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Budget Numbers Affect People, Who Deserve Dignity

Erin Daly

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Much of the chatter about the fiscal cliff makes it sound like politicians in Washington need to solve an algebraic equation, with revenue on one side and expenditures on the other: if they can only solve for "x,"

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they'll be able to balance the equation and we'll all be saved.

But the fiscal crisis is not really about numbers. Or even about abstract values like fairness. It's about people. And about how people live their lives. Gene Sperling, President Obama's chief economic adviser, might have come closer than anyone else recently to focusing attention on what's really important about the looming crisis. Sperling said we needed to focus more on American values. Specifically, he said we should ask whether we are "creating

an economy where those who work hard and take responsibility can raise their children with dignity, work with dignity, retire with dignity. That's the ultimate test; that's the ultimate metric for all we do."

Human dignity isn't often talked about in public policy circles; it might seem too amorphous for some, too obvious for others. But focusing on dignity here might highlight the fact that the policies behind the numbers affect real people, in real ways.

Dignity isn't easily quantified, but like so many other things, we know it when we see it. And we know it when it isn't there. We can see the fraying dignity of a woman living alone on the streets. And we can see that a man who's spent the last year looking for work while trying to be a role model for his kids is having a hard time holding on to his dignity.

Human dignity stands for a

basic principle of humanity. It means that every single person has equal worth and each person's equal worth must be respected and valued. But it isn't a theoretical concept. It isn't abstract like the value of "x" in an equation. It's about how people live, how they feel when they look in the mirror.

In developed countries around the world, the idea of human dignity has become a bellwether, a marker of how well a society is treating its citizens. The constitutions of some countries, especially throughout Europe and Latin America, require that governments set pensions not simply at a minimum level, but at levels that ensure every person can live with dignity. And in most developed countries, health care is guaranteed not just for some but for all; reconstructive surgery, prosthetics and other durable medical goods are provided not be-

cause they are medical necessities but because they are essential to each person's sense of human dignity.

In these countries, people understand that governments have a role to play in assuring the dignity of every person. Governments provide public education so that each person can participate in civic life and know the pride of literacy. And they provide social safety nets like food stamps so that every parent can feed his or her child without a sense of shame. These things are important not just because of some abstract sense of fairness but because they ensure that all people live with dignity, regardless of circumstance.

Every person has a right to have their worth – and not just their net worth – valued and respected.

Instead of arguing about whether the rich have to pay more or what it means for each

person to pay a "fair share," we should ensure that all Americans can raise their kids with dignity, work with dignity, and retire with dignity.

Will a tax hike or a cut in programs enhance, or detract from, Americans' sense of human dignity? How will a deal that increases unemployment affect the dignity of those who will be out looking for work?

Any proposal that diminishes or threatens human dignity should not be accepted by our representatives in Congress, or by the people they represent.

Enhancing human dignity should, as Sperling said, be the metric for all we do.

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