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On Human Dignity, Lost and Regained

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I am very grateful for having been invited as a representative of the William Alanson White Psychoanalytic Institute to a conference at the U.N. to help reflect on our distress about the shape the world is in. As we find ourselves today often at a loss in the face of so much destructiveness and political chaos, working with one person at a time may amount to very little. Yet inquiring into the nature of human motivation remains an unending task. Working intensely with individuals in a way is also microanalysis of social phenomena can add to an understanding of what happens in the larger social context. I also think the theme of the conference of dignity and security is very fortuitously chosen because a current focus in psychoanalysis today is on being securely attached to an other and to be respectfully recognized in one's value to others, as crucial experiences for mental and social health.

Modern culture tends to think about dignity as an attribute of the individual, correlating it with individual rights. But when we look at the history of the word dignity, we see that it originally means something essentially social, having to do with worth or honor, estimates conferred by others. Even as we recognize the importance of having a sense of dignity, we know it is often unavailable to many and is easily destroyed. The great difficulty of restoring lost dignity stems in part from its interpersonal nature, which can make it impossible to recover alone. I wish to focus today on some psychological aspects of the struggle to regain a sense of dignity after it has been lost or damaged, and particularly on some of the factors that make this a necessarily interpersonal process.

In West Berlin in the 1950s I remember hearing the daily broadcast by the RIAS (Radio in the American Sector) of a brief statement by the mayor, Ernst Reuter, saying "I believe in the dignity and the inviolability' [sanctity](Unantastbarkeit) of each individual human being...." ("ich glaube an die Würde und an die Unantastbarkeit eines jedeneinzeln Menschen.") Reuter's words were meant to counter the despair and the cynicism that the holocaust and the war had brought to postwar Germany. He was a socialist who had spent the war years in Russia and Turkey. As mayor of West Berlin, he understood that he was speaking to a vanquished people, a country with a postwar culture that was devastated, a country carrying now the identity of a criminal, having destroyed its own values by denying dignity to a large group of its own citizens. His statement was an effort at making emotional and psychological repairs, a gesture that spoke to the need to confirm the sense of dignity from without, and it helped that such words came from

someone who'd been on the outside during the dark years. This postwar situation in Berlin was at least as complicated as many of our most troubled areas of the world today, where people can be both victims and perpetrators, a situation in which the restoration of dignity becomes extremely complex.

Clearly dignity is an article of human faith, something that we have to find a way to believe. The experience of trauma and victimization conveys to the victim his or her utter powerlessness and worthlessness. Indignity then becomes a challenge of the ability to hold on to an image of self-respect at the moment when the other is not confirming but actively attacking it. Dignity emerges then as a quality of personal strength that transcends humiliation. The African American writer, Alice Walker, tells a story about her mother that speaks to this quality. After working for a white woman an entire day in house and garden, performing a variety of rather useful services with the skilled experience of a lifetime, she was given at the end of the day just 75 cents. Her response was simply to hand the money back to the lady. Such stories carry an important but subtle message about the nature of personal dignity—that it's something that needs to be asserted publicly. It's as if it's not enough to tell oneself, "I'm worth better than that"—one has to make the statement to someone else. It's the same public assertion of personal value that made a Rosa Parks refuse to go to the back of the bus. One wonders what was it that gave these women the strength after having suffered the many indignities of segregation for a long time.

We often associate dignity with someone being in the full possession of his powers and competencies and thus commanding admiration and respect. The kind of dignity I have in mind to talk about however, is not born out of something that comes along with visible external attributes of power and glory, but is the kind of dignity that emerges out of an understanding of some basic intention or design of what life for a human being ought to be like, an understanding that seems to emerge most clearly at a moment when we feel compassion for another, and an understanding that emerges even more sharply at those times when such a vision is horribly disregarded: when so many people are deprived, enslaved, victimized and humiliated in this world that any vision or concept of the dignity of a human being gets seriously challenged.

THE CLINICAL VIEW

The social nature of dignity, the fact that a sense of self-worth is initially conferred upon the individual by others and throughout life depends to a great degree on continuous social recognition, makes dignity part of a very vulnerable system—comparable to other ecological equilibria, which once disturbed cannot be easily restored to their previous state. The difficulties in restoring lost dignity are particularly apparent in the long-term treatment efforts of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy with the victimized individual which show how slow the process of recovery can be even with a very concerted effort, and that significant depressive states are likely to emerge and to interfere with the success of any support program.

Andrew Solomon in his book *The Noonday Demon* gives a moving description of the amount of care needed to restore a sense of self-worth to a group of severely traumatized Cambodian women. He describes how Phaly Nuon has set up an orphanage and a center for depressed women in Pnom Penh, where she provides for their physical care and teaches them to decenter from the trauma, and to trust a loving reconnection with fellow victims at the center. In our culture we may give a homeless person a roof but there are no programs to restore lost dignity.

Longterm psychological treatment offers another kind of care, it is one of very intense caring, a caring for what is most personal, perhaps in a way parallel to the physical laying on of hands. This work tries to get at the very serious blockages that are caused by deprivation, trauma and humiliation that impair the person from going forward. These blockage are the ones that have to do with shame and self-hatred and the various forms of dissociation. These negative, avoidant, and defensive mental stances are very powerful and yield only to endless repetitive reworking. This is so because the assault on dignity and self-worth is also an assault on the adequate functioning of the mind itself. Human beings when violated by significant others, and thus humiliated, lose the capacity to reflect and the capacity to feel, both necessary to fully appreciate what happened as well as having a mind of self reflective capacity altogether. It appears as if there is an almost willful surrender of the mind, in order to avoid re-experiencing the original pain and recognition of who and what the perpetrators are, who are often idealized significant others. Therefore the victim will rather feel guilt and shame, or fragment its mind in dissociation than condemn the other.

When others are either unavailable or have themselves been the actual perpetrators the individual is thrown back upon its own resources. We might hope that the individual could summon his or her own sense of self-esteem, but can one still esteem what others hate?

In the following I want to speak to you about a number of ways in which people tend to respond to the experience of indignity, and describe to you in brief sketches the experience of some of the people I have worked with who grew up with feeling hated, with being raised in a materially and emotionally deprived environment, and with being physically abused. I will also speak about an experience of traumatization and humiliation in adulthood.

One patient cannot forget the look of hatred in his father's eyes when he returned from abroad, and the epiphany he had at age 9 when he overheard his parents arguing and realized they blamed their misery on him: "I suddenly understood why they hated me and wanted to tell them, but I pushed it aside, was also afraid of my anger." So, no Rosa Parks stance here but instead the patient had to surrender his mind and with that his sense of dignity in this dissociative albeit self-protective move. As a result he sank into a chronic depression that lasted from childhood straight into adulthood.

Often the chance to develop a sense of dignity may be absent from the start, as in social conditions extreme poverty. Another patient speaks of the way there was nothing in her family to be proud of. Her father hated being a shoemaker and he hated his wife who was not educated. “If he had valued being a shoemaker, if he had valued that, but I didn’t know what value was, says a patient who struggled all her life with a sense of a vanishing self of being a non-person, unable to value herself, hiding in shame beyond a thin veneer of normalcy.

REFUSAL TO ACCEPT THE TRAGIC VIEW OF LIFE TO PRESERVE A MORE NAIVE VIEW OF LIFE

A loss of dignity can also result from refusing to accept the tragic view of life. Not only is it hard to retain a sense of compassion in the face of being hated (be it by others or by one’s own self), it can also be part of accepting the world as it is, namely as a place always outside of the Garden of Eden and often a place like hell.

A man who was literally and figuratively beaten out of his business by a violent partner and a year later loses his apartment that was opposite the World Trade center during 9/11, has recurrent panic attacks and depression for years as he basically cannot accept what happened to him because it does not fit into his view of the world as a place where good guys win. In his refusal to accept emotionally the disillusioning truth of what happened to him he becomes someone who loses his dignity because he appears weak in his avoidance.

When a sense of personal dignity has been stolen or destroyed early on it may manifest itself also in an inability to claim a sense of compassion and respect for the resultant handicap and emotional suffering. A patient who had been sexually abused and went through a lengthy bout with drugs and alcohol, states that he gave up drugs, but he did not give up losing himself. He says: I am not sick; I am just lazy, weak and scared. He clearly cannot own his suffering and handicap with compassion and dignity, but with shame he is looking instead upon himself as morally deficient. It is the shame that stops him from owning and dignifying his trouble with compassion.

Lost dignity as we only know too well manifests itself often in the belligerent backlash. One response to the widespread indignity that exists in the poverty stricken parts of the world is the voluntary seeking of martyrdom. Voluntary suicide on behalf of a noble cause is an active way of transforming the passive and hated experience of victimization into an illusion of dignity at a terrible price.

“Revenge is a sweet thing” states a German saying: A patient who had been sexually abused as a child wonders whether the only way to ever feeling not afraid of being victimized again would be if he would become strong enough to pay back the violence he experienced when he was helpless to fight back or at least be strong enough to have a choice. At least then he would not have to feel the fear anymore. In the session he speaks

about how much he despises himself in the memory of his helplessness. Since this is someone in one of the helping professions, someone whose kindness to others I know, we can ponder why it is that he can be kind to others and not to himself. How did he come to know kindness in the first place when he grew up under such dreadful circumstances?

Discussion

To attain dignity ultimately depends on owning all of one's life, one's history. This often means to accept the truth of what one's life has been, even if it has been one of humiliation, of deprivation, of abuse, or of any other kind of indignity. Perhaps this is the place for me to emphasize the contribution psychoanalytic thinking can make to our grappling with the larger social issues. The insights on shame, gained from in depth psychological work with individuals can also inform a perspective on the larger group, and in this case can speak to the public about the intellectual and emotional tools necessary, to expand our capacity for tolerance.

The public sense of what the good life should be, and sometimes can be about, the values we cherish in each culture differently, all that has in it the potential for shaming, shaming by others and by one's own self. Because of a deeply ingrained human tendency to respond to deficit with looking for cause, and blaming either self or other, we can not easily accept as normal a tragic perspective on life, in which control often is not in the hands of us humans. We generally have a hard time feeling compassion for when we or others are helpless and the act of reproach offers an illusion of strength and control; at least we know what's wrong and who's done it.

There is I am sure a cross cultural notion of the Calvinist idea that God is with those who are successful, this notion is inherently poisonous because if someone's life is more or less disastrous or a non-life it must be that there is something inherently wrong with such a person.

The fact that this life is often hell for many is not permitted as a public truth; it is repressed like the simpler truth of our unavoidable ultimate death. But in the end such denial is just adding one indignity upon another.

I had started out speaking about the "social nature of dignity, as something that has to do with a sense of self-worth needing to be conferred upon the individual by self and others and how social recognition remains a lifelong concern". I can add now that it is out of such hard won recoveries from shame over lost dignities and the indignities that had to be suffered that a new capacity to restore dignity emerges, when dignity finds its security in a newly found private or even public compassionate and tolerant response to the experiences of helplessness as shameful humiliations.

If a given person can own the indignity of his or her own life, as a powerful narrative, not suitable for conversation but for the ears of a compassionate listener, dignity returns, as

identity returns. No longer will the person have to pretend that it was otherwise, keep smiling, or feel like a fraud; instead there can then be a freedom from shame, as shame is compassionately understood, and with that a certain justification of ongoing mental handicaps and vulnerabilities. As one patient stated: "my entire life I hated myself, now I can say I value myself. It is a hard-won sense of a new dignity when the shame over lost dignity, and the indignities that had to be suffered, can be overcome.