

Searching for Dignity: Human Dignity in a Post-Apartheid South African Contextⁱ

Prof L Juliana Claassens, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Department Old and New Testament, Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch, South Africa
jclaassens@sun.ac.za

1. Have You Seen Dignity?

South Africa has seen more than its share of human rights violations. And unfortunately this threat to the dignity of men, women and children did not end overnight with the end of Apartheid. One only has to read the newspapers to be persuaded of the continuing acts of injustice and violence that still mar a post-apartheid South Africa.

I am privileged to teach in a context where The Promotion of Human Dignity forms an integral part of the Faculty of Theology of Stellenbosch University's research, teaching and community involvement. The focus on human dignity is one of the initiatives that have grown out the University's Hope Project, inspired by the Millennium goals set by the United Nations such as the Eradication of Poverty and the Promotion of Democracy and Human Rights.ⁱⁱ

This commitment to human dignity relates to the constitution of South Africa that reads: "Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected" (Chapter 2.10, South African Bill of Rights) – words that are particularly poignant in light of the dehumanizing events and injustices that have marked South Africa's history of apartheid. Similar language is also found in the preamble to the United Nations declaration of Human Rights that affirms the inherent rights of all human beings in terms of "the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women." This conviction offers the basis of the organization's resolve "to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom" for all peoples and all nations.ⁱⁱⁱ

The term "human dignity" is rooted in the powerful theological claim found in Gen 1:26-27 that humans, both male and female, are created in the image of God – the *Imago Dei* signifying a profound theological insight that implies that human dignity belongs to all people regardless of factors such as skin color, gender, social status, physical or mental capabilities, and sexual orientation.^{iv} Human dignity thus constitutes a gracious gift from the Creator God – to be created in the image of God focusing the attention squarely on God's

activity rather than on human ability or achievement. The perspective that human dignity is not dependent on anything humans are or do, is a profound belief that has important implications for how we view people of all walks of life, regardless of ability, moving the conversation away from achievement or utility value. In our own society in which race matters, class matters, gender matters, sexual orientation matters, the very idea of one's createdness as foundational to be treated with honor and respect is a compelling thought indeed. .^v

To illustrate this notion of dignity, help comes from an unlikely source. In his song "Dignity," songwriter Bob Dylan narrates his search for dignity. Reflecting a context of slavery in the American South as well as ongoing human rights violations in the USA where people are killed for no reason and others are facing hunger in the land of plenty, the narrator is searching high and low and everywhere he can, asking people: "Have you seen dignity?"

This search for dignity is equally relevant in the South African context. We can think of numerous instances both past and present in which people's basic human rights have been disrespected: Situations of violence that cut across racial and socio-economic divides in which the perpetrators have trouble seeing that there is a human being standing in front of me; situations of extreme poverty in which people are living in terrible conditions without access to clean water, sanitation, adequate food, and education; instances in a post-apartheid South Africa where people continue to be discriminated based on the color of their skin, economic situation or sexual orientation not to speak of the continuing objectification and trivialization of women in the media and society at large that contributes to a culture of rape and violence that makes up many women's reality. And one only has to look at how our society treats its most vulnerable members, i.e., the lack of dignity that people with disability experience, to know that Bob Dylan speaks a word of wisdom when he says:

"I went down where the vultures feed
I would've gone deeper, but there wasn't any need
Heard the tongues of angels and the tongues of men
Wasn't any difference to me"

"The tongues of angels and the tongues of men" is a reference to 1 Corinthians 13:1: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (NRSV)." Dylan says that his search for dignity took him to where the vultures feed where all he could hear was "the tongues of mortals and of angels." The

implication of this is of course that there was no love. And where there is no love, one cannot expect to find human dignity.

2. Cultivating Compassion

So how does one go about recovering human dignity in the post-apartheid South African context in which I live and teach – a context in which one may quite often feel overwhelmed by the extent of the injustice and the lack of love? At the heart of the conversation on human dignity is people's ability to comprehend what another person is experiencing, i.e., to suffer with another as exemplified in the literal translation of the English designation "compassion" or the German "Mitleid." An essential step in recognizing the dignity of another is to be able to acknowledge another person's pain, to really suffer with the other. To experience true compassion is an essential precondition for recognizing the other's dignity, and hence, for recovering dignity in our community.

So philosopher Martha Nussbaum considers in her book *Upheavals of Thought* the crucial question of how individuals and groups may learn to have compassion with one another.^{vi} She argues that the ability to show empathy is something that we learn (or do not learn) from an early age – already in the parent/child relationship, and after that in various educational settings. Acknowledging the fact that people often have difficulty empathizing with one another across boundaries of race, class, nationality, gender and sexuality, being focused so much on their own group and their own pain that they have trouble placing themselves in somebody else's shoes, Nussbaum is convinced though that it *is* possible for people to cultivate compassion for the other. She describes three conditions that need to be present in order for one group to truly show solidarity with another group's suffering. First, one has to be convinced of the fact that what is happening with the other person or group is a serious predicament. Nussbaum writes that Aristotle's list of misfortunes that documents what impede human flourishing still rings true today: "death, bodily assault or ill-treatment, old age, illness, lack of food, lack of friends, separation from friends, physical weakness, disfigurement, immobility, reversals of expectations, absence of good prospects (86a6-13).^{vii}

In the South African context one would have to be able to say, it is truly terrible that people's basic human rights are violated; that people are living in shacks without prospects of finding meaningful employment. Or that the education system is in such disarray, failing the young people who are supposed to be the future of this country. Or that a woman is

raped every 27 seconds. The first step in recovering dignity in our communities is to recognize that everything is not right, to name the injustice and to notice people's pain.

A second important point in cultivating true compassion is that one has to be convinced that what is happening to an individual or a group is undeserved. Nussbaum writes that compassion requires "the belief that there are serious bad things that happen to people through no fault of their own, or beyond their fault."^{viii} It is however not always easy for people to recognize injustice around them. In a recent class I taught on Gender, Culture and Scripture, I showed the South African film, *Yesterday* that narrates the story of a young Zulu woman with HIV which she had contracted from her migrant worker husband, to illustrate some of the important issues arising from a conversation on HIV-AIDS as a gendered pandemic. The response of one young Afrikaans woman was particularly telling. For her, the movie helped break down some deep-seated assumptions about HIV-AIDS being associated with immorality – an assumption of course shared by many other people in this country who in the past have viewed AIDS as a gay disease or as the Zimbabwean word of HIV-AIDS would have it: a disease erroneously called "the prostitute killer."

How often does one not hear regarding the poor "They are just lazy," or in the case of rape, that the woman provoked her attacker by the way she dressed or the way she acted? In order to cultivate compassion for the other would thus require that we find ways to challenge these deep-seated assumptions that still live in our students and the communities from which they come.

Finally, according to Nussbaum at the heart of recognizing injustice and forging compassion is the ability to recognize a shared vulnerability among different groups, i.e., to be able to recognize similarities between my own situation and that of the other.^{ix} It is to truly imagine myself in the other's situation, i.e. how it would feel not to be able to provide food to my child, or to suddenly become disabled due to an accident or disease. Compassion is rooted in the ability to see the similarities between myself and the other, recognizing that we as people are more vulnerable than we like to think. As Shylock, the Jew, says it so well in the Shakespeare play, *Merchant of Venice*:

"Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs,
dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with
the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject
to the same diseases, healed by the same means,
warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as
a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?
if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison

us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?”

Shylock’s words that refer to people of different religions may also be extended to include groups from different socio-economic, racial or sexual orientation. We share the same frustrations, joys, and fears. A central aspect of cultivating compassion for one another is to seek common ground. In this regard, it is significant to see how feminist theorist Judith Butler, author of important works such as *Gender Trouble*, has extended the work she has done with regard to gender performativity to other communities that are in, what she calls, a situation of precarity, i.e., a vulnerable position due to factors such as insufficient resources, unemployment, disease, violence, and war. For instance, in her book, *Frames of War*, Butler considers the question who a society deems to be grievable and who not?^x She turns her attention to those individuals and groups who are particularly prone to injury, violence and death; who are in a situation of precarity due to unjust structures and the gross abuse of power. And in *Precarious Life*, she considers whether groups who find themselves in similarly challenging circumstances, subjugated by those in power, may not act in solidarity with one another, forming alliances across those seemingly insurmountable divides of race, gender, ethnicity and class. She asks whether is it possible for people who find themselves in one situation of precarity to be able to look further than their own plight to see the pain of people in equally difficult circumstances?^{xi}

It is noteworthy that a central aspect of Nussbaum’s argument about teaching compassion has to do with the important role of narrative. She says for instance, that in her own life, the children’s story *Black Beauty* and the American classic *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* played a significant role in offering her the first lessons in empathy– for horses and for the slaves in the American South. Nussbaum thus makes a case for the humanities in creating a culture of compassion that is in her mind essential for a society to recognize people’s dignity. Herself trained in the Classics, Nussbaum’s work on moral formation is interspersed with examples from the classic Greek and Latin literature. Literature indeed offers a great opportunity of re-engaging the imagination, to “cultivate the ability to imagine the experiences of others and to participate in their sufferings.”^{xii} She writes:

To promote empathy across specific social barriers, we need to turn to works of art that present these barriers and their meaning in a highly concrete way... In that way, it exercises the muscles of the imagination, making people capable of inhabiting for a time, the world of a different person, and seeing the meaning of events in that world from the outsider’s viewpoint.^{xiii}

And as Nussbaum rightly points out, if one is able to allow someone else into one's imagination, it is much more difficult to wish him/her harm.

3. Conclusion

Bob Dylan ends his song "Dignity" with the following words:

"Soul of a nation is under the knife
death is standing in the doorway of life"

These words speak prophetically to the many situations in South Africa and the other places around the world where the search for dignity can be described in terms of a life and death situation. May we continue to work for justice – by writing and teaching help to cultivate compassion so essential for promoting a world where justice and dignity for all is realized.

ⁱ This paper is adapted from the Gunther Wittenberg Lecture presented at the Department of Religion, Philosophy and Classics, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, 23 April 2012.

ⁱⁱ For more information on Stellenbosch University's Hope Project see <http://diehoopprojek.co.za/hope/Pages/default.aspx>

ⁱⁱⁱ R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead, "Contextualizing Human Dignity," in *God and Human Dignity* (eds. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 1.

^{iv} James Luther Mays notes that even though the "image of God" occurs only twice in the biblical traditions, "its actuality is a structural theme of the biblical account of God and humankind," "The Self in the Psalms and the Image of God," in *God and Human Dignity* (eds. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 38-39.

^v Soulen and Woodhead, "Contextualizing Human Dignity," 12, 24.

^{vi} Martha C. Nussbaum's definition of compassion draws on that of Aristotle who views compassion as "a painful emotion directed at another person's misfortune or suffering" (Rhet 1385b13ff), *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 301-306.

^{vii} Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 306-307.

^{viii} Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 314.

^{ix} Nussbaum notes that "this is a judgment of similar possibilities; compassion concerns those misfortunes which according to Aristotle "the person himself might expect to suffer, either himself or one of his loved ones," (1385b14), *Upheavals of Thought*, 315-316.

^x Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009). In this book, Butler considers why in a case such as the Iraq War, the lives of certain Iraqi's and Muslims are considered less grievable. She holds to the precariousness of all life that forms the basis for resisting the notion that some matter more than others, pp. 13-15.

^{xi} Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 43-49.

^{xii} Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 426-433. Cf. also Myriam Miedzian who quotes Hannah Arendt as having said that the lack of empathy exists in the absence of imagination, "Beyond the masculine mystique." In *Gender violence: Interdisciplinary perspectives*. (eds. L. O'Toole et al.; New York: New York University Press, 2007), 428.

^{xiii} Nussbaum, *Upheaval of Thought*, 431.