

COMMUNITY

On dignity and humility



HOMEFRONT
CONSTANCE
JOHANNESSEN

"Never look down on anybody unless you are helping them up."

Jessie Jackson

It was a day when his longing for history interfaced with his quest for faith.

On his 85th birthday he convinced his family that "just one more time in his life" he would like to attend a service at the King's Chapel in Boston.

A small caravan of family members journeyed north to accompany and physically assist him throughout the day. He was excited, yet during the service he cried when emotionally touched by the poetic aging words spoken by his forefathers in the Book of Common Prayer.

Before exiting the pew, he paused and slowly looked throughout. Upon leaving he shared with the minister the many trips he made over the years and how meaningful this site was to him.

This trip was met with a second request, which was to celebrate his birthday at the Ritz Carlton. Upon entry into the new and changed establishment, the maitre d' welcomed all by saying "We have been waiting for you." In response, the man's humble arthritic posture began to shift upright.

Festivities proceeded and when the cake was presented, even strangers in the restaurant joined the family in singing the traditional birthday song.

Upon leaving, the patrons arose and many unexpectedly shook his hand. They congratulated him for becoming

85 years old. He appeared dignified and humbled in that moment and hesitated to leave.

Now, almost two years later, he can't possibly do the trip. His dignity is challenged daily and his humility speaks volumes louder. The last few years have marginalized his life, diminishing adventures to memories. His world is smaller and few are applauding. He sits in the presence of his books. The dignity he once carried is still within.

What is dignity? It is often defined as the elevation of character and respect, frequently associated with nobility, yet not a necessity. According to Washington Irving, "There is a healthful hardness about real dignity that never dreads contact and communion with others however humble." In a recent "20/20" episode on Queen Elizabeth it

was said that as a young child, she was taught to be both humble and dignified. Her lesson was to embrace ethics, demand respect and status while simultaneously fostering humility. This is truly a challenge worthy of attention and mastery.

As a society, where is our dignity and how does each of us internalize the combined attributes of humility and dignity? Sometimes I feel like I am sitting in the middle of swarming bees. Everyone is so busy doing, yet little effort is centered on building character. It seems that in an attempt to keep one's head above water, people have forgotten how to treat others well.

As a result, I think we are constantly confronted with issues related to bullying, drugs and alcohol addictions, dishonesty, cheating and young

sexually active teens. Have we exchanged competition for character?

More simply, do we teach our children how to be good individuals, as well as the art of competing? Or, in our attempts at building confidence in our children, are we also helping them to deal with frustrations in an ethically based manner?

Dignity is what helps uphold a sense of self. Faced with adversity, challenges and vulnerability, dignity fuels the inner strength to stand up for our beliefs and to handle situations with utmost class. As Henri-Frederic Amiel stated, "There is no respect for others without humility in one's self."

By the middle of our years we have encountered hardships, and humility. It is exactly these experiences that confront and challenge our character. It is frequently the

process of getting through these tough times that can help us understand, respect and connect more fully with others. Our country is composed of individuals who have exemplified sustaining dignity during troubling times: Theodore Roosevelt, Rosa Parks and Helen Keller to identify a few.

So, in the middle of our lives, let us reflect on ways we can uphold character, teach others younger than ourselves the importance of self worth and see the value in individuals less fortunate than ourselves.

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