Dignity
By
Daniel E. White January 13, 2025

Walter Cronkite started my thinking about dignity. In *A Reporter's Life*, he used the phrase "the desire to live in dignity," (p. 298) suggesting that desire as a fundamental motivation of people who have been denied what President Kennedy called "the source of national purpose.

Pope John XXIII noted that, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (December 1948), dignity was described as a fundamental right for all human beings. Confucius taught that "a wise man has dignity without pride; a fool has pride without dignity." Thoughtful people ranging from Cicero to Bernard of Clairvaux to Supreme Court Justice William Brennan have all chimed in their wisdom, to be found on Wikipedia, about the importance of dignity.

My curiosity piqued, I consulted the Oxford English Dictionary to find how the word is commonly understood: "The state or quality of being worthy of honor or respect;" "a composed or serious manner or style;" "a sense of pride in oneself—self-respect." The root is Latin—dignus—meaning worthy.

Whoever wrote the section in Wikipedia added "the right of a person to be valued and respected for their own sake, and to be treated ethically." There it is linked to the notion of inalienable rights, a phrase that ought to be familiar to Americans knowledgeable about their own history.

Actor Michael J. Fox, who has remained prominent in the public eye, his a^liction with Parkinson's for so many years notwithstanding, asserted that "one's dignity may be assaulted, vandalized and cruelly mocked but cannot be taken away unless it is surrendered." One suspects that he speaks from personal experience about assaults and mockery.

Some of those who have written about dignity identify ways in which dignity is surrendered. Immanuel Kant asserted that "by a lie, a man...annihilates his dignity as a man." Likewise, Cicero asked "where is dignity unless there is honesty?" Herman Melville was blunt; "there is no dignity in wickedness."

So, is it apt to say that "the right of a person to be valued and respected for their own sake and to be treated ethically" is dependent upon that person being honest, not being wicked? Isn't this another way of saying that integrity is a core component of dignity?

Popular culture, politics, commerce; these are three aspects of modern life where one might question whether honor, respect, even honesty matter much anymore. It is not hard for those of us of a certain age to dismiss some people as undignified but are we guilty of applying old norms to new times?

Perhaps there are reasons for debate about norms. Justice Brennan contended that "the quest for freedom, dignity and the rights of man will never end." What is understood, though, as constituting freedom, dignity and human rights, is not "revealed truth" but more like "agreed-upon" truth. The quest might be unending, but is it always toward the same ends?

The third entry in the OED—a sense of pride in oneself; self-respect—is an aspect of dignity each one of us can control. Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov is the "gentleman" who is the subject of Amor Towles' novel, *A Gentleman in Moscow*. Count Rostov published a poem titled "Where Is It Now?" in

1913, before the outbreak of World War One, before the Bolsheviks took power in Russia, before the new rulers set out to annihilate the nobility in the Soviet Union.

The story opens with the Count's appearance at a meeting of the Emergency Committee of the People's Commissariat for Internal A^airs in June 1922. Because of his noble lineage, Rostov expects that the outcome will be execution. However, some in the higher ranks of the Party consider him "among the heroes of the prerevolutionary cause" because of what he wrote in the poem. So, his sentence is lifetime house arrest in the Hotel Metropole in Moscow. He is told that, if he steps outside the hotel and is discovered, he will be shot immediately.

There is no doubt that the Commissariat believed that this sentence was worse than immediate execution. Their intent was to humiliate the Count, and that humiliation began by housing him in a storage area at the top of the hotel. There were Party spies in the hotel, so the Count always had to act in a way that did not lead to his arousing suspicions that might endanger his life.

By the end of the book, it is clear that those who would humiliate were the ones humiliated, and that the one sentenced to a fate worse than death had, in all instances, conducted himself with a sense of pride in himself, self-respect, cultivated by his own actions, punctuated by politeness, always informed by his concern for others, even those who would have wished him harm.

The Count was worthy of honor and respect, including his own self-respect.

Cronkite followed the "dignity" phrase with "that aspiration takes many forms, but it is clearly at the foundation of all fights for social justice." He was writing about the Watts riots but could just as easily been referring to any movement in which people have been denied the fundamental human right of dignity.

Confucius might have been writing about Count Rostov. Treating others with dignity reveals one's own.

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