

Work and Dignity: A Conversation between Mike Rose and Matthew Crawford

Rose: Let's begin with the notion of an economy of dignity, the idea that a quality like dignity is not simply an individual property. It emerges in a time, a place, and a context among particular people. Thinking this way gives rise to some interesting comparisons. While some of the writing I've done is directly related to work, some of it's related to adult education. And what hit me was so many of the qualities that we tend to attribute to individuals—intelligence, ability, literacy—every one of those powerful terms, which we tend to regard as personal attributes, could easily fit into this same contextual slot as dignity. For example, take a remedial writing class in a community college: How well a student does in that course is not only going to depend on the student's efforts. Just as much, if not more, it's going to depend on the curriculum the student's given, which is a function of the whole history of teaching similar courses and the assumptions embedded in those ways of teaching, assumptions about literacy development and what kinds of people reach adulthood without being literate. When you start to look at almost any setting and any of the “individual” qualities—ability or intelligence, as well as dignity—that contextual framework really has some resonance.

Crawford: I think dignity is something, like honor, that you feel before others, so it's highly dependent on the social context, like you said. But it isn't simply *conferred* by others; it's something you can have in a more independent way. Let's say you're a carpenter, and you have a problem with your boss. If he doesn't like the work you've done, you can say to him: “It's plumb, it's level, and it's square. Go check it yourself.” But in so many professions we don't have the ability to appeal to concrete standards like that. So everything's open to interpretation, and you have to spend a lot of time managing

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what others think of you. In that situation I think your dignity becomes “manipulable” by social techniques. Whereas when the work does answer to concrete standards, you have solid ground to stand on in your own self-assessment, and it’s the same ground on which others will assess you. Either you can bend conduit or you can’t, and either way it’s plain for all to see. There’s an inter-subjective validity to it.

Rose: Right, particularly among your peers.

Crawford: And that seems like a very secure foundation for a kind of dignity, and it has a certain independence from various forms of manipulation. Contemporary management has gotten so sophisticated at using techniques of industrial psychology and various forms of smarmy, New Age, self-help lingo to massage peoples’ psyches. To have some independence from that is a very valuable thing.

Rose: So with physical work there are particular kinds of indicators.

Crawford: I’m not sure it needs to be physical. It just needs to have clear and objective standards that are apparent for others to see.

Rose: Right, but the more you move away from concrete, verifiable indicators of excellence, the more you’re in the symbolic realm, and the more ways others have to confer on you your worth or dignity. The price you receive for the work you do also has symbolic meaning.

Crawford: That’s interesting because you mentioned before that it’s particularly your peers who can really recognize the excellence of your work. One way to think of it is that your salary is a public validation of the value of your work. It’s sort of like the whole economy, the whole market, is assigning some recognition to it. On the other hand, your regard among your peers—who are qualified to appreciate the especially beautiful bend in your conduit or whatever—that’s a different kind of recognition. In a way it’s more aristocratic. Just think of the word “peer,” which is what the British call the aristocrats. It’s recognition from those who are *qualified* to recognize you, whereas a salary is recognition from the society as a whole. There’s a mismatch between those two sometimes that I think leads to a kind of counter-cultural mentality among workers: the rest of society doesn’t recognize the value of what we do, but amongst ourselves, we’re very discerning.

Rose: A quick detour here: you mentioned counter-cultural. I’ve been thinking a lot about the swing of white, working-class voters toward the Republican party, the Reagan Democrats—I’ve been thinking about this phenomenon in counter-cultural terms. If someone feels strongly about a social issue like abortion, then it makes sense that they’d vote against their economic self-interest because there’s a higher value at stake. But something else that’s going on, I think, is working-class people getting the sense that they’re looked down upon, that their work is demeaned, that the liberal politicians

they see on television are a bunch of suits who are utterly detached from their lives. All this, of course, has been skillfully manipulated by the Right. So you have a voting bloc pushing back against what they see as a prevailing culture that will devalue what they do and who they are—except when somebody’s toilet is clogged or car is in a ditch. So the politics question does very much touch on the issue of dignity and how people feel about themselves and how they perceive what others think about them.

Crawford: I think part of the cause for that feeling, that sense of lost dignity, is a feeling of insecurity at work, a feeling that everyone’s dispensable. Sociologist Allison Pugh talks about the one-way honor system. What she means is that workers have become fungible and replaceable, and the idea of loyalty on the employers’ part has gone out the window. But at the same time, employees remain very committed. They talk about their identity being tied up with their work. In the interviews Pugh did, they describe themselves as workaholics. Their relationship to their work is a reflection of their character, and it’s all about showing up early and staying late. There’s this huge asymmetry in the workplace that Pugh has put her finger on.

Rose: That reminds me of Michele Lamont’s book, *The Dignity of Working Men*, especially that notion of being invested in a job. Even though the job may be hard, you may hate things about it, you may dread Monday morning—still over time that job begins to define who you are. I think of my uncles talking about themselves as being “railroad men” or “General Motors men.” Even when it got dicey, when the railroad was laying people off, that was still a big part of their identity. To have all that so destabilized and so fragmented, it has to take a big hit on your sense of who you are, especially in a culture like ours, where work is such a key identifier, and such a key source of self-worth. On top of that, we’re talking about men and women who, for the most part, have families. Not only are you demeaned by losing a job, or having a job that is low-wage and unstable, but you’re further demeaned because you’re not able to provide for your family, which is a massive thing. It’s a big part of the code of masculinity for a lot of working-class men. So I think you’re right. The current nature of the job market and all the ways that common work has been eroded takes a psychological as well as economic toll on people.

Crawford: Another point Pugh makes is that you have to do a certain amount of emotional work to filter out anger because, in the workplace, that’s not considered an appropriate emotion. But it seems the fitting and proper reaction to this situation of asymmetric loyalty is a feeling of betrayal and anger. Having to suppress anger is damaging to anyone, but maybe especially to men. Because that’s one definition of weakness, not being allowed to express your anger.

Rose: There’s this unjust thing going on, and you’re rendered impotent. You could express your anger, but the minute you do, your kids are going to suffer for it.

I would like to return to that idea I brought up originally, which was taking this socially constituted notion of dignity and substituting some other terms into the dis-

cussion. I think the kind of conversation we've just been having about work wouldn't surprise a lot of people. But I think it would be more surprising to take the same terms of this conversation and apply them to classrooms and educational programs. I want to take an example of something that's going on all across the country right now. Tens of thousands of people are sitting in remedial or developmental classes in mathematics, English, and reading. Some of them have come straight out of high school but with sub-par educations. Some of them haven't been in school for a while. They've been in the military, or they had a job that folded, or they were raising kids, or they just got out of jail. They're sitting in these classes, and they get particular kinds of curricula. They're taught in a certain way because there is a kind of standard script to these classes.

Well, people succeed, or they do so-so, or they flunk out. The tendency is to attribute that failure, when it occurs, to some set of individual qualities, just like we were talking about dignity being perceived as an individual quality. But in this case, the construct, rather than dignity, is intelligence or motivation or perseverance. When folks don't make it through these classes, the assumption is that they are lacking in these particular qualities. But when you look closely at the history of these courses, and the assumptions about learning and cognition that are embedded in them, you begin to see that the student's ability is not only determined by whatever she or he brings to that classroom, but also by unfounded assumptions about the intellectual ability of adults who have had trouble with literacy and numeracy. Also there are flawed theories about instruction that guide teachers to break language or math down to its smallest parts and slowly build competence by practicing one skill, then another, then another. Students are expected to become literate with a curriculum bereft of meaningful linguistic or communicative material or purpose. So the "individual" qualities of intelligence or ability or motivation are profoundly affected by the assumptions about learning, cognition, and literacy that are embedded in the curriculum. A lot of individual qualities we attribute to people are clearly affected by social contexts and belief systems.

To further complicate this, unfortunately our beliefs about what people are capable of doing are also affected by perceptions about social class, gender, race, and ethnicity. Suddenly we're talking about many dimensions of the social context, and they're all playing into these characteristics which are then defined as individual attributes.

Crawford: Motivation and ability can be a function of what's on offer. I think there are a lot of kids in school feeling like what they're offered is frankly not worthy of their full attention. If you're studying for standardized tests, it seems like a perfectly natural reaction to check out mentally. The material is not presented as intrinsically valuable, but as a means to an end, passing the test—just another hoop to jump through. Whereas if what you're doing is, let's say, building a tube-frame chassis for a race-car, then suddenly trigonometry becomes very interesting.

Rose: And necessary.

Crawford: Right. It has a point. It's a question of what's going to spark that love of learning. I taught high school for a year at a public high school. They had me teaching

Latin, which was marketed to students and parents as a means to the end of boosting scores on the verbal section of the SAT. It was a disaster. I kept wishing I had a Ritalin fogger just to get people to pay attention. Yet at the same time, I felt like if I could have taken some of these kids aside and said, “hey, let’s rebuild this engine together,” or something like that, then the very same kids who were troublemakers might have gotten focused and interested.

Rose: Right, so besides the curriculum itself, there’s also the ability of the teacher, whether he or she can do something with that curriculum—or junk it—to catch the student’s attention.

Crawford: And the teacher has to have latitude to improvise, I think.

Rose: If you’re in the situation so many teachers are now in, all across K–12, where you’re given scripted curricula, and you’ve got to raise those standardized test scores, your latitude is pretty constrained.

Crawford: Which makes the teacher feel like a functionary.

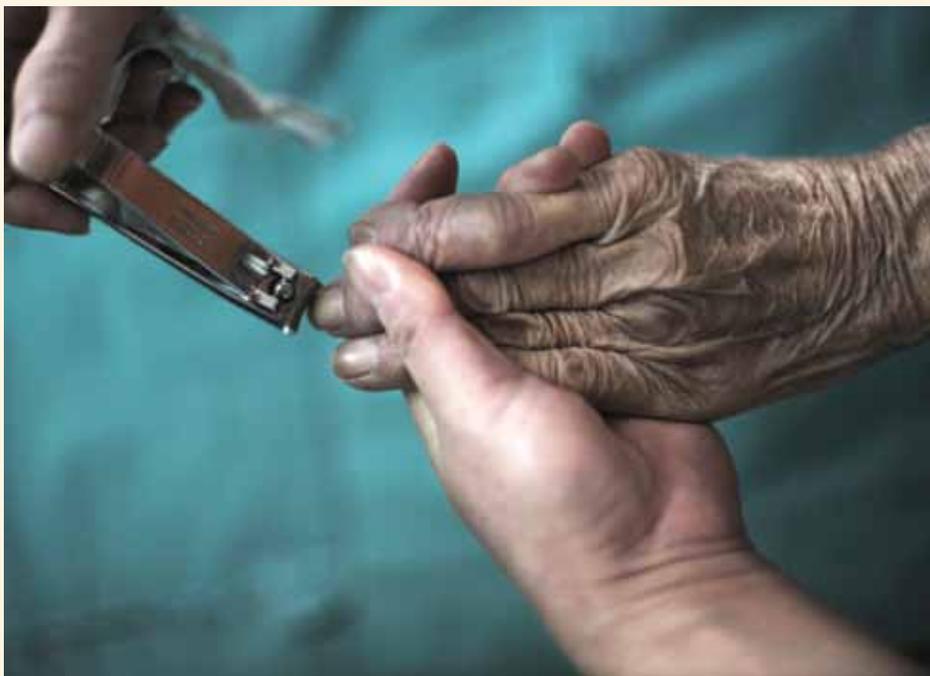
Rose: Yeah, there’s been a lot said lately about that feeling. Talking about the dignity of work, I think there are more than a few teachers out there who feel that the dignity of their work has been demeaned on multiple levels. One level is that every time they open a newspaper or turn on the radio, they hear something blasting teachers, but also in terms of their day-to-day work, they’re living under all kinds of constraints that reduce rather than expand their latitude to use the skills they have.

Crawford: I think there’s a kind of fetish for replacing every instance of individual discretion with the rule of neutral procedures.

Rose: Yes, a technocratic impulse. I think that’s *huge* right now, regardless of where you fall across the political spectrum. I think that a lot of people, Left and Right, are increasingly attracted to technocratic solutions for social problems.

Crawford: It means no one has to take responsibility for anything.

Rose: Well, you do get that, but I think there’s also a genuine belief that there exists some technological way of assuring quality in performance. The profound success of technology in certain aspects of our lives is bleeding into all aspects of our lives. So what happens is that some assume that teaching, for example, will become better if we can improve the technology of teaching. For instance what you’re seeing now in remedial education is the rush to the computer. That’s not unreasonable. You’ve got tens of thousands of people who need services, and one way you can deliver what they need is through technology. But it’s gone beyond that to a blind faith that if we just do a better job of designing assessments, and we target those assessments to more perfectly crafted



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learning modules, then that's going to automatically create this bump in literacy that we haven't been able to create through classrooms and human interaction.

Crawford: I've got two thoughts on that. One is—trust me, this is related—some research they've done on the placebo effect. They've found that the interaction between doctor and patient has healing power in itself; the mere experience of being cared for by somebody actually turns out to be a huge part of the therapeutic benefit of going to the doctor. The interaction with a teacher, it seems to me, has that same element of being cared for. That's something that electronic classrooms simply can't reproduce. The second thing about this technocratic angle is that the main rationale offered for standardized testing is accountability—accountability of the schools, of the teachers. So it's implicitly rooted in a mistrust of individual discretion and authority—like, if we don't hold those teachers accountable, they'll slack off. So it does seem like there's a stance of suspicion toward the individual, in this case individual teachers.

Rose: I think that's correct. The problem is that there *are* some teachers who just aren't very good. You're talking about a teaching force of over three million people. There's going to be huge variation in the talent, the commitment, the training, the creativity of these folks, absolutely. Not for a minute would I deny that there aren't all kinds of cases where kids should be getting better instruction, and technology can certainly play a role.

But I think what is troubling to both of us is that people perceive a problem—which might well be legitimate—but then leap to a reductive solution, even a solution that ends up creating more problems than it solves. In this instance, by trying to improve

instruction, you reduce the role of discretion, the role of individual creativity. You've reduced some of that latitude we were talking about. The solution becomes a different part of the same problem. We're living in a time, I think, where we're trying to technically control the deeply complex, difficult, exhilarating human dimensions of things. Sometimes it's for good reasons: in this case we want more kids to get a good education. But we have to be careful to not paradoxically reduce the quality of that education in the process.

Crawford: That sounds right. We've talked about education a lot; we've found some interesting parallels with work in terms of the economy of dignity. There's one other area I wanted to touch on. As we think about the economy and the big trends on the horizon, we're looking at an aging population so there's going to be a lot of care work. And it leads you to think about the quest for dignity that's occasioned by that kind of work. There's a certain amount of emotional labor involved, I think.

Rose: I think huge amounts.

Crawford: Because you're not just a robot changing someone's bedpan, you're a human presence. It would be interesting to think about what kind of emotional work is involved in caring. The classic treatment of emotional labor is Arlie Hochschild talking about flight attendants. She gives an example: you've got some irate passenger on your plane. You're trained to imagine them as having some traumatic childhood so that your anger gives way to solicitude—not because they actually had a bad childhood, just to make it easier for you to deal with them. It seems to me that this kind of emotional labor requires not just alienation from your own facial muscles (because you're supposed to smile), but also an alienation from your emotional response to a situation—or at least an attempt to manage that response, in the service of the firm and its interests. The philosopher Talbot Brewer is currently writing about this. He says this can be damaging because our emotions are a sort of window onto value. They're not random eruptions of feeling; they're tied to our evaluative stance toward things. The anger that you're feeling as a flight attendant is based on an evaluation of this person: he's being a real jerk. To turn that into solicitude, you have to stand apart from your own evaluative activity. That means you're no longer able to stand behind your own reactions and actions, which is really the keystone of genuine agency, being able to reflectively endorse your own actions as your own.

Rose: Which gets to the heart of dignity.

Crawford: It really does. I think so.

Rose: If we're talking about taking care of the elderly, and maybe also taking care of kids, let's think about who it is who actually does that kind of work. In a lot of the country, we're talking about people who are pretty marginal in terms of their security within the society. They tend to be poor. They tend to be immigrants. Frequently they

don't have a lot of facility with English. So you've got people who are especially vulnerable. They're making minimum wage, at best; from reports I hear, there are a number of cases where they don't get paid at all, or their pay is manipulated. We're talking about a vulnerable population who, ironically, are assigned to care for and essentially protect the most vulnerable people in the population: children and old folks. When you talk about dignity, there are a lot of layers here to complicate the situation. Plus a huge percentage of those caregivers are trying to support families of their own, so they are in turn unable to care directly for their own children and their own elderly.

Crawford: Right, and then the solution to any eldercare problem is usually heightened surveillance of the caregivers themselves. It's getting back to the technocratic thing.

Maybe we should think about this also on the consumer side. So you're the old person who's being cared for by a stranger, at least to begin with, a paid stranger. It seems like there'd be a kind of emotional work involved on your part also, in terms of how you receive that care. Most likely someone else is paying this person, so you don't actually have the kind of authority over them that you would if they were your own servant. Old people can be very sensitive to offences against their dignity, more than children are, because they've lived a whole life and they have a certain sense of themselves. They're humiliated by the mere fact of having to be cared for. What can make caring for old people so difficult is that they may have a hard time receiving care. Maybe in some ways, it'd be easier to receive care from a paid stranger than from your own son or daughter.

Rose: What you're talking about now is actually an argument for the worthiness and importance and the skill of this work.

Crawford: Because it needs a certain finesse.

Rose: So let's play that out. The work involves not only the physical labor of moving people around and cleaning up after them and feeding them and caring for them, but also the kind of emotional labor you're talking about. If this work is well executed, the people doing the work are developing emotional relationships with the people being cared for. I see this with the place where my own stepfather is right now. From what I can tell, those workers—within all the constraints attending the situation—they've developed decent relationships with the residents in that house. This work is seen as minimal skill, but if it's done well, it really calls for a profound set of human skills.

Crawford: It calls for a kind of sensitivity and finesse, and managing to make someone feel like their own agency is, as much as possible, being preserved.

Rose: Yeah, in a terrible situation.

Crawford: I remember when my dad was getting old. He had Parkinson's disease. There was one time I got in the car with him, and he was trying to buckle his seatbelt. It was

just going on and on, and it was all I could do to stop myself from just buckling it myself. After a long struggle he finally got it, and he turned to me, exhausted, and said, “thank you for not doing it.” In other words, I had somehow properly divined that this was the right thing, to refrain from helping him. But I’d almost done the wrong thing, and that was a moment of realizing that it takes some subtlety to do these things well.

Rose: Which gets to something you and I have both written and think a lot about. These jobs that are dismissed as being commonplace or low-skilled actually involve a lot of skill. A good waitress in a busy restaurant is doing so much emotional work, as well as the physical work: dealing with management and with the kitchen, assessing customers’ moods, knowing how to keep them happy, not getting into conversations that are going to last more than thirty seconds. There’s a lot of savvy thinking going on there. That’s doubly true, I think, for the kind of work we’re talking about now, taking care of people. That’s not to say that everyone does it well. But when you see this work done competently, it demands a whole set of skills that are pretty impressive. Just having an appreciation of what it takes to do certain kinds of work contributes to the worker’s sense of dignity.

Crawford: I think that’s why it’s so important to have ethnographic accounts of different kinds of work that detail what’s actually going on in different jobs. Because then you’re equipped to appreciate it. That’s important for society, that we be able to imaginatively project ourselves into different kinds of work, so that we can respond appropriately when people are providing services to us and be able to see them for what they’re really doing and value it.

Rose: I think you’re right. That kind of close, ethnographic detailing of what’s involved behaviorally, cognitively, in terms of the attitude that one takes toward the work, the patience one has, the curiosity maybe that one has toward it—all that becomes part of the power of the work. But I want to emphasize the distinction between appreciating and understanding. You can appreciate something without understanding it. Say you’re getting ready to leave for work, and the garage door won’t open. You’ve got to get out of the house; you have an appointment. So you call somebody, and they come and fix the door’s mechanism, and you are grateful. Obviously you’re appreciative. But there can be appreciation of work without understanding it. Whereas I think that when work is understood, that is a kind of extra layer of something that is given back to the worker, an understanding of what it took, what has been accomplished. Maybe the problem wasn’t the obvious thing, and the person had to troubleshoot it. So you’re not only grateful and appreciative, but you also have some sort of *understanding* of what it took to make that garage door function. I really do think that there are civic implications here. I think that the more people in a society have some kind of an understanding of what it takes to do different kinds of work, it makes for a better kind of civic connection. I do believe that coming to understand the way a broad spectrum of people live and do their work contributes to a healthier democracy. And I’m not so sure we’ve got a lot of that going on today. ■