

A Dignitarian Manifesto

New language and new thinking are different things. Whatever new language progressives used in 2004 failed to change the outcome, and at most it'll help them eke out a few electoral victories in the coming years. New language is like changing the window treatment, not the window, not the view, not the perspective.

What's required for social change, and it could come from either party, is the kind of political realignment we get once every 50 years. Such realignment pulls a sizeable majority from the vast non-ideological, sensible middle of the political spectrum, and creates a real mandate for fundamental social change. Like those that FDR and LBJ presided over. Like the universal health care and campaign finance reform that we need now.

America may well be approaching another such tipping point. To actually tip, we need a core unifying idea to rally around, and equally we need a name for what it is we'll no longer put up with. For the unifying idea I suggest the slogan "Dignity For All." (The bumper sticker goes 'Dignity4All' and they're being created by a woman in Kansas.) The constellation of behaviors and practices "up with which we will not put" all fall under the heading of RANKISM.

Rankism is defined as abuse of the power inherent in rank. It's the culprit. It's the cause of indignity. It's the source of the most vexing political problems troubling Americans, from Katrina to Abu Ghraib to corporate corruption to bought politicians and elections. But most disturbingly, it is the cause of the emergence of an entrenched class locked in permanent poverty. America without the American Dream is not America ... and the Dream is fast becoming a mirage. This trend must be reversed, and it's going to take once-a-generation political realignment to do it.

The goal then is to build a dignity movement that provides grassroots support for democracy making its next evolutionary step. In the sixties the step we needed was to overcome racism; in the seventies we trained our sights on sexism; now the challenge is to target rankism—in all its guises. And they are many: bully bosses, sexually abusive clerics, professors who "borrow" research results from graduate students or exploit them as assistants, politicians who threaten privacy and liberty, condescending doctors, arrogant bureaucrats, coaches who humiliate players. Wherever there is a hierarchy, it's susceptible to abuse by power-holders of high rank.

But neither rank nor hierarchy are inherently, necessarily abusive. Actually, we admire, even love, people who earn high rank and handle it with grace and respect for those they outrank. What we cannot abide, what causes indignity, is abuse of rank. In a word, rankism. And we do need a word. It wasn't until the women's movement had the word "sexism" at its disposal that it made the gains it's now known for: equal pay for equal work; the right to choose; Title IX, etc.

To bring about social change, it's not enough to know what you're for; you also have to know what you're against. The dignity movement is for a dignitarian (not an egalitarian) society and it is against rankism.

That's it in a nutshell. Like any far-reaching analysis of social justice, the full story is a longer, more complex one. This web site is a primer on the dignity movement. There's a 1 minute video for those in a hurry. The full treatment (interpersonal and institutional rankism and how to confront them) can be found in "All Rise: Somebodies, Nobodies, and the Politics of Dignity."

But the goal is not to sell a book; it's to make rankism as defensible as racism has become, which is to say, not very. It didn't used to affect your career advancement to be identified as racist or sexist, but now it stops you in your tracks. As the dignity movement gains momentum, it will be equally disadvantageous to be known as rankist. If you're interested in helping us bring that day closer, please let us know.