

It's hard to know where to begin when talking about something like Human Dignity. How do we define it? How do we know it when we see it? What are the indicators of its absence? Maybe most importantly--who gets to decide what it is and when it is or isn't present?

This summer I came to the stark realization, human dignity is very simply an issue of morality. Human dignity isn't just a nice concept. It isn't just some ephemeral goodness. It's a moral imperative for a life worth living.

There's something important to take notice of when talking about human dignity. It has two sides. One side has to do with the external. We can call it, Power-over. The other is an inner force or drive housed in what we might call self-esteem, self-valuing.

We who have power, can either grant or deny someone else's human dignity. If we are the weaker in such interactive dynamics, we do not have that capability. So there is something inherent about power when we talk about human dignity. Am I the grantor or the recipient of the assignment of dignity?

On the other hand, from the inside out, I always have the ability to accept or reject someone else's assessment or assignment. I don't have to accept how others treat me or what they might believe about me. We always have choice. Even when it may appear otherwise. We can choose to accept and acquiesce or we can stand firm in our own sense of human worth. Think of Nelson Mandela, runaway slaves, as two obvious examples, who were assigned a particular station in life, yet, did not abandon their own sense of self.

There is something else I want to highlight about human dignity. It's not about the details. It's much too important for us to allow ourselves to get lost in the details. Human dignity is an issue of civility, not criminality. In civil law, the criteria of evaluation is the "preponderance of evidence", not the more arduous criminal standard of "beyond a reasonable doubt".

I think it's fair to say those who come from the power-over side, almost always assess based on the beyond a reasonable doubt standard—or even any doubt standard. In other words, if I decide to not grant you or acknowledge your human dignity, I have no doubt that you are unworthy.

I found myself mesmerized by the events in Israel and Gaza this summer. During the several weeks of that mayhem, Michael Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson, Missouri, prompting a series of events that continue to this day. At the time, I experienced them as two separate, ugly happenings, one on top of the other.

Then at some point, like powerful magnets- these events snapped together in my mind. I saw both as morally indefensible examples of the antipathy of human dignity --laid bare for the world to see.

I'm not exactly sure what made the magnets snap together. Maybe it was an article by Naomi Shihab Nye, born in Ferguson, to a Palestinian father. The article was titled "On Growing up in Ferguson and Palestine"

She said, "In Fergusson, an invisible line separated white and black communities. In Jerusalem, a no-man's land separates people, designated by barbed wire". She quotes her father saying that when he was a boy growing up in Palistine, Jews and Arabs mixed together as neighbors, but that now there was power and dominance at stake.

In the words of the poet that she is, she writes: "Dominate- to exercise control over. Black kids in streets. Thousands of Palestinian families."

From what we know of what happened on that fateful day in Ferguson, an unarmed black boy—if you'll excuse my ageism, or an 18 year old young man, walking down the middle of the street, ends up dead, shot by a city police officer. All within 3 minutes, some thirty-five feet from their original interaction.

I say from what we know, because the police report, a public record---which took twelve days to be made public and then only after a freedom of information request—the report was highly redacted and missing the officer's explanation of what happened.

To this day, some two months later, to my knowledge, the officer's version of events has not been made public. Nor, as required by policy, has an "officer's use of force report" been filed.

The law enforcement system certainly exercised "control over" the young man's body, which lay in the middle of the street for four hours; "control-over" providing the family and community the officer's official statement, even the name and whereabouts of the officer was withheld; "control over" the public image of Michael Brown as a thug and thief. And most certainly, they exercised "control over" marching protesters with war-grade military equipment and show of force; machine guns pointed at citizens walking in the streets.

The indignities of it brought tears to my eyes. The scene brought back memories of marching protesters crossing the Pettus Bridge in Selma, site of Bloody Sunday, in 1965.

If we get caught up in the details, we'll miss the preponderance of evidence found in that community's, and this country's history. We'll miss the militarization of local police forces as a direct result of our nation's "war on terror".

We'll miss the similarities with Eric Garner choked to death by a NYC police officer after being confronted for selling loose cigarettes; John Crawford in Ohio, killed by police while holding a toy gun in a Walmart store—he was in an open carry state where public display of guns is legal; Levar Jones, just recently, shot by a state trooper in SC after an alleged seatbelt infraction—for reaching into his car to get his license which the trooper asked him to produce.

By law, police are generally allowed to use deadly force when they feel threatened. Truth be told, this country has a long history of using its power to define black men as a threat. Police officers armed with military equipment are increasingly being trained as soldiers, which means citizens become the enemy.

This summer we saw another chapter in what seems like the never ending war in the middle east. Given powerful new technology we were once again able to watch a war in our living rooms. And watch, I did, with amazement and horror.

Our televisions, and much of the print media portrayed a war between Israel and the Palestinians in Gaza; a war between the Israeli government and Hamas. A war between the good guys and the bad guys.

To my eyes, the preponderance of the data did not support that analysis. It looked to me like a war on and in Gaza. The amount of death and damage was significantly disproportionally confined to the Gaza Strip and the peoples within those confines.

The fact that Gaza incurred the greatest amount of loss is not an accident. Israel's relative military, political and monetary might ensures that outcome. The state of Israel is one of the world's leading military powers. Largely with the here-to-fore, unswerving support of the American government.

I found it odd that so much of the media's coverage seemed to focus on Israel's right to defend its sovereign territory and so little mention was made of Gaza as an occupied territory. So much was made of Hamas as a terrorist organization while Gazans fled their homes in fear after a roof knocking missile warned them of imminent destruction.

I wondered why should Israel's right of self-defense be greater than Palestinians' right of self-determination? I couldn't understand the argument that the civilian death toll was so high because Hamas used them as human shields. They didn't die because of their location, they died when bombs landed on them.

A debating coach once said, "he who defines the terms wins the debate". There are so many terms, false starts, accusations and dashed hopes over some 47 years, it's easy to get lost in the details. But if we step back and allow ourselves to see the forest, ultimately there are very few options, if there is to be peace in that part of the world.

Either Israel must somehow get the Palestinians to fully cede their right to self-determination and give up all resistance to foreign occupation OR seek long-term peace with their neighbors. Only one of these options leaves any room for human dignity.

Since human dignity is not a given, it has to be protected wherever humans beings exist---not only on the right/white side of town, or with some people and not others who look and act differently. Not only on this side of the ocean but on the other side as well.

Human dignity requires protectors, defenders and advocates.

Its time for a change. Our country can not survive much more of this ugliness, this brutality. I sometimes wonder if the world can survive this much hate and distrust, this much militarization and might, this much anti-Catholic, anti-Islam, anti-Christian Right, anti, anti—fill in the blanks.

It's time for those who value human dignity to stand up and be counted, to be heard spreading the message of Universal love and acceptance. Sharing what Albert Einstein, Desmond Tutu, and Unitarian Universalists principles proclaim: We Are One.

Einstien tells us: "Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion. UUs believe in an interconnected web and the inherent worth and dignity of all. For our principles to be more than mere words, we need to heed Desmond Tutu's recommendation:

"Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world."

May it be, and may it be soon.

Amen