Strengthening Dignity

Presentation given at BuhayBuhaySa Radio online conference, Arizona Untited States

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Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to be with you today for this important gathering. Thank you so much for inviting me and thank you Glenda for this wonderful introduction.

There is a lot to say about “Dignity”. Almost every day I discover something new. Today I chose to talk mainly about how to strengthen our personal feeling of dignity and how to live with the awareness of dignity in our daily life.

Looking at today's society and the way people relate to each other we must realize that we are far from living a life of dignity. Politicians discredit each other, the media are used for humiliation. We still have segregation. Mobbing and violence start in school and continue at work.

Working with WFWP International I have met many women from all different cultural, religious and ethnical backgrounds. I have heard their testimonies of how their dignity was violated. I met women who suffered trafficking and forced prostitution. I listened to many stories of rape and sexual abuse, being committed even by close family members. Today we still have forced prostitution, trafficking, sexual violence at work. Domestic violence too is a big problem in our society.

This is irreconcilable with the dignity and value of the human being.

We all attend this meeting today in observance of the International Day of the Elimination of Violence Against Women on November 25.

How can we contribute to eliminate violence against women and men as well?

We need a paradigm shift in our minds and in society. Creating awareness of human dignity is the foremost task to prevent violence!

To create awareness of the importance of living a life of dignity. Blanche Wiesen Cook, American Author of three biographies of Eleanor Roosevelt, Historian and Educator, calls on us to achieve “Dignity for all”. She believes that now is the time, that the vision of Eleanor Roosevelt can be achieved. A culture of “Dignity for all” is an important cornerstone for a peaceful society and world.

But how to create a culture of dignity?

We only can be authentic if we first work on the change in ourselves. We need to feel our dignity within ourselves before we talk to others about the importance of living a life of dignity.

Therefore, I want to take this opportunity today to talk about how to strengthen dignity in myself.

To set a common base to start from I first would like to define what I refer to when I talk about dignity.

In philosophy and in contemporary discussions we find many different interpretations of the word dignity.

We have several possibilities of approach to define dignity.

First I want to look at the meaning of Dignity from a historical/philosophical viewpoint.

Brandhorst [[1]](#footnote-1) , a German University Professor, outlines 6 periods in regard to the definition of dignity: Ancient history, the rise of Christianity, medieval times, renaissance, modern age and time after 1945

**In Ancient history** the term dignity was used only in connection with an official position, as privileges and expectations. Later, the term dignity described the attitude of self-discipline and decency based on reason.

**Through the teaching of Jesus** and his disciples and in Early Christianity man was considered to be created in the image of God and the idea of fundamental equality of all humankind was born. This included respect of the dignity of others.

**In medieval times** dignity was mainly related to virtuousness. Therefore, dignity could be lost through” not virtuous or sinful” behaviour. Somebody who lost his dignity also lost all protection. That was the basis for inquisition and witch hunt and brought about the terrible burning of women who were considered witches.

**During the Renaissance**, the free will was the main aspect of human dignity. In his speech ‘De hominis dignitate’ (Latin translation: “About the dignity of the human being”) (1486/87), the Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola shows that man is free to determine his nature in accordance with his own will. Pico della Mirandola emphasised man’s freedom and God given ability to rise to the vision of the deepest secrets of the universe. Literally, he says: ‘what an enormous and admirable happiness of the human being, to whom it is given to have what he desires and to be what he wishes to be’.

**In modern age** the philosopher Immanuel Kant[[2]](#footnote-2) spoke of the “universal dignity” within each human being. He said: “Each person honours the human dignity through his/her own person; has the right to receive respect from others, for the said human dignity ; and is in turn, obliged to respect the human dignity in those nearest to him…” This means that it is important to grant dignity first to myself and to be free of any doubt concerning it. Dignity is an immanent nature, an innate character of humans, independent from any other characteristics such as age, intelligence, abilities, and gender.

**After the second world war** dignity was given importance in the Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on December 10th, 1948 as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations. It sets out, for the first time, fundamental human rights to be universally protected and it has been [translated into over 500 languages.](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Pages/SearchByLang.aspx)

In the Preamble we read:

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Article 1 All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. [[3]](#footnote-3)

**Next let us look at the origin of the word “dignity”**

The origin of the English word dignity is Latin, dignitas, meaning worthiness. In other languages as well the word for dignity relates to worthiness.

We all have this worthiness as inherent nature in us. It is amazing to listen to **the results of studies by neuroscientists**. They discovered that even the new-born child has a feeling for how it wants to be treated, what is good for them, worthy of a human being. They cry not only because they are hungry but also if they feel lonely, not receiving the attention necessary. This neurobiological connection is already developing in the baby’s brain before birth in the womb of the mother.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Newborns have this inherent dignity as protection and later as compass for understanding what it means to be a human being. Given a good environment this inner compass can later grow and turn to awareness of the internal dignity of this person. Therefore, dignity is our internal compass helping us in a world of high demands and pressure to keep our identity as human beings, to know our worthiness.

This is most hopeful and shows that, no matter what happened in our life or what we did , no matter how much our dignity was hurt , Dignity is within us and can be awakened at any time.

**Definition Summary**

Let me summarize

1. Dignity is a human right of everybody. It is your and our inalienable value as human being
2. Dignity is inherent to us, part of us as our internal compass giving us orientation and helping us to keep our identity, remembering our value and making decisions.
3. Dignity is a way of life. We honour our dignity by giving dignity to others. Dignity can only become alive in the relation of giving and receiving dignity.

**How to relate to our personal Dignity**

It is always easier to relate to someone if we know the name. So, let us give a name to our inherent dignity!

From now on I will call this inherent nature our Dignity Self. This expression is used by Gabriele Frick Baer and Udo Baer, psychological therapist and authors of many specialist books. If you cannot relate to this expression you may use another name. For me, my Dignity Self is my inner Queen Dignity. Giving a name is the first step to connect to your Dignity.

Our Dignity Self needs all our attention if we want to create a culture of dignity. Many of us had debasing and degrading experiences in their life and thus our Dignity Self has been buried under lots of pain. If we want to strengthen our dignity self the first step is understanding how our Dignity Self was hurt during our life. We do not want to be reminded of painful experiences but feeling the pain can be helpful to understand why and how our Dignity Self was hurt. Thus, we can avoid similar experiences and strengthen our Dignity Self.

 Udo Baer and Gabriele Frick Baer call these painful and degrading experiences “Monster”. There are basically four categories.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**The 4 Monsters hurting our Dignity Self**

1. Violence, physical and verbal
2. Humiliation
3. Degradation
4. Being ignored

**1. Physical and verbal violence**.

Experiencing physical violence is the most degrading experience. Those of us who experienced sexual violence, carry the burden of this degradation throughout our lives. Physical punishment and being screamed at are further forms of violence which hurt our Dignity Self. If you experienced serious violations like sexual abuse, rape, or domestic violence you will need professional support. Please do not hesitate to ask for help.

But there is also a silent violence through words and actions which undermines our feeling of worthiness.

May be a child needs help but is rejected with words like “What the hell did you do?” Maybe a child is not allowed to join a group of friends at school, maybe there is mobbing at school. Later you may be treated as a looser in your job even though you did your best, maybe you are the only one not invited to a party of colleagues. Silent violence has many different faces, and we need to understand and recognize what is happening to protect our Dignity Self.

**2. Humiliation** often is not given the importance it has in hurting our Dignity Self. Many times, we are humiliated even by our partners or best friends. In Germany there are exclamations like “Typical, women!” “Only women can be so stupid!” “This crazy driver must be a woman!” “Women take always so much time to get ready”. I guess in the States you have similar ones. Other humiliations are related to our external appearance like: “She is too fat, too small, too tall, too skinny!”

**3. Degradations** are equally painful. “You will never learn that “or “you always are late” or “no way you can do this!” or “you are too stupid”. These sentences can cause loss of the feeling of Self Worth. If in your job you do not receive the promotion you were promised or you deserved, you feel degradation. Also, in a partnership, the partner who has been betrayed since a long time feels degraded.

**4. Being ignored**

I was very moved when I first realized what the monster of being ignored is about. When a child cries, but nobody listens, when a child wants to be picked up, but nobody cares, when a child wants to be seen, but nobody looks, when a child needs support, but only receives scolding. When this happens again and again the child feels being ignored and lonely. This has an immense influence on his personality as adult. Why did this realisation move me to tears? My mother was extremely poor when I was born and had to give me away to an orphanage. I was three months old. Even though I was adopted by wonderful parents, I still feel the crying, the desperation, the loneliness and being ignored of the first days alone in the orphanage deep inside me. How much more suffering children go though who lost their parents through wars, children who are sold and trafficked and end up in forced prostitution, children who become soldiers? We must put an end to this suffering!

But also, we as adults experience this monster of being ignored. When we need a shoulder to lean on, an ear to listen, a hug to feel loved, but our partner or best friend ignores our need, we feel deeply hurt and lonely. This is a degrading experience no matter, how old we are.

Why did I talk so much about theses monsters? Only when we know and realize that these monsters are hurting our Dignity Self, we can say “Stop it!” and put an end to being degraded.

To confront theses monsters we need to strengthen our Dignity Self.

**What can I do to strengthen my Dignity Self?**

Connecting with our Dignity self and strengthening is a process. It is the process of receiving appreciation and appreciating oneself. It takes time. Time is a gift, and we can make use of this gift. Let us not be impatient with ourselves.

We are all different individuals with different experiences, backgrounds, and character. Therefore, we all go our own way in this process. However, some steps are important and may be helpful for most of us as milestones on our way to living our dignity.

Let us start right now. I would like to ask you to straighten up our body. Push your shoulders back and breeze deeply and slowly a few times. Be aware of how you feel.

**The first milestone** **is perceiving and appreciating our feelings**, emotions, thoughts, our pain, our joys, fears, everything we do, and we avoid doing without judging or categorizing. We will realize soon how many emotions and thoughts we repress of different reasons. But all feelings and thoughts belong to us and first need to be appreciated and taken care of. Repressing feelings and thoughts take a lot of energy. Respecting our feelings and thoughts, even though we may not like them, helps us to deal with them and understand why we think or feel something. Sometimes, our Dignity Self tries to get our attention by feelings we do not understand. By communicating with our Dignity Self, we may understand. Later I will talk more about this point.

 **The next milestone** **is respecting ourselves**. There are many situations in daily life we may not respect ourselves without even noticing. Please ask yourselves: How do I react if I am completely ignored, if someone is disrespectful or humiliates me? These are common day to day experiences. I give just a few examples: Maybe in a meeting nobody listens to your opinion, maybe a coffee you ordered is cold because the waiter talked a long time to someone else on the way to your table. A few days ago, in a shop a lady loudly told me to let her pass because she wanted to take my place waiting in line.

How do I feel and how do I react? Can I ask for respect in a good and dignified way?

How do you feel if someone treats you as the young girl you once were even though you have accomplished so much in your life?

**This brings us to the next milestone** I like to mention: **Appreciate all you already have done in your life.** Everyone has incredible achievements. But many times, we are not aware of them. We often think that what we did is not worth being appreciated. We think that we just did what had to be done, nothing special. A few months ago, I talked to my doctor because I felt exhausted, without really understanding why. He asked me: How many children do you have? I did not quite understand why he asked me because our children are all grown up and 4 of the 5 children already have their own families. My doctor knows that so why did he ask me? But he insisted and upon my answer he said: And you do not know why you are exhausted? For me having 5 children and helping them to grow up was never connected with the feeling of exhaustion. I enjoyed every moment with them. I did not think about and appreciate my effort and investment. Many times, when we receive compliments and appreciation, we feel uneasy and not worthy enough. That is a sign that we do not respect our own value, our accomplishments, and efforts.

Sit down in a quiet moment and write down everything you already accomplished in your life and appreciate each effort, whether successful or not.

**Another milestone is our feeling of self worth.** This is not being arrogant. It is to be aware of our inherent worthiness as human being. Religions call this our divinity or being God's children. Philosophy calls it human dignity. We usually do not really think about our own value. How do you think about yourself? Mostly we feel that we do not meet standards asked for or we doubt our capabilities, our beauty or wisdom. We define our value through our achievements. Self-worth is not depending on what we know, what we accomplished, what position we have, how much we earn, what car we have or how other think about us. This kind of evaluation of 'who am I’ and not recognizing our uniqueness and the inherent nature of dignity is one of the problems why we cannot connect to our Dignity Self. Feeling our self-worth also gives us the capacity of valuing other people, discovering their inherent value. Self esteem and feeling of self worth only become alive at eye level with others.

Many times, we even feel guilt if we have been mistreated. This is a further milestone: **Let go of feelings of guilt.** Whatever has happened it was not because of you that you were mistreated. Feelings of guilt leave no room for reflection and healing. They restrict us and put a burden on us. In Buddhism the deep sympathy for us as human beings is a high aim and entails redemption. Feel empathy for yourself!

Jesus told us to love ourselves. (Love your neighbor as you love yourself.) Therefore, another milestone on the way strengthening our Dignity Self is accepting myself daily with unconditional love. Get up each morning, look in the mirror, smile and appreciate your beauty. There is no other person like you. You are unique and special.

If we succeed to accept ourselves, we can **live an authentic life**. We do not need any longer to play roles to hide our personality, to wear a mask. Maybe as a child we tried to be a good girl/boy to be loved. Oftentimes as adults in our jobs we accept difficulties to create a positive image. Maybe in friendships we avoid saying our opinion to not lose a friend. Is this necessary? What is a friendship without being able to say your truth? Can you be happy in a job where you always must ignore your needs? Living authentically is an especially important milestone. A real friendship can deal with emotions and different opinions, a job is only good when your needs are respected. Be yourself, you are special! You are unique!

We all experienced situations when we reached the limit. Exhaustion, stress, sleeplessness, and illness pile up on top of us. Yet, how often do we go beyond these? From my own experience I can say: Too often! Again, and again, we just continue, a small break, maybe a painkiller, and off we go again. The show must go on. We all pay too high a price. What must happen before we will finally listen to our body and say ‘no’ for once? **Taking care of our body and listening to his needs** is another important milestone on the way to live our Dignity.

Another milestone in strengthening our Dignity Self is **developing a sense of your own needs and learning to say no**. I have still to work on respecting my own limits and communicating them. For me this is the most difficult milestone. But in the process, I learned that saying no to requests I cannot deal with straightens me up. Surprisingly my 'no' is always accepted, mostly even without explanation.

**A further milestone is letting go of the fear of failure.** Many of us may have received the love they longed for as a child by presenting best results at school. This accompanies us throughout our lifetime. We feel our worth only through presenting best results. But our worthiness is not determined by perfect results. Our worthiness is inherent to us since the beginning of life. Therefore, no failure deprives us of our value. we easily forgive others. Let us also learn to forgive ourselves any mistakes or shortcomings. Only then we can turn the feeling of failure into a learning experience. Always remind yourself: You did the best you could.

**Be friendly and polite to yourself**

Are you surprised? Well, let us be honest. If we realize that we made a mistake we often scold ourselves. Stupid me! I am a complete failure! I am an idiot! Or you look at the mirror in the morning and think “Oh, I look terrible! “You never would say this to somebody else. Why are you more friendly and polite to others than to yourself? I believe it is important to treat myself well, in all aspects of life. I need to give to myself what I would without any doubt give to others. This is not easy at all; I am still learning.

Finally take time and **write down all the special abilities you have**. Do not hesitate, just write. Let your Dignity Self help you.

**We can communicate with our Dignity Self.** Every time we have to make a decision, we can ask our Dignity Self what would correspond to living a life of dignity. We can always say that we need time to decide. We do not need to answer a request immediately. Then we can think about if what we want to do is respecting our Dignity Self. Is what we are asked to do what we really want to do? Does the request respect our privacy? Is it necessary to be done in the time frame established? Is it for a purpose I support? Can I do what is asked for without an uneasy feeling? Does the request respect or hurt my Dignity Self?

Our Dignity Self tries to get our attention by feelings and thoughts which we sometimes cannot understand at first. There might be some uneasiness after a conversation, a feeling of anger, sadness, frustration, or emptiness. If we try to communicate with our Dignity Self, we may find the reason for these feelings. Maybe our opinion was ignored, or we experienced some subliminal humiliation or degradation.

In the beginning of the process of connecting with and strengthening my Dignity Self we may need something to remind us during our daily life not to forget our Dignity Self. In Germany we say: I make a knot in my handkerchief if we want to remember something. May be a small stone in your pocket, may be a note on your desk, may be a meaningful picture on a shelf can help you to be more aware of your Dignity Self.

**Always let us keep our sense of dignity**: No matter how others treat us, we should never feel we are a victim. Our inherent dignity is much stronger than any evaluation that anyone else may give us. We often have the tendency to be dependent on the compliments from others. It is natural to receive and give appreciation to each other. But to do something only to receive appreciation is hurting our Dignity Self. We all know women or girls letting themselves be misused by men, hoping to get love in return.

We do not need to be ashamed; **it is our right to be appreciated.** We can learn to become independent of the judgement of others, by constantly affirming ourselves that we have dignity, that we are a human being with unique value.

**Did you ever think that your life is a unique work of art?**

I did not allow myself to think about this for a long time. Often, we feel that we have not done enough – yes that we have never given enough, no matter how much we gave. Through our activism we shy away, in the end, from our spiritual creativity and our self-development. We ourselves are the ones to shape our lives, thus be co-creators of our own ‘me’. Discovery of our qualities, development of our talents requires our total concentration, our investment and every new day is exciting and stimulating. Our life is our uniquely personal artwork.

Time is too short today. Please take what I said as inspiration to find your personal way to find and strengthen your Dignity Self. I only want to mention one more point. Dignity not only refers to me but also to everybody else. That means that **dignity is always a way of living**, by granting dignity to others, by respecting and valuing them, by feeling and expressing empathy. Each of the before mentioned aspects corresponds to our own attitude towards others. Only by combining both we can truly strengthen our Dignity Self

The aforementioned authors, Gabriele Frick Baer and Udo Baer had an idea I really liked. We can make a fan with all the different aspects of my Dignity Self, of living our Dignity. [[6]](#footnote-6)

A fan has an outside and inside. The outside turns to the other people, the inside to me. On the outside we write the aspects corresponding to our attitude to others, on the inside the aspects corresponding to our attitude to ourselves. You can also use other forms. For example, you can make little notes with one aspect on each side and take one every day to work on. Important is to remind us that one aspect without the other does not strengthen our Dignity Self. Basically, it is what Jesus told his disciples: love your neighbour as you love yourself. One without the other does not work.

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| Self awareness  | Be aware of others |
| Self esteem | Esteem others |
| Take yourself seriously | Take others seriously |
| Self worthiness | Regard others highly |
| Think of myself, take care of myself | Think of others, help others |
| Accept myself, feel empathy for myslef | Accept others, be empathetic |
| Be able to say 'no' to requests | Live solidarity |
| Respect yourself | Respect others |
| Ask to be heard | Listen to others |
| Be friendly to yourself | Be friendly to others |
| Be polite to yourself | Be polite to others |

You may want to add more aspects to this list or feel that some are not important for you. This is your personal way in the process of strengthening your Dignity Self.

Once we have good communication with our Dignity Self, all that remains is to discover which strengths, dreams, abilities, and desires are within us. I call this the **exploration of the aim of our soul.** That means to give a deeper meaning to our life, quite apart from the external responsibilities. When embarking on this, it is essential to take time. We will come to a more intimate acquaintance with our Dignity Self. The difference between what helps us and what, on the other hand, hinders us, will be clearer to us. In this process, it is important to recognize that even difficult situations can be of help. Some might be an important indication towards the need for a change in our concepts, or way of thinking not to impede our growth. Many happenings in our life serve our internal purpose, correspond to it and further it, often without us being aware of it.

Right at the earliest stages of living our dignity, we often suffocate our desires and visions with thoughts such as: ‘I cannot do this anyway, I don’t have time for this, this is not realistic, I am not strong enough for this, nobody would understand this, and nobody would accept this!’ In our lives we have experienced so many dismissals, have been hurt so frequently that, unconsciously, this became a part of us. Therefore, we often don’t realize the internal aim of our soul. Thus, let us learn to desire. The greatest, internal strength arises out of a personal vision. Visions, clear ideas and wishes will give us courage and help us to overcome any external control. When you make your first step on the way to find your Dignity Self, you will feel support from within and from a small beginning undreamed results can develop. We can not even imagine what wonderful surprises life has in store for us. There is so much within you that urges to develop. Your Dignity Self wants to become visible.

Dignity as a way of life is a cornerstone for a peaceful society and a peaceful world. I want to create awareness about the importance of living dignity. Let us stand together for a future in dignity for our children and grandchildren. Visions and desires are like a fire within us. Let us keep it alight and let it burn brightly. Please remember that today's presentation contains only a few hints. There is much more to discover.

I wish you all the best,

Thank you for listening.

1. Dr. Mario Brandhorst: Zur Geschichtlichkeit menschlicher Würde, Paper presented in Leibniz University Hannover, Presentation during a Workshop »Menschenwürde – Dimensionen ihrer Kontingenz« Georg-August University Göttingen Lichtenberg-Kolleg Oktober 4th 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kant Immanuel: Die Metaphysik der Sitten [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. General Assembly resolution 217 A [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gerald Hüther, Book : Würde - Was uns stark macht als Einzelne und als Gesellschaft [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Baer Udo und Frick Baer Gabriele: Deine Würde entscheidet [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Baer Udo und Frick Baer Gabriele: Deine Würde entscheidet [↑](#footnote-ref-6)