

# 15 dignity and risk: a further reflection

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In August of 1970, I guided a group of students in a 'Summer Work Experience and Training' program in mental retardation on a 1000-mile trip across the state of Nebraska. The purpose of this tour was to visit and study various community services for the retarded, and to take the students to one of their work-study assignments which was a summer residential camp for the retarded at Scottsbluff, near the borders with Colorado and Wyoming. On our way, we visited services in the town of North Platte, about two-thirds across the State. There, we also stayed overnight in the homes of parents of the retarded, and of the personnel operating the newly-developed community programs.

During the evening, there was a supper-seminar at which the coordinator of the regional mental retardation services gave a brief address. He read a letter which the director of the local sheltered workshop had just received from a mother whose two sons had perished in a fire which destroyed their home. One of the sons, a severely retarded young mongoloid adult, had been a worker in the workshop. The letter, exactly as written, follows.

Dear Mike & all

I was in North Platte on a monday but the shop was close.

I wanted to thank all of you for every thing you had done for Robert. He was so proud of his job and the ability to do things on his own.

I am very proud of him as he went to the back room to save his brother. He had Donald from the head of the bed to the foot. If he had only a few more minites he would of had Donald out – even tho we know Donald was dead at the time.

I am send ing his one check back as they say it

A version of this paper by Wolf Wolfensberger has been published in *Of human courage and dignity*. MENTAL RETARDATION NEWS, 1970, 19(9), 6. (b)

would not go thru the machine. put the money in your fund so your books will balance.

to day was my first day back at work. It was a long day but I know I have to keep busy. My two boys was my whole life so now I have to start over. My husband is very under standing – was hurt very bad also.

If I can be of any help at any time please feel free to let me know. I feel I proved to the world a re-tarded child has a place in the world and can be a use ful person.

Many thanks for the picture. All of mine were destroyed. I am very thankful we had some taken the Friday night before the Fire. the Church was taking family portait's. So I have some of each boy.

Many thanks for every thing.

as ever

(signature and town of residence)

The check the mother enclosed had been carried by the boy; it was burned at the edges, and that was the reason it would not go through the magnetic check-reading machine. It was for forty-seven cents.

The workshop director then spoke in an almost tear-choked voice; he stated that he would never relinquish this check, that he would keep it as a symbol of the courage of a retarded boy, and that he did not care if his books remained forever unbalanced because of this action.

Our students were deeply moved, and so was I. I was reminded of an early draft of what became the chapter on 'The dignity of risk', written by my friend, Bob Perske, when he was Chaplain at the Kansas Neurological Institute. We so rarely think of the mentally retarded as having certain positive qualities that are basic to humanness, such as courage, even though the ideology of normalization and our perception of the retarded as fully human would tell us that they should generally be expected to share all our human emotions – not merely our negative ones, such as fear. Robert's story reminded me forcefully that there is dignity in risk, and that it is dehumanizing to remove all danger from the lives of the retarded and handicapped. After

all, we take for granted that there is risk and danger in our lives, and the lives of our nonhandicapped children!

Robert could have led a sheltered existence, perhaps in some residential haven for the retarded where no demands are imposed, and where risks are virtually eliminated. There, he might have lived to a ripe old age; but to me, in his charity-inspired and heroic death in the flames, he had found greater dignity.