

**Troubadour and Poet Ric Masten**  
**by Rev. Ann Schranz**  
**Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation**  
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Ric Masten continues to live a remarkable life. Ric was born in 1929. He has dyslexia, which means that his brain processes information in a different manner than is most common. Ric flunked out of four colleges and dropped out of a fifth. He is the Unitarian Universalist Association's only troubadour minister and its only minister who never graduated from college or attended seminary. In 1971, a mere five years after he and his wife, Billie Barbara, first walked into a Unitarian Universalist church, the Ministerial Fellowship Committee granted him a key credential – something called Preliminary Fellowship, a status which may potentially be “upgraded,” so to speak, a few years later to something called Final Fellowship.

According to Stephen Edington in the new book *Troubadour and Poet: The Magical Ministry of Ric Masten*, Ric doubts that he would have received Fellowship if he had attempted it with the Unitarians prior to 1961. “He was granted Fellowship by the UUA just ten years after the Unitarian and Universalist merger or consolidation. There was still some degree of institutional memory around from the Universalist tradition of the circuit riding Universalist minister, whose formal education may have been limited, but who performed a very effective and necessary ministry nonetheless. This Universalist circuit rider ministry is the tradition out of which Ric sees his own UU ministry. In his words, 'I'm a Universalist Unitarian. I'm closer to the Universalist tradition of being out in the country, moving around and meeting people and helping them raise barns, than I am to the Unitarian tradition of being deep thinkers in and around the environs of Boston.'"<sup>1</sup>

In his “circuit riding,” Ric visited around 500 Unitarian Universalist congregations and countless colleges and other venues, where he read his poetry, sang, and inspired his listeners. Later in the service, Shawn will talk about the distinction between the Unitarian and the Universalist strands of our tradition. As Stephen Edington notes, today we might call Ric a “community minister” whose initial focus was on young adults.

Ten years ago, Ric was diagnosed with incurable, advanced prostate cancer. On his website, Ric includes his health status, doctor visit by doctor visit, chemo regimen by chemo regimen, test result by test result.

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<sup>1</sup> *Troubadour and Poet: The Magical Ministry of Ric Masten* by Stephen D. Edington with Ric Masten, Trafford Publishing, 2007, p. 19. The book may be ordered online at [www.trafford.com/07-0876](http://www.trafford.com/07-0876).

Through the website and through the poems and drawings that he emails weekly to those who request them, Ric continues to minister. Ric and Billie Barbara still live in Big Sur, and I met them two years ago when Ric was the guest minister one Sunday at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Santa Cruz County.

At Ric's request, he and I did a "dialogue sermon" in which I selected which particular poems he would read, and we would talk about them in front of the congregation. Here was the kicker: Ric did not want to know in advance which poems I would ask him to read and talk about. He wanted to be surprised. He wanted to be spontaneous. He wanted to be fresh. He wanted to dance with his dialogue partner, and dance we did.

Ric's signature song is "Let It Be A Dance." The song has even more meaning for me now than it did before I read Stephen Edington's book, for now I know about the tragic car accident which killed three people and injured the girl for whom Ric wrote the song. One December, a first year teacher at Carmel High School drove her VW bus filled with high school dance students to San Jose to watch a performance by a famous New York City dance troupe. According to Ric, "As the carload of dancers was rounding a corner on the way home a drunk driver who had pulled over to the side of the road decided to pull back onto the highway without looking behind him. The VW bus crashed headlong into his car, killing the two front seat passengers, one of whom was the teacher, and a back seat passenger. All the other girls and boys in the back seats were seriously injured."<sup>2</sup>

One of the injured girls, Barbara Brussell, was a close friend of one of Ric's daughters. Barbara's kneecap was so damaged that it seemed unlikely that she would walk again without a cane, much less dance. Ric continues, "My family and I visited Barbara in the hospital where I made a bet with her. I wagered that she would come dancing up our Big Sur dirt road exactly one year from that day. And what's more, I would write the music that she would be dancing to." The next week, when Ric was working in his garden, the song came to him – both the words and the melody. One year later, Barbara did come dancing (limping, but dancing) up the dirt road as Ric played his guitar and sang "Let It Be A Dance."

Dancing ("dancing" in the now) is Rick's number one strategy for surviving advanced prostate cancer. The drawing on the cover of the Order of Service is by Ric. The drawing is a "one liner," and "one liners" are Ric's specialty. He puts the pencil down on the page and does not lift it up again until the

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<sup>2</sup> Page 78.

drawing is finished. One drawing. One line. Speaking personally, I am bored silly by geometric labyrinths, but by following the lines in Ric's drawings, the concept of the labyrinth comes to life. Ric drew the cover art on today's Order of Service to accompany the poem "Garden Under Siege: Advanced Prostate Cancer Survival Strategy." [I read that poem in the service here.]

Ric studied at the Institute de Beaux Arts in Paris for two years. He has a local art connection, too. At Pomona College, down the road, he studied art with Millard Sheets. When Ric received Final ministerial Fellowship, this was recognized at the 1976 General Assembly, which was held on the campus of Pomona College. Ric says, "As it turned out the first college I flunked out of was Pomona College, and that's where the [General Assembly] was held the year I got my Final Fellowship. I walked across the stage where I would have walked across years earlier had I managed to graduate from college. It was just one of those synchronistic things. I wept like a baby."<sup>3</sup>

Ric came close to not receiving Final Fellowship. Not long after he received Preliminary Fellowship, Ric began reading a poem about how close he personally came to suicide. Some of his ministerial colleagues questioned whether he should have been that vulnerable and exposed in a public setting. Was it ministerial? They questioned whether young people, in particular, should hear a poem about suicide by someone who typically came to town, read and sang, and left, without being around to face the emotions potentially stirred up in fragile people. This is "The Bixby Bridge Incident." [I read that poem in the service here.]

With his Final Fellowship status hanging in the balance, Ric talked with the Fellowship Committee and persuaded them that this poem was a message of hope and an affirmation of life, not an inappropriate sharing of "too much information" by a minister. Author Stephen Edington notes that "One of the many balancing acts a minister has to maintain lies in having a congregation who wants to know that their minister is a human being, and who bleeds when wounded – but they still don't want their minister bleeding all over them!"<sup>4</sup>

There is so much more to say about Ric and Billie Barbara, and I hope that you are inspired to learn more about them. Check out the website [www.ric-masten.net](http://www.ric-masten.net). I conclude with the words of Stephen Edington. "Ministry is about the minister – in whatever form his or her ministry may take. But at the same time it has no meaning apart from the lives it has touched and blessed and challenged . . . Ministry is hardly

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<sup>3</sup> Page 22.

<sup>4</sup> Page 31.

those things a minister does. It is instead a dance between the minister and the ministered to; and the lead in that dance is constantly changing. To examine the life and ministry of Ric Masten is to gain a clearer understanding about the dance of ministry.”<sup>5</sup> May the dance of ministry at Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation ever be lively. May we learn to lead and follow (and lead and follow) ever more skillfully. May it be so!

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<sup>5</sup> Page 8.