

THE HUMAN CONSTITUTION



A FRAMEWORK OF RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES
FOR HUMAN MATURITY AND DIGNITY



SEVEN PRINCIPLES. • RIGHTS. • RESPONSIBILITIES.

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Why Do We Need a Human Constitution?

One way to understand human history is as a continual expansion of perspective.

For approximately 300,000 years, we humans have been learning how to live together.

We began in small groups connected by family and tribe. Over time, villages emerged, then cities, kingdoms, nations, and increasingly interconnected societies. Alongside this development came new tools and technologies. We learned to use fire, cultivate crops, build infrastructure, develop writing, exchange knowledge, harness industry, connect through digital networks, and now create forms of artificial intelligence.

Each step expanded what we could do, and also expanded how we understood ourselves.

What is remarkable is that humanity continues to carry many of these perspectives simultaneously.

Today, more than 470 million Indigenous people maintain some of humanity's oldest traditions and governance models. Alongside them exist monarchies, democracies, parliamentary systems, presidential systems, religious systems, international institutions, large global corporations, local communities, and countless cultural traditions.

Rather than seeing this diversity as a problem, it can be understood as part of humanity's learning process, where we can embrace our roots and evolve in our learning.

Different cultures, religions, philosophies, and systems have explored similar questions from different directions:

- How do we live together?
- What is considered a right way of conduct?
- How do we balance freedom and responsibility?
- How do we use power wisely?
- How do we care for future generations?

There is not a single answer to these questions. We are diverse and our circumstances are different. Our histories and therefore our perspectives are different.

Yet for the first time, thanks to technology, we can clearly see how we are deeply interconnected. Information moves across the globe instantly. Economies influence one another. Technologies developed in one nation affect people everywhere. Environmental systems remind us that oceans, air, and ecosystems do not recognize political borders.

We remain local, and we are increasingly global. We belong to families, communities, organizations, cultures, nations, and increasingly to a shared human story.

This creates both opportunity and also complexity.

We now live within overlapping layers of responsibility. Governments, Organizations Corporations and Communities carry responsibilities. So do we as individuals.

As artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and global connectivity continue to reshape society, the question is no longer only what future we are creating, but who we are becoming as we create it.

Learning how these layers interact may be one of the great learning processes of our time. The conversation has begun, and it still has much to evolve.

Some futurists describe humanity as an emerging planetary civilization. Others look toward a future in which humanity becomes an interplanetary species. Whether our future unfolds on one planet or many, a question remains: What qualities will help us thrive together? Technology may change rapidly, but dignity, responsibility, cooperation, and human maturity remain essential foundations for any future we create.

What I have learned is the importance to begin where you stand. Challenges does not become less or vanish because the setting changes. To become a well-functioning interplanetary civilization, we first need to learn how to thrive as a planetary one.

Maybe this is part of our present learning.

The Human Constitution begins with a simple observation:

*We are born with rights.
We mature into responsibilities.*

A child is born with inherent worth.

As we grow, we learn to care for our bodies and minds. We learn to understand emotions and thoughts. We learn about our power and how we affect others. We learn to communicate, and how we impact others. We learn about our participation in society... and we learn about our interaction with life.

These lessons unfold throughout a lifetime.

They also unfold within families, organizations, nations, and now increasingly within humanity itself.

The Human Constitution is offered as a framework for that continuing dialogue.

This is not to replace existing cultures, religions, constitutions, philosophies, or systems of government. Instead, the Human Constitution offers a shared language through which we can *explore the balance* between rights and responsibilities.

This framework is to support the dialogue around humanity's thousand questions, where I am hopeful we can find a million answers and to help us navigate life with greater dignity.

The pages that follow are an invitation to explore seven principles of rights and responsibilities that support human maturity - individually, relationally, societally, and as a species.

This is the invitation of The Human Constitution, maturing with more dignity.

Human Worth and Dignity

At the heart of The Human Constitution lies a simple yet profound observation: every human being possesses inherent worth.

This worth is not determined by intelligence, wealth, education, nationality, religion, social status, age, ability, or achievement. It is not something we earn, nor is it something that can be taken away. It exists before all labels and circumstances. It belongs equally to the child taking their first breath, the elder approaching their last, and every person in between.

Throughout my life, I have been fascinated by what allows us to flourish.

After working in leadership, studying human behavior, supporting people through grief, and standing beside thousands of families at funerals, I saw a truth of life:

*Beneath all our differences
lies a shared humanity and an equal human worth.*

When we lose sight of this worth, we often lose sight of ourselves. We become more vulnerable to fear, division, shame, manipulation, and the belief that some lives matter more than others. Yet when we remember our worth, something changes. We begin to stand a little differently in the world. We care more deeply for ourselves and often find it easier to extend that same respect to others.

Over the years, I have come to think of dignity as a crown that each of us carries.

The Dignity Crown is not a crown of status, superiority, or self-importance, but a crown of self-respect. A quiet reminder that our lives matter, that other people's lives matter, and that how we choose to live, speak, and relate to one another carries significance.

When we remember this crown, we can remember greater care for our bodies, our emotions, our thinking, our communication, our communities, and the living world around us. Dignity becomes more than an idea. It becomes a way of moving through life.

This understanding forms the foundation of The Human Constitution. The framework does not begin with politics, ideology, or systems. It begins with the recognition of human worth

and the invitation to live with dignity. From that foundation rise a natural exploration of both rights and responsibilities, not as opposing forces but as partners in human maturity.

The seven principles that follow are an exploration of what it means to honor that dignity in practice. They invite us to reflect on how we care for ourselves, how we relate to one another, and how we participate in the larger story of humanity and life itself.

Dignity is not something we need to create, it has been present all along, waiting to be remembered. And maybe this renaissance begins with that remembrance.

Istima The Learning Within Life

I have been working with some difficult topics in my professional and personal life. Over the years, I began noticing a pattern. For some the situations seemed unrelated.

A person struggling with addiction coming to self-realization. A family navigating grief and loss. A team working through conflict becoming more efficient and collaborative. An organization-crisis that developed the quality and efficiency. A society attempting to reform itself.

All these various forms of some sort of crisis, different areas in life, different intensity. Beneath the different circumstances, the challenges were accompanied by learning, growth, maturing and gained wisdom.

Not always immediately or willingly. Sometimes the learning emerged only years later. Yet over time, I became increasingly fascinated by this process and the role it plays in human development.

I call this process *istima*.

*Istima is the process of maturing through experience
the learning within the storm.*

THE WORD ISTIMA

One reason I use the word *istima* rather than simply speaking about crisis is that crisis describes an event, while *istima* describes a process. A crisis may last a day, a year, or a decade. The learning often continues long after the event itself has passed.

I searched for a word that could describe this pattern.

The word crisis describes an event. Growth often describes a result. Learning describes what remains after the understanding has emerged.

What fascinated me was the process itself through experience, reflection, resistance, discovery, and understanding.

I wanted a word that could describe what happens when individuals learn through hardship, relationships learn through conflict, organizations learn through challenge, societies learn through reform and cultural development, and humanity learns through history itself. But also understand that hardship is one of many teachers in how we mature, develop, and grow with wisdom.

While exploring languages created by language professor J.R.R. Tolkien, I encountered the Quenya word *istima*, meaning learning. This became the word I used for this broader process of maturation, wisdom, strive for calmness and dignity.

INDIVIDUAL ISTIMA LEARNINGS

Many people encounter istima through personal challenges. It may arrive through illness, grief, burnout, addiction, depression, financial hardship, or periods of profound uncertainty. Although the circumstances differ, these experiences often interrupt the assumptions we hold about ourselves and our lives.

During my years working in Human Resources, I frequently observed this pattern among people confronting addiction and major life transitions. The crisis could be questioning of identity.

It could be the identity of being the “strong one”, “the fun party animal”, or “the nice and pleasant one”... in this breaking point the identity was no longer sufficient, sometimes to the point of collapse, and something new was attempting to emerge.

*What else is possible?
Who am I beyond this identity?*

I also recognized the same pattern in my own life. The loss of my mother, my divorce, and periods of rebuilding life. What I saw was that the suffering was not the entire story. The insights did come not while I was living through the experience itself. The learning and growth came by embracing the process itself, not resisting reality of what was experienced or felt. Once I was through the process I gained perspective, I felt more peaceful and gained deeper understanding of life.

Years later, working in the funeral profession, this understanding deepened further. Supporting in grief gave me a unique perspective on what matters most to people when life becomes fragile.

Time and time again, I witnessed individuals navigating regret, gratitude, forgiveness, love, and meaning. No two journeys were the same, yet there was often a process of maturation taking place beneath the surface. I saw people coming in to the ceremony in turbulent, dense emotions and going out from the ceremony with another sense of completion and lightness.

One insight came repeatedly: acceptance of reality. The gradual willingness to acknowledge reality as it is, rather than remaining attached to what should have been, or could have been. Often this created space for forgiveness, compassion, and a broader understanding of both oneself, gaining inner peace.

INTERPERSONAL ISTIMA LEARNINGS

The same process appeared within relationships; conflicts, disappointments, misunderstandings, and differing expectations can feel uncomfortable, but I also saw the very experiences through which people learn communication, boundaries, responsibility, trust, and compassion.

In the moment, attention is often focused on the disagreement itself. Looking back, however, many people discover that the deeper learning was not simply about the conflict but about themselves and their relationship to others. I saw people maturing in compassion with themselves and better understanding of others.

What initially appears to be a problem between people can sometimes become a learning process within.

I have noticed that *some* people's learnings is to soften and become more compassionate with oneself and others. *Other* people's learning is to have healthier boundaries, learning to say yes or no, standing in an inner power, with integrity and dignity.

ORGANIZATIONAL ISTIMA LEARNINGS

The pattern also appears wherever people gather and attempt to work together in groups or in the boardroom.

Anyone familiar with FIRO and group development recognizes that tension is not a sign of failure. Groups often move through periods of uncertainty, disagreement, and competing perspectives before developing greater trust and effectiveness.

During my years working with leadership development, risk management, crisis management, and organizational culture, I repeatedly observed what people labeled "mistakes, failures, and difficult situations" became important turning points. It is not always, or rather seldom, we can see the "learning" when we are in the midst of the istima process. We can see it in hindsight. Organizations learned to communicate more clearly, strengthen accountability, improve quality, and create healthier, happier organizational cultures.

What initially appeared to be resistance, conflict, or disruption often became the very process through which individuals, teams, and organizations matured. It was also about addressing reality and willingness to go through the process.

SOCIETAL ISTIMA LEARNINGS

Studying sociology and human history my perspective widened. I began noticing the same pattern within societies.

Justice systems evolve. Institutions adapt. New ideas challenge old assumptions. Nations learn through cooperation and conflict, through success and failure, through reform and reflection.

The German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte talked in the mid 1700 about thesis, antithesis and synthesis, the understanding of contrast and fusion.

Viewed through this lens, history itself can be understood as an ongoing process of learning. Human understanding expands, contracts, corrects itself, and expands again.

Sometimes the process is gentle. Sometimes it is painful. Rebellious revolutions are not necessary, but *the evolution of society is part of life and living*. Across generations, societies often develop broader understandings of rights, responsibilities, participation, and coexistence.

LIFE-LEVEL ISTIMA LEARNINGS

Maybe the broadest form of istima concerns our relationship with life itself.

We are continuously learning how to live alongside one another, while sharing this planet with countless other forms of life, in the ocean and on land. A reality is also that we are causing a lot of suffering with our undignified, unsustainable behavior of more, and faster consumption.

I question some peoples statement that we are “the most scary species on the planet”.

I believe that, as a species, we are still maturing. We can see it in the way we sometimes neglect our bodies, allow small personal dramas and disagreements to escalate into deep divisions, or consume the Earth's resources as though they were endless.

This is an invitation to learn. Just as individuals grow through experience and challenge, we appear to be moving through a collective process of learning and maturation. I perceive that we are learning how our choices affect ecosystems, animals, future generations, and the delicate systems which life depends. We are learning how to respect different cultures, beliefs, identities, and ways of living while recognizing our shared humanity.

At this level, istima becomes more than personal learning. It becomes part of humanity's ongoing maturation. And we are maturing. We are suffering ... and creating suffering... we can do better. Much better!

THE ISTIMA PROCESS

My understanding of istima has also evolved. Initially, I associated it primarily with hardship. Today, I see it more broadly. Hardship is one teacher, but it is not the only one. Curiosity teaches. Dialogue teaches. Discovery teaches. New information teaches.

One observation has become particularly important. Suffering often deepens when we become attached to a single perspective. We become convinced that we already know. We stop listening. The world becomes smaller. The istima process is deepening and become denser.

Curiosity creates a different movement. It does not necessarily remove difficulty, but it creates space for another possibility, another perspective, another layer of understanding. Sometimes the circumstances remain exactly the same, yet our experience changes because our understanding has expanded.

Seen in this way, istima is not limited to hardship. It is the learning within life itself, the ongoing process through which we mature as individuals, in our relationships, within organizations, as societies, and even as a species. Maturity is not the absence of difficulty, but our growing ability to remain curious within the learning process itself.

What else is possible?

THE HUMAN CONSTITUTION

If istima describes the process through which we learn and mature, the Human Constitution offers a framework for understanding where that learning often takes place.

HOW THE FRAMEWORK EVOLVED

The Human Constitution has evolved over more than 25 years through reflections from my work in leadership development, crisis management, organizational culture, and later through supporting thousands of families in the funeral profession. Conversations with people from different cultures, professions, generations, and life experiences further expanded the perspective.

Its origins can be traced back to conversations I had many years ago with my friend and mentor Göran Janson. Together we explored questions about human rights, leadership, personal responsibility, and what helps people and societies function well.

How do we balance rights and responsibilities?

These conversations inspired my first book, *A State of Grace – Human Rights and Human Obligations*, published in 2015. The book explored six areas of life through an interpersonal lens, examining how rights and obligations interact in our everyday lives.

Gradually, over the last decade the framework developed into seven principles of rights and responsibilities. One important addition was the recognition of our collective rights and responsibilities within society. Another was a broader understanding of power, including personal, physical, monetary, and relational dimensions. Together, these additions created a more complete picture of human life.

As the work matured, it seemed to move naturally from the individual to our relationships, and finally to our participation in something larger than ourselves.

The first three principles, Body, Emotion, and Thought, focus on our relationship with ourselves and the foundations of a healthy and dignified life. The next two, Power and Communication, explore how we meet, influence, and relate to one another. The final principles, Society and Life, expand the lens further, inviting us to reflect on our role within communities, nations, future generations, and the living world itself.

Together, they form a simple progression: **Me, We, and Us**. It is a reminder that the health of the whole is shaped by the health of its parts, and that personal growth, human connection, and collective responsibility are all part of the same journey.

We start by learning to care for ourselves. We learn to relate to others. We learn to participate responsibly in something larger than ourselves. This evolution eventually led to what is now called *The Human Constitution*. This framework exploring the relationship between rights, responsibilities, and human maturity across the most important dimensions of life.

- How do we care for our bodies?
- How do we understand and mature in our emotions?
- How do we relate to our thoughts?
- How do we become aware and use power and impact wisely?
- How do we communicate?
- How do we participate in society?
- How do we interact with life itself?

These became the foundation of the seven principles of The Human Constitution.

Each principle contains three elements:

A Right – recognizing our inherent human worth.

A Responsibility – reflecting our capacity to contribute, care, and mature.

An Istim – the learning process through which wisdom often emerges.

Together they express a simple observation:

*We are born with rights.
We mature into responsibilities.*

The seven principles are not rules or doctrines. They are invitations to reflect on some of the most important dimensions of human life and explore how rights and responsibilities can exist in balance.

PRINCIPLE ONE – BODY

Right: To physical integrity, safety, and health.

Responsibility: To care for our bodies and support conditions that allow life to thrive.

Istim: Learning through physical challenges, health, illness, aging, recovery, vitality, and the experience of living in a human body.

PRINCIPLE TWO – EMOTION

Right: To experience, express, and explore our emotional world.

Responsibility: To understand our emotions and relate to them in ways that support both ourselves and others.

Istim: Learning through joy, grief, fear, love, shame, disappointment, connection, and the many emotional experiences that shape our lives.

PRINCIPLE THREE – THOUGHT

Right: To think freely, question, learn, and form our own understanding.

Responsibility: To remain curious, examine our assumptions, and seek understanding beyond our immediate perspective.

Istim: Learning through uncertainty, misunderstanding, discovery, changing beliefs, and the expansion of perspective.

PRINCIPLE FOUR – POWER

Right: To personal, monetary, and physical power.

Responsibility: To use power with integrity, protect healthy boundaries, and contribute to growth and cooperation.

Istima: Learning through influence, conflict, leadership, responsibility, boundaries, consent, and the consequences of how power is used.

PRINCIPLE FIVE – COMMUNICATION

Right: To speak, listen, express, and be heard.

Responsibility: To communicate with honesty, dignity, and consideration for the impact of our words and actions.

Istima: Learning through dialogue, misunderstanding, truth-telling, listening, reconciliation, and shared understanding.

PRINCIPLE SIX – SOCIETY

Right: To participate in society and benefit from the protections, opportunities, and structures it provides.

Responsibility: To contribute to the well-being, development, and future of the communities and societies of which we are part.

Istima: Learning through cooperation, disagreement, civic participation, justice, reform, and our shared human journey.

PRINCIPLE SEVEN – LIFE

Right: To live and flourish within the interconnected web of life.

Responsibility: To care for the living systems that sustain present and future generations.

Istima: Learning through our relationship with nature, other species, future generations, and the wider living world of which we are a part.

Principle One – Body

RIGHT

TO PHYSICAL INTEGRITY, SAFETY, AND HEALTH.

RESPONSIBILITY

TO CARE FOR OUR BODIES

AND SUPPORT CONDITIONS THAT ALLOW LIFE TO THRIVE.

Our body is the first home we are given.

Before we develop beliefs, professions, identities, or opinions, we experience life through a body. Through our senses we discover the world. Through movement we explore it. Through the body we experience pleasure, pain, connection, exhaustion, vitality, illness, aging, and healing.

Everything else in life begins with our body.

The body is remarkable. It breathes without instruction, heals when injured, adapts to changing circumstances, and constantly works to maintain balance. Most of the time we barely notice it. It simply carries us through life, asking for surprisingly simple things: nourishment, movement, rest, safety, connection, and care.

Maybe this is why so many of us only begin paying attention when something changes.

One of the remarkable things about the body is its ability to call us back to awareness. Whether through discomfort, exhaustion, illness, strength, or vitality, it continually provides feedback about how we are living and what may be asking for our attention. Over the years, I have come to see many physical challenges as forms of istima. Not because illness or suffering are desirable, but because they often invite learning. Sometimes we learn to slow down. Sometimes we learn to establish healthier boundaries. Sometimes we learn gratitude for what we previously overlooked. Sometimes we discover a deeper respect for life itself.

The learning is not the illness. The learning arrives through our relationship with the reality of what ever is.

This process begins early. Childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and aging each invite different forms of learning. Our bodies change continuously throughout our lives, asking us to adapt, accept, and mature. The body we inhabit at fifteen is not the same body we inhabit at fifty, eighty, or one hundred. Learning to meet these changes with dignity is part of being human.

Physical integrity is therefore more than a legal principle. It is a recognition that every human being has the right to inhabit their own body without violence, coercion, exploitation, or abuse. Our bodies belong neither to governments, institutions, employers, nor partners. They belong to us.

At the same time, rights and responsibilities exist together.

The responsibility is not perfection.

The responsibility is care, and to nourish rather than neglect. It is to support health where possible.

*One of the simplest expressions of dignity is caring for the body
that carries us through life.*

Regardless of culture, nationality, or personal beliefs, our bodies rely on a few fundamental conditions in order to function well. While each person is unique, these foundations appear consistently across human experience.

- Sleep. During sleep, the body restores itself, regulates emotions, and supports learning, memory, and overall well-being. Few things influence our quality of life as profoundly as adequate rest.
- Nourishment. Food is more than fuel; it becomes part of us. The quality and balance of what we consume affect our energy, resilience, and long-term health.
- Movement. We evolved in motion. Regular physical activity supports strength, mobility, emotional well-being, and resilience throughout life.
- Touch. From infancy onward, healthy touch contributes to our sense of safety, connection, and belonging. As we mature, touch may take many forms, including affection, friendship, partnership, and intimacy, yet the underlying human need for connection remains.

Together, sleep, nourishment, movement, and touch form part of the foundation of building health. They do not guarantee perfect health, but they remind us that the body is a living system that requires care, attention, and respect.

Maybe one of the simplest expressions of dignity is learning to care for the body that carries us through life and to recognize the connection between physical well-being, emotional well-being, and the quality of our lives.

The more I have reflected on this principle, the more I have come to see that the boundary of the body is not as clear as it first appears. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and the environments we create all become part of us. In this sense, caring for the body naturally leads to caring for the conditions that sustain life.

Our first relationship with life begins through the body.

Learning to listen to it, respect it, and care for it is one of the first forms of human maturity.

**This is the istima of the body;
learning to listen to our body and respect it.**

Principle Two – Emotion

RIGHT

TO EXPERIENCE, EXPRESS, AND EXPLORE OUR EMOTIONAL WORLD.

RESPONSIBILITY

TO UNDERSTAND OUR EMOTIONS AND RELATE TO THEM
IN WAYS THAT SUPPORT BOTH OURSELVES AND OTHERS.

To feel is part of being human.

Long before we learn language, we experience the world emotionally. We feel comfort and discomfort, connection and separation, safety and fear. In many ways, our emotional life becomes one of our earliest teachers, helping us make sense of ourselves, our relationships, and the world around us.

Some emotions feel pleasant and expansive. Others feel uncomfortable or even overwhelming. Yet... over time I have come to see that emotions themselves are rarely the problem. More often, they are messengers, drawing our attention toward something that matters.

Joy can point us toward meaning, vitality, and connection. Sadness often reveals what we value and care about. Fear may signal uncertainty, vulnerability, or the need for protection. Anger can arise when a boundary has been crossed or when something important within us longs to be acknowledged. Embarrassment and shame can reveal our desire to belong, be accepted, and be seen.

Each emotion carries information, yet the deeper learning often lies beyond the emotion itself. This is where the concept of *istima* is helping to broaden perspective on our emotional life.

Many of us spend years trying to avoid certain feelings. We distract ourselves, suppress them, analyze them, deny them, or project them onto others. But emotions have a remarkable way of returning when their message has not been understood.

Over time, I began to see grief, heartbreak, loneliness, disappointment, anxiety, shame, and even depression as different expressions of the same human process. Beneath the pain often lies an invitation to learn something about ourselves, our needs, our boundaries, our relationships, or our understanding of life.

The learning is not the emotion itself. The learning emerges through our relationship with it.

During my years working in leadership, human resources, and later in the funeral profession, I observed how differently people moved through emotional experiences. Some became trapped in fear, resentment, bitterness, or self-judgment. Others gradually developed

acceptance, compassion, wisdom, and peace. The difference was rarely the event itself. More often, it was the willingness to engage with the learning.

I also noticed that when we resist the learning within emotional istima, the process can deepen. Sadness may become depression. Anger may become hatred. Not as punishment, but as an indication that something beneath the emotion still requires our attention. Sometimes I playfully imagine life knocking on our door, gently saying,

There are other aspects to be discovered here.

Supporting families through grief deepened this understanding. Again and again, I witnessed people arriving in profound sorrow and leaving with a different relationship to their loss. The grief did not disappear, yet something softened. Perspective widened. What had initially felt unbearable slowly became integrated into the story of their lives. In many cases, love became more visible than pain.

These experiences led me to see emotional maturity differently. It is not the absence of difficult emotions, nor the ability to remain positive at all times. Emotional maturity is the capacity to remain present with our emotions long enough to understand what they may be inviting us to learn.

Over time, emotions often evolve when their lessons are understood. Sadness may deepen into reflection, gratitude, and eventually playfulness. Fear can develop into confidence, courage, and trust. Anger may reveal boundaries, unmet needs, or injustice before maturing into understanding, compassion, and sometimes even love. Embarrassment and shame can gradually transform into self-acceptance, belonging, happiness, and inner freedom.

The purpose is not to eliminate uncomfortable emotions. They are part of being human. Through the process of istima, they often become some of our greatest teachers, helping us develop greater awareness, wisdom, resilience, and emotional freedom.

As with all human rights, responsibilities accompany them. We have the right to experience the full spectrum of human emotion. We have the right to feel sadness, joy, fear, grief, excitement, anger, love, uncertainty, and hope. Emotions are part of what makes us human.

At the same time, we carry a responsibility for how we relate to our emotions and how we express them in the world. Emotions can deepen connection, understanding, and intimacy, but they can also become justification for harm when expressed without awareness. Emotional maturity invites us to acknowledge what we feel while remaining responsible for how we act.

For me, this is the essence of emotional istima: learning how we can mature through our emotions and listen more deeply to what they are trying to teach us. When we do this, emotions cease to be obstacles and become companions in our experience, helping us grow into wiser, more compassionate, and more humane versions of ourselves.

**This is the istima of emotion;
learning to mature in our emotions to strive for peace.**

Principle Three – Thought

RIGHT

TO THINK FREELY, QUESTION, LEARN, AND FORM OUR OWN UNDERSTANDING.

RESPONSIBILITY

TO REMAIN CURIOUS, EXAMINE OUR ASSUMPTIONS, AND
SEEK UNDERSTANDING BEYOND OUR IMMEDIATE PERSPECTIVE.

One of the things that has fascinated me most throughout life is how differently people can experience the same reality. The exact same reality!

Two people can witness the same event, hear the same words, or live through the same circumstances and walk away with entirely different conclusions. One person sees failure while another sees learning. One sees rejection while another sees redirection. One sees an ending while another sees a beginning.

The facts may be the same, yet the meaning can be very different.

This observation gradually changed the way I think about thought itself.

Facts matter and the real reality matters. At the same time, our experience of life is shaped not only by what happens, but by the meaning we give to what happens. We are remarkable meaning-makers. We are constantly interpreting, explaining, imagining, remembering, comparing, and trying to understand our place in the world. In many ways, we do not simply experience life; we experience our interpretation of life.

These interpretations help us navigate reality, but they can also limit us. Many of us grow up assuming that our perspective is reality itself. Then life introduces us to other people, other cultures, other experiences, and other ways of seeing. What once appeared obvious becomes less certain. What once seemed unquestionable becomes worthy of exploration.

Far from making life smaller, this often makes life richer.

*Wisdom begins when we realize that our perspective is part of reality,
but rarely the whole of it.*

Over the years, I have come to see perspective as one of humanity's greatest opportunities for growth. Again and again, I have watched suffering deepen when people become attached to a single interpretation of events. We become convinced that we already know. Curiosity fades. Listening fades. Possibility fades.

Yet the moment curiosity returns, something begins to open.

A new question appears, or a different perspective emerges. Then a larger picture becomes visible.

This is where thought becomes a form of istima.

Many of life's most meaningful lessons begin when our current understanding is no longer sufficient. A disappointment challenges a belief. A conversation introduces a new perspective. An unexpected event invites us to reconsider assumptions we may have carried for years. The process is not always comfortable, but it often expands our understanding of ourselves, other people, and the world.

Maybe this is why curiosity is so powerful. It does not require us to abandon our values, experiences, or convictions. It simply invites us to remain open to the possibility that there may be more to learn.

What else might be true?

What am I not seeing?

How might this look from another perspective?

Questions such as these have shaped human progress throughout history. They have contributed to scientific discoveries, philosophical inquiry, artistic expression, and personal transformation. Humanity expands its understanding one question at a time.

As with all human rights, responsibilities accompany them. We have the right to our own thoughts, beliefs, opinions, and perspectives. We have the right to question, explore, disagree, and form our own understanding of the world.

At the same time, we carry a responsibility to examine our assumptions, distinguish between facts and interpretations, and remain curious enough to continue learning. Our perspective is part of reality, but it is rarely the whole of it.

Over time, I have come to see wisdom not as having all the answers, but as maintaining a willingness to learn. Wisdom is the ability to hold complexity without becoming trapped by certainty. It is the humility to recognize that life may be larger than our current understanding of it.

Learning to think clearly while remaining curious may be one of the great maturities of life. And I believe we might have thousands of questions but with collaboration we might find a million answers – when we broaden the perspectives with curiosity.

**This is the istima of thought,
learning broadening perspectives.**

Principle Four – Power

RIGHT

TO PERSONAL, MONETARY, AND PHYSICAL POWER.

RESPONSIBILITY

TO USE POWER WITH INTEGRITY, PROTECTING BOUNDARIES WHILE
FOSTERING GROWTH AND COOPERATION.

We have impact simply by existing.

Power might be one of the most misunderstood aspects of being human. For some people, the word immediately evokes images of corruption, domination, abuse, or control. History certainly provides many examples of power used in destructive ways. Yet over the years I have come to a different conclusion: power itself is not the problem. Immaturity is.

Power exists in every human life. Without it, we could not make decisions, protect what matters, create change, build families, organizations, communities, or societies. Power allows us to influence our circumstances and participate in shaping the world around us.

There are many ways to understand power. Political scientists, philosophers, psychologists, business leaders, and military strategists have all explored it from different perspectives. In *The Human Constitution*, I focus primarily on three forms of power that most people encounter throughout their lives: personal power, monetary power, and physical power.

Personal power is our ability to direct our time, energy, attention, choices, and boundaries. It is the power behind every yes and every no. It influences how we spend our days, who we allow into our lives, what we give our energy to, and what we choose to walk away from.

Monetary power is the influence that comes through resources, ownership, exchange, and financial capacity. Money allows us to make choices, support causes, create opportunities, and contribute to the lives of others. Like all forms of power, it can be used constructively or destructively.

Physical power includes our strength, our physical presence, and (as we mature) our sexuality. It is the power to protect, create, move, build, and connect. It also carries responsibility because physical power can affect others in direct and immediate ways.

Most of us will experience all three forms of power throughout our lives, although not always in equal measure. Some people possess significant financial resources. Others have strong personal influence. Some carry great physical strength.

What I have noticed is that power often becomes most visible when it is out of balance.

Sometimes people give away their power. They struggle to set boundaries, speak honestly, ask for what they need, or stand up for themselves. Other times people attempt to take power

that does not belong to them. They manipulate, dominate, intimidate, control, or exploit. Both situations create suffering, not because power exists, but because our relationship with it has become distorted.

This is where power often becomes a form of istima.

*Power is not the problem.
Immaturity is.*

Life has many ways of teaching us about power. A difficult relationship may teach us the importance of boundaries. Financial hardship may teach us responsibility, resilience, or gratitude. Leadership may teach us humility. Success may test our integrity. Burnout may reveal how often we have ignored our own limits. Conflict may show us where we need greater courage or greater compassion.

The circumstances differ, but the questions are often surprisingly similar.

- How do I use my power without controlling others?
- How do I remain generous without losing myself?
- How do I protect my boundaries without closing my heart?
- How do I lead without dominating?

I have understood that the greater the power, the greater the responsibility.

A physically strong person carries a responsibility not to misuse that strength.

A person with significant financial resources carries responsibility for how those resources affect others and the planet.

A leader, teacher, parent, politician, entrepreneur, or public figure carries responsibility for the influence they have on the people around them.

Power expands our capacity to create impact. Responsibility helps guide that impact toward something constructive.

Maybe this is why mature power often appears quieter than we expect. It does not constantly need to prove itself. It does not rely on fear, intimidation, or control. Mature power creates safety. It protects boundaries. It takes responsibility. It listens. It understands that strength and compassion can exist together.

Power is not something reserved for a small group of people. It belongs to all of us. Each day we influence others through our choices, our behavior, our words, and our actions. Learning to recognize our power, take responsibility for it, and use it with integrity is one of the great maturities of life.

**This is the istima of power,
learning power balance.**

Principle Five – Communication

RIGHT

TO EXPRESS, LISTEN, CREATE, AND SHARE IDEAS.

RESPONSIBILITY

TO STRIVE FOR COMMUNICATION WITH
DIGNITY, HONESTY, AND RESPECT FOR OURSELVES AND OTHERS.

We are storytellers, listeners, teachers, learners, and meaning-makers. Long before we developed writing, technology, governments, or modern institutions, we gathered around fires, shared experiences, passed wisdom between generations, and used communication to build relationships, families, and communities.

In many ways, communication is what allows us to move beyond ourselves. We share knowledge, express needs, resolve misunderstandings, exchange ideas, and create meaning together. It shapes our relationships, our organizations, our cultures, and ultimately the societies we create.

Because communication is so deeply woven into our life, we have the right to communicate. We have the right to express ourselves, ask questions, share ideas, tell our stories, and contribute our perspective to the ongoing human conversation.

But, as with all rights, responsibilities also accompany them.

When I was teaching coaching, I became increasingly interested in our ability to listen. I have noticed that many conflicts are not caused by a lack of intelligence, but by a lack of understanding. People speak, yet do not feel heard. They explain but feel misunderstood. We defend positions while becoming less curious about the experiences and perspectives of others.

Maybe this is one of the great challenges of being human.

We each experience life through our own history, culture, personality, circumstances, and emotional landscape. No two people see the world in exactly the same way. Communication therefore becomes more than the exchange of information; it becomes a meeting between perspectives.

This is where communication often becomes a form of istima, an important learning!

Some of life's most important lessons emerge through difficult conversations, misunderstandings, disagreement, conflict, reconciliation, and the gradual discovery that reality is often larger than our individual perspective. Through these experiences we learn to express ourselves more clearly, listen more carefully, and recognize that our interpretation is not always the whole story.

Over time, I have noticed that listening itself seems to mature. Many of us begin by listening in order to reply. Later, we learn to listen in order to understand. With greater maturity, we may begin listening in order to learn and expand our own perspective.

*Listening is one of the simplest ways we honor
the dignity of another human being.*

This maturity shift changes communication entirely.

Listening is no longer something we do while waiting for our turn to speak. It becomes an act of curiosity. It becomes an acknowledgment that no single person sees the whole picture and that every conversation may contain something we have not yet considered.

Communication also invites us to reflect on dignity. Words can encourage, inspire, educate, comfort, and unite. They can also shame, manipulate, intimidate, and divide. The question is not only whether we have the freedom to say something. The deeper question is how we choose to use that freedom.

Dignified communication does not require agreement. We will continue to hold different opinions about politics, religion, culture, priorities, and countless other questions. The goal is not uniformity. The goal is to communicate across differences without losing our own dignity or diminishing the dignity of others.

Maybe one of the great maturities of life is learning to hold conviction and curiosity at the same time; to speak honestly, listen generously, and remain open to learning. In doing so, we begin to remember that behind every opinion, every belief, and every perspective stands another human being with their own experiences, hopes, fears, and understanding of the world.

**This is the istima of communication;
maturing in communication so it can be heard, and listen to others.**

Principle Six – Society

RIGHT

TO PARTICIPATE IN SOCIETY AND BENEFIT FROM
THE PROTECTIONS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND STRUCTURES IT PROVIDES.

RESPONSIBILITY

TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE WELL-BEING, DEVELOPMENT, AND FUTURE
OF THE COMMUNITIES AND SOCIETIES OF WHICH WE ARE PART.

We are social creatures.

Like many “gregarious species” (social group), we are shaped by our relationships with one another. From families and villages to cities, nations, and global networks, our lives have always depended upon cooperation, belonging, and connection. We learn from one another, care for one another, and build together in ways that no individual could achieve alone.

However... there is an interesting paradox in our time. Never before in human history have we been so connected through technology, and yet many people experience profound loneliness and disconnection. We can communicate across continents in seconds, but being connected is not always the same as belonging. The human need to feel seen, valued, and part of something larger than ourselves remains as important today as it was for our earliest ancestors gathered around a fire.

Maybe this is why every society, throughout history, has been trying to answer a similar question:

How do we live well together?

Different cultures have arrived at different answers, shaped by their histories, values, environments, and experiences. The Human Constitution is not offered to replace these systems. Rather, it is an invitation to explore how people, communities, institutions, and societies can continue to mature within them.

We have the right to participate in society. We have the right to belong, to contribute, and to be treated with dignity within the communities and systems that shape our lives.

At the same time, rights and responsibilities exist together.

Most of us benefit every day from things we did not create ourselves. We rely on knowledge, infrastructure, institutions, traditions, and countless contributions built by generations before us. Society is one of humanity’s greatest collaborative achievements.

Because we benefit from society, we also share responsibility for it.

This responsibility can take many forms. It may be expressed through work, tax, caregiving, leadership, entrepreneurship, citizenship, volunteering, community engagement, or simply through the everyday choices we make in how we treat one another. Not everyone carries the same role, but everyone influences the whole.

Over the years, one concept has become increasingly important to me: what we call *civilkurage* in Swedish; moral courage.

Moral courage is rarely dramatic. More often, it appears in ordinary moments. It is helping when help is needed. It is speaking when silence would allow harm to continue. It is standing for what we believe is right without losing sight of the humanity of those who see things differently. It is the courage of participation and acknowledging each other.

I have also come to see that many of the patterns we observe in society first appear in our relationships. Trust, cooperation, exclusion, conflict, belonging, responsibility, and forgiveness do not begin at the national level. They begin between people. In this sense, societies often reflect the strengths, wounds, and maturity of the individuals who create them.

This is where society becomes a form of *istima*.

Just as individuals learn through challenges, societies learn through successes and failures, cooperation and conflict, justice and injustice. When trust breaks down, there is learning. When communities become divided, there is learning. When people come together to solve problems, there is learning. The process is not always comfortable, yet it is often through these experiences that societies mature.

Maybe one of the most important questions we can ask is not what society owes us, but what kind of society we are helping to create together.

The future is not only shaped by leaders, laws, and institutions, but by millions of everyday choices made by ordinary people. Every conversation, every act of kindness, every moment of integrity, and every act of moral courage contributes to the culture we leave behind.

For me, this is the essence of the *istima* of society: learning how to participate with dignity, responsibility, and moral courage while recognizing that the society we experience is, in part, a reflection of the society we create together. As we mature individually, we create the possibility for societies to mature as well.

**This is the *istima* of society:
learning to build together what none of us can create alone.**

Principle Seven – Life

RIGHT

TO LIVE AND FLOURISH WITHIN THE INTERCONNECTED WEB OF LIFE.

RESPONSIBILITY

TO CARE FOR THE LIVING SYSTEMS
THAT SUSTAIN PRESENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS.

We are part of life.

Long before the first human being appeared, life had already spent 3 billion years emerging, evolving, adapting, and transforming across oceans, forests, rivers, deserts, mountains, and countless forms we will never fully understand. Every generation inherits a world shaped by those who came before, and in turn contributes to the world that follows.

We are part of that story.

For most of our history, our impact on the planet was relatively small. Today, for the first time, our choices influence life on a global scale. We affect ecosystems, species, oceans, forests, food systems, and the conditions future generations will inherit. This reality invites a new level of awareness, not only about what we are capable of doing, but about the relationship we wish to have with life itself.

We have the right to live and flourish. We have the right to clean air, clean water, healthy ecosystems, and the opportunity to experience the richness and beauty of the living world. We have the right to belong, not only within society, but within the larger web of life of which we are a part.

But rights and responsibilities exist together.

Every generation receives gifts from those who came before and leaves conditions for those who follow. Whether we are aware of it or not, our choices ripple outward. The food we consume, the systems we support, the products we buy, and the ways we treat people, animals, and the natural world all become part of a larger story.

In recent years, initiatives such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals have reflected humanity's growing awareness that our well-being is inseparable from the well-being of future generations and the living systems upon which we depend. They are one example of a broader realization that our responsibilities extend beyond the present moment.

This learning is not only environmental. It is deeply human.

Throughout my years in the funeral profession, I was reminded of something both simple and profound: none of us stay forever.

I attended thousands of funerals with people in grief. Different cultures, beliefs, and religions. Different stories, backgrounds and ages.

And one reality remained constant.

We all return to life.

Maybe this is a reason I have come to appreciate life more deeply. Because life does not last forever.

Life is precious.

When we recognize that our time here is limited, questions begin to change. We become less concerned with what we can take from life and more interested in what we can contribute to it. We begin to see ourselves not as owners of the world, but as temporary participants within something far larger than ourselves.

This is where life becomes a form of istima.

Sometimes humanity learns through consequences. Pollution teaches. Resource depletion teaches. Conflict teaches. The suffering we create often reveals where we have yet to mature.

Yet life also teaches through wonder, beauty, connection, and appreciation. A child, a forest, a bird in flight, a whale crossing an ocean, a garden in bloom, or a simple act of kindness can remind us that we belong to something much larger than ourselves.

Over time, I have come to believe that one of the great maturities of our species is learning that we are neither masters of life ... nor separate from it.

We are participants within it.

The more deeply we understand this, the more naturally dignity expands beyond ourselves, beyond our immediate relationships, and beyond our societies. It expands toward life itself.

**This is the istima of life:
remembering that we belong to something larger than ourselves.**

Summary & Invitation

Reflecting on these seven principles, what strikes me most is not how different they are, but how deeply connected they have always been.

The body influences our emotions. Our emotions influence our thoughts. Our thoughts shape how we use power. Power affects how we communicate. Communication influences our relationships, our communities, and our societies. And all of it unfolds within the larger living world of which we are a part.

This is why I became so fascinated by these questions in the first place.

Over the years, whether working in leadership, supporting organizations through change, studying human behavior, sitting beside grieving families, or simply observing life, I kept noticing the same pattern. We are learning. Sometimes individually. Sometimes through relationships. Sometimes through organizations, communities, and societies. And maybe, in our own imperfect way, we are learning as a species.

Not always gracefully or quickly.

But learning nonetheless.

Sometimes learning arrives through curiosity, dialogue, discovery, and new understanding. Sometimes it arrives through hardship, disappointment, conflict, or loss. Yet beneath the different circumstances, I repeatedly observed the same movement: life inviting us to expand our perspective, deepen our understanding, and mature in how we relate to ourselves, one another, and the world around us.

This is what I call *istima*.

What gives me hope is that we are living at a remarkable moment in human history.

Future generations will inherit not only our technologies, but also our cultures, institutions, assumptions, and ways of relating to one another.

For the first time, humanity can see itself with a clarity never before possible. We can learn from cultures we have never visited, hear perspectives we may never have encountered, and collaborate across borders, traditions, and generations. We can see both our differences and our interconnectedness more clearly than ever before.

Yet many of the questions before us remain timeless.

- How do we live well together?
- How do we use power wisely?
- How do we care for ourselves, one another, and the generations that follow?
- How do we participate in life with dignity?

I do not believe there is a single answer to these questions. We are far too diverse for that. Different cultures carry different wisdom. Different experiences reveal different insights. Different perspectives illuminate different parts of reality.

Rather than seeing this diversity as a problem, I have come to see it as one of humanity's greatest strengths. The challenge is not that we see the world differently. The challenge is learning how to listen, learn, and collaborate despite those differences.

The Human Constitution is therefore not offered as a final answer, a doctrine, or a system of belief. It is a framework for reflection and dialogue. A reminder that rights and responsibilities belong together, and that maturity is not a destination but an ongoing process of learning.

When I look at humanity, I certainly see our challenges. I see conflict, suffering, division, and short-sightedness. Yet I also see extraordinary courage, creativity, compassion, resilience, and wisdom. I see people helping strangers. I see communities rebuilding after hardship. I see individuals learning, changing, and growing throughout their lives.

I see we are a species that is still becoming. This is not to become the same or agree on everything. This is not to create a perfect world.

Maybe that is the real invitation of The Human Constitution to participate more consciously in our shared human journey.

To remember our dignity, honor both our rights and responsibilities, and continue learning from life and from one another.

The future is still unfolding.

Let us meet it with curiosity, courage, and dignity.

*We are born with rights.
We mature into responsibilities.*

About the Author

Maria Dolores is a sociologist, futurist, global speaker, recipient of the Ambassador for World Peace Award (2023), and Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters.



For more than twenty-five years, she has worked in leadership development, human resources, crisis management, organizational culture, recruitment, and organizational transformation across both the private and public sectors. Her work has focused on helping individuals, teams, and organizations navigate change, growth, and human development.

A defining chapter of her life came through six years in the funeral profession, where she participated in more than 1,500 funeral ceremonies and personally helped prepare over 3,000 individuals for their final farewell. Working alongside families from Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, and secular traditions offered a unique perspective on both the diversity of human experience and the common humanity that connects us all.

Together with her friend and mentor Göran Janson, these experiences contributed to her first book, *A State of Grace – Human Rights and Human Obligations* (2015), which became the foundation for what would later evolve into *The Human Constitution*.

Over the following decade, Maria continued developing these ideas through professional work, study, observation, conversation, and lived experience. Gradually, the framework expanded from a reflection on rights and responsibilities into a broader exploration of dignity, human maturity, and our shared future.

Today, Maria's work focuses on *The Renaissance of Dignity* and *The Human Constitution*, a human-centered framework exploring how individuals, organizations, societies, and future generations can navigate accelerating technological, social, and environmental change with greater dignity, responsibility, and maturity.

Drawing from sociology, leadership, human development, and futures thinking, her work explores one central question:

How can humanity mature as rapidly as the world it is creating?

Through speaking, writing, media projects, and The Human Contract Foundation, she seeks to contribute to a future where technological advancement is matched by human maturity, and where rights and responsibilities evolve together.

At the heart of her work is a simple belief:

***We are born with rights.
We mature into responsibilities.***
