

Fine: A Story of Acceptance

By Maya Gilmore

A year or two ago, I decided that nothing I did was worth anything, because it was either a product of my genes, which I had no control over, or my environment, which I had no control over. If I hadn't taken art lessons, I would never have been good at art; my good grades were merely a result of equally good genes.

Even now this view is emotionally seductive for me. While I can see how illogical it is when I state it boldly -- "I decided nothing I did was worth anything" -- when I think of it in terms of refuting selfishness and privilege, it's easy to remember why I once believed it.

The most ironic part of my former pity-party worldview was that not only did I believe nothing I did was worth anything, I convinced myself it was *better* that I should believe so: I was, after all, giving others room to shine. Because they hadn't had the same opportunities I had had, obviously, I should value everything they did *more*. This was incredibly arrogant and unfair. I don't think I consciously thought that, but I did unconsciously believe that the opportunities you had in life determined your worth, if not in the usual way that statement is applied. I believed that, because of my privilege, I was worth less as a person; I hadn't had to work as hard to get just as far, and my work determined my value.

I dressed it up. I told myself that it was wrong to believe that my own accomplishments meant anything, because they came from a place of privilege; I told myself that, because what I did was dependent upon where I was in life, and because I wouldn't have done it in a different location, none of it mattered. I was ignoring the value of work, and I was making unfounded assumptions (I had no way of knowing what I would have done in some other place), and, beyond that, I was being hypocritical: while I was perfectly willing to attribute all my own successes to chance, at the same time I still viewed other's accomplishments as, well, accomplishments, not merely the results of the random tides of fate. But nonetheless it would be very simple to slip back into this point of view, and I know why, now: it was an excuse.

It's very simple to live a life where no one at all has inherent worth and dignity, least of all yourself. In this world, no one expects anything of you, and you expect nothing of anyone else, because no one is worthy of respect; everyone is despicable and therefore nothing you do matters. In a world where nothing I did was worth anything, life was very easy: because I was a pitiful, useless person and everything good that had ever happened to or by me was a mere result of chance, I might as well have given up and relied on chance for the rest of my life. After all, it had served me well enough up until then.

But this was ultimately a selfish excuse. Still, to this day, I can't always convince myself that I have inherent worth and dignity, without exceptions or conditions. Though I love praise, I hate hearing it: I specifically asked that my introduction be as low key as possible, and whenever someone praises my artwork, my instinct is to point out flaws rather than to gracefully accept

their praise. I've struggled against that instinct for a long time, and one of my most faithful weapons in that particular war are the words of my former art teacher, Maryke Nel. She hated it when people refused to accept praise, because she thought pointing out flaws was merely a way of forcing others to reassure you, to praise you more, and I've always thought that rang true. In fact, recently I wrote this poem about the phenomena:

Thank yous are stuffed animals

You're welcomes, tides and seas

But sorry is a sharp-edged knife

Wrapped in courtesy.

They rip it from your throat,

Without it there, you bleed,

But sorry is a surgeon's knife,

Not a jagged reed:

With each cut a scar forms

Soon, a channel's there,

Each time the knife lets less blood,

Each time, the pain more rare.

Soon, you're making sorry

A weapon in your hands.

Soon the blood's mere backup

For your most vicious of demands:

Make them pay for your pain

Make them sorry too.

Drill the knife through their ears

Till it lodges true:

Put a plea in their throats

A guilty dark reprise:

Force the knife upon them

Til they 'pologize.

If I am a miserable and unworthy creature, then the world should help me. A helpless, half-drowned puppy on the street deserves to be pampered and saved, and secretly I think a lot of us want to be saved. Saving yourself may have some measure of glory, but it's difficult to plod through the rain and the hail without victimizing yourself. It's much, much easier to simply sit down and cry in the mud about how awful you are, about how nothing you do is worth anything at all. Making yourself a knight, with inherent worth and dignity as your armor, is so much more difficult than sitting in a tower, lamenting your fate. Because, if you're truly worthy of respect, then you should be making changes that mean you deserve that respect. If I believe that I am unconditionally dignified, I should be doing more than wallowing in self-pity. From the perspective of inherent worth and dignity, I want to live up to what I know I must be capable of, because otherwise, why would I have inherent worth and dignity at all? Like a favorite teacher, the best examples of inherent worth and dignity force us to break down our own boundaries and go further than we ever thought was possible.

On the other hand, none of my artwork is perfect, and it can be hard to accept praise when you don't feel worthy of love. And that's okay. Sometimes people do offer excessive praise, and sometimes my artwork really isn't that good. But it's not my place to say their opinion is wrong. My parents, to this day, love a still life I drew when I was a freshman. And I'll admit it's good. At the time, in fact, it was the best artwork I'd ever made, and I was proud to have done something so detailed and so pretty. But today I know that it could be much better. I was unwilling to stray from reality in order to push the values of the blacks and the whites, and so in the middle of the drawing objects blend into each other. Knowing that it's flawed, it bugs me that they hold it up as so beautiful: why do they not see what I see? I could do better! And yet, it's arrogant and unfair

to say that their opinion, that my drawing is beautiful, is worth less than my opinion, that my drawing is beautiful but also very flawed. It's unfair to suggest that what they believe doesn't matter because it contradicts what I believe. Sometimes, maybe you're not worthy of love, but that doesn't mean that others have no right to give it to you.

Another reason it can be hard to accept praise is that it feels more like saying "I'm better than you" than celebrating what you've done. I don't want to be prideful, and there have been times, when I am sad and lonely that other people expressing joy over what they've done does make me feel unworthy of love, undignified, un-everything. But even when I was miserable, I would never have blamed my situation on those people's happiness; my feelings were not a result of them. In addition, it's again arrogant to assume you can know how people feel about your work. It's unfair not to explore your potential because you fear it will hurt others. You shouldn't hold yourself back for other people, because it does them more harm than good. I can assure you, no one appreciates your humbleness; they probably don't even notice.

Ultimately, inherent worth and dignity is the most difficult of all our principles not only because the other principles are built on its back, but because it's an obligation. It's not easy to believe in your own worth and dignity; in fact it's nearly impossible to force yourself to believe that you matter, unconditionally, let alone to think that of anyone else. And that's because admitting that you are worthy is admitting that you could be doing so much more. But it's also admitting that what you are doing, right now, is beautiful. From my lonely world where nothing I did mattered, none of my artwork or my writing or even just my presence meant anything. I could vanish from that world, and it would not miss me; I had done nothing to help it, I had simply existed in an advantageous position. A princess in a tower is nothing more nor less than a shiny medal. Sleeping Beauty could be replaced with a blow-up doll and the story wouldn't really change. Inherent worth and dignity means that we have an obligation to do the best we can, because we are worthy of so much; it's unfair to hold that back because we believe we're weak. We need inherent worth and dignity, because we need people who are willing to go out in the rain and the muck and accomplish something.

But our first principle doesn't just say "The Inherent Worth and Dignity of You". It's the inherent worth and dignity of every single person in the whole wide world. To be honest, for me the first part is more of a problem. I've never had that much trouble believing that others are beautiful; just look at what they've done! We've made so much, in this world of ours.

But 'inherent' doesn't refer to actions, so my admiration of beautiful writers or devilishly skilled engineers doesn't make the cut. It's easy to celebrate what others have done, because it is done; it is not another tally mark on the endlessly growing list of Things to Do. And, if I'm being entirely honest, I have as much trouble with the inherent worth and dignity of every person as the next inherently worthy person. It's just that my problems with my own self-worth rather drown the other-people issues out. I think this problem, our inability to believe that others are inherently worthy of respect, comes down to the same framework that I constructed in relation to ourselves. If we are inherently worthy, then that means we should be doing beautiful things. And if we truly believe that someone else is inherently worthy of respect, that means we expect that they will be doing those beautiful things, because that's what inherently dignified people do. It's a basic

equation: you give them their trust, and they give you back something: perhaps a kind word in the hallway, or a hug when you're tired, or half of a group paper.

But the problem is, we aren't always primed to act as inherently worthy people. We can't say that a lack of a beautiful work of art means believing that a person is not worthy any more than we can say that admiring a beautiful work of art means believing that the artist is worthy, but it's hard. If you place your trust into every single person you meet, you're bound to be disappointed again and again and again, because an inherently worthy and dignified person would be at their absolute best all of the time. At every moment, they would offer all of themselves; they would never unwind, they would never take any time for themselves, they would always be there for the world –

And therein lies the problem. Inherent worth and dignity is an obligation. But we can't always be our best selves; by definition, at that point 'best' would become 'mediocre'. If we believe that everyone is inherently worthy and dignified, then we must also believe that they are at their best one hundred percent of the time, and that's a recipe for disappointment.

Ironically, another issue that stands in the way of appreciating other's worth and dignity is the thought that we *should* appreciate other's worth and dignity: we should know the way forward without instructions or directions or help. And then when we get lost, we blame ourselves, because we're supposed to be strong, and we're supposed to know the way forward.

But we can't always be strong, and there's a better path. It lies through weakness. In our culture, we believe that we should be strong all of the time, and that others should be strong all of the time, and that it's wrong and awful and bad if we are not. Crying is something to be ashamed of, and our pain should be balled up tight in our chests and never shown to anyone. Feelings are an inconvenience, and we should know the way.

From a perspective of inherent worth and dignity, this simply does not make sense. We cannot believe that weakness makes us worth less, because it puts conditions on something that was supposed to be 'inherent'. If our worth and dignity is inherent, it doesn't matter if we're suffering, and it doesn't even matter if we're crying in the mud on the side of the road, or even if we're sitting in a tower, sleeping a hundred years away. We are still beautiful, and we still matter, because our souls are our souls and because *inherently* we are worthy of love, of respect, of this world.

Strength through weakness seems like a paradox or a contradiction, even in the context of my own talk. I told you we shouldn't be princesses, waiting helplessly for our knights in shining armor; we should go out and fight our demons to the ground. But there is no contradiction. It's just that life is a balancing act. We can't always be strong, and our artwork is not always good, and sometimes we just need someone to save us. Rapunzel, in *Tangled*, was trapped in a tower she could have left any time because she needed someone to help her find her way. That doesn't mean she couldn't have found her way out on her own, or that when she did, it was any less amazing; it just meant she was weak, and she needed help.

How, then, do we apply weakness to others and to ourselves? With ourselves, it's relatively simple, which is saying something because it's still not easy. Negotiating the boundaries of where confidence becomes pride and pinpointing the place where humbleness becomes unhealthy; navigating when you're just searching for sympathy versus when you just need to curl up in your bed and cry is incredibly difficult, and I have no real pointers there. You will have to find your own way through that particular maze. But I can tell you this: even if you're wrong, and you push yourself too far or not far enough; even if taxes are due or you have to give a sermon in the morning and it's almost eleven and you're really tired; even if you make a thousand and one mistakes and then a million more, no one can take your inherent worth from you – even you. In the end, we're our harshest critics, and we're slowest to forgive ourselves, because it means allowing that sometimes, we're wrong. But even if we don't always see it, we are always inherently worthy and dignified.

With others, then, it's just a matter of accepting what comes; whether someone hugs you in the hallway or flips you off in the road, ideally the matter does not concern you: that's a reflection of their mental state, not yours. But acceptance is more difficult than it sounds. On the other hand, in some ways, it's very simple to believe in the inherent worth and dignity of others. You should, after all; I've been coached practically since birth on The Golden Rule and sharing, which all come from the basic faith that everyone else is a person, too, however hard that is to believe. In some ways, though, this is self interest only. “Do unto others as you would have done unto you” is one of the most selfish statements of all time. And that's okay. Just as we can't always be strong, we can't always believe in people in a deep and meaningful way. If you can't bring yourself to believe that Hitler was inherently worthy of respect, nothing is going to happen to world, or to your morals, unless that's a problem for you. Ninety percent of our time is spent judging ourselves and worrying, rather than either changing things we want to change or accepting them the way we are. “Should” is one of the most dangerous words in the human language, because it's a judgment call without any backup. It's like a firework – it'll hurt you if it's fired close enough, but ultimately it's just a pretty light show, and changes nothing on its own. And so I say this, with supreme irony: you should not listen to shoulds.

But if we can manage to believe in our own inherent worth, others are easier; both come from a place of peace. If you know that in your heart you're trying your best and you are worthy of love, that means others must be worthy enough to give it. You don't offer an enemy a seat at your birthday party; any gift from them would be an insult. To give is also a privilege. And, from a purely logical standpoint, it would make sense that they are also worthy of love, simply because for all that every snowflake is different, when they're covering the ground they look a lot alike. The things that make us worthy of love, which, when I think of it, has always just come down to 'because you are the person that you are', are so universal that, if we can accept that we are worthy of love, others must be as well.

Inherent worth and dignity, then, is a gift. If you believe that someone is worthy of love, you are sending out warmth into a void which you cannot know will ever repay your debt. But we hope, because if we can love ourselves, then maybe others can love us too; and if they can love us then we can love them back. Because of blind faith, or the joy of giving, or simply because we can. If we're coming from a perspective where we respect and love ourselves already, it's easier not to hold our affection close to our heart, as if fearing someone will steal it from us. Love only

multiplies, but it's terrifying to let go of the dregs you have in a blind leap, with only hope that someone will catch you. When you trust your own inherent worth and dignity, you have a platform to stand on; you're tethered in, and you will not fall into arms so desperately hungry for something like respect that they'll eat your own.

Inherent worth and dignity is a matter of peace and acceptance, and peace and acceptance are nearly impossible to internalize. At least for me, when I think of doing something new, it is always an action or a battle – but peace requires the opposite approach. Acceptance can't be a goal, because then you're fighting yourself, and the moment you start fighting you've already defeated yourself. And that, too, is a reason this principle is so incredibly difficult. Inherent worth and dignity is not a call to arms; it's a call to lay down your weapons but to keep marching nonetheless.

I don't have any easy answers. All I have, really, is this: this talk is too short and has thousand contradictions and a million mistakes, and I am too tired to give it, and it's wrong of me to not have done this before I did. And I don't care, because I am inherently worthy and dignified. And when my parents yell at me, for making so many mistakes, for being so imperfect, sometimes I will hate them, and sometimes I will hate them when they're just frustrated, even though when I'm frustrated, I know I do exactly the same thing for less cause. And I don't care, because I am inherently worthy and dignified, and so are they, even if I don't always see it. And so my answer is this, the easiest and the most complicated answer of all: we don't see it for so many reasons, but that doesn't mean our worth goes away. We are always inherently worthy and dignified, no matter how many mistakes we make. We are always inherently worthy and inherently dignified and no one, not even ourselves, can change that essential, inherent, fact.