

From the Desk of Henry Holland

The Dignity of the Disabled

Several weeks ago, a local theologian and educator was the guest preacher in my church. He is an orator and an excellent speaker. During the processional hymn, in which the choir and clergy walk slowly down the long center aisle of my church, this preacher was robed appropriately but was walking unsteadily with a cane. To climb the three steps to our chancel, he secured his balance by holding on to the side of the pulpit. Later in the service he held on to the ornate polished wooden railings in climbing the six or eight steps to the pulpit. Once in the pulpit, he seemed very secure as he had a large podium on which to lean. Multiple Sclerosis is his personal adversary. Perhaps others in the congregation were not as keenly focused on these little triumphs of his physically moving from the reception area of our church sanctuary to the pulpit. I was aware of his little triumphs because I deal with similar “little triumphs” every day. Many of you probably share the same feeling or experience. This preacher could have elected to enter the chancel of my church from the side and avoided the whole processional. He chose not to do that. How often do we choose not to do something just because it might be easier? We probably do this more frequently than we realize. One of my lasting perceptions of this preacher’s physical pilgrimage to the pulpit was that the whole experience evoked indescribable dignity.

How often do the disabled and particularly polio survivors live their lives with dignity while daily achieving little triumphs? I suspect that we don’t talk or give much thought to this concept of dignity. Among those who attend our support group meetings, I often observe this dignity among our members. Most of us are unaware that this dignity may exist.

President Franklin Roosevelt communicated dignity in his public life despite his efforts to hide his disability. Historically, it is sometimes difficult to find details of how FDR moved from one place to another when he was exposed to public view. One such example occurred in August 1941 during his summit meeting with Winston Churchill at sea off the coast of Newfoundland. This was a secret and highly classified meeting that occurred just four months before the USA entered World War II. On Sunday, August 10, a combined worship service was held on the English ship *Prince of Wales*.^{*} The initial meetings of this first summit had been held on the USS *Augusta*, which was FDR’s ship of travel. FDR was present for the worship service, which had been organized by Churchill. How did he get from the USS *Augusta* to the *Prince of Wales*? I found some description in a book by Theodore A Wilson.

“The leading destroyer, USS *McDougal*, her bow level with the *Augusta*’s main deck and *Prince of Wales*’s stern carried Roosevelt to the great British warship. The president was hatless and wore a blue double-breasted suit. Holding a cane in his right hand and aided by Elliott (his son) on his left, he crossed a narrow gangway from *Augusta* to the destroyer, there to receive the salute of a Marine honor guard and band. *McDougal* then made a “Chinese landing” (bow to stern) on *Prince of Wales*. FDR walked slowly along a starboard gangway to the deck, where he was received aboard with full honors. Fifteen

hundred or so men, including approximately 250 United States sailors and Marines, stood at rigid attention for the two national anthems. Roosevelt moved the length of the ship to his place of honor on the quarterdeck. The prime minister, dressed in the uniform of the Royal Yacht Squadron, watched stolidly, although he may have been as surprised and moved by this display of determination as were several of his aides. Captain Yool recalled that “many of us in England had thought that the President was unable to walk at all....One got the impression of great courage and strength of character as he slowly approached the assembled company. It was obvious to everybody that he was making a tremendous effort and that he was determined to walk along that deck even if it killed him.” This may have been the longest walk FDR had attempted since being stricken with polio.”

Certainly this moment displayed the dignity of a disabled President and Commander-in-chief. Many of those who witnessed this event would perish when the *Prince of Wales* was attacked and sunk in the Pacific four months later.

Many of us may be unconscious of our own dignity in living with a nearly life long disability. Whether it be walking or rolling across a room or sidewalk, climbing a few steps, getting out of a chair and trying to stand, or just trying to communicate, we may all go about these simple activities with a quiet and unpretentious dignity. With the new realities of Post-Polio Syndrome, even greater challenges and a higher dignity surrounds us.

References: The First Summit by Theodore A. Wilson, University Press of Kansas, 1991, Pages: 97-98

*Note: The scripture verses that Churchill selected for the worship service were Joshua 1:1-9. Churchill chose these verses with Roosevelt in mind.