DIGNITY AND DEPENDENCE:

The Ambiguity of Inherent Human Worth
A Sermon Delivered for
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, March 9, 2008
The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

Readings: "Loneliness" Ric Masten
"Ripples"
from *Going Out Dancing*, Skinner House, 2008

That famously laconic New Englander, President Calvin Coolidge, is said to have gone off to church one Sunday without Mrs. Coolidge, who had a cold and stayed at home. When he returned, Silent Cal was asked by his wife what the s sermon had been about. "Sin," he replied. "Well, that doesn't tell me very much!" Mrs. Coolidge then protested. "Just what did the preacher have to say about sin?" Cal answered, "He was against it."

So . . . if someone asks what I preached about today, tell them, "Dignity," and then add, "He was ambivalent about it." because I am—rather strongly.

On the one hand, there is probably no idea that we Unitarian Universalists are more fiercely committed to affirming and promoting than what our denominational statement of principles and purposes calls "the inherent worth and dignity of every person."

It's a concept clearly rooted in the religious idea that each and every one of us is made in the image of God. It's a radical idea. It led our religious forebears to fight against slavery, to advocate for the full equality of women, and to spread universal, free public education, public health and social welfare.

And in secular form, "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family," as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights puts it, "is [declared] the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world." It was the crimes against humanity and human dignity experienced during World War II, that provoked: "We the peoples of the United Nations, determined . . . to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person," to form a UN.

But note: this is an affirmation, a faith—rather than an empirical, observable attribute of every person, at every moment, isn't it? For who among us hasn't occasionally muttered, "Why, that worthless so and so!" Or, like the human rights advocate Samantha Power the other day, in an over-zealous moment, calling Senator Clinton "a monster," reacting to her criticisms of Senator Obama. Because there is always a temptation to demonize those whom we find less than fully respectful of our dignity, or the worth of those we care for.

Because there seems to be a paradox involved in the concept of dignity. If moral humility is a virtue, as I think it is, then anyone who has that virtue should be very reluctant to

conclude that some other human being is mere scum, or a monster, and unworthy of a place in the moral community. The great Israeli moral philosopher, Avishai Margalit, suggests "that we understand the internal sense of respect for humans as humans basically through the negative sense," as when humans are humiliated, and treated as mere tools, or animals, or sub-humans. But because we understand what humiliation is better than we understand the idea of positive human dignity, he urges that we keep our ethics and policies humble—aimed primarily at preventing humiliation rather than on promoting dignity. And yet we are subjected still to debates, and vetoes, on using torture!

The other day I heard NPR interview the author a book about FDR and the New Deal in America. With 25% unemployment, and Dust Bowl farmers and kids nearly starving, the first step was direct relief—soup lines. But Harry Hopkins soon convinced Roosevelt that government handouts destroyed dignity, and what was really needed were real jobs. Hence the WPA, putting people to work on parks, public buildings, and roads; and Social Security, as social insurance, not welfare, for the retired and disabled.

But for the last thirty years there has been an increasingly successful ideological attack, based on libertarian ideas of universal self-reliance and "dignity," on all such social programs, as just encouraging dependency. What I want to point out this morning is that we all enter life dependent on others, and, unless we meet with a sudden death, we typically leave this life that way as well. Dependent. And all through our lives, if we are not too prideful to see, we are all inter-dependent. The real moral community is one that helps us manage to maintain both our dignity and our natural dependence on one another.

I think of the woman in my Dallas congregation who, when she needed a wheelchair and nursing care toward the end of her life, thought it was incompatible with her dignity to be seen in that condition by her friends. So she stopped coming to church, although she had been a beloved member for many years, with lots of people there who loved her deeply. Until I insisted on talking not only to her but also to her daughter, about how we missed her. The next Sunday, there she was back at church, in her wheelchair, her daughter pushing, saying, "I jes' told 'er, 'Mamma, John's right: it's false pride, not dignity! We're goin!'" And so they did, every Sunday, almost to the end.

Because cutting through our pretensions to dignity involves both admitting our human vulnerability, unpretentiously, and seeing that our worth isn't less for our being in need. Recently I read about the great African American scientist, George Washington Carver, going before a Congressional committee back in the 1920s that was holding hearings on agriculture in the South. He had research to present about peanuts as restoring nutrients to the worn-out fields and about their food value. But when he appeared, Southern white Congressmen were shockingly disrespectful, saying it was "beneath their dignity" to have to listen to a black man, and making racist remarks about watermelon and peanuts. Carver later wrote that he was tempted to preserve his own dignity and get up and leave. But then he thought of all the black sharecroppers in need and heard himself praying, "God, we're all your children. These are now acting childishly. So as I'm also your child, help me not forget my worth." He then gave a presentation so powerful and engaging that the committee kept voting him longer and longer extensions of time. When he ended,

they applauded and voted out the funds for his proposal—all because he knew the difference between false dignity and his own worth.

In the early Dylan song with which we started today, a brittle young man leaves saying, "I once loved a woman, a child I'm told; I gave her my heart but she wanted my soul." What? Was he afraid of her dependency? or afraid of commitment and of settling down? Another ambiguity! How much wiser, mature, he seems when he later sings of learning to "lay down one's weary tune/ and rest [one's self] 'neath the strength of strings/ No voice can hope to hum."

In fact, I think that poets often help us cut through the ambiguities of human pride and human worth. I think now of my friend Ric Masten, poet, troubadour, songwriter and minister, whose voice, he'd be the first to admit, is almost as gritty as Bob Dylan's. About forty years ago, Ric was first sent out by the Unitarian Universalists to be a speaker on college campuses, using songs and "talking poems" to cut through more pretentious approaches to philosophy and spirituality and expose its human core.

Self-educated, having flunked out of five colleges himself, Ric finally had the *chutzpah* to say to the denomination, in effect, "Now either what you have sent me out to do on your behalf is ministry, and I should be recognized as a minister—or the reason that I have been invited to give services in literally hundreds of your churches is that I'm just an entertainer, and you need me because you yourselves find your services so boring! One or the other; just tell me which!" So they made him a minister—just before I became one. And we've been friends and colleagues ever since.

Ric's way of talking about his human and personal vulnerabilities in his poems over the years has sometimes been derided by some of our more conventional colleagues as "undignified" for a cleric, since he has talked openly about everything from moments of suicidal depression to his hypochondria, from learning disabilities to marital problems, from youthful foolishness to mid-life angst to the indignities of the aging process.

Nearly a decade ago now, Ric was diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer and chose the radical procedure medically called "bilateral orchiectomy" over a chemical castration, and wrote a remarkable poem that begins, "never could/ look up words in the dictionary/ for a high school assignment/ writing an autobiography/ I called myself a unique person/ scribbled in the margin/ the teacher's correction fairly chortled/ "unique" not "eunuch"/ how could he have known that one day I would actually become a misspelling."

But such self-deprecating humor is—well, just Ric! His fellow sufferers from the disease have named him "the Poet Laureate of Prostate Cancer," in appreciation for his ministry, which often brilliantly balances realism about our human vulnerabilities with the kind of humor that makes people feel less alone, and more capable of hope.

As our mutual friend, the Rev. Steve Edington, writes in his introduction to a new book of Ric's poems, "the fine line between joy and hope, and tragedy and loss, is [perhaps] best expressed in Ric's signature song and poem, 'Let It Be a Dance.' It was written . . .

years ago in the wake of a horrible tragedy—a senseless automobile accident—that took the lives of several high school students and their young dance teacher . . . . [Ric wrote it] to encourage one of the survivors not to give up on her dream of becoming a dancer, while it was still uncertain whether she would ever walk again." The words invite us to both "share the laughter" and "bare the pain." As though cutting through every pretension and false dignity is the only way, somehow, to know our true and enduring human worth.

A week ago I got an email from their daughter Jerri saying that Ric's wife Billie Barbara is recovering from a fall in a rehabilitation facility and his latest tests show brain tumors. "We're going to love and embrace each other and enjoy all the time we can squeeze out," she wrote. No more treatments. Just love and good food. Dad's spirits are good. He's not worrying. He's dancing. He wants you to have these two poems. They'll be in [his new] book, *Going Out Dancing*." I read one earlier. Now let's sing the other. Because it shows we must both learn to follow and learn to lead, to know our inherent human dignity and worth, and our dependency and need, all through our lives, for one another, and for love. Amen.

Closing Hymn 311 *Let It Be A Dance* Ric Masten

Let it be a dance we do
May I have this dance with you?
Through the good times
And the bad times too
Let it be a dance

Let a dancing song be heard
Play the music, say the words
And fill the sky with sailing birds
And let it be a dance
Learn to follow learn to lead
Feel the rhythm, fill the need
To reap the harvest plant the seed
And let it be a dance!

Everybody turn and spin
Let your body learn to bend
And like a willow with the wind
Let it be a dance
A child is born the old must die
A time for joy a time to cry
So take it as it passes by
And let it be a dance!

The morning star comes out at night
Without the dark there is no light
And if nothing's wrong then nothing¹s right
So let it be a dance

Let the sun shine, let it rain.
Share the laughter, bare the pain
And round and round we go again
So let it be a dance!

Benediction — Dance Benediction — Ric Masten

Yes, let it be a dance. Let life be a dance
Because we dance . . . to dance/ not to go anywhere
And because within the dance
We move easily with the paradox
Knowing that for every step forward
There must be a step back
And anything else would have us marching
away from the music.

Readings

The readings are taken not from the Journal listed, which first inspired this theme today, but rather from a volume by Unitarian Universalist troubadour-minister Ric Masten, called *Going Out Dancing*. The first is a poem called "Loneliness."

standing by a highway
waiting for a ride
a bitter wind is blowing
keeps you cold inside
a line of cars is passing
no one seems to care
you look down at your body
to be sure you are there

sitting in a hotel
staring at the wall
with cracks across the ceiling
and silence in the halls
you open up the window
and turn the TV on
then you go down to the lobby
but everybody's gone

and this is loneliness
the kind that I have known
if you've had times like these
my friend
you're not alone

so you leave the empty city
and go down to the shore

you're aching to discover
what you're looking for
the beaches are deserted
in the morning time
a solitary figure you walk
the water line

come upon a tide-pool
and stand there peering in
and when you touch the water
the circles do begin
they lead to where a seabird
lies crumpled on the sand
so you take a single pebble
and hold it in your hand

and this is loneliness
another kind I've known
if you've had times like these
my friend...
you're not alone

you come back up the beaches
at the end of day
and see how all
your footprints
have been washed away
no ... nothing is forever
we are born to die
so may I say I love you
before I say good-bye

I must say I love you
before I say good-bye

And from the foreword that same volume, by the Rev. Stephen Edington, Minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashua, NH, and from another poem, "Ripples."

"I was recently asked to officiate at a funeral for a person I did not know, who had passed away while living in a local homeless shelter. It's always a challenge to plan a service like this, to somehow speak meaningfully about someone I've never me. As I worked on the funeral I [suddenly] though of . . . a poem by Ric Masten . . . "Ripples," that tells of being in a situation similar to mine:

"Although/ I didn't know the deceased/ I am a minister
and so would have said this/ at the memorial service.

First I’d say his name/ and then I’d say/ that he was old enough to say/ I am!
Therefore/ he most certainly was!
The proof of it gathers before me/ in them/ who had known him first hand,
in them who were more than they might have been/ because of his being.

Again I’d say his name/ and say/ that even I who had never met him
Had met him—there in them/ that day

A pebble/ does not enter a pond/ without a ripple circling out
and in time/ touching every shore.

We are all—every one of us/ in this thing together.

Again/ I’d say his name and then/ I’d say that he has been!
Now this is certain/ and he, having been/ must always be

For nothing is lost/ nothing is wasted/ No one
Not one of us is that/ Alone