

Lesson 1: Hierarchy of Being and Human Dignity

PURPOSE

To understand the special place human beings have in the world and in relation to other humans.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Understand the powers humans share with other living beings, recognizing the powers to think and choose as specifically human powers.
2. Understand human dignity as the universal, intrinsic and inalienable value of human persons.
3. Understand that we need others to become fully ourselves.

MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- Introductory Questionnaire
- The Need for a Thou
- Supplementary Lesson
- [Video](#): What Makes a Good Life? by Robert Waldinger

VOCABULARY

- Human dignity: the universal, intrinsic, and inalienable value of human persons
- Universal: every person has dignity
- Intrinsic: it is within each person, simply because they are human
- Inalienable: dignity cannot be given or taken away from a person
- Power: the ability of a living being to do something on its own
- Power to Think: the human ability to know and connect ideas about oneself, others, and the world
- Power to Choose: the human ability to knowingly select between options

PRELIMINARY ACTIVITY

Ask the students to fill out the [Introductory Questionnaire](#) before the first class. If you consider it helpful, comment on some of the questions at the beginning of the lesson to understand the students' opinions on some of the most critical issues the course deals with.

PROCEDURE

Ask the students to fill out the [Introductory Questionnaire](#) before the first class. If you consider it helpful, comment on some of the questions at the beginning of the lesson to understand the students' opinions on some of the most critical issues the course deals with.

Step 1: Introduce the purpose of the course.

Ask students what they expect to learn in the course.

Explain that the course will primarily deal with the following questions:

Who am I?

What am I capable of?

What can I become?

In academic courses, the students are mostly learning about the world around them. In this course, they have the opportunity to learn about themselves. Knowing oneself is the first step in determining how to live a good life, how to have authentic friendships, how to deal with problems, and how to give and receive respect.

Knowing oneself is the basis of understanding what one is capable of and what one can become. If someone can achieve excellence in what they do, they can become excellent as a person. One purpose of this class is to learn how to become excellent. During the course of the following lessons, the students will learn what this means.

Step 2: Review the key points from Lesson 1 in Grade 9. [If the students have not completed it, guide the students through the [Supplementary Lesson](#) available in the materials]. Draw an empty [Hierarchy of Being table](#). Review the vocabulary definition of Power: the ability of a living being to do something on its own. Ask students to recall:

- A) Three powers that all living beings share
- B) Three powers which only animals and humans share
- C) Two powers unique to humans

Fill in the table as students provide correct answers.

The correctly filled **Hierarchy of Being table** should look like the one below:

| | Plants | Animals | Humans |
|---------------------------------------|--------|---------|--------|
| POWERS | | | |
| Eat | x | x | x |
| Grow | x | x | x |
| Reproduce | x | x | x |
| Move from place to place on their own | | x | x |
| Use the senses | | x | x |
| Feel emotions | | x | x |
| Think | | | x |
| Choose | | | x |

Highlight that the powers to think and to choose are specifically human powers and write the definitions of those powers on the board:

Power to Think: the human ability to know and connect ideas about oneself, others, and the world

Power to Choose: the human ability to knowingly select between options

Ask the students to consider whether there is something else that distinguishes humans from all other beings, apart from the powers to think and choose. Humans differ from all other living beings in one specific aspect.

Write the definition of Human Dignity and its three characteristics on the board:

Human dignity: the universal, intrinsic, and inalienable value of human persons

Universal: every person has dignity

Intrinsic: it is within each person, simply because they are human

Inalienable: dignity cannot be given or taken away from a person

Step 3: Our human dignity is what gives us human rights, as well as responsibilities. Explain that the human person is a dynamic being. This means that while each person possesses natural powers, they have to make the effort to develop them. Each person has the power to think, but also needs to develop habits of excellent thinking. Each person has the power to choose, but must strive to choose what is excellent. The similar thing is true of our human dignity: each person has a special value, which means that we should always act in a way that recognizes and responds to this dignity in ourselves and others.

Step 4: What does it mean to act in a way that responds to our dignity and the dignity of others? The class will explore this idea by reading the text “The Need for a Thou”. “Thou” is an archaic word for “You” and is based on the book “I and Thou” by Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher of the 20th century. The main proposition of the book is that we can think and choose to relate to existence in one of two ways: an attitude of “I” towards an “It”, characterized as a relationship of use or experience (what can this other person do for me?) Or the attitude of “I” towards “Thou” or “You”, knowing and valuing another person for their own sake. Buber’s work influenced the Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., and he references Martin Buber and the “I-Thou” relationship in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” as well as his sermon, “A Testament of Hope”, describing the cultural and legal climate of segregation as an “I-It” relationship, reducing human beings to “things”.

Divide the students into groups to read “[The Need for a Thou](#)” text. After the students finish reading and discussing, ask each group to share their answers with the rest of the class. Respond to questions as needed, using the Answer Key for the teacher, provided.

Explain that in the depth of our being, each person is directed towards others. For example, in the first year of life, human babies cannot distinguish themselves from their mothers. If their mother is hurting, they think they are hurting too; if their mother is happy, they are happy too. It is only in the second year of their lives that children start to develop an ego of their own. That is why, in this phase, it is common to hear children say “no” and refuse the help of parents and older people. By doing this, they create boundaries around their ego and develop their own identity. This psychological fact reveals that from the earliest age, human beings need others to properly develop. Each person discovers their identity through other people: first with family and later through friends. While this is most evident in childhood, where the influence of parents, grandparents, siblings and one’s surroundings has a larger impact on who we will turn out to be, it is also relevant later throughout life.

In the discussion, the class mentioned some examples of I-Thou relationships, such as true friendship. There is another important factor that appears in the I-Thou relationship, and this is that in it, we recognize our own dignity and that of others.

In this way, one discovers that they are truly important and valuable, simply because they are themselves. In an I-Thou relationship, we want the true good for the other person and delight in them simply for who they are, not for qualities or characteristics they possess.

This image of love is vividly present in thinking about a mother’s love for her child. If a teenager behaves badly, even to the point of making very bad decisions, his mother will still love him. She may get mad or even punish him, but his mother’s love is there for him. (Unfortunately, there are cases in which some mothers do not love their children in this way due to psychological, emotional or other reasons.) In the case of true love, “I” and “Thou” relationships, the only condition attached rests on the person being themselves, not on their behavior or actions they take.

Step 5. Summarize. Review the three powers which all living beings share, three which only humans and animals share, and highlight that the powers to think and to choose are specifically human powers. Recall the definition of human dignity and its three characteristics. Finally, highlight once more that each person is a being who both is and is becoming, and that each person needs others to fully realize themselves, to live out our human dignity. Recall the main messages from “The Need for a Thou” article.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

1. Supplementary Lesson
2. [Video](#): What Makes a Good Life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness | Robert Waldinger

The Need for a Thou¹

Some years ago I started feeling terribly lonely. It didn't happen in a moment, the process developed over time. I couldn't find a reason for it.

The thing perplexed me. I was studying hard while in college, then got hired in a top consulting firm, had many colleagues I would spend time with in the evenings, was healthy and in a good shape, the list could go on and on. Hey, I even had girlfriends here and there! And I still felt lonely.

Then a guy who I knew from the gym told me to read a book by a guy called Martin Buber. Apparently, he was a Jewish philosopher and a smart guy. The book was called "I and Thou". At first I was discouraged because it was written in such a complicated language. It starts with this:

// The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude.
 The attitude of man is twofold in accordance with the two basic words he can speak.
 The basic words are not single words but word pairs.
 One basic word is the word pair I-You.
 The other basic word is the word-pair I-It; but this basic word is not changed when He or She takes the place of It.
 Thus the I of man is also twofold.
 For the I of the basic word I-You is different from that in the basic word I-It."

What the author was trying to say is that we are always basically in these two modes of existence: I-Thou or I-It:

// When one says You, the I of the word pair I-You is said, too.
 When one says It, the I of the word pair is I-It is said, too.
 The basic word I-You can only be spoken with one's whole being."

[...]

¹ Martin Buber: I and Thou, Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, 1952.

Ok, I grasped this. But, why does this matter, I asked myself? I never imagined the book would have the answer to my loneliness, but I continued reading:



There is no I as such but only the I of the basic word I-You and the I of the basic word I-It. When a man says I, he means one or the other.”

Things started to unravel for me. I understood that ever since I was little, I understood myself solely as an individual, as an “I”. Yes, I always wanted to be a good person, work hard, succeed in life, but I always did it merely as an “I”: I studied hard for myself, progressed in my career for myself, exercised for myself, etc. And now, Buber was telling me that I never exist solely as an “I”, but always in relation to either You or an It. I started to unpack the story further. [...]

Buber explained the life I was living:



The life of a human being does not exist merely in the sphere of goal-directed verbs. It does not consist merely of activities that have something for their object.

I perceive something. I feel something. I imagine something. I want something. I sense something. I think something...
...this is the basis of the realm of the It.”

Even though I didn’t do it on purpose, I was living an I-It life. I led a life “in the sphere of goal-directed verbs” treating everything around me as an object. I wanted career progress, I wanted success, even the time I spent with colleagues was mostly for networking and my career advancement. I sank into the realm of I-It, but I needed I-You:



But the realm of You has another basis.

Whoever says You does not have something for his object. [...]

Where You is said there is no something. You has no borders.

Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation. [...] The basic word I-You establishes the world of relation.”

And this was where my problem lied. I never entered a true relationship. I always understood myself as an individual and everyone around me as an object. I acquired, learned, improved, earned, achieved, but never stayed or stood in relation. No, not even with my friends or girlfriends. The book again explained to me why this is so:

// One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation: relation is reciprocity. [...] When I confront a human being as my You and speak the basic word I-You to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things. [...] Neighborliness and seamlessness, he is you and fills the firmament. Not as if there was nothing but he; but everything else lives in his light. The basic word I-You can be spoken only with one's whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished without me."

Yes, I tried to dilute the meaning of the relation: I never offered reciprocity to the other person. Yes, I have never spoken the basic word I-You with my whole being. I was never fully present. And I was never fully at the disposal of another. I worked to become always better and more independent, but I never understood the truth which Buber put so plainly:

// I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter."

I sought to achieve development, to become who I should be, but without others. I never realized this was not possible. I needed others to become fully myself. Without others, I could never become fully "I". Every "I" needs a "Thou" to discover who we really are. And here was the key to unlocking the meaning of my loneliness: whoever does not live in the basic I-You mode, sinks into loneliness. Man is a "being-with-others" and "for-others". Without others, he loses his life's energy; only with others he can flourish. As Buber would say it:

// Relation is reciprocity. My You acts on me as I act on it. Inscrutably involved, we live in the currents of universal reciprocity."

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

How would you describe the main message of the text?

What was the reason for the main character's loneliness?

Can a person become fully themselves by their own forces (by themselves)? Why or why not?

What is the proper mode of relating to others?

Answer Key for the teacher

1. How would you describe the main message of the text? The main message of the text is that the human person is fundamentally a social being. We're all familiar with the saying, "man is not an island," which reminds us that human persons need others. We learn and grow and develop in relation to others. Without a proper view of others as equal to us in dignity and value, we look at people as "it" or objects, which in turn leaves us to feel empty and lonely.

2. What was the reason for the main character's loneliness? The main reason for the main character's loneliness is his individualistic way of life. He was going through life pursuing his individualistic goals. He understood himself as an individual and everything and everyone else as his object. Even in his relationship to himself, he saw himself as an "it" or an object, i.e. that he was his college degree, or his job status or his physical physique. What he didn't realize is that relationships of exchange will leave him lonely.

3. Can a person become fully themselves by their own forces (by themselves)? Why or why not? No, every person needs reciprocal relations with others. As Buber puts it, he is never an isolated "I", but he always lives in an I-It or an I-Thou mode. He needs to choose how he will direct his life, whether towards I-It or I-Thou relations, but only through I-Thou relations, in living for more than himself, can he become fully himself.

4. What is the proper mode of relating to others? A proper mode of relating to other persons is always I-Thou. Even though I-Thou is often hard to achieve and we tend to sink into I-it relations, we should always aspire and try to achieve I-Thou relations. For instance, a person sitting next to a complete stranger on a park bench may enter into an "I-Thou" relationship with the stranger merely by beginning to think positively about people in general. I-Thou are relations that are fully reciprocal and in which we enter with our whole being (while in I-It we usually enter with just a part of ourselves). As Buber says: "Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation."

5. What are some examples of I-Thou (You) relationships? The clearest examples of I-Thou relationships are true friendships. Many of us have probably had the experience of talking to a best friend or a sibling, parent, family member, etc. for hours, losing all track of time. The exchange is fully reciprocal and persons seem to be exchanging, sharing and relating their whole person, and not just words. After such an experience, a person often learns something new about himself or herself, something which he or she would not know simply by individual, personal reflection. In this way, the person also feels that he is more fully actualized, seen, or heard, and this encourages us to strive to be more of our best self.

SUPPLEMENTARY LESSON

1. Explain that the core concept the students will explore in this curriculum is called human dignity. Only humans have a special value called human dignity. This dignity makes them worthy of respect and gives them certain rights, but also responsibilities; and demands that all people behave in a certain way to nurture and protect this dignity. The word “human” in “human dignity” means that all humans have it and that they have it simply by being human. Even though people differ in many ways, they all possess human dignity regardless of any differences. It is important to note that no one gives people human dignity – it is not granted by the society, political community, family, etc. Every person has it simply by being human and no one can take this value away from people. Human dignity does not exist in degrees – one cannot say that some people have more or less than others – each person is equal in dignity.

2. Explain that all living beings have powers to eat, grow and reproduce. Non-living beings like rocks can be divided into pieces by an outside force (e.g. if someone smashes them) but this is quite different from reproduction in living beings. Reproduction means creating a new member of one’s species. When the rock is smashed, nothing new is created, but only the existing piece is divided into smaller pieces. Power to eat means that living beings are able to take in nutrients from the environment in order to sustain themselves. With the sufficient intake of nutrients and by receiving the needed support from the environment (e.g. warmth, parental support, etc.), living beings can grow and develop. Notice that the support from the environment helps living beings to grow, but it does not generate this growth. The growth is generated “from within” and each living being grows and develops following specific instructions coded for by their genes. These genes provide instructions and direction for growth.

Animals and humans share three extra powers which plants do not have. First, this is the power to use the senses, such as smell, touch, sight, sound and taste. With the senses, animals and humans gather information from the environment. Senses are the powers which help humans and animals to gather different kinds of information from the outside world or within ourselves. This is done through sensory organs (e.g. nose, eyes, ears, etc.) which means senses are connected to our bodies. Plants too receive stimuli from the environment (e.g. the flower being directed towards sunlight) but it is hard to say that they sense it, i.e. that they perceive the stimulus when being exposed to it. The third is the already mentioned power to move from one place to another. Obviously, someone could move the plant from one place to another, but the plants cannot do that by themselves without outside help. Of course, sometimes plant seeds disseminate, but this is not the same as moving on one’s own. The seed is usually taken to another place by the wind or by an animal, and not by the plant itself. Then, after the seed is taken to another place, a new plant grows. On the other hand, animals and humans can move on their own, which means they do have this power.

Power to feel emotions is connected to the power to use the senses, both internal and external ones. After gathering information through the senses, through their emotions, animals and humans can experience reactions to the things that affect them. For example, an animal can see a predator approaching which can trigger the emotion of fear. A human person can hear someone making fun of him or her, and feel the emotion of sadness. On the other hand, when plants receive stimuli from the environment, they do not experience it emotionally. If someone cuts a tree, the tree does not feel pain.

Finally, humans alone have the power to think and choose. Plants and animals do not share this power. Animals, and especially higher animals like chimpanzees, do have some form of cognition and decision-making. However, this is always strictly connected to the basic survival instincts. For example, an animal can learn how to escape different mazes or use tools in order to reach food. A dog can learn how to respond to basic commands such as “sit”, “stay”, “go”. However, these are not, strictly speaking, the powers to think and choose. Humans are not just able to use more complex tools to reach food, but they can also decide to temporarily give up on food to pursue higher goals. Humans alone can think about complex concepts, such as solving a math problem, making new inventions, inventing jokes, or creatively expressing themselves through art. Humans are also fundamentally free from their environment. Whenever an animal is exposed to the same stimulus from the environment for a prolonged period of time, it will develop the same response to this stimulus (e.g. when exposed to pain, it will run away or attack back). But, humans can freely decide how to respond to stimuli. For example, when someone hits us, we can decide neither to flee nor to fight back, but to forgive the person and try to reconcile with them.