

SOT Reunion Keynote – June 22, 2018 – The Call to Vulnerability

Tonight we celebrate the School of Theology. Its graduates and alums, one in particular (Chuck Ceronsky) whose life of service and call to healing we honor in a special way. We also celebrate this place, this people, this community of faith and formation.

But what is it that we share—beyond a strange hankering for Johnnie bread or the ability to weather the polar vortex of Minnesotan winters?

I would argue that we share a call—to vulnerability. And from that call to vulnerability, come our particular callings. No matter where we have gone or served, taught or worked since our days connected to the SOT, I believe this community prepares its students for the kind of vulnerable love and service that every personal and professional calling ultimately demands.

I've spent a long time thinking, studying, researching, and writing about calling. Since I graduated from the SOT nine years ago, I've been working with Kathleen Cahalan on the Collegeville Institute Seminars: an interdisciplinary, ecumenical project that aims to develop more robust practical theologies of vocation. I'm now directing a new project on vocation for the Collegeville Institute—the Communities of Calling Initiative—which seeks to help congregations support the callings of all their members to God's work in the world.

So I've been working on vocation and calling for a long time. But vulnerability? This is something new for me.

Let's start with a definition. (I'm a writer, so I love etymologies.) What does vulnerability mean? The word comes from the Latin "vulnerare": to wound. To be vulnerable is to be capable of being wounded.

Google has a fascinating tool called the Ngram viewer. The Ngram viewer shows the frequency of how often words appear in books. Over the past 50 years, the use of "vulnerability" has skyrocketed. Its frequency has increased by 800% in English-language books since 1960.

Why is this a buzzword now? Are we discovering our own vulnerability? Our culture's? Civilization as we know it? The vulnerability of the very planet we call home?

Perhaps the persistent press of the Doomsday Clock toward midnight has something to do with it. As does our all-access, 24/7, tell-all, tweet-all culture of social media, selfies, and armchair confessionals.

But lest we relegate vulnerability to pop psychology or Oprah's latest "Super Soul Sunday," we would do well to recognize the place of vulnerability within our Christian faith, and in particular, our Catholic tradition.

Vulnerability also has to do with the nature of God's love, in particular, the fact that God's own heart is capable of being wounded. This is what we see depicted in images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This is what happened when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The Incarnation and the Passion both teach us: that love depends on vulnerability. God chose to love like this: to be born as a helpless baby, into poverty, utterly dependent on others. Then to give his body—his very flesh—over to be tortured and crucified, only to rise with wounds that still bore witness to his vulnerability, proof of the power of love.

Sometimes we think vulnerability has to do with weakness, shame, fear, the possibility of pain or rejection. But I would argue that vulnerability is ultimately how we connect with others most deeply and how we come to know more of God.

I came to this truth about vulnerability through writing about grief and through connecting with others through their losses and suffering. In 2016 my husband and I had twin daughters who were born prematurely and lived only a few days. While we had experienced infertility and then miscarriage as part of our road to parenting three sons, we never imagined the depths of what the loss of these two children would do to us.

Since I was already a writer, I took to writing to help me make sense of this profound grief—to sort through the existential questions that such suffering raises (how could a good God allow this to happen? Was death a part of God's plan?). As I wrote and shared much of these thoughts through my blog and other places I was writing online, I witnessed a profound response to my own vulnerability.

Readers would write and tell me stories they had never told anyone—about children they had lost, about grief for family members that continued to shape their lives decades later. But these weren't just stories about sorrow or depression. There were also stories about joy or God they had never told anyone else.

While holding our second daughter as she died in our arms in the hospital NICU, my husband and I experienced a powerful moment of—I still honestly don't know what to call it. God? Joy? Grace? Some foretaste of heaven? Words always fall short when I try to capture the fullness of what we felt and understood in those most beautiful, perfect hours of my life.

Whenever I share about this, in writing or when I'm speaking to groups, people will reach out later and say: "I had an experience like that, too. I know what you mean. I have never told a soul about it—or I did tell people and they thought I was crazy. But I know that kind of joy in grief." That kind of absolute affirmation that God exists and is good beyond anything we can imagine.

And these stories, these experiences, these connections—all of them were born of vulnerability. Mine and theirs.

The calling to vulnerability that I experienced through my daughters' deaths was not a calling I ever anticipated (and could never have prepared for). But did this place, the School of Theology, help form my capacity for vulnerability? Absolutely.

First and foremost, the SOT is a community that gathers around the Word and the table, at Convivium and at Eucharist. In the Eucharist, God is made as vulnerable to us as in the Incarnation or the Passion. Jesus' own body is broken open and given to us, freely out of love. In the words of Saint Augustine, we become what we receive.

Secondly, and flowing out of this embodied practice and presence, the SOT is concerned with the formation of the whole person: the mind, certainly, but also the body, spirit, and soul. And the formation of the person happens in community: living, working, and learning alongside others who also want to know, love, and serve God.

Ultimately our experience of community is as important (if not more so) that what we learn from books. It is this spirit of community that we celebrate in reunion today: gathering, remembering, rejoicing, and giving thanks.

Of course, we know that the reality of community is complicated and conflicted. Wherever two or three are gathered, there is Christ in their midst, but there is also sin, misunderstanding, and pain. My husband and I joke that it only takes two children in a room to illustrate the basis of every geopolitical conflict (we need only think of the story of the first two brothers, Cain and Abel). Every marriage, every family, every parish, every school, and every religious community teaches this truth: humans are hard to get along with.

But vulnerability is what allows us to start bridging the hard gaps between each of us. It is the beginning of forgiveness, the precondition for friendship, the birthplace of love. Vulnerability allows us to see and be seen.

Our call to vulnerability is not a call to bare our soul to every stranger, but to let ourselves be honest and vulnerable with those closest to us. This stance can transform our relationships, our marriages and friendships, but especially our relationship with God. And this vulnerability, then, shapes the Christian witness that we bear to the world.

As part of our work on vocation with the Collegeville Institute, Kathleen Cahalan and I wrote a book called *Living Your Discipleship* about the call to discipleship that Christians share. In this book we looked at 7 aspects of discipleship and what they mean for our vocations: our sense of God's call in our lives.

We argued that to be a disciple is to be a follower, worshiper, forgiver, neighbor, prophet, steward, and witness. That all of these 7 aspects of the call to discipleship in the New Testament stand as callings for us today, within the unique contexts and circumstances of our lives.

And now I can see how vulnerability is bound up with each one.

We are called to be a follower and a worshiper—which means vulnerability in our relationship with God.

We are called to be a forgiver and a neighbor—which demands vulnerability in our relationships with others.

We are called to be a prophet, a steward, and a witness—which invites vulnerability in our work and daily lives.

All seven of these aspects of discipleship involve vulnerability because they involve other people! We can do none of them in a vacuum.

Whatever our particular vocations—to be a teacher or minister, a healer or preacher, a parent or pastor—we are called to do it out of this vulnerable love that God models for us.

If we teach, we are called to let our students and colleagues change and teach us in turn, to let our hearts be open to them, class after class, year after year.

If we minister in a church or diocese, hospital or school, we are called to let our hearts remain flesh, not stone, to resist becoming hardened by sin, structures, or systems that frustrate our work, to remain vulnerable in hope and faith.

If we are single, married, ordained, or professed religious, we are called to live vulnerably in love and forgiveness with those with whom we share our lives.

And all of us are called, as Saint Benedict reminds us in the Rule, to “keep death daily before our eyes.” Mortality is our ultimate vulnerability: to love with death in mind, to look past daily grievances, worries, and small slights to see the long view of what really matters. To devote our lives to these mysteries of faith—seeking to understand them, live them, teach them—this is the common Christian calling we share.

Tonight we honor Chuck and his call to be a healer through his chaplaincy work. All of us who have been formed by the SOT can honor and reflect on our own calls to give and receive healing, to be a channel through which God's mercy can flow. Through our vulnerability, we too can become healers—but vulnerable, wounded healers.

While Carl Jung coined the term, Henri Nouwen, of course, wrote the book on the concept. Nouwen argued that ministers are called to recognize their own sufferings and those of the world in order to serve others. “Our service will not be perceived as authentic,” Nouwen wrote, “unless it comes from a heart wounded by the suffering about which we speak.”

The paradox of the wounded healer captures the reality of Resurrection, too: that Christ kept his wounds, showed them to his friends as proof of himself and his love, and it was by these wounds not only that we were healed, in the words of Isaiah, but it was also by these wounds that we, like Thomas, would know him.

If we are intimidated to claim any calling to be a healer, then this notion of “wounded healing” may open up the possibility. I certainly have known wounds in my life, wounds that have opened my heart to the suffering of others, wounds that have led me to love deeper and with greater compassion than I had before I endured such pain.

Being a wounded healer is not weakness, but vulnerability: a stance of openness to others and a willingness to learn from—not run from—the sufferings of life. As we connect to God's own heart—powerful yet paradoxically vulnerable—we can draw our love and service from this depth of compassion.

Henri Nouwen wrote that “To love life means to love its vulnerability.” This is what the SOT and its students and alumni are called to do and be. We are wounded ministers, we are vulnerable teachers, we are imperfect spouses and parents, brothers and sisters.

We cannot choose to love or serve without the possibility that our hearts might break along the way. But the risk of vulnerability is also what allows new life to be born.

In my life, vulnerability has become the heart of my vocations—both as a parent and as a writer in this call to keep sharing stories that draw forth truth from readers' own lives.

I wrote this talk on the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart at the beginning of June. Ever since my daughters died, and I have come to know more of the woundedness of God's own heart that grieves and mourns with us, the Sacred Heart has become a deeply meaningful feast—a feast of vulnerability.

The images of Christ that I found troubling as a child, Jesus pointing to his pierced heart, uncovered by skin or clothing, wounded out of love, now remind me how the heart of God is so vulnerable. This is how God loves so deeply, no holding back. And Christ points right to it: this is the point of who He is.

The prayers from Liturgical Press' "Give Us This Day" book on the Feast of the Sacred Heart spoke to the heart—pun intended—of our call to vulnerability. I offer them tonight in closing as our prayer:

Faithful God, you embrace all life in your tender mercy. Mindful of your great compassion shown to us in the sacred heart of Jesus we pray: God in your love, hear us.

Make your Church a place of welcome, safety, and love for all people.

Heal the brokenhearted and bind up all their wounds.

Extend our prayer and your mercy to the forgotten places in the world.

This vulnerable, healing mercy is what we do, here in this place and out in the world. This is who we are, and how we are called to love.

Thank you.