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CHAPTER 1

MINDING YOUR DIGNITY

"There is more to you than you know."

BY ROSALIE DE ROSSET

DIGNITY: Formal, grave or noble bearing, conduct or speech; nobility or elevation of character. The quality or condition of being worthy, esteemed or honored; inherent nobility and worth; poise and self-respect; formal reserve or seriousness of manner appearance, or language.[1]

She is clothed with strength and dignity. . . .
She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.
PROVERBS 31:25–26 (NIV)

THE DIGNIFIED WOMAN

In the spring of 2011, the newest movie version of *Jane Eyre*, based on the extraordinary 1847 novel by Charlotte Brontë, opened in theaters across the country. Though there have been a number of films based on the novel throughout the years, many critics praised it. In earlier movies, some critics noted, the lead characters have often been too good-looking, the female heroine too mild-mannered, both of these representations not in line with Brontë's characterization.

I was struck by the words of two critics. Writing for Chicago's *The Reader*, J. R. Jones notes, "Casting handsome stars in the lead roles has been a chronic compromise in adapting *Jane Eyre*, whose heroine is repeatedly described as plain looking and whose hero is downright ugly." More important, however, he writes about Jane the following words: "[In *Jane Eyre*], Brontë struck a mighty blow for her gender when she created her title character and narrator, an orphaned girl who matures into a formidably self-possessed young woman; Jane's moral sensibility is so detailed, so fully realized that no reader could think her any less a person than the men surrounding her."[2] In other words, here is a woman to be taken seriously because of her character.

"A formidably self-possessed young woman with a fully real-

ized, detailed moral sensibility." That's a description that deserves attention. I decided to look at each primary word or phrase of the sentence to remind myself exactly what they mean. It's so easy to miss the beauty of fine language. The dictionary defines two of the words as follows. *Formidable*: causing great respect, even fear; *self-possessed*: someone who has control of her longings and attendant feelings and behavior especially when under pressure. *Fully realized, detailed moral sensibility* means that Jane has developed and refined her convictions, intellect, and longings to a great capacity. She is a woman of character, what one writer calls "the inner form that makes anyone or anything what it is—whether a person, a wine or a historical record."[3]

Although I have heard speakers and leaders stress the importance of humility and honesty for women, I have heard little or no admonition to them to be spirited.

Jones is not alone in his assessment. A. O. Scott, writing for the *New York Times*, says, "Jane Eyre may lack fortune and good looks—she is famously 'small and plain' as well as 'poor and obscure'—but as the heroine of a novel, she has everything. From the very first pages . . . Jane embodies virtues that might be off-putting if they were not so persuasive. . . . She is brave, humble, spirited and honest, the kind of person readers fall in love with and believe themselves to be in their innermost hearts."[4] Here in a secular venue is a reviewer who at once acknowledges that Jane is plain and poor and contends with admiration that she is a young woman who has

"everything." The everything she has, Scott says, is that she is "humble, spirited and honest." *Spirited* is a word defined as "full of or characterized by animation, vigor, or courage."[5] Scott also admits that her virtues are "off-putting if they were not so persuasive," a particularly intriguing phrase. How interesting that a contemporary, secular critic has found a plain woman to have "everything." And, I might add, how comforting and unusual. That he thinks readers "believe themselves to be [Jane] in their innermost hearts" has to be a mark of what many women and some men want to be since the reality is that few people today are like Jane. Even fewer quickly admire the Janes they meet in real life, a telling irony.

Over a period of thirty-five years, I have spoken at a great many conferences and seminars for women of all ages, but I have never seen advertised or heard a talk entitled, "How to become a formidable, self-possessed woman of fully realized moral sensibility." Although I have heard speakers and leaders stress the importance of humility and honesty for women, I have heard little or no admonition to them to be spirited, even though the definition of the word as noted above describes a commendable, even necessary attribute for a woman of character.

I can't help stopping on the last reviewer's words that Jane has virtues which are "off-putting if they were not so persuasive." I think what he means is that Jane knows her mind, a quality that is always startling, even threatening. In some Christian circles this would be seen as the proverbial "too strong." Jane is a person of great conviction, which sometimes means telling a hard truth when it needs to be said. What is persuasive is that finally, Jane Eyre is virtuous (another concept one hears little about) and dignified in the way that Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice,*

also is, with the difference that Jane's choices are influenced by God's overt action in her life. The foundational premise in these remarks is that it takes spiritedness and conviction and even telling a hard truth to be truly virtuous and dignified, a virtue and dignity that involves purposeful attention to one's mind, one's soul and its longings, and one's spirit, all of which affect one's physical life.

It seems possible to suggest that the average Christian girl and woman may learn more about how to do this from classic novels like those of Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë than from a Christian women's magazine, a Christian romance novel, a Christian-living book, or from some women's conferences. I can hear some readers saying—can't you find something more current than these books to illustrate your point with contemporary women? The definition of classic is a work that lasts, that is dated only in superficial detail such as particularities of dress and speech, but whose themes are universal and timeless. These novels are specific, hard-hitting, do not resort to pious clichés, and they show consequences. They show instead of just telling, one of the first principles any writing or speech teacher tells her students. They are also elegantly written. And, while profoundly moral (all truth is God's truth), this novel is not "religious," generally or specifically.

Beloved for years by women of every age and class, *Pride and Prejudice* and its various film takes show the contrast between silly women who make poor choices and a heroine who, while flawed, is nevertheless principled, modest, noble, self-disciplined, and dignified. Even non-Christian women whose moral code, philosophy of modesty, and dating behavior aren't remotely like those of the novels' characters appear to be engaged. One can only speculate, then, that women yearn for the very dignity and restraint they

eschew by allowing themselves to be clones of the culture; they long to be respected and cherished even when they choose men who do neither; they want to be like Elizabeth Bennet and Jane Eyre or at least to end up being loved as these heroines are by good men. Many of them, Christian and non-Christian seem, however, unable to navigate the paths to such conclusions.

Elizabeth Bennet, while having attractive features, is not said to be beautiful. What emerges far more clearly is her wit, her intelligence, her honesty in speaking her mind, her refusal to accept disrespect even from the man she loves, her willingness to be alone rather than compromise her soul, and her independence exercised with restraint. In summary, she is the picture of dignity.

And that is what seldom comes up today, the crucial role that dignity needs to play in the development of every woman who claims to know Jesus Christ as personal Savior. This is what needs to inform every facet of a woman's life, every choice she makes. I'm not even sure *dignity* is a word anyone has thought about for a long time.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

I have wondered through the years who Christian women's role models are and if they are getting the purposeful guidance they need from older women. I have informally asked groups of young women this question yearly in a class I teach. Depending on the year, three or four names come up. One or two of them is usually the latest well-known female author/speaker of the day; the others are historical figures like Susanna Wesley or Amy Carmichael. Or they name a grandmother, a mother, or a sister, something which usually has more conviction and specificity. The women I ask seem

to have a hard time thinking of people or articulating what they are modeling themselves after.

I found interesting what one young woman wrote about Emma Watson, who plays Hermione Granger in the Harry Potter film series. "When a young woman has grown up with millions of people watching her entire adolescent development, criticizing and controlling her physical appearance, and confusing her identity with that of a fictional character, the pressures make consistent dignity seem impossible. Emma Watson has lived this life with dignity and self-respect, prizing her education, maintaining privacy, avoiding scandals, conducting interviews and public statements with grace, and encouraging other women to have self-respect."[6] Whether or not you agree with this assessment, it hits many of the right notes.

So, I ask you to think about the question: What do you think of when you hear the word *dignity*? Perhaps more specifically, who do you think of? What person comes to mind? Is it a popular singer, speaker, movie actress, or perhaps a friend or relative? And how do you picture dignity? Is it something you aspire to be? What would you change about yourself to be dignified?

DIGNITY DEFINED

Dignity: the word, again, deserves a close look. The first or second definitions of the word from a variety of dictionaries are as follows: "formal, grave or noble bearing, conduct or speech; nobility or elevation of character; the quality or condition of being worthy, esteemed or honored; inherent nobility and worth; poise and self-respect; formal reserve or seriousness of manner appearance, or language."

Dignity, it is clear, is not the same thing as poise; it is not the same thing as beauty, and it is certainly not the same thing as style

though, of course, a dignified person may have any one or all of those qualities. Probably the characteristic most confused with dignity is poise, defined as "to be balanced or held in equilibrium: balance; freedom from affectation or embarrassment; composure."[7] Little about this definition suggests much about the internal values of the person or about her character; instead, it describes an outward behavior that may or may not be influenced by internal stability and integrity. Many of the celebrities presented to us in media outlets have been poised, although admittedly, even that is becoming a thing of the past as one looks at the embarrassing and ludicrous behavior of so many who are having what Andy Warhol called their fifteen minutes of fame.

The truth of the matter is that most of us are in process, no matter what our age.

Probably one of the most famous individuals in modern history who consistently and deservedly has been called poised is Princess Diana, whose decisions, as she suffered disappointment and betrayal, were deeply flawed and led to undignified choices and the tragedy of her life. Interestingly enough, Mother Teresa, who died within a few days of Princess Diana, was probably seldom described as poised, but always seen as dignified, an issue of character. In recent history, Laura Bush was seen by almost everyone on both sides of the political spectrum as dignified and graceful. These were qualities that emanated from her person; while not beautiful, she was often radiant without being showy; when asked hard, even rude questions by her husband's enemies, she answered with gra-

cious conviction, and sometimes a sense of disarming humor. She handled the duties of the White House without bringing attention to herself; she was modest and contained.

Dignity contains within it, as the definitions suggest, not only noble *bearing*, a facet of appearance, but also noble *character* which comes from *inherent* nobility and worth. That means the person is sure of her values and beliefs, she is sober and thoughtful about every part of her life. And, what this discussion is trying to do is to introduce to you dignity's importance, not to present yet another unreachable ideal. If you can see the crucial role of a quality, it is possible to begin the journey toward that quality because it promises a life of greater integrity. The truth of the matter is that most of us are in process, no matter what our age. It is easier for some of us to look dignified than others, but to truly be dignified is something different that has a number of components.

Just as I have never heard or seen advertised a seminar called "How to become a formidable, self-possessed woman of fully realized moral sensibility," I have also never seen one entitled "How to Be Dignified in Your Choices," though of course wise books and innumerable articles have been written and countless presentations made about making good choices. Oddly enough, given its importance, one seldom hears the word *dignity* discussed as a value for human behavior by non-Christians or Christians although it may be used to describe someone from time to time. If you do a cursory search of articles on dignity, besides random references in Christian blogs here and there, you'll find mostly pieces addressed to the medical and social services communities, articles about helping people to die with dignity and the disenfranchised to find dignity through a better life. John Paul II wrote about the dignity of women

in one of his apostolic letters, arguing that Christianity, more than "any other religion" has given women special dignity and urges the church to use them in more significant ways.

Dignity is a strong, chosen, deliberate way of life, the result of the totality of a person's choices and worldview.

When dignity is talked about among Christian women, it most often has to do with the passages about wives' behavior in 1 Timothy and the proverbial "quiet and submissive spirit," a phrase that is seldom correctly scripturally interpreted and is too often equated with passivity contributing to women's voicelessness. Passivity, wrote one clinical psychologist, "is born of anxiety; it is a fear of using our energies lest we risk disapproval by others or risk failure in our own eyes. . . . It is a disowning of our nobler parts—our self-reliance, our courage under fire, our resolve to win, our determination to inspire others to greater heights."[8]

DIGNITY LIVED OUT

To be a Christian woman of dignity, a woman must know who she is before God; she must have dealt thoughtfully with her personhood and made decisions about who she will be. Dignity is a strong, chosen, deliberate way of life, the result of the totality of a person's choices and worldview. Which takes us back to Jane Eyre, who is a model of that kind of living. Again, I chose this book, not because of its age, but because of its unusual central character, one whose strength and character stand out enduringly.

Jane Eyre endures oppression, starvation, madness, condescension, and coldness. She is presented with a number of women role models whom she observes, learns from, and departs from to become her own person. One of those models is too ideal, too compliant, though good. Another is too angelic, and still another sometimes passive-aggressive. Jane is too strong to compromise her convictions, and she is passionate, qualities which presented problems for Victorian critics and perhaps for us today at times. And, she dares to suggest that singleness is preferable to an inappropriate marriage.

If you know the story at all, Jane Eyre is the account of a young, orphaned British girl who goes to live with an aunt and cousins, all of whom treat her cruelly. She is then sent to a boarding school for poor girls, where a supposedly Christian director, actually a monster, treats the orphans abusively and tyrannically—many of them dying of cold-related illnesses and starvation. All of this has historical precedent in the times of the novel and was part of Charlotte Brontë's and her sisters' experience.

Jane, who does not have the advantage of good looks or good fortune, survives in spirit because she chooses the path her life (spirit, mind, and behavior) will take, often against cultural mores and corrupt authoritative voices, She has a sense of voice from the time she is a child and tells the truth in every circumstance, even when it could endanger her well-being. Though she must learn to refine her expression, she will not silence the voice of her intellectual needs or mute her moral voice by compromising her character with poor relational or sexual choices for the sake of fleeting happiness. She rises to a higher standard, a God-given understanding of righteousness.

So, first of all, she tells the truth, a righteous truth. She trusts her instincts—something women are often prone to ignore. She doesn't go along with the conventional wisdom that says "keep quiet, take the abuse, answer questions the way you're expected to." She calls her aunt on her cruel behavior. She refuses to give pious answers to the evil school director, Mr. Brocklehurst, when he asks her supposedly "spiritual questions" about the Bible. Listen to the following exchange—starting with his attempt to intimidate her.

"Do you know where the wicked go after death?"
"They go to hell," was my ready and orthodox answer.
"And what is hell? Can you tell me that?"
"A pit full of fire."
"And should you like to fall into that pit, and to be burning there for ever?"
"No sir."
"What must you do to avoid it?" . . .
"I must keep in good health, and not die." [replies Jane][9]

The reader can't help smiling at this childlike honesty, but also the kind of truthful spirit that will become "a strong moral sensibility." That's the kind of women I think Jesus wants us to be—that's the kind of biological and spiritual daughters He wants us to raise, women who have a righteous instinct for recognizing, naming, and resisting abuse and falsehood.

When Jane leaves the boarding school, she goes to Thornfield, an estate where she becomes a governess for a young girl. The job of governess was only as good as the employer made it. Anything could be done to governesses, and, because of what they endured, the

proportion of them in mental asylums was substantial. While Jane is grateful for the job, she is not subservient. She remarks:

> It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility; they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. . . .
>
> Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer. . . . It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.[10]

These words still ring strong today as they were shocking then, 160 years ago, but they show an accurate understanding of the need for women, as human beings, to fulfill their gifts, to use their creativity, to stretch beyond prescribed activities and passivity to true humanity. Dignity requires the development of principle and the use of intelligence.

When Jane meets Rochester, her boss, and the man who becomes the great love of her life, she nevertheless keeps her sense of voice, outrageous then as it is now. At one point, when he has been condescending to her, she says to him articulately to say the least:

> Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless?—You think wrong!—I have as much soul as you,—and full as much heart! . . . It is my spirit that addresses

> your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal,—as we are![11]

This is not a woman who can be put down or forced into false submission by her social position or the dominance of the man who loves her. Charlotte Brontë was severely criticized for this work because she dared to portray a woman who would not surrender to the worst of her culture's expectations—would not give up her sense of self and conviction, no matter what her social caste. This is a woman who puts a high value on herself as God does also. In her own defense, in the face of critics who accused her of presenting an inappropriate model for young women and who called her sensibility "masculine," Brontë wrote the following words in the preface to the novel's second edition: "Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last. To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisee, is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns."[12] In other words, what has always been done culturally is not the same as moral principle. Pointing out the hypocrisy of what a person or church has decided is appropriate is not an attack on the person of Jesus Christ.

As I say to my students, Jane and Rochester are not just "in heat."

I wonder how many young women reading this feel that sense of self, that sense of worth before God, a worth that extends to their choices and ability to stand for what they know is right? I wonder how many women in general can make the distinction between

what their subculture dictates (the church, the circles they occupy) and true morality, between the self-righteousness of peer pressure and true conviction, between pharisaical demands and what Christ wants His daughters to be?

Not only is Jane truthful and thoughtful, but she is also morally resolute; she does the right thing in the face of great temptation, a righteous behavior which is not accidental but born of a *whole* life filled with the practice of character, what we would call holiness. So, when Jane must leave Rochester, whom she has in her need for love made a god (I will not insert a spoiler for those who have not read the novel) yet with whom she has fallen deeply in love, she runs like Joseph ran from Potiphar's wife. This is no small act, as the love Jane and Rochester feel for each other is completely different from the shallow relationships usually drawn in formulaic Christian or secular romance novels and even in some personal accounts.

In much the same way that Darcy and Elizabeth are attracted to each other in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane and Rochester are drawn to each other because each finds the other so interesting. Each admires the other's strength and thoughtfulness (by this I mean giving thought to) as shown in behavior and conversation. Each challenges the other in the best sense of the word. This is a connection of the minds which leads to a deeper, more enduring passion than that sparked by a less layered attraction. As I say to my students, Jane and Rochester are not just "in heat." So, Jane's refusing to sin is the result of her moral resolve, her sense of identity before God, her choice of what is right over what the heart wants. Her choice is "spirited." This is the refusal to surrender to desperation or fear of being alone; it shows nobility of character and dignified living.

Listen to the process Jane goes through in the midst of loss, of

homelessness, of nothing to quiet her terror but God and in the face of her overpowering love, attraction, and compassion for Rochester. First of all, she asks herself the question any woman who has loved can understand. Think of a time when you have been dating a man who has a pornography problem, who is not treating you well, or who isn't good for you spiritually, emotionally, or physically. Jane feels torn by her beloved's desolation—she wants in our vernacular "to be there for him." She says, "Feeling . . . clamoured wildly. 'Oh, comply!' it said. . . . 'Soothe him; save him; love him; tell him you love him and will be his. Who in the world cares for *you*? or who will be injured by what you do?'" In the wake of her pity, her habit of thinking rationally and theologically and her self-respect kick in. "Still indomitable was the reply—'*I* care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man.'"[13] *Indomitable* is another of those words that deserves a closer look. It means "incapable of being overcome, subdued, or vanquished."[14] Here, of course, the sense of it is that even the greatest passion, the deepest human longing cannot overcome Jane in the face of truth, of what she knows to be right.

Finally, in one of the more powerful theological statements Jane Eyre makes, she teaches her readers the foundation of how one is to live when she says with desperate determination, "I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad—as I am now. Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation. . . . They have a worth—so I have always believed; and if I cannot believe it now, it is because I am insane—quite insane: with my veins running fire, and my heart beating faster than I can count its throbs."[15] To rephrase, God's laws are easily kept when one

is not enduring temptation. How committed we are to what we say we believe is tested when we are "insane," literally out of our minds with temptation, when it is hard to remember truth.

DIGNITY AND MEMORY

Approximately two hundred uses of the word *remember* appear in the Old and New Testaments, many of them reminders to recall the historical events through which the patriarchs passed so that their descendants might be given faith. Readers are urged to remember how God led His children and their enslavement and deliverance, to consider the generations long ago. They are even urged to ask their fathers for that history. Readers are called upon to extol God's words and wonders, to remember the ancient laws and find comfort in them. The failure to remember marks some of the great defeats of the children of Israel. Sometimes my mother used to say to me as I went out with my friends, "Remember who you are and whom you belong to." Dignity demands that we remember that we are daughters of God, that we belong to Him at all times, but particularly when as Jane says, we are "insane."

If your faith matters, your mind matters.

What helps Jane in temptation and loss is both her ability to think critically in a moment of passion and her theology—her objective belief in a God of truth, her insistence upon remembering truth. She understands that she must behave with righteousness and dignity in spite of what she feels. She must live above her emotions as powerful as they may be; she must not rationalize her

choices, choices which make all the difference in her life, the difference between wasting time in sin and trusting God for her happiness. And, it makes her a model to others, proof that one can live wisely and well.

If your faith matters, your mind matters. If your mind matters, it is important what you do with it, theologically and intellectually. You cannot separate your spiritual life from the life of the mind. You can't be fully human without using wisely all the faculties God has given you. They are intertwined; one will not thrive without the other. In neglecting one or the other, you will live a small, shriveled existence. Jane makes the right decisions because her intellectual reasoning ability and theological understanding are sound, protecting her from moral failure.

The culture has encouraged so much self-focus and indulgence that sometimes I wonder if we haven't told ourselves we can't be heroines in the old-time tradition. Being a heroine means being countercultural where culture or subculture is wrongheaded. Everywhere we look, people are telling stories of recovery from sin; and, of course, God's grace is marvelous beyond words. However, it is possible to choose well, to spend less time recovering and more time deepening our walk with God.

In J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, the magician Gandalf tells the reluctant and unlikely hero Bilbo Baggins, "There is more to you than you know,"[16] more in this instance than doing what he has always done. The wise magician knows that Bilbo has become addicted to that cozy hobbit hole; he likes eating and drinking well, he likes being comfortable. But Gandalf knows that Bilbo has two sides to his nature, that "within the hobbit's veins coursed blood not only from the sedentary Baggins side of the family but also from the

swashbuckling Took side."[17] Bilbo has gotten used to the sedentary side, and after all, he's not doing anything wrong; he's just a nice, even generous, placid hobbit who knows how to have a good time, who fits into his community. But, something transcendent is calling to Bilbo—telling him there is more to life than this, that there are adventures to be had on a heroic scale, that there is good and evil in this world, and he has to be part of fighting the wrongs. Bilbo has a choice at this point, to continue to observe the status quo or to have an adventure which will make him a hero. It is a difference between the status quo as spiritual death, and the transcendent adventure which is life. It's a choice each one of you is being called to make.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is your concept of dignity? How has it changed after reading this chapter?
2. Who do you find dignified and why? Be specific.
3. How do you see dignity as a component of Christianity?
4. Form a book club and read one or both of the novels mentioned in this chapter with a view to forming a philosophy of dignified womanhood.

SUGGESTED READING

- FICTION: *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë or *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. Choose unabridged editions.
- NONFICTION: Biographies/autobiographies of women in missionary work; women in Christianity. (See *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, edited by Gerald H. Anderson.)