

Dignity—A Unifying Value for Americans

Robert W. Fuller

What core value, what slogan, could move us beyond the toxic standoff that paralyzes American politics today? The answer lies in a word—Dignity. The bumper sticker is “Dignity for All.”

The notion of dignity may at first seem too simple to pull together the disparate elements of this divided nation, but it's not. Dignity is what people want, on the left, on the right, and most importantly, in the vast, non-ideological middle.

Dignity is not negotiable. As Martin Luther King, Jr. showed, people will stand up for their dignity, and once they're on their feet, they'll march for justice.

Two hundred years of bloody world history suggest that there is no direct path from Liberty to Justice. But if we interpose a steppingstone, we *can* build a bridge to justice. The name of that stone is not “Equality.” Its name is “Dignity.” By establishing the right to dignity, and then enacting legislation that protects everyone's dignity, we can give concrete meaning to Thomas Jefferson's evocative claim that “All men are created equal.”

A “dignitarian society” pulls together what's best from the three ideological traditions encapsulated in the French revolutionary slogan—Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. The polarizing stranglehold these ideals exert on the contemporary imagination, when any one is prioritized over the others, is a major source of the incivility that infects our politics today.

Conservatives see themselves as liberty's defenders; progressives pride themselves as the champions of equality. Both parties promise fraternity, but neither delivers it.

Dignity is more encompassing than liberty, equality, or fraternity. A *dignitarian*—as contrasted with an egalitarian—society can deliver on America's founding promise of “liberty and justice for all.”

The politics of dignity puts the “We” back in “We the People.” It spans the conservative-liberal divide. It closes the ideological fissures that separate libertarian, egalitarian, and fraternitarian ideologies and breaks the stalemate that has stalled the advance of justice since the 1960s.

A dignitarian society does not tolerate indignity—towards anyone. When this principle is translated into social policy, it rules out acceptance of a permanent underclass. It disallows prejudice and discrimination toward *all* the groups that have rallied around the various flags of identity politics. It transforms the stalemate over abortion and gay marriage into a civil discussion of whose rights to dignity are being abridged. It proclaims everyone's right to a sustainable environment.

Like liberty and justice, dignity is most easily defined in the negative. As a precursor to banishment or exploitation, we're all attuned to detect the slightest hint of indignity.

What causes people to experience indignity? The precise and universal cause of indignity is the abuse of power. Make a list of the most distressing issues of recent years: corporate corruption, the lobbying scandals, Katrina neglect, sexual abuse by clergy, Abu Ghraib, domestic spying, etc. Every one of them can be traced to an abuse of power by individuals of rank. Often the abuses had the blessing of officials of even higher rank.

To effectively oppose the full range of abuses of power vested in rank, we need a word that identifies them collectively. Abuse and discrimination based on color and gender are called “racism” and “sexism,” respectively, and absent these labels, it’s hard to imagine the gains we’ve made against them. By analogy, abuse and discrimination based on the power inherent in rank is “rankism.” This coinage provides a vitalizing link between the methods of identity politics and the moral values of democratic governance. Having a generic name for abuses of power makes them much easier to target, and targeting them is precisely what’s called for if democracy is to resume its evolution.

However principled the cause, no party can present itself as a champion of dignity so long as its members reserve the right to indulge in rankism. This includes treating political opponents with indignity. Humiliation and condescension—toward domestic opponents or foreign enemies—are inherently rankist postures, and as such they have no place in dignitarian politics.

How would a society that makes dignity its watchword differ from ones shaped by ideologies that accentuate liberty, equality, or fraternity? The difference is one of nuance, not opposition, for a dignitarian society combines the strengths of all three.

Dignitarian politics promotes individual economic freedom and respects the free market as an inherently anti-rankist economic mechanism, what Adam Smith called a “system of natural liberty.” But market forces are restrained by institutions of social responsibility that insure that concentrations of financial power are not turned to monopolistic exploitation or used to gain unmerited educational or political advantages. You shouldn’t have to be rich to attend quality schools, or command a fortune to stand for office.

A dignitarian society provides genuine equality of opportunity. In a dignitarian society, loss of social mobility, let alone division into impermeable classes, is unacceptable. There’s a way out of poverty within a generation in a dignitarian society. Everyone earns a living wage and has access to quality health care.

The politics of dignity sees democracy as a work in progress. Democracy’s next step—one that will enlarge liberty, extend justice, and foster fraternity—is to overcome rankism and build a dignitarian society.

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