

Message for the World
For HDHS Virtual Workshop -- NYC
December 10,11,12, 2020

Toward an Understanding of Dignity as
Experience

Hello! My name is Lucien Lombardo.

I am **an Actively** retired college professor, which means I still teach. I also continue to engage in advocacy focused on ending child maltreatment.

I was Introduced to human dignity and humiliation (though not in those terms) fifty years ago when I started my teaching career in a maximum-security prison in Auburn, NY.

Twenty-five years later, the lessons in learned from my prison work were again encountered and reinforced as I tried to understand and teach about violence in the world of children at Old Dominion University. I guess prisoners and children often experience human dignity and humiliation in similar ways.

Today those experiences combine with lessons and positive energy gained from HDHS' annual workshops on transforming humiliation and violent conflict helping me **bring a dignity focus** to schools, local government, and human services in community where I live.

Some examples shaping to my understanding of the meaning of dignity!

PRISON: When I started in the prison as a full-time teacher, I was observing and struggling to understand the men, their situation, and myself as I sought ways to teach English, reading, writing to prisoners who came to my classroom. Here are a few observations from that time:

Excerpt From: Observations Existential Crisis of the Criminal (LXL-1971)

Our criminal is a man of intense human feeling. He sincerely cares about others. He desires more than anything else to express these feelings to others. Whenever he strives to express himself and be heard, however, he finds himself facing a pair of impenetrable barriers.

The first is the apathy of the communicative self of the others around him. To him they are insular, self-group contained. From the criminal's perspective, they communicate nothing but banalities and trivialities.

*The prisoner's **second barrier** is himself. He feels, he sees like an artist. He knows social hypocrisy. He feels the other person's apathy more strongly than perhaps anyone else.*

*He needs to communicate, or at least feels the need. He needs to be seen **as a person** by **another person** in order to see himself as a person and verify his worth as person connected to others.*

In his being, he feels and senses these needs. However, he is unable or only vaguely able to transform these feelings and sensations into knowledge existing in his conscious self.

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From Prison to College and ‘Violence in the World of Children’:

Many years later other ideas about dignity came to me from College Students and their attempts to define dignity and to describe how their dignity was supported and violated when they were children:

***First:** Dignity reflected **How they saw themselves:** Terms like self-worth, -esteem, self-value appeared.*

*Students also linked Dignity to **authenticity:** Phrases like: Pride in my abilities, being able to be who and what I am; being able to be myself, being comfortable with what and who I am.*

Second** students saw human dignity stemming from **interactions with others.

Interactional Themes:

- ***power and control:** Being able to make or have input into family decisions.*
- ***not being controlled,** having freedoms over their body, feelings, opinions.*
- ***treatment by others:** with fairness, Respect, valued.*

- *Finally, students observed that dignity grew from **experiences where they were able to contribute to others, to help others.***

R.D. Laing, KNOTS, NY: Vintage Books, 1970, p.6. Applies to the difficulty of being in touch with dignity: It applies Prisoners and Children and All of US!

They are playing a game. They are playing at not playing a game. If I show them that I see they are, I shall break the rules and they will punish me. I must play their game, of not seeing I see the game.

Prisoners reacted very strongly to this poem, usually saying “That’s right!!”.

College students recognized this KNOT in their childhood experiences when adults violated their dignity. The KNOT reflects in children Alice Miller’s concept of ‘poisonous pedagogy’ where children cannot accuse parents of harm!

Peace Linguist Francisco Cardoso Gomes de Matos, “On Defining Dignity” in Dignity: A Multidimensional View. Lake Oswego, OR: Dignity Press 2013, p.22

Although dignity may be too complex scientifically to define

Educationally it is a life-improving force humanizingly yours and mine

How can dignity be given a tripartite semantic interpretation?

*By representing **it as a process** integrating character + conduct + communication*

**What is my tentative conclusion at this point?
What does dignity mean to me?**

Dignity is an essence of our lives and a process that connects us to others and with our life’s meaning.

Dignity is not something to be earned, rather it is something that we all have, but something that can be supported or violated in experience.

Dignity is always in us and between us.

Dignity is not granted by a judgment of someone or some group who presumes the power to judge!

Unlike justice, equality, fairness, equity, dignity is not debatable nor subject to codification through legal processes.

Dignity is not subject to measurement.

Dignity is not based on judgments about persons or a people and the odious comparison,

Dignity is not political!

Dignity is in us all and between us all!