**Human Dignity in Pacific**

***What is Human Dignity?***

Dignity, and the respect that accompanies it, has always been easily bestowed on certain fortunate individuals. After all, it is normal to show respect for persons who have title, position, or recognized ability. We know story after story of such people being treated with honor, feted, crowned, and even apotheosized. But that is no more than recognizing social status. The story probably does not differ so much whether we’re on a Pacific Island way back then or anywhere else in the world in our own day. “You have your rock stars, movie legends and Hall-of-Famers, but we have our own island heroes,” our Pacific Islander friends might say. A Hawaiian chief might be honored a little differently from Kanye West or Taylor Swift, but in the end every society enshrines its heroes in its own cultural way. After all, it’s only natural to celebrate individuals for what they have achieved or the prominent status they have inherited by birth.

But what about our respect for those who appear to have nothing special to offer their society? How do we regard the mediocre student, the less than gorgeous woman, the kid who can’t carry a tune and has no hope of ever making a sports team? Or, to take it a step further, how much respect does our society show for the disabled, the handicapped, the deformed–in other words, those at the tail end of the social spectrum? Our answer to this question may be a far better measure of what we are calling “human dignity.”

Human dignity is reverence for the value of every human being, regardless of social status, personal gifts, achievements or recognition. Human dignity is founded on the belief that all human beings are brothers and sisters, regardless of nationality, language or anything else. Human beings derive their value, as all the major religions would assert, from the belief that we are all created by God. It took human society a few thousand years to come to this realization and to find a way of formulating it, but we now have a term (human dignity) to represent this noble ideal.

Human dignity, in turn, justifies human rights. When people are divided up and given a value based on characteristics like class, gender, religion, and so on, this results in unequal societies where discrimination runs rampant. People assigned a higher value get preferential treatment. Anyone who doesn’t fit into the privileged category is abandoned or oppressed. We’ve witnessed what happens in places where human dignity isn’t seen as inherent and human rights aren’t universal. While the privileged few in these societies flourish, society as a whole suffers significantly.

The rights that derive from human dignity, as they would be framed in our contemporary society, could include freedom of religion, care for the elderly, freedom of speech, right to marry, child rights, support for vulnerable groups (eg, disabled), anti-discrimination, right to education and housing, food security, right to a fair wage, and so many more things. But to list these is to follow the trail of Western society and its preoccupation with rights. We’re meeting here today to take another pathway, one that is more likely to be followed by Pacific Islanders.

***Another Way of Looking at the Matter***

We may have the language and other tools needed to make an assessment of human dignity in modern contemporary society. But that still leaves us with the question central to this presentation and of major importance in our entire conference: What measure should we use for gauging human dignity in island cultures?

Don’t bother checking the island dictionary for a translation of “human dignity.” The concept was never really formulated as such, and was only introduced through contact with Westerners, who themselves had recently invented ther term. Any emphasis on the “rights” of the individual is simply foreign to Pacific cultures. Even the notion of the autonomy of the individual is counter-cultural for a traditional islander. How can the individual good become the focal point of an ethnic system when the cultural emphasis is on the family, the lineage, the community? That old African saying can just as easily be applied to the Pacific: *I am because we are*.

Hence, we are handicapped by the lack of language, and the concepts behind it, in island societies to describe the theme of this conference. But even so, there are cultural clues we can use to gauge the importance that traditional island culture might place on what we in the West would now term “human dignity.”

Let’s recall the universal dimension of human dignity that was mentioned above. Suppose I don’t owe you any special respect by virtue of your status. Suppose there is nothing important you can do for me. What regard should I have for you, in that case, and why?

Rather than trying to force island characteristics into a term of later invention that originated in a far different cultural setting, let’s consider a cluster of typical Micronesian practices, together with the values that underlie these practices, and see what they might suggest on the respect islanders have for all persons.

***The Micronesian Psyche***

What follows is drawn from personal observations of mine on how island thinking differs from the usual American mindset. Over the years, I compiled a list of striking differences that I called “The Micronesian Psyche.” The notes evolved into a book that was published a few years ago under the title *Making Sense of Micronesia*. From the following items, grouped under five headings, we might be able to gain some insight into how Micronesians regard the human person and the values linked to humans.

1) Personal identity, with the sense of self-worth that accompanies it, has deep social roots in the family.

*Importance of social identity***.** The Micronesian is first and foremost a member of a social group. Everything that he or she is stems from this social identity. Group maintenance is to be preferred to individual achievement. Fitting in is critical for any Micronesian. A corollary is that privacy does not have nearly the same value for an islander that it does for a Westerner.

*Self-esteem.* The bedrock value for Micronesians is the sense of membership in their social group, especially their family. Americans assume that self-esteem, or the sense of personal worth, is based on one's individual achievements or abilities. This is not true in traditional Micronesian societies. Self-esteem is grounded in knowing that one has a secure place in the family.

2) Deference and self-effacement are strong cultural values.

*Calling attention to oneself***.** To call attention to oneself is risky (even by volunteering in class) since it exposes one to ridicule—for failing if one should give the wrong answer, or for attempting to stand out if one is correct. To make blatant attempts to get ahead individually is to invite opprobrium. It is the tallest tree that is in danger of being struck by lightning, and the crab that climbs farthest up the side of the pot that will be pulled down by all the rest. Bragging or overt self-aggrandizement is always in bad taste. The individual is expected to let his deeds speak for themselves.

3) Great importance is placed on cultivating personal relations.

*Friends and wealth***.** Personal relationships are more valued than material wealth. The latter passes with time, but the former endures. The main purpose of having money is to give it away, thus transferring it into social capital. Moreover, even the key to one's material well-being lies in those relationships that guarantee assistance when one may need this in the future. Consider, for instance, that children are seen as a better form of social security than bank savings.

*Being attuned to social signals.* From early childhood Micronesians are taught to scan the horizon for social signals (eg, of approval or disapproval, of the unexpressed needs of those around them). They are generally much quicker in replying to unexpressed needs than Westerners. On the other hand, because their awareness is diffused to pick up these signals, they can find it difficult to block out what Americans consider extraneous noise and focus on a single subject. This makes concentration on studies difficult.

*Fear of criticism***.** People are guarded about making critical remarks, even obliquely critical remarks, for fear of disrupting personal relationship. They fear that word of the remark will make its way back to the person they are criticizing through another. When a person hears something negative–eg, details on a suicide case for verification–the first question asked will be “Who told you that?” Hence, the source or channel of the discrediting information is regarded as more important than its accuracy.

4) It is critical to protect those relationships that are threatened and repairing those that may be broken.

*Coping with conflict.* Small Pacific island societies are designed to prevent conflict, if only because they are not well prepared to deal with it once it occurs. They prevent conflict by restricting individualism in the community. Quirky artistic types who are liable to challenge the group do not find acceptance in this type of community. As conflict threatens, persons usually respond by withdrawing from the fray (eg, by quitting school when trouble arises, leaving home in the face of tensions with parents, and even committing suicide).

*Conflict resolution.* In longstanding controversies, as over land, the general attitude seems to be that time will heal. There is no rush to bring the matter to a head for fear of provoking a violent response from one or the other party. In cases where blood has been shed, however, there is a sense of urgency to heal the rupture before it turns into a feud. The family, not the individual who committed the deed, is responsible for making amends, and the reconciliation is handled on a family-to-family basis, often with an intermediary to effect an understanding. It is assumed that the family of the miscreant will discipline him themselves.

5) Inclusiveness is a key cultural value in a society that prides itself on welcoming others.

*Inclusiveness.* There are very few social events that are closed. It is unnecessary to apologize for bringing a friend, or even half a dozen, to a party. Even in basketball games, it is considered bad form to rule out the late arrivals from shooting for slots in the next game. Generally island societies are inclusive rather than restrictive. Even the traditional practice of adoption indicates this, for children acquire additional parents rather than replacing their birth parents with others. Likewise, people are willing to accommodate almost anyone who shows up on their shores, regardless of nationality or personal foibles.

***“Human Dignity” From an Island Point of View***

Using the practices and underlying values in island society that were cited above, we can formulate the following conclusions on how Micronesian society might express its own view of human dignity.

* The individual in island society doesn’t count for much on its own. All individuals are the product of their family and social group, and their worth must be measured by the strength of their ties with the family or the other groups that form them. When it comes to human dignity, then, the person must be allowed a place in society together with the family that supports him.
* The person need not worry about himself and anything that might suggest a sense of self-entitlement. All self-interest will do is deprive one of opportunities to keep his friendships and his critical relationship with his own family intact. With respect to human dignity, the rights that stem from this and that are usually articulated in the West need not be highlighted in island society. The fundamental question is whether society has room for the individual and his support group.
* Emphasis is placed on the importance of personal relationshipa–that is, face-to-face contact rather than an affirmation of the conceptual rights of the other. It is as if the culture is saying: cherish those relationships and treat people kindly, even if the island society doesn’t provide the philosophical or religious reasoning behind this directive.
* It is important not only to nurture existing personal relationships, but also to repair those relationships that have been damaged, both within and outside of the family. These personal ties, after all, are vulnerable. The application to human dignity might be expressed this way: the individual deserves not just a home and the means of survival, but the positive personal relationship with others that are just as important for the individual’s survival.
* The island cultures place great importance on inclusiveness, rather than the opposite. This means an openness toward befriending others, even from very different backgrounds, and welcoming them into island society. To put this in terms of our theme, the islands should provide a home for anyone and everyone, natural-born or adopted into the culture. This underscores the universal dimension of that respect for human beings that is so characteristic of the Pacific.

In brief, the island viewpoint may come down to this. We don’t have a charter of human rights, but we do have a culture of tolerance for the choices that individuals make. If someone we know happens to be gay, or a practicing Buddhist, or show other signs of unconventional behavior, we accept these departures from the ordinary because we accept him or her. The personal ties that we value so highly in our island culture dispose us toward such tolerance.

Moreover, we don’t value the individual so much *in se*, but much more as a part of our functioning society. After all, the individual stems from the family, is shaped by family and friends, and eventually returns to the earth from which he came. There is no need to remove him from this social framework and bestow on him individual rights. Indeed, that might have the harmful effect of inflating his ego and altering the societal framework that we have instilled in him from the start.

The island culture offers more than an open door to visitors. It also provides the means by which they may be incorporated into society–through adoption into families, consolidation into social groups, and possibly even bestowal of a chiefly title.

Traditional island society may have little room for the kind of individualism that Western society has fostered in recent centuries. Even so, at its deepest core, our island culture endorses the same values of tolerance and acceptance that others do, even if it may be expressed differently. In short, islanders might say: What you call human dignity, we honor as well, even if we describe it in other terms.

***Postscript***

Permit me to offer a few words of personal testimony to support the conclusion that I have tried to present above.

Why is that so many outsiders fall in love with the islands? Certainly not just the beauty of the place, as stunning as it is, but something personal. I tell people all the time that over the course of my stay in the islands I felt adopted by the people of the place. Others who have been here for years say the same thing. Islanders are quick to laugh at what strikes you as humorous. Likewise, their mouth drops and their eyes become moist when you relate a personal tragedy. They seem to be bonding in the most natural way, implicitly letting you know that what makes you happy makes them happy too. Similarly, your misfortunes are their misfortunes.

I vividly remember the time I apologized to one of my former high school students for my insensitivity–“tough love” it could be called–during my early years at Xavier. He waved me off, telling me “Don’t worry. We knew all the while what was in your heart.” After years of experience in the islands, I don’t think that’s a far-fetched claim. In fact, I often wondered whether the island people knew me better than I know myself.

How about that as personal testimony to the respectable ranking of island society on the chart of what we today call human dignity?

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