

WE INVITE YOU
to the zoom lecture on Saturday, February 19,
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HOW TO MAINTAIN DIGNITY IN PARTNERSHIP
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Does my partner respect me? Does he accept me as I am and does he love me with all my strengths and weaknesses?

How can we love, support and encourage each other even more?

What can we do to make each other even better and more loving?

We live in a time that challenges us all in many ways. Corona, Covid 19, Delta or Omikron, the constant threat of infection, illness, quarantine, vaccination certificates, closed shops and restaurants, short-time work and lack of sources of income, inflation, financial burdens due to lock downs, plus closed kindergartens and schools, home-schooling, home office and the question of whether to vaccinate or not are putting a strain on our families and partnerships. Add to this government crises, fear of impending conflicts in our neighbouring countries, the feeling that nothing is really safe anymore. These worries and uncertainties influence our thinking and feeling and weigh us down in addition to everything that normally weighs on our shoulders.

I have always talked a lot in my lectures about human dignity, what it means, how it exists in us since birth as a compass that can guide us through life, how much this dignity has been violated in each of us during our lives, sometimes even deeply buried, and how we can heal it.

Today, I ask myself and us what all this means in our daily lives under the present circumstances. How can dignity become my way of life? What does it mean in practical terms? What does it mean in relation to our relationship with our partner, with our children and parents?

First of all, let me give you a brief review of the definition of dignity:

- Dignity is a human right to which everyone is entitled, it is your and all our general value in our being human.

- Dignity is inherent in us, a characteristic of our humanity, our inner compass that can give us orientation in the decisions of our lives.
- Dignity is a mandate to shape our environment , to be creative and take responsibility
- Dignity is also a way of life. Those who meet others with dignity give expression to their own dignity. Dignity is therefore not a state, but a process that is reflected in being worthy and being appreciated.¹

My talk today is mainly about the last point: how can we integrate dignity as a way of life into our lives at this time?

Peter Bieri, philosopher and author, sees dignity as a way of life, as a "certain way of living a human life. Dignity is thus a "pattern of thinking, experiencing and doing". Dignity as a way of life consists of three components:

- 1.) the way I relate to myself.
- 2.) the way I treat my fellow human beings and the attitude I have towards them
- 3.) how I am treated by other people - what do I allow, how do I deal with it?

Bieri's model of this way of life shows important aspects in the relationship between people.

Relationship between people is the central point in our lives. These relationships form the foundations of our society. If we look around us now, we see that in this time of crises, it is precisely these relationships in friendships, partnerships, marriages, families that are particularly affected.

Often there is a special burden on our shoulders as women. We contribute to financially support the family, but at the same time we are mothers, partners, and carers for our elders. This raises internally many questions and conflicts as mentioned in the invitation:

Does my partner respect me? Does he accept me as I am?
Does he love me with all my strengths and weaknesses?
How can we love, support and encourage each other even more?
What can we do to make each other even better and more loving?

I was reflecting about my life. My husband and I have been married for 50 years this year. There have been many crises, difficulties, different perspectives. How did we resolve conflicts, overcome crises? What kept us together?

And how do our children cope? I asked one of our daughters. She has three children, the last one is just 5 months old, and her husband is still in education. She herself has not been able to work for two years because of the Corona pandemic. Financially it is not easy, although there is more support here in Germany than in other countries. But home-schooling, a 9-year-old girl and a 6-year-old boy, a baby, household and supporting her husband, how does she shape her life, what is important for her?

My daughter said it is important for her to talk to each other, to listen to each other, to express what one feels, thinks, wants and to understand what the other feels, thinks and wants. Silence and not talking to each other brings distance and separation. A central point for her is communication.

¹ Peter Bieri

Is it possible not to communicate, to live without communication? Everyone can choose not to speak, not to listen, not to look at each other. But, this too is communication, because through these attitudes one communicates that one does not want contact, does not want to listen, is not interested, is perhaps angry. For example, silence and looking away can be interpreted as the communication "I don't want to talk now". As soon as people perceive each other, they relate to each other and that is communication. Paul Watzlawick, an Austrian communication scientist, psychotherapist, sociologist, philosopher and author sees all interrelated behaviour as communication and said, "You cannot not communicate".

What does communication mean? The word itself comes from Latin (*communicare*, *communicatio*) and means to share, to communicate, to let participate; to do something together, to unite. Communication therefore creates something in common, a community, in Latin *communio*. So, this is also the basis of our relationship with our partner. Whether we love each other or are currently in a crisis in our relationship, whether everything is going well, or nothing is going at all, communication is what forms the common ground between us. Only through good communication can we create and recreate our partnership.

Communication is an essential factor in development. People can only develop in relation to others. Only in relation to my partner, through communication in the broadest sense with him, can I develop further. This is true also for our partnership, our family, the connection to our children and elders.

A child needs communication with its parents from the very beginning. Already in the womb, the child experiences the closeness of its parents, who communicate with it. Especially for fathers, the first three months after birth are difficult, because they feel that they can't do anything and because the baby hardly seems to react at that time. But this time is so important. When I met my biological mother for the first time after more than 50 years - she had to give me to an orphanage when I was three months old because she couldn't feed me - I thought I would meet a strange woman whom I would have to get to know. But at the first meeting, in the very first moment I knew her voice, the feeling of her hands and even her smell. During pregnancy and the first three months she had cared for me, talked to me, loved me. This communication had left its mark on me and neither the orphanage nor the experiences in my adoptive family had erased these impressions.

When we hear the word communication, we think first of the spoken word, in the sense of communicating information. In this context, "information" is a summary term for knowledge, insight, experience, decisions and feelings.

But interpersonal communication happens not only in spoken language, but also non-verbally, through facial expressions and gestures, through tone of voice and rhythm, i.e. fast or slow speech, through closeness and touch or distance, through eye contact and through body posture.

If I speak quickly, I signal haste, impatience. If I speak slowly and emphatically, the other person often feels that I do not trust them to understand me correctly. Speaking loudly is intrusive, speaking too soft suggests insecurity. If you were all sitting there now with your arms and legs crossed, I would realise that I have little chance of getting anything across because there is no willingness to receive. Yawning is usually perceived as disinterest. Often the clothes we choose also play a role. We can also use it to signal, consciously or unconsciously, what we feel.

Eye contact is very important. If we keep avoiding the other person's gaze, we show that we are insecure, think differently but don't want to say it, are hiding something, in short, are not open to honest communication.

Touch can often express more than words. Some touches you never forget. Years ago, when all our children were still at home, I was standing in the kitchen cleaning up after dinner when one of my sons came and rubbed my back a few times. Then he disappeared again, without words. He had to study for an important exam. I will never forget that touch. It expressed more than words could have. I knew he had noticed my tiredness and thanked me for my work.

According to the mime artist and university teacher Samy Molcho, the non-verbal part of communication causes more than 80 per cent of the reactions. We are certainly not always aware of this. But the way we put a plate of food on the table in front of our partner, for example, reveals a lot about our mood. Our partner notices it, often unconsciously. This sets the course for the success or failure of our further communication.

How can we shape, strengthen, build and sometimes restore our relationships through good, successful communication?

St. Augustine said: "God does not seek words from you, but the heart".

This is also true for our communication with others. The more important aspect of communication is the inner one. "Successful communication does not only come from an exchange of "information" but demands a relatedness to others that is born of mindfulness and love." Communication scientist Barbara von Meiborn calls this aspect the "connecting power of love", which then creates the *communio*, i.e. the community, the connectedness to each other through the communication.

I would like to turn more to this aspect now, because it is what shapes and forms our relationships with each other.

The unifying power of love is a beautiful expression and certainly true, but how do we access this power in the midst of crises?

Bieri speaks of dignity as a way of life, and we have defined dignity as our inner compass that is innate to us. I would now like to reflect on how this inner dignity can lead us to the unifying power of love.

- 1.) First of all, it is important that I become aware of how I relate to myself. How do I see myself? Am I aware of my own dignity, my own worth? From a religious point of view, it would be: Am I aware that I am a child of God, that I carry divinity within me? If so, I don't expect affirmation, agreement with my opinion, praise or recognition. If I am aware of my value, of my childship to God, then I can be open to other ideas, opinions, to criticism and even rejection. I can think about other points of view, consider, inquire, change my point of view, or simply accept that my counterpart thinks differently. The awareness of my value, my dignity, sets me free. That is the best basis for any communication.
- 2.) Another point is how do I treat myself? When feelings of any kind come up in me, what do I do with these feelings? I can actively control my feelings once I have recognised and understood them. That is certainly not easy. First, it is important that I do not judge myself or suppress feelings. I can look at them and try to understand where they come from. Sometimes it takes a while to get that far. For a long time, I reacted angrily when my husband talked to me about my oh-so-thin and grey hair and suggested a visit to the hairdresser. In times when we had financial difficulties that was like a special present. But I always felt offended. I didn't know myself why I became so aggressive. It took me a long time to remember that when I was a child, I had to wear a wig at all the big parties because my hair wasn't pretty enough. Internally I connected my husband's suggestion with "not being pretty enough" from my childhood.

Sometimes it is also good to get help, for example by talking about our feelings to someone we trust. It is important that we treat ourselves with love. The basis for successful communication with others is loving communication with myself, within myself.

- 3.) Looking at myself as a valuable human being, I can then also look at everyone else as valuable human being. In religious terms, if I see myself as a daughter of God, my partner is a son of God. If I respect myself, I can also respect my counterpart. Please do not misunderstand me. Self-respect and awareness of my worth and dignity is something quite different from self-centredness (egocentrism). Egocentricity creates separation and not community.
- 4.) Respect for the other also entails that I communicate with them at eye level. This means that I do not feel that I am better, smarter, more experienced, more stable, more mature or in any other way superior. These are subliminal feelings of which we are often not aware. It is worth checking ourselves for this.
- 5.) Respect entails openness to the other. I respect his worth and dignity. I respect him as he is. This is a difficult point. Especially in a partnership, we tend to have expectations. We are disappointed and hurt when they are not fulfilled. I remember an evening together with my husband many years ago. We were watching a beautiful sunset. I was so excited! Such a beautiful thing! Unbelievable! Simply unique, heavenly! That's when my husband brought me down from my cloud: "Now calm down!" I was hurt and didn't speak much that evening. I had expected him to express his joy in the same way. I had expected him to be like me. I had not allowed him to be different. So I spent the rest of the evening feeling hurt and silent. If we have expectations of each other's reactions, every difference becomes a source of conflict. Expectations are poison for successful communication. It was only through a conversation about this with him that I understood that great joy had always been curbed in his childhood and so an unconscious fear had developed that too much joy is always followed by something sad.
- 6.) This brings us to the next point. Every person has different experiences, life situations, a different cultural or religious background. To build good communication, it is important to adapt to this. Even if we grew up in the same town, in the same community, there are so many things that have shaped our lives differently. My husband and I grew up 20 minutes' walk from each other, but in very different family structures. I was an only child, there were no financial worries, I could study, learn the violin, participate in the orchestra and choir, and had time to read and be creative. My mother was always at home, only my father worked. My husband was the eldest of 4 siblings. Both parents worked. To make an additional living, they had a small farm with chickens, pigs and goats. In addition, they had fruit trees, fields with potatoes, beets, carrots, cabbage and much more. He started an apprenticeship as a printer when he was 14, because his grandfather knew the owner of the print shop. He could not choose. There was no money for further schooling. There was no free time, as there was always something to do in the house and on the farm.

Our characters are as different as our origins. As an East Westphalian, my husband is rather quiet and doesn't talk much. As a Rhinelander, I am more expressive and love changes and new experiences. These differences were and still are fascinating and our life and communication never gets boring because over the years we have learned to accept the differences as something enriching. Sometimes we even laugh about it. My husband said the other day: "We have always loved our differences."

Differences in origin and experiences are often the reason for disturbed communication, especially between generations. I often talk to women who have a lot of difficulties in their relationship with their mother. My mother's generation grew up during the Second World War, brought up by mothers who lost their husbands, fathers and brothers in the First World

War. These women were just struggling to survive. They were tough. Love was not an issue, there was only discipline, work and doing their duty as a woman, as a mother. They were not asked about their desires and wishes. That is how our mothers were brought up too. Lack of attention, understanding and tenderness then also shaped our mothers. What could they pass on to us? And what have we passed on? There were and are many conflicts, sometimes even accusations and hatred. Why? Because we do not know the circumstances, the history, the background of our parents' and grandparents' actions. We know little of their lives, their childhood. What were their aspirations as young people? What do our children know about our lives? Unanswered questions and unresolved conflicts destroy communication between generations. Acquired wisdom cannot then be passed on or accepted. In a lecture to young people on this topic, I advised them to ask questions to their parents and grandparents, to leave nothing unanswered.

- 7.) Openness for the other also means that we give each other the freedom to do what is close to our hearts. Partners do not always have the same interests. To this day, my husband supports me in my enthusiasm for my passions, even though he himself has completely different interests. We give each other the space and enjoy the moments together even more.
- 8.) Another point closely related to openness is empathy, 'empathy'. The term empathy (ancient Greek ἐμπάθεια *empátheia* 'to suffer with') refers to the ability to recognise and understand another person's thoughts, emotions, intentions and personality traits. Empathy also includes one's own reaction to the feelings of others, such as pity, sadness, pain or giving help. This also requires that I can deal well with my own feelings. A few helpful points to express empathy and openness in a conversation are:
- I prepare myself for the situation and my partner.
 - I try to define terms precisely (= avoid ambiguity)
 - I give feedback: I tell my partner what I have understood.
 - I ask if something remains unclear or incomprehensible to me
 - I can ask my partner to describe what he means again in other words if I do not understand something.
 - I listen and do not interrupt
 - I do not judge or pass judgement
 - I use only positive phrases
 - I thank my partner for his/her messages and explanations
 - I express my thoughts and feelings honestly as "I messages"

This last point of I-messages is one that my daughter Andrea has put on my heart. For her it is an extremely important point. I think we all know this, but, in the heat of conversation, we often forget it. Then my feeling that the person I'm talking to isn't telling me everything accurately turns into, "You're lying!" and my feeling that I've already heard that becomes, "You're repeating yourself!" Maybe we want to ask for help in tidying up and instead say, "You don't feel like it anyway!" These are then hurtful remarks. It would be better to say: "I would like to know more about that", and "I think you have told me that before" and "Could you please help me tidy up?"

Definitely we need time and practice to create a pleasant and empathic way of conversation, especially in times of crisis. Maybe a paper with these points can remind us.

- 9.) I would like to add that communication also includes shared experiences. Outings, holidays, theatre, cinema, food, concerts - there are countless possibilities, even in Corona times. Being creative together creates connectedness. If concerts are cancelled and restaurants are closed, then it's a special meal with music at home! And please don't forget the special clothes we would have used when going out!

So far, we have talked about dignity as a way of life in terms of the way I see and treat myself and the way I see and treat my fellow human beings. Another point is, what do I allow others to treat me and how do I deal with it? Accepting my counterpart as a human being with his or her own life story and respecting his or her dignity does not mean uncritically accepting all behaviour. Constantly saying "yes" without a sense of one's own, without self-respect ultimately doesn't help to create a healthy relationship. A "no" can liberate and lift us up. Breathing is easier after a "no", also in a figurative sense. Perhaps those around us are not used to it and are surprised. But it will be accepted, even without explanation. I am not good at saying no to requests. My elder daughter carved in a piece of wood: "Learn to say no without justifying your decision." She put it up in my kitchen, where I see it every day.

Sometimes this "no" is also necessary to distance ourselves from situations or people who threaten to violate our dignity. There are many situations in everyday life that demand self-respect from us. The other day I was shopping with my friend when a woman behind us scolded us and loudly demanded that we let her take our place at the fruit stall. I probably would have stopped my selection to let the woman go first, but my friend did not. She had enough self-respect to kindly but firmly point out to the other woman that we were also selecting fruit and that she should please wait a moment. We did not respond to the further insults. Self-respect does not mean engaging in open conflict or complaining about everything. Self-respect also means to not allow being provoked or drawn into an argument. Sometimes self-respect is also simply letting others' disrespect go to waste. But self-respect means always listening to the inner standard of my dignity. Listening inwardly and sounding out whether something corresponds to our dignity or violates our dignity takes time and teaches us not to answer every request, whether in the professional or private sphere, immediately. Signs such as a bad aftertaste after a conversation, discomfort, feelings that seem to have no reason, restlessness, a guilty conscience and talking to oneself can be an indication that our dignity has been subtly violated or disrespected or limited by a decision or action.

Even if we feel hurt or angry, it is always better to first take a breath and reflect on how this situation came about. When something like this happens in our partnership, the best thing to do is to talk about it calmly, to express how we feel. We might also postpone talking about it until a quiet moment. We need time, especially in the beginning, to understand our feelings and the signs of our inner dignity.

If our partner does not understand why we feel that our dignity was disrespected by his words or actions, we can ask him or her to refrain from doing it anyway. Our feelings of dignity are often as different as our characters. But we can also respect and honour these differences. A partnership grows together over the years if we communicate.

In times of stress and crises, this is of incredibly special importance to maintain and strengthen our partnership, family, and friendships.

So far, I have talked about how we can love, support and encourage each other, how to strengthen our partnership by improving our communication. What about the question of whether my partner loves me, respects me, accepts me as I am? Yes, we definitely need resonance. Mutual appreciation is an important part of a partnership. We can also talk about this with our partner. Most important is however our attitude of appreciation for our partner. And again, appreciating ourselves, knowing our

value, our divinity helps us not to be dependant of appreciation from others, not even from our partner.

What can we do to make each other even better and more loving? During the years of my marriage, I have learnt that I cannot change my husband. Only he himself can change if he wants to. Accepting him with all his strengths and weaknesses is the best we can do. Accepting him as he is, is the first step to look closer at our partner. Then we can perceive his internal beauty, even though it may not be obvious at first sight. Appreciating then turns into loving our partner from a new viewpoint. Our way of looking at our partner will change us both and our relationship.

The question whether my partner loves me, accepts me as I am, only he can answer. But there are also many clues. My husband also did not say he loved me for a long time. Why? I asked him once. For him it was important to express love for me in deeds, not words. Yes, sometimes I was blind to his way of showing me that he loved me. Communication is not just a matter of words.

I will briefly summarise: The basis for successful communication with my partner and others is awareness of my own dignity and worth and loving communication with myself. Just as I see myself as a valuable person, I can then also see everyone else, be open to the differences of my counterpart and feel empathy. This brings us to the unifying power of love, which makes communication communitio, community and connectedness. When we put these aspects into practice, dignity comes alive in our lives.

Last night I found a greeting card that I would like to show you here.

A happy love always has three roots:

1. the willingness to accept the other person for what he or she is, without wanting to change him or her
2. trust in each other's affection without demanding proof of it
3. the courage to open one's heart.

With this I would like to end my thoughts on this topic today, even though there is much more to say about it. I am looking forward to hear your experiences and ways to deal with times of crisis.

Thank you for listening