

From Fragility to Circular Vulnerability

Jean-Marc Barreau, PhD

At the end of 2017, I published my fourth book, with the title: *Soins Palliatifs. Accompagner pour vivre!*¹ Although the critics were unanimously favourable, some were nonetheless surprised that its content addresses the question of the end of earthly life not from a theological viewpoint, but rather from one that is exclusively anthropological.²

To be honest, I appreciated the criticism. In my opinion, it underlined the difficulty that our Church encounters with the “concrete ... historical man”³ perspective, as Saint John Paul II was already telling us in his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis (RH, 1979, see no. 13)*. In this short article, I will only respond to that issue with reference to the following question: “Doesn’t the fragility inherent at the end of life necessitate that any accompaniment process be subject to a requirement in which the starting point is human kind, that is, the ‘concrete’ experience of man?”

As a health care worker (attendant, companion or guide) in palliative care,⁴ I like to talk about the “magnifying glass syndrome.” This term is a way of popularizing the fact that everything that is experienced at the end of life is potentially present in our societies, in our families, in our joint living together. Potentially present in the life of the companion and the health professional!

The Fragility of Our Relationship to Finitude

And without wishing to risk listing a litany of the different types of fragility, it seems obvious to me that among all these fragilities there is one that emerges above the others, to the point that we can recognize it as the fragility that cuts across all the others. It is the question of the vertigo of human beings in their relationship to their own end: finitude. Some respond with denial, others with anger, if not flight. Faced with the reality of their death, nearly everyone responds with some form of vertiginous spiritual suffering!⁵

The relationship to finitude therefore constitutes a cross-cutting spiritual suffering. It emerges and roots itself in the psycho-spiritual reality of an aging body. Year after year, this body deteriorates until it becomes the broadcaster for an end that is announced, but not yet truly absorbed.

Henceforth, the accompaniment consists of making that cross-cutting fragility, as well as each of its corollaries—loss of vital forces, loss of autonomy (physical, psychological, relational)—become not a place of guilt and tension, but rather a place of opening up. This is the challenge of accompaniment. Allowing the patient to accept such fragility visited, so that accompanied, it becomes transformed into vulnerability.

¹ Barreau, Jean-Marc, *Soins Palliatifs. Accompagner pour vivre!* [Palliative Care: Accompanying to Live!] Paris, Médiaspaul, 2017, 282 pages.

² I mean a philosophical anthropology.

³ We use the word “man” in its generic sense, without attributing any type of discrimination.

⁴ For the past five years, since the opening of palliative care at the Marie-Clarac Hospital in Montreal, each week I accompany its patients who are near the end of their life on earth, 36 to date.

⁵ In my book, I propose a classification of spiritual suffering. See *Soins palliatifs. Accompagner...*, p. 11-166.

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In this mutation, fragility is the necessary material in order for the accompaniment process to “tip” the accompanied person into a vulnerability of growth. Herein lies the dignity of the person being accompanied! On the one hand, fragility becomes vulnerability because “brought forth” by the individual to their guide. On the other hand, fragility becoming vulnerability is, simultaneously “carried” by the accompanier. Therein lies the dignity of the guide!

And it is indeed, because the “offering” made to the guide transports the latter to his own fragility that the accompaniment process comes together around two vulnerabilities face-to-face with one another: the vulnerabilities of two humanities in desire for growth. This encounter of vulnerabilities prepares the fertile ground for a common quest for meaning that had been previously paralyzed by the fear of “unveiling” oneself to the other, from “I” to “you.”

If it were necessary to illustrate this essential reality of accompaniment, we would refer the reader to the image of the gardener who plunges his two hands into the humus of the earth to deposit in the earth a seed of life. This gives rise to two further images; two hands: that of the guided and that of the guide and the image of life: that of the seed fertilized by two vulnerabilities. This is what I refer to as circular vulnerability.

Towards a Common Quest for Meaning

When I talk about “circular vulnerability,”⁶ I do not induce the fact that the guide is forced to deliver his own fragilities to the guided (we would then have naught but a poor caricature of accompaniment). When I speak of this magnificent circular vulnerability, I insist on the “truth of life,” on the fact that circular vulnerability leads us to a common quest for meaning. That is why moral judgement in the accompaniment process is so terrible, it stifles the search for truth, hence the quest for life...

To truly understand the successive impacts of acts of circular vulnerability, I invite you to take a look at the heartbreaking story of Victoria and Joseph in my book,⁷ in which we see circular vulnerability overcoming those walls of resentment accumulated over so many decades.

The “Concrete Poor”

Whit Pope Francis’ strong and insistent exhortation to the universal Church to go out on the paths of its “peripheries,”⁸ isn’t the Pastor calling upon each of us to become passionately aware, like an outstretched hand, of one’s own fragility?

Do not the “concrete poor,”⁹ the people who are so often marginalized in our Christian and religious communities, have a prophetic mission to remind us of the burdensome reality of our existence as vulnerable men and women? Is this not a reality in which any accompaniment is nevertheless rooted? It is from this mix of our human fragilities,

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47-52.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80-84.

⁸ Jean-Marc Barreau, *François et la miséricorde* [Francis and Mercy], Paris, Médiaspaul, 2015, p. 73-75.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

collected respectfully as a core foundation, that the good wine, the nectar of vulnerability of *living life* will come to fruition.

Would not this be a question of philosophical anthropology, lined with a question of Christian mysticism?

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