

The Power In Vulnerability*

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We often think of human life as residing in individual bodies. We think about each other as if I were a Thing and you were a Thing and we two Things interact now and then, all the while remaining separate entities. This is not a very powerful model for describing how our lives are sustained or how we in fact develop our capacity to contribute to each other and to our society at large.

I believe that it is more powerful to think about human life as if it were a thread floating between and connecting bodies –giving each body the capacity to be a person. Alone I am alive but not revealed or fulfilled. In relationship with one person I am able to become the qualities that the relationship allows for. For example in relationship with my mother I am enabled to be a child, a student, a loved one, a potential caregiver as she becomes older, and much more.

When I come into relationship with two people I acquire the capacity to become more than twice of what I am with one person. The presence of both individuals to each other creates possibilities that don't exist with each alone with me. For example my mother and my mother's friend each see me as a very different person, drawing different capacities from me. My mother and her friend together create their own new possibilities in the world and, connected with me, we create yet even more possibilities of me, more than either one does with me alone.

As an individual's relationships increase in number and diversity the possibilities for that person give great room for that person to both become themselves and draw forth new capacity in others. In other words one or two threads will offer little support but a gossamer network of even five or six threads has strength to sustain a rich life.

Euthanasia and other Sanctity of Life questions are raised very often these days when people with disabilities are being talked about. The focus of discussion is inevitably on the person's physical and cognitive functioning. The concern is to determine a benchmark of capacity that would allow experts to say with certainty when it is appropriate to end a "damaged" life. But physical and cognitive functioning are virtually no more than a necessary condition for life. In the presence of a body from human parents –breathing, if only assisted by a respirator– I am in the presence of the first essential for human life. The condition of having a breathing body really only sets a background for me to have capacity.

When I am in relationship with other individuals and if these others are networked with each other and especially if these others are different from each other, the possibility exists for all of us to have a rich life, drawing on each oth-

er's gifts. Differences in each other's physical and cognitive functioning, our interests, history and experience, our possessions and resources only add to the mix of possibilities that increase our total capacity.

Many people, especially parents of a newly labeled child, establish their relationship with a person who is handicapped through a process of identifying a need the person is struggling with or through empathizing with an experience of injustice that the person is undergoing. Taking on the role of therapist and advocate, one person stands by the other.

Therapy calls for the person with a handicap to be seen as needing to be fixed in some way. Advocacy calls for the person with a handicap to be viewed as a victim of some outrageous misfortune or circumstance. Both these stances have value and can lead to good for the person and the community. But neither approach calls for a contribution from the labeled person in order to sustain the relationship or the work. And if success in therapy or advocacy is not quickly forthcoming the relationship must suffer. Paradoxically even success can destroy such a relationship because success erodes its foundation.

Sustained vibrant relationship demands that the person with a handicap be viewed with a different vision and listened to with a different ear. Foremost of the alternative possibilities is to see and hear the person as a welcome fellow traveler. We must see our shared life journey as one of transforming human suffering by creating the supportive relationships we all need to sustain life and of celebrating together life's joys, victories and surprises.

As fellow participants in an imperfect community many persons with disabilities have valuable gifts to offer. Some show a capacity to take a great deal of satisfaction from very simple everyday occurrences. The unusual behavior of others can be a contribution to those who find society's restricted codes too tight for self-expression. The silent ones may be the best listeners. The very presence of many people with handicaps is a means out of the overwhelming individualism imposed by society's norms. Then there is an unlimited number of possible gifts that individually each person with a handicap can develop, like everyone, the nature of which can only be determined by those who stand close enough to watch, listen, care and share.

Welcoming into community those who have been excluded and recreating community so that these people's giftedness becomes part of everyday life – this is the strong road to building the capacity of communities everywhere.

*Written in 1989