



Prophets and Seers: Vulnerability

as the heart of transformation

Donald Eadie



An address recorded on camera due to the fact that I was not in a condition physically or emotionally to negotiate the journey into central London nor sustain the days.

Vulnerability as the heart of transformation

Introduction

Welcome to my much loved room.

I am grateful to Fiona, Anne and Bob for their imagination, determination, sensitivity and generosity in making this link possible. Now I can speak of **'our conference'** in St Martin in the Fields and not **'yours.'**

This is the first time I have engaged with a camera in this way and am a little nervous. I hope that speaking from a text that has taken years in the emerging does not come across as being too stilted.

I choose to speak on the theme: 'Vulnerability as the heart of transformation.' These are not my words but those of our former Anglican Archbishop, Rowan Williams. Also I have chosen to speak in the context of a question: What could our experience of the human body, and in particular those of us who live with impairments, physical and psychological, bring to our being re-shaped within the Body of Christ?

'We are,' as the Psalmist said, 'wondrously made.' (Psalm 139:14) The human body has infinite pathways of communication, memories stored up in organs and cells. The body is our teacher yet we are so slow in our learning, in our listening, and in our being gentle with it.

The journey from the centre to the edge

First I begin by speaking personally and of the journey from the center to the edge. For much of my life I have taken my body for granted, enjoyed sport, loved walking in the mountains and through most of my working life and to my shame worked all hours. In 1987 I commenced my work as Chairman of the Birmingham District of the Methodist Church. Five years later my experience of living with my body changed. I was told that I have a developing degenerative disc disease.

There have been 3 major spinal operations including the implanting of scaffolding to support the spine. I live with continuing pain and physical limitation. I am unable to stand or sit for more than a few minutes.

I asked those in authority in the Methodist Church for help to minister from a chair, a ministry of stability and availability, and was told that to be a Minister I must be mobile and be able to work a three shift day. I was confused, I was angry and I wept.

The journey away from the centre of the busy life of the church to the edge, was paradoxically, a journey deeper into the heart of things. It was unexpected, unwanted and yet became a frightening liberation.

What were the fears?

The letting go of identity, role and relationships.
Living with the new aloneness, the new silence, the new limitation.
Living with feelings of marginalisation and abandonment.
And living with the death of the old life, and not being able to imagine a new life with meaning and purpose.

During this time a Jesuit priest, Gerry Hughes, came to visit me and we began to explore what was happening and to interpret the meaning. He accompanied me in this way for nearly 10 years. He helped me both to build a bridge into the future and later to let go dreams and wishes, and to face the emptiness and the waiting within weakness.

Waiting with openness for what is new is not easy. In this experience we become pilgrims. It was Gerry who spoke of the journey from the centre into the borderlands. 'The borderlands,' he said, 'are the place of exploration and discovery, they are the new centre.'

'There will be new companions,' a wise old friend promised. And to my great surprise and joy this has been true. I have met wonderful people I never knew existed. I have encountered prophetic communities.

Much of my time was, and still is lived in a loved room.
And people began to come to the room, not for counseling or therapy but as those who are also pilgrims within the borderlands, just as I had experienced with Gerry.

Some seek the life-giving presence of God within this wondrous and terrifying world, and within the story of our lives. Others seek help to live their faithfulness to God within complex and ambiguous situations.

Some are bruised and oppressed through different forms of religious bullying yet continue to live with a poignant sense of the 'otherness' and the intimacy of God, and ask if this is enough?

Others appear to be beyond the reach of the Church yet have spiritual needs and ask faith questions.

'This room has become my Church.' one person said. And months later: 'No, the world has become my Church.'

Physical limitation, perhaps even divine calling, brings some of us to a marginalised place. It becomes a conversion experience

A Dutchman, a director of mission from Rotterdam also visited my room. He spoke of our listening to the voices of people and communities on the margins in society **as the mission priority**. 'The borderlands,' he said, 'are the context where God's Spirit works to convert the Church.'

I speak first of the journey from the centre to the edge.

And second: I speak of the connection between our experience of our body with the body of Christ.

We are understandably hesitant to make these connections.

For Paul the imagery of the body is central to both his experience and his teaching.

'We are all brought into the one body by baptism.' (1 Corinthians 12:13 cf)

'When we break bread, is it not a means of sharing in the body of Christ?' (1 Corinthians 10: 17)

God's call, says Paul is to be drawn into the mystery of the Body of Christ, to share in his life, suffering, death and resurrection.

'We carry in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our body.' (2 Corinthians 4:10)

The power of the resurrection is only experienced through suffering and the cross. This perplexing mystery belongs to the way of God in the world.

'The continuing passion of God in the world,' a South African friend said, 'is carried not in abstract ideas but in our human bodies and souls, in our willingness to absorb evil, suffering, grief and shame willingly.'

I want to introduce you to some of those new companions who have helped me to make these connections.

In 1997 a group of priests, women in religious orders and Methodist Ministers, all living with physical or psychological impairments began to meet together in Birmingham. We still come together 4 or 5 times a year like children to nursery, each of us clutching our sandwiches.

There have been 12 of us and among them:

Angela, an Australian Franciscan nun who lives with MS, is in a wheel chair.

Bob, an Anglican priest who also has MS and is in a wheel chair.

Stan is a Methodist Minister and has lived for many years with the illness called depression and Kath is his wife. Stan now lives with cancer.

Bernie is a La Retraite sister living with a severe spinal condition and with pain.

John is an Anglican parish priest and his wife Jo. She was born with cerebral palsy. She is in a wheel chair and communicates through a small light pointer attached to her head which beams onto a qwerty keyboard on her lap.

Geoffrey, also an Anglican priest with his wife Janet. He is in the foothills of dementia..

In this group we explore the mystery and meaning of our own suffering, we are real, and not heroic, we listen and learn from the discoveries and insights of others with acceptance and without judgments, and we seek the resources to live honestly and compassionately within places of darkness, weariness, frustration, pain and vulnerability.

It is our experience that the Church speaks much of pain and suffering but is embarrassed by it.

What are we learning?

We are learning from the experience of dependency, for some this means dependency on others for the toilet, for the washing not only of our feet but the whole body, for receiving food and drink, for being dressed and undressed. We know something of being stripped of roles, responsibilities and masks, of nakedness and exposure, of the loss of dignity, and of humiliation.

Jesus at the end of his life was also stripped, stretched horizontal on a cross, and handed over to others, and in his final hours is shown as almost naked. We are beginning to make the connections of his physical vulnerability with our own experience of weakness. And more, we are discovering theological and spiritual meaning within this experience of our bodies.

We are learning from our experience of pain, of physical and psychological pain inter-connected within the memory of the body.

We are critical of a Western medical culture that sees pain as simply something to be got rid of, anaesthetized, zapped. We are learning that pain can be a message.

We consider the place of pain in the Christian pilgrimage.

We are drawn into a contemplation of the passion of Jesus, what his body bore within that journey, the receiving of the help offered by Simon of Cyrene, the offer and refusal of the drugged wine, the women watching, the soldiers and others drinking and jeering.

We live with the mystery that there are those in the world who are the 'pain-bearers,' and that sometimes some good comes out of all that suffering, and this has its place in the redemptive process.

We use the feeling of solidarity with others in pain as a focus for prayer, victims of earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, Tsunamis, HIV Aids, TB. Sometimes we catch glimpses of God in pain.

We are learning from our experience of depression. One person says "I've found a oneness with people with all sorts of mental difficulties. I've found a wisdom in insanity that I miss very much now that I'm back in the so-called sane world.' And another speaks of living in 'a kind of chemicalised numbness,' within which he is learning the presence and goodness of God within the sense of the absence of God.

We are learning that theology must not be left to those who are fit and strong. Theology must also be wrestled for through pain and disability: these are the raw materials of our encounters with a mysterious, silent, hidden and powerless God.

We are also learning from something utterly central to our meetings: we laugh and laugh, we leave the meetings energised and with a deeper hope and trust. This is the group above all where we are able to be ourselves, and show others who we really are.

I have spoken secondly of our experience of our body and the connection with the body of Christ

And finally I speak of the receiving of threatening, dangerous gifts that could transform us.

It is our experience that the Church finds it difficult to receive the gifts of God through those who live with impairments. We are 'an uncomfortable presence.'

In the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples and Simon Peter's difficulty in accepting this, it is as if Jesus is saying to us 'if you are not able to receive you can no longer be a disciple of mine.' (John 13:1-20)

Openness to receive the gifts of God through encounters which may threaten us include the possibility of transformation, as Simon Peter discovered in his encounter with the Gentile, Cornelius, (Acts 10:1-48) and as Jesus discovered with the Samaritan woman at the well.(John 4: 1-15)

I want to introduce more of those 'new companions,' and this time in the context of Sarum College, a theological College near the beautiful Cathedral in Salisbury. We have had 3 conferences there and in different ways explored the faith journey of the impaired pilgrim. On each occasion there have been between 20 and 30 people.

And among them: Susi, a wheelchair user, a former nurse who worked briefly on the Afghan border of Pakistan.

Gordon, a wheel chair user, living with MS, a lecturer in the Physics Department of Birmingham University, dependent on the care of his wife Dot.

Anne who is on the autism spectrum and was among other responsibilities, the Autism Consultant for the Diocese of Oxford.

Sally, another wheelchair user with MS, formerly a teacher of religious education, with her husband and carer Gerald who is a driving instructor. Ros, a wheel chair user, a Methodist mission partner in Nigeria, a pioneer in mental health provision, a spiritual director.

And Peter, who lives with a spinal condition and with chronic pain, and who had to retire early as a Minister. His thesis on the 'spirituality that emerges from impairment speaks of 'dangerous gifts,' threatening gifts, challenging the traditional view of God and also of God's world.

What are the gifts of those living with impairments?

We bring our experience of darkness as the context of hidden growing and transformation.

We bring our calling to go into the fearful places without being imprisoned by fear.

We bring our experience of fragility, of physical weakness, of what it means to trust, and of the mystery of strengthening within our continuing reality.

We bring our experience of restoration through touch, embrace and holding, and of an inner healing which is deeper than physical healing,

We bring our experience of our bodies, a source of wonder, pleasure and pain, the dwelling place of God, where we meet God in the here and now of our actual humanity.

We bring our experience of waiting, waiting into the unknown.

We bring our experience of anger,

We bring faith journeys which sometimes include the experience of dereliction, of God forsakenness, of being apparently without faith in order to grow in faith.

We bring our experience of playfulness, of humor, of laughter

We bring our discovery of bread on the edge and of wells of water under our feet, in desert and in destitution as did both Elijah (1 Kings 17:1-7) and the slave girl Hagar before us. (Genesis 21: 8-20)

Consecrated food from heaven is not confined to lie under white cloths in our Churches.

We bring these gifts and many others not as victims but as liberators.

I speak thirdly of receiving threatening, dangerous gifts which could transform.

In conclusion I wish you well and look forward to earning more from our encounter with each other

I bring a story of a journey from the centre to the edge, of making connections between our experience of body and the body of Christ, and of receiving threatening gifts which could transform.

And with questions:

What does the journey toward transformation through vulnerability mean in our situation?

What are our stories of frightening liberation?

How can our transforming journey as Churches become a sign of transformation in our British society, the showing of a different way, a different paradigm?

The world has a right to say to the Church 'Unless I see the marks of the nails in your hands- I will not believe.'

Stanley Magobe, a former President of the Methodist Church in Southern Africa, speaking to the British Methodist Conference

Not included in the main text but part of subsequent reflection-

I hope that our focus will be on our common experience of human fragility and how it can become the context for transformation.

How to keep the paschal mystery, the suffering, dying and resurrection of Jesus, as the heart of the creation of the coming great Church?

How to form congregations where we are strong enough to bring our weakness, open enough to bring our different experiences of pain, and hopeful enough to recognise that these could also be transforming gifts?

'Out of the fragmentation and brokenness of the crucified peoples of the world spring a mighty hope for the renewal of our culture- a powerful light which illuminates the shadow of our world.' Jon Sobrino from El Salvador.