

The Right Way: Lost and Found

When asked if they think things in this country are going in the right direction, Americans say—by a two-to-one margin—that we’re on the wrong track. Echoing Dante’s mid-life lament, we find ourselves “in a dark wood; far off course, the right way lost.” So the question now is how do we find our way back? Is new leadership enough to put America back on course, or will it take a deeper, more fundamental change to lead us out of this "dark wood"?

The headlines chronicle the ills that plague us: Corporate corruption, lobbying scandals, sexual predators exposed in our churches and now in Congress, domestic spying, bullying in the workplace and schools, and more. Think Enron, Columbine, Katrina, and Abu Ghraib—an alarming and seemingly diverse array of abuses. But step back for a broader view and the common thread among them is evident. All are abuses of power. Or more precisely, they are abuses of the power inherent in rank.

It happens everyday, everywhere. A boss ridicules an employee; a customer demeans a waiter; a coach bullies a player; a doctor disparages a nurse; a teacher humiliates a student; a parent belittles a child. Those with higher rank and more power--the *somebodies* of the world—put down and exploit those with lower rank and less power—the *nobodies*. We call race-based injustice racism and gender-based abuse sexism, and branding them as such was a critical step in galvanizing the fight against both in the last century. But today “nobody” is the new N-word. Upon closer examination, we find that much of what is now labeled racism or sexism goes deeper than color or gender differences. It is rooted in the fact that the target of abuse lacks the protection and privilege of rank. But if we are to fight back, it needs a name, so by analogy, let’s call it *rankism*. Naming it and putting it in the spotlight, is half the battle.

Despite rankism’s pervasiveness, we’re as blind to its cancerous effects as we were to those of racism and sexism before they were named and de-legitimized. Embedded in businesses and schools, in church and state, rankism is the source of much of the indignity that corrodes our lives. In the classroom, repeated indignities sap students’ will to learn. In the workplace, they make employees feel like replaceable nobodies, impeding performance and lowering productivity. In civic affairs, rankism’s corruption erodes public trust. And in the international arena, it breeds contempt that leaves victims thirsting for revenge.

Eliminating rank is not an option. That makes about as much sense as saying we should do away with race or gender. When earned and exercised appropriately, rank is a legitimate, virtually indispensable tool of organization. We can admire, even love, those who use their high rank while respecting our dignity, and therein lies the key. Dignity is what people want, on the left, on the right, and most important, in the vast, non-ideological middle. It is what connects the disparate elements of this divided nation because, as Vartan Gregorian has noted, “Dignity is not negotiable.”

How do we ensure dignity? By opting for a *dignitarian* society that holds simply—but with wide-ranging policy implications—that regardless of rank we are all of equal dignity. Far from being utopian, a dignitarian society is a practical and timely next step for American democracy.

A half-century ago, after a titanic struggle, America extended its democracy by rejecting segregation in favor of racial integration. As Martin Luther King, Jr., showed, people will stand up for their dignity, and once they're on their feet, they'll march for justice. Building a dignitarian society is a mission of comparable magnitude. It demands that we identify the rankism that permeates our lives and institutions, and systematically root it out.

Like the civil rights and women's movements of the past, it will involve consciousness-raising and legislation to secure the rights of those who are victimized. In schools it means zero tolerance for the indignities that handicap learning. In politics it means serious campaign reform so candidates don't have to command a fortune to run for office. In the workplace it means stamping out chronic bullying—a practice so damaging to an employee's immune system that it is equivalent to smoking three-and-a-half packs of cigarettes a day.

A dignitarian society embodies the promise of our nation's founders—the right to both liberty *and* justice. It offers universal healthcare, equal access to quality education (including adult education and retraining), an equitable tax structure, affordable housing, and wages that allow us to live in dignity.

This kind of transformation calls for more than committed leadership; it requires a change in attitude from all of us. But once the costs of the rankist status quo are measured against the benefits of a dignitarian society, Americans will certainly find their way out of the woods.

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