

Imago Dei: Missing in Action

My brother-in-law is dying.

He's well aware of this fact, as he was diagnosed months ago with an incurable lung disease. He spends a good deal of time sleeping these days, loses his breath after walking up a few steps, and uses an oxygen machine to supplement the air his lungs can't supply.

Bob's a good man who has treated my sister well. He's one of those guys who can put anyone at ease.

In mid-October, a crown on one of his upper incisors fell out. Getting to the dentist for repairs meant a long and painful ordeal for him. Though Bob rarely appears in public anymore—as he is homebound by his infirmities—the gap in his teeth not only made eating more difficult but also embarrassed him.

Coincidentally, two days later, my sister went to their dentist for a cleaning and a checkup. When she told the dentist what had happened, he said, “Why don't I come by before we open tomorrow and take a look?” He appeared at the agreed-upon time, examined Bob's teeth, and arranged to return the following morning. This time, he brought an assistant, and together they restored both the missing tooth and a dying man's dignity.

By that act of kindness, which bowls me over every time I think of it, the dentist also added to his own dignity and worth as a human being. He gave of himself, as did his assistant, which is surely the core of compassion.

About the same time, my friend Anne's 104-year-old mother died in an assisted care facility. Anne spent several days fretting over the obituary she felt obliged to write. Finally, she shaped a love letter she deemed worthy of her deceased mother. Anne's act of homage and kindness recognized her mom's dignity

as a human being, and it did the same for Anne. Anne's effort and words honored both mother and daughter.

In 1997, a mentally ill Jordanian soldier patrolling the Jordanian-Israeli border [murdered](#) seven Israeli schoolgirls and wounded six other people. [King Hussein](#) of Jordan immediately traveled to Israel, condemned these killings, and offered his condolences to the victims' families. The following year, while being treated at Minnesota's Mayo Clinic for illnesses that would soon bring his death, the king endeared himself to the staff with his kindnesses. In [one instance](#), a janitor wept after Hussein arranged a birthday party for her in his suite.

By these deeds, the king recognized the dignity and humanity of others, which in turn brought him dignity as well.

"Human dignity is the recognition that human beings possess a special value intrinsic to their humanity and as such are worthy of respect simply because they are human beings," [says](#) The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity in their definition of human dignity. In the very next sentence, this definition explains, "This concept, once foundational to ethical reflection in such diverse areas of engagement as social ethics and human rights on to the clinical bedside and bioethics, has come under increasing criticism." The Christian-based Center then points out that "human dignity is an inherent quality in all human beings in virtue of our having been created in the image of God."

While the examples I've cited above reveal people who treat others as worthy of respect, this vision of our fellow travelers as created in the image and likeness of God is largely absent from today's culture. Supporting the abortion of babies up to the moment of birth, [composting](#) deceased loved ones to fertilize the garden, and treating citizens as widgets rather than souls with faces (as governments did during the COVID quarantines) are commonplace in our post-Christian

culture. On a more individual level, some people are disgusted by large families, look with loathing at the obese woman in an electric cart at the grocery store, and spend hours anonymously savaging people with whom they disagree on social media.

When we diminish the dignity of other people and groups, considering them unworthy of respect as human beings, we make them subhuman. This leads to such horrors as genocide, gas chambers, and the divisive hatred now common in our own country.

And in that pact with evil, we murder our own dignity and humanity as well.

More power, then, to the men and women who, like that dentist, my friend Anne, and King Hussein, recognize and honor the divine spark in the human soul.

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