

No Such Thing as a Sure Thing

My sermon last Sunday was my riff on Robert Hunter and Jerry Garcia's poem and song *Ripple*. I'm playing off of yet another poem today with the poet being a little closer to home this time. I speak of Ric Masten who now is best known in UU circles as the writer and composer of the song *Let It Be A Dance* as found in our gray hymnal.

Above and beyond the gift of that one wonderful song, Ric had quite a remarkable troubadour ministry throughout a wide scope our UU movement as the Rev. Ric Masten. From the late 1960s on he probably appeared in at least half of our UU congregations, as well as at numerous other UU gatherings and General Assemblies, bringing his magical ministry of poetry and song. He operated out of his home in California's Big Sur country just south of Carmel; and his home congregation was the UU Church of Monterey and Carmel.

I first met Ric very briefly at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City in the early 1990s when I was chaperoning a youth group trip there and he was doing a concert. This was back in the days when I could still sleep on church floors. I didn't know he'd be performing at All Souls, and the group I was helping chaperone had another place to go that evening. So ours was just a quick "nice to meet you, love your work" kind of meet-up.

I had opportunity to reconnect with Ric several years later at his Big Sur home and we hit it off quite well. I arranged for him to sing and speak at the Nashua UU church a year or so later on what proved to be his last East Coast swing, as by then his troubadour ministry was winding down. I had just gotten out my book on the Beat Generation writers then, and Ric had read it. As we were having breakfast on the morning he was leaving he somewhat jokingly said, "That was a pretty good book, Steve; why don't you do one about me?"

"Somewhat joking" turned into some serious conversation, and after a few more visits to his Big Sur home, and my tracking down as many people as I could who had known and worked with him for their input, we finally got the book out: *Troubadour and Poet—The Magical Ministry of Ric Masten*. It's pictured on the cover of your Order of Service for today. We were honored to have the actress, the late Ruby Dee, write the Forward as she was one of those who had crossed paths with Ric in the process of their respective careers.

By the time Ric and I reconnected he'd been given a diagnosis of prostate cancer, and while—for him—it was treatable, it was not curable. It was from his dealing with that diagnosis, and with the ups and downs of his treatment regimens, that he wrote a whole genre of what Ric himself called his "cancer poems." One of them was called *A Word for Survival*, some of which I'll read from momentarily. It's included in a chapter we titled "The Ministry I've Been Preparing for All My Life" in which Ric describes how getting his cancer diagnosis changed the nature and tone of his ministry. Thanks to the internet and to his contacts with a network of various cancer survival groups and organizations,

Ric took his ministry—in his final years—in a new direction. It was at that stage of his life that he and I met and collaborated on our book.

We had a Book Dedication and Signing at the Monterey/Carmel UU Church in January of 2008. Ric was rather frail by then, but he held forth well through two services and a party/reception in his honor afterwards. He died five months later.

Oh yes, the poem. Here are the lines I hold up for today:

Fear--the silent assassin, will bring you to your knees
 While faith can pull Excalibur from stubborn stones with ease.
 The outcome of any illness is never absolute,
 [But] No matter what the odds are the end is always moot.
 It's only in uncertainty that true hope can be found
 And you can bet a sure thing will always let you down.

With respect to those last two lines, which are also our Order of Service quote for today, there are some obvious caveats that need to be stated. Yes, we all have to have what I'll call "operational certainties" in our lives in order to just to get from one day to the next. I live same house in which I've lived for nearly 30 years, and with the woman to whom I've been married for nearly 40 years. I'm assuming that she, and the house, will still be there when I get home this afternoon.

No, we would not be able to function if we were to wake up every morning to nothing but a mish-mash of uncertainty--as if all the parts of our lives that were in place when we went to bed the night before were no longer in place in the morning. We can't live that way. I get that.

What I also get, and what we also know, is how tenuous and fragile those operational certainties--necessary as they are--can be. It's a tenuousness that can range from the merely inconvenient (like maybe I'll get a flat tire on my way home and arrive later than I'd planned) all the way to the painful, tragic, and devastating. Indeed it is the sudden unexpected loss, the crises, or the painful turn of events that remind us of how tissue thin those operational certainties can be at times. Fragile and thin or not, however, we need those operational certainties in place in order to simply make it from one day to the next.

So where, then, is the truth in Ric's lines "It's only in uncertainty that true hope can be found."? Paradoxical as it may sound, those few lines constitute a profound statement of faith. Yes, a statement of faith. Go back from these lines in the poem to some that precede them few lines earlier: "Fear, the silent assassin, will bring you to your knees; while *faith* can pull Excalibur from stubborn stones with ease."

Using some King Arthur imagery, as in pulling the Excalibur sword from the stone, Ric gives us faith as the opposite of fear *and* as the opposite of certainty. He puts in a good word for faith and then goes on to say "a sure thing will always let you down." That could come as a surprise for those who equate having faith with having a sense of

certainty. I'm with Ric, though, in regarding faith as the opposite of certainty. I'll explain it this way:

While I was not raised in a strictly fundamentalist religion, although it was very conservative, I still grew up in a culture where Christian fundamentalism was strong and pronounced. I'll say more on this next Sunday when I offer my personal take on J.D. Vance's book *Hillbilly Elegy*.

What I came to see once I was able to take a few steps back from that milieu and view it from some objectivity, was that fundamentalism--whatever "brand" of religion it may appear in--is essentially a religion of fear, insecurity, and uncertainty. It is a clinging, a kind of desperate clinging, to a literal reading of the Bible--or whatever text one may take as sacred; or a clinging to a specifically delineated set of "God's truths," largely out of fear of what terrible things might happen should one lose, or even loosen, his or her grasp of them.

I won't go so far as to say that this is the case for every single person who considers him or herself a fundamentalist. But when I encounter someone who has to be so insistent that he or she has the unadulterated truth, as summed up in a set of rote precepts, I have to wonder what's behind such insistence. And usually, somewhere deep down, is a deep uncertainty, if not fear, that maybe I don't have it all locked up after all; but rather than admit that I'll keep on insisting on my possession of the complete truth, and I'll congregate with others who feel the same way so I'll feel reinforced in my certitude.

Far be it from me, however, to tell someone they shouldn't have such a stance; it's just that in such a stance I see no real or honest faith at all. Who needs faith, after all, when you have certainty? I happen to think that that kind of certainty is really an illusion, while also knowing that those living by such illusions--as I'm calling them--don't really care what I think; but that's OK.

Faith, as I've come to understand it--and as Ric is using the term in this poem of his--is a willingness to live with uncertainty, to live with the knowledge that an alleged "sure thing" may well let you down at times. It is a willingness to live with mystery and with the unknown, while also trusting in one's abilities to meaningfully probe at mystery and at the unknown, discovering and living out what one can, while still knowing that you'll never quite get the whole thing. In addition faith is the choice to live *as if* certain things are true in the absence of sure knowledge--in the absence of the sure thing that may well let you down. I go back to my work with Ric for an example.

In January of 2007 I spent several days with him at his home in Carmel working on some of the still unfinished parts of our book. While I was there I visited the UU Church in Carmel to see about their hosting the event I mentioned earlier. The Carmel UUs were good to go with the idea. When I passed the news on to Ric his somewhat rueful response was, "Well, I guess this means I'll have to live another year."

With the enthusiastic support of the Carmel UU Church, we planned the event, *as if* it were going to happen. We made it, as already noted, with five months to spare before Ric passed away. When I think about the many things the phrase "journey of faith" can mean, one of the things I recall is those 12 months from January of 2007 until January of 2008, with their mixture of uncertainty and hope, knowing that we couldn't bet on a sure thing. In this case the hopes were fulfilled.

I'll take one more pass now at the poem we've been exploring. Remember, the title is *A Word for Survival*. I haven't told you, yet, what the specific "word" is that Ric offers. The poem, taken in its entirety, is a tribute to a man Ric met as a fellow cancer battler and, for a time, survivor. His name was William Hoyt. By the time Ric wrote the poem Mr. Hoyt had passed away. Here's the part of the poem where Ric writes about his late compadre, Bill Hoyt:

He fought the 'Big C' monster with spunk and attitude
 Another cock-eyed optimist you should *not* conclude.
 He was no Pollyanna; his word no platitude
 To things considered saccharine he could be abrupt and rude.
 In the present day vernacular he was a righteous dude.
 Let's hear it for the man who coined the word "Spiritude!"

That was Ric's, and Bill Hoyt's, word for survival: Spiritude. It's a mix or an amalgam of the words "spirit" and "attitude." Spiritude. Not bad. It speaks to a life stance one can take knowing that hope is found in the ability and willingness to live with uncertainty; and that a sure thing can let you down. It's the same stance I've referred to in other sermons as "trustful agnosticism;" that is to say a willingness to live in the flow of life, and trusting in the direction of that flow, and trusting as well in one's ability to steer your way through that flow--without complete, and ultimate, and once-and-for-all final answers as to what the flow is all about or exactly where it is going. Trustful agnosticism.

Spiritude. It's a trusting attitude towards a life guided by the spirit, or spirits, one calls on. Call that spirit what you will: The human spirit, the life spirit, the spirit of the universe, the spirit of God--whatever feels the most authentic to you.

One more place to go, one more story, before we close for today. The story of how Ric came to write his signature song, *Let It Be a Dance*, is one of both terrible tragedy and deep blessing. I'm going to let him tell it in his own words—as he relayed them to me, and as we recorded it in our book:

“It was one of those horrendous tragedies... (It) took place one December at Carmel High School. A first year teacher offered a course on modern dance, and had 14 young men and women performing like professionals. My two oldest daughters took the course and were a regular part of the troupe. During Christmas vacation the teacher saw that a famous ensemble out of New York City was performing in San Jose, about 80 miles from Carmel. She called up all her students and said that if they were willing to be crowded

during the journey they could go up to San Jose in her VW bus. Both of my daughters wanted to go but they had other holiday engagements scheduled.

“As the carload of dancers was rounding a corner on the way home a drunk driver who had pulled over to the side of the road decided to pull back onto the highway without looking behind him. The VW bus crashed headlong into his car, killing the two front seat passengers, one of whom was the teacher, and a back seat passenger. All the other (young people) in the back seats were seriously injured.

“One of the injured was Barbara Brussell, my daughter Jerri’s best friend at the time. (Her) kneecap was so badly damaged that the doctor doubted that she would ever be able to walk again without a cane, let alone ever dance again. My family and I visited Barbara in the hospital where I made a bet with her. I wagered that she would come dancing up our Big Sur road exactly one year from that day; and I would write the music she would be dancing to.

“The following week, while working in my garden, the entire song arrived. I ran to the house and wrote the lyrics down as fast as I could type. Better still, the words came along with a melody. Barbara Brussell, who became a well-known cabaret singer in New York, did come dancing up our country road exactly a year to the day after the accident, with me singing and playing *Let It Be a Dance*. She was limping—it’s true—but dancing!”

The horrible accident cited in this story is one of the more sobering examples of what I said earlier about how tissue thin, at times, the operational certainties of our lives can be. And one of the outcomes of those terrible tragic losses, was and is a song that has touched and blessed the lives of hundreds, make that thousands, of people.

And no, that does not mean that everything turned out OK in the end for everybody. The families and loved ones of those whose lives were lost in that accident had to live with the pain of those losses for the rest of their lives. It’s just that a thread of blessing, a thread of hope, and a thread of faith and courage to keep on keeping on, did find expression in the midst of a terrible event in which some of the supposed certainties in the lives of those affected by it were suddenly gone.

Let the sun shine
 Let it rain.
 Hug the laughter
 Bare the pain.
 As round and round we go again.
 Let it be a dance.

Let’s sing it together.

Stephen D. Edington
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