

A countenance had fallen. And with that, a world changed. A countenance had fallen, a face dropped, a sigh, a quiver of the bottom lip, unmistakable, the furrow of the brow, watering of an eye, reddening of the cheeks, the sort of feeling you cannot hide no matter how hard you try, a feeling that is caught in an instant by another, by one who is the most careful observer, not a spy, but one who cares, one who catches a secret in the manner of a butterfly catcher catching the wind. “His countenance fell” – these three words used to translate the final clause of the 5th verse of the 4th chapter of the 1st book of the Bible, Genesis, strangely beautiful words, words dating from the first decade of the 17th century in the rather archaic language of the King James Bible, but deemed so powerful, so pertinent, that not even the translators of the New Revised Standard Version almost 400 years later could uncover more fitting words to capture the image of Cain’s falling face, Cain’s epic fall from grace.

The story is probably familiar. Two brothers, Cain and Abel, the firstborn children of God’s newly created world, children of Adam and Eve; Abel grows up to be “a keeper of sheep,” while Cain chooses the life of an agriculturalist, “a tiller of the ground.” The brothers bring

forth an offering for God, each according to his vocation. It is said that God had a greater regard for Abel and his offering of a succulent sheep, more so than for Cain's offering of grain and vegetables. Then we read in verse 5b, "So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell." Cain was so angry, in fact, that he lured his brother out into the field and killed him, the first act of murder, brother against brother, for, it turned out, Cain was *not* his brother's keeper.

Now, I wonder if you'll bear with me for a moment, as I try to rethink this passage. Let's try to imagine a very common scenario: two brothers each bring one of their parents a gift. The parent loves both children very much, and believes in her heart that she loves them equally. She is equally delighted by both gifts. Yet, one of the children *perceives* that the parent has greater regard for the other sibling's gift; this child starts to worry that he is not favored equally to his sibling; he feels slighted; he feels jealous; he feels angry; and he betrays his emotions on his face. The parent sees this and questions him: "Why are you angry? Why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, you will be accepted. Don't let false, negative feelings get in the way. You must learn to master these feelings, or else terrible things might happen."

So, I wonder if one way we can interpret this story is, rather than focus on the murder, to instead focus on the fact that Cain mistakes what he sees, that he perceives something that is not real – God’s disfavor with him – which really is not the case at all. Cain lets his mind and emotions get the better of him because of this misperception. And, what he misperceives is that his brother Abel is *able* to do something better than him.

I want this word play to stand out. Because in the reading I am attempting, I want to suggest that Cain misperceives that Abel has a certain ability (or set of abilities) that he does not – whatever other abilities Abel may possess, the one that hurts the most in the eyes of his jealous brother is the ability to please his parent. Hence, I want to suggest that this archetypal story is also about something other than murder. Yes, Cain commits fratricide, and yes, there is a message to be learned in this – don’t kill your brother! But I wonder if there’s not something else at stake here, something equally detrimental to the history of humanity – Cain not only brings the stain of murder into human potentiality, he also introduces into the human equation the social construction of ability and disability. And with that, the

privileging of certain perceived social abilities over perceived disabilities.

There is, of course, a wide range of disabilities: the Americans with Disabilities Act covers a disparate set of physical and mental impairments, although it is my understanding that there is no exclusive list of conditions. To be sure, though, the word “disability” covers many things, including deafness, blindness, epilepsy, schizophrenia, addiction, AIDS, autism, muscular dystrophy and many more. Each of these conditions raises unique questions and problems in terms of treatments and accommodations; every individual case invites us to consider questions of civil rights, accessibility, dependency and vulnerability. In the short time I have, I will attempt a few general statements on a faith-based approach to disability.

One of the most important thinkers of disability studies is Eva Feder Kittay, a philosopher at the State University of New York, Stony Brook. Kittay has a daughter almost my age who has severe cerebral palsy: she is not able to speak, ambulate or otherwise care for herself independently. Over the years, Kittay, a moral philosopher, whose area

of expertise focuses on ethics and fundamental human rights, has advocated for her daughter and others within the disability community.

In fact, within the past quarter century or so, many disabled people began to argue that disability, much like gender and race, is a social, not a natural or biological, category. The social construction or social model of disability is therefore the idea that society and its institutions – governments, but also things like schools and even religious organizations – have the power to construct disability around social expectations of health, wellness and ability. This is precisely the snowball process that I suggested our long-lost brother Cain began when his countenance fell.

Kittay's approach to disability is helpful for us in the liberal church as it is based on a fundamental belief in the equal dignity due to all, a demand accorded on the intrinsic worth of all human beings. When she talks about dignity and worth, she cannot help but to ground her reasoning in love. She asserts that even someone like her daughter Sessa, someone with severe impairments, "can give and receive love – *even if it cannot always be manifested in the usual ways.*" This is something that should resonate with we Unitarian Universalists

Standing on the Side of Love. And, indeed, the disability rights movement underscores the manifold ways in which love is made manifest, thereby working to help all members of society realize that a life like Sessa's need not be seen as tragic. Instead, Kittay argues, "What is tragic is the failure of the larger society to include people with variant bodies and modes of functioning." Sessa, a human being, is fundamentally a loving being, able to give and receive love.

For too long, society – especially our post-Enlightenment society which, in the spirit of Descartes' aphorism *cogito ergo sum* – I think, therefore I am – has privileged the human capacity for rational practical reasoning, coupled with a glorification of the athletic body going back to the first Olympiad of the Ancient Greeks. These biases toward certain mental and physical abilities have led to the modern social construction of disability of which we've been talking. But, together with Kittay, we might wish to challenge any such notions which ascribe dignity based solely on mental or physical ability. Rather, we should champion the fact that our dignity "is bound both to our capacity to care for one another and in our being cared for by another who is herself worthy of care." To this end, Kittay offers her own aphorism which serves as a check to Descartes' *cogito* – "We are all some mother's child." Kittay

explains, “by mothering person I do not necessarily mean a biological, or even an adoptive mother. I mean a woman (or man) who devotes herself (or himself) to, or takes responsibility for, the care of a dependent and vulnerable other, and who sees that other’s well-being as central and enmeshed with her or his own.” Hence, Kittay affirms a “care and connection-based understanding of our humanity...in which value is created through relationship.”

This, I believe, is a powerful challenge to us for all that we are and in all that we do – to stand on the side of love in celebration of the manifold ways divine and human love are made manifest in our earthly world, to bestow upon our sisters and brothers the dignity demanded of each and all regardless of practical reasoning or physical ability, and to engage in care and connection-based relationships which generate mutual, reciprocal, life-giving value to some mother’s child even as we ourselves are some mother’s child. May our countenance not fall, but rather in the words of the Letter to the Hebrews, may we “go on doing good and giving to others, because God is well-pleased with such offerings.” May we perceive it as such, and know that it is real, and it is good, it is good.