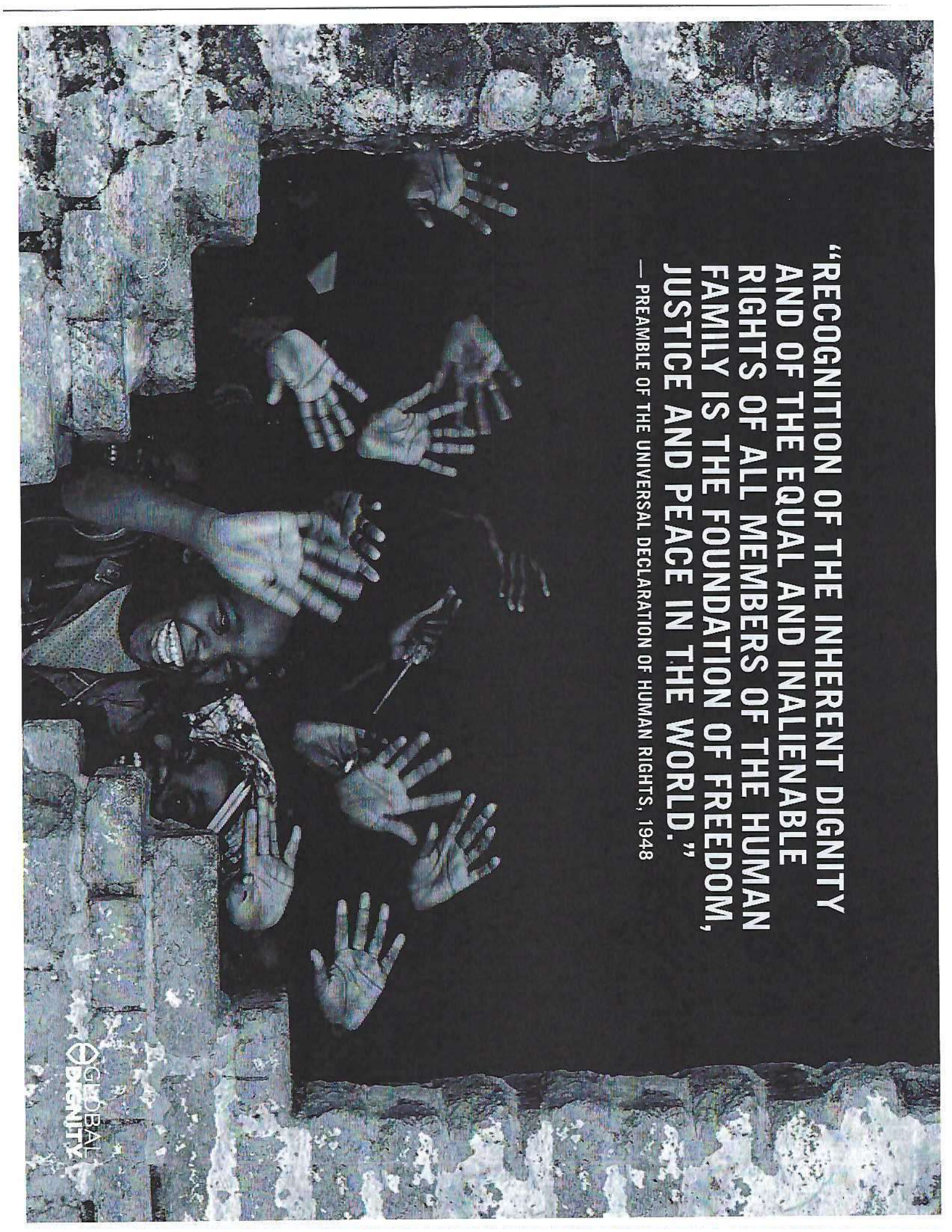


DIGNITY: THE ESSENTIALS



**We have the knowledge,
wealth and technology to
solve even the most complex
problems. So why is there so
much hate, injustice, violence
and inequality in our world?**

Everyone is born with dignity. It is our inherent value. Dignity is an inextricable part of what it means to be a human being. There is so much that divides us: ethnicities, religions, skin color, gender, politics, borders, and status. But dignity is the great equalizer. It cuts through all divisions and unites us around our shared humanity.



**“RECOGNITION OF THE INHERENT DIGNITY
AND OF THE EQUAL AND INALIENABLE
RIGHTS OF ALL MEMBERS OF THE HUMAN
FAMILY IS THE FOUNDATION OF FREEDOM,
JUSTICE AND PEACE IN THE WORLD.”**

— PREAMBLE OF THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS, 1948

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

In order to truly transform ourselves and our communities, it's important that the principles of dignity be manifested in four areas. It starts with recognizing your own inherent dignity. Then, it's critical that we also acknowledge the fundamental value of others—and that our individual humanity is bound up in the humanity of all people. Next, we can build cultures of dignity in our organizations, schools, workplaces and communities. At the highest level, the principles of dignity lead to the creation of new politics and economic systems and, ultimately, societies and nations that are more just, open and peaceful.



INDIVIDUAL

- Self Worth
- Confidence
- Resilience
- Integrity
- Agency



RELATIONSHIPS

- Open-mindedness
- Compassion
- Kindness
- Love
- Empathy
- Forgiveness



CULTURES OF DIGNITY

- Trust
- Transparency
- Belonging
- Recognition for everyone's unique talents, voice and contributions

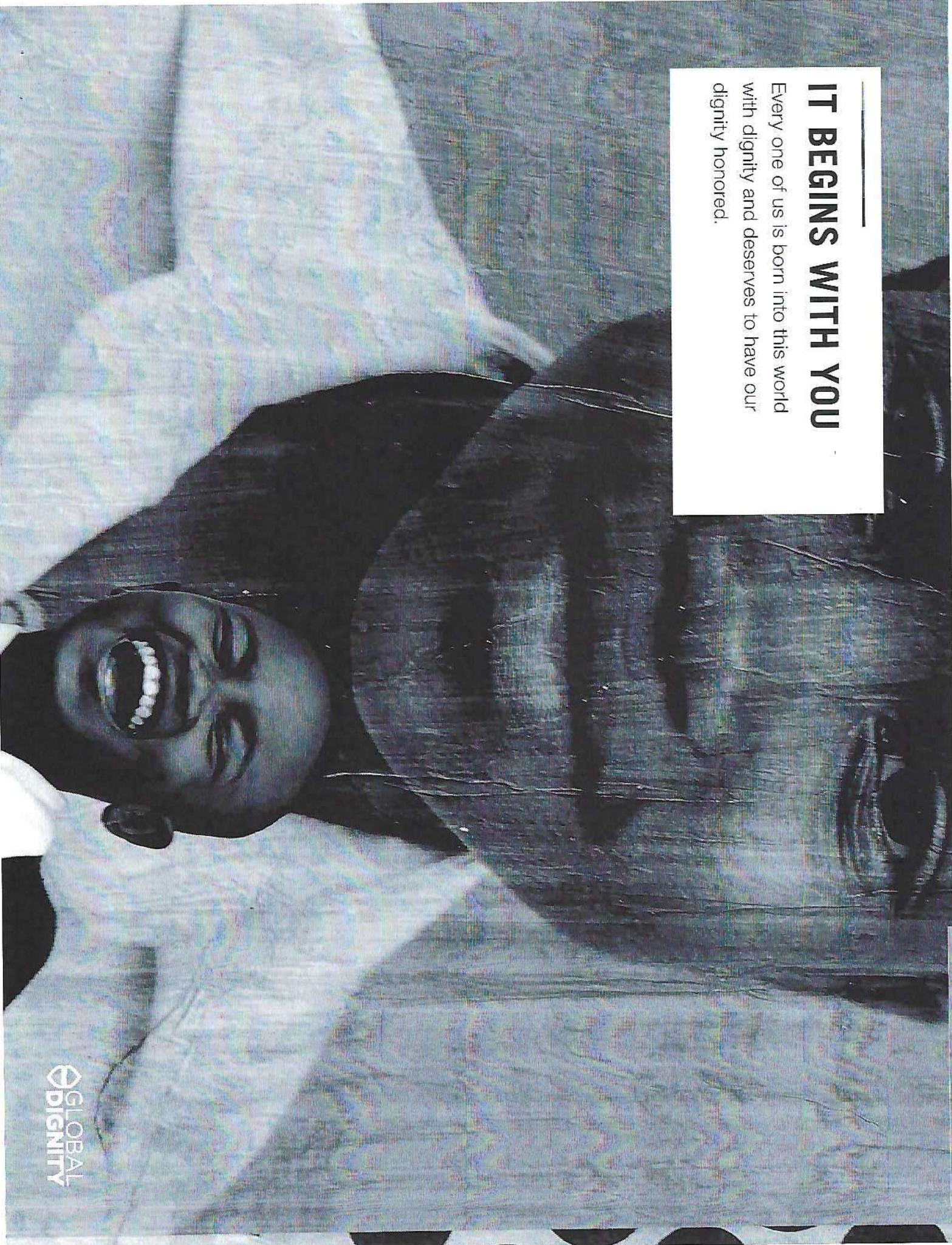


SOCIETIES + NATIONS

- Justice
- Equality
- Peace
- Openness
- Freedom
- Inclusion
- Safety

IT BEGINS WITH YOU

Every one of us is born into this world with dignity and deserves to have our dignity honored.



RECOGNIZING YOUR OWN DIGNITY, VALUE AND SELF-WORTH EMPOWERS YOU TO:

- » better navigate a complex and often difficult world;
- » help and protect other people;
- » become a change maker;
- » transform your communities and the world, and
- » cultivate resilience and inner-strength.

AN IMPORTANT PART OF HONORING THE DIGNITY OF OTHERS IS TO ENSURE EVERYONE CAN FULFILL THEIR FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN NEEDS:

Safety: physical and psychological security.

Autonomy: power over our environment and circumstances.

A Connection to Others: close personal relationships that allow us to depend on and share emotions with one another.

A Sense of Purpose: goals that give life meaning.

ACTIVITY

1. With these needs in mind, think about a time when your dignity and needs were honored. What happened? How did you feel? Why do you think you felt that way? What did you do?
Optional: share with a small group.
2. Now, think about a time when your dignity was violated, and your ability to fulfill your needs was limited. What happened? How did you feel? Why do you think you felt that way? What did you do?
Optional: share with a small group.



WHY DO WE LOSE SIGHT OF DIGNITY?

Dignity starts with each one of us. The next step is to see and honor the dignity in every other person.

AS HUMANS, WE NATURALLY GRAVITATE TO PEOPLE AND GROUPS SIMILAR TO OURSELVES.

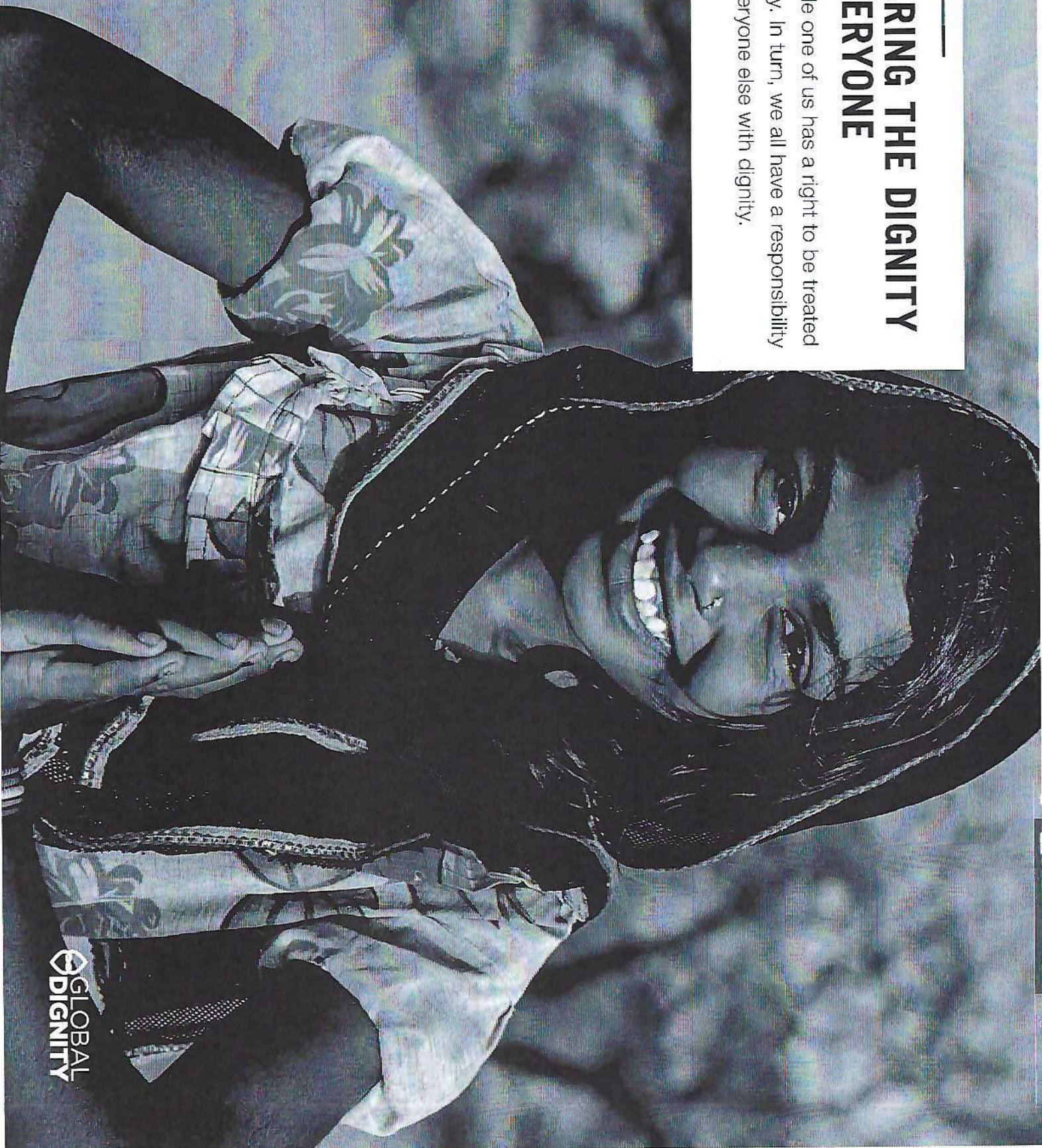
We tend to identify with those who share the same race, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, status, gender, abilities, and social status. It's easy to see people outside of these groups as "other." But every person on the planet shares a much larger identity: as a member of the human family.

ACTIVITY

Reflect on a personal or world conflict resulting from people being dehumanized, humiliated or seen as "other." Summarize the experience for yourself on paper, or share with others if you are working in a small group.

HONORING THE DIGNITY IN EVERYONE

Every single one of us has a right to be treated with dignity. In turn, we all have a responsibility to treat everyone else with dignity.



THE TEN ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF DIGNITY

Donna Hicks is a renowned authority on dignity and author of *Dignity and Leading with Dignity*.

DR. HICKS EXPLAINS THAT WHEN WE HONOR SOMEONE'S DIGNITY, WE:

Accept their identity and give them the freedom to express their authentic selves without fear of being negatively judged.

Recognize their unique qualities, talents and ways of life, and give them credit for their contributions, ideas and experience.

Acknowledge them and make them feel seen and heard. We validate and respond to their concerns and what they have been through.

Include them and make them feel that they belong and are part of a community.

Make them feel safe—both physically and from fear of being shamed or humiliated.

Treat them fairly and with equality.

Give them a sense of freedom and independence, and empower them to experience a sense of hope and possibility.

Seek understanding and give them the chance to explain their experiences and perspectives.

Give them the benefit of the doubt by starting with the premise that they have good motives and are acting with integrity.

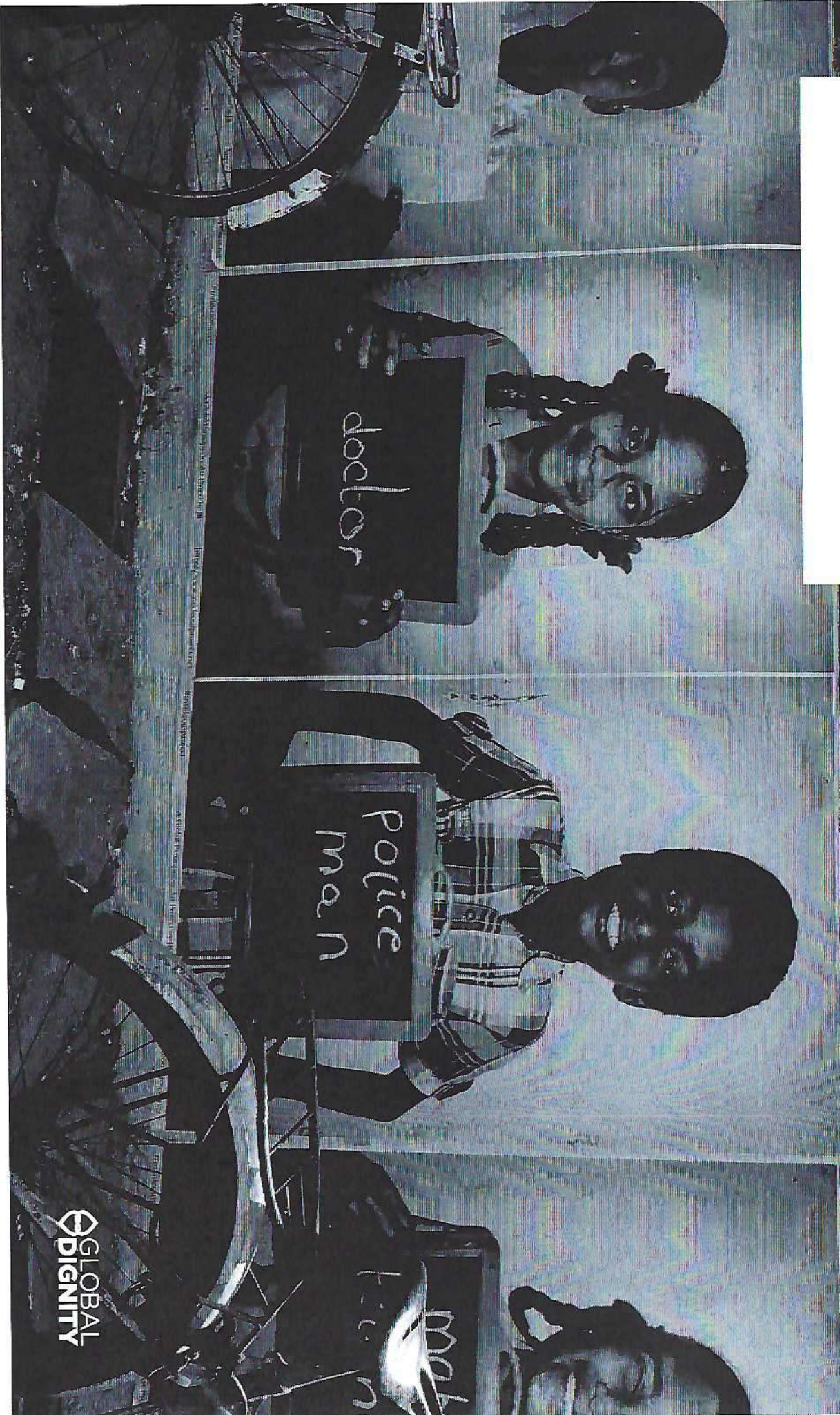
Apologize and take responsibility when we have violated their dignity. We make a commitment to change hurtful behaviors.

ACTIVITY

1. Individually or as a group, choose three of the Ten Essential Elements of Dignity that your school, organization or community are doing well.
2. Now choose three Elements that your school, organization or community could improve upon, and how.

DIGNITY VS. RESPECT

The words dignity and respect are often used interchangeably. In fact, they are different.



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Illustration: © The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia

A Child's Hospital of Philadelphia

DIGNITY IS INHERENT.

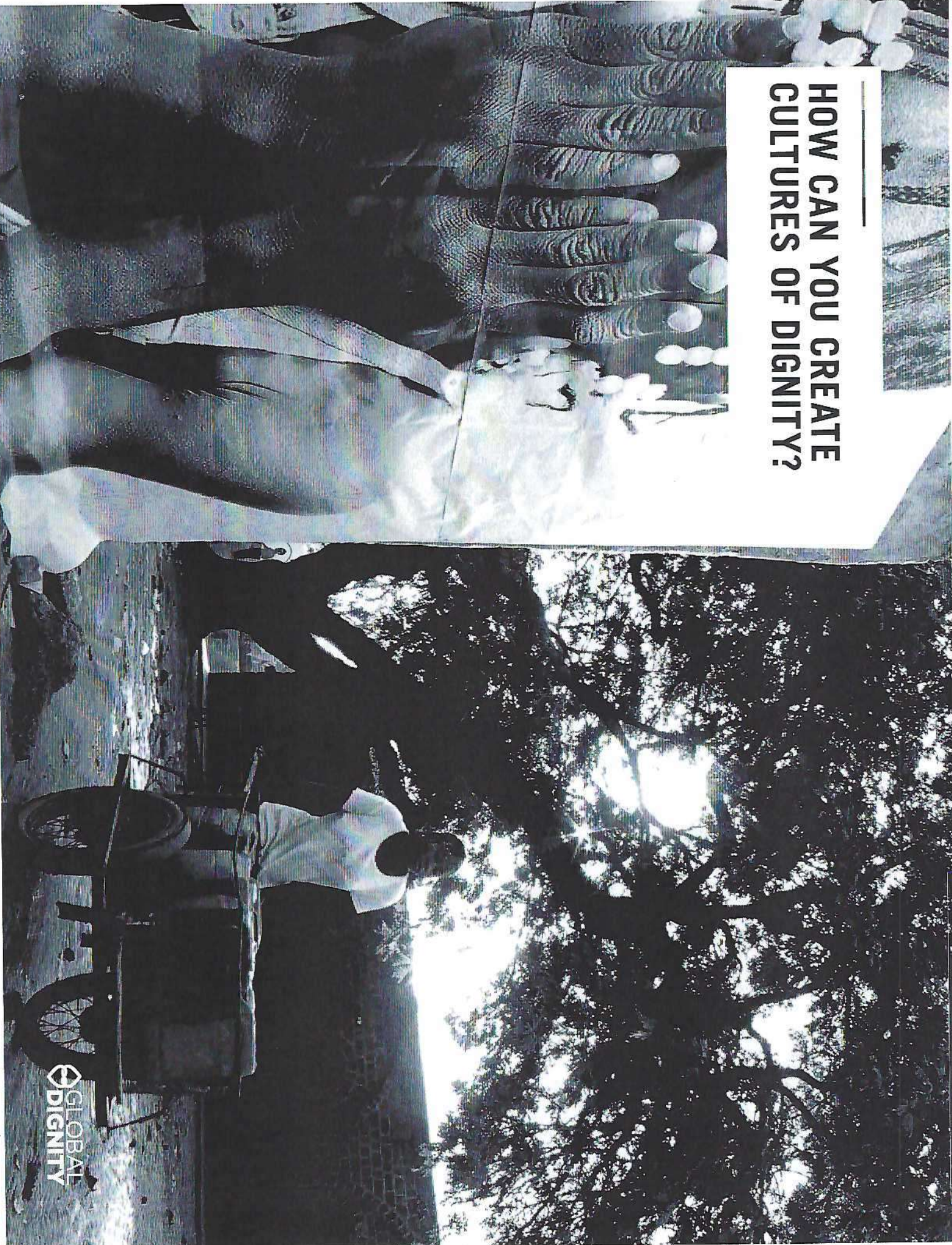
We are all born with dignity and it cannot be taken away. It is the core of our identity and self worth. **Respect is earned.** It is given to you by others based on your actions, abilities or achievements. You don't need to respect someone's behavior, but you should always remember their inherent dignity. This helps you break free from cycles of revenge, hatred, and resentment that lay at the heart of so many conflicts within families, communities, organizations and society.

ACTIVITY

Think of people from history, literature, films or from your own family or community, who:

- » demonstrated their dignity even though they were not treated with respect
- » is respected yet does not treat people with dignity
- » is respected and honors the dignity of others

HOW CAN YOU CREATE CULTURES OF DIGNITY?



Like any skill, dignity must be practiced. Cultivating our own dignity awareness helps us stay true to our core when someone does us harm. Think about why people like Gandhi, Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela and Malala Yousafzai are revered: their fights for human rights are rooted in compassion and love, not revenge and hate. If we dedicate ourselves to practicing dignity in our daily lives, we can then build dignity into our schools, workplaces and communities.

YOU'VE TAKEN TWO CRITICAL STEPS ON YOUR DIGNITY JOURNEY:

We've covered the first two areas of dignity—recognizing your own inherent worth, and the dignity and value of all others. Now it's time to work together to create cultures of dignity by taking action.

LEADERSHIP MATTERS

All organizations have a culture. It's reflected in the way people relate to each other, how business gets done, what's considered acceptable and what's not.

Leaders play a special role in setting or changing organizational cultures, which is why leaders who understand and implement the principles of dignity are needed everywhere: our schools, governments, non-profits, businesses, and every workplace.

CALL TO ACTION

What is one action you can take this week to create or contribute to a culture of dignity:

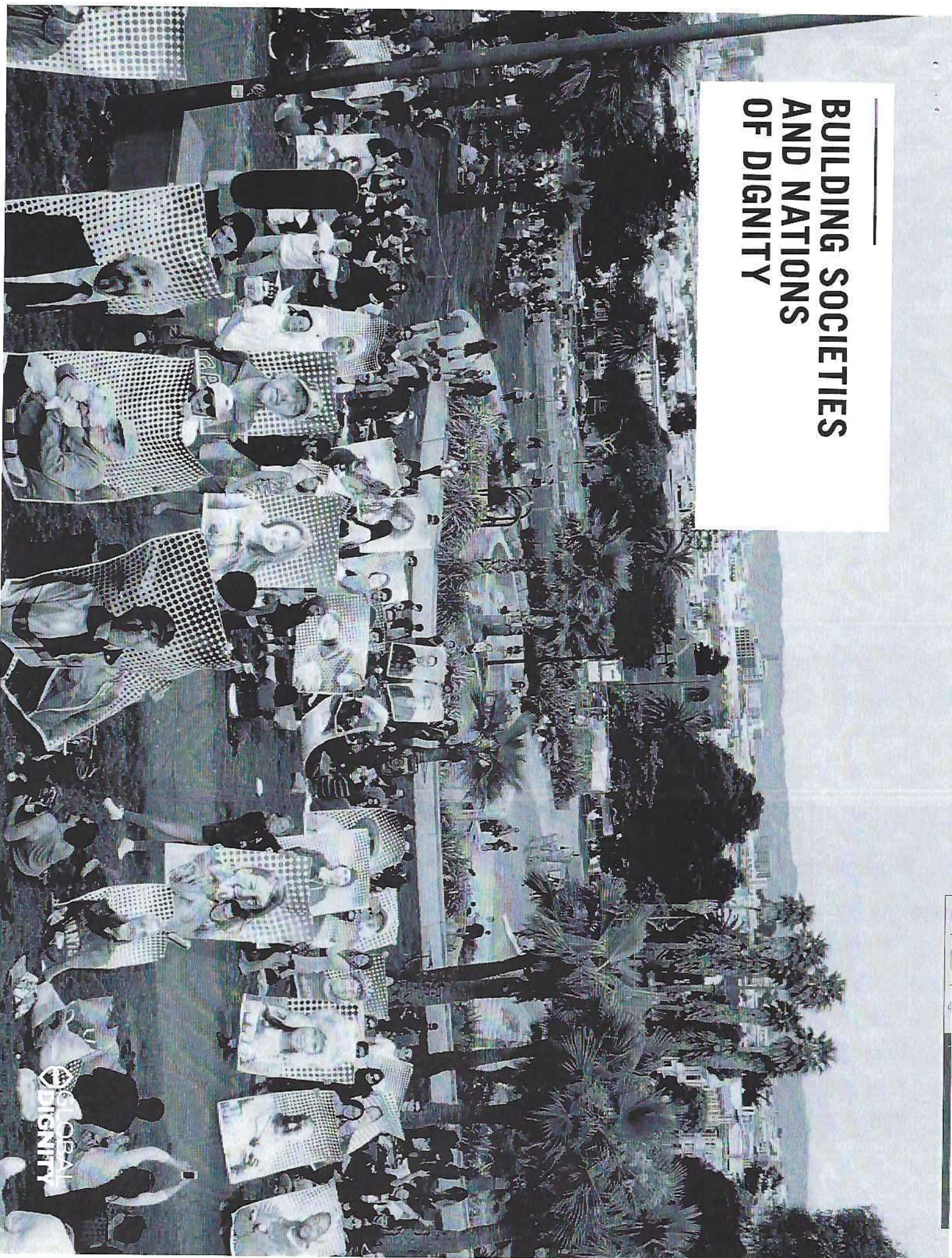
- » in your school?
- » in your community?
- » in your home?

ACTIVITY

Individually or in small groups, think about how the Ten Essential Elements of Dignity can help transform:

- » our classrooms?
- » our schools?
- » social media?
- » our workplaces?
- » any organization or group important to you?

BUILDING SOCIETIES AND NATIONS OF DIGNITY



THE FINAL STEP ON OUR DIGNITY JOURNEY IS THE MOST DIFFICULT.

Ultimately, we need to build entire societies and nations where the dignity principles are at the heart of our politics, our economies, education, healthcare, and justice systems. **The fundamental question is: what kind of world do we want to live in, and pass on to our children?** History shows us that individuals and groups, sometimes working alone and sometimes working with enlightened leaders, can transform their societies into ones that uphold the values of equality, freedom, tolerance and freedom of expression.

ACTIVITY

Imagine a place where the dignity of every person is honored. What would it look like? Write about it, draw or paint it, make a video, or express it in any creative way you'd like.


**We are building a global
movement rooted in the belief
that our shared humanity
depends on honoring the
dignity of others. Heal your
community. Transform the
world. Become an artisan of
hope. Join us.**



JOIN THE MOVEMENT

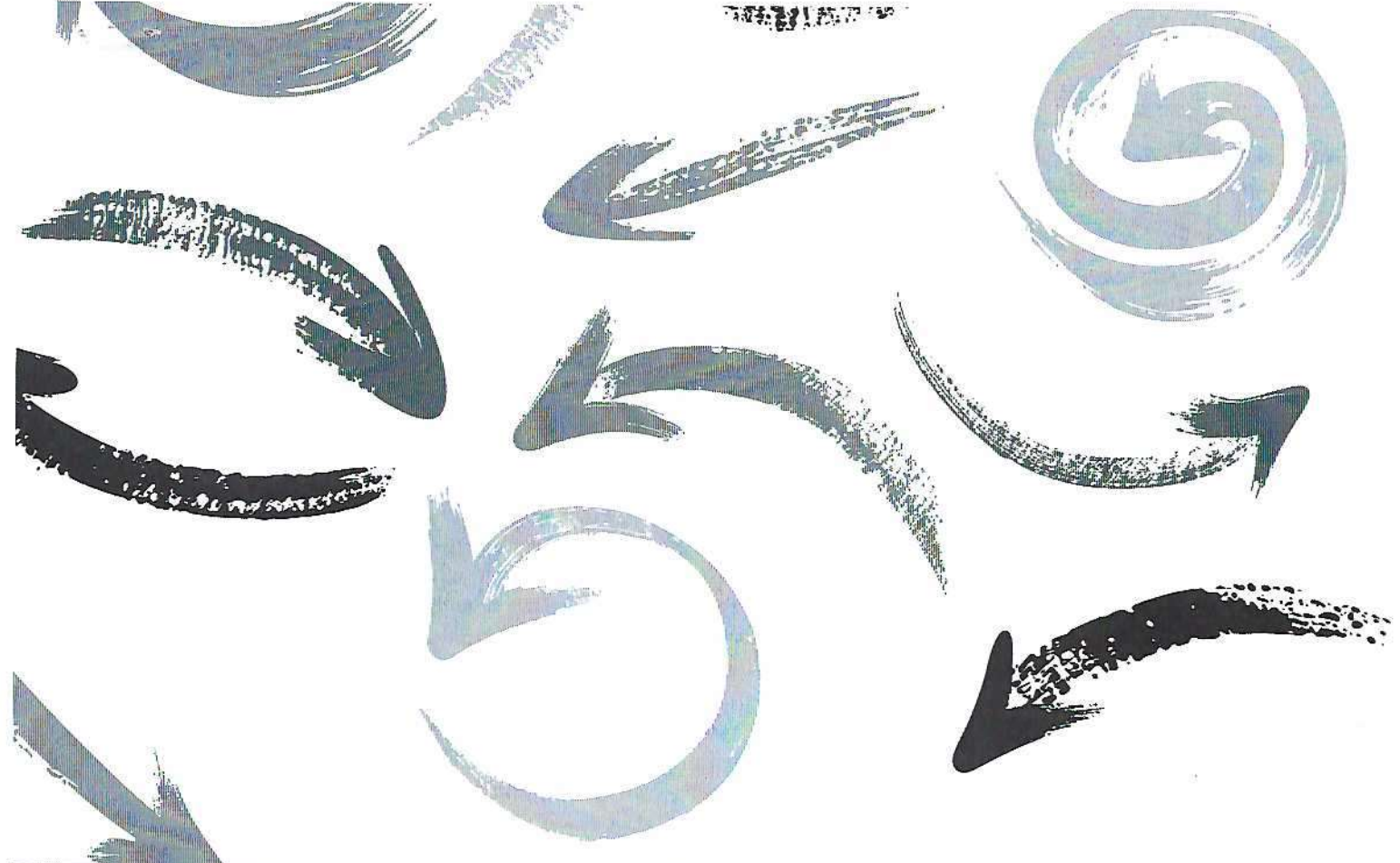
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 GLOBAL
DIGNITY



Avoiding Racial

Students experiencing racism can't wait for schools to move at their own pace and comfort level.

Paul Gorski

In schools committed to racial equity, educators who resist anti-racist measures should feel uneasy, isolated on the outskirts of their schools' institutional cultures. I mean this literally. The educators least invested in racial equity should wonder whether they belong.

Sadly, research shows the inverse tends to be true in many schools, even when leaders claim equity commitments. Often, the educators most adamant about racial equity are cast to the margins of institutional culture. They are the ones feeling isolated, wondering whether

they belong (Kohli, 2018; Picower, 2011). Colleagues call them troublemakers for naming what others refuse to name. Some are shushed or encouraged to adopt a color-blind perspective by equity-skittish leaders. They are accused of being too "political" simply for pointing out conditions that harm families of color. Educators of color who raise these concerns tend to face even greater hostility, as Kohli (2018) documented through the narratives of racial-justice-oriented teachers of color. They often are labelled "militant" or "angry" for telling the racial equity truth.

This is a failure of equity leadership.

A Racial Equity Reckoning

If the most emphatic racial equity advocates feel silenced and less central to institutional culture than their equity-resistant colleagues, what we have from an equity point of view is a sick institution.

Any meaningful accounting of racial inequities in schools must reckon with this reality. Is our commitment real? Why do emphatic equity advocates often face harsher repercussions for their advocacy than equity heel-draggers face for their inaction? Why is taking a strong, impassioned stand on racism interpreted as *deviant* while refusing to take a stand on racism is interpreted as *in a developmental process* (Mayorga & Picower, 2018)?

Are we driven by authentic desires for racial equity? Or are we content with rearranging inequities, hiding them behind multicultural arts fairs and diversity clubs (Au, 2017)?

The disturbing reality is, in my 20 years of experience working with schools and districts on matters of equity and justice, I've found that most initiatives and strategies that pass for "racial equity" efforts in schools pose less of a threat to racism than to the possibility of racial justice. Following Olsson's (1997) accounting of the detours white people follow to protect their privilege and avoid the messy work of racial justice, I call these initiatives and strategies *equity detours*.

The detours vary in scope and nefariousness but share a function: They create an illusion of progress toward

have in common is that they mask racial inequity. They relieve us of the responsibility to name and eliminate the ways racism operates in our schools (Ladson-Billings, 2017). Rather than being paths to equity, they are detours around it.

Four Racial Equity Detours

Described below are four racial equity detours commonly embraced in schools,¹ followed by equity principles that can help educators avoid these detours and build a more transformational racial equity approach.

① Pacing-for-Privilege Detour

This detour underlies the other detours. It speaks to the situation described earlier, wherein an equity approach coddles the hesitations of people with the least racial equity investment while punishing people with the most investment.

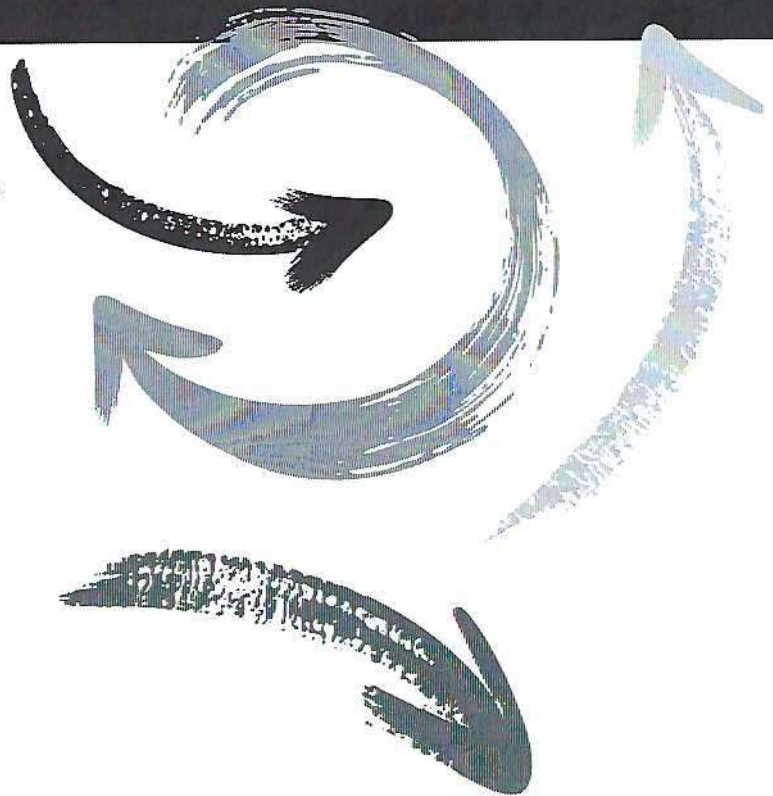
In too many schools, the pace of equity progress prioritizes the comfort and interests of people who have the least interest in that progress. Professional development in these schools appears designed to accommodate the feelings and fears of white educators in "difficult"

Equity Detours

equity while cementing, or even exacerbating, inequity. They can be more devastating than explicit racism because they do racism's work while consuming resources ostensibly earmarked for racial equity. They are the *anti-anti-racism*.

For example, people who study equity initiatives in schools have tracked educational leaders' tendencies, in the name of equity, either to implement deficit-oriented strategies, such as "grit" initiatives that obscure inequity (Kohn, 2014) or, worse, to build equity efforts around debunked approaches that create more inequity, like the "mindset of poverty." Some educational leaders inexplicably continue to embrace the "mindset of poverty" even though it reinforces racialized stereotypes (Redeaux, 2011)—and despite the fact that research clarified that *there is no such thing as a mindset of poverty* 50 years ago (Valentine, 1968).

What all these types of initiatives and frameworks



conversations about race rather than to advance equity for students of color (Swanson & Welton, 2018). A common “equity” PD framework in these contexts is *cultural competence*—an approach that provides a way to talk about “cultural differences” without having to name or confront racism (Gorski, 2016a; Pon, 2009). Cultural competence is important. But by itself it’s no threat to racism.

The hard truth is, racial equity cannot be achieved with an obsessive commitment to “meeting people where they are” when “where they are” is fraught with racial bias and privilege. Students, families, and educators experiencing racism cannot afford to wait for us to saunter toward a more serious racial equity vision. They cannot afford to wait, in particular, for all white educators to ease into racial equity commitments at a pace of our choosing while they suffer the consequences of our casualness.

In schools committed to equity, the time is *now*. We must prioritize equity over the comfort of equity-reluctant educators. We move on racial justice first by honestly identifying and addressing all the ways racism operates in our schools, and then we bridge the equity hesitators to our equity vision. We refuse to equivocate on racial justice. We find the will to implement, and hold one another accountable to, policy and practice changes *today*, rather than waiting for an elusive consensus.

When I make this argument to education leaders, they often emphasize the importance of staff buy-in. I appreciate consensus-based leadership—but not always when it comes to equity. The school-to-prison pipeline is flowing (Annamma, Morrison, & Jackson, 2014).

The hard truth is that racial equity cannot be achieved with an obsessive commitment to “meeting people where they are” when “where they are” is fraught with racial bias and privilege.

Students who are disproportionately targeted with assignment to special education, harsh applications of discipline policy, unengaging pedagogy, and the sorts of “school reform” initiatives that redistribute access up the privilege continuum don’t need consensus. They need justice.

Start where we need to be: *Equity is neither optional nor negotiable. This is who we are as a school; these are the values to which we will be held accountable.* Our best resources in these efforts are equity-minded educators—the ones accustomed to the shushing. When we make them the center of our schools’ and districts’ institutional identities, we are primed for equity progress.

2 Poverty of Culture Detour

Culture is one important equity consideration. However, although racial identities may inform cultural identities, racial inequities aren’t predominantly cultural misunderstandings. Racism is a tangled structural mess of power, oppression, and unjust distributions of access and opportunity. This mess cannot be resolved with greater cultural awareness alone.

I call this the *poverty of culture* detour in honor of Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006). In “It’s Not the Culture of Poverty, It’s the Poverty of Culture,” she describes the hazards of adopting diversity frameworks built around vague notions of “culture.”

“[T]he problem of culture in teaching is not merely one of exclusion,” she explains. “It is also one of over-determination. . . . [C]ulture is randomly and regularly used to explain everything. . . from school failure to problems with behavior management and discipline” (p. 104).

The result is that we too often attribute educational disparities to students’ cultures. We cannot allow racism-infused misperceptions of *their* cultures to justify *our* failure to create racially just schools. Often, we interpret racial disparities in which students are suspended or expelled, for example, not as the result of racial bias, as research shows it primarily to be (Rudd, 2014), but as a cultural defect in communities of color. So we might attempt to solve these disparities by adjusting the behaviors, mindsets, or emotions of students of color rather than by adjusting educators’ racial presumptions or schools’ inequitable practices.

We cannot fix a problem we refuse to name. If our equity initiatives feature the word *culture* more than the word *racism*, we’re probably off track. If we adopt an approach that obscures racism behind vague nomenclature like *cultural competence* or *the diverse kids*, we might be off track.

3 Deficit Ideology Detour

If we spend any of our equity efforts attempting to “fix” students of color—fortifying their

grittiness, modifying their mindsets, adjusting their emotions—we need a reaccounting, not only of our equity understandings, but also of our equity intentions. These strategies locate the source of educational outcome disparities within communities of color while often ignoring the role of racism—the clearest sign of *deficit ideology* (Gorski, 2016b).

We should be instinctively suspicious of popular educational approaches that often detour us around equity with a deficit approach. For example, presuming we can resolve racial inequities by simply teaching students of color to have grit is like presuming we can resolve climate change by teaching coastal communities to swim faster. It shifts the onus of responsibility away from schools and onto the very youth who are cheated out of equitable opportunity—and who, due to this cheating, often already tend to be quite resilient. It can obscure structural conditions with which marginalized communities contend. What good is grit against curricular erasure or inequitable school policy?

As somebody who attended school having experienced the childhood trauma of sexual abuse and often found myself being punished for the implications of that abuse, I find the growing interest in mindfulness and trauma-informed practices compelling. But too often, these practices are adopted as though they are racial equity initiatives. In some cases, we offer students of color coping mechanisms rather than correcting in-school conditions—like inequitable policy or racially tinged tracking practices—that exacerbate racism's traumas. Our best strategy for minimizing the impact of racism is to eliminate racism. Trauma-informed practices as implemented

in most schools don't do that.

Before we follow the deficit ideology detour, we should ask ourselves some questions. In whose image is school policy and institutional culture crafted? Which students have the most access to higher-order pedagogies, relevant curricula, and a full range of course options? Which students face grinding inequities in and out of school? What do trauma-informed practices look like for students whose primary source of trauma is the racism they experience *at school*?

Equity initiatives should focus on eliminating conditions that marginalize students—never on fixing students of color. If we cannot describe how our efforts are eliminating those conditions, it's time for an equity overhaul.

4 Celebrating Diversity Detour

Recently, while visiting a colleague's classroom to facilitate a conversation about race and poverty, I asked a group of African American and Latinx 10th grade students about their school's upcoming Diverse Friends Day. For one lunch period, they would be forcibly integrated, coerced into celebrating diversity by sitting with classmates racially or ethnically different from themselves—classmates with whom some of them normally wouldn't socialize.

"They mean well, but this activity is racist," Pam shared.²

"I don't know about racist," Tariq responded, "but I don't want to do it."

José added, "A lot of the white students don't like us. I don't want to be forced to hang out with them."

I asked Pam to elaborate on her observation that Diverse Friends Day is racist. "There's a lot of racism in this school," she insisted.

She wondered how disturbing her lunch—the only time she could relax in a predominantly white school—was going to change that. "I think Diverse Friends Day is for white people," she concluded.

Is she wrong? I don't think so, especially in the absence of more serious racial equity efforts, which these students agreed were missing from their school. In my experience, many "celebrating diversity" initiatives are crafted to help white students learn about diversity—not *racism*, but *diversity*—in ways that will be most comfortable for them.

In some cases, students of color are used essentially as props for the gentle diversity education of white students through activities like Diverse Friends Day. This allows white people to opt out of considering racial justice while deriving social and cultural benefits from diversity awareness. It creates the illusion of diversity appreciation while entrenching inequity.

Requiring students of color to participate in these diversity spectacles while failing to attend adequately to inequity can be exploitive. Pam, Tariq, and José didn't need to share lunch with white students to learn about difference, much less how racism operated around them. They developed these insights as a matter of survival. White educators were asking them to celebrate a diversity in which their experiences were invisible. This is one way white privilege persists even in the context of diversity efforts.

Five Principles of Equity Literacy

At this point, I presume readers are thinking, "So what *should* equity efforts look like?" I'm cautious about addressing this sort of question. It may signify a common impulse in

education to grasp for simple strategies to address challenges that are more about ideology and will than strategy. I encourage us to think, instead, about principles that can guide our equity actions.

Here are five *equity literacy* principles (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015) that can help us avoid equity detours and maximize the impact of our equity efforts.

1 Direct Confrontation Principle

The path to racial equity requires direct confrontations with racial inequity—with racism. We start, again, by asking, “How is racism operating here?”

Gather the racial equity advocates in your school, district, and

consequences for students of color if applied by educators who harbor racial bias even if they aren’t intending to be racist? What do you need to change about that policy, or about the racial ideologies in your school or district, to make it equitable?

2 Redistribution Principle

Equity involves redistributing access and opportunity at the most basic institutional level. This includes material access to things like learning materials, technology, healthy food, and even healthcare. It also includes nonmaterial access to higher-order pedagogies, relatable curricula, and equity-conscious teachers.

The idea here is to intimately examine how institutional policies

dress code policy banning items associated with specific racial groups or assessment practices that could mask racial bias? Work with the equity advocates in your school and community to revise those policies and practices *right now*. Then attend to dynamics of institutional culture that resulted in the existence of biased policies to begin with.

3 Prioritization Principle

The only way to redistribute access and opportunity is to prioritize the interests of students of color. Every policy and practice decision should be filtered through this lens: *How will this policy impact families of color? How will it improve conditions for students of color?* Remember that, in inequitable contexts, equality—attending *equally* to everybody’s interests—reproduces inequity. For example, we know that students of color are disproportionately tracked out of “upper-track” classes (Leonardo & Grubb, 2018) and that on average, students in “lower-track” classes have less access to engaging pedagogy and more exposure to control-oriented teaching practices. And because we also know these disparities are driven significantly by racial bias in referral and assessment processes (Faulkner et al., 2014), a racial equity commitment should lead us to abandon traditional tracking methods. We can prioritize the interests of students of color by trading what we perceive as the equality and efficiency of those methods—*efficiency for whom?* we might ask—for a process that eliminates the influence of racism.

4 Equity Ideology Principle

Equity is a lens and an ideological commitment. No strategy can help us cultivate equitable schools if we’re

Although racial identities inform cultural identities, race is not culture. Racial inequities aren’t predominantly cultural misunderstandings.

community and map the ways—big and small, implicit and explicit—that racial inequities persist. Examine policy, curricula, and discipline practices. If you struggle to identify how racism is operating, invest time to learn how to do it. When I work with educational leaders committed to acquiring an equity lens, I find simple prompts like these can provide opportunities for meaningful practice:

- What is one practice in your school that focuses on fixing students of color rather than fixing the conditions that marginalize them? How can you reshape that practice for racial equity?

- What policy might have harsher

and practices provide some students more access and opportunity than others. It may mean re-examining how school practices are crafted in relation to students’ lived experiences and whether institutional policy and culture are responsive to the interests of the most marginalized students.

For example, as we examine behavior policies, we might ask ourselves whether we’re cognizant of the depth of racial bias associated with how educators tend to interpret behavior and dole out behavior referrals.


Policy handbooks are another good place to start. Study your school’s policies line by line. Might any perpetuate racial inequity—like a

unwilling to understand how racism operates. Professional development opportunities related to equity should emphasize the ideological work required to more deeply understand the dynamics of racism in society and schools. Then we can draw on those deeper understandings to build our practical approach for eliminating racism.

5 #FixInjusticeNotKids Principle

Effective equity efforts focus not on fixing students of color, but on eliminating racist conditions. If we find ourselves, in the name of equity, adopting initiatives meant to improve educational outcomes by adjusting mindsets or cultures in students of color, it's time to reconsider our efforts.

Do We Have the Will?

Implementing a transformative racial equity commitment is difficult, especially if we face significant resistance. Of course, it's not more difficult than navigating racism, which many students, families, and educators of color endure. I cling to hope that most of us want racial equity. The question for those of us who find the detours alluring is whether we have the will to align our actions with our philosophies. My hope is that, by considering the detours and principles discussed here, we can find ways to strengthen our equity efforts and create schools that deliver on the basic ideals of equity and justice. 

¹This is not an exhaustive list, but gives a few examples.

²All student names are pseudonyms.

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GUIDING QUESTIONS

› Do you think your school or district engages in any equity detours? How might you reexamine such initiatives in light of Gorski's equity literacy principles?

› Do you agree with Gorski's point that schools “must prioritize equity over the comfort of reluctant educators”? What would this mean in your school or district?



Paul Gorski (gorski@edchange.org) is the founder of the Equity Literacy Institute (equityliteracy.org) and EdChange. He helps educators across the United States and internationally strengthen their equity and justice efforts and is author, coauthor, or coeditor of more than 10 books, including *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty* (Teachers College Press, 2013) and *Case Studies on Diversity and Social Justice Education* (Routledge, 2013).