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The Gift of Vulnerability

As we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany, we take time to marvel and wonder at the mystery of the incarnation. One of the beautiful mysteries we encounter in the birth of Jesus is the vulnerability of God expressed in God's total embrace of our humanity in Jesus.

The notion of a vulnerable God may be challenging for some. However, when we look to Jesus; when we reflect on his life and his death, we begin to appreciate something of the nature and quality of God's vulnerability.

We know that each morning Jesus got up long before dawn to be with God. What happened in that prayer time? We know he was completely at home with God and shared his experiences with God. What would Jesus have said about his heartache at the suffering and pain he saw around him, or about the insincerity and hypocrisy of the spiritual leaders? (Matthew 23:1 – 12). What would he have shared with God about the affirmation he received from others (Luke 7:1 – 10) or about the criticism and judgements that were thrown at him? (Luke 6:7). What would Jesus have shared with God about refusing to help a Canaanite woman until she challenged him? (Matthew 15:21 – 28)

We see in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36 – 46) Jesus' absolute

fear and total vulnerability with God. What was the movement within him that empowered him to move from "let this chalice pass from me" to "not my will but yours be done"? (Matthew 26:39) His ability to accept the chalice

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It came to birth during those
hours of intimacy with God in
his lifetime where open honesty,
trust and surrender became a
rhythm in his living.
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did not happen during his time in Gethsemane. Gethsemane was the ultimate vulnerability, the ultimate trust, the ultimate surrender.

Grappling with human experiences would have fostered in Jesus a profound empathy and vulnerability, in and through which, in his word, action and presence, he made God visible and real.

This deep empathy is seen so beautifully in Luke 7:13 when he chanced upon the funeral of an only son whose widowed mother was grief stricken. His heart went out to her in her great loss. With tender compassion Jesus brought him back to her.

He saw with heartfelt understanding the burdens that were inflicted on his

people that caused hardship and struggle and he bravely spoke out against the injustices of insincere and hypocritical leaders. (Matthew 12: 1–13)

In his healing Jesus saw beyond the outward need for healing, he saw the soul and the hearts longing. In John 9 Jesus heals a man who, all his life had been considered cursed by God in his community because of his blindness. Jesus not only restored his sight but told him that God's glory was revealed in him. How often he cured the invisible wounds as well as those that were visible. (John 9: 1 – 12)



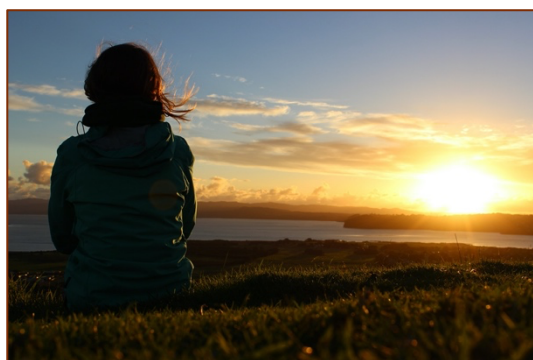
Like Jesus we too are invited to be ourselves with God. To be vulnerable, totally exposed as we are and allow ourselves to become anchored in God's grace, wisdom, acceptance and love. From that secure and vulnerable position, we can know God's power at work in us and in freedom be God's grace for others.

For many of us being vulnerable is not an easy place to be in, especially in positions of Leadership. We can be uncomfortable and uncertain in allowing our frailties and flaws to be seen let alone known. We hide and cover our insecurities and so connections and relationships are less than genuine because we cannot move out beyond the façade. But when we are real, authentic and transparent, we come into genuine connections and sincere relationships.

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Vulnerability in its essence is the courage to accept the Divine gift of ourselves and to step out from behind the masks we wear and be ourselves worthy of love and respect. It is vulnerability that enables us to cross many thresholds in our transformative journey. It's as easy as asking 'Can I help,' as deep as saying 'I'm sorry' or as profound as speaking out daringly and courageously from our truth. This is the vulnerability we see in Jesus.

When we accept the person we are, when we have the courage to be imperfect and compassionate with ourselves we come to know the true beauty of ourselves. The 'should be's' and 'ought to be's' fall away from us and we can genuinely be ourselves. We can be creative, joyful, we can love and find belonging, we can live in gratitude and hope. We can do this and so much more, because being vulnerable brings us to a sense of being at home and comfortable with ourselves.



Vulnerability and Spirituality

Perhaps it could be said that vulnerability is a spirituality. Spirituality is what gives our lives meaning beyond our basic need of food and shelter. It fires our purpose and allows it to unfold in life giving ways. A spirituality of vulnerability calls us to let "The false burdens fall away" so we can come into a rhythm with ourselves where "Our clay shape gradually learns to walk beautifully on this magnificent earth." (O'Donohue 2)

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The question for us to consider here is, how do we allow vulnerability to become a source of meaning in our lives and a blessed gift to us?
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As Christians the significance of our lives is rooted in the incarnation of Jesus. Daniel O'Leary tells us that this incarnation of Jesus means that, "From the beginning God was in love with us and wanted to live among us, and as us, to reveal to us what true humanity looks like." (O'Leary 162) Vulnerability invites us into the realisation that we are beloved of God and asks us to trust in that love to find our divine, infinite potential.

Brené Brown whose research on vulnerability is the underpinning of this reflection-believes that vulnerability is, "The core, the heart, the centre, of meaningful human experiences." (Brown, Daring Greatly 244) She makes the point that being vulnerable is about being at home in your own skin, knowing you are worthy of love and respect; knowing that you are not perfect; that you stumble and fail at times; that you get caught in the baggage you carry.

But vulnerability is also about an innate capacity within us to get up and try all over again. This buoyant capacity prevents us from falling into the black hole of darkness and despair, which is triggered by feelings of shame, imperfection and failure. It enables us to rediscover our own innate goodness and beauty. Each of us holds the potential within to move towards new horizons of growth and possibility. We need to believe in ourselves and not allow

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ourselves we put limits on the power and strength we hold.

Being vulnerable is not about having a passive and easy nature. On the contrary vulnerability asks for great courage and for resilience; resilience in addressing some aspects of our ancestry and our habitual ways of thinking. Vulnerability also requires resilience in addressing the negative narratives we carry about ourselves and others. Vulnerability then invites us to have the courage to trust and entrust ourselves to others. That is not to say that we open ourselves to everyone or that we are careless and indiscriminate in what we say or how we

behave. "Vulnerability is based on mutuality and needs boundaries and trust. Sharing appropriately with boundaries, means sharing with people with whom we've developed relationships that can bear the weight of our story. The result of this mutually respectful vulnerability is increased connection, trust and engagement." (Brown, Daring Greatly 45)

A significant focus of Brené Brown's extensive research on vulnerability is around people who embrace vulnerability in their lives. She calls them Wholehearted people. From her research on Wholehearted people Brené named characteristics that were common among them. Some of these are:

- ≈ They have let go of who they thought they should be.
- ≈ They have courage to be imperfect.
- ≈ They have compassion for themselves and can offer this compassion in relationships with others.
- ≈ They make strong connections/relationships because they are authentic.
- ≈ They have a sense of their own beauty and know they are worth loving.

Vulnerability springs from and lives in the heart of love. This love has no strings attached nor is it dependent on

reward, achievement or success. It is made real and visible in compassionate presence and goodness.

Vulnerability and Empathy

Albert Einstein said that many of us live in a prison that restricts the vision of our world to our own personal needs and those of a few people that surround us. He reminds us of our true purpose. "Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

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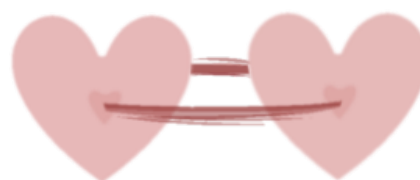
When we expand our circle of compassion it draws us into a unitive consciousness which broadens our perspective inviting us to see others in a contemplative way from God's perspective.

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Ilia Delio takes this expansive unitive consciousness, further when she explains that "Deep in our DNA we belong to the stars, the trees, and the galaxies. Deep within we long for unity because, at the most fundamental level, we are already one. We belong to one another because we have the same source of love the love that flows through the trees is the same love that flows through my being. . . We are

deeply connected in this flow of love. (Delio 179-180)

Margaret J. Wheatley comments further on what can happen when we recognise our interdependence. "When we seek for connection, we restore the world to wholeness. Our seemingly separate lives become meaningful as we discover how truly necessary, we are to each other." When we become conscious of our interconnection and need of one another we help each other grow into wholeness.



Holding each other in conscious awareness of our oneness, in this flow of love that we share, nurtures our capacity for empathy. Empathy is that disposition which allows us to understand what it feels like for the other. But if we have resisted vulnerability and prevented ourselves from feeling negative emotions such as grief, loss, heartache and hurt then we cannot understand what it feels like in the heart of another. "It stands to reason that to see and understand emotions in others, you have to be able to recognize and understand those same emotions within yourself." (Sullivan)

Brene Brown says that “Empathy fuels connection” and that it, “Is a choice and it’s a vulnerable choice. Because in order to connect with you, I have to connect with something in myself that knows that feeling.” (Brown, RSA)

People who are consciously empathetic are those who face and deal with their negative emotions and who are aware of and in touch with their own vulnerabilities. Empathic people, “Are in touch with their own vulnerabilities. They can access their own painful experiences and sit with you in yours. Feeling truly heard or understood is something we experience so little anymore that when a vulnerable person meets us exactly where we are, it is a deeply moving experience.” (Sullivan) When we attend to the inner work of our own growth and development, we deepen our connections with others and in turn our lives are enriched in relationship.



Vulnerable, empathetic people live with a sense of love that is compassionate and grateful. They know in their lived experience that, “To share your

weakness is to make yourself vulnerable; to make yourself vulnerable is to show your strength.” (Jami).

Vulnerability and Intimacy

The paradox of vulnerability is that when we allow our wounds to be seen and touched we are not diminished but rather, we are healed, strengthened and find new meaning. As John O’Donohue says in his book *Anam Cara* “When love comes into your life, unrecognized dimensions of your destiny awaken and blossom and grow.” Vulnerability is the bedrock of intimacy. It fosters intimacy, physical intimacy and/or an intimacy of heart, mind and spirit. In this place of vulnerability, trust, understanding and connection is experienced and deepened.

“Vulnerability is that space within which human beings can truly meet each other and speak the same language... Deep down, vulnerability and surrender are what we most deeply want”. (Rolheiser)

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To enter this depth with another
requires great courage and
openness, as we tend to hide our
failings and woundedness from
fear of judgement or rejection.

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Henri J.M. Nouwen, says that intimacy is the fruit that grows through touching one another's wounds. (Nouwen)

Living the gift of vulnerability opens us to possibilities beyond imagining in relationship to ourselves, to others, to Earth and to the ever-present origin of all life – God. It enables us to stand in the acceptance of our own truth; it calls us into empathy; it allows deep and meaningful connections to form; it asks us to stand in oneness with all of creation.

“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.” (Brown, Daring Greatly 34)

About the Author



Hilary Musgrave, from Tramore, County Waterford, Ireland, is a former Teacher, Principal and Religious Education Advisor in the Dublin Diocese. She received her Master's Degree in Pastoral Ministry and Spirituality and a Post Masters Certificate the The Practice of Spirituality from Boston College. She works extensively in the area of Creative Spirituality through sacred clowning, story-telling and facilitation with Monica Brown from Emmaus Productions. Since 2003, Hilary and Monica have facilitated Celtic Pilgrimages in

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