

Returning to Our Original Love: The Grace of Vulnerability

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How might our embrace of vulnerability help us be even more effective leaders?

Returning to our original Love is a “coming home” to that place for which we long, that place for which our restless hearts were made. It is the place that drew us forward to this life. We can spend years unsuccessfully searching to return home, wending myriad pathways titled “success,” “comfort,” “security” or “affirmation.” Yet it is the unchosen path, often named “failure,” “fear” or “dead end,” that may offer us the grace of true homecoming. The way home -- the home for which our hearts were made -- is typically by way of a path

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Great literature is marked by tales of heroes whose true victory follows a dreaded encounter with the monster of the story. The lives of saints are filled with the accounts of women and men whose relinquishment of ego-centered projects enabled them to enter deeply into relationship with the Holy One. Simply put, a common theme of life involves letting go of what we thought to be our sure defense to encounter, in one’s

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felt nakedness, the power to welcome and speak the truth. The hero or saint or prophet learns that walking this pathway requires vulnerability -- and this includes embracing the possibility of failure or annihilation.

Great literature, children’s fairy tales, and the lives of saints all have in common the ultimate willingness of the hero, the child, the saint to accept the grace of vulnerability in some form in service to a greater good. In fact, their acceptance of this grace allows them to overcome the adverse circumstances they face and achieve success, safety, holiness, and freedom in their true home.

What might this mean to us, leaders of congregations with concerns of seemingly heroic proportion? What is graced vulnerability?

The word "vulnerable" finds its root in the Latin *vulnus* – wound. "Vulnerable" translates to "able to be wounded." Author Brené Brown, whose life's research focus is vulnerability, defines vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure." She goes to great pains to point out the difference between vulnerability (able to be wounded) and weakness (inability to withstand wounding). She reminds us that "vulnerability is the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experiences." [1]

Graced vulnerability does involve being able to be wounded. More, there is purpose in the wounding. Responding to the grace to be vulnerable calls for the acknowledgement that there is someone or something beyond us that deserves risking the best of ourselves without reservation. The risk of our fortune or our reputation or our life is worth the price of serving the person or the ideal calling us forth. In our tradition, we name the person, the one greater, God. We claim the Gospel as that ideal. In responding with graced vulnerability, we touch once again the one who first called us to move beyond our own interests to that which is greater, the one who is truly our Original Love. The circle is complete.

Most of us have already learned the lesson of graced vulnerability. We know the challenge, the resistance, the pain, and the freedom experienced in living this dynamic. As we age, that cycle becomes more familiar and, perhaps, easier to negotiate. A question remains for us who are called to leadership: What does this mean for us as leaders? How do we as community respond to the call to graced vulnerability?

We hear hints of an answer in stories of women whose chapter decisions include the recognition that their institute is at a point of completion or that it is time to sell the motherhouse. Stories of our foremothers who risked societal or church sanction in their foundation stories, of our sisters who with little education and minimal resources established institutions to provide education and healthcare

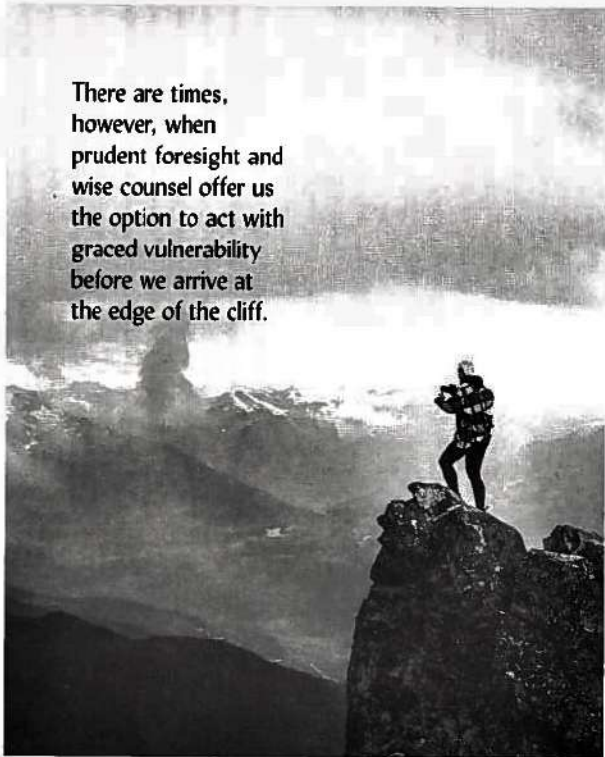
for those in need, of today's prophets who risked new ways of living religious life and ministering to the people of God all speak to us of the graced vulnerability these women lived.

Too often, as we recall these stories, we cite these prophetic women and note significant achievements. We fail to see in them invitations to us to listen to the call of grace today. We forget that we are part of those chosen in this day and at this time to continue to write the salvation history story of our congregation. Problems overwhelm our agendas, and we focus on finding solutions. Seeing them as occasions for living graced vulnerability -- opportunities to risk -- might open our minds and hearts to even more avenues of response.

Sometimes, we find ourselves in positions of vulnerability by default and stand figuratively at the brink of a precipice with the choice being jump

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or get pushed off. Sometimes these circumstances are unavoidable. There are times, however, when prudent foresight and wise counsel offer us the option to act with graced vulnerability before we arrive at the edge of the cliff. Too often, our fear of failing or need for certainty that our decision is correct prevent us from yielding to the graced call to vulnerability.



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The successes we have enjoyed in so many ministerial ventures over the past decades have numbered some of us in our willingness to act boldly and risk failure. Might we consider trying new things or responding in new ways with an air of freedom and adventure, allowing for the fact that not all will succeed? Dare we look for the gifts and learnings that the experience of failure will bring? Somehow, we have forgotten the wisdom and life lessons that stories of our failures contain.

In seeking to better respond to invitations to act with graced vulnerability, Inspector Armand Gamache, the protagonist in Louise Penny's series of novels set in Quebec's Three Pines, might help. In their training to be members of an elite investigative division, *Sûreté du Québec*, Inspector Gamache instructs his new officers to learn and use four simple phrases. He assures them that they are necessary if they are to succeed in their chosen work. He insists that the capacity to admit to the truth of each of these statements in specific circumstances would ensure the possibility of success in their law enforcement careers. These four statements are: "I was wrong." "I'm sorry." "I don't know." "I need help."



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It is no surprise that these bits of wisdom are initially met with little respect and even derision by the inspector's new officers. Yet, as the series proceeds, the power of these admissions is unmistakable. As is the tragedy when the need to acknowledge their truth is ignored.

We have probably experienced the truth of each of these statements in our own lives. Whether we had the courage to utter them is another matter. We might have acknowledged an error or need for our apology, our ignorance or need for assistance, to a trusted friend. How easy is it, however, to acknowledge this truth to those whose responses we cannot predict or those whom we anticipate pouncing on such an admission? Yet, it is in the very statement of our vulnerability that we invite the other to relationship, to exploring the truth, to arriving at greater potential. Such is the action of graced vulnerability. Might acting on these suggestions bring us to deeper levels of relationship with one another?

In the March 2022 hearings preceding her appointment to the Supreme Court of the United States, Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson offered us an example of graced vulnerability in a statement

akin to "I was wrong." In her prepared introduction, she said she was "saving a special moment ... for my daughters," and went on to note, "I know it has not been easy as I have tried to navigate the challenges of juggling my career and motherhood. *And I fully admit that I did not always get that balance right.*" (Italics added). *The Washington Post* titled Michele Norris' article covering this presentation "The timeless truth that Ketanji Brown Jackson said out loud." [2] In acknowledging in a public forum, which most certainly included opposition, her less than perfect performance, Justice Brown left herself vulnerable in the moment and to future commentators who might use her vulnerability against her.

The significance of this admission for us lies not so much in the acknowledgement of the challenge of balancing a career and motherhood as in the risk of publicly acknowledging something as difficult and accompanying imperfect results. How might we risk shattering myths related to our leadership roles by simply admitting their challenges and the unevenness of success? Might doing so also serve to free others from the burden of this myth?

Concluding this reflection on vulnerability with advice from a fictional leader in criminal investigation and an example from a recent congressional hearing may seem strange. The risk is that you will discover in these stories a call to graced vulnerability. May you find that your response once again completes the circle, bringing you ever closer to your Original Love.

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Endnotes

1. Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*, New York: Penguin Random House, 2012
2. Michele L. Norris, *Washington Post*, "The timeless truth Ketanji Brown Jackson said out loud," March 22, 2022



Miriam Ukeritis, CSJ (center): "... it is in the very statement of our vulnerability that we invite the other to relationship, to exploring the truth, to arriving at greater potential."