Encountering Dignity: Building Human Community

Mary Elizabeth Moore and Shinmyoung Kim
Boston University School of Theology

When you are out in the world, act as if meeting an important guest. Employ the people as if you were assisting at a great ceremony. What you don’t want done to yourself, don’t do to others. (Analects 12:2)

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years… She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak … Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. (Mark 5:25, 27, 29, NRSV)

Encounters were central in the lives of Confucius and Jesus, as to many other religious founders and leaders. Their own worldviews and sense of the Holy were shaped by interactions with people and communities in distress, and their encounters were imbued with dignity. Encounters with dignity are learning moments that foster humanization and communal values, even in settings of radical difference. This paper probes the potential of such learning, beginning with a brief review of pedagogies of encounter and an analysis of the values of dignity implicit in that work. For many educators, encounters and dignity are inherently related (as in Freire 1978, 2004), but little has been written to explore that relationship explicitly. This paper is an effort to explore the intersection in some depth, drawing particularly on narratives of encounter, as represented by two documentary narratives, The Lemon Tree and I Shall Not Hate, and oral histories, all analyzed to discover the textures of dignity encounters.

Our thesis is that encountering dignity is a critical goal and process in religious education. Such encounters foster humanization and communal values in complex ways that are revealed in lived religious practice and taught in Confucian and Christian traditions. The very idea of dignifying encounters is tantalizing but what does it mean? We begin with Donna Hicks basic understanding of dignity as “the feeling of inherent value and worth” and “a mutual sense of worth” and/or recognition of basic human rights (2013, 6). What we want to learn, however, is how people themselves experience and describe encounters and dignity. Thus, we ask four questions of the documentaries and oral histories: (a) what were the moments of encounter; (b) what did people learn in the encounters; (c) where did dignity appear, and how was it described; and (d) how did the people describe their own learning to dignify others?

We discovered a treasure trove in the narratives and theological analysis, yielding expected and unexpected insights. We thus invite readers to join a journey of discovery. The paper unfolds in four movements: (1) emerging insights from the literature; (2) analysis of published narratives and oral histories of dignifying encounters; (3) analysis of both from Confucian and Christian perspectives; and (4) generative proposals for dignifying encounters in learning communities faced with radical difference. The paper is exploratory, and further research will develop the themes in greater detail and nuance. We seek to learn from living cases of dignifying encounters, and to reflect religiously and educationally on the emerging insights.
Encounter and Dignity: Emerging Insights

Research and reflection on encounter and dignity have been growing and expanding in the past 50 years. Those who do this research are motivated to build human community and justice by fostering understanding and respect for the value of all persons, especially in contexts of radical human difference. What has been missing in research to date is an explicit focus on the interplay of encounter and dignity, so important in religious traditions. This is our concern.

Religious education research reveals that much learning takes place in encounters, or unexpected experiences of meeting. Encounters are often informal and unplanned meetings with other persons or situations, especially people and situations that are unfamiliar. Encounters may be informal, but educators can also create opportunities for these moments of meeting. The educational research on encounters often reveals much about dignity, but dignity itself is largely unnamed. Paulo Freire (1978, 2004), in particular, planned encuentros that created opportunities for deep meeting with others.

The educational research is wide-ranging. For some, learning in encounter has focused on experiential education, honoring the dignity of the learners (Dow 1971; Clark, Erway, & Belzer 1971). For others, the focus has been on encounters with human differences and differential power, honoring the dignity of human diversity (Evans, Evans & Kennedy, 1987; Freire 1978, 2004; Cassidy 2006; Miedema et al, 2009). Some highlight multiple forms of encounter – divine and human; religion and culture; diverse cultures and values, and power differentials (Brinker-Gabler 1995; Davis & Spears, eds. 2013; Lamm 2010; Miedema et al, 2009). Still others emphasize the complications in such encounters, such as power differentials (Botha 2015) or the psychological limits of dignity (Skinner 1971).

While educators have been focusing on learning through encounters, many advocates for justice and peace have been studying the phenomenon of dignity and the role of encounters or direct engagement in that work, whether focusing on forgiveness (Tutu and Tutu 2014) or on attitudes toward others (Yablon 2012 and 2010; Gopin 2012). Donna Hicks (2013) analyzes the phenomena in global peace-making pursuits and in families and local settings, identifying factors that contribute to or inhibit dignity in human relationships. In her international peacebuilding work, Hicks concluded that dignity is critical for relationships that are just, rights-respecting, and peaceful: “I saw that if indignity tears us apart, dignity can put us back together again” (xii).

This brief review reveals the power of encounters in learning dignity – learning to appreciate the inherent worth of others. Previous work invites a deep dive into narratives of encounter, particularly dignifying encounters. We thus turn to the stories.

Analysis of Dignity Narratives

To explore encounters the complexities of dignifying encounters, we analyze a sample of documentary narratives and oral histories (Abuelaish 2012; Tolan 2007; Oral History Project of Boston University School of Theology). We share our findings through portraits, portraying human lives within their complex cultural contexts, a method influenced by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis’s social science portraiture (1997).

Abuelaish – I Shall Not Hate

Izzeldin Abuelaish was born on February 3, 1955, in Jabalia refugee camp, Gaza Strip (Abuelaish, 2012). The separation of Israeli state from Palestine in 1948 had dispossessed his family of its heritage and property, leaving them poor. Abuelaish’s mother helped him cope with
the appalling situation, raising goats and pigeons to make money with which she sent Abuelaish to the United Nations school in the camp (40). Her passion for education taught Abuelaish that education is necessary to escape from a miserable existence. He called her “the hero, the one behind the successes” (47). He himself became a medical doctor and the first doctor to practice in an Israeli hospital, beginning as a researcher in Sheba Hospital in Tel Aviv, while also working to build human relationships in Israel and Palestine.

On January 16, 2009, the Israeli military attacked the Gaza Strip in reprisal for the killing of Israeli civilians by Qassam rockets. Identifying Abuelaish as an activist, Israel tanks shelled his apartment, hitting his daughters’ room, killing Bessan, Mayar, and Aya and injuring his niece. Abuelaish sent a message to an Israeli friend, Shlomi Eldar from Israeli TV’s Channel 10, and was soon broadcasting live the horror of discovering his gifts. “Ya Rabbi, Ya Rabbi—my God, my God—they shelled my house. They killed my daughters. What have we done?” (177). The catastrophic loss strengthened Abuelaish’s belief that God could bridge the divide, sharply aware of his daughters’ sacrifice and God’s providence. He interpreted this tragedy as God’s test for him as found in Ayoub in the Quran or Job in the Bible (197). He believed God’s plan was to establish him as a messenger to help bring about the peaceful coexistence of two states. He said, “Hatred eats at your soul and takes opportunities away from you. It’s like consuming poison” (122). Instead of hatred, violence, and despair, Abuelaish dreamed of a better future for Palestinians and Israelis through the educational organization, Daughters for Life. Abuelaish became determined to use education to make the Middle East peaceful and secure.

Abuelaish argued strongly that coexistence, cooperation, and partnership at the grassroots level were the only way forward for Palestinians and Israelis. This vision inspired Daughters for Life, named for his dead daughters who had been filled with dreams for a better future. The aim of the foundation is to promote relationships between Jewish and Palestinian children. He claims that the organization gives both groups of children strong voices with which to improve human dignity in the Middle East (223). In particular, the foundation seeks to improve the status and role of girls and women; it provides scholarships for female students for high school and university studies and examines the existing programs and curriculums to assess what is working for girls and women. Abuelaish believes that improving the status of women can positively affect all levels of Palestinian and Israeli societies (224).

Another dignifying encounter was similarly influential for Abuelaish. When his three daughters and niece were hit, his friend Doctor Zeev Rotstein was filled with indescribable grief. He asked Abuelaish to come immediately with his wounded children to the Sheba Medical Center (181). Ignoring the political risks, Rotstein wanted to save lives with compassion, and without regard for ethnic differences. This encounter convinced Abuelaish that health care is a humanitarian action to bring about social transformation. He and Rotstein became partners in a vision that health care can be a critical bridge between Israel and Palestine. It can save lives and renew relationships. They want people to see the faces of Israelis and Palestinians, not through a rifle’s scope but through compassionate, non-hostile eyes (216). They believe that humanitarian health care can help restore dignity, revealing that the dignity of Palestinians is equal to that of Israelis; the value of life is not hierarchal. Thus, humanitarian action can promote human dignity and reinforce collaborations for peace and reconciliation.

According to Abuelaish, human dignity means freedom from physical and mental suffering. However, the Palestine people continue to face a deep human crisis, whereby millions of them are denied their human dignity because of brutal oppression by the Israeli government.
and the Palestine Authority’s (PA’s) corruption and ineptness. Specifically, Gaza’s health-care system does not work; it is unable to provide proper treatment to many patients because the procedures for requesting permission to leave Palestinian territory are complicated. Palestinians have to get permission from both the PA and the Israeli authorities, meaning that Palestinian patients who are gravely ill are unable to see doctors and medical teams in Israeli hospitals that are equipped with the medical devices they need. For Abuelaish, proper health-care is the minimum requirement for human dignity and offers a significant way to connect Palestinians and Israelis.

Abuelaish learned much from his mother, the tragic death of his daughters, and his encounter with an Israeli doctor. These encounters convinced him that education and health care can transform Israeli and Palestinian societies and improve human dignity. For him, human dignity belongs to all regardless of ethnicity, gender, culture, or religion; all humans deserve to be respected by others. Education and health care cannot only bridge the divide that separates Palestinians and Israelis, but they can also result in social transformation.

**Tolan – The Lemon Tree**

We turn now to another narrative of encounters (Tolan 2006), also in Israel and Palestine and also under the influence of actions in 1948, 1967, and beyond. The story opens in 1967, and Bashir Khairi travels with two cousins to the Al-Ramla homes their families had to evacuate almost 20 years earlier. Bashir is filled with dread. Meet also Dalia Eshkenazi, whose family fled from Bulgaria to Israel with thousands of other Jews after World War II. They settled in Ramla (Al-Ramla to Bashir) in 1948, moving into the home that Bashir’s family had left behind when forced across the thirsty desert to Ramallah. Dalia sits gazing into the garden behind her home, enjoying the jacaranda tree planted by her father and lemon tree planted by another father long ago (Bashir’s father). She has often wondered who lived in this house before her family. She learned in school “that the Arabs had fled like cowards, with their hot soup still steaming on the table … but the older she got, the less sense it made. Why would anyone voluntarily leave such a beautiful home?” (20). As the first chapter ends, Bashir stands with his hand on the bell of his family’s (now Dalia’s family’s) home (24).

As the book unfolds, readers encounter two families, two peoples, and two geo-political entities. Bashir’s father, Ahmad, had built the house himself, created a beautiful garden, and planted a lemon tree. “Once the tree was in the soil, Ahmad knew it would be at least seven years, and probably more, before the strong Palestinian sun and sweet waters of the al-Ramla aquifer would nurture the tree to maturity. The act of planting was thus an act of faith and patience” (30). The house and tree were living symbols of the Khairis’ family life. And they were living symbols of Islamic values of compassion and respect for their neighbors.

Bashir and Dalia both encountered indignity at many points, as did their families. The Khairis were among those forced to leave their homes and their hometown al-Ramla in 1948, and yet the Eschenazis had their own story of near destruction. They were among the masses of people herded into a school yard to be deported on trains to a death camp. Fortunately, the Orthodox Christian Church and a few brave Jewish leaders and Bulgarian officials intervened on behalf of thousands of Bulgarians standing ready for deportation and almost certain death. As Tolan notes, if things had happened differently, the likely result is that “forty-seven thousand Bulgarian Jews, including Moshe and Solia Eshkenazi, would have perished at Treblinka, and that Dalia would have never been born” (62, end of Chapter 3).
The world was upside down after World War II. The Holocaust took a huge toll on Jewish lives. The Zionist movement was growing and emphasizing the return to Zion, describing the region as a “‘land without people for a people without land’” (93). With the British takeover after WWI and the Balfour Declaration, a new national home was promised to the Jews (104). This historical moment laid the ground for Bashir’s family to lose their land and Dalia’s family to make home where they could be safe from the devastations of Jewry in Europe.

Bashir and Dalia both grew up in loving families in the midst of a war-torn, constantly changing and explosive land. Dalia carried the nagging question of why the Palestinian people had left their homes, and Bashir carried the embodied memory of losing his hand to a landmine as a young boy. Both knew that some people were treated worse than others, and both were concerned; yet, they brought different histories and experiences to these realities.

Bashir became a lawyer and a strong advocate for Palestinian rights, particularly for the right of return. His first protests landed him in prison for many months, where he was tortured daily. He became known as a strong, level-headed leader among the Palestinians, but he was frequently cast into prisons or exile, sometimes for many years. After the first imprisonment, Dalia went to visit Bashir in Ramallah, where she met his family and experienced extravagant Arab hospitality for the first time. The connection she and Bashir felt on their first meeting was still strong, and they entered a moment of truth-telling that shook them both. Dalia said, “I know this is a sensitive issue … It must be very difficult that someone now is living in your house” (186). Bashir did not desire this turn of the conversation, but realized that “Dalia needed and deserved to be engaged,” so he replied: “Listen, Dalia, … How would you feel to leave your home, all your belongings, your entire spirit, in one place? Would you not fight to get it back with everything you have?” (186).

Then, Bashir stood suddenly and led her to a cabinet. There, amid the books and decorations, she saw a lemon. When she asked about it, he spoke of his first visit with her: “Do you remember that Kamel asked you for something as we left? And what you gave him as a gift?” Bashir recalls her response: “‘Oh, my God. It’s one of the lemons from that visit. But why did you keep it? It has been almost four months now’” (187). He replied: “To us this lemon in more than fruit, Dalia … It is land and history… A few days after we brought the lemons home, it was night, and I heard a movement in the house … and I got up. The noise was coming from this room right here. Do you know what I saw? My father, who is nearly blind. … Dalia, I saw him holding the lemon with both hands. And he was pacing back and forth in the room, and the tears were running down his cheeks.” (187)

Bashir and Dalia recognized that both had exile stories and future hopes – for Eretz Yisrael (Land of Israel) or Arde Falastin (Land of Palestine) (188). Bashir resisted comparisons, however, because Western occupying powers had created Israel on Palestinian land (189). Dalia replied: “‘Okay, Bashir, I live in your home … And this is also my home. It is the only home I know. So, what shall we do?’” He replied calmly, “‘You can go back where you came from.’” (190) Dalia “felt as if Bashir had dropped a bomb” but she “forced herself to listen.” He said, “‘We believe that only those who came here before 1917’ – the year of the Balfour Declaration and the beginning of the British Mandate in Palestine – ‘have a right to be here. But anyone who came after 1917 … cannot stay’” (190). Dalia “was struck by the total contradiction of her situation: complete disagreement across a seemingly unbridgeable gulf, combined with the establishment of a bond through a common history, in the Khairi home where she felt utterly protected and welcomed, and where she felt the depth of their gratitude (190). She recalled later:
“That every body could feel the warmth and the reality of our people meeting, meeting the other, and it was real, it was happening, and we were admiring each other’s being ... And on the other hand, we were conversing of things that seemed totally mutually exclusive. That my life here is at their expense, and if they want to realize their dream, it’s at my expense.” (190)

Bashir and Dalia were not to find a resolution then or ever. Dalia’s response was: “I have nowhere else to go, Bashir … We have to live together. To accept each other.” Bashir’s reply was: “You are living in a place that does not belong to you, Dalia. … It’s not your country, Dalia. You stole it from us” (190). As Dalia prepared to leave that day, the whole family bid her a warm goodbye, and Bashir said: “You are not a guest in this house, Dalia … It means you have to come again and again, and we’re going to do this, too.” (191)

Many horrific events happened after that – violence perpetuated by state governments, individuals, organizations, alongside efforts at peace and the gradual or sudden unraveling of those efforts. Bashir was arrested and often tortured for long periods, but he never confessed to the acts attributed to him. He never gave up the fight for the “right of return,” and he spent almost twenty years of his adult life in prisons and in exile. The communication between him and Dalia continued on and off until both were in their sixties when the book ended.

When Dalia’s father died in 1985, she wanted to do something to make reparations with the house. She thought of selling it for reparations, but she went to visit Bashir. His suggestion is the one she enacted, creating a pre-school for Arab children. Bashir said to her: “I want them to have the childhood that I never had” (221). Dalia did establish the school, and it eventually became Open House, which was not only a school, but a site for summer peace camps, and dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis.

In 1988, when Bashir was imprisoned for his suspected role in the intifada, Dalia wrote a letter to him in the newspaper. She described her sadness in their intertwined histories, but also how she hoped (assuming that he was guilty) that he would now choose a nonviolent way to lead (231-234). Due to imprisonment and exile, he saw the letter many months later. They were never to agree on the best path forward, but they continued to listen to one another, realizing how overwhelming the challenges were. In 1995, peace talks between Rabin and Arafat showed promise; yet, on November 4, 1995, Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated (263-266). Hopes for peace unraveled again.

During that time, Open House was like an island for intense conversations. Dalia and Yehezkel (her husband) “were amazed at the outpouring of emotion from Arab citizens who began talking openly about their own family stories from 1948” (274). Yehezkel saw a shift: “Liberal, well-meaning Israelis who thought they were building cultural bridges and alliances were forced to confront the fact that there were endemic problems and injustices in Israeli society that required much more than cross-cultural encounter and coexistence activity. It required social and political transformation on a societal scale.” (274)

The horror continued … another suicide bomber, another arrest of Bashir, more missiles, bombs, and demolished homes, evoking more violence and fear. Many Israelis decided to leave, but Dalia would remain. “I am going to stay present for the pain, and for the hope. I am an integral part of it all... I am part of the problem because I came from Europe, because I lived in an Arab house. I am part of the solution, because I love’” (281).
In 2004, amid controversy about the Israeli wall, Dalia visited Bashir in his office in Ramallah. Bashir said to Dalia: “I’m eager to see you, but I was very afraid for you.” (292) Dalia eventually spoke her hopes: “Bashir. Maybe I have no right to say what I’m going to say. We need to make sacrifices if both of us are to live here … By not accepting the state of Israel or by not accepting the state of Palestine, I think none of us has a real life here” (294). Bashir reiterated his insistence on one state where everyone was equal rather than a Palestinian state on 22% of the original Palestinian land (295). They closed with hopes: Bashir’s wish that “more people were like you [Dalia],” and Dalia’s hope for deep care between the two peoples so “We could create a reality together” (298). They looked deeply into one another’s eyes as they parted, and Dalia said softly: “Our enemy … is the only partner we have” (298).

The book closes with mutual disappointment, but Bashir and Dalia share something deeper than friendship, “something to do with family” (308). The narratives in The Lemon Tree reveal the possibility, power, and fragility of encounters with dignity. The encounters themselves may be life-changing, but they alone are not sufficient to transform injustice to justice, violence to compassion. For that, social-structural change is also necessary.

James Lawson, Peter Storey, and Mercy Amba Oduoye

We will share less from the 55 oral histories, but these three life stories represent many others, describing dignifying encounters that point to dignity-based responses to racism.

James Lawson (1928-present) has been a major Civil Rights and justice leader since his young years. He led sit-ins and marches, and advised Martin Luther King, Jr. and many others on non-violent action. As a young boy, however, he had his share of racially-infused fights with white boys. When asked to describe significant people and moments in his life, Lawson describes a time when he was 8 years old and his mother sent him to buy bread. On his return, a young white boy hung out of his car and taunted him. Jim spoke words in return, and the two got into a physical fight. Then Jim went home to deliver the bread and sit with his mother as she cooked. With her back turned to him, she said, “It looks like you had some trouble.” Jim told her the story, and awaited in the silence until his mother said “There must be a better way.” That is all she said, but Jim Lawson sees that moment of encountering dignity (the dignity of his mother and that to which she pointed) as the beginning of his own search for a way of non-violent resistance.

Mercy Amba Oduoye (1934-present) is a native of Ghana and a global ecumenical leader, seeking to build communities and societies marked by human justice and dignity. Mercy has taught on every continent; served as Youth Education Secretary and Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC); founded the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians; and authored many books and articles, including Daughters of Anowa and Beads and Strands. She recalls a poignant moment of global encounter in 1968:

The fourth assembly of the World Council of Churches which was held at Uppsala in Sweden in July of 1968 was to have had Revered Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as keynote speaker at this assembly whose theme was, “Behold, I make all things new.” In him the Council had a person who was working for the transformation of human relations. But that was not to be. The presence and the address of James Baldwin, the shock of the assassination, and the power of the civil rights movement propelled the Council into what became the Program to Combat Racism.
We cannot forget the turmoil that Africans were going through at this time. And especially the struggle against apartheid … As a faith community, Christianity professes a theology and a view of life that is incompatible with racism … We search for the roots of violence and we try to uproot them. But then we also experience the inadequacy of using violence to combat violence. The military language of combat was rejected … We are trying to overcome violence, not to combat anybody. What we are after is to transcend the attitudes that breed racism.

For Oduyoye and the WCC, an encounter with violence and indignity, and the deep pondering of it, evoked the urgency of dignity and a 10-year program to resist racial violence.

Peter Storey (1938-present) is a white South African Methodist minister and Bishop, who struggled for decades against the racist philosophy and structure of apartheid. He was chaplain to Nelson Mandela and others on Robben Island, and a major leader in the Church’s anti-apartheid movement. Storey’s whole ministry emphasized the importance of non-violent struggles, drawing on his early encounters with the life of Jesus as one who resisted evil with nonviolence, and on Martin Luther King Jr., whose stories of non-violent protest he heard from his father.

After the abolition of apartheid in 1994, Storey believed that the path toward restorative justice was listening to the voices of apartheid victims in South Africa. He argued for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and gave leadership to setting it in place. He was convinced that TRC was a first step in restoring dignity to victims, so victims and perpetrators from all sides were required to attend the hearings. Storey and others wanted victims to have “the dignity of being heard and acknowledged, their suffering recognized and reverenced” (oral history, Nov. 20, 2013). Healing justice required reparations, speaking, and listening: “Unless there is something beyond punishment, there is very little hope for the restoration and healing of societies which have been deeply divided and deeply wounded” (ibid.).

Storey today recognizes that encounters with dignity were critical to resisting the apartheid regime and establishing reconciliation. In spite of ongoing political and economic challenges, South Africa is growing stronger, having had no major acts of revenge based on the past and having had four peaceful democratic elections. From his viewpoint, encounters with dignity have been at the center of the positive transitions, past and present.

Analysis of Confucian and Christian Perspectives on Dignifying Encounters

To reflect religiously on dignity encounters, we turn to Confucianism and Christianity. In different ways, these two traditions accent the importance of humanization and communal values. The highest goal of learning in Confucian tradition is 仁 (Ren), which begins with compassion and is critical for dignity. Confucius did not define ren; however, it refers to a caring heart, compassion, and empathy. Thus, learning in Confucian tradition is a cultivation of ever-expanding compassion toward others. The greatest value in Christianity is love for God and neighbor. We explore these two traditions to discern deep meanings of dignifying encounters.

Confucian Traditions

“Cruel politics are more dreadful than tiger.” (苛政猛於虎) This saying comes from an ancient event in the Book of Rites. (Legge, 1879) This book contains a dialogue between Confucius and a woman. Confucius talked with a crying woman. Confucius asked her, “Why are you crying?” She answered, “My father-in-law, my husband, and my son have been killed by a horrible tiger on this mountain.” Confucius asked her, with a quizzical glance, “Why don’t you
leave the mountain and go to the town?” She answered, “There is no oppressive government here.” Confucius then said, “Oppressive government is more terrible than tigers.” (190-191)

Confucius (551 BCE - 479 BCE) lived in the Warring States period (770 BCE – 403 BCE) in ancient China approximately 2,500 years ago (Peimin Ni, 2002). During the period of ancient China, there was the socio-political and economic unrest because feudal lords revolted against Zhou Dynasty (1045 BCE – 256 BCE) and small and big wars often provoked. By waging war against other states that other feudal lords governed, the states collected excessive taxes and drafted soldiers, regardless of their age, for wars (2-3). Moreover, if feudal lords died, their slaves, wives, and children were buried alive with the dead. Suffered the indignity of being forced to pay heavy taxes, to serve in the military, and cruel customs (4-5). Because human dignity was lacking, Confucius claimed that humaneness (仁, ren) based on empathy (恕, shú) was the most crucial elements to improve human dignity.

Ren (仁) means to overcome one’s selfishness and to coexist and love others. The logogram 仁 combines of two other Chinese characters, 人 (a person) and 二 (two). It means that a person cannot live without others, and indicates how people should treat one another. There are various meanings of ren, including kindness, goodness, perfect virtue, humanness, generosity, and altruism. However, all meanings are concerned with our relationships with others.

Yan Yuan (514 BC – 483 BC) who Confucius regarded him to be a valuable disciple, asked Confucius about humaneness (仁) in the Analects (Legge, 2012). Confucius defined humaneness as overcoming selfishness and having a sense of propriety (12:1). That is, humans should struggle against their selfishness, establish proper relationship with others, and behave with propriety. Confucius also considered humaneness to involve coexistence in the society. A person who has humaneness “wishes her/himself to be established and sees that others are established, and wishes her/himself to be successful and sees that others are successful.” (6:30) Coexistence is a vital element and the right direction in humaneness. Lastly, humaneness is to love others. Fan Chi, who was Confucius’s wagon driver, asked about the meaning of humaneness. Confucius said simply, “Love others” (12:22). Encounters with others necessarily need love, which helps one to become a true human and to build up a loving community.

Confucius suggested that a way to show humaneness is through the demonstration of empathy (shú), which is the Confucian golden rule for society. The logogram 恕, is a combination of 如 (to be equal in) and 心 (mind-heart). It means that when one empathizes with others’ mind-heart, humaneness can be accomplished in empathic action (恕). Thus, a term of shú refers to respectful attitude toward and empathy with others. Confucius explained the importance of empathy thus, “My Way (Dao, 道) is penetrated by a single thread (shú).” (4:15) Since Confucius’s ideas are based on empathy, it is the best way to interpret Confucian ones. In this sense, the aim of Confucian ideas is for humaneness to be actualized in the empathy.

The Confucian cultivation of humaneness based on empathy is a key to establishing human dignity in society and involves expanding the empathy from the dimension of “self” to the dimension of “others” in human relationships. Great Learning (Legge, 2012), a work by Confucius, provides guidance on how to become an exemplary person (君子, junzi) through the cultivation of empathy. According to this book, one must cultivate one’s mind-heart and body to expand one’s focus from the level of “self” to having empathy with one’s family and then to
expand this empathy from family to country and from country to world. Confucius taught us to always endeavor to overcome selfishness, to coexist with others, and to love others as these are core moments in learning to be truly human and in improving human dignity by cultivating our mind-heart and body with empathy.

**Christian Tradition**

The goal of Christian life is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27, NRSV; cf: Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:30-31; Deut. 6:5). Again, the accent is on right relations, marked by love. This accent on love is not a mild-mannered, soft concept, but one that leads to challenging unjust social structures and acts of hate. Such love emerges in encounter. Indeed, encounters with dignity mark the life of Jesus, as noted in the opening quote from Mark 5:25-34. In Jesus’s encounter with the suffering woman who touched his garment for healing, he stops to engage, “Who touched my clothes?” (5:30b). The woman comes forward to tell Jesus “the whole truth” (33b). He then recognizes this woman’s courage and says: “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease” (34).

One of the boldest advocates for love in the twentieth century was Martin Luther King, Jr. King himself associated love with encounter, including encounters with himself in moments of deep questioning and prayer; with countless marchers and leaders in the Civil Rights Movement; with political leaders in streets and courthouses; and with congregations where he preached and conducted funerals for people killed in the Movement or in random acts of racial hate. According to Walter Fluker, Martin Luther King believed that “ethical leaders are transformed nonconformists who become aware of the transforming power of the encounter with the other within themselves and in community with others” (Fluker 2009).

In both Confucianism and Christianity, learning is the cultivation of compassion or love – being with and for others. Thus, dignifying encounters are central to teaching and learning.

**Interpretation and Proposals for Dignifying Encounters**

We conclude with a proposal that religious education be reshaped with a central place for encounters with dignity. We draw on the narratives of this essay and themes in Confucian and Christian traditions. Our brief summary points to radically reconstructed educational practices, especially in communities living with radical differences. Here we list our central findings, to be explored further:

1. Encounters with dignity are life-changing and life-shaping, and are at the center of Confucian and Christian traditions (and many others).
2. Encounters are not the final word (Dalia and Bashir) in resolving, or even living with, complex conflicts. The potency of these encounters for creating social change is affected by socio-political-economic factors.
3. Common projects create opportunities to continue building dignifying encounters (Abuelaish and Oduyoye).
4. Encounters with *indignity* disrupt the potential to create social change (continuing violence in Israel and Palestine).
5. Encounters with difference can stretch one’s imagination about what is possible in human relationships and actions (Abuelaish).
6. Communal encounters with dignity over time increase the possibility of real and lasting change, however fragile, however complex, and however long it takes (TRC in South Africa).

7. Encounters with dignity are often be rooted in childhood, opening people to dignified encounters later in their lives (Lawson and Storey).

8. Encounters may disrupt the dominant narrative of one’s life or one’s community, opening people to imagine the world differently (Lawson).

Though these conclusions will be expanded later, the central message is clear. Learning toward compassion and love is learning toward justice, and it happens best in encounters with dignity. This calls forth a disruption of didactic educational systems and demands a system in which genuine encounters are encouraged and supported. What better community to build such a system than religious educators, whose very religious traditions center on compassion and love!

Bibliography


