



IN OUR WEAKNESS IS OUR STRENGTH:

REFLECTIONS ON THE POWER OF VULNERABILITY

By Tom Petriano



“Sing like no one is listening, love like you have never been hurt, dance like no one is watching, live like it’s heaven on earth.” (Mark Twain)

VULNERABILITY, THE ONLY TRUE COURAGE

What treasures the boxes and bins that fill our attics may contain! Recently while rummaging through one of those boxes searching for a book, I came across the book, *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?* by John Powell, S.J. It was given to all of us to read as 9th graders in what was then St. Pius X Preparatory Seminary. For some reason I held onto that book through the years. Little did I understand as a ninth grader what I now know about all the possibilities we risk losing when we hide our true selves. Little did I know then what I now know about vulnerability as a source of creativity. Little did I realize then the possibilities of a theology that sees vulnerability as a way of understanding – and even experiencing – the mystery of God.

Recently, while teaching a class on Zoom, I had one of those experiences that all teachers know well. A student asks a question to which I realize I don't know the answer. Eek! What do I do? The split-second decision is whether to act as though I do know the answer and try to fudge an explanation in the hope that it will be acceptable to the inquisitive student, or to reveal my imperfections, honestly answering, "I don't know, but I'll find out?" I describe but one of many occasions when life challenges us to accept our vulnerability and overcome our fear of appearing weak or imperfect.

There is within us an inclination to listen to the voice of our culture which proclaims that vulnerability is a sign of weakness. To let another know who I am is to risk rejection. To acknowledge not knowing is to risk revealing our limitations. To put ourselves out there to express an idea, an opinion, or our truest feelings is to risk derision. To share with others the chaos within us is to expose ourselves as imperfect. And yet, as Socrates, the older mentor in the movie *Peaceful Warrior*, (based on the true story of gymnast Dan Millman) states to the young aspiring athlete, "A warrior is not about perfection, or victory, or invulnerability. He's about absolute vulnerability. That's the only true courage."

How can vulnerability and courage go together? Isn't there a contradiction here? How can vulnerability be "the only true courage?" To answer these questions, we first need to clarify just what we mean by the word "vulnerability." The Oxford dictionary defines vulnerability as a state of being susceptible to harm. Psychologist Brené Brown defines vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure." (*Daring Greatly*, pg. 34). In her popular TED talk, she says it is simply about "showing up." When she once asked subjects taking part in one of her research projects to complete the sentence, "Vulnerability is _____," she received an interesting list of answers, such as: "standing up for myself; saying no; asking

In her popular TED talk, she says it is simply about "showing up." When she once asked subjects taking part in one of her research projects to complete the sentence, "Vulnerability is _____," she received an interesting list of answers.

for help; initiating sex with my spouse; sharing an unpopular opinion; asking for forgiveness; admitting I'm afraid; saying 'I love you' first, while not knowing if I'm going to be loved back; admitting I'm afraid; having faith."

Other examples might include statements like, "Vulnerability is... being silly; acknowledging our doubts; maybe even writing an article. It takes courage to put ourselves out there in any of these ways. It is precisely this possibility of being hurt or rejected that makes us hold back. Madeline L'Engle has written,

When we were children, we used to think that when we were grown up we would no longer be vulnerable. But to grow up is to accept vulnerability. To be alive is to be vulnerable.

It is worth noting that the word "vulnerability" is derived from the Latin word, *vulnus*, which means wound. We would be right to ask ourselves, "how can a word derived from a word which means wound be a manifestation of courage?" Can it really be possible that there lies in our woundedness a hidden strength? St. Paul seems to think so when in 2 Corinthians 12 he states, "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." This is truly a paradoxical statement. How can I be strong when I am weak? In the delightful, thoughtful and heart-warming story, [The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse](#), author Charlie Mackesy includes the following instructive dialogue between the boy, the horse, and the mole:

"What is the bravest thing you ever said?" asked the boy.

"Help," said the horse.

"When have you been your strongest?" asked the boy.

"When I have dared to show my weakness," said the horse.

"Sometimes I worry you all will realize I am ordinary," said the boy.

"Love doesn't need you to be extraordinary," said the mole.

Through his dialogue with the horse and the mole, the boy learns an important lesson. It is okay to ask for help; it is okay to acknowledge our weakness; it is okay to be ordinary. At the same time, it is much less risky not to acknowledge to ourselves or another our woundedness.

DISCOVERING OUR SUFFICIENCY

In another one of her books, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, Brown identifies the messages of our culture, which she refers to as "gremlins," that subtly enter our consciousness and foster the unrealistic expectation that we have to be perfect. It is this expectation that hinders our "showing up." These are the inner voices that tell us things like:

"What will people think?"

"You're not _____ enough." (pretty, skinny, wealthy, happy, smart, masculine, strong, admired, contributing, etc...).

"No one can find out about _____."

"I am going to pretend that everything is okay."

"Taking care of others is more important than taking care of me." (pg. 39).

Because our culture is constantly putting before us images of unattainable perfection, it is difficult for us to accept and face the truth of our own imperfection. It is the fear of being seen as imperfect that fosters inauthenticity and



inhibits vulnerability. This, according to Brown, is because we tend to live out of a mindset of “scarcity.” What we have is never enough. “I didn’t do enough.” “I didn’t get enough sleep.” “I didn’t lose enough weight.” “I don’t make enough money.” “I don’t pray enough.” “I’m not good enough.” And the list goes on. Brown suggests that this mindset of scarcity needs to be replaced by a mindset of “enough.” Accepting the “enoughness” of things as they are requires of us a willingness to be vulnerable, but it is also what allows acceptance of who we are and the courage to be our truest self. On this point, Brown quotes Lyn Twist, author of *The Soul of Money*:

We each have the choice in any setting to step back and let go of the mind-set of scarcity. Once we let go of scarcity, we discover the

surprising truth of sufficiency. By sufficiency, I don’t mean a quantity of anything...Sufficiency isn’t an amount at all. It is an experience, a context we generate, a declaration, a knowing that there is enough and that we are enough. Sufficiency resides inside each of us, and we can call it forward. It is a consciousness, an attention, an intentional choosing of the way we think about our circumstances. (*The Soul of Money*, p. 75)

Here a caveat is in order. It is important to recognize what perfectionism and sufficiency are not. According to Brené Brown, perfectionism is not striving for excellence. The quest to be better, what St. Ignatius called the *magis*, or “greater,” is an important component of growth. Striving to be better is a good thing. Perfectionism, on the other hand, is focused not on being the best version of myself but rather, on what others think of me. It is an ultimately self-destructive and addictive habit that seeks to please others and live up to a false standard of excellence. Excellence is about authenticity and having the courage to say and be who we really are.

Perhaps a useful example of why it is not only okay, but important to accept our own vulnerability comes from the Japanese world view known as *wabi sabi*. Leonard Loren in his book, *Wabi Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers* defines *wabi sabi* as “a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. It is a perspective on beauty which is often incorporated into art. It is a worldview that recognizes that “greatness exists in the ordinary and inconspicuous and that beauty can be coaxed out of ugliness.” The Japanese art form known as *kintsukuroi* is a good example of this. It is the practice of repairing cracked objects such as cups, or mugs, or dishes with a gold or silver

lacquer as a way of acknowledging the beauty of broken things. The wisdom behind this practice is helpful. To believe in ourselves and be ourselves, despite our own brokenness, requires the courage of vulnerability. Not only ceramic or pottery objects have cracks. So do we, and, amazingly, those cracks have a unique beauty to them. As Leonard Cohen reminds us in his song, “Anthem,” “There is a crack in everything, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

THE BEAUTY OF THE ORDINARY

Another obstacle to being vulnerable is our constant quest for the extraordinary instead of appreciating the ordinary. Because the dominant culture persuades us that a life well lived has achieved levels esteemed as “extraordinary,” we tend to think that we have to measure up to some unrealistic measure of achievement. Greatness tends to be equated with notoriety. Vulnerability means it’s okay being who we are and recognizing that life’s greatest gifts come in the ordinary moments of our existence. A favorite passage from George Elliot’s Middlemarch comes to mind here:

“But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

This message seems to be what Pope Francis had in mind when in the recently published proclamation for the Year of St. Joseph, “*A Father’s Heart*.” He praised St. Joseph as someone who lived and loved quietly and in the shadows. His life was quite ordinary; his virtue was hidden in his daily faithfulness. Pope Francis compares him to the doctors, nurses, essential workers, cleaning personnel and many others who have been the heroes of the Covid pandemic. Their names do not appear in magazine headlines or television shows. Their greatness is found in their quiet devotion to what they were called upon to do. He writes, “Each of us can discover in Joseph – the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence – an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of trouble.” Saint Joseph reminds us that those who live their lives faithfully, hidden or in the shadows, can make a quiet but extraordinary contribution to our world. They teach us not to be seduced by the lure of the extraordinary because it an obstacle to the vulnerability that saves and heals. Quite possibly this is what E.E. Cummings had in mind when he wrote:

*“To be nobody but yourself
in a world which is doing its
best, night and day, to make
you everybody else – means
to fight the hardest battle
which any human being can
fight; and never stop fighting.”*

“Each of us can discover in Joseph – the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence – an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of trouble.”

She used her potential liabilities as a source of creativity. It is neither accidental nor coincidental that some of the greatest contributions to art, culture, and civilization have come from those who were living in conditions that made them very vulnerable.

WOUNDS AS DOORWAYS TO CREATIVITY

A recent article in the Arts section of the New York Times ran under the headline, “The Transformative Power of Vulnerability.” The article is a review of an exhibit of photos by Latina photographer Laura Aguilar. The exhibit is titled, “Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell.” The article recounts how despite her disabilities, social class and ethnicity, she used her potential liabilities as sources of creativity. It is neither accidental nor coincidental that some of the greatest contributions to art, culture, and civilization have come from those who were living in conditions that made them very vulnerable. Dante wrote the Divine Comedy while he was in exile in Florence. Giovanni Boccaccio wrote his collection of stories, The Decameron, while in isolation in the Tuscan countryside during the plague of 1348 after his father and stepmother died from the plague. In Boccaccio’s incomparable medieval imagination, the stories that make up The Decameron were told by individuals while they were living in quarantine. John Milton’s great poem, Paradise Lost, was written when he was blind. Beethoven was deaf when he wrote his extraordinary 9th Symphony. It is deemed likely that Shakespeare wrote both Macbeth and King Lear while in quarantine as the bubonic plague of 1606 paralyzed London. In 1665 another bout of the same plague ravaged England again. Cambridge

University was closed and a young student named Isaac Newton had to retreat to his family estate. It was there during a year long period of quarantine that he developed ideas that would become the basis of calculus as well as his theory of gravity. (See “Five People Who Were Amazingly Productive During Quarantine” by Michael Debczak at: <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/620764/productive-people-in-quarantine>) Other examples abound.

The artist Edward Munch not only witnessed the ravages of the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1919 but was himself taken ill by it. It was through his experience of this illness that he was able to create two of his greatest works, *Self-Portrait with the Spanish Flu* as well as *Self-Portrait After the Pandemic*. In the latter of these two paintings, we see him standing in a room flooded now with light and a Tau cross



appearing to shine through his window. His experience of being bed-ridden by the pandemic enabled him to create a painting of lasting beauty that captured the truth of the suffering caused by the pandemic. Munch is reported to have once said to his doctor and friend K.E. Shreiner, *“For as long as I can remember I have suffered from a deep feeling of anxiety which I have tried to express in my art. Without anxiety and illness I would have been like a ship without a rudder.”* (quoted in James C. Harris, “Self-Portrait After Spanish Flu,” in Art and Images in Psychiatry at: <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/fullarticle/209451>. Precisely in and through Munch’s woundedness his tremendous creativity was released, a creativity that has helped countless of his viewers to recognize our common woundedness.

Pope Francis, in his recently published interviews with journalist Austin Ivereigh, Let Us Dream, affirmed this same insight by sharing what he called his own “Covid moments.” In presenting his thoughts on the pandemic and the opportunity created by it, Pope Francis quotes the German poet, Friedrich Hölderlin, who in his poem, *Hyperion*, writes, “Where the danger is, also grows the saving power.” Francis

identifies three “Covid moments” that he has experienced in his own life. The first was when he was 21 and found himself near death because of serious respiratory illness. This was his first experience of “limit, of pain, and loneliness.” It was out of this experience that he learned to “depend on the goodness and wisdom of others.” It was the experience that led him to rethink his vocation. His second “Covid moment” came in 1986 when he found himself living alone in Germany working on a dissertation. He calls this time in his life, “the Covid of displacement.” It was a kind of exile for him, and experience of “non-belonging,” which confirmed for him where he really belonged. These experiences prepared him for a third an even more intense moment of vulnerability which occurred in Cordoba, Argentina between 1990 and 1992.

While Francis was then Fr. Bergoglio, provincial for the Jesuit community in Argentina, he underwent a particularly trying time as he dealt with the atrocities perpetrated by the Argentine junta during the so-called Dirty War. Tensions arose between the pro and anti-Bergoglio camps in the Jesuit community because of the way he dealt with activist Jesuits in his charge who were adherents of Liberation Theology. Because





of these tensions, Bergoglio was relieved of his leadership role and sent to Cordoba. It was a kind of exile and it precipitated a difficult but transforming period in his life. He describes it as “a kind of lockdown. Out of that time came what he called a “real purification.” He confides to Invereigh, “It gave me a greater tolerance, understanding, the ability to forgive, and a fresh empathy for the powerless...I learned the importance of seeing the big in little things and attending to the little in big things. It was a period of growth in many ways, the kind of new growth that happens after a harsh pruning.” (pg. 42). By allowing himself to accept his vulnerability, his wounds became a source of healing. His openness to this process undoubtedly came from his keen awareness of the power of vulnerability as it is revealed in the Scriptures and in the life of Jesus himself.

THE POWER OF VULNERABILITY IN SCRIPTURE

The Book of Genesis 1:1-2 tells us, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and

the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” The words, “formless” and “empty” (*tohu wabohu* in Hebrew) are sometimes translated as “chaos.” For the author of Genesis, from chaos emerged the cosmos. The insight is remarkably similar to the role of chaos in Greek mythology where from Chaos, Gaia and Eros come into being. Both the biblical tradition and Greek mythology concur that the cosmos itself came into existence through being vulnerable, that is, in a state of chaos. Jewish Kabbalists take this insight a step further, understanding creation as an act of divine contraction (*tzimtzum*). Similarly, out of the chaos of the great flood emerged a new beginning, a “Noah moment.” In Let us Dream, Pope Francis suggests that in the same way, great possibilities can emerge in a post-Covid world.

Another example of the power of vulnerability is clearly put forth in the Suffering Servant passages of the later chapters of the Book of Isaiah. These powerful verses about the redemptive suffering of God’s servant tell us unambiguously that:

...he was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity. He bore the punishment that

makes us whole, by his wounds we were healed. (Is. 53:5, NAB)

Here we can see quite clearly how, through the wounds of the unidentified servant figure of Chapters 42-53 of the Book of Isaiah, redemption and healing come about. Christians would later see in this figure a foreshadowing of Jesus and the wounds he would bear. In the life and death of Jesus we can see with complete clarity the transformative power of vulnerability when it is accepted and seen as a source of strength instead of a sign of weakness.

From his birth to his death, Jesus is a model of vulnerability. In the very pattern of His human life, we see divine vulnerability. His humble birth in a stable offers us an icon of total vulnerability. The poet, John Donne, in his poem “Nativity,” writes:

Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb
Now leaves his well-belov'd imprisonment... Weak
enough now into the world to come.

From this beginning to the end of his life, Jesus models vulnerability. When Jesus wept

over the city of Jerusalem, He manifested vulnerability. Weeping at the death of his friend Lazarus, He was not afraid to reveal his humanity. Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane He was not afraid of allowing Peter, James, and John to see his struggle.

The cross is the ultimate symbol of divine vulnerability and for that same reason the perfect sign of divine love. Friederich Holerin's painting called, “The Eucharistic Man of Sorrows” presents the crucified Christ standing before us and from his wounds emanate wheat and grape vines, a powerful symbol of the life that comes forth from the wounds of Jesus. From his very wounds emerge life! This undoubtedly is also why the risen Christ appears to Thomas the week after Easter Sunday, revealing to Thomas his wounds. Caravaggio has given us a dramatic image of this scene where we see vividly the wound in the side of the risen Jesus as Thomas is invited to place his finger in it. Even in his risen life, Jesus models vulnerability.



Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.

St. Paul, to whom the risen Christ also appeared, seems to have gleaned from his encounter with the risen Jesus the truth of vulnerability in his own life as well. In 2 Corinthians 12:6-7 he speaks of an unnamed “thorn in the flesh” that he endured in his life:

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. 8 For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. 9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

While we do not know the exact nature of this “thorn in the flesh,” clearly it was a wound or a weakness with which he struggled. By the time he was writing Corinthians, he had come to realize that power came from this wound. In that same letter, he stated, “when I am weak, then I am strong.”

From this brief survey of vulnerability as biblical theme, it would not be off the mark to say that vulnerability deserves a place among those divine attributes mentioned in classical theology. A God who becomes vulnerable models for us the transformative power of vulnerability. This is why St. Paul in 1Cor. 1:25 could say, “God’s

weakness is stronger than human strength” In a culture that values perfection and strength, the God of Jesus shows us the power that can come in and through our wounds.

CONCLUSION

In Daring Greatly, Brené Brown writes:

Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.

The truth of this insight is confirmed by the witness of creative geniuses, the testimony of the Scriptures and the example of Jesus. This is perhaps why the spiritual writer, Thomas a Kempis, in The Imitation of Christ, recommends, “live willingly in his holy wounds. You will gain marvelous strength and comfort in adversities.” The wounds of Christ, as well as the insights of psychology and the lives of great artists reveal the transformative power of vulnerability. They remind us that our chaos can be a source of creativity, that the ordinary is extraordinary, and that weakness can be strength. They remind me that the next time I am asked a question to which I don’t know the answer, it will be okay to say, “I don’t know.”

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Tom Petriano shows how accepting one's vulnerability is truly a "threshold" for greatness. Through His wounds, Christ saves us and we can relate to Him. Great art and literature has come to gestation through times of pandemic and personal trauma, etc. Consider your own life-story: think about times when you lived through a physical or psychological struggle, frustration in a relationship or a disappointment in your ministry. Out of that experience of vulnerability, what spiritual growth came in your life? Maybe a new pathway opened up for you?
2. As you mature in life and in your vocation, do you find it easier to admit your weaknesses and limitations? Has such humility on your part helped others around you to do the same? Have others in your family or workplace modelled vulnerability for you and helped you to take a risk?
3. Quoting the psychologist, Brené Brown, the author of this article offers an important distinction or clarification regarding perfectionism – a familiar and ever-present antagonist to vulnerability in our culture: we are reminded perfectionism is not striving for excellence but is simply concerned with personal image. How are you dealing with perfectionist tendencies in yourself? Are you ever able to help another recognize and address these tendencies in his/her behavior?
4. Prayerfully imagine situations where you feel vulnerable – perhaps public speaking or playing a new game, golfing, being publicly "passed over" or made fun of by others. How could you invite the Lord to accompany you in this setting of apparent humiliation and find peace, perhaps even joy?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Petriano is Professor and Chair of Religious Studies at St. Joseph's College, teaching on both the Long Island and Brooklyn campuses. He received his doctorate in theology from Fordham University. Among the courses he teaches are Belief and Unbelief in the Modern World, World Religions and Buddhism which is part of the Mindfulness and Contemplative Living Minor recently established in collaboration with the Psychology Department. He has travelled with students to Nicaragua as part of a Global Service Learning program sponsored by St. Joseph's College. He lives with his wife Karen in Huntington Station, Long Island.