

**My God these are such distressing times! Tonight for the first time I awakened in darkness; my eyes were stinging; before me passed images and images of human suffering. But there is one thing that is more and more obvious to me, that you cannot help us, but that we ourselves must help you, and in that way we help ourselves.** (Etty Hillesum)

I have been asked to share some thoughts on vulnerability and religious life. As I tried to get my ideas together, I began to notice that the concept of vulnerability and particularly the call to *embrace* our vulnerability was being heard from many quarters all at once. Why is it, I asked myself, that so many different groups – particularly among those pursuing consecrated life – are focussing on vulnerability.

There are many obvious reasons for this: our inability as a species to cope with the sheer pace of change that engulfs us and the vast amount of information that floods our computers; our understanding of what it is to be a human being today; the inability of organised religion to offer meaning that satisfies the modern imagination, and so on. But is there something deeper that we are being asked to acknowledge, something that touches the core of our human journey?

What does our tradition say on this topic? Who are our ancestors in the faith that exemplified the ability to embrace vulnerability? Where is the blessing in this? How is this counter-cultural?

Maria Popova writes: We spend our lives trying to anchor our transience in some illusion of permanence and stability. We lay plans, we make vows, we backbone the flow of uncertainty with habits and routines that lull us with the comforting dream of predictability and control. But no sooner do we do this than we find ourselves again and again bent at the knees with surrender to forces and events vastly larger than us. In those moments, kneeling in a pool of the unknown, the heart breaks open and allows life — life itself, not the substitute for life that comes from control — to rush in.

Vulnerability, that loss of control, the realisation that we cannot manage the outcome, leaves us with a feeling of being lost and helpless. It reminds us that, in spite of our advanced technology and pseudo-sophistication, we are small fry in a huge universe. For all our posturing, we are tiny creatures in a solar system that incorporates a little part of a medium sized galaxy among billions of other galaxies. Life itself is so fragile. Beauty is so fleeting. Everything dies. No wonder vulnerability terrifies us.

As a religious brother, I return to my sacred tradition to seek there the wisdom necessary for my time as my Judeo-Christian ancestors did in theirs. I have been programmed since birth to see Jesus of Nazareth through the lens of organised Christianity. What would happen if I changed the way I approached him? After all, everything he said and did was to challenge how people saw their relationship to God.

I think it was Bonhoeffer who said that “Jesus of Nazareth turns upside down everything that religious people think about God.” Fr. Richard Rohr reminds us that Jesus did not come to change God’s mind about humanity (which atonement theology teaches), but to change humanity’s mind about God. The Quaker scholar Elton Trueblood used to say: “The historic Christian doctrine of the divinity of Christ does not simply mean that Jesus is like God. It is far more radical than that. It means that God is like Jesus.” In other words, the doctrines of the incarnation and deity of Christ are meant to tell us that we cannot start with a predetermined, set-in-stone idea of God derived from the rest of the Bible and then extend that to Jesus. Jesus is not intended merely to fit into those predetermined categories; he is intended instead to explode them, transform them, alter them forever, and bring us to a new evolutionary level in our understanding of God. An old definition of God does not define Jesus—the experience of God in Jesus requires a brand-new definition or understanding of God. (Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*).

The God that Jesus reveals is not the patriarchal god that is the theistic model: all-powerful, omniscient, awesome, distant, fearful judge, vengeful and violent. In other words, the god that we grew up with. The God Jesus reflects is quite the opposite.

- Weeps over Jerusalem
- Frustrated by the blindness of the Twelve
- Feels abandoned on the cross
- Wracked with fear in the garden
- Amazed by God's predilection for the simple and lowly
- Surprised by the fact that all are God's chosen
- Caught up in the love of the Abba whose beloved son he feels
- Forgives those who grievously wrong him and hate him
- Reaches out to the one who denies him and the one who betrays him

This God that Jesus reveals is a vulnerable God, because love makes God vulnerable.

We are sent to this earth to learn how to love. Or, as William Blake so eloquently put it all those years ago: We are here to learn to endure the beams of love. We are here to learn that true love costs. This is a mystical insight.

**To learn to love**

**Is to be stripped of all love**

**Until you are wholly without love,**

**Because until you have gone**

**Naked and afraid**

**In that cold, dark place**

**where all love is taken from you**

**You will never know that you are**

**Wholly within love.**

Madeline L'Engle, *The Birth of Love (Lines Scribbled on An Envelope, 1969)*

This is the only way to understand the Cross.

And so, what Jesus is doing is telling us that at the heart of our humanity dwells our ability to live with vulnerability. I want to show you how to live your humanity fully, says Jesus. I come that you may have life, life to the full. This is life here and now, not life in an imagined heaven after you die. It is about life on earth. That is why modern scholarship reminds us that Jesus did not come to bring us a new religion.... Jesus came to tell us that life could be lived differently, that human values could be different, that human relationships could be different.

He calls himself the Son of Man, the human one. Living human life fully helps you to touch the divine in yourself. As we grapple with what it is to be human in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we come to the realisation that we need to embrace vulnerability. It is essential to our growth.

What are some of the implications of this?

Consider the example of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Note her perplexity: *How can this be?* Her understanding of God is challenged. She has to learn that faith and doubt are not opposites—that beyond all the easy platitudes and pieties of religion, we serve a God who dwells in mystery. She has to consent to evolve...to wonder...to stretch...If we agree to embark on a journey with this God, we will face periods of utter bewilderment.

But this frightens us, so we compartmentalize our spiritual lives, trying to hold our relationships with God at a sanitized remove from our actual circumstances. We don't realize that such efforts leave us with a faith that's rigid, inflexible, and stale. And that is why there is so much wrong with our living of consecrated life.

Stephen Levine, the poet and author, best known for his work on death and dying, was once asked by a member of the audience what was the meaning of life. Acknowledging that this was a vast question, he proposed that “the meaning of life is to let your heart be broken.” Risk loving. Embrace vulnerability.

The composer, Tina Davidson, reflecting on his words writes: Let your heart be broken. Allow, expect, look forward to. The life that you have so carefully protected and cared for. Broken, cracked, rent in two. In deep anguish, your heart breaks, and in the two halves, rocking on the table, is revealed rich earth. Moist, dark soil, ready for new life to begin.

(Quoted by Maria Popova in *Marginalian* 23/04/2023)

Now you are ready to face your humanity, to live life fully, no masks, no pretence, total trust.

II

### **Facing Congregation Brokenness**

Allow me to share with you my personal experience of Congregation brokenness. My Congregation faced the storm of child sexual abuse by some of our members. Across three continents victims accused us of some of the most horrendous suffering they endured as children. My whole term in office, from the first year to the end, was spent in dealing with this. It was a harrowing time for leadership, for the Brothers, for staff in our institutions and those who walked with us. It demanded of us that we face squarely, without denial or excuse, what had happened. The shame and guilt would at times be suffocating. We had to remember the pain of the victims and survivors and place that first at the heart of our response. We had to ask painful questions of ourselves and our congregation culture that could permit such terrible things to happen.

It was in facing this, that we also discovered the blessing in the brokenness. It was a painful journey but also a blessed one. We learnt a lot about ourselves, about what brotherhood really meant, and above all, what it is to be a truly human person. Beneath the externals, we found who we really were.

What did we learn through all of this?

- No avoiding the truth...face it squarely: no denial
- Feel the pain and the shame
- Name what is happening
- Living with uncertainty
- Stay with the Word of God
- This is our mission...not anything else
- A new face of God

At the same time we know that our living of religious life today fights against and denies any trace of vulnerability. Look at the facts:

- Financially secure and independent
- Putting the institution above all else
- Little risk being taken...very calculated steps
- When we find resources lacking, it is the work with the poorest that is dropped
- Resistance to change: holding on to the past
- Not helped in dealing with emotions
- Little help in learning to love

The decision not to feel vulnerable means we need to create defences to protect our self-esteem. We all use armour to protect ourselves, but that armour is heavy and prevents us from growing, being seen, and being in connection with others.

When we're in fear, or an emotion is driving self-protection, there's a fairly predictable pattern of how we assemble our armour, piece by piece in the stories we tell ourselves or the statements we make.

Some examples of armour:

- Making excuses
- Rationalizing
- Blaming
- Joking

Anything that stops us facing ourselves in our vulnerability. What is the armour you tend to use?

“The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek” - Joseph Campbell

The whole globe is shook up, so what are you going to do when things are falling apart?

You’re either going to become more fundamentalist and try to hold things together, or you’re going to forsake the old ambitions and goals and live life as an experiment, making it up as you go along —Pema Chödrön, Buddhist Teacher.

We realise that vulnerability is not weakness. Vulnerability is the ability to allow myself to be seen as I am. It takes real courage to do this.

- Vulnerability is emotional risk, exposure, uncertainty
- It is our most accurate measure of courage
- To be vulnerable is to let ourselves be seen, to be honest
- Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, change
- Adaptability to change is about vulnerability

### **Reflection Questions**

- Where do you feel particularly vulnerable at this time?
- How are you dealing with it?
- What is the vulnerability that your Province faces? How are you dealing with it? What help do you need?
- How has this situation helped you to approach God?
- What is our sense of diminishment and loss? Can we see it?
- What are we being invited into?
- Do we see the struggle that is taking place in our midst?
- What is the future for us?
- What is your role as leader?

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