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**HUMAN DIGNITY IN TODAY'S WORLD:**  
**OUR VITAL STRUGGLE**

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A Social Psychologist by training he was acting Chairman and Chairman of the Department of Ethics of the three Ethical Culture Schools from 1951 to 1976; taught in the Encampment for Citizenship of the American Ethical Union and lectured in and co-Directed the Leaders Training Institute with Prof. Horace Friess and Dr. Howard Radest. He has been a Lecturer for the New York City Police Department on "Ethics and Violence" and addressed the Nursing Schools of Montefiore Hospital and New York Hospital.

Dr. Spetter studied at the Amsterdam City University in his native country, the Netherlands; was awarded a fellowship at the Leicester University, England, and received his Doctoral Degree from the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York. Founder of the Riverdale Mental Health Clinic in 1960, he serves both on its Board and its Professional Advisory Council.

He is a Clinical Member of the American Association for Family Therapy and serves as a Family Therapist. He is a member of the American Psychological Association and its Social Psychology and Personality Division and of the Academy of Religion and Mental Health.

He was co-author of *Bio Ethics and Human Rights* (Eds. Bandman, Little Brown, NY) and of *A Lively Connection* (Ed. Neuhaus, Ethica Press NY).

During World War II Dr. Spetter served in sectors of the Dutch and French Resistance. Arrested in 1943, he was condemned to death because of his work on behalf of Allied Intelligence, subsequently he was a prisoner of the Nazis at the Buchenwald and Auschwitz Concentration camps. After his liberation he served in the Dutch Security Branch of the G2 - G3 section of the U.S. Army, Seine HQ and later functioned as a witness for the U.S. Prosecution at the International War Criminal Trials in Nuremberg, Germany. (Gen. Telford Taylor) He was awarded the Resistance Cross by the Government of the Netherlands.

A working member of the War Control Center since its inception he was a participant in the White House Conference on Disarmament. A Member of the Board of the International Humanist and Ethical Union Dr. Spetter has represented the AEU since 1957 and has delivered keynote addresses at the Congresses of the IHEU in Oslo, Amsterdam, and Hanover. He is an Alternate Delegate for the IHEU at the United National Non-Governmental Organizations and a Member of Amnesty International and the World Council on Peace and Religion.

Recent addresses were the Brown Lecture at Manhattan College on: *The Holocaust and the Sanctity of Life* and at the Free University in Amsterdam on: *To Rescue the Human Spirit*.

Among Dr. Spetter's many publications are: *The Courage to Stand Alone* (NY 1960); *Man, the Reluctant Brother* (NY 1967); *Bruder Wider Willen* (Barth Verlag, Munich, Germany 1969); *To Deny The Night* (NY 1970); *De Dag Ligt Nog Voor Ons* (Stockum, The Hague, Holland 1970); *Symbolism, Ritual and Man* (Rekenschap, Utrecht, Holland, 1971); *Sounds of the Heart* (Columbia Press, NY, 1980); *Coping With Our Darker Hours* (NYSEC, NY, 1994); *The Work is Peace in: Building a World Community* (Ed. Kurtz Prometheus, Buffalo, NY 1990). *Humanists Say "Yes" to Life*. Humetisk Forb. Norge, (Oslo, 1980); *Our Hidden Oneness* (NYSEC, NY, 1994).

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Dr. Matthew Ies Spetter

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DIGNITY AND LIBERAL FUTURE

A few years ago a group of sociologists in California set out to measure what—as they put it—“*matters most in people’s lives today.*” In a book entitled *Habits of the Heart*, they wrote that the questions people came up with were very simple. Like: “*How ought we to live?*”: “*Who are we?*”: “*What shall we teach our children?*” In short, said the sociologists, what people are asking for is “*How can I preserve a coherent life which makes sense to me?*”

Now, obviously, we in the Ethical Culture movement don’t have the answers. But I think we have a pathway to show, a direction, a sensitive approach to such questions. For affirming human dignity is a positive and enabling aim. It allows for a certain perspective of optimism. But what exactly does human dignity require from us? Can we spell it out? What is it? Where does the idea come from?”

In Ethical Culture we often say that our main faith is in “*the worth and dignity*” of every person. Is that a valid faith or is it mainly hopeful thinking? Can it help us to reorient ourselves? I want to deal with these questions in two ways. First, the

philosophical underpinning. Second, its practical value for us today, whether it is worth struggling for.

The word “*dignity*” comes from the Latin word “*dignus*” which means that which is worthy of honor. A person who behaves honorably, who is reliable and trustworthy, is a person of dignity. The idea that all of us have this capacity was first fully formulated at the end of the 15th century (1486) by the Italian humanist Pico Della Mirandola. He wrote a study which he named “*Oration on the Dignity of Man*” (*De Hominis Dignitate*).

Since the Roman Catholic church was all powerful he had to be careful in claiming human autonomy, human self-sufficiency. The inquisitors were always watchful....so, Mirandola presented his thesis as if it were an oration by God, the Creator to humankind, saying: “...*Thou are confined by no bounds...Thou wilt fix limits for thyself...I have placed thee at the center of the world...The molder and maker of thyself...Thou canst grow upward from thy soul’s reason into the higher natures which are divine....*”<sup>1</sup>

What Mirandola expressed was the foundation of today’s humanism and liberal thought. Namely, that by our ability to reason we can be free, we can grow, we can make and mold our own lives. We are not at the mercy of the Gods or the angels. The human mind sets us free so that our soul can soar into the “*higher natures*” that gives us dignity. Human beings are worthy to be honored because of what they may become.

It was that faith which during the French Revolution was codified in the declaration of “*human rights and the citizen*” (*Lesdroits de l’homme et du citoyen*) and in our own Declaration of Independence “...*we hold these truths to be self-evident—that all men are created equal: That they are endowed by their Creator with inherent and unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*”—and so forth. It was the

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1(In: C.G. Wallis. Bobbs-Merrill. Indianapolis, IN 1965)

foundation as well for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights endorsed by the United Nations in 1968. What all this means is that human dignity depends upon the ability to pursue one's individual best in an open society: each man, each woman "*the molder and maker of oneself*" as *Mirandola* had put it. And not just self, but the self in community with others, sustaining the dignity and worth of every other person. In short: the ethical ideal.

Why is that liberal faith in such disrepute in America today? Why is there such a growing appeal for the new orthodoxies whether in politics or religion? Why is liberal, humanist thought scoffed at? Is it because the humanist ideals are unattainable and people would rather seek for faith in all kinds of "*peace of mind*" teachings than accept the burden of free choice? The television preachers, the Christian coalition, the passionate evangelists?

Now, I think liberal thought is far from dead and that Humanists today have to learn to have far more confidence in the great, liberating ideals of our origin and their dynamic call. But it is far too simplistic to put the decline of humanist influence at the doorstep of fundamentalist religious movements. They have caught the interest of so many because those of liberal religious opinion have failed to set goals that provided involvement, hope and the satisfaction of belonging. In our liberal groups there are few coherent programs to pull people together or to have a direct impact upon their lives.

Liberal movements have allowed themselves to become stagnant, floating with the tides rather than militantly drawing upon our appeal as reformers. As a result we may have too much nostalgia for the times that were, and far less forward looking risk-taking for the future we believe in. Such complacency ill behooves those who see with alarm the growth of fundamentalism the world over, from Russia to the Middle East and from Latin American to our own country. Make no mistake there are Jerry Fallwell's today on every continent.

When personal lives become aimless, negativism, cynicism

and retreat become endemic. Liberal humanists who have chosen the dignity of humankind as their base have to regain the zest of a moral appeal, both in free thought, economics and practical political goals. We must never forget that any of us can only believe in values which do not just pertain to our own narrow interests, but which also refer to purposes based on unchanging aspirations and hopes. The ethical is always a direct as well as an ideational proposition pointing to the glimpses beyond the immediate. The idea of human dignity is of such quality, it clarifies what we live for and so can provide us with the warmth of the longing of the heart. It is this dimension which we neglect far too often to our own detriment.

### A MILITANT HUMANISM

Now liberals have a nefarious habit of fighting with each other. To some it is their favorite indoor sport. But the real issue is to fight against resignation. Liberal humanism is not dead as long as we are earnest in wanting to make for the difference, whether in work-opportunity or health care. Morally we cannot allow, nor afford to lose the gains that have been achieved with such struggle and suffering and which are threatened, whether in Medicare or social security. Losing the social edge that we have won is what dehumanizes society and teases out the wreckers of freedom. Hate groups, racist groups are symptoms of a social disease, they are happening because of demoralization which makes many a frustrated man or woman worship guns, militias, playing at war. The destructive trends in society must never be sanctioned by the silence of those of good purpose. Only a militant humanism can safeguard the dignity of each person. Allow me to be specific.

We all know that arsonists are burning down black churches in the south, thirty-one so far. Just in one week last month twelve black churches went up in flames.

Why could we as liberal humanists not start a national movement to rebuild those churches? The newspapers and television have hardly concentrated on those crimes. Why are not

the FBI and the U.S. Army mobilized to find the criminals?

If the churches here in New York or in Washington D.C., were being burned to the ground would there not be a groundswell of outrage? Why not for the black churches? We all know that the church in the rural areas are the religious but also the social and cultural center for the poor black communities. Terrorism and racism are a curse. Don't we remember that the Nazis in Germany first burned books, then temples and then people?

Could we as Ethical Humanists, believers in human dignity, not be the vanguard of a national program to heal the wounds? Here is an opportunity beyond the merely self-serving. Compare it with former President Carter's organization called "*Habitat for Humanity*". Tens of thousands of people have been inspired to build homes for others who otherwise would never have had a home of their own.

We have to learn to feed into the spiritual hunger of millions of people to transcend their sense of helplessness, to help repair and bring about an universal culture of humanity. Humanist-liberalism is not dead if we will it so.

It is true that men like Pat Buchanan or Pat Robertson are more entertaining to many who have come to believe that liberalism is the source of all their troubles. Demagogues are trying to cash in on the fears of many, by regressive scapegoating, racism and antisemitism. We need to be vigilant but not afraid. Would people really want to go back to the times before the New Deal; would Americans stand for resegregating black people and other minorities; do those who brought about the so called "*Republican Revolution*" rather have Rush Limbaugh or Gordon Liddy as models for their children? Do they want to abolish social security and screen America off from the rest of the world; do they want to abolish the separation of church and state? I could go on.

No, the humanist gains of the centuries are not dead at all. Its historical base in the declaration of the "*dignity of man*" of 400

years ago, is as vividly crucial now as it was then at the beginning of the Renaissance. The values expressed in humanism are not political values. They are values that have their origin in the drive to make the well-being of individual men and women, like us, a reality. Whatever people's philosophical or religious differences.

Here are a few of these basic humanist values.

1. That human beings and human societies can grow and change for the better, without supernatural intervention.
2. That secular values—values of this world—can promote human development for better ethical relationships and norms.
3. That by the use of our minds, our intellects we can rescue the human spirit, so that we live with tolerance and respect for one another in a more just social order in which the pursuit of happiness is open to all.
4. That hope for some happiness in our lives depends upon what expectations we build for ourselves—not by theology, but by human effort.

## BEYOND RELATIVISM

I am sure you can add suggestions of your own. The basic issue before us is whether that humanist ground is still tenable after we have lived through the horrors of two world wars and the slaughter of the innocents by Stalin, Hitler or Mao Tse Tung. Religion as an institution has not been able to do anything about that dehumanization process of our era. The sanctity of the inner life has been trampled upon but too easily by the killers whether in the German extermination camps, Rwanda, Somalia or Bosnia. When in the last few years a beautiful cosmopolitan city like Sarajevo was being destroyed, with

uncounted thousands killed and the world watching—we had a terrible example of the contagion of cowardice and cynicism.

The introduction of “*ethnic cleansing*” by both Serbs and Muslims was borrowed from Hitler’s insanity of wanting to make the world “*Judenrein*” “*cleansed*” of Jews, with the butchers as high priests of death. Not even now, are the Serbian war criminals brought to trial. Why can’t the NATO armies in Serbia not take them into custody, as Israel did with Eichman? The triumph of humanist values or of democracy is not certain at all. We may actually live in a time very much like the twenties, when the dark forces were gathering world-wide. Nor does science or space exploration give us guarantees at all. Human dignity must come from deeper layers, those that lie beyond cynical relativism, beyond the celebrations of death. Much will depend on how militant will be those of our generations who have seen and understood that human worth cannot be reduced for anyone if civilization is to survive.

That is the challenge of our time. I believe in the human urge for quest, for courage, for the free-mind to seek ways even in the wilderness of much that is chaotic. We are tested in these years of our lives, but we need not let the paradoxes overwhelm us. Human endurance is as much real as disappointment.

A concrete example of proposing a practical humanist program happened last week at the mass meeting for children in Washington D.C. Close to 300,000 people came for an inter-faith, inter-racial, inter-political rally to stand up for our children. They represented 3,700 organizations united for social renewal in America. They were a new power coalition to defend the 8500 children abused each day, the one-in-five children living in abject poverty.<sup>2</sup> They refused to remain silent, they refused to allow the further disintegration of human dignity. They committed themselves to change. Human societies are very fragile. They can crumble if there are no counter forces mobilized to the neglect of decent norms.

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<sup>2</sup>*The New York Times*. June 2.

I heartily agree with the latest encyclical of the Pope in which he spoke out against what he called the “*culture of death*.” He lambasted the scandalous inequity between the rich and the poor, the millions forced into hunger and malnutrition the world over. He included both the irresponsible tampering with the world ecology and the fact that the needs of far too many of the elderly and disabled are seen as “*too burdensome*”, while untold wealth and luxury is piled up elsewhere. He called his encyclical an “*evangelium vitae*”—an outcry for life. Retrenchment can only be overcome by a militant engagement that strengthens the human bond. That is what human dignity means to us as well. It is the hard cutting edge of humanism. We are not a “*peace of mind*” movement, but a movement that seeks the moral development in people like ourselves who say “*yes*” to life, whatever our imperfections. Our world needs one ethic, the ethic that promotes life. Not one ideology or religion which fundamentalism propose again in many nations. But one ethic that motivates for good action; for programs that address the individual. An universal coalition beyond the stone-age thinking of “*them*” versus “*us*”—a coalition—here on earth—to give lives direction and so defies death by new perfectives. Changing one’s mind-set is probably the most difficult change any of generation can be asked for.

Here is an example. A friend of mine who has risen to the top of a worldwide business recently sent me an article on such mind-set change. To the article he had clipped a personal note that read: “*So that is what you have been teaching all these years?*” The article dealt with the relationship between one’s rights and one’s responsibilities. A critical ethical issue.

For any coherent community there has to be a balance. Those who focus primarily upon their rights without accepting their obligations weaken the sense of shared purpose and so negate commitment to a common good, And what is the common good? It is the value of what can be of benefit to the largest number of people.

The author, Dr. Keshavan Nair a native of India and a management consultant, used the example of the great India leader, Mahatma Gandhi. He became a leader of his people because he embodied the better human capacity—the impulse for a decent serving life. Gandhi insisted on living among the poor because he felt he could not effectively struggle against discrimination if he had not experienced discrimination himself. Only when he had understood in depth what the needs were of the many disadvantaged in India, did he feel that he had the ability to minister to them and to help them to regain a sense of self-respect. His statement was: “*just as our rights are inalienable rights, so is our responsibility to treat others as ourselves beyond dispute*”. Faith in that principle of reciprocity is central to us too, of course.

One of his strategies was to encourage poor tenant farmers to spin and weave cloth. Thus, while receiving economic assistance they learned to also help themselves. He demanded that the rest of India would give up refined factory made cloth for the coarser handwoven material made by the farmers. Thus both parties were involved in a higher social obligation to one another thereby strengthening the awareness of a communal effort. Of course that did not resolve the grinding poverty and the cast system in India where even today there is child slave labor but at least a beginning of social consciousness, rights balanced by responsibilities.

This focus removed the resentment of the privileged against those who needed economic help. They were not asking for assistance without giving something back in return. They did not need to feel humiliated. Each sector could comprehend better that by making a contribution to the community as a whole they were establishing their dignity of being partners in their own right.

Compare that with the rage today in our country against the welfare system, and the alienation on the other hand of those who are dependent upon it. Commitment to shared obligation creates an environment of cooperation and that is what Gandhi was trying to teach the Indian nation. A higher level of ethical

sensitivity and action.

Compare it with what is happening today in corporate America. Downsizing and laying-off millions of productive people without providing training for future occupations is the exact opposite of community building. By destroying people's hope to be able to provide for their families, the corporate structure encourages despair. The fabric of society is damaged as well as the lives of individuals. Shortsighted selfishness invites class warfare.

In today's world, what we now call "*the information age,*" all levels of society are intertwined by sheer necessity. The future of the entire economic framework depends upon a very different standard than advantaging the few at the expense of the many. Gandhi's example stressed that moral progress is possible only when the dignity of each person is far more important than competition in the race for ever more wealth for the smallest portion of the nation. "*Human dignity*" is not an abstraction—not just words spoken with solemnity. It pertains to the practice of living.

### BUILDING A PIER

A society aiming at accumulating power to maintain the status of the privileged is a society in which caring for one another is looked upon as a charity instead of as the central human obligation. The rewards of communal caring are those of moral growth. Whereas the opposite creates selfishness, exploitation and the destruction of the sense of dignity of the many.

We see the result of such moral destruction in today's growing violence in America; the sexual abuse of women and children; the addictions and the lack of compassion and civility. Just listen to some of the political rhetoric, with its accusations, smears, hostility and distrust. How can one hope to further the common good of our civilization when with unrestrained hostility political leaders tear at the very fiber of our nation by demeaning one another. Is not one of the major rules of social relations that one treats another with the respect one expects for oneself?

A short time before Gandhi, was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic, much as Yitzhak Rabin was recently in Israel,—Gandhi was asked what he considered the central message of his life, he answered: “*My life is my message* “. The values he lived and died for were that simple, and that is far reaching even for us today. For human societies make progress only, when they keep alive the ideals and the hope, that all of us are enabled to draw upon our potential for better standards in our families, in our work, in our communities.

To my friend who sent me that article with the note saying: “*so, that is what you have been teaching all these years*”, I can respond: “*yes,*” I do not know what the purpose or destiny of this world is. But I do know that the main hindrances and barriers to betterment are the limitations we set upon ourselves and our societies. It is that ingrained tendency to think little of ourselves that holds us back. But such is not our inevitable fate. As did those who broke into a new life pattern in the Renaissance and who proclaimed the dignity of the human being, we too can be pathbreakers and overcome the lethargy of nihilism that still keeps us down. Of course, I hope my friend, will agree with the quest of our humanist outlook and help us to stop the flight from values which safeguard the worth of every person. For in the self-discovery, I am sure, lie the possibilities of a faith for living.

That is approaching one another in terms of what each of us can bring to life, evoke not just yearning for wholeness, but steering our lives in such ways that we help to bring it into reality. It is only by concrete social action that we stimulate the courage in one another, by translating fine ideals into personal involvement. Each of us is needed to create the possibilities for a worthwhile human existence. Growing self-knowledge guarantees nothing. As a matter of fact it can lead to stifling self-absorption unless what we understand about ourselves serves the quality of how we actually behave and build human bonds.

I was greatly impressed by the dignity of Israel’s Prime Minister Peres who after his defeat in the recent election was

asked what his purpose was to be in the future. He said: *“I was thinking of myself as the builder of a pier towards peace, in the turbulent waters of threats and violence, just a modest pier, knowing that a pier is really an unfinished bridge. You can already see the other shore. Of course, you know that there may be mines hidden in the land across. You know the dangers, but if you want to build peace, you do not abandon the road.”*

Those wise words bring me to the conclusion of these few thoughts about human dignity. The philosophy and the practice.

I end with a personal example of a daughter holding high the dignity of her father who was stricken with Alzheimer’s disease. Her statement is particularly fitting this Sunday because this past Thursday was D-day, June 6th, and her father was one of those young man who liberated Europe from the yoke of fascism. They were so young—they had to throw their poor bodies against the wall of steel and concrete which Hitler had built around Europe. I was part of that generation which had to learn to fight the curse of Nazism and so I feel particularly close and grateful to those men now lingering in the Veteran’s hospitals. The daughter I quote from is Mary Rodd Furbee, a television producer, of West Virginia, a young woman with a dear heart.<sup>3</sup>

*Last week I sang to my seventy-five-year-old father, who has Alzheimer’s disease.*

*I took his hands, looked into his half-closed eyes, and sang ‘Red River Valley’. It was his favorite song. Slowly he raised his head, opened his eyes, gazed up at me like a lost child. For an hour he gazed at me, transfixed with a joy so powerful that tears streamed down his face....*

*Twice during these years the V.A. has discharged him to nursing homes....(then) he was sent back to the last stop on*

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3(In: newsletter, *The Alzheimer Association*. New York Chapter. May 1996.

*the line from crazy old soldiers: to sterile wards smelling of urine, body odor and antiseptic; to colorless day rooms rimmed with gaunt old men in stained and tattered hospital pajamas, who sit in wheel-chairs and do nothing all day...*

*The restless distant father of my childhood in the decade before his illness worked hard to mend fences with his children, and took his beloved grandchildren for countless walks in the park.*

*Both men—the formidable father of my childhood and my daughter's gracious old grandfather are now gone.*

*Here in the same body, is a helpless man—child who spends his days and nights fighting a battle for dignity he cannot win.*

*The old soldiers on my father's ward are neither sainted heroes nor spent shells. They are human beings still, who did the best they knew how for their children and their community. They need us to fight their battles for dignity and win. There can be no escaping. It's our turn now.*

It is this message of decency and courage that I leave with you. For each of us in his or her place, can so affirm human dignity by the ways in which we commit our lives.