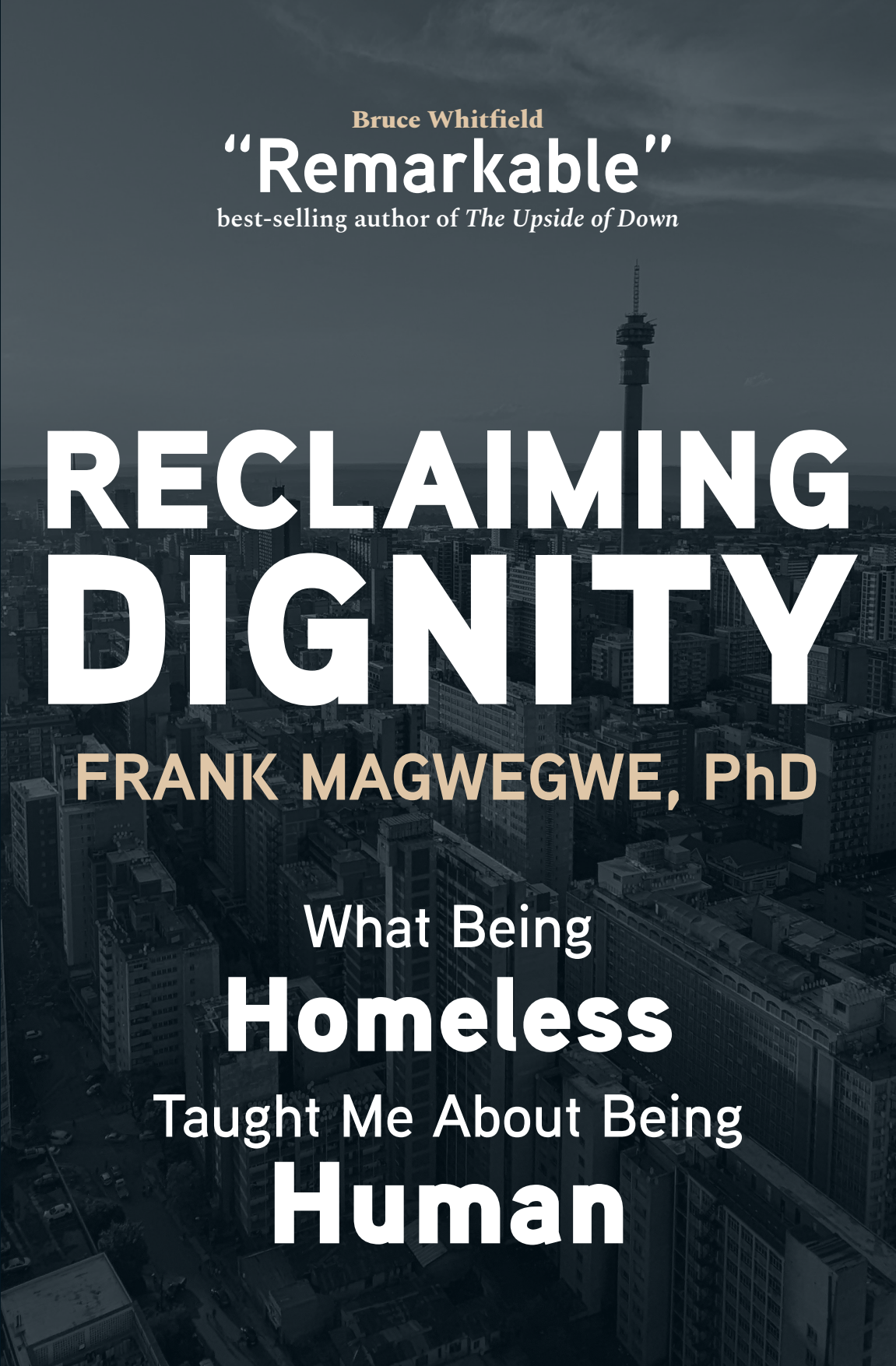


An aerial, high-angle photograph of a city skyline, likely Toronto, with the CN Tower visible in the background. The image is in grayscale and serves as the background for the book cover.

Bruce Whitfield
“Remarkable”
best-selling author of *The Upside of Down*

RECLAIMING DIGNITY

FRANK MAGWEGWE, PhD

What Being
Homeless
Taught Me About Being
Human

PART I



Before I Understood What
It Meant to Be Human

Chapter 1: An Unforeseen Future

My life, like that of many young adults, was shaped by quiet assumptions — that effort would be rewarded, that stability would build on itself, and that setbacks were temporary interruptions rather than turning points.

Being unemployed at the age of 20 in 1992, instead of being at university, felt like one such interruption. Having completed high school in 1991 with a Matric exemption, I was convinced this was merely a delay — something that would pass quickly before I continued becoming who I thought I was meant to be. I focused on progress, contribution, and a future that felt both earned and inevitable. I did not yet know how fragile those assumptions were, or how a life can shift from forward motion to uncertainty without warning.

It was not a sudden free fall, but a gradual decline.

I searched relentlessly for work, convinced that effort alone would be enough, but with every visit, every enquiry, every hopeful approach, the answer remained the same: there is no work here. Sometimes it was spoken, but more often, it was written bluntly on signs at factory gates: NO JOBS. Over time, those words became harder to bear than the physical exhaustion of walking from place to place.

Over several months of frantic job searching in and around Uitenhage — now Kariega — in the Eastern Cape, rejection became a daily companion. Rejection stings. Being judged or dismissed without ex-

planation is painful, yet I had to keep going, day after day, carrying the weight of each “NO” while trying to remain hopeful. Slowly, rejection began to turn into something else: shame.

I started to believe there must be something wrong with me, otherwise, why could I not find work when I was willing to do any job, no matter how menial? Three months into my search, I could no longer bear the signs at factory gates as I moved from place to place on foot, desperate for any opportunity. I was searching for work the way a thirsty person searches for water. Between searches, tears were shed — not from weakness, but from the absence of answers. At my lowest point, no one wanted to hear my story or give me a chance to prove myself through work.

I remember wondering why people could be so unkind — why signs had to replace conversation, why no one would simply listen. I had a story. I had not chosen unemployment. Something had happened to me, not because of a lack of effort, but despite it.

My darkest moment came at the Volkswagen plant on Algoa Road in Uitenhage. I stood outside what I believed was a “big” company — a place that surely had space for someone who was eager, able, and willing to work. I remember thinking that I would not even cost them much. I was ready.

After yet another rejection, I simply stood there and cried. Not quietly, but openly and uncontrollably — the kind of crying that surprises even the person doing it. Fellow job seekers noticed and asked if I was all right, but I could not answer. All I knew was the fear that settled in as I realised, once again, that I had failed to secure work. Even worse, I no longer recognised who I was becoming.

The journey that followed would forever change how I understood what it means to be human.