St. Stephen's College

A Permeable Way: How Vulnerability Nourishes Pastoral Leadership

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine the phenomenon of vulnerability as it relates to pastoral leadership. Setting the phenomenon within a theological framework, I ask: What difference does it make to the understanding and practice of pastoral leadership when it is viewed through a hermeneutic lens of vulnerability? By way of clarifying the phenomenon, I examine its treatment by authors representing a variety of disciplinary approaches, and I identify it as a theological theme exemplified in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and, indeed, throughout the scriptural narrative in so far as it exhibits a pattern of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation in depicting the dynamics of our life with God. On the basis of these considerations, I argue that vulnerability is an inherent and valuable element of our being. It is the milieu or quality through which not only wounding but healing arrives. Because of this perceived duality vulnerability may induce anxiety and is thus frequently repressed through the use of strategies of invulnerability which diminish those who employ them and often damage others. I claim, however, that when vulnerability is accepted, honoured, and inhabited with peace, it is generative of courage, creativity, and compassion. I demonstrate this claim by analysing my own experience in pastoral leadership, employing an autoethnographic methodology. After examining the qualities of vulnerability and of leadership I reflect on liturgy, contemplative artistic practice, and governance, as areas in which leaders may gain facility in inhabiting vulnerability in ways that nourish their leadership and in which they can model the vitality of this inhabiting for those with whom they are in pastoral relationship. I suggest that a language of vulnerability comprising words and silence, ritual and gesture, is essential if the language of the market, frequently embraced by the church and its leaders, is to be subverted. I also argue that scripture and spiritual practice provide rich resources for the peaceful inhabiting of vulnerability.

Keywords: vulnerability, pastoral leadership, courage, creativity, compassion, narrative of Scripture

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Opening Narrative and Introduction

Opening Narrative

On the last weekend in May 2016 I stepped onto a small black plywood stage in the arena in which my denomination, The United Church of Canada,[1] was holding the Annual General Meeting of the Conference[2] which covers the Maritime Provinces and Bermuda. The black plywood platform felt insubstantial as I stood on it; I could feel its dip and flex under my feet. The stepping up felt mundane and yet full of potential, both for my self-understanding and for the denomination of which I am a part. I stepped up amidst as many as 300 people and invited those who were interested into a conversation on *Governance as Spiritual Practice*[3].

This stepping up was in some sense impromptu, an accepting of the in-the-moment energy that lives in the best practice of Open Space Technology[4]. Open Space

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[1] "The United Church of Canada came together in 1925, through a union of Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational, and other Christian churches – one of the first ecumenical unions in the world to bring together major Christian denominations into one body.", accessed May 30, 2019, www.united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada.

[2] The Conference, within the UCC, consists in members of the Order of Ministry and lay representatives who meet as Committees or Task Groups to carry out those areas of governance and oversight for which it is responsible, and which pertain to the congregations with in its geographical bounds. It covers a wider geographical area than the Presbytery. Near the completion of this dissertation The United Church moved from a" four-court structure which included Presbyteries and Conferences to a three-court structure that dissolved the former two courts and created Regions.

[3] *Governance as Spiritual Practice* is a way of congregational governance developed with a group of three congregational members when I was in pastoral leadership with Sackville Pastoral Charge and then adopted by the larger of the two congregations on that pastoral charge. I have continued to develop this way of governance and it is now in use in several other congregations within this Conference. In this development, I have received support from an Innovations Grant from the UCC through its EDGE network for ministry development.

[4] Harrison Owen, *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1997).

operates on the premise that anyone who wants to initiate a discussion or activity announces it to the full gathering. Break-out areas are then provided, and people decide which discussion group they want to attend. If they try one group and are dissatisfied, they are free to move on to another group. In accord with this process, I convened a group on *Governance as Spiritual Practice* and, given the response, offered a second gathering the next day. This Conference had chosen Open Space as a way of generating conversations about things that might sustain and enliven our church. It is a time in which the denomination struggles to prune itself back to what it identifies as essential to its existence in order that energy might be available for new life. It is hoped that the pruning will be accompanied by planting so that the church might continue to live and grow in ministry and mission. The invitation to self-examination, it is hoped, will be answered by those in all areas of practice: local, regional and national ministries and missions. I will say more about this in the Introduction.

My stepping up was impromptu in one sense. I wasn't certain until the very last moment, as I felt my feet moving over that bare arena floor, moving from its edge to its centre, that I would actually speak. In another sense, my stepping up had been encouraged by others and mulled by me over several days. I had these questions. Who of all those people would be interested in talking about governance? How would I feel if no one responded? Would it discourage me from continuing the path I had chosen? Would it bless me or wound me? Or both?

Through all this, I tilted back and forth examining internally what might be love and what might be fear. I was already exhausted going through the work of my own pruning so that I might live and grow in ministry. This pruning involved the

relinquishment of a full-time ministry[5] position in a pastoral charge. I wanted to invite conversation not only about this way of governance but also what had led to it. On the other hand, I wanted to be safe. Perhaps, I reasoned, in that tired, timid moment, an opportunity to offer what I had been working on might come at another time.

In the end, what moved me both physically and emotionally toward the stage was the grounding within me of the research that has become more and more articulate in my living. What would the practice of pastoral leadership look like when viewed through the hermeneutic lens of vulnerability inhabited with courage, creativity and compassion? What was permeable[6] leadership in this moment?

It was only some weeks after that experience that I felt the desire to begin my dissertation by narrating this experience, because surely that stepping up was a spontaneous moment rising from a long, slow integration. Everything that had preceded it opened the tight bud of that moment. All my life experience, all that led me to the Doctor of Ministry Program (DMin) at St. Stephen's, and all that I have learned and practiced was in that moment. It is part of me. It is in my leadership and my life.

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[5] Pastoral leadership and pastoral ministry (ministry) will be used interchangeably in this paper. While both pastoral leadership and ministry may have very broad definitions, here I use them as they describe my personal vocation, that is, as a minister of Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care in relation to a particular congregation or faith community. My ministry also contains a deep commitment to faith formation, 4particularly as it relates to the spiritual practice of "seeing God in all things", the holy in the ordinary, and to the arts.

[6] I use the word permeable to mean porous or pervious. In this context, a state of being as a person or faith community that allows the vitality (of questions, gifts, needs, etc.) of one entity to flow through the boundary or container of the self and vice versa. This is not to say that permeability is unreflective. At times the pores must close in the face of oppression or harassment. It also recognizes that that the self is not dissolved; the membrane or permeable boundary remains. There is discernment and distinction.

Introduction

In this dissertation, I reflect on vulnerability[7] and on the "strategies of invulnerability",[8] that we, as pastoral leaders, may be tempted to practice. These strategies attempt to deny or suppress or manage vulnerability, which is an inherent and potentially rich dimension of our lives as individuals and communities in relationship. Strategies of invulnerability have the potential to damage and diminish us and others, and so have implications for the life of the church and those in ministry within it. Moreover, our strategies of invulnerability render the church less able to live with compassion in a vulnerable creation.

Based on my experience I ask the following question:

- how does the understanding and practice of pastoral leadership develop when leadership is viewed through a hermeneutic lens in which vulnerability is seen as a valuable element of our being which, when honoured, is generative of courage, creativity, and compassion?

Embedded in this question are others:

- What is vulnerability?
- Why is the honouring of vulnerability important to the practice of pastoral leadership?

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[7] I work in this research with vulnerability as an inherent quality of human life. I note that beyond our inherent vulnerability there are exacerbated vulnerabilities experienced by many outside the often-protected state of white privilege. There are these vulnerabilities also within white privilege the exacerbated vulnerabilities of persons of the LGBTQ2 community, those who suffer mental illness and others. I write from the position of white privilege and yet I have at times been excluded, dismissed or even endangered by attitudes, behaviours and practices of those who have internalized the paradigm of male dominance. I also note that those existing within white privilege may experience the anxiety of relinquishing that privilege. I cannot speak in a voice other than my own and I acknowledge the complexity of vulnerabilities that exist over and beyond the inherent vulnerability I address here. For a succinct expression of this complexity, see n.209.

[8] Kristine A. Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 6,7, & 24.

- How does the phenomenon of vulnerability connect or coincide with the Christian Scripture and tradition?
- What language might support and encourage leadership in the inhabiting of a robust vulnerability?
- How might a culture of resilient vulnerability be encouraged in and offered to those in pastoral leadership (within the United Church of Canada)?

These questions emerged in me as I served a number of Pastoral Charges[9], first, part time as a student and subsequently over the last ten years as a full-time ordained minister. All of the congregations[10] which made up these pastoral charges have been family[11] or pastoral[12] size or transitional[13], fewer than 150 in attendance on Sunday. This is where I have desired to be. It is the place from and into which I write. My research is situated within the practice of my vocation which is expressed institutionally in paid, accountable ministry (Ministry or Pastoral Leadership)[14] within the UCC.

My research methodology is autoethnography which has at its foundation the reciprocal shaping of self and culture.

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[9] "The unit of organization for the United Church shall be the Pastoral Charge. A Pastoral Charge may consist of more than one local church; a local church is a body of persons meeting for public worship in one place." *The Manual, 2013, The United Church of Canada/L'Église Unie du Canada*, United Church Publishing House, Toronto, 2013. (I will refer, throughout this paper, to the local church body as a congregation or faith community. Faith Community is the term in use in The Manual 2019 which has just been published).

[10] "There are four main types of local ministry units in the United Church: congregations, pastoral charges, missions, and outreach ministries. A congregation is a group of people that meets for public worship. It has been formed by the presbytery as a congregation of the United Church." *(The Manual, 2013*., 50).

[11] Margaret Bain, Ellen M. Goudy et.al., eds., *Fundamentals of Transitional Ministry: The Work of the Leader,* (Baltimore, MD: Interim Ministry Network, 2012), 2:43

[12] Bain, *Fundamentals,* 2:44.

[13] Bain, *Fundamentals*, 2:44.

[14] While ministry is a responsibility shared between laity and clergy, in this paper I speak of the particular institutional vocation of paid, accountable leadership in a congregation or faith community. For brevity's sake I will refer to this as Ministry or Pastoral Leadership.

> [. . .] The concept of culture is inherently group-oriented, because culture results from human interactions with each other. The notion of 'individual culture' does not, and should not, imply that culture is about the psychological workings of an isolated individual; rather it refers to individual versions of group cultures that are formed, shared, retained, altered, and sometimes shed through human interaction. These interactions may take place in 'local communities of practice' in which 'what particular persons do [is] in mutual influence upon one another as they associate regularly together'."[15]

Our lives shape and are shaped by more than one culture. Examples might be family, spiritual community, political community, educational community, work or other vocational community. The UCC, as it is expressed through congregational life nested within the denomination, is one of my primary cultures. I have shifted my position within the culture of the UCC, within the culture of pastoral leadership. But I am still within, shaping and shaped by that culture.

Cultures, if they are healthy and resilient have permeable borders. Some years ago, as I moved from one pastoral charge to another, a colleague said to me, "you should write about borders". She was thinking about poetry and I am writing a dissertation, but her words come back to me as they have often over the years. What does it mean to be on a border, to be able to see from one realm to another? A number of my pastoral charges have been on the edge of geographical borders, between provinces, between countries, or between buildings. One has been on the border between land and sea.

We are always, within ourselves and as local, regional, and denominational church, moving over the border between then and now, this way and that way. I see that I am in fact writing now about borders because vulnerability itself is about a more or less defined and defended border. I have referred in other elements of the DMin program to the two-

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[15] Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method, (*New York:Routledge, 2012*),*Kindle.

fold way in which human vulnerability can be understood both as a quality bisecting us like a net through the water of our life, and also as the water in which we live.

The border is again a place in which I find myself. I live on a geographical border between provinces. I am on a marsh which is for me a potent image of permeability or vulnerability, the porousness of earth and water. I am also on the border of my vocational life within the United Church of Canada. I have moved out of full-time pastoral ministry. I've done this, in part, to tend church in other ways, inviting small communities on the fringes of congregational life, to contemplation and prayer. My call to inhabit vulnerability in a way that may infuse the places where I touch the life of the church, beyond the pastoral life of one congregation, places me on this particular kind of border.

In writing of the way feminist theologians engage with women's experience, Kristine Culp notes that they not only strive to retrieve and reconstruct women's experience "in relation to critical constructs of gender, liberation and oppression",[16] but also recognize that, "we do not, [. . .] simply have experience, we are entrusted with it. We must do something – make something with it." [17] I hope that in following the thread of my own experience as I have lived it in my work in congregational ministry and in weaving it through my ongoing engagement of theology, I can likewise make something with it.

It is commonplace to observe that the church is in a time of particular transition. Certainly, the UCC is arguably in a time not only of transition, but of crisis. The crisis,

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[16] Kristine A. Culp, "A World Split Open"? Experience and Feminist Theologies", in E*xperience of God: A Postmodern Response, eds.* Kevin Hart and Barbara Wall, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy Series, No. 48, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 56.

[17] Culp, "A World Split Open"?, 56.

involving the resources of people and finances relative to the desire to provide ministry and mission, necessitated the initiation, in 2013, of a group called *The Comprehensive Review Task Group (CRTG)*.[18] This group solicited, gathered, and reviewed hundreds of responses to its questions from individual members, Congregations, Presbyteries[19] and Conferences[20] across Canada over a period of two years.

At its General Council Meeting[21] in 2015, the CRTG brought a report, based in part on these responses, to the gathered body to be approved or rejected. There was much discussion, some re-shaping, and certain decisions made based on that re-shaping. These were tested by remit[22] throughout the national body of the UCC. In 2016 eight of these remits were issued within the UCC, five of which are considered Category 3 Remits, that is, remits "for substantive changes to the Basis of Union[23] that affect denominational identity, [. . .]."[24] Seven of the eight remits passed and were adopted at the 43rd General

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[18] "The 42st General Council [. . .] in August 2012, directed that the task group be established to examine the vision and circumstances of the UCC and recommend alternate models that will enable the church to sustain its faithful leadership in God's world." This quote is from an Advent letter sent by the CRTG Chair to all United Churches in Canada. The text of this letter can be found at emmanuelunited.ca/-pdf/task_group.pdf

[19] The Presbytery within the UCC consists in members of the Order of Ministry and lay representatives who come together regularly to carry out those areas of governance and oversight for which it is responsible and which pertain to the congregations within its geographical bounds.

[20] See note 1.

[21] Conference meets once yearly for its Annual General Meeting and it is here that those who have completed their preparation for ministry are ordained, commissioned or recognized.

[22] "The General Council may change the Basis of Union only if the change is approved through a remit. A "Remit" is a vote by presbyteries or by presbyteries and pastoral charges to change the Basis of Union.

[23] The Basis of Union is the agreement originally signed by the three founding denominations of the UCC and sets for the Doctrine, Polity, Order of Ministry and Administration of the church. Changes to the basis of Union are possible through remit as described above.

[24] The Manual 2013, United Church of Canada/L'Eglise Unie du Canada, (Toronto:United Church Publishing House, 2013), 125.

Council Meeting in 2018. As of January 2019, the UCC will look quite different in some ways. Some see the press of change within the UCC, and within the church more broadly, as threat and some as opportunity.

My purpose in this research is neither to support nor dismiss any one of the proposals tested by remit. Rather, my purpose is to recover a too easily neglected way to live with depth and integrity in the face of change and finitude. I will argue that in the Christian Scripture generally, and more particularly, but not exclusively, in the narrative of Christ's appearance in our flesh, his death and resurrection, we are presented with an account of our vulnerability held within the divine life. We are presented with the invitation to embrace it courageously, creatively, and compassionately.

It is here that we discover the wisdom to live with change. The particular context of change within the UCC is named here only as one concrete example of the sweeping transitions in the context of our life as faith community[25] to which we respond in various ways. My purpose is to go under the unfolding context(s) of change to seek the Spirit moving under the change, to explore the motivations for our responses to change, and to engage and work with the language we use as we meet change. It is my belief that this entails an opening up of the way in which we understand vulnerability.

It is not sufficient for our fullness of life to meet each transition as though it was contained in a folder the contents of which could be dealt with and then laid aside. The fabric of our being must be woven to meet the constancy of change. We must be permeable, porous, receptive to the Presence that grounds and accompanies and nourishes

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[25] Note 9.

us in change.

In contexts such as the one described above, the crisis within the UCC, we may feel vulnerable. The response to this feeling is often an attempt to protect our self or the institution at all costs; to practice what Kristine Culp names, "strategies of invulnerability".[26] These strategies are operative when a person or entity attempts to numb or resolve their discomfort by responding in ways they believe, consciously or unconsciously, can protect them from hurt. The concomitant result is blockage against the creativity and compassion vital for fullness of life.

We are always moving from one season of life to another, living and dying, relinquishing and being gifted. It is crucial that we embrace ways of life and leadership that allow us to remain limber and loving in the midst of ongoing change. It is vital that we live in transition, open to transformation. I propose that an interpretation of vulnerability that sees it, not as something to be avoided or managed but as an element through which compassion and creativity flow, is essential for pastoral leadership[27] that holds open space for transformation.

One of the reasons Autoethnography is an apt methodology for my research is that it encourages space for questions that may be, even unanswered, a vital part of our deepening knowledge. Still, research needs to have criteria for assessing whether it moves toward the telos or ends it set. Some of these assessments might be described as

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[26] Kristine A. Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account.* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2010), 6.

[27] In the context of this research, an individual who has been ordained, commissioned or recognized by the UCC as a Licensed Lay Worship Leader (LLWP) and who is in paid accountable ministry with a congregation and responsible for Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care. (In 2019 The UCC voted against a proposal by remit to combine these three ministry designations into one order.).

'outcomes'. How can outcomes be understood, both in relation to the integrity of Autoethnography and in relation to the content of the Dissertation itself?

As I read the word 'outcomes' I often experience a sense of unease, a kind of sad fatigue. While I absolutely recognize the necessity of rigour in this undertaking, I believe we are, in congregational and denominational culture, let alone our broader North American culture, far too tied to outcomes. (The word has the whiff of the statistical or quantifiable result.) I want to name the danger of too deep a bow to outcomes in this research and in our counter-cultural, vulnerable practice as faith community. I do not want to unfold my research and my dissertation with the kind of attention to outcomes that undermines the very thesis I am putting forward.

As we live in the flux of life we need to live with an engagement of its losses and gifts without always setting our sights on the achievement of some static state or fixed outcome. Part of inhabiting vulnerability peacefully is developing one's ability to live in the questions. My work is performative of an answer to my research question. It is autoethnographic because it is my own permeable answer, my standpoint knowing offered to others as a way to evoke their own knowing.

An assertion of the gifts of vulnerability is a challenging thesis to express within a culture which so often demands that activities be judged in terms of quantifiable consequences as distinct from the activities themselves [the experience]. Sometimes though, the experience *is* the outcome. For example, there were certain measurable aspects to the practice that will be described in Chapter Seven. But the more quantifiable outcomes did not develop my leadership, my openness, my peace with my own vulnerability to the extent that the experience did, and the way my reflection on the experience has.

That said, I respect the importance of having some concrete illustrations or suggestions for readers to hang their hats on, some touchstone experiences which may encourage leaders to imagine how vulnerable leadership might look within their own context. While Chapters One through Five will focus on Introduction, Literature, Methodology, Vulnerability and Leadership and provision of a Theological Framework for the dissertation. I will include instances of such experiences throughout the Project-Dissertation. Chapters Six through Nine will focus on more concrete instance of vulnerable practice. Chapter Six will focus on the language of vulnerability particularly as it is expressed in liturgy. Chapter Seven will focus on my experience of a creative spiritual practice. Chapter Eight will focus on the development of a new way of governance within a faith community. Chapter Nine will focus on boundaries and thresholds. Chapter Ten will conclude the Dissertation.

The deepest reach of this research will, I hope, be in its invitation and encouragement toward the freedom that honouring our vulnerability brings. That freedom will give permission and encouragement and nurture to who knows how many creative movements within ministers and faith communities, local, regional or denominational. That reach will come not primarily through descriptions of finished products but through a kind of slow apocalypse, the radical uncovering that occurs when we shift our understanding of vulnerability.

As I bring the introduction to a close, a story may perhaps illustrate the kind of immeasurable outcome that I seek. While leading a seminar on the topic, I was speaking of the reasons for and manifestations of resistance to vulnerability when I noticed tears on one participant's face. She described how my description of the phenomenon of

vulnerability spoke to her experience in pastoral leadership. She was near despair in the face of her congregation's lack of response, what she now realized was the numbness I described as a strategy of invulnerability. She had been at the point of capitulation to that numbness, of internalizing the congregation's defense. But hearing the experience described broke the transfixion by that numbness.

She did not know, nor did I, what she would 'do' when she returned to her congregation. She only knew that in adjusting her lens, resources had been freed within her to live whole-heartedly within her ministry context. I just had to say within the larger context of the seminar,

> *This [vulnerability] is a quality of our being. Through its honouring we come to fulness of life. Beautiful and terrible things come about through the lowering of our defenses against our vulnerability, defenses that congregations and our culture often choose consciously or unconsciously to erect. Lowering our defenses (not without reflection) can be scary. But don't be afraid. We were made for this*.

I hope this research will be used to support leaders, primarily, but not exclusively pastoral leaders, as they listen for their own desires and gifts and those of the communities with which they are in leadership. I hope it will speak of the rich resources available within our Scripture [28]and the various theological and multi-disciplinary streams that support ways of meeting transition in ways that are transformative. Increasingly my research has come to interrogate language and to offer resistance to a

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[28] Scripture in this research refers to the Judeo-Christian canon of books gathered together in what is called the Bible. I note Paul Fiddes' reflection on this canon. "A community which holds its identity through a certain body of material has an obligation to engage with it. It cannot ignore it. The boundary marks out an area, sets up a space, in which exploration is required. [. . .] But the boundary of a canon also invites comparison with literature beyond its frontiers. The enclosure of a certain body of material by a community should not result in reading it to the exclusion of other texts, but always in reading it in relation to others." Paul Fiddes, *Concept, Image and Story in Systematic Theology,* 2009 (16). This is consistent with the UCC's belief that Scripture is to be held in balance with reason, tradition and experience

particular discourse.

Jane Mischenko speaks of Foucault's emerging understanding of power and how "his later work claims the possibility of positioning oneself creatively against the discourses and therefore incorporates the potential for and suggestion of resistance (Foucault, 1984)".[29] I am resisting a particular discourse, a triumphalist one[30], which mainstream Protestant denominations often speak of as an obvious distortion of the gospel which we have moved beyond. In reality, triumphalism is very subtle. It can be identified in broader culture by the influence of "big business" or the market on many levels of society, including politics, education, healthcare and religion. This latter can be seen in the way the language of the market informs the way we speak about the church and about the life of its faith communities or congregations. We may use words such as success, target market, competitive advantage, bottom-line, coaching, entrepreneurship,[31] in an unexamined way.

This has impact on the way the denomination regards its smaller congregations and the way those congregations understand themselves. I am finding, as I delve more deeply into vulnerability in pastoral leadership, resistance emerging within me as a practice of my research and of the practice of my ministry, resistance to the growth of market discourse or rhetoric within the life of the church.

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[29] Jane Mischenko. "Exhausting Management Work," *Journal of Health Organization and Management* 19, no. 3, (2005):211.

[30] See definition of triumphalism, page 93 of this paper.

[31] *Rising to the Challenge*, an article in the United Church Observer is an example of how the market influences discourse. https://uwaterloo.ca/stpauls/sites/ca.stpauls/files/uploads/files/richard_yim_observer.pdf. Accessed May 30, 2019.

The integration of our inherent vulnerability in a way that receives the gifts it makes possible is essential for fullness of life. The Christian narrative and the broader representation of its language in word, symbol, ritual and silence, shaped to share that story, offer what seem a unique perspective on vulnerability. As Douglas Hall writes, "The ethics of the cross presuppose vulnerability and the risk of engagement."[32] Not only the cross, but the full humanity of Christ, as we encounter it in the gospels, shows vulnerability.

The honouring and integration of vulnerability comes with practice, supported by the language continually received, reflected upon, created, and offered, through the life of the one who is in pastoral leadership. It is slow and tender work. It needs the constant intent of the leader. It is sustained by language and practices that support pastoral leaders in opening space for individuals and communities where they may live unashamedly with the tide of both wound and healing that wash through vulnerability.

In conversation with texts from Scripture, various theological streams and voices from other disciplines woven with my own experience I offer reflection on the tender wonders of our life as vulnerable creatures, beloved of a vulnerable God. This brings me

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[32] Douglas J. Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 201.

to reflect on narrative[33], practice, discourse[34], and a way with language[35] that might beckon and hold us as we inhabit this vital quality of our being.

[33] "A narrative can be defined simply as "A report of connected events, real or imaginary, presented in a sequence of written or spoken words, sounds, still or moving images, or both", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative. Accessed May 30, 2019. To this I would add that human experience is structured or made sense of through narrative and that narrative has a perspective. One event may be narrated in as many different ways as there are people involved in the event directly or observing it. Individual personal narratives exist within a larger narrative of some kind, whether acknowledged or not. In this paper, I situate my experience within the narrative of the Christian Scripture, particularly, though not exclusively the narrative of the life of Jesus Christ as I receive it, a narration that includes a place for vulnerability in fullness of life.

[34] Discourse as I use it in this paper refers to is words used repeatedly throughout written or spoken communication in ways that shape and/or express a culture. Discourse particular to one area of meaning can overlap with discourse particular to another. Words that are particular to one field can also be appropriated by another. In my research, I note the overlap of words that shape understanding within the market with words that shape understanding within theology. In some cases, this overlap can, as metaphor may, provide fresh understanding and expand or focus the meaning of one field with words from another. In other cases, the words imported from another discourse are used only because they have become ubiquitous and offer no enrichment of meaning but rather distortion when used frequently in the field of meaning into which they are imported.

[35] Language is a way of communicating that is not only verbal but includes words, ritual, silence and gesture.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this dissertation I explore the quality of vulnerability inherent in human life particularly as it informs the life of pastoral leaders and the faith communities in which they lead. I uncover its value in my own life and leadership practice as an invitation to others. While I remain acutely aware that there are exacerbated states of vulnerability beyond the common human vulnerability of which I write, I do not address them explicitly in this research. This is not to ignore exacerbated vulnerabilities which are vitally important considerations in the living of our lives and the practice of our ministries. I am rather de-limiting my work here to explore in a focused way the fundamental existential state of vulnerability. It is from this place, deeper that all that separates us, we may move to lament, reception, reconciliation and justice.

The scope of my research is focused on meeting the anxieties that prevent us from inhabiting our inherent vulnerability well. I understand permeability to be a quality of leadership that allows the elements of Word, the context or culture of the faith community, the context or culture of the wider society, and the leader's own longing and gifts to flow through and inform one another. This permeable leadership is the work of a life-time. The ability to undertake and sustain this work is resourced and nurtured by certain practices. In this review I consider the literature that deepened my understanding of vulnerability and the practices that encourage me to inhabit it with courage, creativity and compassion.

Autoethnography is the methodology I use to explore vulnerability, using my own experience as a lens through which to examine the importance of inhabiting it with courage. Autoethnography itself is, as I will describe in the dissertation, a vulnerable methodology,

in which the researcher is both subject and object. The literature relating to Autoethnography has been covered extensively in Chapter Three and so will not form part of this Literature Review.

This review will not be exhaustive. Other texts will appear throughout the dissertation. Here, l cover the literature that has most influenced my thought either by its support of, or its challenge to, my understanding of vulnerability. This literature does not always explicitly name vulnerability as its subject. In all cases, it does shed light on what it means to live a life tuned towards wholeness. Vulnerability can always be found at that frequency.

I focus first on literature that illuminates the quality of vulnerability. I then move to cover material on leadership. I conclude with a brief section on the literature of practices that have strengthened my ability to honour vulnerability personally and in pastoral leadership.

Views on Vulnerability: Theology

In "*A World Split Open"? Experience and Feminist Theologies*, theologian, Kristine A. Culp, opens the door to the value of one's experience in shaping theology. Culp reconsiders the use of experience in feminist theologies, asserting its importance. Experience is not only to be reflected on and interpreted in relation to history and culture, it is to be made something of and to be offered. Though Culp, in this text, is not explicitly speaking of vulnerability, this way of doing theology through the lens of one's own experience is a vulnerable act.

Culp explores vulnerability in her book, *Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account* She first considers figurative language used throughout history as it relates to, "[.

. .] a picture of life before God as vulnerable, ambiguous, and yet capable of bearing glory".[36] She then addresses contemporary questions about devastation and transformation, relating them "[. . .] to theological themes of discipleship and conversion and of bearing suffering".[37] These themes are developed through exploration of the Gospels and the work of various theologians. Finally, Culp explores ways of living before God. This theme of living *before* God, causes me some discomfiture since it suggests to me a less permeable membrane between God and self than that to which my contemplative practice disposes me. With this small reservation I find Culp's work a rich source for understanding vulnerability.

Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, in *The Power and Vulnerability of Love: A Theological Anthropology,* examines vulnerability in humans and in God through the lens of maternity and natality. She proposes divine invulnerability as the, "[. . .] dimension of divinity that offers vulnerable human beings, stability of identity as *imago Dei* and an unchanging love on which to draw for courage, resilience, and resistance, even in the face of horrors."[38] She then asserts the vulnerability of Christ, the second person of the Trinity. "The invulnerability of divine love's free self-expression, [. . .] is most fully manifested in creation when it does [. . .] what it is in love's essence to do – enter into vulnerable relation with the beloved, even when to do so seems to contradict the invulnerability of the divine essence."[39] Whatever questions I may have of this representation of the Trinity, Gandolfo's

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[36] Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory,* 7.

[37] Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory,* 9.

[38] Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love*, 189.

[39] Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love, 224.*

work is compelling, complex and full of rich theological reflection on vulnerability, divine and human, seen through the lens of mothers' experiences. Her final section on practices is especially relevant to the work of this dissertation.

William C. Placher's, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* asks, "[. . .] what sort of God one would believe in if one took the biblical narratives, especially the Gospel stories about Jesus, as the best clue to who God is. [. . .] God is the one who loves in freedom, and in that free love God is vulnerable, willing to risk suffering"[40]. Placher realizes this assertion is not without its challenges and addresses these, covering such questions as the eternity of God, the Triunity of God, the vulnerability of Biblical narratives, ecclesiology, and finally, Christianity expressed in academy and society. Placher's position on the Trinity provides a counterpoint to Gandolfo's. The image of perichoresis or coinherence of the divine persons is helpful as we consider vulnerability, providing an image and example of permeable life in community.

Douglas John Hall, in *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*, provides a passionate call to, "[. . .] the continuous process of disciplined and prayerful *thought* through which a community of faith seeks to understand what it believes and thus to be guided in its living out of that belief [. . .][41]. Theology matters. "So long as Christian faith is unable to distinguish itself at the level of foundational belief from the western imperial peoples with which it has been and is inextricably linked, its actions and ethical claims will be ambiguous, even when they are inspired by apparently Christian motives".[42]

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[40] William Placher *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture,* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), xv.

[41] Hall, *The Cross in our Context,* 3.

[42] Hall, *The Cross in our Context,* 4.

While elsewhere in my dissertation I hold the ability to live with ambiguity as a desirable quality of our life together, Hall uses ambiguity in its undesirable sense. In this sense it reflects an inability to distinguish between the foundational beliefs of Christianity and western imperial culture.

With Hall's work I return to consideration of the Trinity in whose coinherence I find such rich food for reflection on vulnerability and life in loving relationship. "[. . .] what we posit of the second person of the Trinity cannot be reserved for the Son only but applies in some quite definitive sense to the Father and the Spirit as well – *no matter how radical the consequence.* [. . .]. Thus, if Christians confess that the Christ, the divine Son, "suffered," [or is vulnerable] they cannot turn about and claim that suffering is impossible where God the Father is concerned."[43] Hall's is a systematic theology that insists on contextuality. It proposes a 'modesty' that prevents any resolution into ideology and critiques the triumphalism which gripped the church and still oppresses so many.

Hall examines the culture's fixation with death, a fixation that expresses itself in an attempt to deny death. The church is not immune from this fixation though it has resources through which it may be freed. In baptism as we go under the waters, symbolically "[. . .] we are brought that close to death – so that we may at long last face it and see through it to the life that is God's gift for us".[44] Our vulnerability is, of course, tied up with our mortality. Like our fixation with death, which we must face to be freed, so our vulnerability must be honoured in order to receive its gift.

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[43] Hall, *The Cross in our Context,* 83.

[44] Hall, *The Cross in our Context*, 148.

Hall's articulation of the cross as the ultimate refutation of any attempt to create a theology that diminishes the value of our humanity is central to my exploration of the theological importance of vulnerability. The cross is a refutation of death as a punishment for sin and an assertion of God's engagement with our life and death. Drawing on the spiritual resources of the Biblical narrative and our tradition we learn to live peacefully, courageously, with our fear of death and the various perishings in our life. We learn to honour vulnerability.

> The only way of affirming life among a species and in a world that is preoccupied with repressing its knowledge of death while in its actions pursuing death with a wondrous single-mindedness – the only way of saying yes to life in such a context is to discover, somehow, the courage that is needed to confront the culture's repressed [. . .] no. The theology of the cross is for Christians the most reliable expression of the Source of that courage.[45]

Hall defines the triumphalism whose lingering effects I believe are so damaging to faith communities, most noticeably to small communities which haven't the resources to pretend any success. Paradoxically, an acknowledgement and surrender to their paucity of success in the world's terms may open them to find deeper meaning. Against the ideology of triumphalism Hall unfolds this theology of the cross, a theology that is anti-ideological, hopeful, and contextual. What has been particularly resonant with my pastoral experience is the idea of "disestablishment as opportunity".[46]

Finally, Hall's development of discipleship heard through the key of the cross informs my resistance to the reach in pastoral ministry and in congregations for a security that is not deeply rooted. Hall says, "[. . .] constancy of change has produced in many a

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[45] Hall, *The Cross in our Context*, 9.

[46] Hall, *The Cross in our Context*, 165.

kind of psychic vertigo that reaches out blindly for stability."[47] This must be grappled with as we make decisions about the way we live. As I note in the dissertation, particularly in the extended chapters on the *Moments* and on Governance, Hall's theology of the cross is a theology of "[. . .] faith (not sight), hope, (not finality), and love (not power), and it is not resolution in the ordinary usage of the term"[48]. Hall weaves this theology through his engagement of the world, the church, creation, and God's reign.

Next to Hall's theology of the cross, I hold a book that questions the place of the cross and its impact on the lives of women. *Introducing Feminist Christologies* surveys various feminist theological questions and positions. "Fiorenza is aware that none [no texts] cause more problems than those that have led to a theology of the cross."[49] My position is that what the misuse of dangerous texts has led to is not a theology of the cross, as Hall presents it, but a co-option of the cross as a tool for the powerful to use, wielding it as an image of submission. This image of submission is not used to apply to those that hold the power but to those whom they oppress. "By making [Jesus'] death non-political, the status quo can preserve itself.[50] Isherwood herself points to other ways in which the cross and Christ can be understood, going beyond Western culture to search out alternative Christologies.

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[47] Hall, *The Cross in our Context,* 181.

[48] Hall, *The Cross in our Context,* 214.

[49] Lisa Isherwood, *Introducing Feminist Christologies,* Introductions in Feminist Theology, (Cleveland: Shefield Academic Press, 2002), 88.

[50] Isherwood, *Introducing Feminist Christologies,* 88.

Walter Bruggemann in his *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church,* is concerned with the Christian Church and the way in which it might be permeable, or vulnerable to the world while maintaining the unique voice of the Gospel. "Our faith, I propose, is not about pinning down moral certitudes [which we *often* do both as conservatives and as liberals in our different ways]. It is, rather, about "*openness to wonder and awe in glad praise",* a vulnerable way. Like Hall, Bruggemann describes the Gospel as a life-giving response to despair. He emphasizes the need to distinguish our script from the Western script of "[. . .] therapeutic, technological, consumer, militarism [. . .]".[51] He urges us to own our distinct voice, to take the risk of loving the world around us while not over-identifying with its script.

Hall and Bruggemann are thought-provoking at any time, but their work is especially fascinating as I watch the debate within the United Church on whether a self-described atheist can be a Christian minister. The need to relinquish what has been heightens our sense of vulnerability. Whether it is called for within small congregations or within individuals, it is hard to let go our prior life in the old structure that sheltered us. What does *belonging* mean in pastoral leadership and in the life of struggling congregations within the denomination? We are reminded of our vulnerability and the way or the place in which we felt secure. We need the practice of a robust vulnerability to hold us in our relinquishing.

In, *The Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spiritualty*, Söelle articulates the need to contradict the militaristic view, supported by media, that "our window of

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[51] Bruggemann, *Mandate to Difference* 196.

vulnerability"[52] must be closed. This stance on closure is a fear-breeding stance very relevant today as we witness the rhetoric of President Trump. Söelle critiques militarism and environmental destruction. She raises up the necessity for a discerning language of symbol (accessible and life-giving for both women and men), myth, narrative, and poetry to communicate the gospel that counters the drive to armour ourselves against the vulnerability that is so necessary for our relationship to our deepest self, to God, to others and to all creation.

"Transcendence is dangerous because it makes us vulnerable."[53] While Soelle engages questions of vulnerability through a political lens, I am making a similar argument. "Transcendence is dangerous", if we don't want to be open to vulnerability. But the flux between opening to transcendence and vulnerability moves both ways. Vulnerability also opens us to the transcendent. If we become detached from our core narrative and the deeper spiritual practices of our tradition, we run the risk of closing the life-giving 'window of vulnerability'.

Söelle twines mysticism with politics, feminist theology, and environmental stewarding, and provides excellent commentary on symbol and God language in her chapter God, Mother of us All. She demonstrates the use of Scripture as an asset for understanding and inhabiting our vulnerability without shame. Finally, her engagement of the place of the feminine as a resource for living vulnerability as a necessary element of wholeness is very helpful both to my research and my professional practice.

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[52] Dorothee Söelle, *The Window of Vulnerability*, ix.

[53] Söelle, *The Window of Vulnerability,* xi.

Of the many books by Henri Nouwen that rest, well-worn, on my bookshelves I note two.

The Wounded Healer (1972) gives voice to the value of our vulnerability. In this book, Nouwen uses the image of the wounded healer to bring unity to his reflection on ministry seen through four doorways: a 'suffering world', 'a suffering generation', 'a suffering man', and 'a suffering minister'.

> When [the minister] tries to enter into a dislocated world, relate to a convulsive generation, or speak to a dying man, [the minister's] service will not be perceived as authentic unless it comes from a heart wounded by the suffering about which he speaks. Thus, nothing can be written about ministry without a deeper understanding of the ways in which the minister can make his own wounds available as a source of healing.[54]

Certainly, in this age fixated on celebrity and relentless productivity, there are times when authenticity seems barely to be heard. But Nouwen's book still speaks its truth. It is through our vulnerability that healing connections come to be and transformation is made possible.

A second book by Nouwen*, In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership,* offers a powerful reflection on one of our great fears as pastoral leaders; the fear of irrelevance. To enter the state in which we face our irrelevance is to hear the whisper of the world that needs to be tended. How often in the church do we hear the criterion of relevance used to evaluate our ideas, our ministry, our congregation's mission? We need to be in conversation with one another's needs and gifts. But we can only find the most authentic movements of relevance if we are prepared to enter the realization of our irrelevance. "It is here that the need for a new Christian leadership

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[54] Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, (Garden City: Image Books, 1979), xvi.

becomes clear. The leaders of the future will be those who dare to claim their irrelevance in the contemporary world as a divine vocation that allows them to enter into a deep solidarity with the anguish underlying all the glitter of success and to bring the name of Jesus there."[55]

Parker J. Palmer also, through his many books and the development of *The Courage to Lead Programs*, shows us the gift that well-inhabited vulnerability is to life and leadership. Palmer is concerned with the soul and how culture discourages our attentiveness to soul through secularism and moralism. We need to find safe places to nurture our true self, since there are many places in which we cannot. "At first [in school] I needed a wall to hide my vulnerabilities from the assaults of the world. But selfhood hidden from strangers soon becomes hidden from intimates as well: [. . .] Then [. . .] I began hiding my truth from myself as well."[56] In striving to, "to center our outer lives on inner truth"[57], Palmer is clear that integrity requires that this centering must never build a wall that excludes.

The work of Palmer's that most informs this research is, *The Politics of the Brokenhearted: On Holding the Tensions of Democracy.* Parker addresses the way in which heartbreak is not only personal but political. He offers two ways of picturing a broken heart, "using *heart* [. . .] as the core of our sense of self".[58] In the first the heart is

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[55] Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 35.

[56] Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life: Welcoming the Soul and Weaving Community in a Wounded World,* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 43.

[57] Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness,* 46.

[58] Palmer, *The Politics of the Broken-Hearted*, 232.

brittle, broken by tension into shards that sometimes wound others. The second is "[. . .] a heart "broken open" into largeness of life, into greater capacity to hold one's own and the world's pain and joy".[59] Here heartbreak becomes a source of healing, enlarging our empathy and extending our ability to reach out." "In personal life and politics, one thing is clear; when the heart breaks in ways that lead us to retreat or attack, we always give death dominion."[60]

Palmer uses the illustration of the cross, in Christian tradition.

> [. . .] the broken-open heart is virtually indistinguishable from the image of the cross. [. . .] the cross as a symbolic form embodies the notion that tension – 'excruciating' tension -- can pull the heart open. The arms of the cross stretch out four ways, pulling against each other left and right, up and down. But these arms converge in a center, a heart, that is pulled open by the tension of opposition so we can pass through it into the fullness of life.[61]

Parker doesn't only describe this broken-open heart through the Christian tradition; I chose this image as it connects to the thread of my research and to the work of Hall and others.

Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* is a powerful exploration of choosing not to take on the qualities of your oppressor once you come to power. This, Volf writes, is the journey to forgiveness and embrace; a journey connected to his personal experience. How does he, as a Christian, and a Croatian, embrace the Serbian? When I first read this book in seminary it was one that expanded my heart. I have never forgotten it.

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[59] Palmer, 232.

[60] Palmer, 233.

[61] Palmer, 233.

The whole book, and in particular the section *The Anatomy and Dynamics of Exclusion*, is a robust and challenging companion to my encouragement toward a permeable leadership and an illustration of false boundaries. "We exclude not only because we like the way *things are* (stable identities outside) or because we hate the *way we are* (shadows of our own identity), but because we desire *what others have*[62]. This is a double-sided message to leadership. Sometimes we exclude and sometimes we are afraid of being excluded. We need to sink deep into the questions within to avoid oppressing the other or adopting an unhealthy subservience as a bid for acceptance.

Sandra M. Schneiders*, in The Ongoing Challenge of Renewal in Contemporary Religious Life* encourages us to stand open-eyed and receptive in the place where we are. She begins with a description of the impact of the Second Vatican Council to Roman Catholic Religious Life, then moves to the consideration of where communities of Religious now find themselves. Schneiders describes this through the examination of three markers: relation to the institutional church, grasp of certain key theological insights, and cultural situation.

The core of this article is found in Schneider's description of the "new normal". "The event or experience that precipitates a "new normal" not only de-stabilizes but qualitatively and irreversibly modifies our life-construction, and we have to find a new way not just of coping with the event but of being and living." [63] The present "new normal" is brought about through two main precipitating events: culturally, the

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[62] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity*, *Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 246.

[63] Sandra Schneiders, *The Ongoing Challenge of Renewal in Contemporary Religious Life*, (paper presented at Conference of Religious of Ireland, April 24, 2014) https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/jst/4/. Accessed May 30, 2019.

demographic shift through the extended life span, coupled with the increasing minority of children under five, and ecclesiastically, the the individualizing of ministry.

Though Schneider's article makes no explicit mention of vulnerability, her description of transition, well or badly engaged, implicitly describes what the its peaceful inhabiting makes possible, the embrace of a new normal. Schneiders also uses the metaphor of touch, set within the gospel narratives of Jesus' encounter with Mary Magdalene and with Thomas, to demonstrate the resources Scripture provides for this endeavour. I note here the use of the senses and the body as a lens through which we know: in Schneider's work, touch, in Culp's, taste, in Gandolfo, the experience of maternity, including the physical experience of giving birth.

Vulnerability in other Disciplines

While vulnerability as a term became prominent in relation to fields such as environmental studies and sociology, where elements of the natural world or populations at risk were understood as vulnerable, other disciplines began to take up the word or the concept the word designates.

The most prominent voice in the last ten years has been that of sociologist Brené Brown, the foremost researcher and writer in this area at present. Using grounded theory to accomplish her research she has moved from a professorship at The University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work to work on leadership and organizational development, in 2016 launching Brave Leaders Inc to offer online learning and in-person facilitation. Brown continues to write in the area of vulnerability and courage and is a sought-after speaker.

I was first introduced to Brown's work in the TED talk, *The Power of Vulnerability*.[64] I was excited by this talk because it articulated themes I was seeing in the life of small congregations and in my own life. I already knew these themes and resources for living into vulnerability; I found them in Christian Scripture. When, after Brown's TED talk, I gently introduced the idea of vulnerability to a group on the charge, inviting them to consider the vulnerability of Jesus, my sense of how unfamiliar this way of thinking was for congregations was confirmed. I went on to read *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead (2012*); to watch the second TED talk on shame, and, most recently, to read *Dare to Lead. Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts. (2018).*

Brown's thesis is that connection is what we long for and that there is no authentic connection without vulnerability. "Connection is why we're here. We are hardwired to connect with others: it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives, and without it there is suffering.*"*[65]

Brown describes how as she asked research participants about connection, they began to tell her about their experience of shame, 'the fear of not being worth real connection'[66] She then asked, "What do the people who are the most resilient to shame, who believe in their worthiness – [. . .] the Wholehearted [. . .] have in common?"[67] Wholeheartedness,

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[64] Brené Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability* (Houston:Tedx,2019), https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en&utm_campaign=tedspread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare. Accessed May 30, 2019.

[65] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (DG), 8.

[66] Brown, *DG,* 9.

[67] Brown, *DG,* 9.

worthiness, the belief that I am enough, is a stance not easy to hold in what Brown identifies as a culture of scarcity or never enough. Her three components of scarcity are shame, comparison, and disengagement. How often I saw and see those components in the life of small and mid-sized congregations. The opposite of scarcity is not abundance but enough.[68]

Brown debunks myths around vulnerability, one of the most prevalent being that vulnerability is weakness. She outlines practices for rooting out shame and goes on to list the armour we put on to protect ourselves from experiencing feelings of vulnerability, She names antidotes to these armors. For "foreboding joy"[69], "practicing gratitude"[70]. For "perfectionism"[71], "I am enough"[72]. For "numbing"[73] "setting boundaries"[74]. Brown's work runs right alongside my work in pastoral leadership, naming many of the elements I've found to be present in the life of congregations and the way faith communities and their leaders answer questions about leadership. While Brown lists faith as one of her key values, her work is not explicitly related to faith communities, though it asks excellent questions of leaders in all areas. As pastoral leaders we are abundantly resourced to live into those questions by our Scriptural narrative, our rituals, our sacraments and our humble and receptive silences.

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[68] Brown, *DG,*29.

[69] Brown, *DG,*117.

[70] Brown, *DG,* 123.

[71] Brown, *DG*, 67, 117.

[72] Brown, *DG,* 137.

[73] Brown, DG, 117, 137 – 141, 142 – 150.

[74] Brown, DG, 46, 56,142-146,159-160.

We find vulnerability or the qualities of a vulnerable life also described in the work of philosophers such as Adam Phillips, and Erinn Gilson. Phillips is a philosopher and psychoanalyst. His book *Balancing Acts*, in particular the section, *Negative Capabilities,* asserts the value of negative capabilities. John Keats is said to have first used this phrase in a letter in 1817. "It struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, [. . .] I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, [. . .]."[75] Phillips posits helplessness as a strength, as I posit vulnerability, which sometimes overlaps but is not the same as the helplessness he describes.

> I take it that there is something about our helplessness – the pictures we have our ourselves as helpless – that we find repulsive; and that the barriers that arise between each single ego and the others is, in part a least, a consequence of our disavowal of our original helplessness, which is the thing we have most originally in common with each other [. . .][76].

Phillips makes a case for a way of turning toward fullness of life. He makes the case, not in explicitly religious terms, but in terms that easily align with that discourse. "I want to make a case for helplessness as something we shouldn't want to think of ourselves as growing out of. "[77]Phillips then makes two suggestions one of which I include here.

> That any psychoanalysis that privileges knowing over being, [. . .] diminishes if not actually forecloses our real acknowledgement of helplessness. If we could think of our helplessness as like a figure inside us – [. . .] 'a being who breaks my categories' we could be trying to sustain it. We could think of our helplessness as

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[75] Negative capability is described at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negative_capability. Accessed May 30, 2019.

[76] Adam Phillips, *On Balance,* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), chap. 3 sec. 2, Kindle.

[77] Phillips, *On Balance,* chap 3, Kindle.

> sustaining us. [. . .] It would not simply be one of the best things about us, but it would be *the* thing, the condition without which we could not be who we are. In this picture, there is no version of ourselves that is not helpless, even if, in different areas of our lives, there are different forms of helplessness, and we are helpless in different ways. We can be competent, but we are always helpless.[78]

We can live it, uncomfortable as it sometimes is, with courage, creativity and compassion or we can resist it by strategies that limit us and may damage others; but we are always vulnerable.

Gilson provides an excellent analysis of vulnerability in *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice.* For Gilson while vulnerability is common to us all, "[. . .] intersubjective vulnerability is a matter of practice. [. . .] Its presence can only be cultivated, just as we so often cultivate its absence: distance and detachment, the security and comfort of the familiar, imperviousness and composure, in a word, invulnerability." [79] Gilson describes why vulnerability is uncomfortable and difficult and why the cultivation of an ability to inhabit it well is essential for our world. She reasons that our commonly accepted understanding of vulnerability devalues it and its potential.

Gilson explores the ideas of vulnerability and precariousness articulated by Judith Butler, describing, "the [illusory] ideal of an invulnerable self [as] defined by complete self-sufficiency, self-sovereignty and autonomy, independence from others, and an imperviousness to being affected".[80] She explores the complexity of risk through the work of Michael Foucault and asserts that "the ideal of invulnerability demands not just

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[78] Phillips, *On Balance,* chap. 3, Kindle.

[79] Erinn C. Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice,* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group: 2014), Introduction, Kindle.

[80] Gilson, *Ethics of Vulnerability,* Introduction, Kindle.

the rejection of vulnerability but also the devaluation of, and dissociation from, those individuals and groups that are culturally positioned as vulnerable (who are at risk or regarded as failing to take requisite risks) [. . .]"[81] This is relevant to my concern for small congregations. While there are grave concerns to be addressed in the world and we cannot as a church shy away from them, there are also vulnerable places within the church.

Gilson concludes by drawing upon her earlier analyses to "investigate whether and how common pornographic representations of sexuality and habits of consumption contribute to the pursuit of invulnerability"[82]. Hers is an excellent study of vulnerability and our ethical responsibility to engage it.

Marina McCoy, in *Wounded Heroes: Vulnerability as a Virtue in Ancient Greek Literature and Philosophy* works from classical scholarship to develop the thesis that vulnerability is found as an essential virtue in Greek texts from Homer to Aristotle and in the communities in which they originate and those in whom the texts are received.

> Characters within these literary and philosophical works struggle with the right appropriation of their vulnerable condition, and their capacity to do so well or badly is deeply affected by the responses of their friends, families, comrades in arms, or partners in dialogue. The audience's encounter with such struggles with vulnerability in performed tragedy, epic, or philosophy invites the political community to witness and so more fully to incorporate the vulnerable into the body politic. [83]

McCoy's is another voice that understands vulnerability not only as the capacity to be wounded but as a necessary virtue for fullness of self and the building of community.

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[81] Gilson, *Ethics of Vulnerability*, Introduction, Kindle.

[82] Gilson, *Ethics of Vulnerability*, Introduction, Kindle.

[83] Marina Berzins McCoy, *Wounded Heroes: Vulnerability as a Virtue in Ancient Greek Literature and Philosophy,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 205.

In *Everything Happens for a Reason: and Other Lies I've Loved*, Kate Bowler writes an autobiographical account of her experience of vulnerability. Bowler previously wrote a history of the prosperity gospel movement in the United States. In *Everything Happens* [. . .], she writes, "the prosperity gospel looks at the world as it is and promises a solution. It guarantees that faith will always make a way."[84] This gospel offers, "[. . .] the promise that I could curate my life, minimize my losses, and stand on my successes."[85] In other words, this gospel wants little to do with inhabiting vulnerability with courage, creativity and compassion. It wants to seal off its losses and move right on to success. It is not a Christianity that makes the modest claims of Hall's theology of the cross or holds the healthy self-critical stance described by Placher. Bowler became caught up in this gospel, and then she was diagnosed with cancer. This is a book about the inadequacy of the prosperity gospel to life.

Even Seth Godin, well-known entrepreneur, has created a picture book, illustrated by Hugh MacLeod, *V is for Vulnerable: Life Outside the Comfort Zone*[86]. It is a fun and thought-provoking, alphabetic romp through elements of vulnerability beginning with A for Anxiety and ending with Z for Zabaglione. Yes, Godin does manage to connect zabaglione to vulnerability.

Poets have a particular facility with the language of vulnerability. To receive inspiration the heart and imagination have to open: they need to be permeable, receptive.

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[84] Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason: and other Lies I've Loved,* (New York: Random House, 2018), Preface, Kindle.

[85] Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason,* Preface, Kindle.

[86] Seth Godin, *V is for Vulnerability:Life Outside the Comfort Zone*, Ills. Hugh MacLeod, (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2012).

I could name poets, at length, whom I turn to when I am feeling the anxiety of vulnerability and want the company of words that know, or when I am washed with imagination or ideas and want words to companion my discovery and delight. George Herbert, Rainer Maria Rilke, Jane Hirshfield, Naomi Shihab Nye, John O'Donahue, Mary Oliver, begin the list. *Leading From Within: Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Lead*[87], a collection of 93 poems and commentary, is a book I have often used in leadership. It has been helpful in articulating my leadership for myself and to my congregations.

Poet David Whyte writes most explicitly in this area. In, *Consolations:The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words.* Whyte offers brief reflections on 52 words including an excellent description of vulnerability. His interview with Krista Tippett (On Being) *The Conversational Nature of Reality*,[88]brims with illustrations. Conversation, if it is to mean anything, involves vulnerability. The mind and heart which my speech expresses, needs to be permeable to that which is expressed in your speech, or in the language of nature, or culture, or Mystery. In silence, we are in conversation with Mystery and undiverted, meet ourselves.

> It's one of the basic reasons we find it difficult even just to turn the radio off or the television or not look at our gadget — is that giving over to something that's going to actually seem as if it's undermining you to begin with and lead to your demise. The intuition, unfortunately, is correct. You are heading toward your demise, but it's leading towards this richer, deeper place that doesn't get corroborated very much in our everyday outer world.[89]

Whyte addresses perishing and anxiety and loss and our attempts to protect ourselves.

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[87] Sam M Intrator and Megan Scribner, eds., *Leading from Within: Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Lead,* (San Francisco:Jossey-Bass, 2007).

[88] *The Conversational Nature of Reality*, An On Being interview with David Whyte, hosted by Krista Tippett, https://onbeing.org/programs/david-whyte-the-conversational-nature-of-reality/. Accessed May 30, 2019

[89] Whyte, *The Conversational Nature of Reality.*

> [. . .] half of all human experience is mediated through loss and disappearance. This is one of the reasons why we won't have the conversation. [. . .] and if you have a really fierce loss, the loss of someone who's close to you, the loss of a mother, a father, a brother, a sister, a friend, God forbid a child, then human beings have every right to say, "Listen, God. If this is how you play the game, I'm not playing the game. I'm not playing by your rules. I'm going to manufacture my own little game, and I'm not going to come out of it. I'm going to make my own little bubble. And I'm going to draw up the rules. And I'm not coming out to this frontier again. I don't want to. I want to create insulation. I want to create distance.
>
> Many human beings do that for the rest of their lives. Many do it for just a short period and then re-emerge again. But all of us are struggling to be here. One of the great theological questions is around incarnation, which simply means being here in your body — not anywhere else, just here with life's fierce need to change you — the fact that the more you're here and the more you're alive, the more you realize you're a mortal human being and that you'll pass from this place. And will you actually turn up? Will you actually have the conversation? Will you become a full citizen of vulnerability, loss, and disappearance, which you have no choice about?[90]

Whyte's transition to poetic animator of the corporate world, which inspired, *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*[91], came about when a corporate leader heard him give a presentation and spoke to him immediately after. "We have to hire you", said the corporate leader. "Why?", asked Whyte. The response, "the language we have in that world is not large enough for the territory that we've already entered. And in your work, I've just heard the language that's large enough for it."

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[90] Whyte, *The Conversational Nature of Reality*

[91] Whyte, *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America,* (New York: Doubleday, 1994, revised 2002).

Leadership

It is difficult in this review to draw a clear line between literature on vulnerability and on leadership. Still, the following resources, while they are rich examples of vulnerable practice, have a particular thrust in that direction.

Ronald A. Heifetz in *Leadership Without Easy Answers*[92], addresses the leadership of those who have official positions within organizations and those who look to them for direction. The title of his book indicates its relevance for vulnerable leadership that must live in the questions and not shy away from those that are difficult. His work applies not only to leaders who have authority by virtue of their position within the organization but those leading from the centre, edge, or in-between places within an organization. This various flourishing of leadership is vital within the church. Heifitz also considers the relationship between technical and adaptive problems and between leadership and authority. "Rather than define leadership either as a position of authority in a social structure or as a personal set of characteristics, we may find it a great deal more useful to define leadership as an *activity."*[93] This is a more challenging and vulnerable way to understand leadership.

William Bridges in *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change,* draws the important distinction between change and transition. "Change is situational, [. . .] transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation."[94]

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[92] Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994).

[93] Heifitz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers,* 20.

[94] Bridges *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change,* (Reading:Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1991), 3.

Managing Transitions is full of helpful leadership practices. It led me when I first read it, and leads me still, to pay attention to what element might provide enough sense of security that people could take the necessary risk. The book affirmed my sense that to mark a threshold is vital. It is full of practical wisdom around change. It encourages kindness as we ask those we lead to go deeper or in a different direction. Bridges' earlier book, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes: Strategies for coping with the difficult, painful, and confusing times in your life*[95] is also wise and practical. Neither of these books is written for congregational life but both are helpful in the practice of pastoral leadership.

Divergent Church: The Bright Promise of Alternative Faith Communities,[96] by Tim Shapiro with Kara Faris, tells the story of alternative faith communities in various contexts within the USA. Shapiro and Faris define a divergent church as "one in which tried and true practices are expressed in creative ways [. . .] shaped by unique, contemporary expressions of time-honored religious practices"[97]. Worship remains central to the life of these faith communities, as does, "a steadfast focus on another subject that doesn't just augment their spiritual focus but is fully integrated into a way of being the church".[98]

As I work with small congregations, I increasingly want to encourage ways of being church that will live beyond conventional ways of understanding church. *Divergent Church* offers examples. "Our exploration of divergent churches has shown us that alternative faith communities cannot be created by replication. Rather than transferring the models,

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[95] William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes: Strategies for coping with the difficult, painful, and confusing times in your life,* (Cambridge: Perseus Books, 1980).

[96] Tim Shapiro with Kara Faris, *Divergent Church: The Bright Promise of Alternative Faith Communities*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), Introduction, Kindle.

[97] Shapiro and Faris, *Divergent Church*, Introduction, Kindle.

[98] Shapiro and Faris, chap. 1, Kindle.

strategies, and tactics that have worked elsewhere, you will want to deeply explore what the practices look like in *your* place, among *your* people."[99]

John Pentland, in *Fishing Tips: How Curiosity Transformed a Community of Faith*, begins with curiosity, a quality he believes can lead to transformation. Pure curiosity is possible only in whole-hearted vulnerability. Pentland, together with the writers of *Divergent Church*, takes care to note that his book is not a "a one-size fits-all blueprint"[100] In Nine Fishing Tips, each one comprising a chapter, he tells the story of Hillhurst United Church and what came to life during his ministry with them. Fishing Tip One is titled *Let Leaders Lead*. "Often churches don't really want a leader, they want a manager or an administrator."[101] This is, in my experience, a deadening but familiar experience for pastoral leaders. Pentland names trust, listening, and the ability to till the soil for growth, as some of the qualities of a great leader. Added to those are "get[ting] the right people on the bus" and in the seat that fits them. Certainly, the risk-taking necessary for the kind of growth Pentland describes requires a willingness to honour vulnerability.

This book, at the forefront of bookshelves of many UCC pastoral leaders, offers important and engaging questions for any congregation. It urges both congregations and leaders to claim greatness. Pentland does take care with the word greatness.[102] Still, the leader in congregations that are facing a death or diminishment that no change on their part can stave off, requires an even deeper delve into theological underpinnings. I am seeking

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[99] Shapiro and Faris, chap. 11, Kindle.

[100] John Pentland, *Fishing Tips: How Curiosity Transformed A Community of Faith,* (Toronto: EDGE, 2015), xiv.

[101] Pentland, *Fishing Tips,* 44, 50.

[102] Pentland, *Fishing Tips,* xvi.

that kind of an understanding of greatness; one that can be claimed both by those who are growing in a variety of ways and those who are growing only in grace.

Leadership Practice

The following books present and support the practice of pastoral leadership in thoughtful ways. The Chapter, "Creating Bread-like Boards" from *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders*[103], was part of the formative reading for creating *Governance as Spiritual Practice*. The Chapter, "From Board Culture to Ministry Culture" in *Transforming Congregational Culture*[104], was also grounding for the governance endeavour. Both recognize the changes in culture and support grounding our responses and our missional identity in biblical reflection. *A Door Set Open: Grounding Change in Mission and Hope*[105], *Reflecting with God: Connecting Faith and Daily Life in Small Groups*[106], and *The Pastor*[107], all opened me to consideration of vulnerability and how permeable leadership is to be. *Worship as Pastoral Care,* [108] and *Ritual and Pastoral Care* [109] support reflection on the overlap of worship and pastoral care and the importance of ritual across the spectrum of the pastoral leader's work.

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[103] Anthony B. Robinson, *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders,* Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006).

[104] Anthony B. Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture,* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003).

[105] Peter L. Steinke, *A Door Set Open: Grounding Change in Mission and Hope,* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2007).

[106] Abigail Johnson, *Reflecting with God: Connecting Faith and Daily Life in Small Groups,* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2004).

[107] Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Pastor: a Spirituality,* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

[108] William Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care,* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

[109] Elaine Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care,* (Philidelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

Worship

In thinking about the language of ritual, silence, words, Word and gesture I find sustenance and challenge in the following: *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*[110]; *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine*; *God beyond Gender: Feminist Christian God-Language*.[111]

Preaching

The Preaching Life[112]; *Finally Comes the Poet*: *Daring Speech for Proclamation*[113]; and *Preaching as Testimony*[114], all enliven my work. *The Preaching Life*, offers words like fountain spray, and inspire me to liveliness in my work with words and the Word. *Finally Comes the Poet*, one of my first books on preaching, freed my preaching voice and challenges and animates me still. *Preaching as Testimony* offers a valuable impetus to the offering of the Word in ways that resist abstraction. Anna Carter Florence, through case studies, history, and theological exploration, brings the value of testimony alive. This is a form of preaching that is available to anyone so pastoral leaders may consider it in their own preaching and also encourage it in the members of their congregation.

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[110] Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology,* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

[111] Gail Ramshaw, *God beyond Gender: Feminist Christian God-Language*, (Minneapolis:Fortress Press, 1995).

[112] Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life,* (Cambridge: Cowley Publicatons, 1993).

[113] Walter Bruggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*: *Daring Speech for Proclamation*

[114] Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony,* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989)

Pastoral Vocation

Regarding a language of vulnerability and grounding in pastoral vocation, the following books deepened my reflection. *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*[115]*; The Pastor: a Spirituality*[116]; *Practicing our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People.*[117] A quote from Peterson gets at the vulnerable risk of moving beyond the usual metrics in pastoral leadership. Not that metrics aren't important in some situations, but we mustn't become addicted to them. Peterson, as he searches out a spirituality adequate to nourish a pastoral vocation, notes, "our vocations are bounded on one side by consumer appetites, on the other by a marketing mind-set."[118] He notes the temptation to the banal and says, "Holiness is not banal. Holiness is blazing."[119] Holiness enters through vulnerability.

Theological Formation for Leadership

For Life Abundant: *Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* [120]addresses questions around the practice of Christian ministry and how it might be taught. *Valuing and Nurturing a Mind-in-Heart Way: The Promise of a*

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[115] Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness,* (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992).

[116] Lathrop, *The Pastor*.

[117] Dorothy C. Bass ed. *Practicing our Faith*: *A Way of Life for a Searching People* (2nd edition) The practices of Faith Series, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

[118] Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, 3.

[119] Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, 5.

[120] Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, eds., *For Life Abundant*: *Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry,* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2008).

Contemplatively-Oriented Seminary[121], informs my questions as to how our denomination and particularly our theological schools and training programs might encourage the practice of a robust, engaged, vulnerability. Edwards proposes not the devaluing of the mind in theological education, nor the relegation of the heart to left-over spaces but the intentional inclusion of both – a "mind-in-heart" way. He suggests, "the possibility of grounding both thinking mind and piety in the direct, penetrating, awareness of the spiritual heart"[122] Here again we see the need for the permeability of one part of our self to another, the egoic mind to the infusion of Spirit. As these parts of our self are open to one another, in well-inhabited vulnerability so is our integrated self, permeable to the call of others and the Other.

Abigail Johnson in *Shaping Spiritual Leaders: Supervision and Formation in Congregations*[123] situates learning within congregational life. With her extensive experience in supervising student ministers, Johnson creates a practical and deeply reflective text that supports leadership formation throughout the faith community. She identifies the job of ministry as, "less about being a resident theologian than about making theologians and leaders in the community". Johnson also uses the wonderful metaphor of reading the river to inform the complexity of the minister's leadership.

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[121] Tilden Edwards, *Valuing and Nurturing a Mind-in-Heart Way: The Promise of a Contempllatively-oriented Seminary,* (Washington: Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, Inc., 2010).

[122] Edwards, For Life Abundant, 5.

[123] Abigail Johnson, *Shaping Spiritual Leaders: Supervision and Formation in Congregations,* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2007).

Denominational Context for this Research

As I probed vulnerability and leadership I kept in touch with the context and culture of the United Church through its website at united-church.ca, its Facebook page, and various publications These were: the several iterations of the report of the Comprehensive Review Task Group (see note 17) beginning with *Fishing on the Other Side*[124]. Subsequent reports that I was originally able to access on line I can no longer find there. The proceedings of three General Councils, 41st[125], 42nd[126], and 43rd, (not yet online) which were responsible respectively for formation, reception of reporting and action on the report that would bring about the restructuring of the denomination give valuable context. I also consulted the *Findings of the Flourishing in Ministry Study: Ministry Personnel Wellbeing in The United Church of Canada*[127] Reading these reports reminded me of my experience in attending focus groups on isolation in ministry, listening to the questions and stories of the gathered group, offering my own, and then reading the report [128]which coded,

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[124] The United Church of Canada/L'Église Unie du Canada, *Fishing on the Other Side: Seeking the Wisdom of Presbyteries, Districts, the Consistoire, and the Synod*, (February 6, 2014), https://www.wesleyknox.com/images/Fishing_on_Other_Side.pdf. Accessed May 30, 2019.

[125] *The United Church of Canada/L'Eglise Unie du Canada, Record of Proceedings of the General Council 2012*, https://commons.united-church.ca/Documents/Governance/General Council/41st General Council (2012)/GC41-2012 Record of Proceedings.pdf. Accessed May 30, 2019.

[126] *The United Church of Canada/L'Eglise Unie du Canada, Record of Proceedings of the General Council 2012*, https://commons.united-church.ca/Documents/Governance/General Council/42nd General Council (2015)/GC42-2015 Record of Proceedings.pdf. Accessed May 30, 2019.

[127] Findings of the Flourishing in Ministry Study: Ministry Personnel Wellbeing in the United Church of Canada, accessed May 30, 2019, https://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/resources/findings-flourishing-ministry-study.pdf.

[128] *Isolation in Ministry Study of Isolation in Ministry for the United Church of Canada*, (Toronto: Warren Shepell Research Group, 2003). I can now find the former document only in hard copy. It is mentioned in the following document, *Resource on the Isolation in Ministry Project (2011, 2005)*, https://commons.united-church.ca/Documents/Governance/General Council/41st General Council (2012)/Background Material/Resource on the Isolation in Ministry Project.pdf. Accessed May 30, 2019.

categorized, and, I felt, manipulated through that coding and categorization, the living stories. I say this realizing the necessity of having some way of presenting a large amount of data in a comprehensible way. The reports confirm for me that quantitative approaches alone are not sufficient to the question and that more United Church input is required within the trajectory of any report produced by an organization external to the UCC.

Personal Spiritual Practice for Leaders

> Gandolfo reminds us,
>
> > It is by way of practices that human beings suckle divine love in their own vulnerable selves and care for the vulnerability and dignity of others. Practices of contemplation and action that nurture the divine image within and honor the divine image in others are powerful resources for resilience and resistance in the face of both ordinary vulnerability and radical suffering.[129]

To conclude I offer a number of books that support the life of contemplative practice that enables me to turn over and over again to acknowledgement of the vulnerability through which life flows and to, at least sometimes, act from the strength found in that open-eyed vulnerability. *A Sunlit Absence; Dark Night of the Soul; Into the Silent Land; Lectio Divina – the Sacred Art - : Transforming Words & Images into Heart-Centered Prayer; Mystical Hope; Open Mind, Open Heart; Sabbath Keeping; The Cloud of Unknowing; and The Wisdom of the Wilderness.* Reference information for these books is found in the Bibliography.

[129] Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love*, 266.

Chapter Three
Methodology

I came to this research with a tacit sense of something misplaced or lost in the life of the church. I began my ministry serving small pastoral charges, congregations, or faith communities, that had not only lost hope, but I came to see, resisted it. By this I mean that these communities witnessed over time their diminishing numbers and the accompanying loss of their wealth and influence and, at the same time, seemed wedded to the notion that the recovery of that wealth and influence was the only way to measure their worth.

Faced with their demographics, the consequence was often a state of numbness evidenced as resignation, and even resentment by which the faith community shielded itself from risk and hope. Even though theological hope is not grounded in present circumstance but in the possibility that God offers in any circumstance new ways of being in relationship with God and involved in God's mission, some small communities would not entertain it. They unconsciously preferred the familiarity of long-held resignation and resentment rather than the risk hope entails.

In my ministry I experienced these disjunctures. There was the felt disjuncture between my own understanding of the Christian culture (narrative, tradition, prayer, and practice) that has shaped me and the culture of the local churches I served. There was the tension and interplay between the denomination and the local church. Because my own identity is both shaped by these fluid contexts and active in shaping them in turn, I am passionately committed to understanding them. My desire was, and still is, to understand myself and my context more deeply, as well as the theologies that inform my pastoral

ministry, my church, the local congregations I serve and those gathered on the fringes of the church.

This desire has threaded itself through the integration of my ministry and scholarly work. But it has been a desire accompanied by anxiety. What if the questions that took shape from my desire were only *my* questions? In my first DMin Integrative Seminar (IS), at St. Stephen's College, I noted that the authors of *Walk Out, Walk On*, pose the question as to where to start a learning journey. Do I, "[. . .] begin where I am"[130], from the very core of myself, through a self-study of my leadership experience in pastoral ministry with particular congregations? How much self-revelation will be called for?[131] How can I do research in a way that keeps the pastoral relationship present but does not treat those for whom I offered that leadership as objects of research? How do I ensure that any appearance others make in my research narrative also maintains their privacy? How can retrospective data find a place in my research?

The first question, 'do I begin where I am', was answered affirmatively as I pondered a text that became the touchstone for that first IS I attended, *A World Split Open"? Experience and Feminist Theologies*[132] by Kristine Culp. Culp quotes the words of poet Muriel Rukeyser, "If a woman told the truth about her life, "the world would split open".[133] These words struck a chord with me and have remained foundational to my research.

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[130] Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze, *Walk Out Walk On:A Learning Journey into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now*, (San Francisco:Berkana, 2011), 83.

[131] Wheatley and Frieze, *Walk Out, Walk On,* 88.

[132] Kristine A. Culp, "A World Split Open"?:Experience and Feminist Theologies," in *The Experience of God: A Postmodern Response,* Kevin Hart and Barbara Wall, eds., (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 47.

Speaking in the third person of "a" woman who speaks the truth about her life, the world is split open when she names her experience and interprets it, not simply as her own private experience but as one interactive with community and culture. Moreover, the experience is to be offered, as a way to speak, through complexity and ambiguity, of our understanding of God and what is holy. As Culp notes, the appeal to, and use of, experience is integral to feminist theologies.

> [There is] [t]he need for theology to engage richly with the ambiguous [. . .] stuff of life and (2) the importance of experience as a root of protest and resistance. First, we must examine what we undergo and how we reconstruct and interpret it, and do so in relation to history, culture, and meaning. Elsewise, we surrender possibilities for both complex individuality and profound connectedness [. . .].[134]

This articulation of the foundational character of experience in feminist theologies resonates in me and in autoethnography. I see the trajectory of my research and the search for a means to express it. I spend significant time on the methodology in this dissertation because the search for it, the discovery of it, and the methodology in itself, embody the subject of the research. My writing, in sermons and prayers and weekly contemplative words and images, shared with my congregations, and others, gives body to my research, embodies it. It expresses it, even as giving shape to its expression uncovers new layers of knowing. My research was also deepened by my personal spiritual practice, including my invitation to congregations to enter spaces of shared spiritual practice, and my professional practice of worship, sacrament and pastoral care.

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[133] Culp, "*A World Split Open"?* 47.

[134] Culp, *A World Split Open,* 49.

What is Autoethnography?

As a place to begin the development of this chapter on methodology I offer several definitions. The first defines the methodology as "grounded in postmodern philosophy that makes room for diverse and non-traditional ways of knowing, [which] produces 'highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding'."[135] In the case of this research, my purpose is to extend theological understanding as it relates particularly to pastoral theology and pastoral leadership.

Carolyn Ellis[136] notes that while gaining acceptance, AE still needs to be edgy and sometimes subversive in making a place for itself in academic research. She defines AE as, "research, writing, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social. This form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness and introspection . . . [and] claims the conventions of literary writing." [137] It may also have a performative element.

Finally, I quote at length Heather Walton who writes autoethnography from within the discipline of theology.

> *Autoethnography is a way of using personal experience to investigate a particular issue or concern that has wider cultural or religious significance*. The experience here acts as a lens that allows us to see and interrogate aspects of the concern in question that might be missed in a more abstract discussion of ethics or values. [.

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[135] Sarah Stahlke Wall, "Toward a Moderate Autoethnography", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5, no.1 (January–December, 2016): 1, https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406916674966. Accessed May 30, 2019.

[136] Many authors of autoethnographic texts choose not to use sentence case in their titles. Where that is the case I have respected that in my citations of those texts. r

[137] Carolyn Ellis, *The autoethnographic I: a methodological novel about* autoethnography, (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2004), xix.

> . .] It is particularly effective in reflective theological writing because it allows us to look with fresh eyes at familiar beliefs and practices.[138] (italics Walton's)

I adopt this methodology because it allows me to see and interrogate and shape discourse in relation to the understanding and practice of vulnerability in pastoral leadership.

In AE, standpoint knowing is considered essential. '*Standpoint epistemologies'* refer to the unique place, the concrete experience that the researcher or narrator holds in relation to the phenomenon. This knowing may be used to open the world but must not be used to shut down dialogue. "Have you been there?"[139] Dauphinee notes, can be used as an exclusion of any questioning of the personal experience of the researcher. "As I understand it, those who work in an academic discipline must thread standpoint knowledge through the language of the discipline. The discipline must not be used to eliminate the private voice. Nor must the private voice, though it may challenge the public, be used to summarily dismiss it."[140]

AE is also informed by poststructuralist thought according to which the self is fluid and complex.

> The subject is considered, within post-structural accounts of subjectivity as an ongoing project – as shifting, contradictory, multiple, fragile, fragmented. [. . .] poststructuralism drew attention to the self as a subject who is constituted in language, within and through discourses that are socially and culturally framed, and that are always in circulation not only within texts but in the multiple stages and pages of our lives. Recent theoretical moves have strengthened the imperative to know the self differently by focusing less on the individual self, separate from others, and from place, and more on the self in relation to others, [. . .].[141]

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[138] Heather Walton, *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection,* (London: SCM, 2014), chap.1, sec. 6, Kindle.

[139] Elizabeth Dauphinee, "The ethics of autoethnography," *Review of International Studies* 36, (2010): 804.

[140] Catherine Smith, *Reflection Paper Three: SSC 770: Topics in Autoethnographic Research*, (2016):1-2.

AE's honouring of standpoint knowing connects me to the conclusion engendered in that first IS in which I determined that I must begin where I am. This way enabled me to be in ministry while following the track of my own emergent knowledge in relation to others without having those others, including those with whom I was in ministry, become objects of research.

While quantitative research methods are appropriate for certain fields of endeavor, we need to recognize the limits of scientific, quantifiable research methods of knowledge generation. We need to recognize and gain facility in additional ways of generating knowledge of value particularly in the humanities. They deepen our cultural understanding, through the lens of our personal experience. They provide ways of understanding micro and macro linkages, agency, and social change.

Auto (self), ethno (culture) graphy (analysis) are all part of this methodology though various researchers often lean more heavily on one element or another of the three. I propose a balanced or moderate way. This not only best serves the purpose of my research, but I believe addresses the critiques to which this relatively new methodology is sometimes subjected within academic disciplines.

Debates and Critiques

Two main debates are active in relation to the value of AE. One moves in from outside the methodology. That is, can this type of inquiry be accorded the status of research. Is it self-indulgent? Andrew Sparkes demonstrates the breadth of opinion on this in his article, *Autoethnography and Narratives of Self: Reflections on Criteria in*

[141] Susanne Gannon, "Sketching Subjectivites", in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis, eds., (New York: Routledge, 2016), 231.

Action[142] in which he analyzes responses to an AE, a narrative of self, that he submitted to a major journal. Sparkes demonstrates that the presence of the researcher self within the research, less explicitly recognized in the past, is now made explicit and honoured. With this recognition, traditional criteria used to evaluate studies are no longer adequate. Sparkes notes that demonstrating criteria appropriate to AE, criteria that enable reviewers to look for the particular rigour that attends it, are vital in diminishing the barriers to accepting the gift of autoethnographic inquiry to the academic world. I will offer later in this chapter criteria that I hope will prove valuable in assessing my autoethnographic research.

Mykhalovskiy also refers to this movement of qualitative inquiry when he argues, "to characterize autobiographical work as self-indulgent is to make claims about its content by invoking a reductive practice that asserts the autobiographical to be only about the self of the writer and no one or anything else."[143] Voices such as that of Mykhalovskiy and Charmaz, affirm the concept of self, undergirding AE, that is, a concept of self that cannot but be made up of a culture full of others, a culture which shapes and is shaped by the self. Even when it reflects those perspectives only through the lens of the self, that self is not in isolation. "The value of the personal viewpoint is that "there is nothing completely idiosyncratic about a single personality"[144]; we are

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[142] Andrew C. Sparkes, "Autoethnography and Narratives of Self: Reflections on Criteria in Action," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 17, no. 1 (2000): 21-42.

[142] Eric Mykhalovskiy, "Reconsidering table talk: Critical thoughts on the relationship between sociology, autobiography and self-indulgence, *Qualitative Sociology* 19, (1996):133.

[144] Camilla Stivers, G*ender Images in Public Administration: Legitimacy and the administrative state,* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1993):413.

socially connected, created and creating. This skepticism can also be answered through the quality of analysis that accompanies the accounting of the researcher-self.

This brings us to the second debate which is over how much analysis must be included if it is to be considered as research acceptable in academic settings. Must we add theoretical abstraction or conceptual elaboration, and if so, to what extent? This debate informs the question of criteria explored above. "The opposition between the AE work of Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (2000, 2006) and the analytic proposals of Leon Anderson (2006a) serves as lens through which to explore key aspects of the discussion."[145] Anderson argues for "[. . .] reclaiming and refining autoethnography as a part of the analytic ethnographic tradition."[146] Ellis and Bochner have concerns about this. Ellis writes,

> I guess my fear is that analytic autoethnography may be an unconscious attempt by realists to appropriate autoethnography and turn it into mainstream ethnography. Once they diffuse the power of autoethnography by watering it down and turning it into something it was not intended to be, then journals such as *Contemporary Autoethnography* can feel justified rejecting autoethnographic work simply because the author has not privileged traditional analysis and generalization.[147]

Those more supportive of Anderson's position such as Mayor Montagud, suggest that Ellis and Bochner refuse abstract theoretical systematization which, if one looks at the breadth of their work, and their explicitly stated aims, seems to be an inaccurate assessment. They respect explicit analysis as sometimes appropriate to AE but,

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[145] Major X. Montagud, "Analytic or evocative: A forgotten discussion in autoethnography", *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum:Qualitative Social Research* 17, no.3, (Spanish -read abstract only).

[146] Leon Anderson, "Analytic Autoethnography", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 4, (2006): 392.

[147] Ellis and Bochner, Analyzing Analytic Autoethography, 433.

responsive to the aim and content of the particular research. They make the case that, "traditional analysis is not more appropriate to understanding interpreting or changing people than is storytelling."[148] All this said, certain subjects are appropriate to autoethnography and others are not. Training physicians, for example, cannot be done through story-telling, though story-telling can enhance the necessary quantitative training, opening the learners to the needs of their future patients.

Andrew Sparkes expresses a short form of the debate, "Is a good story enough?"[149] Perhaps, *almost* good enough. While I do feel that autoethnography most often requires some form of analysis beyond the simple creation of a narrative, I don't find Anderson's arguments persuasive. I believe he is attempting to simply add something to more traditional ethnography rather than to acknowledge AE as distinct. Kevin Vryan's assessment of Leon Anderson's proposed criteria for analytic autoethnography rings true for me. "It really seems to be, [. . .] a manifestation of his specification of analytic autoethnography as a subtype of traditional sociological ethnography (albeit with a twist) [. . .]"[150].

Both Anderson and Atkinson "advocate for an analytic autoethnography that limits the use of self to anything other than an enhanced level of researcher reflexivity within conventional ethnography"[151] This is not autoethnography. Neither, though, is the presentation of a poem or a story, a play or a piece of visual art that is offered with no

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[148] Ellis and Bochner, Analyzing Analytic Autoethnography, 439.

[149] Andrew Sparkes, Autoethnography and Narratives of Self, 23.

[150] Kevin Vryan, "Expanding Analytic Autoethnography and Enhancing Its Potential", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 4, (2006):405.

[151] Sarah Stahlke Wall, "Toward a Moderate Autoethnography", 7.

attempt at analysis relating the researcher's experience, expressed presumably, through the art, to the wider culture. The reader or viewer is left to puzzle this out for themselves.

As I consider this debate, I suggest a re-description of the two poles of the AE continuum now understood as analytic and evocative. I find the distinction of analytic and evocative autoethnographies unhelpful. Much AE work is both. I propose the creation of a continuum with explicit analysis and implicit analysis as the ends of that continuum. This implies that all AE will contain analysis in some way and that all may (I would suggest should) be, to some extent, evocative.

In the act of choosing what to include in the evocative description of my experience I have already begun an analysis of what is most vital in regard to my question. Beyond that however I include theology and theory represented by the literature throughout the dissertation and project. I analyze a cultural phenomenon through the lens of my own experience, giving rigour to that analysis by the use of several data sources and through reflection on its coincidence or disjuncture with the literature of theology and other disciplines.

I write hoping to evoke through my own experience the reader's recollection and reflection on their own experience. I write hoping to invite, through evocation, a kind of emancipation in the reader reached through the freeing of the imagination. Emancipation is one of the goals of AE. I hope that this emancipation leads those in leadership or those who work with leadership within the culture of the UCC to consider the movements of their leadership in less restricted ways.

AE emerged as a way for voices that are often actively suppressed or un-regarded within a culture to speak. Inviting, through a genre seeking to be accessible, audiences

whose members identify with them in some way, AE may create, through the gathering of those who read or listen, a community of those whose lives were unspoken or silenced. AE offers an invitation to the reader to respond, to find and to weave their voice into a narrative intentionally or unintentionally subversive of, or counter to, the discourse of the dominant culture.

I have a soft voice. I love to write. I am disturbed by the dominant discourse of the settings in which I practice my vocation. I find it partial and reductionist, an attempt to feel safe as our denomination and its ministries are caught up in the changes that bring us face to face with our vulnerability. This can sometimes feel alienating. But I believe I am not alone. This work both shows and tells (offers analysis) what I have learned.

I want this research, what comes of it, to be accessible. I begin with telling a truth about my life that I hope may invite you in, into these questions, into the knowing that rises from them through my own life, into the knowing that may be met in your own. When we put the partial knowledge from our own situated selves together, learning grows, as does community. AE holds this possibility.

To separate my research questions from my lived experience would render it less vital and vulnerable both within me and as an invitation to others. There have been many things written within the area of pastoral leadership. There has been, in the last ten years particularly, invited by the work of Brené Brown, much written and said about vulnerability, and there have been spiritual autobiographies such as *Traveling Mercies* by Anne Lamott that use an autobiographical style to create a spiritual narrative. There is, at the heart of Christian theology, story or narrative that shares the call and response to intentional robust vulnerability in leadership and in life. Still a gap can be found in the

literature that concerns pastoral leadership and vulnerability; a gap that calls to be addressed. AE is the method that I understand as the best way for me to enter that gap and express hope

As I reprise all these characteristics of AE - recognition of complexity and the impossibility of removing the self from research; valuing of partial but valuable knowing; respect for embodiment, the use of retrospective data, relationality (self and community), reflexivity, refusal to foreclose on an "answer", hospitality in its invitation to the reader in making meaning of the writing (co-creation), and the convergence and blurring of genres which together create new knowledge - I see vulnerability. These constituent parts of the vulnerability that as leaders, practicing our vocation, we are called to live in with intention and hope.

There are many elements of AE that make it a fruitful methodology for my inquiry: it's emancipatory telos, its use of evocative writing to engage readers (the idea of researcher and writer as co-creators beyond the time when the words are published), the sharing with theology of words such as epiphanies and witnessing, the respect for resisting closure, the recognition of researcher bias as part of understanding, the varieties of representation, accessibility beyond academia. I turn to a consideration of four elements of AE that further accentuate its congruence with my research.

Narrative and Resistance

In the Introduction I noted Mischenko's use of Foucault's work to illustrate AE's potential for positioning oneself creatively against the discourses as a kind of

resistance.[152] Resistance has a lot of energy for me. Ellis too speaks of this resistance. "Narrative is a form of resistance to canonical discourse".[153] I am resisting a triumphalist discourse that has shaped the church, but also in the present what may become a new triumphalist discourse, that of the market that increasingly informs the way we speak about the church.

I am finding this resistance emerging more clearly as a motivation for my research or, perhaps, as a practice of research, just as it was a practice of ministry. Narrative can resist one discourse by embodying another. Narrative can invite other voices in to the body of its discourse, invite them in carrying their own words and experience, finding their own voices.

Embodiment

"The Christian emphasis on the incarnation of God's presence in Jesus and the Christian understanding of community, which describes the church as the body of Christ, both put embodiment at the center of Christian meaning."[154] Since what makes meaning of my life is the gracing of God's embodying and embodiment, and our holy engagement with our own vulnerable, embodied self, the respect of AE for embodiment is another piece of its fit for my research. The Word is embodied. "Embodiment is central to the

[152] Jane Mischenko, "Exhausting Management Work," *Journal of Health Organization and Management* 19, no. 3, (2005): 211.

[153] Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I, A methodological novel about autoethnography,* (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2004):121.

[154] Stephanie Paulsell, "Honouring the Body," in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for Searching People,* ed. Dorothy Bass, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass,1997), 16.

Christian faith"[155] and it is central in my research and in this methodology, which shapes and holds my research.

Accessibility

I believe the engagement of vulnerability holds comfort and challenge. I want to offer space for this engagement. I want what I write to be accessible beyond the rooms or hard drives in which our many dissertations are shelved or stored. "Access and availability can happen through the use of engaging writing, as well as an autoethnographer's ability to bridge the academic and the affective by addressing the *heart* (emotions, the sensory, spiritual, and physical aspects of experience, intuition, and values) and the *head* (the intellect, knowledge, the analytical).[156]

Vulnerability

I describe vulnerability in more depth elsewhere in this dissertation. For the purposes of understanding this methodology and its affinity with my research I offer another definition. "Vulnerability", defined by Webster's Dictionary as "being exposed to the possibility of harm," creates a strong ethos and compelling rhetoric for autoethnographic writing [. . .]"[157] The self-disclosure of the researcher self in this method requires a particular attention to how much of the self is revealed and the possible consequences of that revelation by the researcher and by those bodies that review the research in its formative and most final expression.

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[155] Paulsell, Honoring the Body, 16.

[156] Ronald J. Pelias, "The Critical Life," *Communication Education* 49, no. 3, (2000): 223.

[157] Leon Anderson and Bonnie Glass-Coffin, "Chapter 1: Learn by Going," in *The Handbook of Autoethnography,* eds. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 75.

AE is itself a vulnerable practice, vulnerable to those who question its rigour, its admissibility as a serious research method, and vulnerable, too, in the self-revelation through which the research uncovers and offers knowledge. It is my hope that this methodology will be in itself that which it describes, a practice of research, and leadership, that offers a view through the hermeneutic lens of vulnerability that I seek to inhabit with courage, creativity and compassion.

Ethics One: Aims

In AE, ethics has two senses, the first, as its telos, that is to move toward transformation, and the second, an ethics of representation. The ethics of purpose belongs here, at the beginning of this section, since it relates to the aims and the heart of the method itself. In this sense ethics is "not something that can be attended to by an ethics review but is part of its aim, its emancipatory practice. AE, moves as a way that invites a kind of freedom and/or healing for both author and reader"

Another way of thinking about the philosophical ethic of AE is that it "[. . .] centers attention on how we should live [. . .]. This is the moral of autoethnographic stories – its ethical domain."[158] Its impetus is to offer a particular standpoint, an experience of life, that through its expression invites the opening and transformation of other lives. It is important to acknowledge this ethical dimension; it will become one of the criteria for evaluating research. "The ethics of AE insists that we ask, "[. . .] whose voices are not

[158] Carolyn S. Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, "Analyzing Analytic Autoethnography: An Autopsy," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography"* 35, no. 4, (2006):439.

being heard and why?"[159] I hope that the resonance in others' lives of the sounding from my standpoint will make a difference, that it will invite transformation.

Ethics Two: Care of Self and Others in Representation

As the single research subject, I will need to make choices about how much of myself I reveal in the narrative of researcher/self. I will need to consider the possible consequences to myself and others of my self-revelation. Those who form my Project-Dissertation Committee and others who review my work, prior to its final submission, will also need to be mindful of what impact those things I include in my written research may have on my life. Jane Mischenko, speaks of the risk for the autoethnographer, "Well here I am, [. . .] taking a leap of faith; I open up to your scrutiny one of my vulnerable "selves" and I do this with the knowledge that therefore I may remain forever in your eyes, pinned down, as a miserable specimen of a manager."[160]

Though I am the single research subject, my story, like all stories, will include others. I am very conscious of what is for me an important ethical aim, that is, not to disclose or reveal details of pastoral life in a way that would betray the confidences of those with whom I am or have been in ministry. There are various ways this can be accomplished, most reliably perhaps, is the composite setting or person, with names changed. Often, changing names alone is not sufficient.

Others will also be involved in my story through the e-mail correspondence I use as data. To address this ethical consideration, I have prepared a written consent form for

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[159] Elizabeth Dauphinee, "The ethics of autoethnography," *Review of International Studies* 36, (2010):806.

[160] Jane Mischenko, "Exhausting Management Work,", 205.

each of my correspondents detailing a covenant that binds me to share, at the beginning, mid-point, and before submitting my dissertation, any segments of our correspondence that I may use as data. Although at present I see no other issue of confidentiality arising in the representation of my research, I will remain vigilant and ensure that any identifiers of persons, places, and congregations will be removed to protect those who are linked to my story.

Representation

Representation, then, is grounded both in the ethical telos of the methodology and informed by the ethic of care for self and other. Representation also seeks to find the most effective way to invite the reader into encounter with the phenomenon being represented. "Autoethnography wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act, and it shouldn't be used as a vehicle to produce distanced theorizing."[161]

Ellis and Bochner's reference to "distanced theorizing" need not be taken to mean that theory is in itself distancing. While the ethical telos of AE takes priority, theory can take its place within the overall goals and representation of AE. Theory too can be emancipatory.

> Theories are word-tools for navigating history, directing movements, defining enemies, predicting the future, getting specific, exploring connections, and moving through the hard places. Theories are word-tools for saying what you mean and meaning what you say. Theories are community builders – some divide and exclude, and some invite and incite. [. . .] Some theories are deadly. Theory-making, like touch, can open the body. Which theories do you live in? What kind of words shelter you? Turn you? Give you courage? Guide your way? " [162]

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[161] Carolyn S. Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, "Analyzing Analytic Autoethnography: An Autopsy," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography,"* 35, no. 4, (2006): 433.

[161] Jacquelyn N. Zita, *Body Talk: Philosophical Reflections on Sex and Gender,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 208.

Theories can be used as barriers, but they can also form bridges. How we understand, shape and use theory, how we feel it can serve the hope we have of our research, will emerge in our research's representation.

Questions about the ethics of who might legitimately represent whom in research led to a *crisis of representation*. described by Jones, Ellis and Bochner [163] with reference to others. "The question [has been] raised about political and cultural representation – not only about who should represent whom but what should be the forms of representation in relationship to hegemonic practices."[164] These questions marry well with postmodern philosophies of knowing and also question the bias against affect and emotion.

> [. . .] although there are many presentations of autoethnography they all hold a core principle of starting with a personal story, which incorporates the physical feelings, thoughts and emotional experiences that expose the vulnerability of the self and therefore "challenge the rational actor of social performance" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 744). [165]

The self is not merely permitted to appear tangentially or timidly in AE; self is explicitly present both in the voice of the researcher and in the use of researcher experience as data. This use of self as data raises questions about how it is represented. How much of the self needs to be revealed for the purposes of the research aim? How does the researcher retain a sense of agency should the research present moments in her life when she was most vulnerable and perhaps when that vulnerability was exploited? How does the researcher

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[163] Stacy Holman Jones, Tony Adams and Carolyn Ellis, "Coming to Know Autoethnography as More than a Method," in *Handbook of Autoethnography,* eds. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016),28-29.

[164] Patricia T. Clough, "Comments on setting criteria for experimental writing," *Qualitative Inquiry* 6, no.2 (2000): 283.

[165] Jane Mischenko, Exhausting management work: Conflicting Identities, *Journal of Health Organization and Management* 19, (2005): 4.

reveal herself in a way adequate to advance knowledge and at the same time protect herself and others who appear in her account?

> A number of examples reveal the place of anxiety over self-representation in AE.
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> > During the production of my autoethnographic text, I experienced persistent anxiety about how I was representing myself in it. It was important to me to reflect in my paper the same sense of identity and self-understanding that I had established in my life. This included an understanding of myself as an autonomous social agent, my family as a "normal" nuclear family, [. . .] and my son as a resilient and healthy child. [166]

And since AE is to advance knowledge, what if the self that stands revealed through the process is not who one understood oneself to be? AE carries that kind of risk.

> Another anxiety around the representation of self is expressed by Mischenko.
>
> > I feel I need to share with you my fear, my feelings of anxiety; I am consciously taking a number of risks in this work. I'm putting my story "out there", in the domain of "others", for you to judge and perhaps, permanently fix my identity as an overwhelmed and insecure manager. Once a paper is produced and "out there" the resulting prose remains fixed and frozen in time.[167]

Mischenko quotes from a poem by Alden Nowlan to counter her anxiety over presenting an identity which will be forever fixed; "As long as you read this poem/I will be writing it [. . .]".[168]

Beyond questions of who represents whom, and how the self is represented in research, there are the questions of form. How do we represent our research? "By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable".[169] I choose in my AE to use varying ways of layering data.

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[166] Sarah Wall, "Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography," *International Journal of Qualitative Methodology* 7, (2008):41.

[167] Mischenko, Exhausting Management Work, 204.

[168] Mischenko, Exhausting Management Work, 204.

[169] Andrew Sparkes, "Autoethnography and narratives of self: *722.*

> Layered accounts often focus on the author's experience alongside data, abstract analysis, and relevant literature. [. . .] unlike grounded theory, layered accounts use vignettes, reflexivity, multiple voices, and introspection (Ellis, 1991) to "invoke" [sic] readers to enter into the "emergent experience" of doing and writing research (Ronai, 1992), p. 123), conceive of identity as an "emergent process" (Rambo, 2005, p. 583), and consider evocative, concrete texts to be as important as abstract analyses (Ronai, 1995, 1996).[170]

One principle of autoethnographic representation is that the form of the research and its content should be congruous. An example of this is an essay by Ronald J. Pelias in which he argues that, "academics, similar to tourists, often only manage to get to the surface of any area of inquiry they pursue, in part because of the nature of what constitutes full understanding and in part because of the habits of academic life".[171] The condition that Pelias foregrounds is the climate or culture of present day academia, the workload, the breadth of work that is expected. This leads to a frenetic life on the surface of those things that one might want to explore or experience more deeply; the academic, as Pelias describes her or him is so caught in the very freneticism they want to escape that they are unable to create effective resistance to it. To match form with content Pelias creates an essay in which the only periods are at the end of paragraphs, giving a breathless, headlong feel to the writing.

In my Pilot Project for this research, I used a contemplative prayer form, *Lectio Divina,* as a shape for one level of my analysis. Since my data was anchored by four examples of a spiritual practice of creating *Moments*[172] it seemed that I might best present

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[170] Ellis, Adams & Bochner. Autoethnography: An Overview, 278-279.

[171] Ronald J. Pelias, "The Academic Tourist," *Qualitative Inquiry* 9, no. 3, (2003): 369 – 373.

[172] Moments are small juxtapositions of word and image that I created semi-regularly over a period of approximately 20 months. Image and text arising from contemplative theological reflection were deeply entwined with my interior reflection, during the practice of pastoral ministry. The images were either chosen from photos I had taken, and then, reflected on through the creation of text, or, less often, the text arose and a photo was found or taken. Image and text, once they had come to a stage at which,

my analysis of their creation and the knowledge gained through their creation through another contemplative practice.

Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading) is an ancient prayer practice that unfolds through three movements toward its telos or fourth movement, *contemplatio* (contemplation), the state of wordless, imageless prayer. *Lectio*, in Christian history, practiced long ago by the desert fathers and mothers of the 3rd and 4th centuries, had roots further back in "[. . .] a Hebrew method of studying Scripture called *Haggadah*, a process of learning by heart".[173] *Lectio* long practiced in the Benedictine tradition is being more widely recovered. We may practice *Lectio* not only with Scripture but with other texts. *Lectio* has in common with AE a fluidity within its movements. In both, we move back and forth between data collection, analysis and interpretation. There is a consistency in this way of emphasizing that permeability, porousness, openness to the Other, to life, to learning, generate wholeness. (For the movements of *Lectio Divina* see Appendix 3.)

As I researched and wrote the Pilot, *Lectio* was performative of what had been at the root of the *Moments*, namely, a turning toward a threshold on which one is disposed for deeper knowing. *Lectio,* my reading, was on the text of the *Moment*. *Meditatio,* my meditation or reflection, gathers up further supporting data and begins analysis. *Oratio*, speaking or praying, gathers data, reflection and analysis into a kind of raw, poetic synthesis. *Contemplatio,* contemplation, provides a silent pause before I, as the

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subjectively, it felt right to release them, were then circulated by e-mail, through use of a program called Mail Chimp to members and adherents of the congregations with whom I was in ministry. Though I say photos were taken there was a sense in this creative practice that much was received. Others external to the congregation sometimes asked to be added to the list. Appropriate permissions were received from those to whom Moments would be sent and there was a simple option to unsubscribe included in every e-mail.

[173] Christine Valters Paintner, *Lectio Divina The Sacred Art*: Transforming Words & Images into Heart-Centered Prayer, (Woodstock: Sky Light Paths Publishing, 2011), 4.

researcher-self, express the interpretations to be offered to the reader. It was the pause to allow for what transcends data and encourages tacit knowing to emerge.

The following account of the process of *Lectio Divina* is helpful in understanding how these layers must be vulnerable, porous, permeable to one another. Reading Cynthia Bourgeault's book, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*, I come upon her description of the four movements of *Lectio*. *Lectio, Meditatio, Oratio* are the first three. The layers are still distinct. The fourth step *Contemplatio,* is transformative. "In the deep receptivity of this step, the imaginal can begin to stir, [. . .] *Contemplatio* is a bit like weaving the "basket" of the heart around the three "poles" of knowing".[174]

This layering in my AE must also represent the permeability that is an essential quality of whole-hearted vulnerability. My experience melds with the text of Scripture, and the discourse of theology, and other disciplines, that flow through my life. Though the accounts are layered those layers are permeable to one another. The possible alchemy of the layered content is an element of vulnerability and of this research.

Data Collection and Analysis

I have chosen, for reasons described above, to be the sole research subject, a field of one, which makes data readily available. While some autoethnographers include interviews with others in their research, my project maintains a sole focus on the examination of self in relationship with culture. I am supported in this focus by the word autoethnography itself, that is: *auto* (self) – *ethno* (culture) – *graphy* (writing). While the meaning of this three-part word is sometimes extended, as in Reed-Danahay, to mean,

[174] Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart,* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2003), chap. 7, Kindle.

auto (self) – ethno (sociocultural connection) or *graphy* (the application of the research process)[175] it can still be understood to support, and even favour, self as both data and researcher.

In AE participant and researcher may become one. "You are a generator, collector, and interpreter of data."[176] This gives researchers easy access to primary data from the very beginning of the process. As researcher-participant I am able to maintain my vocation of pastoral ministry as precedent over my research, even as my life unfolded that research. My attention to those to whom I offered pastoral leadership was unhindered by the data collection requirements such as interviews. AE is also, with the proper attention to ethics as described above, a way of inquiry whose methods allow generously for the protection of those whose lives overlap with the researcher's. This for me was a vital factor in my pastoral leadership.

Despite the advantages of being the researcher-self, I am conscious of the need to strengthen the reliability of my subjective memory and reflective data with additional data such as e-mail correspondence, journal entries, and congregational artifacts, for example, the documentation of *Governance as Spiritual Practice*.[177]

In the autoethnographic literature, there are many examples of the researcher as the only participant. For instance, Andrew Sparkes drew data from medical records, diary

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[175] Reed-Danahay, *Auto/ethnography: rewriting the self and the social",* (Oxford: Berg,1997).

[176] Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method (Developing Qualitative Inquiry), (New York: Routledge, 2008)* chap. 9*,* Kindle.

[177] *Governance as Spiritual Practice* is a way of governance I initiated and created with three other congregational members, to overcome the long-standing duality in congregational life of spiritual and temporal. It also seeks to make leadership accessible to a wider range of people within the congregation. It engages the core leadership group in regular, ongoing faith formation through engagement with the narrative of Scripture and the congregation. It will be extensively described in *Chapter Eight.*

extracts, and newspaper articles about himself to discuss his sporting career and the chronic condition that ended it[178]. Elizabeth Ettorre consulted a diary, letter, articles, and medical laboratory results to support the analysis of her illness experience.[179] Nicholas Holt relied on data found in his reflective journal[180] and Muriel Duncan used an extensive reflective journal as well as e-mails, memos, and sketches to support an evaluation of her professional work.[181]

Autoethnographic data collection and analysis are combined in an interactive, non-linear process. "In an autoethnographic study, moving to the next step, data analysis and interpretation, does not mean abandoning the previous step, data collection, because data collection is likely to continue along with data analysis and interpretation to fill gaps and enrich certain components of data."[182] Analysis and synthesis, or theory creation, reflect the ongoing movement in autoethnographic research. "Whereas analysis is more likely to direct you to zoom in at one data set at a time, interpretation tends to pull you away from details to hover over the entire data and the context".[183]

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[178] Andrew C. Sparkes, "The fatal flaw: A narrative of the fragile body-self," *Qualitative Inquiry* 2, no.4, (1996): 463-494.

[179] Elizabeth Ettore, "Gender, older female bodies and autoethnography: Finding my feminist voice by telling my illness story," *Women's Studies International Forum* 28, (2005): 535-546.

[180] Nicolas L. Holt, "Representation, legitimation, and autoethnography: An autoethnographic writing story," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2, no. 1, (2003), http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqum/backissues/2_1/html/holt.html. Accessed April 21, 2017.

[181] Muriel Duncan, "Autoethnography: Critical appreciation of an emerging art," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods,* 3, no. 4, (2004), http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3_4/pdf/duncan.pdf. Accessed May 30, 2019.

[182] Chang, *Autoethnography as Method*, chap. 9, Kindle.

[183] Chang, *Autoethnography as Method*, chap. 9*,* Kindle.

Wolcott (2001) suggests that one begin writing early in the ethnographic [in this case AE process], even during the early stage of fieldwork, because it stimulates and facilitates data collection and eventually stimulates cultural analysis and interpretation. "[. . .] In AE, this advice is even more applicable and doable because you enter into a research project with the pre-knowledge of your life. Therefore, you are predisposed to begin connecting data fragments and contextualizing them without having to wait until data collection is advanced. For this reason, autoethnographic studies can achieve much more organic transition from data collection to data analysis and interpretation."[184]

My attention to the phenomenon of vulnerability emerged from my personal experience. So, from my early life I have been collecting, first unconsciously and later more intentionally feelings, thoughts and emotions that relate to the relationship to vulnerability in my life and culture. Even before I engaged in this research, I had already begun a collection of data describing or arising out of my personal and professional awareness of vulnerability.

"The value of any document or artifact for such research [AE] depends on its evocative potential – its ability to either open the researcher to deeper reflection on relevant experiences and relationships or to evoke compelling images, emotions, or understandings in other readers."[185] Reflection from the present moment on these sources that emerge from the past provides an opportunity for interrogation by my researcher-self in the present.[186]

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[184] Chang, *Autoethnography as Method*, chap. 9, Kindle.

[185] Leon Anderson and Bonnie Glass-Coffin, "Learn by Going," in *Handbook of Autoethography,* eds. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis, (New York, Routledge, 2016):68.

[186] Anderson et al., 66-67.

Personal memory data in AE is supported by textual data or artifacts." This is the case in Chapters Seven and Eight of the Dissertation. Data sources include my personal/pastoral journal entries, e-mail correspondence, photographic artifacts, minutes and reports from congregational life. These are brought together and analyzed to extend knowledge of my experience and practice of vulnerability.

Brené Brown, as referenced in the Literature Review, is one voice. While Brown's work slightly overlaps the faith life of individuals, theological reflection on vulnerability, especially as it informs pastoral leadership, has not been her focus. Brown's research and theory of vulnerability, shame and worthiness, has been a vital catalyst in society for inviting reflection on the place of vulnerability in our lives. Other voices include the systematic theology of Douglas J. Hall, along with the theological anthropology and feminist theology of Kristine Culp and Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo. The pastoral and spiritual theology of, among others, Henri Nouwen, Parker Palmer, Sandra Schneiders, and Constance Fitzgerald, will be present, as will selections from poetry and fiction.

In the concluding section of the Dissertation I draw together the threads of these explorations of pastoral practice and vulnerability in a way that will be, I hope, inviting and accessible beyond the enclosure of academic work. While I believe it is important that my method contain some measure of explicit analysis and theory, I refer once again to the emergent nature of this method in order to resist too rigid a definition of its steps.

The Pilot Project

In the Pilot Project, I proposed to show how my understanding of vulnerability and its value in deepening pastoral leadership grew through a particular spiritual practice,

namely the creation of the *Moments.* The Pilot created the frame for emergent knowledge, gathering the data of memory, retrospective and present reflection on the experience, journal entries and e-mail correspondence, anchored by four of the *Moments* themselves. This practice of creation rose at the intersection of self and culture(s). It both grew from and extended my deeply reflected-on questions of self, others and Other.

The creative practice described is contemplative reflection on the blurred edges of personal and vocational life. It emerged within the cultures of faith community and the wider culture in which we are situated. In the midst of pastoral life, I found, or made, time to be present to all that I experienced in a reflective way. The tangible creation emerging from and embodying this practice was the expression of what might be referred to as small pieces of art, text and image which I named *Mid-week Moments* (*Moments).* For the most part, the images are photographs taken by me. For the purposes of this research they are treated as artefacts, that is, non-textual data of a period or epiphanic moment in my life. The texts reflect both the inner and outer atmosphere of my life as it was experienced in, and contributed to, congregational culture.

The Pilot responded to my primary research question by showing these *Moments* as an instance of "what happens to leadership practice . . .". Responding to other questions particular to the Pilot, the research followed the autoethnographic movement inward and outward, shifting the researcher gaze between self and culture. Data collection and analysis moved to completion in a non-linear fashion, one piece calling for another until knowing is expressed.

As the Pilot Project responded to the primary research question by showing what happens to leadership practice "through a layered autoethnography",[187] so Chapter Eight extends the examination of the questions through exploration of the impetus for, creation of and experience of a new way of governance, *Governance as Spiritual Practice*. With very few exceptions, personal retrospective and reflective data will be from the period 2007, when I began full time ministry, through 2017, when I began the writing of the dissertation.

What Barbara Brown Taylor, has to say about the work of a preacher illustrates how the act of preaching (including working with the text in all the ways above and preparing oneself) is consonant with the work of AE.

> No other modern public speaker does what the preacher tries to do. [. . .] All the preacher has is words. Climbing into the pulpit without props or sound effects, the preacher speaks [. . .] to people who are used to being communicated with in very different ways. [. . .] The sermon counts on listeners who will stay tuned to a message that takes time to introduce, develop, and bring to a conclusion. [. . .] This is only one of many ways in which the sermon proves to be a communal act, not the creation of one person but the creation of a body of people for whom and to whom one of them speaks."[188]

While AE takes many forms, like liturgy, sermon, ritual, and governance, it seeks to be a communal act. AE does not stop dead on the printed page. It inquires and represents in hope of a community; a community that waits to complete the researcher's inchoate creation by taking it into their lives in ways that make a difference.

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[187] "The layered text is a strategy for putting yourself into your text and putting your text into the literatures and traditions of social science [or theology]." Denzin, Norman K. and Yvonne S. Lincoln. Richardson, Laurel, Writing as Inquiry in The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research, 3rd ed. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, 979.

[188] Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life,* (Cambridge: Cowley Press, 1993), 76-77.

Walton states that, "For the theological reflector this approach [performative][189] encourages us to think beyond the personal and therapeutic aspects of AE and embrace its prophetic and disclosive potential. It also encourages us to see our sacred places as theatres in which worship and ritual may be 'performed' as political acts."[190] A clarification is necessary. Seeing our sacred places as theatres does not suggest that we succumb to the prevalent wish to find worship entertaining. Rather, this is cosmic theatre, challenging us to engage the core questions of our life; it touches the place where God stirs our hearts toward wholeness for ourselves and all creation.

Criteria for Evaluating Value and Validity

It is first necessary to acknowledge the difference between AE and other methodologies, both quantitative and qualitative, in order to create and realize appropriate criteria for assessing autoethnographic research. "Alternative conceptions about truth, reality and method are required to support the autoethnographic turn."[191] "[. . .] the differences between alternate forms of inquiry, in terms of their process and products need to be acknowledged so that each could be judged using criteria that are consistent with their own internal structures".[192] As Nicolas Holt notes,

> Whereas the use of autoethnographic methods may be increasing, knowledge of how to evaluate and provide feedback to improve such accounts appears to be

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[189] There is a genre of AE called Performative AE but here I use the word as an approach that is constitutive of that which it speaks/writes about. The Moments were an experience of the gifts of vulnerability, as is sermon writing, governance creation and many other pastoral acts. All these immerse one to greater or lesser extent in the experience of living with courage, creativity and compassion in one's vulnerability.

[190] Walton, *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection,* chap 2, part 3, Kindle.

[191] Wall, "Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 7, no.1 (2008), 50.

[192] Sparkes, "Autoethnography and Narratives of Self," 29.

> lagging. As reviewers begin to develop ways in which to judge autoethnography they must resist the temptation to seek universal foundation criteria, lest one form of dogma simply replace another.[193]

And as Dauphinee cautions, "What I wish to point out here is the possibility that we may find ourselves more invested in what we can verify, . . . not because the issues are always more important politically or ethically, but simply because we can verify." [194] Often we are as attached to our process, as to our ethics or politics.

If we are to assess AE then we need to set aside, at least for the time of assessment, any investment in positivist research paradigms, any attachment to the sense of invulnerability which concrete standards of verification may seem to provide. We must be open to the particular efficacy of careful, competent, artful AE. "[. . .] the good ones help the reader or listener to understand and feel the phenomena under scrutiny."[195] AE asks that we be open to feeling and understanding that comes in unfamiliar ways.

A methodology that is consistent with postmodern philosophy should be assessed in terms of the achievement of what offers itself as *a* truth, rather than *the* truth. The understanding and measure of qualities such as reliability, validity, verisimilitude, trustworthiness, transferability, (rather than generalizability), are altered. "For an autoethnographer, questions of reliability refer to the narrator's credibility.[196] Could the narrator have had the experience described, given available 'factual evidence'?

> Validity in autoethnograpy means that a work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible,

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[193] Nicolas, L Holt, "Representation, legitimation, and autoethography," 18-19.

[194] Elizabeth Dauphinee, "The ethics of autoethnography," *Review of International Studies"* 36, (2010):812.

[195] Bochner, "Criteria Against Ourselves," *Qualitative Inquiry* 6, no.2, (2000): 270.

[196] Ellis, Carolyn and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An overview", *Forum: Qualitative Social Research/Sozialforschung,* 12, no. 10 (2011): 282.

> a feeling that what is represented could be true. [. . .] It connects readers to writers and provides continuity in their lives. [. . .] An autoethnography can also be judged in terms of whether it helps readers communicate with others different from themselves or offer a way to improve the lives of participants and readers or the author's own. In particular, autoethnographers ask: 'How useful is the story?' and 'To what uses might the story be put?'[197]

I paraphrase Art Bochner, in his article *Criteria Against Ourselves,*[198] as he proposes criteria that include concrete detail, that reflect the nonlinear process of memory work, that express the author's emotional credibility, vulnerability, and honesty, that show a life course transformed by crisis, and that is ethically self-aware. Drawing on my reading of Ellis and Bocher and Laurel Richardson [199] I propose the following criteria.

- Is the writing evocative?
- Does it invite the reader to engage with the phenomenon at the centre of the research?
- Does it provoke response?
- Might it be helpful to you should you encounter the phenomenon in your own life?
- Does it invite reflection?
- Does it encourage empathy, not only with the writer but in the reader as she relates to others?
- Is it believable?

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[197] Ellis et al., 2011.

[198] Arthur P. Bochner, "Criteria Against Ourselves," 270-271.

[199] Laurel Richardson, "New writing practices in qualitative research," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 17, (2000):15-16.

- Might it make a difference; encourage healing and/or transformation? (The ethical telos of the methodology is seen here.)
- Does the data selected express the movement of the inquiry in a comprehensive way?
- Are interpretations and/or theories arising from the data well-grounded in the data?

Conclusion

"The questioning of the dominant scientific paradigm, the making of room for other ways of knowing, and the growing emphasis on the power of research to change the world, create a space for the sharing of unique, subjective, and evocative stories of experience that contribute to our understanding of the social world and allow us to reflect on what could be different because of what we have learned."[200]

Many of the questions and qualities of AE coincide with my research question(s) and with my context in pastoral ministry. Both the way of engaging vulnerability I research and the way of this methodology call for courage, creativity and compassion. Both respect and express themselves through narrative, both value and honour embodiment and emotion. Both are concerned with voice, and evocation, words, and the way we author ourselves in relationship with them.[201] In my understanding, God, Divine Mystery, or the Word is a pervasive element of that alchemy. AE, like a sermon, at its best, is, "A creation that makes something happen - a poetics and way of relating to self

[200] Sarah Wall, An Autoethnography on Learning about Autoethnography, 3.

[201] Thomas.Ryan, Ed. *Reclaiming the Body in Christian Spirituality,* (New York:Paulist Press, 2004), xv.

and culture that shows how we make meaning and construct relationships on the page and in the world".[202]

[202] Stacy Holman Jones, Tony Adams, and Carolyn Ellis, *Coming to Know Autoethnography as More than a Method,* in Handbook of Autoethnography, eds. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis, (Adingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), 38 – 39.

Chapter Four

Vulnerability and Pastoral Leadership

Vulnerability

'Vulnerability' can be an off-putting word, even a frightening word. As I undertook this research, I considered whether another word, a word like openness, might encourage more people to engage my research. It is not without reflection that I have committed to finding ways to hold that particular word 'vulnerability' and to surround it with a consideration of the gifts it bears. I believe that its reception not only as a word but as a way is vital and that other good, if less challenging words sometimes protect us from the essential work to which it calls us. This does not mean that I use the word vulnerability frequently in conversation, but that I seek the way of inhabiting the quality itself in ways that generate courage, creativity and compassion.

I understand vulnerability to be, at least in part, as Elizabeth Gandolfo states,

> [. . .] ultimately the threat of nonbeing, which is experienced most absolutely in the face of personal death. The basic conditions of human existence – embodiment, relationality, process and perishing, conflict and ambiguity – expose human beings to the imminent threat and ultimate inevitability of death". [203]

I also believe that, as Kristine Culp posits, though in much of contemporary literature, "definitions of vulnerability stay close to the word's Latin root of "wounding [. . .]", vulnerability signals not only the capacity for harm and to be damaged, but also capacities implied by contrast, to be kept safe and whole, to have integrity and dignity, and to be healed and lifted."[204]

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[203] Gandolfo*, The Power and Vulnerability of Love*,108.

[204] Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory,* 94.

Inherent vulnerability, as distinct from exacerbated vulnerability[205], is not a negative circumstance to be overcome but an invitation to draw close to the One who offers and asserts the goodness of the material creation. It is an invitation to ponder God expressing God's self through Incarnation: birth, life, death, and resurrection. Accepting this invitation, we open ourselves to both the hurt and healing that come to us through this quality of our being. We draw near to a vulnerable God, with whose unconditional love and infinite resilience we may be infused as we move through life. We consider what our embodiment, relationality, and perishing mean in light of the complex promise of resurrection.

A resurrected Christ cannot be contained as mere memory or model encased in historical time. Christ can be met as the Other who lived historically but meets and challenges and creates us in the present, so our bodied selves are vulnerable to death and history but also permeable to resurrection. We consider resurrection not as an event that takes meaning only at a point on some linear future but as it is received through each moment of our permeable lives.

Living as vulnerable creatures in a vulnerable creation we experience anxiety. This, too, is not something we need try to repress. Brother David Stendahl-Rast's words to Krista Tippett in an interview provide a helpful perspective on anxiety.

> This word [. . .] comes from a root that means "narrowness," and choking, and the original anxiety is our birth anxiety. We all come into this world through this very uncomfortable process of being born, [. . .]. And that is the original, the prototype, of anxiety. [. . .] If you go with it [the channel of anxiety], it brings you into birth. **[. . .]** It's a reasonable response, and we are to acknowledge it and affirm it, because to deny our anxiety is another form of resistance.[206]

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[205] See note 7.

[206] "David Steindl-Rast: Anatomy of Gratitude", hosted by Krista Tippett, *On Being,* January 21, 2016, https://onbeing.org/programs/david-steindl-rast-anatomy-of-gratitude/ . Accessed January 9, 2016.

Paul Tillich has given much attention to anxiety, and his understanding is helpful in thinking about the ways in which we encounter our vulnerability.

> The awareness of this three-fold threat [of non-being] is anxiety in three forms, that of fate and death (briefly, the anxiety of death), that of emptiness and loss of meaning (briefly, the anxiety of meaninglessness), that of guilt and condemnation (briefly the anxiety of condemnation). In all three forms anxiety is existential in the sense that it belongs to existence as such and not to an abnormal state of mind as in neurotic (and psychotic) anxiety. [. . .] The three forms of anxiety (and of courage) are immanent in each other but normally under the dominance of one of them. [207]

Our vulnerability and anxiety are linked.

It is important to add to the definition of vulnerability four understandings fundamental to my research:

- that the narrative of the Christian Scripture, which describes the movement of life, death, new life, or, orientation, dis-orientation, re-orientation, provides resources for inhabiting vulnerability with courage, creativity and compassion;
- that the God of the Christian narrative is vulnerable and infinitely resilient;
- that a distinction can and should be made between vulnerability inherent to all human beings and the exacerbated state of vulnerability[208] many find themselves in, the latter brought about through the violation of inherent human vulnerability by actions or systems of injustice, poverty, oppression and violence;
- That vulnerability does not equate with suffering or weakness.

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[207] Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be, London, Fontana Library of Theology and Philosophy,(London: Nisbet & Co., Ltd., 1972), 49-50.*

[208] See note 7.

The first and second points will be addressed explicitly throughout this dissertation; the third and fourth will be held implicitly. The latter two are vital to note and hold in any understanding of vulnerability. For that reason, I emphasize them in the foregoing definition, though they are beyond the scope of this present work.

I understand vulnerability as a quality inherent in human beings and in any relational being or entity (such as a faith community, congregation, or denomination). It is inseparable from our knowledge of temporal perishing, which is not only known and experienced through death, but in our relationality, our loves and their perishing, and our anticipation of that perishing. When inhabited courageously and peacefully it is the milieu of our transformation and the site from which we live in compassionate solidarity with the rest of vulnerable creation.

Vulnerability is the weave through which the ambiguity and complexity of our lives move and are held in creative tension. Kristine Culp speaks of it as‟ [. . .] the pivot of salvation.” [209] While that metaphor is apt in its expression of the vital place vulnerability holds in our salvation, it lacks the sense of permeability that is so important in a comprehensive consideration of this quality. Understanding salvation through its root meaning of healing, I propose vulnerability as the milieu of our being, within and without, wherein the potential for wounding mingles with the potential for healing and blessing.

The reality of vulnerability is both essential and complex enough to root and influence the whole of our lives. Feminist philosopher Erinn Gilson writes,

> [. . .] Talk of vulnerability indicates concern about the susceptibility of others to violation and injury, evinces awareness and anxiety on the part of the

[209] Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory,* 8.

> relatively privileged about their own exposure to forces outside their control, and points to an incontrovertible fact about the human condition. [. . .] vulnerability has widespread salience and application. Its breadth, complexity, and variability make it important and interesting. For these reasons, I also reject the self-evidence of the dictionary definition of vulnerability as susceptible to injury and the simple interpretation of its etymology as the ability to be wounded. [. . .] Vulnerability can have positive manifestations and value, enabling the development of empathy, compassion, and community. To comprehend the multiplicity of ways we experience being vulnerable, we cannot endorse a narrow definition of the term.[210]

To inhabit vulnerability well is essential for our whole- hearted engagement with life. As Gandolfo writes, "[…] I also have come to understand the power of beauty, love, and connection that is only available in vulnerability".[211] It remains only available, and not realized, until we come to live insightfully and courageously in our own vulnerability. I am concerned with how those with whom I am in ministry experience vulnerability and how they experience the Word; the Word revealed in Scripture, and the Word in the person of Jesus Christ, the permeable Word.

The Word in both senses sometimes seems to be understood as a dead or static Word, impervious and fixed rather than living, porous and dynamic. I encountered the Word in the latter way. I was vulnerable to the Word as the Word was to me. Each week, as I prepared the sermon, the Word shaped itself anew through the Scripture text. I entered in, holding in awareness, the life of congregants and congregations and the life of the world. The complexity of my life interacted with that of the Word. How often after a sermon people said, "I've never before heard the story told in that way"? In the tenor of those words I heard a longing and found a small sliver of hope that perhaps the

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[210] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 8-9.

[211] Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love*, 2.

congregation might open more deeply to this Word as it opened to them. I held that hope alongside the anxieties and outward actions of the congregation and began to see how hard it had become for people to find themselves in the story[212]. Somehow the permeability of the narrative, had been lost. Or we had become impermeable to its story and projected that imperviousness onto the narrative itself.

I gathered a small group of women from a congregation one day, around a video of Brown's first TED talk[213]. After we watched together, I moved to the Word. I spoke of the vulnerability of Jesus but was met with a gently skeptical response. I offered a few texts[214] and spoke of Jesus' birth and the misunderstandings of his ministry, his loneliness and betrayal, his death. "Yes", came the tentative-sounding response, "come to think of it, these did seem to suggest that Jesus might have sometimes been vulnerable". I heard in this answer the care that these women and I had for one another. They did not want to hurt or offend. I was unconvinced however that the attachment to an air-brushed, Caucasian Jesus had really been shaken by my invitation to consider a vulnerable God. Nevertheless, a seed had been planted. These women were mostly life-long church-goers but we had been living in very different relationship to the Word. While I encountered God as vulnerable in love and incarnation it seemed I was in leadership with those who lived with a sense of more formal relationship to an impervious God, a position which easily leads to shame and numbness.

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[212] The Scriptural text or passage on which the sermon is based.

[213] Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability,* https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.

[214] Jesus' words about becoming like children in order to enter the realm of God (Matthew18:24), Jesus in Gethsemane (Mt. 26:36-46), Parables of Yeast and Mustard Seed (Luke 13:18-21).

In that first TED talk that provided an entry way for my discussion with the women, Brown tells the story of her visit to a therapist. Her therapist asks the question,

> 'What's the struggle?' And I [Brown] said, 'Well, I have a vulnerability issue. And I know that vulnerability is the core of shame and fear and our struggle for worthiness, but it appears that it's also the birthplace of joy, of creativity, of belonging, of love. And I think I have a problem, and I need some help'. [215]

Brown goes on to say,

> Am I alone in struggling with vulnerability? No. So, this is what I learned. We numb vulnerability — [. . .]. The problem is — and I learned this from the research — that you cannot selectively numb emotion. You can't say, here's the bad stuff. Here's vulnerability, here's grief, here's shame, here's fear, here's disappointment. I don't want to feel these. [. . .] You can't numb those hard feelings without numbing the other affects, our emotions. You cannot selectively numb. So, when we numb those, we numb joy, we numb gratitude, we numb happiness.[216]

Numbness is a key word in relation to my research. In many of the congregations I have been involved with it was very present. In the face of congregational numbness, this state impermeable to the minister's creative life and to their own, those of us in ministry can become numb ourselves. I have experienced this. Others have as well. The illustration in the Introduction is only one example. How does a pastoral leader faced with congregational numbness find a way to remain responsive herself? I hope that the invitation in this dissertation to honour vulnerability, to understand numbness, to remain open through spiritual practice, and to hear that you are not alone brings hope and encourages creativity.

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[215] Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability*, https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability. Accessed May 30, 2019.

[216] Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability.*

The words quoted above are from Brown's first TED talk. Brown went on from there to delve deeply into vulnerability, shame, worthiness and whole-heartedness and to offer her findings in ways that have been transformative for many people. Here I offer a small cautionary note on the lurking temptation in any work that has grown from its deep roots into a more airy popularity. The caution is no reflection on the value of the originating work itself. It is a caution on the tendency, once that work is popularized, to misunderstand the slow, ongoing work that living healthily into vulnerability requires. Brown has now become a kind of celebrity and her work has issued in slogans printed on pillows and pictures, t-shirts, and other crafts sold in her online store, *The Marble Jar*.

There is nothing inherently wrong with wearing a t-shirt or drinking from a mug or looking at a picture decorated with or created of a 'vulnerability' or "whole-hearted living" phrase. It may turn one's attention to the deeper work that is at the foundation of the slogan. The temptation however is that it will merely encourage the belief that if you're wearing the t-shirt, you're there. Wearing the t-shirt without doing the work is much like sprinkling the word in sermons or liturgy or conversation with little connection to the ongoing practices that ground us in vital vulnerability. That work requires ongoing intention, theological reflection, attention to, and immersion in the deeper language that is W/word and silence, symbol/gesture and ritual.

Pastoral Leadership[217]

My task is to ask how in pastoral leadership this theology can be lived in the various contexts in which we find ourselves. Before going further into this question, it is necessary to clarify my understanding of leadership/ministry: the ways we assess this leadership, and the way in which vulnerable leaders are formed and sustained. It is also important to emphasize that my focus here is not primarily concerned with leadership in a broader scope but with the particular leadership exercised in pastoral ministry. This is not to say that pastoral leadership cannot draw fruitfully from the learnings of those who study and engage in leadership in non-pastoral settings. Heifetz, Bridges, Wheatley, Drucker, Godin have all been good teachers to me but that their theory is only in service to and not definitive of the more particular leadership that is ministry. When the two are conflated or confused, pastoral leadership is often diminished.

For example, while pastoral leadership may be in conversation with words such as success, its speech in that conversation must be resonant with a gospel voice. It must speak in a voice informed by the Incarnate God, Jesus Christ, a bearer of transcendence expressed in the immanent. Pastoral leadership must be acutely aware of and responsive to context while always calling up the hidden transcendent potential within the moment. This Gospel voice is a received one: challenging, visionary, compassionate, courageous, and creative. It is a voice in its historical context unsuccessful, yet unwaveringly committed to fullness of life,[218] to choosing life.

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[217] Leadership, in general terms, is the work of guiding a particular community, society or organization. While firmly grounded in the present and informed by the past, it is necessarily future-oriented, visionary and authoritative. Pastoral leadership continually holds before the church its founding narrative, reciting, interpreting and celebrating it in worship, and in encouraging the particular ways the narrative may be exemplified in the experiences of individuals, and in the shared life of the community.

[218] John 10:10b. [New Revised Standard Version]

This turn toward fullness of life for all, not only the faith community, is a more cross-contextual way of understanding leadership and ministries that are thriving. Some ministries, perhaps because they have turned too much to protecting themselves and some for reasons beyond their control, are at the brink of death. How do we as pastoral leaders, in the first case encourage the relinquishment of a congregation's strategies of invulnerability or in the second accompany a death that may be in itself a conduit for fullness of life.

Pastoral leadership is fraught with temptation to abandon its own deepest purposes. Eugene Peterson, distinguishing between jobs and professions and crafts, writes, "in these [professions and crafts] we have an obligation beyond pleasing somebody; we are pursuing or shaping the very nature of reality, convinced that when we carry out our commitments, we benefit people at a far deeper level than if we simply did what they asked of us." [219] As a pastor Peterson asks,

> Am I keeping the line clear between what I am committed to and what people are asking of me? Is my primary orientation God's grace, God's [sic] mercy, God's [sic] action in Creation and covenant? And am I committed to it enough that when people ask me to do something that will not lead them into a more mature participation in these realities, I refuse?[220]

I feel a sense of vulnerability in citing these words. They may not be well received by a number of pastoral leaders who feel the words erect barriers to inclusivity or retard a certain progressive bent. That is not how they are intended. My thesis rests on relationship to these realities, to the narrative of Scripture and the understanding of

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[219] Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 132.

[220] Peterson, *Contemplative Pastor*, 134.

community afforded by the Trinitarian nature of God. It is those realities that encourage and sustain me in relating to individuals and to current contexts in ways that are permeable, receptive to their deepest needs and desires. It is these realities that help me calm my own need for affirmation, a need that may lead me to abandon what gives meaning for what brings recognition or popularity.

We have sometimes in the church become a bit skittish about leadership and authority. We have sometimes tried to ease our discomfort by describing congregational leaders as serving congregations rather than leading congregations. However, the two are not exclusive of one another. Certainly Jesus, as servant and leader was also vision-holder and challenger and led with authority, authoring a new creation.

There has been much written about types of leader and leadership: directive, adaptive, etc. Our individual personalities incline us to a style within which we find our footing most naturally. We can't always stay in this inner place of greatest comfort. Leaders don't exist in a vacuum. What must be taken account of is the permeability of leader and community, Word and context. To lead does not mean we make ourselves into a leader with which the community is most comfortable but that we take account of the congregation's personality, its deepest needs and gifts, in practicing our leadership.

Abigail Johnson uses a helpful metaphor to describe this.

> As a canoeist [. . .] I've learned that with skill, a canoe can be used to navigate both calm and turbulent waters. As a canoeist, you learn how to read the river, examining the surface to discern what's underneath. Sometimes you choose to go with the current; sometimes you go in a completely different direction. You also learn how to use the canoe. In similar fashion, leaders need to be able to read the congregation, getting a sense of what's going on underneath the surface so that they can choose either to go with the flow or to chart another course. They also need skills to navigate conflict without becoming personally embroiled, to find times of solitude even in the midst of chaotic congregational life; to see the bigger

> picture and not get bogged down in details, yet to attend to details for the smooth running of the church.[221]

The work of vulnerable leadership, in support of its central task, is to invite the opening of ourselves, as individuals and communities, to live unashamed of all our ambiguities and perishings, in the assurance of our belovedness. In a worship service after reading *The Heart and the Bottle*, a story about a little girl who protects her heart from grief, my reflection on vulnerability and courage included the following, "What I am always asking is how can I, in this particular form of leadership, continue to help you, individually and as a community of faith, to remove your hearts when they are stuck in a bottle. And how can you help me?"[222]

We need to learn and teach, and, in some cases, create language that excavates vulnerability from the rubble of past meanings that have been heaped upon it. We need to become fluent in a language that expresses both what we love and what we fear, so that we can live whole-hearted and unashamed. This is not easy work; it will be resisted both within ourselves and by those to whom we offer leadership. The language of vulnerability as a creative milieu is unfamiliar and counter-cultural. It is close to the language Jesus lived and spoke. Jerome Berryman says this in speaking of the language of faith.

> The problem is that religious language is so different from the language of science . . . most emphasized in schools today. Instead of the functions of adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing, the Christian language system has the functions of identity making (sacred story), stimulating exploration of Christian meaning (parable), making redemption available to the community (liturgical action) and opening the way to experience the presence of the mystery of God directly (contemplative silence).[223]

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[221] Abigail Johnson, *Shaping Spiritual Leaders: Supervision and Formation in Congregations,* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2007), 16.

[222] Catherine Smith, *The Heart in the Bottle: A Sermon.*

[223] Jerome Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of*

We have to know uncertainty and ambiguity and paradox, not as things to be eliminated from our lives but as elements that make us, in relationship with God, whole. Rowan Williams, in his reflections on art and love through an examination of the work of Maritain, says: "If the artist sets out to please, he or she will compromise the good of the thing made. If it is well and honestly made, it will tend towards beauty – presumably because it will be transparent to what is always present in the real, that is the overflow of presence which generates joy." [224] The seemingly contradictory dispositions of the leader toward vigilance and an unguarded receptivity may be understood if we consider both our lives and our creations as art.

The trust necessary for the risks we take as leaders must be grounded in our own attention to, and relationship with, the divine narrative and our own stories. For this to be truly vulnerable work, its undertaking must be based not on an assurance of its success, but on an assessment of its attempt at faithfulness, that is, on whether it opens space for the congregation to hear and respond to its call. We must be rooted in our relationship to a life larger than that of the pastoral charge or denomination, larger even than social context.

This work is also vulnerable because it moves to no set pattern, other than the deep etching of life, death and resurrection/orientation, disorientation and reorientation. It moves fluidly, in the moment, seeking always to feel the balance between encouraging people to let go of their power, and offering the gospel resources described above in order

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Children (Denver: Morehouse Pub. Co., 2009), 3.

[224] Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic Publishers, 2006), 14.

to nourish a supple receptivity. The work moves to no set pattern nor can its results be measured by the usual metrics congregations long to use. The work of vulnerable leadership does not avoid numerical growth or financial increase, but it does not measure its health or flourishing in those ways. It is as though we stood in the tragic gap that Palmer describes:

> If we are to stand and act with hope in the tragic gap and do it for the long haul, we cannot settle for mere "effectiveness" as the ultimate measure of our failure or success. [. . .] When measurable, short-term outcomes become the only or primary standard for assessing our efforts, the upshot is as pathetic as it is predictable: we take on smaller and smaller tasks—the only kind that yield instantly visible results—and abandon the large, impossible but vital jobs we are here to do.[225]

To move with too much fervour or speed into the taking away of old power devices or the unmasking of strategies of invulnerability, is to invite a self-protective push back, not only against the vulnerable leader, but against the very openness that is being nurtured. We must hold out both myth and parable. "Mythic narrations comfort us and assure us that everything is going to be all right; parables challenge and dispute the reconciliation that our myths have created. [. . .] these are complementary narrative forms, and human beings need both of them."[226] There needs to be a constant attentiveness by the leader to the tension of the thread she or he holds, the thread that connects to the heart of the community.

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[225]. Parker J. Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 74.

[226] Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 15.

Synthesis

Those offering vulnerable leadership need to stand in the tide of flourishing and perishing (as described by Gandolfo) [227] with those with whom we are in ministry, and feel week by week, season by season, its ebb and flow. The anthropological constant of perishing which Gandolfo describes so clearly in relation to maternal life is present in the relationship of leader and congregation. This is not to say that we do not set goals or make plans; it is to say that all we envision must be sensitive and responsive to the infusion of Spirit, the tide within the community and the individuals in whom the community consists.

We need to hold a supple understanding of greatness and success. These will look very different in different contexts. Abundance of life for our faith communities and for our neighbours is a more cross-contextually generous way of understanding what it means to be vital as a faith community. All can find a place under this umbrella. The large urban congregation and the numerically diminishing rural or urban faith community can be permeable to the grace offered to all and can share this through their living and their dying.

Living, supporting, and encouraging the inhabiting of vulnerability with courage, creativity and compassion is a central task of vulnerable leadership. Without this practice, little whole-hearted and sustainable movement can be welcomed. Without this practice, the Spirit, with her comfort and challenge and surprise, will find few entry points. The louvers of the blinds of our hearts will be shut to protect what we imagine is of greatest

[227] Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love*, 77-78.

value; our present knowledge, our present security, our past stature, our relevance, our little triumphs in whatever idolatrous shape they take.

Chapter Five
A Theological Framework for Vulnerability

Though my specific theology of ministry will be woven throughout this paper it may be helpful to offer it in concentrated form at this stage. "There's a thread that you follow"[228], says poet William Stafford. This is my thread. For as long as I can remember I have been aware of my own vulnerability. I encountered it earliest in relationship with my family of origin and with the divine. I have been alert to the finitude of my life, the possibility of loss, the fragility of what this body experiences, and of the body that experiences it. I have at times tried in desperate ways to control that sense of vulnerability.

Though I am no stranger to the practice of perfectionism[229] and other attempts to control my environment with "strategies of invulnerability", I am healed over and over, saved, by God with us. It is in some of my darkest days that my greatest sense of compassion and joy has appeared, and lives, and grows. It is when I acknowledge and inhabit my own vulnerability with peace that I am most whole, most capable of courage, creativity and compassion.

There is a matrix (pattern) of vulnerabilities formed within my practice of ministry. There is the essential vulnerability of my humanity through which all these

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[228] William Stafford, *Ask Me* in "100 Essential Poems of William Stafford," (Minneapolis:Graywolf Press, 2014), Kindle.

[229] "The pursuit of perfection has become a major addiction of our time. Fortunately, perfectionism is learned. No one is born a perfectionist, which is why it is possible to recover." The quote from Rachel Naomi Remen naming perfectionism is beyond the scope of this dissertation but I include it as invitation to further reflection /http://www.rachelremen.com/beyond-perfection/ Accessed May 30, 2019. Perfectionism, a "strategy of invulnerability" is also given significant attention in Brené Brown's work.

others move and develop. There is vulnerability that arises in and from my personal life, that is, my life not directly connected to the pastoral charge: my family, friends, life partner, recreation. There are the cries of creation, human and non-human which call for response and so shape my life. There is that which arises through the search to express within my work what gives meaning to life. There is the vulnerability of person and psyche that are harmed when in the course of the practice of vocation my personal boundaries are violated. It is our essential human vulnerability as it is honoured and expressed through the practice of pastoral leadership that is my focus here.

I situate my research within a particular understanding of the narrative of Christian Scripture. Through the Old and New Testament narrative we see a God who is always moving toward us and within us, stirring loving relationship. This stirring includes all the complexity and ambiguity of anger, fear, and resistance, and the effort of those God loves to become self-sufficient or untouchably powerful. In Jesus Christ, God's loving intention toward a creation called good is enfleshed, and our possibility of understanding this loving telos of God is amplified as we watch an incarnate God live our humanity, through its natality, its loves and abandonments, its commitments and humiliations, its mortality, and its resurrection into an unimaginable livingness that death cannot ultimately extinguish.

It is important to clarify my theological grounding for the proposal of courageously inhabited vulnerability as the milieu in which the elements of wholeness are received and mixed. Though I have always seen and traced the narrative of inhabited vulnerability through the Old and New Testaments of Christian Scripture, Douglas Hall's theology of the cross was my earliest encounter with the systematic expression of a

theology whose content gave me a root and language for vulnerability as a fundamental component of our wholeness.

This theological grounding is vital. As Hall says, "[. . .] unless and until one is ready to consign theology [. . .] to abstraction, if not to the nether regions of rationalization and hypocrisy, one is surely bound to affirm that the actions of believers are usually the acting out of foundational beliefs, whether in conscious or unconscious ways."[230] It was my experience of congregations' disconnect from the vitality of vulnerability expressed in the narrative of the life of Jesus Christ, that set me on the path to a greater understanding of vulnerability's existential potential.

Something precious had been lost to these small congregations. The authentic narrative thread had been dropped. They had been seduced by a story in which they played the part of the powerful and dominant. They had taken it as their lover and imagined it as their thread. When it left them, as our glittering and insubstantial lovers do, they found themselves awash in the wake of their numerical and financial diminishment. As with the little girl in Oliver Jeffers story, *The Heart and the Bottle*,[231] who, on her father's death, fixes things by putting her heart in a bottle to keep it safe, many of the congregants I related to had put their theological hearts in a bottle. They felt safe for a time, defended by the glass of their bitterness or anger. Over time, their need to protect themselves had made their hand so great and unwieldy, and that they were no longer able to reach into the bottle and pull out their heart.

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[230] Hall, *The Cross in Our Context,* 2.

[231] Oliver Jeffers, *The Heart and the Bottle,* (London: Harper Collins Children's Books, 2010).

Congregations and pastoral leaders seldom make this choice of bottling consciously. It happens over time. The dangers of the choice are less apparent as long as their circumstances are favourable and the cloth of their congregational life intact. Eventually though, they find themselves shaken or bereft of voice and status and societal markers of success and the defenses become more rigid.

I believed, from the place I stood in my life, that the narrative of Scripture, the story of Jesus Christ in particular, could equip them to pull their hearts out of the bottle. I believed that that narrative was a rich resource for living unbottled lives, lives that need not be ashamed. These congregations had been seduced by triumphalism, the anti-resource for well-inhabited vulnerability. The triumphalist stance is taken by many of us, consciously or unconsciously and prevents us from entering unashamedly and creatively into our lives and the life of creation.

> *Triumphalism* refers to the tendency in all strongly held world-views, whether religious or secular, to present themselves as full and complete accounts of reality, leaving little if any room for debate or difference of opinion and expecting of their adherents unflinching belief and loyalty. Such a tendency is triumphalistic in the sense that it triumphs – at least in its own self-estimate – over all ignorance, uncertainty, doubt, and incompleteness, [. . .].[232]

This, it can be seen, is the antithesis of well-inhabited vulnerability which has the courage to admit of paradox, ambiguity, complexity and doubt.

I understand the cross or the crucifixion as the ultimate refutation of any attempt to create a theology that diminishes the value of our humanity by seeing death only as punishment for sin. The death as well as the birth of this One tells our life as one that God enters. This understanding finds support not only in Hall's *The Cross in our Context*

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[232] Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, 17.

but in Culp's *Vulnerability and Glory [. . .]*. Culp offers an alternative to 'strategies of invulnerability' of bottling our hearts, an alternative of life shared with God and in community.

"The cross – Jesus' crucifixion by imperial powers and the rise of courage and faith among his followers – can be interpreted within this ancient prophetic calling [to be present and active among the oppressed and suffering]. In this way it signals the presence of the living, transforming God amid persecution and oppression."[233] Culp is careful to emphasize that suffering is not something to be valorized, as some interpretations of the Christian narrative suggest. Not only is the valorization of suffering problematic but some interpretations of kenosis[234] have been misused in the history of the church.

Culp's conclusions are helpful as we parse vulnerability, learning to identify it as distinct from, though sometimes mingled with, weakness and suffering. Her conclusions also encourage us to accept and live into our human agency in vulnerability as seen in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "[. . .] The sign of the cross", Culp writes, "can be understood as pointing to transformation that comes through recognition of pain and response to it, rather than as a sign of divine favour for suffering or resignation."[235]

I know, as I work with the language of vulnerability, as I find grounding in a theology of the cross, and as questions of weakness, suffering, and kenosis appear even

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[233] Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory,* 119.

[234] Kenosis is derived from the Greek word 'kenoo' which means 'to empty'. In Christian Theology it is often understood as the 'self-emptying' of Jesus described in Philippians 2:5 - 11. As Sarah Coakley describes in *The Work of Love,* cited in the Bibliography, there are many different ways in which the term kenosis is understood and so, many different ways in which it might affect our understanding of God, creation, and humanity. The understanding of kenosis has also been a contentious theme in feminist theology.

[235] Culp*, Vulnerability and Glory,* 119 – 120.

implicitly in this research, that these words and some interpretations of this theology agitate the waters of feminist theologies. It is right that we take great care with these words. They have been used and are used still in terribly damaging ways. I understand why some of us reach the conclusion that any relationship with them must be severed; that they are beyond recuperation. Still, while I abhor the ways in which some have and do wield these words and theologies, I believe in the value of exploring more deeply the meaning that resides in them. I hope that the way I describe vulnerability, incarnation, creativity, language and leadership, as well as the use of AE, holds a sense of my own concern and practice as a feminist.

As stated previously, it is my understanding and belief that the Christian narrative has been sadly reduced in many instances, from its plurivocality to a flat narrative of glory, understood as success. God, in this reduced narrative, is posited as either present to the individual in a simplistic and sometimes sentimental way or as an untouchably powerful Other. The complexity and ambiguity of a narrative or theology that makes room for our human complexity and ambiguity is smoothed out in a narrative of triumph. "It is the theological triumphalism of Christendom that must be altered if the Christian faith is to exist in the world of today and tomorrow as a force for life and not death." [236]

While many of us may feel we have put triumphalism or Christendom behind us, there is evidence in our language and practice that it is always near. It finds entry through our longing for certainty and closure. The first we can see in the rush to new models we imagine will save us, with little reflection on the context and being of the faith

[236] Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, 5.

community itself. The second we see in our difficulty to hold with honour the historicity in which God is revealed.

A permeable view of history is encouraged in engagement with incarnation, and in the thin places in time we are reminded of by liturgical days such as All Saints. Despite this, we may in our uncertainty or fear embrace an impervious kind of 'progressive Christianity'. In some cases, this embrace requires us not to integrate but to move beyond old ideas of cross and resurrection. Thus, we seal ourselves off from what might be found through practices that re-imagine, letting time and its revelations flow though us timelessly. Ben Quash writes of this as he explores theories and practices relating the "given" and the "found". Quash uses the concept of matrilation as expressed by Halivni, along with reception aesthetics (Jauss) and theories of abductive reasoning (Peirce and Coleridge) as "[. . .] fundamentally committed to the inescapability of historical process as the medium of human interpretation [. . .] All three theories advocate the constant relating of the given to the found."[237]

Quash says of history that it is,

> The God-given medium of encounter with God, and only a historical sort of finding (a historical finding which thematicizes and embraces its historicality rather than seeking to compensate for or to suppress it) is properly equipped to resist the abstractly universalizing claims that frequently tempt Christian discourse about God and the nature of the Church [. . .][238]

So, it is important, as we reflect theologically, to note that not only are individual lives vulnerable but history too is permeable and can mingle with the particularity of the present moment through which the future is found.

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[237] Ben Quash, *Found Theology: History, Imagination and the Holy Spirit*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), xv-xvi.

[238] Quash, *Found Theology,* 10.

There are two other ways in which Quash's writing can be related to this research. First, in the attention he draws to the vulnerability of the Scriptural text and, second, to the value of art for theology. These will be explored in Chapter Seven. Here I reiterate that we defend ourselves against not only those perishings that threaten us, but against those ideas, or times that call us to examine the particularity of our theological moment permeable to the flow of history.

We may also defend ourselves, or practice strategies of invulnerability through the language we use. I increasingly notice the language of the market adopted by the church[239]. This points to a kind of unreflective permeability of cultures. Language is important in shaping our understanding and sense of self both individually and institutionally. The UCC clearly understood this as it sought to be attentive to the shaping of gender inclusive speech and song. Gail Ramshaw, a feminist theologian, in her book, *God Beyond Gender*, speaks of liturgical language as first arising in metaphor that,

> [. . .] a believer hopes that such speech, originates in God's own creative power [. . .] the danger is that metaphors in doxological language die. When the surprise goes out of the speech, two different outcomes, both problematic, loom as possibilities, First, religious speech can become a taxonomy, memorized theoretical categories that maintain the religious status quo. [. . .] Second, an opposite reaction counters: liturgical planners change the texts of public worship willy-nilly. [. . .] Thus, Christianity can die from two causes: it can bury itself in archaisms or can dismember itself.[240]

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[239] One example of this is the grant application for Innovations Grants, which uses the Quadruple Bottom Line Assessment Tool using five 'bottom lines' to assess the value of grant applications: the idea, strategic fit and market potential, leadership, spiritual impact, social impact, ecological impact and financial impact. While there are a number of good questions in the application., I am concerned about others, ie, "how well does the idea and organization have a competitive advantage in the market?" This tool may be found at https://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/resources/quadruple-bottom-line-assessment-tool.pdf. Accessed May 30, 2019.

[240] Gail Ramshaw, *God Beyond Gender: Feminist Christian God-Language*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 6.

Attention to the language both of liturgy and other elements of the life of the faith community is a vital part of my research. What does it mean to pastoral leaders in ministry with congregations in transition, perhaps near death, to be met with the language and metaphors of the market: (sales) pitches, bottom-lines, entrepreneurial leadership and even innovation? Might the prevalence of this discourse indicate a move toward a new empire or a new triumphalism? Even relevance, that quality so esteemed as we evaluate ourselves as pastoral leaders, is a two-edged sword. To what or to whom need we be relevant?

The word 'relevance' is not an unambiguous word. We are reminded of this by the reflections of Henri Nouwen. Writing of the understanding gained through his time of residence in a L'Arche Community, Nouwen says,

> This experience was, and in many ways, is still the most important experience of my new life, because it forced me to rediscover my true identity. These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self – the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things – and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments. I am telling you all this because I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing but his or her own vulnerable self. [241]

We are called to listen to the voice of God in the world, to be in the world listening deeply, to be obedient in the original sense of the word [242]. That listening that informs and shapes all our responses is our primary work, and the outflow of that

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[241] Henri J.M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 29-30.

[242] Obedience, from Latin *oboedire* (also *obēdīre* ("to listen to, harken, usually in extended sense, obey, be subject to, serve")), from *ob-* ("before, near") + *audīre* ("to hear"). This etymology can be found at https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/obedience.

listening may at times seem irrelevant. Listening deeply without concern for a relevance whose primary purpose is to reassure our egoic self, draws us onto our most authentic path where we become participants in the mending of and celebration with the world.

I return to another text that fundamentally informs my reflection on vulnerability, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love [. . .]*. Its author, Elizabeth Gandolfo is a Roman Catholic theologian and the mother of three children who seeks to further the dialogue between systematic and practical theology. In her introduction, Gandolfo situates herself as a theologian who models what she explicitly states as valuable, the relating of her own personal experience of maternity to the universal experience of vulnerable humanity. "[. . .] The particularity of passionate love for our family and friends can also be a powerful resource for cultivating universal compassion and enacting a more extensive network of solidarity."[243] Gandolfo begins from her experience of motherhood. She expresses through metaphors and narratives of natality and maternity the deep rooting through body, heart and mind of the experience of vulnerability from which, "[. . .] some important insights about the human condition, suffering, and divine love have emerged from my bout with the baby blues." [244] Gandolfo defines vulnerability as, "the universal, though diversely experienced, and often exacerbated, risk of harm in human life"[245] and sees it as the milieu where both harm and healing are experienced. Vulnerability causes great anxiety which we may try to quell with strategies that cause harm to self and others. I believe these strategies, more entrenched by the move from establishment to the dis-

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[243] Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love,* 316.

[244] Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love,* 2.

[245] Gandolfo, 3.

establishment of the Western Christian church, have encouraged a kind of dehydration in some faith communities, cut off or turned away from the living water of their core narrative and the God who moves within that narrative and within whom it moves.

Gandolfo argues that while the violation of vulnerability, sometimes practiced by those in positions of privilege, must be reduced, vulnerability itself ought not to be rejected. Rather, "[. . .] it is the exploitation, abuse, mismanagement and neglect of our [vulnerable] condition that ought to be resisted."[246] Creating a theological anthropology that illustrates, through examples of diverse experiences of motherhood, the embodiment, perishing, and conflict, that are constituent of maternal and human vulnerability she draws the connection between vulnerability and violence. She describes three sites of vulnerability: embodiment, interdependence and perishing.

Embodiment, with its susceptibility to physical harm, makes possible physical damage and perishing in the lives of women who give birth and in the developing life of the fetal and natal life. These vulnerabilities are impossible to eradicate despite the best of efforts.[247] The outcome cannot be fully controlled. Both mothers and those being birthed are at risk. The entry into such vulnerability seems to describe a passage in the spiritual life as well. We enter into contemplation, meditation, prayer, the life of ministry, most fruitfully when we realize the impossibility of, and relinquish the control of, a particular outcome.

Interdependence, both psychological and physical, is the next connection between maternal and wider human vulnerability. In relationship, we are vulnerable to suffering.

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[246] Gandolfo, 8.

[247] That said, there are places in the world in which the uncertainties of pregnancy, birth and mothering are exacerbated and this is something that must not be ignored.

"Relational existence, then, is inherently vulnerable. We can be hurt by those with whom we are in relation, and when we care for and about those with whom we are in relation, we can be hurt by what hurts them"[248]

Finally, perishing is examined by Gandolfo through her description not only of the loss that exists in the death of a mother or child, but the loss that occurs through all the stages of a developing child's life. The mother must loose and lose the child at each developmental stage. And a mother is herself reminded of the loss of her own youth seen in relationship with the child's development. Perishing is ongoing in the maternal relationship with the child as it is ongoing in all human life. Still, "[. . .] the very dimensions of the human condition that make our lives so precarious are also the conditions for the possibility of human life itself and of human virtue, happiness and flourishing."[249]

In seeking to avoid our inherent vulnerability, and the anxiety it produces, we respond in unhealthy and sometimes violent ways, damaging ourselves and violating the vulnerability of others. Mothers may enact this violence upon their children or others may enact violence upon mothers and/or children in the heightened state of vulnerability in which they exist through the passages of maternity, natality and dependent childhood.

Gandolfo explores this damaging response to vulnerability by setting maternal experiences of suffering and perpetrating harm "[. . .] within the social context of privilege"[250] which she interprets as "[. . .] communal mismanagement of vulnerability in which certain groups and individuals have disproportionate access to assets that capacitate

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[248] Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love,* 63.

[249] Gandolfo, 96.

[250] Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love,* 25.

them for self-protection and resilience in the face of harm".[251] Gandolfo sets out clearly the chain reaction of vulnerability, anxiety, and violation. This is something we must grapple with in our personal and congregational lives; our facility in engaging our own vulnerability determines the depth of our ability to act with compassion, to engage reconciliation and work toward justice.

As an example of how deep into our theology an examination of vulnerability may take us, I note Gandolfo's position that it is not sin but vulnerability that is the root human dilemma. "[. . .] sin is not the *root* cause of vulnerability and suffering, but vice-versa".[252] This is not to say that sin is not part of our human experience and theological reflection. "Sin is not categorically banished from this alternative framework, but it does take a backseat to the deeper reality of vulnerability as the defining characteristic of the human condition."[253] It is important, when receiving or rejecting this thesis on sin and vulnerability, to grasp firmly that all human beings are inherently vulnerable. It is vital not to see those who experience the exacerbated vulnerability to which systems and circumstances expose them as more sinful because they are more vulnerable. This would be an intolerable position. Rather, it is the strategies of invulnerability, particularly those of the privileged, that may violate the inherent vulnerability of those less powerful, that creates and continues such an exacerbated state. "Human vulnerability and its anxiety-filled devolution into violation cries out for redemption."[254]

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[251] Gandolfo, 25.

[252] Gandolfo, *181.*

[253] Gandolfo, 6.

[254] Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love, 181.*

In the central section of the book, Gandolfo "offers theological and practical assets for meeting human vulnerability with resilience to harm and resistance to violence"[255] Here, Gandolfo explores the ability of human beings to inhabit their vulnerability in ways that allow them to survive, not only the ever-present reality of death and perishing, but great wounding, anxiety, and struggle living in ways that are neither passive nor violent.

This chapter's notable interest for me is Gandolfo's naming of the existential assets (beliefs, practices, spiritualities, etc.) of the Christian tradition. To be consistent in attention to language I will refer to these 'assets' as resources. These resources have been controlled to some extent. Those in a position to do so have kept a focus on doctrine and practices that favour the dominant groups in society. They have also kept the consciences of the privileged and the cries of the oppressed turned down by emphasizing reward in an afterlife. Certainly, consequences of the first, a focus on particular doctrine and practices, and to some extent, the second, the emphasis on reward in the afterlife, have been present in a number of small congregations I have served. Members of these faith communities have found themselves either unprepared or unwilling to access the existential resources Gandolfo describes.

Gandolfo lists some of the ways existential resources are shut down as follows: "exclusive male language for God, interventionist doctrines of divine omnipotence, the identification of women with sinfulness, the division of humanity into the saved and the damned, the glorification of self-sacrifice, theological anthropologies of gender complementarity, world-denying eschatologies [. . .]".[256]

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[255] Gandolfo, 22.

[256] Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love,* 180.

She meets the critique of Christian tradition by feminist, womanist and liberationist theologians with a proposal that theology can be differently constructed in a way that frees up its existential resources. "[. . .] I construct a theology of divine love that responds to vulnerability with existential resources for courageous, peaceful, and compassionate resilience and resistance."[257]

Gandolfo posits a divine love that is invulnerable. She reaches and supports this conclusion through reflection on the narrative of Mary of Nazareth, and on the work of Delores Williams, a womanist theologian who creates a mosaic of the lives of black slave women's stories, and an analysis of the biblical story of Hagar. To this she adds reflection on Alice Walker's, *The Color Purple*, and Julian of Norwich's image of the servant thrashing in the dell. All these Gandolfo states, "[. . .] suggest that that which is invulnerable in God – namely, divine love – grants vulnerable human beings the strength and courage for survival, resilience and resistance in the midst of the most destructive forms of violence and suffering."[258]

Gandolfo asserts that, "the Trinitarian depths of divine love respond to the needs and violations of vulnerable humanity with invulnerability, incarnation, and empowerment for creative transformation".[259] I understand her to describe these three qualities as correspondent with the first, second and third persons of the Trinity respectively. I note here Gandolfo's association of invulnerability with the first person of the Trinity. This is a fundamental part of Gandolfo's argument and yet I find it not completely convincing. Any

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[257] Gandolfo, 157.

[258] Gandolfo, 175.

[259] Gandolfo, 178.

extensive reflection on the Trinity is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but I name it as a fundamental question for me as I engage Gandolfo's work.

While Gandolfo gives attention to the wariness of some feminist theologians when God is spoken of as invulnerable, she maintains that the divine invulnerability she describes is not the invulnerability of a remote unfeeling God. She deftly picks up a contradiction in the logic which states that God freely chooses to enter into vulnerability and also that vulnerability is part of love's essence. If it is the essence of God in God's self, then it is not voluntary. While humans can and do choose to act against the truth of themselves God does not. It seems, that Gandolfo herself falls into contradiction when she posits an invulnerable love that then becomes vulnerable through incarnation.

Gandolfo's argument for an invulnerable divine love, in relationship with love incarnate and vulnerable leaves me with questions. I am unclear whether for Gandolfo divine love is understood as substance, person or attribute of God. She writes, "[. . .] that which is invulnerable in God – namely divine love, grants vulnerable human beings the strength and courage for survival, resilience and resistance [. . .]".[260] And later, "There is a sense in which divine love for creation makes the invulnerable God inherently vulnerable."[261] These statements exemplify others which I experience as contradiction rather than coincidence. My response is to question whether a God, whom I understand to be inherently relational in God's self, one essence, three mutually interpenetrating persons, can be in one person invulnerable and in another vulnerable. I am grateful to Gandolfo for provoking my thoughts in a way that leads me to clarify my own understanding.

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[260] Gandolfo, 175.

[261] Gandolfo, 202.

While I understand the divine as limitless and divine love as unconditional, I question whether love, in essence, can be invulnerable. I understand the God portrayed in Christian Scripture and reached for through tradition as relational. My understanding of God is as relational within God's very being. I suggest that it is unnecessary and undesirable to understand any aspect of God as invulnerable. Is it not sufficient to posit within God's self an essential resilience? Perhaps the quality Gandolfo describes as invulnerability, is what I would call resilience. A loving God is vulnerable to creation as well as to the interpenetration of Son and Spirit in the dance of Trinity.

The difference between divine and human vulnerability is that God cannot be destroyed or perish. God is essentially resilient while humans are not. Vulnerable human beings are capable of participating in God's resilience in the present, although we can do so completely only in an ultimate state rather than in our present condition. We do this through our participation in the life of the resilient, though not invulnerable God. Our capacity to participate in God's resilience is realized through our admission and honouring of our own vulnerability.

I note the value of the attention Gandolfo pays to natality as a vital site of the expression of vulnerability in the Incarnation. As I read this section, two examples of how my present work touches the vitality of this understanding occurred to me. The first was an Advent sermon I preached on the Annunciation and the *Magnificat* called *Tilting Toward Promise.* It situates Mary of Nazareth as someone who had every reason to refuse God's words but chose to be open to the promise of God, trusting God's powerful, loving intention. Power and love are not exclusive of one another. In this sermon, I spoke about the way we tilt (or not) toward God's promise, embodying, as Mary did, this choice. And

as we tilt toward promise we then pour out in creation what has been captured in the cup of our embodied choice. Not only the text of the sermon, but the vulnerability of embodied prayer actions within it, express and invite vulnerability. The liturgy itself may be shaped with silence framed by words or chants repeated each week to hold in a familiar container the vulnerable and inviting place of that silence.

A second place where my present practice touched Gandolfo's urging to include natality as vital for our understanding of vulnerable Incarnation was in the telling, each Sunday in Lent, of *The Faces of Easter*, the Godly Play story in seven segments that helps us prepare for The Great Mystery of Easter. Each week leading up to Easter I told one of the stories. The following words are part of the first story, the birth. "When the baby looked up at Mary the mother's face, he already saw the cross. When he looked into the face of Joseph the father the cross was there too"[262] This integration of the birthing and the dying of Jesus as part of the Mystery of Easter is, for me, an example of the theological depth of the *Godly Play* curriculum and the place of natality as a site of divine and human vulnerability.

Returning to Gandolfo's dissertation, we find next her description of the courage, peace and compassion offered to us through our relationship with God. These qualities allow us to inhabit vulnerability through our oneness with God even in the worst of our pain, suffering, sorrow, and wrongdoing."[263] She does excellent work in including voices with which she is in at least partial disagreement or in whose exposition she finds a further step that it would be helpful to take. Since some of her own concepts are

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[262] Berryman, *Godly Play*, Vol.4, 35.

[263] Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love,* 175.

expressed in language that raises potential red flags for feminist theologians, she takes care to anticipate the concern that would accompany the following words, "surrender, kenosis, acceptance of vulnerability . . ."[264] These words may signify dangerous ground for all those who have been the victims of domination, and oppression, all those who have had another's discourse loudly drown out their own interior discourse and the words about themselves that nurture courage, creativity and compassion.

I began my theological exploration of vulnerability from my own experience, my own longing and my own strategies of invulnerability. I witness to the resources I have found available for the courageous inhabiting of vulnerability found in the narrative of Scripture, one of the ways through which we discern God's movement towards us in love. This narrative is living and spacious; it can hold the complexity of our lives.

I find resonance for this in Hall's theology of the cross. I seek a language and practice of vulnerability that resists the triumphalism Hall describes. Culp and Gandolfo further support my theological reflection on vulnerability as they consider the cross, the resources of Scripture and Christian tradition, the vulnerability of the Trinitarian God and the experience of women and other groups and individuals who have been and are oppressed.

I conclude with the recognition of how dangerous some words can be when mishandled; how the language of triumphalism or the valorization of suffering have damaged so many. In Chapter Six, I move to explore the leadership practice of language that offers space for risk and wonder and healing.

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[264] Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of* Love, 254.

Chapter Six

The Language of Liturgy as Leadership Practice

The language of vulnerability cannot be parsed out of the discussion as a whole. Still, it receives its most focused attention in this chapter, and the next two, as it is expressed in liturgy, in a particular creative practice, and in governance. We begin the work of vulnerable leadership by a conscious, attentive inhabiting of our own vulnerability. We live in it courageously, creatively and compassionately through our recollection of the Biblical narrative; through the placing of our own stories and the stories of our faith community over the pattern of the narrative, into which they settle and by which they are held. We find a practice of prayer that lives in us. We find others with whom to practice the language. And as we do this, we turn over and over again to our faith community in invitation.

Invitation brings us more specifically to the leader's lexicon of vulnerability. This vocabulary includes gestures and words that both model the leader's openness and invite the openness of others; encouraging receptivity to the Divine One in the holy space within us as individuals and community. This vocabulary includes both the 'given' language of the tradition and the 'found' language rising through the leader's experience in and with the faith community.

In pastoral ministry, the weekly gathering for worship is the most regular and consistent time to practice the language of vulnerability and the invitation to inhabit it thoughtfully. Though this language will emerge and develop throughout the spectrum of leadership in congregational life, instances of which are explored in Chapters Six, Seven

and Eight, it is worship and liturgy I describe here. Liturgical theologian, Gordon Lathrop asks, "is the liturgy, [. . .] simply the survival of a collection of quaint customs from a more secure and simple time? Or do its symbolic interactions propose to us a realistic pattern for interpreting our world, for containing our actual experiences, and for enabling action and hope?"[265] I believe they are a vital way of nourishing vulnerable life. The gathering, the sermon, the Sacraments, the repetition of certain movements, which we might call ritual or gesture, within the pattern of worship, and, the pattern itself are important. "In the midst of life's discontinuities, rituals become a dependable source of security and comfort."[266] And, "[. . .] ritual action transforms the voltage so that people can stand what is next."[267] Here again the leader must be attentive, creating a balance of comfort and risk.

At the same time, in order to prevent ritual from becoming only ceremony, we must recognize that ritual is at the service of a movement through the narrative of orientation, disorientation, re-orientation that is the story of our life enfleshed within the narrative of God with us. "For human beings, narrative and ritual are symbiotic: they have an intimate and mutually beneficial relationship despite their individual identities."[268] The small rituals situated within the larger ritual of worship are touchstones for the moment and movement we cannot predict as we are encountered by Spirit.

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[265] Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology,* (Minneapolis:Fortress Press, 1998), 1.

[266] Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 49.

[267] Susan Marie Smith, (2012) *Caring Liturgies: The Pastoral Power of Christian Ritual*, chap. 6, Kindle.

[268] Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals,* 25.

One thing must be noted as we move into the pattern of worship.

> [. . .] public worship often fails. Rather than the awesome or mystical arena in which the human and the divine meet it is frequently experienced as boring and irrelevant. [. . .] one reason for this failure is a paradox: public worship, especially Christian worship, does not adequately mediate divine presence because it is inattentive to the human story." [269]

It is out of attention to the human story, as it lives within the Divine, that I must at times shape worship differently, in each of the points of my pastoral charge. Their stories and contexts are different. In what follows I set out the usual shape of worship[270] namely the elements into which content can be poured to speak to the congregation of God's presence to them in their stage of the journey. Each element must touch the others, shaping the invitation to come carrying one's own individual story and the story of the gathered community into the Word, then sending them out to continue to listen for the Transcendent calling in the world.

We are, says Lathrop, "[. . .] surrounded in our culture with overinflated words"[271]. The language of vulnerability, of liturgy should be honest. I am reminded as I write this of a conversation I had with my elder son about my research. "What", I asked him, "comes to your mind when I speak of vulnerability?" "Honesty" was his answer. I was intrigued, and as I reflected, delighted with his answer. Honesty, authenticity, showing up as who we are, these are vital in vulnerable presidency within the faith

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[269] Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals,* 42.

[270] While the UCC has elements of liturgy that are generally included, the denomination provides the minister with great flexibility in ordering those elements and in shaping the language of liturgy. This is a great opportunity for creativity but also a snare, into which I am often tempted, of imagining it must be something I create that brings the Spirit.

[271] Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology,* 98.

community. We are ourselves symbols, "broken symbols"[272], broken-open symbols of the One of whom we speak.

> Neither public nor intimate, this speech [liturgical speech] tells the truth simply; it addresses God and other invisible realities directly; it unhesitatingly uses metaphors and images; it does not shrink from naming death and failure nor from unfeignedly expressing joy; it calls people without ceremony by their first names; it works economically, frequently falling back into silence.[273]

Its authenticity is its eloquence. What follows is one way of thinking about the language of vulnerability expressed through liturgy. Designations such as Call to Worship, Prayer of Approach, Prayers of the People, will be familiar to most UCC pastoral leaders. That is not to say that all will use them but that they are recognizable. Concrete examples of each element are found in Appendix One (A-1). The Appendix is indicated only the first time a designation or title is used.

The Call to Worship (A-1) expresses the stunning Otherness of God the Beloved who calls us beloved. It is not primarily about us. We are not the object of worship. We open ourselves to be comforted and changed by the One we address in this moment. We are made aware of the possibility we have embraced by our attendance at worship. This is no mundane moment.

> Turner, who was responsible for identifying the transformative power of the liminal within rituals also noted those actions which are conservative in function, which serve to reinforce what is already established in a particular culture or religion. This type of action he calls "ceremony" Such actions differ from ritual in that they lack the experience of liminality, the expression of chaos and disorientation which helps to move a person from one stage in life to the next.[274]

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[272] Gordon Lathrop, *The Pastor: A Spirituality,* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 5.

[273] Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 98.

[274] McKenna, Rebecca, "Holy Departures", (PhD diss. St. Micheals College) chap.4,6.

Unfortunately, the Call to Worship in many instances has become words about us. To create the experience of liminality, the departure from all we came from in order that we may return transformed, we must know that we are in a kind of liminal space in worship, moving over its ground to the One we call upon here even as that One moves toward us. We open in vulnerability to the Other.

Though the initial portion of the worship service is often called "Gathering" it gathers us away from our daily practice into a liminal space within which that dailiness is integrated and potentially transformed.

The lighting of the Christ Candle, in the Godly Play way, is attended by words such as these which are paraphrased from the story, The Light. *There was once someone who did such wonderful things, and said such amazing things, people followed him. And one day they just had to ask him, who are you? And he said, "I am the light.*[275] There was once someone who still reminds us of the incarnate presence of God. As does the tension held in vulnerable leadership, the lighting of the Christ candle in this way reminds us that through the ages individuals like us have followed this One and, when curiosity got the better of them, asked him who he was, and were answered simply, "I am the light". In silence, we then proceed into the time of worship in the acknowledged presence of Mystery.

The hymn (A-1) is carefully chosen to support our movement in awe and accompaniment, and though there are a number of hymns throughout worship, I will

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[275] Sonja M. Stewart and Jerome W. Berryman, *Young Children and Worship*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 71-76.

speak of the hymns only here. Once again, we hold the tension of the old and the new, the thing that will transform the voltage but also allow the current of opening to be conducted. There will be those who long for a theology of glory, or more dangerously, a triumphalist theology expressed in many of the hymns of older vintage. For the community of faith to move forward, risking their security for an openness where anything but abandonment by God may happen, the leader needs to provide tethers. The experience of worship may become like a storm which we need to enter to feed those parts of ourselves that we have housed far off. Like those who leave the comfort of their home in a storm, to tend creatures in the outbuildings, tethering themselves to a solid landmark to prevent getting lost, we take hold of the rope of liturgy and we go into what awaits us. Once the feeding or caring is accomplished, we return, and the rope is no longer necessary. So, with hymns.

When offering the comfort of an older hymn filled with either triumph or overly personal piety, I often hold the tension of this by writing new words to the most triumphalist or world-denying verses. The tune and some of the words hold security enough for trust to be built and risk to be taken. This is also important in the movement through the liturgical year when the temptation is to jump over Advent to Christmas, missing the longing anticipation and preparation that the Advent season holds.

In the Prayer of Approach (A-1) we move toward the One who is Other. We hold the content of the Call to Worship and the lighting of the Christ Candle and the hymn and we move closer in. In the Prayer of Approach, I hope again to open the amazing possibility of this approach and to ground it in the particular good earthiness of our existence. We are emboldened and set longing by the Prayer of Approach, (in ideal terms

which are seldom completely present) to name in the Prayer of Confession (A-1) all that holds us back.

The Prayer of Confession is not to be feared as an antiquated beating about the head with a dull stick, not to reduce nor transfix us with a long list of ways in which we have failed. It is to remind us of the richness that we have yet to live into and to call us to name those things that keep us dabbling in relationship with God, or with one another, or the shunned parts of ourselves.; those things that keep us turning away from rather than rushing into the water. In the Prayer of Confession, the dropping of all those things that frustrate our attempts at relationship, I picture us as kids on a slope by the water's edge running downhill, shedding shirts, pants and shoes, until finally, down to the bare essentials, we throw ourselves into the refreshing water.

We break into the silence of the Prayer of Confession with a sung response that echoes God's acceptance of us in our nowness. Though the Prayer of Confession is a freeing prayer, even within that moment of shedding we must know we are loved before ever our clothes hit the ground.

The Assurance of Love and Forgiveness, (A-1), often called the Assurance of Pardon, does just that. It tells us how much we are loved by God and how any impediment we have erected is toppled. We are known and loved and freed to love others.

Next, I set aside time to spend time for conversation or story-telling with the children. My practice is seldom to have a formal story but to interact with the children, asking about their week or having conversation with them about what we will be doing in our worship while they are in Sunday School. I struggle with the whole concept of the

children's time since at its worst it can become a time of sentimental entertainment for the adults. My preference is to have the children involved in the liturgy in real practice as they are able. Sometimes I will tell a Godly Play story or read another story. Sometimes we have rituals before and after the seasonal pauses of Sunday School or the beginning or ending of school terms. Always the children share in the Sacraments of Communion or Baptism. Aside from these and other special times of ritual we most often share what comes in the moment. The children and I then lead the congregation in the singing of the Lord's Prayer and they leave us for Sunday School.

We are now ready to sing again and to hear the Word. The Word opens itself before us like a lover; it has opened itself already to the preacher or those who have read the text, as we follow the lectionary cycle, before Sunday worship. The Word is vulnerable to our embrace or our shunning. The One who calls us together in worship, and the One who lives among us bodily, open themselves. We read the Word and then we say particular words that remove the Word from any straight-jacket of literalism.

Then follows the sermon, reflection, or homily (A-1). Whatever word we choose to describe the verbal invitation deeper into the text, the proclamation of the good news to be found there comes in this moment after the text. It is my practice to place nothing between the read Word and the sermon. They are tied up together so intimately that no prior interpretation through music or other movement seems appropriate. There are exceptions to this, but they are rare. There is only a brief prayer, the same each Sunday to invite the alchemy of Word and preacher and hearers; our lives with the divine life; our stories with the divine story.

I have come vulnerable to the text earlier in the week. I have prayed and slept and imagined with it until finally something rises out of it that touches my ongoing exegesis of the faith community and I begin to write. Often through a kind of wrestling, I arrive at the moment when I say the prayer that asks for us to come closer to the Word through our questions and pondering. The sermon is porous enough for the Spirit. Though it may be preached without notes or with every word written down, it must be permeable to the moment and the movement of God. We can and should consider the growth of our preaching skills, but what is most vital is that we preach in a way that is authentic to who we are as preachers and that we always know ourselves about the task inviting others to host and be hosted by the narrative as we ourselves have been. The sermon comes to be through the mingled elements of preacher, congregation, Word, world and Spirit

After the sermon there is silence, as there has been silence after the lighting of the Christ Candle and during the Prayer of Confession before we break into that silence by singing. There may be silence during the Prayers of the People and there will be silence just after the closing blessing before the postlude begins. The silence in worship is introduced gradually by the leader if the congregation is not familiar or comfortable with it. Silence needs to be present because it is part of the vocabulary of well-inhabited vulnerability and holiness.

Normally there follows a hymn and the movement into offering. The offering is received and dedicated, held up as the gifts of our hearts for God's work in the world.

There may then be special music, and the Minute for Mission produced by the General Council of the United Church of Canada is presented, either read by a member of the congregation or shown on screen as a video clip. We are receptive and turned toward

both the Other and others in the world. Our vulnerable openness to the Other makes us more deeply aware of the lives of all vulnerable others.

We come then to the Prayers of the People (A-1) and this is the point at which a variety of prayer movements may be experienced. Almost always the concerns and joys of the world are named, but beyond that the prayer may vary greatly. It may be the words of a poet with responses from the congregation interspersed within the poetry. It may be a Visio Divina or an embodied prayer with movements possible while seated or standing. It may include sung response or written responses from the gathered individuals. Here there is great possibility to gradually invite people into the variety, vulnerability, and possibility of prayer.

We sing a final hymn and the Words of Encouragement and Benediction are offered. Often this time holds the changing of the light of the Christ Candle, the reminder that as we go, the Light goes in and among each and all of us. There is silence and then music.

There are also, at certain times within our worship, one of the two sacraments of the United Church of Canada, baptism and communion.

> *[. . .] as we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism,*
> *we are called to believe that Christ has arrived before us*
> *here at the water,*
> *here at the font.*
> *He has been here waiting for us . . .*
> *In the gospel of Matthew,*
> *Jesus the Christ, son of God,*
> *inseparable from Father and Spirit,*
> *wades out into the waters to be tipped back by John's wiry arms,*
> *into the lapping Jordan river.*
> *He goes down under the waters,*
> *God,*
> *with all that God is,*
> *to be with us,*

He goes down to anticipate all the times we will go under
and to anticipate in his rising all the possibility of our rising.
He anticipates us.
He is there before us in those waters,
in these waters,
in death and in resurrection, he is there before us."[276]

Minister and congregation are intentional about remembering these things as we prepare for baptism and then we come to the symbol and ritual of baptism itself which continues to teach us throughout our life. Baptism makes us physically vulnerable. Child or adult or infant we stand or are carried to the water as people watch and we feel another's touch. We are tipped back in immersion or splashed and pressed with the water of the font. We are marked with the strangeness of the water; standing in a world of words we are marked by the moment of its silent presence on our bodies. Baptism is a powerful expression of vulnerable life; it is a rupture and a redeeming through which we move.

Communion is also a vulnerable act or encounter. In it we are reminded of the true courage of Christ's life, standing to offer itself, standing in the midst of acknowledged betrayal. We remind ourselves of the wounding that is possible as we say the words "on the night he was betrayed" and know the pattern of life opened to wound and blessing in community, not only the gathered community but the universal community. We know this in our own vulnerable lives and we hear our experience affirmed in the narrative of the One who hosts us at the table.

And we are vulnerable to one another as we come to this table, which in the UCC is open to all who long to live in peace. We are reminded of self-offering and gratitude and we are fed. We enact the pattern of taking up our life, a life sometimes broken, of blessing,

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[276] Catherine Smith. *Baptism.* Sermon September 2, 2012.

and giving thanks for that broken life, of sharing that broken life, and of remembering that brokenness as something of value to be shared with the world. In ministry we serve with our own broken lives the Word through the Meal.

Shaping the liturgy, with or without the sacraments, sculpting carefully a container for encounter with the Divine who loves and unsettles and surprises us is a vital and a vulnerable task. There are voices, and sometimes these voices are loud, which call for worship to be entertaining or informative. While worship should never be dull, entertainment and information are not its primary purposes. Its primary purpose is to create living space within a container secure enough to allow the unimaginable to happen. Each liturgy should equip those who enter in to leave having been offered Word, song, symbol and story resources for living with openness to God, themselves and others in the world.

I have described the liturgical pattern I most often return to, though there are times the worship calls for and I create a very different shape. This, I hope, gives some sense of how I understand worship to afford opportunity to evoke, express and invite the honouring of our inherent vulnerability in the presence of a vulnerable God.

Beyond the worship there are many other ways in which the leader may encourage the thoughtful inhabiting of vulnerable life. Always calling individuals and community back to the narrative that tells and holds us in the life of a vulnerable God the leader moves in ways often surprising to the community. They are not what was thought to be necessary. They may not be immediately effective in ways that can be measured. But they do encourage us to enter and stand in liminal space open to that which may transform us.

Chapter Seven

Creativity as Leadership Practice
The Experience of Creating the Mid-Week Moments[277]

What is, "the thesis you are living and cannot see?"[278]

Introduction

Here, I present a practice[279] through which I honed my seeing. While that was not the initial goal it became strongly evident to me that through it I claimed and understood my leadership more deeply. I undertook research into my experience as a Pilot Project for this research using the methods described in Chapter Three. The character of this chapter is different than others, illustrating the way various means of representation may encourage differing pockets of knowledge to emerge. Even now, I continue to be lured by the latent knowledge I experience in these *Moments*, and their creation.

This chapter is at the more evocative pole of the authoethnographic spectrum, its analysis present, though less explicit. The necessary linkage of the personal and social or the micro – macro is perhaps not as clearly evident. The personal nature of the practice is linked to cultural discourse through its subversion of it. The micro is linked to the macro through a performance of resistance to it. In a time of big work for the congregation and temptations to reach for and grasp the quantifiable, to be busy and thus 'important' I turned toward this small nourishment for my life and the life of the congregation. This practice was deeply formative of my vocational life both personal and pastoral. The ways in which we were nourished and formed entered the stream of our larger life

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[277] For a description of *Moments* see note 164.

[278] Shaun McNiff, *Art-Based Research*, (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998), 146.

[279] I will use creative and spiritual synonymously in describing that practice.

together.

I am not describing my experience of the *Moments* as one that must be adopted by other pastoral leaders in order to engage vulnerability as a resource. What I am hoping to show is that each leader needs a practice into which metrics do not enter and through which the heart is nourished. Each needs to be able to invite others into some part of the depth of life one meets through that practice.

In *The Power and Vulnerability of Love: A Theological* Anthropology, Elizabeth Gandolfo writes, "Both practical theologians in the North American context and liberation theologians in the Latin American context argue that the practices of the Christian faith provide a privileged epistemological *locus* for theological reflection because practices are productive of knowledge."[280] The practice reflected on in this chapter created a locus for theological reflection and a frame for emergent knowledge around my experience of vulnerability.

There is a parallel in Christian contemplative tradition to the relationship of self and culture foundational to the autoethnographic methods. "Forming the spiritual heart is intrinsically a communal process in Christian tradition. God's very nature is seen as ultimate Loving Community; our human nature reflects that image."[281] In contemplative theology or experience unitive awareness holds self, and others in Other. The *Moments*, as they formed my spiritual heart, were in ways hidden or revealed, forming community. Each was for me a touching place; a 'reception' to which I invited others.

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[280] Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love*, 21.

[281] Tilden Edwards, *Living in the Presence: Spiritual Exercises to Open Your Life to the Awareness of God,* (New York: Harper Collins*),*123.

I love to write, to search out words that are just right, using them like paint to create texture and light and movement. I spend significant time on this. The *Moments* had a different quality and process from other writing. Though they may have been shaping themselves without my consciousness, at some point, they emerged quickly and intensely. They required a surrender to Presence in a moment of despair or hope or fatigue. They seldom came from a moment of ease. And they were whole-making for me. Each *Moment* is created from an intensity of paying attention with love. Each depends on honouring the vulnerability necessary to receive. Each is a witness to creativity as receptivity.

The Language of Vulnerability

Language is shaped by but also shapes culture. Here I explore language through a practice extending beyond worship into the daily life of the leader and the faith community. This language is nourished by Word, Silence, Gesture and Ritual.

Gandolfo, quoting Nussbaum, asks,

> How can we live with courage, peace, and compassion when such virtues can lead not to less vulnerability but more? [. . .] What human beings need in order to inhabit vulnerability constructively and non-violently, are spiritual resources that capacitate us for dealing with anxiety differently – in other words, existential assets for facing vulnerability with courage, peace, and compassion, rather than aggression, passivity, and insularity.[282]

Creative practice helps us to access and live in these spiritual resources of Word, Silence, Ritual, Gesture as they come to us through tradition and are received and re-shaped.1

Consideration of the four elements of Word, Silence, Gesture and Ritual are woven throughout this chapter but a few words are needed here in terms of how I came understand

[282] Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love*, 178 – 179.

and relate these elements to a language of vulnerability. The Word is multifaceted. It is sometimes used to refer to Jesus Christ as the Word of God made flesh (John 1:14). Or, it may refer to "the gospel of Christ" or the message or proclamation about Jesus; what God reveals of God's self and God's relationship with creation through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. It may also be used to refer to the Bible, the Christian Scripture. This narrative, the Word, its description of the movement of life, death, new life or, orientation, dis-orientation, re-orientation, provides resources for inhabiting vulnerability with courage, creativity and compassion, while Christ's experience of natality, life and death honour our humanity and so accompany us in all our experiences.

As the Word holds meaning-making space for our sorrow or loss, the Word also invites us into freedom and delight. Culp, quoting Augustine writes, "The Scriptures, 'which are sweet with the honey of heaven and radiant with your light,' also teach him [sic] that God's sweetness and radiance dwell within his own soul. His scrutiny of sensory experience and of memory leads to the edges of God."[283]

The God of the Christian narrative is unconditional in love, vulnerable and infinitely resilient. This is how I understand the Word and the world. Not everyone would agree with this. The vulnerability of God is a point of debate within and between communities and within the literature of theology. I offer a concurring voice. "The Christian gospel, [. . .] proclaims the God self-revealed in Jesus Christ, [. . .] a God, in Leonardo Boff's phrase, 'weak in power but strong in love' a God willing to be vulnerable to pain in the freedom of love."[284] My life is given meaning through my

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[283] Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory, 170.*

[284] Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, 3.

encounter with Word in the several ways described above. I am in relationship to the Word as the person of God incarnate, to God revealed in flesh, the person of Jesus, and Word as the foundational text of our shared life in Christian community.

"A community which holds its identity through a certain body of material has an *obligation* to engage with it. It cannot ignore it. The church therefore must find creative ways of encouraging its constituents, clergy and laity, to engage the Word. The boundary [of the canon] marks out an area, sets up a space, in which exploration is *required* (italics Fiddes)"[285] This is not to say that this requirement need be rigid. Rather it should be organic, open to ways that encourage the learning and layering of the Word though our lives. The Word is spacious and hospitable, even in the challenge it poses.

It is my vocation to invite others into the Word, with my words not only in weekly worship, but also at other times. All during the week I pray and work and create with words. So, Word is fundamental to who I am and to the vocation I practice. The Word is one of several descriptors of the Presence of Mystery to which I seek to dispose myself in prayer. And words lead me to the silence in which I abandon myself; the silence in which the wordless Word is heard. The *Moments*, though not explicit bearers of the Word as text, are first responses and then invitations to the divine immediacy that beckons to us through the Word.

Silence is Word's milieu. In fact, "silence, writes John of the Cross, "is God's first language"[286]. So, Word and Silence are inextricably braided.

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[285] Paul S. Fiddes, "Concept, Image and Story in Systematic Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 1, (2009):16.

[286] Cynthia Bougeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, (New York: Cowley Publications, 2004), 65.*

> God's immediacy is too overwhelming for the mind's thinking categories to grasp; [. . .] Perhaps the mind in its first movement can only know God as a fulsome Silence [. . .] active Word spilling from luminous Silence. It is the mystical home base in whose radiant darkness we are trustingly vulnerable to the Spirit's shaping of fresh eyes and of loving, discerning actions.[287]

To honour vulnerability is to know there are sometimes no words. Whether bowled over by joy or gutted by grief, there are some things that can't be held by words. To become more fluent in silence is to allow space receptive for spirit and emotion to be in us in ways that move us toward wholeness.

Ritual, too, helps us to take into our lives in a meaningful way that which is too deep to reach with mere words, too wondrous for mere speech but too significant to let alone, too vital to visit only once. Ritual is a way we handle transcendence.

> Transcendence is dangerous because it makes us vulnerable. Therefore, the state which has raised up the idol of invulnerability in the name of "security" must attempt to disallow all genuine transcendence; only the false transcendence that has reduced itself to the otherworldly [. . .] That transcendence creates vulnerability is true for all religions but in Christianity it is driven to the limit: in Christ, God makes Godself vulnerable.[288]

"Ritual has the capacity to create and express meaning. [. . .]." [289] Narrative and ritual are connected and so once again Word, as the narrative of God's life with us, and words as the way we tell our life into meaning, appear.

> The ritual imperative, like its narrative counterpart, is deeply embedded within us and cannot be ignored. [. . .] rituals often evolve in ways that we never expected and expose aspects of relationships never before understood. [. . .]it is not so much that we invent rituals as much as they invent us. [290]

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[287] Tilden Edwards, *Valuing and Nurturing a Mind-in-Heart Way*, (Washington: Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, 2010), 16-17.

[288] Söelle, *The Window of Vulnerability*, xi.

[289] Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, 24.

[290] Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories,* 25.

Two of the rituals of the church, the sacraments of Holy Communion and Baptism now too often fail to make us either bow with reverence or gasp in wonder. This is not the fault of the hope and promise these rituals are meant to enact. It is rather, that, within some areas of the Western Protestant church, they sometimes appear to have fallen prey to novelty as distinct from newness. Newness is always spacious enough to bear the ancient within, allowing it to infuse our present context and our present longings.

> One of the crucial questions for faith communities is how this central worship event can be ritually resuscitated and narratively revived. How do we recover the dynamic between God's story, as embodied in Jesus, and the human stories through which we make sense of the world and fashion our identities?[291]

Etymologically, gesture arises from the Medieval Latin *gestura*, "bearing, behaviour, mode of action", in turn from the Latin *gestus*, "gesture, carriage, posture". I learned the importance of gesture me as I became a Godly Play Storyteller[292]. The movement or stance of the body as a way of communicating was wound up with my increasing awareness of the honoring of embodiment in our vulnerable precious selves. Sometimes in worship the children and I would sit on the floor in the midst of the congregation who would be arranged around us in an almost full circle. So that the adults could see as well as hear the Godly Play story, I would tell it first several days before worship. The movements of my hands with the Godly Play figures or in gestures of invitation to the tableau would be photographed and projected during its telling in worship. When I look at those images now, I can be moved to tears. The body and emotional memory of those gestures and the ones to whom I offered them is strong and

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[291] Anderson and Foley, *Mighty* Stories, 157.

[292] Jerome W. Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children*, (Denver: Morehouse Education Resources, 2009).

vital in me. The recollection of all that was in the gestures brings me to a place of gratitude, humility and confidence. Gesture can also be made of words, which brings me full circle and shows the interconnectedness of the four elements.

Implicitly, each *Moment* holds more than one or more of the elements of Word, Silence Ritual and Gesture which are permeable to one another. Word becomes articulate in Silence. Gesture is made in recognition of Word's presence which then, repeated and shaped in particular ways may become Ritual. The unfolding of these four elements is fluid.

In the process of reflection on this creative practice, I recalled the context, the sensations, the feelings and cognition from the time in which each *Moment* [293] was created and wove that with my experience, memory and reflection in the present. As Tessa Muncey wrote, "fabrication of my particular patchwork life requires paying attention to physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions, which exposes a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretation".[294]

I was intrigued by the idea that the presentation of autoethnography should reflect or be congruent with the content. "Writing is also a way of 'knowing' – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable".[295] Since these

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[293] *Moments* will appear as originally written except that, spelling and punctuation will be corrected where necessary, the identity of the pastoral charge will be obscured, and the header quote will not appear.

[294] Tessa Muncey, Doing Autoethnography, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 4, no. 1, (2005):2.

[295] Laurel Richardson, "Writing as a method of inquiry," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research, eds.,* N. Dezin & Y. Lincoln, (London: Sage,1994), 516.

Moments were a contemplative practice, I conducted my research, as described in the Chapter 3, through another contemplative, creative practice, *Lectio Divina (Lectio)*[296] *It wa*s performative of what was at the root of the *Moments* when they were written; a turning toward a threshold through which one is disposed for deeper knowing.

[296] See Appendix Three.

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I am delighted to begin these Mid-Week Moments; a way of being in touch with you. Each week I hope to send something that will connect us, a picture, a poem, something that has stirred the spirit in me. Usually these moments will not include scheduling or other 'informational' words. They will be words of reflection sent from my heart to yours.

This first Mid-week Moment though, is a departure in many different ways. It is the launch of a new thing among us. It marks the movement of our faith community, the spill of its life through the gates of Palm Sunday into the solemnity and celebration of Holy Week.

It acknowledges the re-igniting of energy for outreach [here I name a few specifics that must be omitted to honour my ethical responsibility to anonymize the pastoral charges].

So, with this first Mid-week Moment I invite you deeper into our common life [. . .]. And I celebrate all the newness and possibility to which we are beckoned.

I wrote this *Moment* from a place of work that felt sometimes like abundance and sometimes like its shadow, excess. I wrote amidst a flurry of e-mail correspondence from individual members of the congregation. These e-mails posed questions or made requests often about the most mundane details. I understood them as a way to let off the steam of anxiety that arose about a significant transition in the congregation's life (about which I can only speak generally). The transition had been decided by the congregation, before my arrival, and was one that drew vilification from portions of the surrounding community. The anger and scorn from an external source were a heavy burden for

[297] In this chapter I've diminished the images in the *Moments* from their original size.

members of the congregation on top of the sense of loss and hope accompanying their decision. In fact, it was the congregation's courageous decision to enter into this transition that had activated my sense of call to this ministry site. While I understood the many agitated questions as a way for their initiators to retain some sense of control within the larger transitional moment; dealing with them all was exhausting. To hold the individual questions while creating a way to open the conversation around loss and hope in transition and to encourage healthier ways to feel secure in change was essential and demanding work. It was essential to engage the Word, in the context of the congregation, through silence, ritual and gesture.

I wrote too from the emotional and pastoral challenge of moving through the minefield created by one member of the pastoral charge; tiny mines set to go off in the midst of worship or planning or communication with the congregation. Correspondent One (C1) wrote:

> I wish for you a cute little bomb defusing robot. You know, one that rolls onto the scene and is controlled by the operator who stays as a distance and manipulates the little robot's arms and picks up the mines, grenades and devices and packs them in an explosion proof disposal box and they are no more. Right. No robot. Instead the operator has to take the risk of standing in the midst and no amount of training and no amount of armour helps. Yes, that is you.

There in the midst of my own work of holding and shaping spaces, various attention-seeking disruptions concentrated in the actions of one prominent person intruded in the ongoing dialogue with the congregation, which, in turn, was nested within the denominational issues at hand. It was a complex situation and there is little detail I can provide and still protect the confidentiality of the faith community in a way that honours the pastoral relationship of the time and my ethical responsibility in this research. I wrote

out of that mixed place and in the writing, I held the ambiguity and in my deepest self, felt it as wholeness.

When I created this first *Moment*, I had been reading Brené Brown's *Daring Greatly*[298]. I was reading about shame, and about the stories we tell ourselves. I appreciated her sentiment that, "the bottom line is that daring greatly requires worthiness. Shame sends the gremlins to fill our head with [. . .] Dare not! You're not good enough!"[299] I could recognize these gremlins or those like them that said, "don't trust your instincts; why would they be right? Aren't you being a bit presumptuous?" In my journal around this time, I was wondering what congregations were feeling in relation to shame and worthiness. And I wondered what their ministers were feeling. I also read Brown's words about using "[. . .] the power of expressive writing to bring about wholeness".[300]

The idea of writing *Moments* had been shaping itself in me for some time. Once begun, the practice drew me into a more spacious, non-linear sense of time. It integrated the dissonance that I described in an e-mail to Correspondent One (C1). *I don't like living a hurried life in a hurried age. It creates a cognitive dissonance for me. I don't believe in it and yet I am doing it.*

On this inaugural day I had listened to a podcast on emergence. The idea of the container necessary for emergent newness, surprising newness, excited me. In a reflection, I wrote, "I know that the unpredictable reactions of factors coming together

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[298] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly.* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012).

[299] Brown, *Daring Greatly,* 66.

[300] Brown, *Daring Greatly,* 82.

need a container flexible enough to let the confluence and energy work together and yet strong enough so that all the elements don't diffuse." This related to what I saw as part of the pastoral task and as I reflected, I saw the *Moments* as tiny containers within my own personal life for the mingling of elements that produce surprising newness.

The closing bracket of the week in which the first *Moment* was written was Easter Sunday. At sunrise I reminded the congregation that on Good Friday we had spoken words from the *Song of Songs*.[301]

> All night, all night, I lay on my bed
> I looked for the one my heart loves.
> I looked for him, but I did not find him.
> I will arise now and go about the city [. . .]
> I will search for the one my heart loves, [. . .]
> for love is as strong as death, it burns like a blazing fire, [. . .]
> many waters cannot quench love.
> Rivers cannot wash it away.

"All night since the terrible night we looked for the one our heart loves, and this morning we are found". The *Moments* have about them at times, the almost crushing search to find the one my heart loves in the instances of pastoral dailyness. The *Moments* were one way I knew myself found.

On Easter morning, John 20:1-8 was our text. A cellist played the Bach Gounod *Ave Maria* and I preached the text as a kind of riff on the music; a riff on joy.

> *Resurrection; say it softly, as one must after the softening note go wherever notes go when they no longer sound." [. . .] Resurrection. It doesn't come from nothing; It has a past. We heard it in the music. That last clasped note of cello and piano held everything that soared and dipped toward it, just as the clasped names of Mary and Jesus held the notes of their dipping, soaring lives [. . .] Resurrection has a past and a future [. . .].*

[301] Song of Songs 3:1-2; 8:6-7.

Each *Moment* reminded me of my name and each *Moment* expressed my longing that as those who were beloved community we would listen for our true name.

I noticed in this inaugural *Moment* the sky is striated. It holds my favourite sky colours of gold and white and blue. It is an image that suggests opening. I was able, rather than merely developing strategies to manage the busyness, to drop into a living emptiness in which something other was received. This was a kind of prayer. I can take little credit for it other than the small spark of courage it took to pause. This *Moment* and others were often found at the end of my rope. What came to me in those open, vulnerable, empty instances became touchstones for leadership in the present and in an ongoing way.

I can feel the potential for losing one's self in pastoral leadership in an unhealthy way. I recall the heavy workload of Holy Week and the danger of letting one's own life of relationship with Word and Silence be smothered by responsibilities to the congregation. As I reflected on these *Moments,* I recalled the longing each time I wrote a sermon or liturgy that my deep sense of our belovedness would be somehow communicated through my words. I recalled the moments before each worship in which everything prepared is in some sense let go and one's whole self becomes a string to be played. I recalled the times after worship, as my adrenaline drained, in which I wondered what, if anything, had been stirred. I recalled weariness. I recalled the times that I perceived Love moving in the silence of our shared worship. I recalled this ambiguous life.

I knew that Word and Silence and Gesture and Ritual had so permeated me and paradoxically received me that even when I was limping around in loneliness, or fatigue,

or disillusionment, I would again be drawn to these elements. It was because I am threaded with Word and Silence that I created the *Moments*. I know that I so desire to share my particular experience of the wonder in dailyness that I could not resist.

Looking through the lens of the inaugural *Moment,* I recalled the yearning and the hope that generated it. I looked at the actual words of the *Moment* and see that I wanted to offer something that 'stirred the spirit' in me, 'words [. . .] from my heart to yours'. I longed for intimacy of spirit with the congregation and I longed for them to cultivate their own yearning and their own intimacy with all that that was within them. I know, as I knew then, that this is an intimacy of a particular sort. I did not long to be taken into their day-to-day lives nor to involve them in mine in any way that did not emerge naturally from the flow of our pastoral relationship. It is important when speaking of intimacy to clarify. The deep conversations of our spirit life, invited within pastoral relationship, flow best when boundaries are clear.

> Vulnerability is based on mutuality and requires boundaries and trust. It's not oversharing, it's not purging, it's not indiscriminate disclosure, and it's not celebrity-style social media information dumps. [. . .] The result of this mutually respectful vulnerability is increased connection, trust, and engagement. Vulnerability without boundaries leads to disconnection, distrust, and disengagement. [. . .] boundaryless disclosure is one way we protect ourselves from real vulnerability. [. . .] vulnerability is bankrupt on its own terms when people move from being vulnerable to using vulnerability to deal with unmet needs, get attention, or engage in the shock-and-awe behaviors that are so common place in today's culture. [302]

What I hoped to express, as leader, was this invitation to move, "deeper into our common life".

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[302] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 45-46.

Not only words but images are vital in the *Moments*. The first *Moment* and most subsequent *Moments* did not speak of the Word explicitly but through image and words expressed and likely received in silence. Of all the words written, only a fraction was ever spoken, a line or two here or there that found its way into a sermon or liturgy. For the most part, they are words that live in silence.

In this first *Moment* I named a threshold, "the movement of our faith community, the spill of its life through the gates of Palm Sunday into the solemnity and celebration of Holy Week". Thresholds or liminal space are a significant theme in my ministry and life. They are often places of exposure or loss, even when crossing them may lead into a place of great joy and celebration. I encourage their honouring. I tend "negative capability"[303], living in the unfolding process, allowing the ambiguity of feelings, both open and aware[304]. This I believe deepens my ability to stand in the uncertainty and anxiety of a congregation and to encourage in them their own honouring of thresholds.

[303] See note 74.

[304] More on Negative Capability can be found in Adam Philips book, *On Balance* (see Literature Review).

This is the time of the liturgical colour blue, the colour of the night sky. But it is almost the colour of pure celebration. You can see it, white and gold, approaching through the spare and longing branches.

All during the last four Advent weeks, those who approach Christmas as a holy opening have been preparing our hearts, waiting, anticipating, caught on an in breath.

All of Advent I have been more and more struck by the moment just before -- the one on the edge where the Ferris Wheel of blue pauses at the top and from one instant to the next tips its riders into the colour of white.

I have been feeling that moment of gathering into the last push before the baby is delivered; the moment when the softened cloths lie, still waiting, on the straw. The moment when silence opens, wide and immense, to receive the first cry.

This is the moment just before. Whatever is done or not done, this is the moment. Whatever is lost or found, made or unmade, hurt or healed; this is the moment just before. There is no word for this Word.

May you fall into what comes with wonder.

As I wrote I imagined the moment when the breath has been inhaled and there is pause, a time when the body is in an instant poised for possibility. Even breath is not stirring . . . yet. It is the moment just before. I love Advent. It is full of silence and anticipation for me and so to write about the colour of the night blue sky, the expectancy and the attention to preparation was a joy for me. Looking back, I can recall the sky outside my dining room window, the huge window that makes me feel as though I am almost in the open expanse that is my yard, looking up at the black branches and the

comforting blue darkness. There is a great sense of intimacy in the way the sky receives my gaze and the way it enters me. Writing this was a way to touch the deep knot of my own relationship to the One who was coming into the world and who was already with me. In a time of many details this was my way to touch bottom in the best sense, to be grounded and to offer that grounding to my community.

There was probably a fire going in the fireplace and I was writing at the table there where I did much of my work. I had come home through the cool air that held, as did the solitary home-coming itself, a touch of delight and a scrape from the edge of that fine line that runs between solitude and loneliness.

Mary and the smallness of Bethlehem and the manger, intended for the food of livestock but soon to hold the Bread of Life, were very much in me as I sat under the deep Advent blue. They made me feel at home in Advent. I felt an affinity with the small, hiddenness of Bethlehem, "[. . .] one of the little clans of Judah".[305] I felt exhilarated by the stunning choice of Mary, living in me as I prepared to preach that Sunday.

Many questions accompanied us in Advent, questions which were like spoons carving out space to receive the Word. I felt the grit of the story and wondered whether others felt it too. At this time of year, there is a sense that infancy, the vulnerable child, will be able to enter hearts often defended and that the questions that swaddle the infant will open in our lives. This is the pastoral hope but also the personal one. I want to stay open to that hope even in times when its fulfillment seems hidden.

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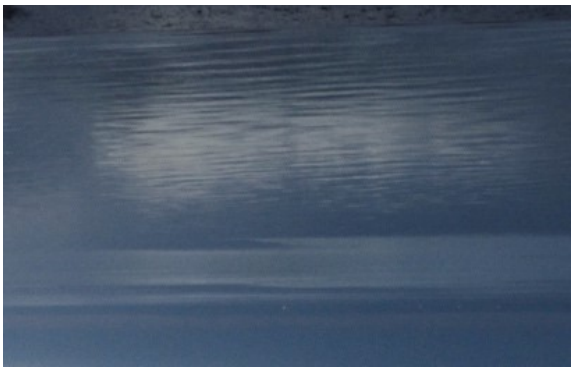
[305] Micah 5:2

The moment just before is empty of the moment to come. It is this assent to the empty moment a choice is ‘made’ or, in contemplative parlance, received. The emptiness is essential; a part of ongoing discernment that informs decision making but is distinct from it. It is this breathless void into which I invite people, the moment when anything is possible. Our best choices are not made by grasping at them or even for the deepest of questions by totting up pros and cons. They come from an ongoing listening to the longing and desire within us. While in this chapter I reflect on one small practice, I believe that exercising our capacity for emptiness is essential for leaders, congregation and denominations.



There was such integrity, in the morning you woke before the sun rose, where you entered the thin place between dark and day, where light somehow rested like a miracle on the solitary blue of the water.

In each of us is that thin place; the soft, strong membrane through which everything may pass: the rush of a fall day, the challenge of beginning or memories, the sharp whistle of loneliness, the colour, and the clang, and the silence.

There is a thin place within you in which all that has passed through, may come to be held and healed; a place where even anguish is touched by its truest meaning and where joy and sorrow, rush and rest are intimate with one another. There is a thin place within you through which all that is may pass. There is this place of shining stillness, this quiet that says everything, this knowing that gives voice to everything your life is longing to say.

In this *Moment* I recalled the late summer ocean and the sense of joyful calm that met me as I gazed on the image of the water. It was the joy that doesn't exclude grief or loss but rises through them. This *Moment* describes the place I found myself, when, as I wrote, I knew my truest self and offered it. In the midst of everything I dropped deep into myself and found reserves I could not myself alone have created. The data only began to capture the energy expended. As I wrote and reflected, the memory was in my mind and heart but also in my body. I felt what I sought, a grounding necessary to nourish wholeness and resist fragmentation, a grounding stand in my own questions and with others in theirs. I felt the deep breath I took through this Moment. I felt the memory of constriction in that time; a constriction that could have become a carapace had I not sought ways to soften. I felt the hunch of my shoulders under the weight of doing, the

necessity to straighten my back and lift my chest, opening my heart to what was present. This required the attentiveness to small things that revitalized me; tea in a small, crockery pot, the sunrise each morning, the receiving of images with my camera, also gardening and novels and writing.

The creation of the *Moments* schooled me in attentiveness. They deepened my knowledge that creativity and joy and hope can well up in loneliness or grief. They encouraged me to experience creativity as receptivity. They gave me courage to practice letting go in order to receive what might be given and courage to trust my perceptions and my gifts. They were the language of a way not to be forgotten given those who formed the congregation. They offered not what I was accomplishing, but who I was. They invited through my opened heart, the vulnerability that attentiveness brings, the invitation to the recipients' own attentiveness. The creation of the *Moments,* and the sharing of them, kept me supple and close to the congregation. I became more compassionate toward myself, those with whom I was in ministry and those I encountered in my life.

I did at first move to delete this picture. But I couldn't. When it kept hold of me, I thought perhaps that I could touch it up. Eventually, I came to know its voice sounds clearest through its flaws. It carries in its uncorrected state the grace of imperfection; a grace hospitable to all our less than perfect moments.

See, there and there, those tiny holes and tears through which light comes, there in the leaves and there in your life. See how the slender leaves rest, unashamed, on the breath of the water.

They have an aspect, still and unafraid, and tell a truth; a truth that comes to us this Sunday as in community we recognize All Saints. A truth, gentle and shining and unextinguished, shared, even while we, as these leaves, become first like lace and then light.

The Word on the Sunday following this *Moment* reminded us that we were surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1). The congregation wrote the names of their beloved on ribbons. The children, their Sunday School teacher and I, wove the ribbons into our loosely woven circle of cloth and we were all together, a bright coloured circle of witnesses. Holding all this we sang their song, a simple chant, sang it to one another and to the One, "I see the love of God in you/the light of Christ comes shining through/and I am glad to be with you/O holy child of God". The ritual held elements of familiarity and newness. It allowed us to express what words alone could not. I felt, as did others, the thinness of that place.

This *Moment* participates in a kind of disjunction. It was the last in the steady

series of *Moments*. I made no conscious decision to stop writing them. Still, the next one I recall most vividly is the one six months later when I wrote to tell the congregation that I would not apply for a called position with them. I spoke these words to the congregation at the end of worship and they were scheduled to be sent at that same time to all who were not present that day. These were hard words to find and to say; they were from my heart. AE allowed me to see that perhaps the two were connected by my physical heart.

I had written in my journal about an experience that turned my attention to my heart, the elevation of my heart rate to dangerous levels. In the hospital Emergency Unit, my heart's pace still increasing, I underwent first one chemical cardioversion, then another. Each created a strange experience of pressure into which I disappeared, everyone in the room becoming further away till there was nothing. It all happened very quickly, though in the recollection there is a dream-like slowness. It was only later that [my husband] described his experience, sitting in the cardiac room, unprepared, seeing the monitors register the stopping of my heart. When it began again the second time it was at a normal pace and rhythm. "I feel a great sadness in these days after. I am left with the physical and metaphoric power of what happened to my heart. It feels vital to me. I need to pay attention."

As I created the AE, I saw more clearly the connection of my physical, emotional and spiritual heart with this *Moment* that describes the disappearance of the leaves until they are all light. I did not think my death was imminent, but I felt its movement. I felt profoundly gifted to have experienced this situation. I felt the holy oddness of drifting away from those around me in the small cardiac room. I still can't express the knowledge that is held within that instant. As I looked at the words of the *Moment* I see 'the tiny

holes and tears through which light comes and I know this experience as a gift to my vocational discernment, as over the next months I lived into increasing certainty that my path lay out of pastoral ministry for a time. The inchoate knowledge in this *Moment* became clear through my research. What I saw was that in the letting go of the *Moments* I began the initially unconscious preparation of the congregation for the moment my leadership would become like lace and then, hopefully like light. I saw in this *Moment's image* the fragility of the leaves connected to the physical vulnerability of my body and that for which physical vulnerability may make space.

Conclusions: A Synthesis of Learning

I noticed that the creation of the *Moments* in themselves represented an answer to the overarching question of the doctoral research, how does pastoral leadership practice develop when leadership is viewed through the lens of vulnerability that is inhabited with courage, creativity and compassion? They are expressions, offerings, of my own vulnerability and its sacredness, within my personal and vocational life and so, an answer to the overarching question of this project. The creation of the *Moments* is one way in which leadership practice develops. This media is performative of the answer.

It has become fairly common now within pastoral charge life to send a weekly mid-week message to one's congregation. But many of these are words about what is 'doing' in the life of the congregation. What has happened over the last week? What is coming up; what project, what special worship, what event? These are largely informational. There is no doubt that they have a constructive, communicative role in the life of the community.

The *Moments*, though, are another way. They are steeped in the contemplative tradition but also nourished by the words of theologians such as those of Walter Brueggemann, who says that "We shall not be the community we hope to be if our primary communications are in modes of utilitarian technology and managed, conformed values."[306] Brueggemann is focusing his thoughts on preaching, on the sermon, but these words are also applicable to these less managed, non-utilitarian, vulnerable words that I sent to the congregations.

Largely, the *Moments* a kind of creative art, a simple poetics[307]. Heather Walton in her exploration of poetics in relation to theology notes that, "The term 'poetics' is not commonly found in theological texts. Despite a recent growth in reflexivity there is not (yet) an accompanying awakening of interest in writing as a creative act." [308] Walton writes, in the chapter "Poetics as Practice", "If poetics matters, then it should have something significant to say to practical theology, a discipline that is focused upon useful action. [. . .] Crucially, poetics should enable us to create pastoral responses to people in pain. Most important of all, poetics should enable us to construct theological wisdom in the midst of everyday life." [309]

The *Moments* are poetics as practice. They come from the kitchen table, looking out over the grass and sky, the sunrise or the darkness, from the feel of the ground and the

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[306] Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet; Daring Speech for Proclamation*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 2.

[307] Poetics may be defined simply as the art of making poetry. "The term "poetics" comes from the Greek [. . .] poieticos "pertaining to poetry", literally "creative, productive," from [. . .] poietos Poetics may also refer to the theory of literary discourse which is not the sense in which I use it here. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poetics accessed May 30, 2019.

[308] Heather Walton, *Writing Methods*, (London: SCM Press, 2014), chap. 13, Kindle.

[309] Walton, *Writing Methods*, chap. 13, Kindle.

feel of the day. They come from the moment of solitude or loneliness at the late end of the day: the stockinged feet, the fire, the waiting bed, the gentle book. Or from the early morning, the tea, the vibrant arrival of the sun, the fear and the hope the day carries, the knowledge that sunrise will need to sustain ministry through the fatigue that sleep has not dispersed. They invite theological reflection or spiritual awareness in the lives of those to whom I send them from my kitchen. They create, "pastoral responses to people in pain"[310] or at least in the various anxieties and perplexities of life where we must choose the courage that opens us to creativity and compassion.

The Moments' intention was to say, right here, in this instant, as I am, I have experienced something holy. I want to send it to you, as you are. I have this hope and so I take this risk. Pausing, I stitched together the words and images that came into little invitations to attentiveness to one's inner space and the gifts that enter there. 'What is the name by which you imagine the One you search for is searching for you?', 'What is wild and growing in you? What space can you give it? How can you keep it in view so that it will flourish and delight you? What is caught in the living water of our lives [. . .] what do we reflect?' All these questions, especially set in the context of congregational life and coming at the end of reflections that point us toward the transcendent, are a way of poetics as it relates to theology. This is a permeable way, a way of conclusions that are touchstones rather than walls, pausing places rather than arrivals.

As I considered how the *Moments* related to and increased my understanding of vulnerability in pastoral leadership, I noticed several things. First is that the words, (not

reproduced in this chapter) "start close in"[311] from a poem by David Whyte formed the header in the majority of *Moments*. I saw in Whyte's words a relationship to my initial wondering in this doctoral research: "Where do I begin?"[312] Whyte's words mirror my belief that authentic relationship with others and the Other is to be found in the depths of one's individual experience. If one goes deeply and courageously into one's self, a self-infused with the transcendent that permeates both inner and outer life like light that waits to be recognized, one is immediately in community, in communion.

I saw the choice of this small phrase as an assertion of what had become an answer to my question, not only in research, but in leadership. This answer, implicit in my approach to leadership, expressed the need I felt in all my ministry settings to honour the members'[313] deepest experience as individuals and as community. In honouring my experience, I opened and modeled a space for others to be open to and compassionate toward their own.

That is not to say that Christian self-understanding is purely a matter of individual fulfillment. Cynthia Bourgeault describes "the mutual inter-abiding which expresses the indivisible reality of divine love. We flow into God – and God – into us – because it is the nature of love to flow. [. . .]".[314] Reflecting on "Love your neighbor as yourself"

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[311] "Start close in/[. . .] take a small step/you can call your own/don't follow someone else's heroics,/be humble and focused,/[. . .]/start with the first/thing/close in, the step/you don't want to take" from the poem "Start Close In" published in *River Flow: New & Selected Poems*, (Langley:Many Rivers Press, 2007). This poem is worth reading in its entirety and can be found at various online sites.

[312] Kristine A. Culp, "A World Split Open"? Experience and Feminist Theologies," 56.

[313] Here I mean not only members through baptism but all who live in some intentional way connected with the congregation.

[314] Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Tranforming Heart and Miind – A New Perspective on Christ and his Message* (Boston: Shambala, 2008), 31-32.

(Mark 12:31, Matthew 22:39) Bourgeault writes, "It's just "Love your neighbor *as* yourself"—as a continuation of your very own being. It's a complete seeing that your neighbor is you. There are not two individuals out there, one seeking to better herself at the price of the other, or to extend charity to the other; there are simply two cells of the one great Life. [315]

I noticed that both my pastoral vocation and research began with a longing. Not in the sense of a superficial desire, but the deep longing that through contemplation can be recognized as coincident with the longing of the Transcendent. We are not complacent, nor are we passive; we hold this longing deeply and attentively enough to discern its vocational centrality in us. I longed to know myself 'beloved'. I found and find that knowledge of my belovedness within the Word and Silence, Ritual and Gesture. These elements are central to unfolding a coherent narrative of my life.

As the longing became more articulate within me, there was another question: "In what way do I begin?", to be, to lead, to create . . . In pastoral leadership, one is faced with discerning the path amidst the needs and wants of the congregation. Concurrently, one is faced with discerning one's own gifts for leadership in meeting those needs. This discernment is ongoing as it needs to be. At present, it is the gift of that longing and the knowledge of belovedness that most fundamentally anchors my leadership. It grounds my story.

Part of my personal story was woundedness, honoured in the Word, in the story of a God's seeking after a people who kept turning away or forgetting or abandoning. That story was in the Word as revealing text and in the person of Christ as embodied

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[315] Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus, 31-32.*

expression. “Because stories can heal, the wounded healer and wounded story teller are not separate but are different aspects of the same figure”[316]. The *Moments* integrated woundedness and healing.

I read Mary Oliver’s words about the realms that saved her. One was nature, the other literature. Her words on the second world or realm recalled for me not only my own joy and solace through reading but also something of what I experienced in the received creativity of the *Moments.*

> The second world – the world of literature – offered me, besides the pleasures of form, the sustentation of *empathy* (the first step of what Keats called negative capability) and I ran for it. I relaxed in it. I stood willingly and gladly in the characters of everything. And this is what I learned: that the world’s *otherness* is an antidote to confusion, that standing within this otherness – the beauty and the mystery of the world, out in the fields or deep inside books – can re-dignify the worst-stung heart.[317]

While I love the world of literature, Oliver’s words caught my attention especially because what she describes here, the creation of the *Moments* did for me. Remembering these creative gestures that would repeat until they became ritual, I felt the endeavour as “an antidote to confusion”. I could imagine each person opening the e-mail that was for all of us but also for each of us. This imagining kept my heart soft. My empathy with others grew. Creativity encouraged more courage and compassion.

Creating the *Moments* was just one of many ways I chose to live vulnerably in pastoral leadership. My choice existed within a range of vulnerabilities that were created

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[316] S. Philip Nolte and Yolanda Dreyer, “The Paradox of Being a Wounded Healer: Henri J.M. Nouwen’s Contribution to Pastoral Theology,” *HTS Theological Studies* 66, no. 2, (2010), xii.

[317] *Staying Alive: Mary Oliver on How Books Saved Her Life and Why the Passion for Work Is the Greatest Antidote to Pain* , https://www.brainpickings.org/2016/11/02/mary-oliver-upstream-staying-alive-reading , accessed May 30, 2019.

in me through the context in which I led, and by how those within the context chose to resist or live at peace with their own vulnerability. I continue to see our tilt toward the quantifiable and the active as temptation. Action is of course absolutely necessary – we are called to it, but it becomes frenetic and brittle when it is undertaken only as a way to escape, often unconsciously, the discomfort of uncertainty or powerlessness. Rilke instructs the young man who is discerning his vocation as a poet with these often-quoted words:

> [. . .] have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the *questions themselves*, as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for [I might say grasp for] the answers, which cannot be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps, then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.[318] (italics Rilke's)

These words may seem terribly impractical to pastoral leadership or to faith communities anxious about the unfolding of their existence. But they describe a vital element of vulnerable pastoral leadership and peaceful creaturely existence.

There are countless examples of how we resist the receptive inhabiting of questions and of vulnerability. It may manifest as a fixation with bringing back past 'success'. It may be expressed by rushing too quickly into the future. It may be expressed as an inability to recognize what exists in the present as good. I recall a congregation that would repeatedly bang its head against the lament of "no Sunday School". Sadly, even when a small Sunday School began to form and to participate in the life of the congregation, the lament, or perhaps more aptly complaint, went on. Lack had become

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[318] Rainer Maria Rilke*, Letters to a Young Poet,* trans. Stephen Mitchell, Vintage, New York: 1984, 34.

such a perverse way of knowing who they were that they could not let it go. They couldn't risk the uncertainty of letting go an identity that had become familiar, no matter how hopeful the present.

Knowing the human propensity for answers and boxes in which to put everything, it feels risky to intentionally hold questions until the answer is ripe. Those of us in pastoral leadership have our own longing for solutions and blueprints. In the face of the blueprint measure of effectiveness, what earthly good might a *Moment* be? If I took off some of my armour, would others let go of theirs? If I, encouraging and supporting the essential work necessary to maintain some fundamental structure, paired that with invitations to rest and pray, to play and eat together, would anxiety diminish? Could we embrace uncertainty? Could we have that much courage?

Libby Byrne, writing about art and embodiment, about being "grounded in the sacred by a deepening and mutual relationship with art [. . .],[319] speaks to the creation of the *Moments* as vital in my leadership development. Her words describe the deepening of my understanding of my experience of vulnerability and the importance of that deepening and practice for the creation of community. Byrne writes,

> [. . .] for human beings to flourish we need to really know who we are and how our presence in the world makes a difference. Being aware of ourselves in relationship to others creates opportunities for connection that enable human flourishing. [. . .] Art is an experience of connectedness, an assurance that we are not alone in our human journey.
> [. . .] the work awakens us to ourselves [. . .] awakens us to the presence of the sacred within our lived experience.

While the *Moments* were not art in the conventional understanding, they were creative expressions, formed of the ongoing art that is a life.

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[319] Libby Byrne, "Grounded in the Sacred," *Colloquium* 48, no.2, (2016): 116-117.

The *Moments* as creative expression were vital in equipping me to inhabit my own vulnerability in ways that could allow anxiety without being overwhelmed or numbed by it. Anxiety may be experienced in the search to express within one's work that which gives meaning to one's life. Paul Tillich identifies three types of anxiety.[320] It is the third, that of emptiness and meaninglessness, that have at times assailed me in ministry and that I know have assailed others. It is this anxiety that is most related to the importance to creativity. It was this that made the subversion of liturgy and communication with the congregation by a person threatened by vulnerability so disheartening.

> Everyone who lives creatively in meanings affirms himself as a participant in those meanings. He affirms himself as receiving and transforming reality creatively. [For example] the scientist loves both the truth he discovers and himself insofar as he discovers it. He is held by the content of his discovery. This is what one can call "spiritual self-affirmation [. . .] Spiritual life in which this is not experienced is threatened by non-being [of] emptiness and meaninglessness.[321]

In my experience, pastoral leaders particularly want to experience this reception and transforming of reality. This is a crucial aspect of the development of my leadership through the practice of the *Moments.* Many tasks of ministry require the face-to-face offering of our self, our creativity through liturgy, preaching, pastoral care, governance and involvement in the wider community. We offer our hearts over and over again. Sometimes the response may express a collective numbness not necessarily owned by individuals within the body. Our own creative spiritual practice whatever shape it takes

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[320] Tillich, *The Courage to Be*.

[321] Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 64.

resists numbness. The creation of the *Moments* of them animated and affirmed my spirit in a way that energized other aspects of my ministry.

The experience of their creation had this two-fold sense of nurture, first my own participation in meaning-making and then the invitation to community to join me. They nourished me like tears and like tears they were small enough, soft enough to pass into places often armoured against unscripted possibility. Each time I pressed send on my computer I felt a sense of risk and exhilaration, of courage and compassion brought about by their creation. Each time I sent them I felt that if they spoke to even a few, a tiny space in the heart of the community would be opened.

I recall the bond of love with the community that existed right along with hurt and exasperation. And I recall how the desire to speak directly from my heart to theirs in a way that was an extension of our Sunday gathering, but also different from it, presented itself as knowledge residing in a place, inclusive of, but larger than, the intellect. They said, there is a whole other room in our lives to which we might pay attention.

What I hoped for in community was originality in its deepest sense. Cynthia Bourgeault writes, "in the actual meaning of the word, [. . .], being original doesn't mean trying to be different. It means being connected to the origin. [. . .] You become original by staying true to what your heart sees."[322] To listen to the heart is vulnerable practice. It requires times in which anything measurable is relinquished, at least briefly. What I hoped for in the faith community was what I hoped for in myself, to be original in the deepest sense; to let mission and ministry flow from their heart. The *Moments* were reminders of our originality of heart.

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[322] Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*, Kindle

To know one's heart; to trust the One who sustains our vitality, requires over and over again a practiced surrender, a small courageous act. To trust one's own individual or collective heart in this way requires self-compassion. I spoke with someone recently who said, "when I practice *meta,* or loving kindness meditation, I notice that when I first direct compassion toward myself I then have much more for others". Jean Vanier writes, "The heart of Jesus, the vision of Jesus is to bring people together, to meet, to engage in dialogue, to love each other. Jesus wants to break down the walls that separate people and groups. [. . .] He will do it by saying 'You are important. You are precious'."[323] We need to hear this message for ourselves and for our community, so that we may offer it to others.

Brené Brown too, expresses this need for self-compassion which I understand as based in our knowledge of our belovedness, what Brown calls worthiness, when she says, "Wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness. [. . .] No matter what gets done and how much is left undone, I am enough. [. . .] Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn't change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging."[324] In congregational life where we are enjoined to justice and compassion there is a particular challenge to take the time to sink into one's own belovedness, to practice *meta* first toward one's self, not as prior to but as part of opening to others. This practice of compassion[325] takes courage and issues in the originality Bourgeault describes, which is the greatest creativity.

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[323] Hauerwaus & Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness, (*Downer's Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 62.

[324] Brown, *Daring Greatly,* 10.

[325] Matt. 22.39; Mark 12.31; Luke 10.27.

The creative, originating Word writes itself through words but also through Jesus Christ. There is challenge in the Word, to do justice, to love kindness . . . but first there is a benediction through the word 'good' pronounced over all creation, sounded again in the Word that is Jesus Christ. There is also, as cited above, the admonition to love one's neighbour as one's self.

I write beloved. Over and over again, through sermons, and *Moments,* through the Word and in Silence and Ritual and Gesture, I repeat it. My partner teases me; people as we sit together sometimes answer their own questions with it in the silence between us. It sticks. A woman of some prominence came to me, a woman passionate and involved her life-long in justice for others. Dogged still by an old wound. Through conversation and a ritual created just for her we touched the wound and blessed it. Some years later, after her death her partner came to see me. On every page of the journal subsequent to our meeting the entry began, 'I am beloved'.

The *Moments* say beloved; beloved me, beloved you, beloved creation, beloved community. Who knows what questions we can bear to stand in, what work we can take on, what holy resistance we may be, what hospitality to the world we will offer when we have heard our true name.

The creation of *Moments* brought integration of tacit knowing. It gathered up all that I understood, intellectually, spiritually, and experientially, about the necessity of honouring vulnerability and inhabiting it courageously. This spiritual nurtured that integrity within me, which at times threatened to fracture as it encountered various pressures and distractions. The *Moments* came as vivid infusions of received creativity, like prayer opening me to the transcendent Presence that is also received in moments of

unguarded vulnerability. I was turned toward the congregation with a softened and nourished heart, a heart of compassion, enabled to invite them, with me into the experience of the Holy.

This was, for me, a way of sharing The Word, the narrative of God's gracious, redemptive involvement in our lives, the Word that challenges the strategies of invulnerability we may put in place, ideologies and blueprints of success and worthiness drawn with lines of ownership, consumption, popularity. The Word, and Christian tradition at its best, offer images of worthiness that reflect our value and our call. They draw attention to small things: mustard seed and salt from which the realm of wholeness grows. These images challenge the ideologies in which we are tempted to find comfort, for example: wealth, power, celebrity. Both Word and tradition invite the weaving of our lives into the dynamism of God's life; both are spacious enough to hold the new and the ancient in conversation.

The *Moments* are also invitations. They do not necessarily name the Word or the tradition, rather they focus on opening up to the moment, paying attention to what is life-giving, entrusting ourselves to the One whose story and presence is offered in Scripture, manifested in nature, and in the daily, celebrated through the living elements of tradition. Writing or recognizing an image I was always aware of those words, "The Word is very near you". I hope I never forget the warm breath of the Word as I wrote in the darkness or the morning. The experience of it kept me supple when I otherwise might have hardened.

I hope too, that I remember the Silence and the way writing and the near Word, turned my times of loneliness into solitude and my stiffness into suppleness. I remember Love in the Gesture of creating and sharing, Love that convinced me to trust my sense of

direction, to keep holding an attentive and peaceful stance toward all that could not yet be answered as I continued to offer practices, through Word, Silence, Ritual and Gesture that nurture hope. I believe the world, and the denomination, and the church need this stance. It led to a whole new way of being in our congregation. The *Moments* as gestures, became in me, a leader who reflects on and shapes the Rituals of the tradition, a kind of ritual in themselves.[326]

As I reflected, I saw that these *Moments* became for me experiences that told me where I most deeply was. They kept me susceptible, in the best of ways, to the congregation and the world and my own ground nourished by Word Silence, Ritual and Gesture. In the following chapter, I describe how vulnerability, nurtured by these elements, was expressed in the creation of a new way of congregational governance.

[326] Mary McClintock Fulkerson in *Theology from a Place* (see note 81) writes "While all theology is practical and situated (just as any academic endeavor is a practice), it is still useful to foreground a dimension of theological reflection as its practical task."

Chapter Eight

Governance as Leadership Practice

I pin my hopes to quiet processes and small circles in which vital and transforming events take place[327].

Rufus Jones

Introduction

This chapter is in two parts. In the first I offer excerpts from a document that was provided to "Small Town United" [328]to illustrate the *way* or shape of governance that I refer to as *Governance as Spiritual Practice (GSP)*. I hope that having this illustration before you will help your movement into the second part of the chapter in which I offer reflection on the way vulnerability was a gift that nourished my leadership in creating this governance. I did not create it alone; I invited and was permeable to the ideas and hopes of others. The Bubble Group[329] and I worked out the way of this governance together. While I sometimes use the word model to describe *GSP* it is more than a model. It is not static.

The specific dates, locations and speakers/writers associated with the quotes are omitted in service to maintaining confidentiality of the sources themselves. Dates are also removed from any materials included. With these exceptions the quotes themselves remain unaltered. The time from inception of this way of governance, beginning with the formation

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[327] In 1920 the Society of Friends had its first World Conference, held in London as soon as possible after the First World War. In 1937, when the world was so plainly drifting toward a second and more terrible conflict, it was decided to hold another conference, this time in the United States. Rufus Jones was asked to preside over the meetings. He accepted, but the Conference loomed before him as an ordeal. He wrote to Violet Holdsworth: In regard to the World Conference, I sincerely hope for good results, but I have become a good deal disillusioned over 'big' conferences and large gatherings. I pin my hopes to quiet processes and small circles, in which vital and transforming events take place. But others see differently, and I respect their judgment. http://qfp.quaker.org.uk/ Chapter 24:56, Accessed November 5, 2018.

[328] A fictitious name to protect the identity of the congregation.

[329] See p. 158.

of Bubble Groups to its adoption as trial was approximately one year. (This does not take into account the pre-Bubble group work also described in this chapter.) Then, after 14 months as a trial it was adopted as the ongoing way of governance for the congregation.

I have become uneasy with the word model since I have seen that models can be clutched at in a way that distracts congregations from seeking and embracing a deep understanding of their own identity and relationship to the world. Models can also be a discouragement when they are imagined as an answer rather than a way to provide a shape in which questions can be asked. Models are best used to spark ideas rather than to be applied rigidly to many situations. So, I prefer to understand this model as a 'way', flexible and permeable enough to nurture the context of your own faith community. When I use the word model to describe this governance it is always with that understanding. So, *Governance as Spiritual Practice*, is a model in that it enables the effective work of a pastoral charge. It is also a way or practice. Like any regular spiritual practice, it changes and deepens us as we engage in it.

Governance as Spiritual Practice is based on my theological understanding that in faith communities it is essential that spiritual and temporal not be held as dualities but as elements permeable to one another. This theology also holds Scripture as central to our identity as faith community and therefore essential to our discernment in mission and ministry. Being vulnerable to the vulnerable Word[330], shapes and informs and energizes

[330] As stated in Chapter Seven, the Word is multi-faceted. It is sometimes used to refer to Jesus Christ as the Word of God made flesh (John 1:14) or it may refer to the gospel of Christ or the message or proclamation about Jesus: what God reveals of God's self and God's relationship with creation through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. It may also be used to refer to the Bible, the Christian Scripture. My life is given meaning through my experience with Word in the several ways described above. I am in relationship to the Word as the person of God incarnate, to God revealed in flesh, the person of Jesus, and Word as the foundational text of our shared life in Christian community.

us. It keeps us from becoming captive to cultural discourses that may be linear, fashionable, and ephemeral, while still keeping us acutely open and aware of our call to compassion in our present context. So, *GSP* is a model, a theological expression, and a practice.

In this chapter I believe a number of vulnerabilities or permeabilities are visible. There is the permeability of spiritual and temporal at the heart of the model. There is the permeability of my pastoral leadership vulnerable to its own longing, to the Word, and to the hopes and anxieties of the community and the ways in which those hopes and fears are enacted. There is also the vulnerability of the faith community, its own longings and hopes, its own fears. The model calls both the minister and the faith community to relinquish something and to embrace something and those are vulnerable acts.

Dialogue with the Word and the world and one another continually form us as community. I hope that what you will see is one phase of my journey into the ever-deepening inhabiting of vulnerability in ways that both call for and generate, courage, creativity and compassion. I hope that it will illustrate the gifts that vulnerable practice offers for both leader and faith community. I hope that it will accompany you into your own vulnerable practice and perhaps also provide a map for a way of governance that I have experienced as capable of shifting congregational culture, strengthening its deep roots, nurturing its authentic life, and integrating the understanding temporal and spiritual.

Part One

Description of *Governance as Spiritual Practice* adapted from a document shared with the congregation and the Presbytery

[. . .] This practice, or model, grew out of my longing to create a way of shared pastoral leadership that took seriously the integration of temporal responsibility and spiritual life in the very activity of governance. It was developed in lively conversation with a Governance Bubble Group, invited by me and approved by the congregation. "Bubble Group" was the term I used of a group invited to address a well-defined task. A Bubble Group meets intensely for six weeks to two months and then, having accomplished a piece of work and presented it, disappears.

This way of governance developed also out of my intentional study of "pastoral leadership viewed and interpreted through a particular interpretive lens, that is, the lens of vulnerability inhabited with courage, creativity, and compassion." Two core values inform this model. Some aspects of the model may be adapted, but the core is essential to its identity.

The Two Core Values

The first core value is that faith formation is at the heart of all we do as Christian Community. Hence faith formation is to be undertaken by the leadership group, informing its decisions and enlivening its encouragement of the life and ministry of the congregation. An engagement with faith formation on the part of the leadership group requires more than a brief prayer or meditation at the beginning of a business meeting. In fact, it is accomplished by committing time to Grounding Gatherings which are kept free of regular business and planning. It is likewise crucial that those who provide eldership be present to and involved in the decision-making and regular governance of the congregation.

The second core value is that leadership is to be encouraged in all areas of the congregation, from the newly-forming edges to the more established centre. The way of offering leadership needs to be made easily accessible. One does not need to learn all the details of a committee structure to offer leadership. There is simplicity and fluidity in this model. This encourages liveliness throughout the body.

The Shape

It is important to note that this way of governance **ensures that all the responsibilities of governing bodies prescribed by The Manual of the United Church of Canada (2013) are fulfilled**.

The Executive is the governing body of the congregation, occupying the place of a Board or Council or Session in other governance models, though functioning somewhat differently. The name was chosen to reflect this body's close engagement with the whole

congregation through **Ministry Areas** and **Circles of Service** facilitated by the **Elders.** Since its relationship to the congregation is not mediated by a committee structure, it is closer to the congregation than its equivalents in other models. There is no need for a Nominating Committee since necessary positions are filled by the Executive working directly with the congregation. Anyone who volunteers or whose name is put forward to be a member of the Executive has their name brought to a congregational meeting for ratification, as are the names of those to serve as Trustees, on Ministry and Personnel, and as Presbytery Representative.

The Executive consists of a **Chair**, a **Treasurer**, a **Communicator** (akin to a Secretary, see Terms of Reference) and **Elders**. There are three Elders, but there can be as many as four. The Minister attends all Executive meetings. The Executive meets approximately twice monthly between September and June, once for grounding and growth in the narrative of scripture and of the congregation, and once to conduct business. By rule, no business is discussed at the **Grounding Gatherings**

Circles are important as we work with this governance shape. We imagine the congregation as a permeable circle of ministry in the world; tending those who move in and around it. The Executive encourages and supports the ministry of that congregational circle.

Small Town United identified five areas of ministry within its congregational circle. The **Ministry Areas** are:

- Worship and Faith Formation
- Justice and Outreach
- Pastoral Care and Inreach
- Property and Finance
- Communication

The Executive is responsible for ensuring that work is carried out in the five areas of ministry identified by the congregation. Your congregation might decide to change these designations to reflect your life.

Within these Ministry Areas, Circles of Service were invited by the Executive or initiated from the congregation. Some areas were tended to by groups that were either pre-existed the new governance or bubbled up early in the year (for example, the Outreach Committee continued its work and other short-term outreach projects grew up around it). The Executive invited Circles of Service to form in other areas (for example, around Property and Maintenance). Some of these Circles of Service will necessarily be longer term, such as Property and Finance. They can however relieve themselves of all but the most crucial ongoing tasks by encouraging short-lived circles to tend various parts of their ministry. And they can be re-vitalized by the Executive inviting a Circle of Service to specifically work on Terms of Reference for the Property and Finance Group.

One of the tools at the disposal of the Executive (and the congregation) for inviting or encouraging ministry is the **Discernment Board**. The Discernment Board is a magnetic board in a very visible space. In Small Town United it is on our left as we enter the

worship space. Forms for inviting Circles of Service are held in a folder to one side of the board. Each week an elder or elders check this folder for new invitations from individuals in the congregation. If an idea supports the ministry/mission of the congregation, it can be posted immediately on the Board. If money is required to support the idea, Elders will consider it in consultation with the Executive. If Elders are unsure whether the idea supports the congregation's ministry/mission, they may bring it to the Executive for further discernment.

Once a new invitation is posted on the Discernment Board, the Elder(s) provide encouragement and support to the person who is inviting the Circle of Service. Support may include help with or suggestions for communication about the group, direction to the church office regarding available time on the church calendar for booking space and following up with the person as the group proceeds. The first sign of support may be to mention to the person inviting the Circle that it has been noticed on the Board.

The Executive also calls **Shared Ministry Gatherings** three or four times per year. This is a place for any who have engaged in Circles of Service, standing committees, or the life of the congregation generally, to be present to one another for the sharing and celebration of ideas. The elders are present to support new ideas that arise, to notice Ministry Areas that are less active and to encourage celebration of the various expressions of ministry within the congregation. These gatherings are a great opportunity for a shared meal or a dessert evening.

Terms of Reference for the Executive

All those on the Executive of the Congregation (EOC) attend the Grounding Gatherings, described elsewhere, ten times per year. These gatherings are in addition to the meetings that tend the ongoing work and administration of the congregation.
The responsibilities include all those contained in *The Manual* (UCC) and the relevant sections are listed.
The Chair (7.6.1)

- Call meetings
- Prepare the agenda
- Lead the Executive Governance meetings
- Be aware of and attend to (with the Executive) requirements for congregational life as per the Manual
- Act as spokesperson for the congregation
- Oversees the tracking of finances
- Reports regularly on finances
- Works in consultation with The Finance and Investment Group

The Communicator (This position contains and expands the responsibilities of a Secretary) (7.6.2)

- Records minutes
- Distributes approved minutes

- Keeps records (minutes) current and in order
- Receives and brings Correspondence to the meeting alerting Chair and Minister prior to the meeting
- Liaises with and supported by a core group within the Communications Ministry Area

The Elders

The Manual in its definition of Elders gives us a place from which to begin. "People elected by the congregation or pastoral charge for their wisdom, caring, spiritual discernment and other gifts of the Spirit. They must be members of the congregation . . . unless the Presbytery makes an exception" (Manual 2013: 7.2).

In this governance model, we build on this definition. We make explicit the role of Elders to intentionally tend the connection between the ministry and mission of the congregation and the gifts of individuals within the congregation. This connection is kept before, and informs, the decision-making process of Executive.
This model is shaped to include 3 – 4 Elders. Eldership is a responsibility shared among those who serve in this way.

Qualities

- Good listener
- An active participant in the life of the congregation
- Committed to individual and group/congregational faith formation
- Values and encourages shared leadership
- Approachable in a variety of ways
- Open to the emerging ministries to which we are being called

Responsibilities

- Attend meetings of the Executive of the Congregation (Executive), Executive Grounding Gatherings and Shared Ministry Area Gathering
- Facilitate the grounding gathering on a rotation basis of all members of the Executive
- Tend the Discernment Board: Check regularly and frequently for new ideas submitted and take appropriate action
- Bring new ideas needing Executive discussion to the soonest Executive meeting
- Be alert to the many gifts/talents/interests present in the congregation; practice a ministry of encouragement supporting the sharing of those gifts
- Nurture the shared ministry of Eldership: keep in touch with one another, support one another in the sharing of responsibilities

Time Commitment

- Meetings: average 3 hours total per month for all meetings
- Attention to the Discernment Board and to those who have posted there: a few minutes per week (this time is at the Elder's discretion)
- Consultation among Elders (a few minutes each week)
- Shared Ministry Gathering (3-4 times per year)

Other Responsibilities (7.4)
All responsibilities outlined in The Manual at 7.4 are covered by this Governance Model.

Grounding Gatherings

[By way of illustrating the concept of the Grounding Gathering, I reproduce here an edited version of my comments to the Executive after our first such meeting.]

I want to comment briefly on this first Executive Grounding Gathering so that we all feel a sense of its movement. This will form a basic template for the gatherings. For those able to be present today some of this will be repetitive but it will perhaps serve as a refresher as time goes on. These gatherings will not be minuted.

We began with agreements on our participation.

- That unless we are ill or have and emergency or a commitment that cannot be moved we will be present.

- That because we will gather with a prayer, music or a reflective piece of some kind and perhaps a check in which we did more spontaneously today, we will arrive on time to participate in this centering moment.

- That we hold ourselves to the practice of meeting, not for planning or explicit problem solving or arriving at answers. We meet as a way of opening us to the narrative of Scripture and of the congregation in ways that will deepen our spiritual practice and our relationships and inform our direction and decisions at administrative/management meetings of the Executive.

- While we may speak outside the gathering about what arose in us or for us during the time together, what we learned or a new direction that emerged for us, we will share that without attaching names or identifiers or divulging private information that has been shared.

After this we will spend about 20 -25 minutes* in some kind of **conversation with Scripture.** Today the Scripture was Luke 9: 1-6; 10-17. Whoever is facilitating the gathering that day will choose a Scripture they'd like to work with and will bring it to the group in whatever way they are comfortable. Today I chose to engage the Scripture with *Lectio Divina* (I have the steps available if anyone would like to use that method). You might choose to bring a question that rises out of the text for you and to jump start a discussion with that. Or you might bring a piece of art relating to the text. Or you might invite us into Scripture some other way. The choice is yours.

Today we had coffee or tea available beforehand, but it could also be a time to break between the Scripture and the narrative of the congregation. For the **narrative of the congregation** feel free to bring something that has struck you about our congregational life, a particular situation, a hope or a more general wondering.

Today I spoke about my experience of the way stewardship is understood by many (though not all) within the congregation and how that differs from my understanding of stewardship. (I used an outline for theological reflection that I provided for everyone. There is discussion bubbling in the congregation about the Stewardship Resources recently provided by the denomination.

We almost wobbled into planning, but we were able to stay true to the purpose of these particular gatherings and just say to one another that we felt enough energy around this subject that we would like to bring it to a regular meeting of the Executive and speak of it in a setting where we might test the possibilities for this in other ways. . . .

*A retrospective note: during the first year of gatherings we found that we were happy to go without a break and so spend approximately half the gathering on each of the narratives. This is not exact since the narratives blend in conversation. We have kept to our stated time of 1.5 hours total for each gathering.

Glossary

Chair: The leader of the congregational executive, who calls meetings, acts as a spokesperson, etc.

Communicator: An executive member with a job description that encompasses and expands on the role typically given to a Secretary.

Circles of Service: groups of individuals that form to carry out the work of the church.

Long Term: a circle that has an ongoing responsibility, such as Property and Building or a group for centering prayer that wants to continue as a constant presence.

Short Term: a group that has a time-limited task or activity, such as a book group, or putting in a flower bed, planning a fund-raiser, etc.

Discernment Board: a bulletin board that contains invitations to form Circles of services. The invitations can be issued by the Executive or by members of the congregation.

Elders: three to four members of the Executive who intentionally tend the connection between the ministry and mission of the congregation and the gifts of individuals within the congregation. Among other tasks, they facilitate the creation of Circles of Service.

Executive of the Congregation: the primary decision-making and oversight body, consisting of officers directly elected by the congregation.

Grounding Gathering: a monthly meeting of the Executive in which its members explore and grow in the narrative of scripture and of the congregation. No formal

business is carried out at these meetings.

Ministry Areas: the categories of ministry/mission that the congregation has identified as important and that the Executive is charged with tending. Small Town United has identified the following: Worship and Faith Formation, Outreach/Justice, Pastoral Care/Inreach, Property and Finance, and Communication.

Shared Ministry Area Gatherings: quarterly gatherings of the congregation to provide an opportunity in which any who have engaged in Circles of Service, standing committees, or the life of the congregation generally, are present to one another for the sharing and celebration of ideas.

Standing Committees: committees as mandated by the Manual United Church of Canada such as a Board of Trustees or the Ministry and Personnel Committee on a one-point pastoral charge (PC). If the congregation is one of two or more on a PC, each congregation nominates to the PC Ministry and Personnel Committee.

Treasurer: an executive member who, in consultation with a Finance and Investment Group, tracks and reports to the executive on congregational finances

To provide some denominational context for this model I note The United Church of Canada (UCC) has several recognized forms for governing the life of pastoral charges and/or congregations[331]. The oldest is the Session/Stewards Model[332]. Other forms approved and described by the denomination are The Unified Board Model,[333] The Church Council Model[334], The Mission Team Model[335], The Streamlined Board Model,[336] have been adopted to establish and maintain the ongoing life of the faith

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[331] *Models of Board Governance/Manual 2013* found at united-church.ca

[332] The Models of Board Governance [. . .] document referenced above describes the Session-Stewards as follows. "The two primary decision-making groups in this model are, the **Board of Elders** (also called the **Session**) [and] the **Committee of Stewards.** Each of these groups meets separately and has distinct areas of responsibility. In this model, the Session and the Stewards are mandated to meet together on at least a quarterly basis. When they meet, they are called the **Official Board**. (p. 7).

[333] *Models of Board Governance/Manual 2013*, 8.

[334] Ibid., 9.

[335] Ibid., 10.

[336] Ibid, 11.

community. All of these models, to greater or lesser extent, separate the management and administrative functions of a pastoral charge (the temporal) from its worship and faith formation (spiritual). To quote from The United Church of Canada resource *Congregation Organization Handbook*[337] in which all the above models are described, "The responsibility for spiritual leadership rests with the Session in the traditional model or with its equivalent in other organizational models. This function is usually associated with committees, groups, or teams responsible for worship, membership outreach, pastoral care, and education."[338]

In the second part of this chapter I narrate the development of an alternative way of governance. *GSP* and reflect on my pastoral experience of preparing the ground, encouraging its creation and shepherding its adoption and use within the congregation. In this narration I use documents, reflections and artifacts from the context in which GSP was first created. To maintain the confidentiality of the setting itself I have removed specific dates, locations and speakers/writers associated with the materials.

Governance as Spiritual Practice is an example of governance that holds together, the two areas of administration/management and faith/spiritual development. In this chapter I tell the story of how it came to life and how it is spreading to other faith communities as a practice. How an organization governs itself might be thought to be quite pragmatic and perhaps even dull, but the evolution and practice of *GSP* has engaged the hearts of those who adopt it. It is an example of the development of pastoral

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[337] Ibid.

[338] Congregation Organization Handbook prepared by Support to Local Ministries Unite/General Council Office/ The United Church of Canada/L'Eglise Unie du Canada, 2006. (An earlier iteration of Models of Board Governance.).

leadership viewed through the interpretive lens that sees vulnerability as a place of blessing and growth as well as danger and wounding.

This is a model of governance rising out of and nurturing vulnerable practice within a congregation. Its creation and implementation grew from and deepened my practice of pastoral leadership. It encourages the ability to hold dualities in creative tension, an important gift of robust vulnerable practice.

Part Two

Stirrings

My life was shaped in the United Church. I was baptized as a round-faced infant in a crisp, lace gown, nurtured by wonderful teachers in its Sunday School and confirmed as a searching and idealistic teenager. It was as a teenager that I first entered into the governance practices of the UCC as they existed within a particular congregation. I recall the conversations at congregational meetings and how many meetings were dominated by the concerns around property and finance. This congregation had an Official Board (Session-Stewards) model and I observed first-hand the dedication of my father, an Elder on the Session. I knew the time he spent visiting and, I can imagine, praying with and for those in his district. I observed the value he placed on his own ongoing faith formation. My father was becoming the exception. Even then this vital work of lay leadership, eldership, was beginning to flag. Alongside this, as the UCC's influence in society (along with that of other denominations) diminished, and worry seeped in, it came to be, in practice, that property and finance were more and more the preoccupation of our meetings. This excessive turn of the dial toward those areas that have more tangible metrics can in itself

be seen as a strategy of invulnerability; a response to the denomination's loss of influence and many congregations' diminishing numbers. This was a congregation faithful to worship and in its own way caring for others and one another. But even then, the seeds were being sown, through the hardening dualism of temporal and spiritual, for a crisis in the years to come.

I continued my involvement in the UCC, and in its local governance structures, as I became an adult. I experienced, as an adult lay person, that same niggling sense I had as a teenager that something was askew. After ordination I experienced this more deeply as I immersed myself in the life of congregations and listened to the stories of those associated with faith communities. I saw clearly how impermeable the "temporal" life of the church had become to the "spiritual" and how great the damage that imperviousness had inflicted on faith communities. I tried in various ways with greater or lesser effect, to encourage flow between the two elements that I believed existed, like sacred and secular, as false dichotomies. Elsewhere in this dissertation I speak of liturgy and sermon, ritual and silence as invitations to experience vulnerability as a threshold of nurture and healing as well as wounding. It was only after several years that an image of healing this longstanding division through governance began to shape itself in me.

Opportunity offered itself in a place of great transition. I began an appointment[339] with a congregation that had recently undergone and was still undergoing significant

[339] The pastoral charge was instructed by Presbytery to fill its vacancy by appointment rather than call, precisely because of the transitions it was moving through, both selling their building, renovating another and moving from part to full-time ministry; it was to allow time to see whether their hopes could be realized, and their losses tended in a way that brought healing. At the end of two years I proposed to the congregation that they request an extension of appointment rather than call. I felt that my ministry had many of the characteristics of an Intentional Interim, (without the support group) and that it would be beneficial for the charge and for me to continue together the work we were doing, assessing in another year and a half. This is what we did. At the end of that time the pastoral charge proceeded to prepare for a call

change: the sale of an historic building significant in the community, the anger of some in the wider community visited on the congregation, the time, much longer than anticipated, in which they relied on the hospitality of other churches and organizations to provide worship, meeting and office space. The transition involved both loss and hope and these elements were experienced differently by different people within the congregation.

The pastoral charge had also newly moved from part-time to full-time ministry, another transition. So, there was excitement but also anxiety and a great fatigue in the body and spirit of the congregation. As so often happens on the edge of personal burnout, in the body of the congregation there was a kind of frenetic and often fruitless pace of activity. I was not surprised or taken aback by this. I felt called to this place; I came to it as open-eyed as one can be. That does not mean I was not affected by its struggles; that it didn't sometimes hurt or frustrate or exhaust me. It does mean that through my inner dialogue with those challenges the place and the people helped create in me a deep receptivity to Word and Spirit, a beckoning to possibilities for which there was no blueprint.

Stirring the Space

As I think back on that time the two qualities most challenging were anxiety and fatigue. In as many ways as possible I named fatigue in our life together as unsurprising and understandable given all that was happening. I invited their acknowledgement in a more than passing way. I also named rest as something to be honoured, placing it within our creation story and Sabbath as one of "the ten best ways"[340], the language of Godly Play

for which I did not apply. The decision not to apply was a hard one and is not a reflection on the pastoral charge but on a deepening of my own call to specific areas of ministry.

[340] Jerome W. Berryman, *The Ten Best Ways, The Complete Guide to Godly Play*: *Volume 2* (New York: Morehouse Education Resources, 2010), 73 – 80.

for the Ten Commandments. This was challenging for a congregation that was caught in the necessary process, the concrete external realities of the change they had undertaken. They had chosen the change and though it had brought relief and release, it had also hurt more than they had imagined, and it had taken longer than initially expected.

The discomfort with lingering feelings of loss and grief in company with relief speaks to a more general lack of facility in society for living with ambiguity. The modern idea of 'progress' can encourage the misconception that to move forward temporally in a way deemed successful is to leave behind those uncomfortable elements of our spiritual or emotional life. We expect that if we have made a good decision, feelings of loss and longing should fall away, and we should be filled only with the energy of living in the new. We try to "get over" things that occurred in the past rather than find healing ways to let them inform the present. To "get over" the past or the emotions its events engendered suggests that the past doesn't live in some way in the present. But that is a reductionist view; it leaves us poorer, and ill-equipped to deal with the more complex reality of our lives.

My experience of the response to the ambiguity of feeling within the congregation was that those who had less sense of loss were impatient with those who had more. My experience was that some of those who remained after the transition felt a responsibility to placate those who had left angrily. My experience was that people imagined that the visible transition of selling a building and creating new space was 'the' significant piece of transition when in fact, it grew from and nurtured something deeper. In my experience the congregation was stymied by the complexity of feeling for which they had been unprepared.

Since the larger measurable completion eluded them, they wanted to be doing something, whatever shape that doing might take. Unaware of, or unpracticed in, honouring the vulnerability that is more noticeable in times of intense transition, uncomfortable with the necessity of living with unanswered questions and ambiguous feelings they sought strategies of invulnerability, of distraction and control. They flung themselves against walls of good ideas without the interior spaciousness to receive them deeply or choose the ones that were, "just for them".[341] The efforts of the previous few years had been enormous and yet the congregation seemed unable to give themselves permission to pause. As a pastoral leader that was one of my ongoing tasks.

Many lamented the things they thought they should be doing as a congregation but weren't. Should is most often a deadening world; it keeps us in bondage to ego. We know this as individuals, but it can also take hold of the personality of a congregation. 'Should' prevents us from answering the question, "Who are we?"[342]. Fatigue and anxiety can lead us into a busyness driven by 'shoulds'. This, unchallenged or unchecked, can lead to a kind of sloth or acedia about which Kathleen Norris says,

> I believe that such standard dictionary definitions of *acedia* as "apathy," "boredom," or "torpor" do not begin to cover it, and while we may find it convenient to regard it as a more primitive word for what we now term depression, the truth is much more complex. [. . .] I think it likely that much of the restless boredom, frantic escapism, commitment phobia, and enervating despair that plagues us today is the ancient demon of acedia in modern dress. I would suggest that while depression is an illness treatable by counselling and medication, acedia is a vice that is best countered by spiritual practice and the discipline of prayer.[343]

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[341] In Godly Play, one of the 'Wondering Questions' asked at the end of the story is, "What part of the story is just for you?"

[342] Gilbert Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations*, (Herndon:Alban Institute Publishing, 2003), 3.

[343] Kathleen Norris, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and A Writer's Life*, (London: Riverhead Books, 2008), 3.

Six weeks after I arrived on the pastoral charge, I offered a series of weekly Lenten Gatherings in which we spent time each week with one of the Spiritual Literacy DVDs[344] on qualities such as compassion, gratitude, joy, etc. We brought bag lunches and had discussion. We opened and closed with worship. We had no learning outcomes. These gatherings were well attended and people expressed a sense of refreshment. This gathering was what I believed was needed and what my sense of leadership urged in me. I felt the disapproval of an element within the congregation who would have preferred a more outcome-oriented study or project. I encouraged anyone who wanted to lead such a gathering to undertake it. But no one did.

Within those first weeks on the pastoral charge I also initiated a series of gatherings in which I would have opportunity to meet groups comprising everyone on the pastoral charge who chose to attend. This was enthusiastically approved by the Pastoral Charge Council and a planning group was formed. By the mid-way point of the fourth month of my appointment I had met a large proportion of the congregation through these gatherings. When meeting, after going around the circle to say a few words about ourselves, we shared refreshments, and discussion on three questions. Where is God's Spirit at work in the congregation (What do you give thanks for? What do you enjoy? What do you celebrate?)? Do you have a struggle in congregational life (How might that struggle be addressed or that hurt be healed?)? Do you sense God calling the congregation in some way (What gift do we have to offer?)?

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[344] Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, *Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life,* Spiritual Literacy Series DVDs, filmmaker David Cherniack, (Spiritual Literacy Media).

These gatherings did accentuate my sense of vulnerability in that many responses centred on events and leadership in the past and the dreams for the future were caught in those events and leaders. There was also a sense of those almost generic dreams of congregations centring around young people, more people, being a presence in the community. I didn't sense much connection or reflection on how these things might be brought about or whether they were in any way the actual call of the congregations or pastoral charge.

One assertion made several times was their need for strong leadership. I asked what it would take for them to know they had strong leadership. They weren't able to answer that question, but it would have been easy to imagine that for some it wasn't me. The question made me anxious; being porous to that anxiety, not shutting it down without honouring it, allowed me to not merely dismiss my own feelings or the context out of which the question arose. It allowed me to hear the questioners' inability to answer my question. It allowed me to lean into compassion rather than defensiveness and to learn that I needed to continue to think not only about leadership but about how I could communicate what leadership might be. I wanted to open up ways in which leadership might be recognized that were integrated with my beliefs and not solely driven by cultural understandings that had not been reflected on theologically. I wanted to create space for others to reflect too.

Despite the more challenging aspects of these gatherings, overall, they were a wonderful experience. I learned a tremendous amount. People loved being together in this way and forming a relationship with their new minister. The gatherings released energy within the congregations. People felt they knew one another better. Though this was a model I adapted from somewhere else it felt new and exciting to those who participated.

They wanted to do it again, six months or a year later. For me, and for those who organized it, that would have required too much energy. It was clear though, that encouraging gatherings in informal, less energy intensive ways was vital, and so I did.

In describing a particular phenomenon that was very present in the life of the faith community, a phenomenon that as it informs pastoral leadership is the focus of my research, I bring anxiety and fatigue and the strategies of invulnerability into high relief. I don't want it to seem that this chapter holds a comprehensive description of all facets of the character of the congregation. I want to hold alongside anxiety and unfocused busyness the hospitality and curiosity, the intent toward caring and justice of these people. Even with all that was happening within and around them they were drawn and gradually opened to something more.

Chairs of committees continued to resign, a string of resignations that began before I arrived. These resignations provided me with opportunities for choice. I sought over and over again to acknowledge my own vulnerability in these moments, to feel my own discomfort and to resist armoring myself against it through particular actions that rushed toward closure however ill-considered. The tempting thing was to beat the bushes for new committee chairs, to talk about duty and to shoehorn people into position whether their passion or desire was congruent with the position or not.

The way that was more challenging in the moment, namely, to live with my own exposure as a lightning-rod for the anxiety activated in people as the old structure devolved was also the more creative. It required a courage that could barely be seen, a courage that manifested according to each situation as a still, non-anxious presence, or a firm guidance, or a beckoning to a new way. It required compassion for myself and all my own emotions,

my hopes and my fears, my own need for affirmation. It required compassion for others who sought to live faithfully and who were anxious and unsure when they couldn't see the way ahead clearly.

It was easy to fall into self-doubt. Who looks for the chairs of committees to fall like dominoes in the first year after arrival? Who easily resists self-blame for that? The antidote was to focus on what I sensed was stirring. The old was making way for the new. The old was resisting. Even though I couldn't yet see the shape of what was coming, and even though part of me was tempted to 'solve' this quickly I somehow stayed open, acknowledged my vulnerability, allowed the pain and the possibility of the moment to wash through me. I will not pretend that this was an elegant or easy process; it was often internally ragged as these e-mails illustrate:

To Correspondent One.

> I had a nap this afternoon. I am trying to do as little as possible at the moment to recoups some energy to stand firmly but with some suppleness in the face of those who are clinging desperately to old power. They are very angry. [One person] sees conspiracy everywhere. [One] is busy planning yet another committee meeting (we must meet every month whether or not there's anything to do and when there isn't, we must worry about why there isn't and try to manufacture something).

From Correspondent Two, whom I had asked to attend and observe and reflect back to me after a worship in which I made a significant personal announcement wrote:

> I experienced you as clear, calm, and present. This was a service that was decidedly you in creativity, theology, image and presence. Not that others aren't but all four elements seemed very present to me today. (Besides analyzing everything I also felt fed, invited, calmed and joyful.) So, in the way your DMin is so connected to your pastoral ministry, your personal may also be influencing your leadership. No wonder your work is on vulnerability. That is a lot of permeability. Yet I know no one better to stand in the midst and both receive and guide the flow.

As I look back, I recognize and feel these moments of openness, and what surrounded them, in my body. I also feel the gratitude for my friends and my partner who

supported me with their presence, with listening hearts, with words and meals shared. I can feel what I longed for and what I long for still in the congregation in which I am in ministry expressed in this quote I placed in the bulletin when I had been with the congregation just over two years.

"All I want to say to you is 'you are the beloved,' and all I hope is that you can hear these words as spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold. My only desire is to make these words reverberate in every corner of your being." [345] In the sermon I spoke of belovedness and baptism, the texts from Genesis 1:1-5 and Mark 1:4-11. I wove in insights from an address by Roman Catholic scholar Sandra Schneiders[346]. In the concluding segment of her address Schneiders speaks of the 'new normal' brought about my many factors but in large part by the expectation that in 2050 the number of people over 65 will be double the number of children under 5 and fully a third of the population will be over 60. This has consequences for the church and I identify a kind of baseless shame over not being who we were in terms of demographics. (How often do we hear the longing for "more children, more young people" or the lament over the large Sunday School that once was.) And with that I sometimes feel the speaker's anger and sometimes their shame.

Schneiders urges us to be clear-eyed about who we are. People are living longer and are more active throughout the life span. Rather than lamenting the young people that

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[345] J. Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World,* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1992),30.

[346] Sandra Schneiders, *The Onoing Challenge of Renewal in Contemporary Religious Life,* A paper deliverd at CORI Conference 25th April 2014, http://sosj.org.au/the-ongoing-challenge-of-renewal-in-contemporary-religious-life, Accessed November 6, 2018.

aren't there we in faith communities need to be attending to our own spiritual/faith formation and preparing to welcome and mentor the 'younger' adults when they come. This is another call to look at life from a non-defensive posture, to be permeable in order to receive the call meant for us in the moment of our life as faith community.

I felt strongly about this congregation's need to pay attention to their life, their context, their gifts rather that what they felt they 'should' be about. I urged this consistently in the worship, the words, the presence and the practices I offered. This was a time to live in the questions and along with the congregation examine myself and my motivations, not only through processes of the mind but by sinking into prayer; allowing what was essential in me to emerge through all the distractions so that I might hear the most essential self of the faith community. It was a time to stay close to the Word whose narrative animates my own. I recall these words, "if this moment of Christ's most radical, speechless vulnerability does not reconstitute Christians through and through and even in what they say, they will surely lose the way".[347]

It was a time to encourage listening for our direction not only in the external context which is vital but also within.

> Social concern is the dynamic Life of God
> at work in the world, made special and emphatic and unique,
> particularized in each individual or group who is sensitive and tender
> in the leading-strings of love. A concern is God-initiated,
> often surprising, always holy,
> for the Life of God is breaking through into the world.[348]

It was also a time to continue to clarify what I myself believed about pastoral leadership and to articulate that for Council and congregation and individuals. This is

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[347] Stanley Haurerwas, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary,* chap. 7, Kindle.

[348] Thomas Kelley, *A Testament of Devotion,* Harper One, New York:NY, (1996), 84-85.

essential in any leadership. It is particularly so in leadership that respects the necessity of living with ambiguity and unanswered questions, leadership that seeks to encourage transformation. It is important for the congregation to know there is leadership whose arms continue to encircle and provoke and tend the emergent life of the congregation in a very intentional and vigilant way even as old structures fall away. In a report to Council a year and a half into my appointment I said,

> As we move into a new phase of our life in ministry and mission, I would like to share this poem with you. I share it because I think it says something about the leadership task that I believe is mine in the coming months. Often people say to me, we should do this, we should take on this project, we should . . . I listen for what they are willing to do in connection with the endeavour. Some areas require me to take a primary leadership role, but I don't believe it creates or nurtures a healthy church for one person to be the engine for all kinds of projects. So, an essential part of my leadership is to create the spaces, to add a log to the fire, to support those taking on areas of outreach, inreach, faith formation and service through music, and governance, to nourish people through worship, and to begin projects in areas in which my passions and gifts lie.
>
> Fire
> What makes a fire burn
> Is the space between the logs,
> A breathing space.
> Too much of a good thing,
> Too many logs
> Packed in too tight
> Can douse the flames
> Almost as surely
> As a pail of water would.
>
> So, building fires
> Requires attention
> To the spaces in between,
> As much as to the wood.
>
> When we are able to build
> Open spaces
> In the same way
> We have learned
> To pile on the logs,
> Then we can come to see how

It is fuel, and absence of the fuel
Together, that make fire possible.

We only need to lay a log
Lightly from time to time.
A fire
Grows
Simply because the space is there,
With openings
In which the flame
That knows just how it wants to burn
Can find its way.[349] (Judy Brown)

William Stafford's poem, *The Way it Is,* also, is helpful in leadership and congregational life.

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
Things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
Or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

When I shared this latter poem, I encouraged people to know that I was paying careful attention to the thread and that I would encourage them in their holding of it. I encouraged us to consider that perhaps sometimes as individuals we do let go of the thread and then the leader and/or the community is there to hold it for us, until we return from whatever has loosed our grip and can take it up again.

As a leader, experiencing my vulnerability as a porousness through which nourishment as well as pain flowed, I was at times informed by Wagoner's poem, *Lost*.

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called here.

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[349]Sam M. Intrator ad Megan Scribner, eds., *Leading from Within: Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Lead*, (San Francisco:Jossey-Bass, 2007),193.

> And you must treat it as a powerful stranger.
> Must ask permission to know and be known. [. . .][350]

Where I was, was called here. I could not skip over it, not ignore the discomforts and despairs of it any more than the hopes and the delights. As a leader, I needed to stand still at times. I found practices to help with that. One of them was the creation of the *Moments.*

I came to understand more clearly the falling off of committee chairs as a gift, even though for a time it required more work on my part to ensure the fundamentals of life together were tended. It required an intention to provide a sense of both comfort and challenge *woven* through worship and pastoral presence. I committed myself, in conversation with those close to me and in my journaling and prayer to offer a more directive[351] leadership only in areas in which it was essential and only in a way which would pave the way for relinquishment to others as they became ready to take up the parts that were properly theirs.

As the old structures loosened further, I invited other ways of being community. We gathered for quiet studies and shared lunches. Members of the congregation were prompted to invite others inside and outside the traditional bounds of the faith community to gather around something that interested them. We met at restaurants, homes, coffee shops and even for *Visio Divina* [352]at a local art gallery. One evening someone led us

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[350] David Wagoner, "Lost", in *Travelling Light: Collected and New Poems, (Chicago:*University of Illinois Press, 1999),10.

[351] By directive leadership I mean leadership that puts in place solutions that meet an immediate need within the organization. For instance, on one committee, after the chair's resignation I assumed leadership of the committee on a temporary basis. I just did it. This was not the way I wanted to function on a long-term basis, nor was it the way I wanted the congregation to live but in this particular instance it was necessary to foster enough sense of security within the congregation so that it could move into more adaptive, long-lasting ways of being. Some in the congregation would have liked more of this kind of leadership but it would not have encouraged the deeper change I hoped to help birth.

through a conversation on compassion. Another night people met at the pub for Bible study and beer, some wrote haiku for six weeks, others gathered for supper once a month. I was not the initiator nor was I present at each of these gatherings. Committee lines were breaking down, but different groups were forming and re-forming. In one worship I wove stories, told by those willing to share them, of faith journeys. I wove them with prayer and Scripture and song. In another, individuals responded to a series of parables, sharing their own interpretations; witnessing. In both these instances people were given weeks to reflect and prepare. We were drawing closer to the Word, becoming more permeable to it, hosting and being hosted by it. The faith community was being stirred. And I with it.

Inviting Others

As anxiety began to be gentled through worship, the honouring of rest, as small groups hummed along and I practiced Thomas kelley's admonition to lead, "a listening life"[353], I felt the time was right to take another step toward deepening. The Council meetings were long and tended to revisit decisions made, but not enacted, over and over again. The energy was low as was the level of effectiveness. The old pattern I'd seen damaging congregational life through so much of my time with the UCC was obvious; the spiritual and temporal were divided. A number of those who held the reins of financial matters seldom attended worship and those who felt energy in worship and faith formation and social justice were frustrated that money was available to them only grudgingly. I

[352] *Visio Divina* is a four-movement way of praying with images. The local art gallery provided an exciting place for those who gathered to choose and image they would focus on while I led them through the four movements of this meditative prayer.

[353] Thomas Kelly, Quaker Philosopher, source unknown.

strongly encouraged the Council and the congregation to consider an alternative way of governance. This is when I suggested that what I called a Bubble Group[354] be formed that would shape this way. What they shaped would be brought to the Council for information and to the congregation for approval or disapproval. And so, we began.

The initial step was a congregational motion, "that Council appoint or designate a working group to investigate and prepare a structure of governance for "Small Town United" according to the United Church Polity and with a deadline eight months hence". Council members were to bring names to the Council meeting so that a committee could be formed to act on the motion. It was established that the Minister and Council Chair would be on the working group.

> As we opened a Congregational Meeting 15 months into my appointment I said,
>
> > God is always doing a new thing. The call to us is to see that new thing and to jump into it with God, to question whether the decisions we make are encouraging us to be drenched in this new thing and whether they are welcoming others to newness. God is always doing a new thing, making old things drift light as feathers and new things grow roots. I have seen some jumping in my time here, a few cannonballs into that refreshing pool, a few moments of standing round the edge wrapped in extra towels. I encourage your daring. I understand your hesitancy. I hope for our shared trust in that newness of life, that mission and that ministry to which we are always being called.

This is how I described the Bubble Groups to the Council and then for the congregation 5 months later.

> As we live into our new space, two areas (among others) will need our particular attention. One is the shape of our governance, the other is how we share this new sacred space. The summer was an intentional time of being in our sacred space, celebrating our arrival at this resting place on the journey, this space that will hold so much of the expression of our faith as a community.

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[354] I note that there were two Bubble Groups working simultaneously; one on sharing space as we tried to move away from rentals to a different kind of sharing. The other was devoted to shaping governance. This latter is the one relevant to this chapter.

> In [. . .] came the time to move intentionally into consideration of the two areas named above. To address these areas two 'bubble' groups have formed. One will look at how we can best shape a governance structure that will 'leaven' the life of our faith community. The other will consider how we will ask good questions that enable us to live well in the space ourselves and share space with the wider community in a faithful way.
>
> Bubble is the word that describes the groups because they will form, work for between four and six weeks, report to Council for information and prepare recommendations to come to a congregational meeting. After that brief, intense time of work they will disappear. In the summer and early fall we asked for volunteers. We are now ready to begin. The membership of each group has been approved by the [Council] Executive and names will be in the bulletin and on the [pastoral charge] website.

The names of those who were to serve on the Bubble Groups were brought to Council and a motion passed to approve these two Bubble Groups and have them report their findings to Council for information and subsequently to the congregation for approval. As planned, three persons plus the minister would form each Bubble Group.

Bubble Groups at Work

In my initial e-mail to the members of the Bubble Group I highlight the necessary time of rest and celebration, a time of Sabbath, that we had been invited into as the summer passed.

> Now, though we may be uncertain, we have been preparing our hearts. The time has come to begin to gently and intentionally attend to a long-needed reshaping of the way we order our lives together, our decision-making, our encouraging of leadership from within the congregation, the seeding and support of faithful practice through our governing group. [. . .] This is big work. [. . .] We will be creating something new".

Within a week of the Council meeting, where names were approved, we held our first Bubble Group gathering. We held these words and this image as we began. "The question is not, how can we get the needs of the church as institution met? But how the

congregation can help people identify, claim, and exercise their gifts for ministry."[355] I used with the Bubble Group the image of the core governing group as leaven (Matthew 13:33, Luke 13:20-21, Gospel of Thomas 96:2) for the congregation, as I had earlier used this image with the Council.

What follows is the outline of objectives for each gathering, providing a framework in which our work could be accomplished. I prepared and distributed this outline just prior to our first gathering of the group. While flexible it gave structure to the creative work of the group. This illustrates what I have found as essential in vulnerable practice; a balance between structure and freedom, between security and the risk of embracing chaos and creativity. The group met over a two- month period.

Meeting One: Describe and Discern

Describe: Our present governance

Describe: A clarification of what the United Church of Canada requires
Trustees
Ministry and Personnel
Some model of larger governance with Chair/Treasurer

Beyond that what do we imagine is required: in nuts and bolts

Discern: What is our mandate? Our scope of work?
Ways to encourage and inform the congregation throughout this process.

Something to take home and reflect on

Meeting Two: Discern: Vision, Practicalities

Meeting Three: Discern: Vision, Practicalities, Decide (if we feel ready to begin sharing our work)

Meeting Four: Describe: Each One Teach One
Let each of us find one or two or three people to have a conversation with about this model. This is a way to encourage ownership and to alleviate anxiety with the sense that

[355] Anthony B. Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture,* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 80.

something is happening. It is also a time to listen and come back to refine what we have decided and shape what we will present to the congregation.

Meeting Five: Describe and Do

Meeting Six (if necessary)

We drew on the resources, *Transforming Congregational Culture*[356], and *Leading Change in the Congregation*[357] which clarifies the distinction between leadership and management. I also received from a member of the congregation an article, *Creating'Breadlike' Boards*[358] which I shared with the group. We created and used a number of case studies to test how this model would address the emergent needs of the congregation. For example, if someone had a question or a request or wanted to share what their group was doing with the governing body, what path would they follow? We honed the two core principles as described earlier in this chapter and began to shape a consideration of the role of Elders. We drew on the definition of Elders from the Manual. We pondered the role of Elders in the First Nations cultures. I introduced ideas from a video created by Laura Hunter, Maritime Conference, Justice and Stewardship, on Eldership[359].

As we pondered, we also played. Someone suggested that Elders had something in common with the Jedi in Star Wars, guardians of peace and justice who studied, served and used the Mystical energies of the force, the energy field created by all living things. Playing

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[356] Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture*,76 – 84

[357] Gilbert G. Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation*, (Lanham:Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 14 -23.

[358] Charles M. Olson, *Creating "Breadlike" Boards, Alban at Duke Divinity School, http://alban.org/archives/creating-break-like-boards,, accessed November 5, 2018.*

[359] Laura Hunter: To Change the Church, accessed May 30, 2019, http://youtu.be/0AOWF6yK0Ec.

with this word lightened our time together and helped us to eventually come to an understanding of the role of Elders and of the workings of what we would come to call the Executive of the Congregation.

Early in our work of shaping this way of governance we had been illustrating our ideas of structure with triangles. It seems worth noting that when we started drawing circles instead, permeable circles, that it all fell into place.

Speaking about Vulnerability

I felt a responsibility to keep the congregation in touch with what I was doing in my doctoral work from time to time. Along with a number of other more concrete items this formed part of my report to Council almost two years into my appointment.

> [I'm doing an independent study] in which I will explore the language, spoken and unspoken, of whole-heartedness. We cannot be whole-hearted in ourselves or in our faith communities until we learn to inhabit vulnerability well. This vulnerability is part of who we are and is particularly evident in times of transition. If we don't honour it, we turn to particular *strategies* to make ourselves feel invulnerable. These strategies close us off from fullness of life, from new ways of being church and these strategies often cause hurt to others as we wound them through criticism or exclusion in order to protect ourselves and our comfort.
>
> [In this course] I explore, language, ritual and narrative as resources for radical whole-heartedness, the foundation for hospitality and compassion and deep relationship with the holy. As I go deeper into this research its fruits are shared with you through worship, pastoral care and spiritual formation.

More often though I didn't name vulnerability explicitly. Using the word is much less important than honouring and inhabiting well the quality the word describes. I invited vulnerability's honouring through Scripture stories of the minuteness of salt, the effervescence of light and the unruliness of mustard seed, through the shaking knees of a listening prophet at the edge of a cave and a God who spoke in a whisper, through the

longings of the barren and the uncertainty of the wilderness, the disciples sent out with nothing and the abundance that comes from what seems to be scarcity. I invited it through the gradual increase of silence in worship, the invitation to celebration and the honouring of loss, anxiety, and sorrow and the naming of joy that might shimmer in the midst of all our complex emotions. And I tried to live into it myself.

Two years after the beginning of my appointment we gave notice of the congregational meeting "to receive, discuss and take action, in the form of motions, relating to the adoption of a Governance Model and the implementation of recommendations related to sharing space." There was also some background to this in a separate announcement.

> Our two [Bubble] groups one around Governance and the other on Sharing Space have shared their work with Council. There will be a congregational meeting [. . .] at which the two groups will again present and at which there will be time for discussion and further action. Fuller explanations of the work of these two groups and their membership has been in the bulletin for some time and is also available on the website.

At this congregational meeting the report of two Bubble Groups were presented. The second was the report of the Bubble Group on Graceful Governance. It went second in anticipation that there would be more discussion, as there indeed proved to be. In worship that day I continued to till the ground for considering newness. I preached on Mark 1:29 – 39 a sermon called *Thresholds*.

> *[. . .] Our text from Mark this morning fairly bristles with thresholds. They are sticking out through the bag of the text like awkward twigs gathered up after a morning of gardening. But if we loose them from the bag they are a wondrous array of passages from one state of being to another. They are spilling out in front of us. [. . .]*
>
> *Each one of these could be a sermon in itself. But for us I think the most formative movement through the text is to wonder what thresholds have in*

common; how we can recognize them; how we can honour them; how we can find courage to set foot on the other side.

Because surely, we have recently been a people passing over thresholds.
And we are at a threshold moment now.

Last week I told the Godly Play story of exile and return. I was illustrating a threshold. There was a time when God's people were of one mind; that they could pray to God only in the temple. Then they were dragged across the desert, a long torturous liminal space until finally, not right away, but sometime after they arrived in Babylon, they crossed the threshold. On the other side they knew that God was not only present in the temple but everywhere. They did not have to go back to where they had been.

The threshold was not the desert. The long stinging journey was only a catalyst for destabilizing old patterns so that they might reach a new understanding of God and of themselves as God's people. The threshold itself was the barrier set up across their understanding that kept God in one place only.

We have been a people passing over thresholds and we are on a threshold now. Two years ago, I met this congregation on the road. Old things had been left behind, and it was hard. There was much anxiety; as is often the way in in-between or liminal space. The waiting; the preparation time in which we sometimes feel everything is out of control is not unusual around the crossing of threshold. We longed for concrete markers; we distracted ourselves by talking of them. Without fixed space to be in we worried terribly when old ways of being wobbled. We longed for our arrival in this new space. And we arrived, and we recognized our arrival and we celebrated.

Not only did we celebrate amongst ourselves, but we invited others, the community; the Presbytery, the Conference. We welcomed people and I'm not sure we realize yet, how much hope there is for others in our coming to this place. We crossed a threshold and we said with our lives, you can do this too, not in the same way that we did, but in a way that God will show you. I know well many of the quirks of this place, but I am still celebrating our arrival here. I hope that you are too.

The thing about thresholds is that if you pause reverently before you cross them, if you don't stumble mindlessly or heartlessly over them, they open you to know that you are more than you imagined you could be. Remember, there are more than six thresholds in the Mark passage one opening into another.

And so, it is no surprise that the threshold we crossed into this new space has spilled us into yet another liminal space, another place of in between in which we are called to an even deeper understanding of God and of ourselves as God's people. This is the journey of discipleship.

I believe that the move to a new structure of governance, not even the structure itself, but the ways of understanding ourselves that it will open us to, is threshold. This is my answer to why we are shaping a new governance structure. Because I believe that this sacred space we occupy now is but a room on the journey; that we are called, having lived into courage and newness, over another threshold. And the threshold I believe is to leave the old building of our governance, which we no longer have the resources to maintain, to move into a brighter, more hospitable, structure that will invite the gifts of all and encourage leadership from the edges.

I don't have all the answers for what this will look like or for where it will take us. But I believe that as congregations change shape, we have a tremendous opportunity to understand God, and ourselves as God's people, differently. I believe that in congregational life, we no longer need to praise and reverence God only in one place; not only on Sunday; but within our very structures. I believe that a prayer and reading at the beginning of a Council meeting are no longer enough. I believe that when we came here to write prayers under the paint, we were at the beginning of something very bold, very risky, very ancient and very new. I believe if we can cross this threshold, we will be made new.

I know there are a thousand questions about how this might work and that might work; how this might fail and that might fall apart. And they are real questions. We will make mistakes. We will be frustrated. But what I want to give you today is the hope that this is more than just a small tweaking of what already has been. This is leaving an old building. It is crossing into a much different space, in which we will continue to be made new.

Though the details are not insignificant; they themselves are not the threshold, just as the desert was not the threshold. The threshold will come as we open ourselves to ask again what it means to be disciples; what it means to create spiritual community and find an even deeper answer. The rest will follow. Whether this new shape is effective or not will be less important than asking the question and following where it leads.

Threshold is not always the moment something is done; it is the moment the heart moves.

For the God who stands always on the thresholds of transformation, who waits with us to find our courage, who steadies us as our heart moves, who welcomes us on the other side, we give thanks.

In the meeting following worship and a shared lunch, a motion was adopted, "to approve the trial period of this proposal to test this new governance model in our congregation for

fourteen months. The motion was also adopted, "that the Congregation's Executive create evaluation criteria, in consultation with Presbytery, to determine the success of this trial period of this new governance proposal and present it to the Congregation within two months.

To Correspondent One I wrote:

> It passed but there was no celebration, no sense of possibility. It just passed either because things have already fallen apart for the people who were there, and they want a new model to blame their disappointment on or it passed because somewhere inside they know they need to be freed from themselves and in passing this they will let those who have energy into the centre of their congregational life and those new people will create something that will heal them. It was a yes that felt tired and tiring [. . .] It is in some ways astounding that it passed. [. . .].

To Correspondent Two:

> It does feel at times as though I have dismantled us and left us open and exposed, [. . .]. Of course, once something is dismantled something else can be rebuilt. I am aware that today I am out beyond [the limits of my energy]. The work of the Bubble Groups is done [. . .] I am now holding something that is born not quite ready to be viable on its own. [I am] carrying it, along with the Prayer Group, who is also holding it tenderly. Until Executive begins, I am in some way on my own and after Executive begins, I will need to gradually and hopefully gracefully relinquish part of leadership to the Executive in a way I have not felt called to do under the old 'model'.

Though the "yes felt tired and tiring" there were those who were energized by the possibilities and said so. It was as though a new vein of energy had been opened in the community. At that meeting those present were encouraged to look for persons throughout the congregation to fill the Executive positions and to respond with those names to be received at a congregational meeting that was held six weeks later. The process was described at the meeting and in bulletin announcements following the meeting.

> Nominations Sheets for the New Executive of Council are again available today on the side table with Terms of Reference for each position. Please look over the Terms of Reference for each position and reflect prayerfully on whose gifts might

> match the description well. Remember that each person on the Executive of Council [this should have read the Executive of the Congregation] commits not only to the scheduled meetings of the Executive of the Congregation, times for a particular kind of decision-making and leadership, but also to the monthly meeting for grounding in the narrative of faith and the life of the congregation. Although the members of the Executive will meet monthly for for formation and grounding, the Executive will meet for business regularly but not monthly. In the coming week, please e-mail or drop off your nomination [. . .] at the office. A slate of names will be prepared on which we will vote at the AGM of the congregation.

There had been conversation in the Bubble Groups about how to fill the positions on the Executive and an awareness of how important it was to have people with energy for this new way. We invited the congregation's involvement, but we also approached people directly to put their names forward. We were acutely aware that though the congregation had voted to adopt the new governance for a trial period if names were not found we would all be in a very difficult place. As the time of the congregation meeting drew near, our hearts sank; there were not sufficient names. At the last minute, however, an unexpected offer from person exquisitely suited for the work and then another, just as well suited, gave us our complement. These two individuals coming forward so close to the wire, stepping out of their comfort zones, felt like grace and an affirmation of the importance of taking the risk of holding space.

At a congregational meeting six weeks after the motion to adopt this governance as a trial was passed the nominations for the Executive of the Congregation were accepted. and the nomination for Chair adopted. The new Executive was constituted. Three weeks later they would hold their first meeting. At this meeting excitement was expressed over all the things the past year had brought including the new governance structure. Something had shifted. Two years after I began my appointment, which had now been renewed for another year and a half *GSP* began.

The Executive Begins

I opened the first meeting of the Executive of the Congregation (Executive) by recalling the Scripture we read at our service of dedication of the new physical space for our congregation approximately six months earlier. This scripture was one threaded through our Council meetings, "we are God's building, God's field" (1 Corinthians 3:9). I felt and spoke of how grateful I was that this was the first day of our new governance structure, a "building" that we had been working on for some time; one I believed had the potential to seed ministry and leadership in new ways within the congregation and community. I reminded the Executive, as we worked on Terms of Reference, that the way of governance we were living was supple and permeable. In reflecting on two earlier pieces of its development, I offered a reminder of, “the organic nature of this model; how we’re revising in response to our experience of the congregation, holding the balance between encouraging the new and offering some comfort as some of the old falls away”.

The group worked extremely well together and moved through huge swathes of work; old things that had tended, in the past, to be re-visited and not acted on. These included a reorganizing of financial accounts and decision-making and many things relative to the physical church space.

In this stage, as in all stages, communication was essential. I can’t stress this enough. Members of the Executive engaged others in conversation about the new governance and published and spoke about those things that were being discussed and implemented. *Elders* announced when new invitations went up on the Discernment Board and re-iterated the process for inviting a *Circle of Service*. Almost every Sunday there was an announcement in some way relating our governance to the life of the congregation. We

clarified who to speak to if there was an item or issue it was felt needed the attention of the Executive. We invited questions and published the answers. We described the governance over and over again in as many ways as we could imagine.

We were not surprised by resistance and the oft repeated assertion regarding Executive, "I never know what to call that group". We supported one another in meeting resistance responsively rather than reactively. In my experience the Grounding Gatherings helped us with this.

Grounding Gatherings

Holding firm on the importance of this element of the governance felt risky both as I introduced it to the Bubble Group (who in fact got it right away), and to the congregation. What if people wouldn't commit the time? What if holding this as integral meant no one would step forward? In actuality it meant that in most cases, only those who welcomed the value of this way stepped forward. Occasionally, in other congregations where I have introduced the governance, I've heard of those who opposed this way offering themselves with the intention of bringing governance back to its senses by eliminating the Grounding Gatherings. To my knowledge these individuals usually find the change they hoped for is resisted and they withdraw.

People do resist this piece of no visible outcome, no business, this place of openness to Scripture and to one another's stories, this porousness of the core governing group to the story of the congregation. "There is so much to be done" some say. "Couldn't we just leave this to the Bible Study Group or the Sunday School or worship on Sunday morning? Do we have to come out for one more meeting?" And yet, once it is lived into, most feel its value. Here is where the culture shifts.

In my experience trust in one another and our own ability to lead others into Scripture builds as we spend time together in this way. The boundary of "no business" frees us, as boundaries sometimes do, to engage the stories and one another without distraction, without arguing a position. The narrative of Scripture opens us to knowing our participation in a large story peopled with others who share our existential questions and who find answers in the One we gather around. Of course, the work of management was carried within us. The hope of this way is that spiritual and temporal are porous to one another. But it was not addressed in any outcome-oriented way in the Grounding Gatherings

Though Grounding Gatherings when described, seemed to require additional time, overall, the time spent in meetings shortened. When we came together for more outcome-directed meetings, those more conventional governance meetings were shortened, and more was accomplished. Dangling ends of decisions hashed over for years were tended and brought to completion. The decisions necessary for the ongoing life of the congregation were handled, a carefully considered and detailed revision of the congregation's financial managements, goals and reporting was accomplished. Leadership from the broad spectrum of the newest to the longest standing participants in congregational life continued to be encouraged through the Elders tending of the Discernment Board and the Executive's invitation to short or longer-term working groups whose formation would support some aspect of the congregation's life. Examples of short-term groups invited by the Executive could include a group to research exterior signage, another to support the Treasurer at Budget Preparation time. A longer-term group might be formed to attend to day-to-day Property needs.

In all these, communication with the congregation through spoken and written announcements on Sunday morning, and on our website, through one-on-one conversations, through published summaries of Executive's meetings, through longer reports on what was happening in particular areas, through connecting work with Scripture and through the drawing of attention to the groups appearing on the Discernment Board, through the frequent repetition of how the new way functioned and who to go to with questions helped provide a sense of security for those in the congregation. Even with all this we experienced and understood there would still be some anxiety and there would be resistance. We met this with increasing compassion. Resistance and anxiety could become part of a Grounding Gathering. Where in our Scriptural narrative did these appear? How were they met and held and healed by the Holy? How were we following or not following that Way?

In Grounding Gatherings we've told the story of the Israelites' captivity, desert journey, holy mountain, and promised land. We've asked where each of us has experienced those events in our congregations. Different answers, from different members of the governing group, help us to listen, to examine the narrative of the congregation each of us has, to enlarge our vision and practice our empathy for others. We have examined how we, as a group hold responsibility for our interaction with people in the congregation who hurt others. We've looked at the "mirror" passage in James [360] and how we can sometimes delude ourselves as individuals and congregations, choosing to aim for what we 'should' be rather than trust the Spirit's promptings to be who we most deeply are. We've looked at

[360] James 1:22–24, (This was led by a member of the Executive so the text read may have been extended beyond these two. I am depending on my recollection. I do know that verses 22 -24 were the verses that held the theme of our discussion.

stewardship and how we need to become comfortable talking about money and also about valuing other resources and, as this governance seeks to do, clearing space for those in the congregation to share their gifts and develop their leadership. We've looked at what the metric of attendance at worship means in congregational life, what it is or is not a measure of. This is just a small sampling.

I'm sometimes asked by congregations whether they might combine Grounding Gatherings and the more conventional meetings of the governing body on the same night. I maintain that this shouldn't happen until the gifts of the Grounding Gatherings are firmly established within the group. Even then my preference would be to keep them at separate times. In a culture so prone to measuring worth by productivity, it is just too tempting to let the grounding time shrink. It is too easy, when both are on the same evening, to say this evening we're going to shorten grounding just a bit to handle a very pressing issue of business. This is not to say it's impossible to hold the two on the same day, but it holds greater risk of this way devolving into the more conventional way of business.

I was so glad to hear from one of the congregation's in which I'd introduced Governance as Spiritual Practice that not only were they finding their business meetings much more effective, but that they chose, when given the opportunity, not to hold the two ways of meeting on the same day. They wanted the freedom to talk without feeling the pressure of moving into a business meeting immediately after and they wanted the freedom to give energy to the Grounding Conversations which can be, in the moment, tiring in the way any deep work is tiring. This group had become committed to what the Grounding offered.

Like Centering Prayer, which is a fundamental act of trust, the value of which cannot be measured by what one feels or does at the closing of each time of prayer but only by its gradually emerging fruits in one's life, this grounding too is an act of trust in a way that transcends the accomplishment of tasks.

Discernment Board

The Discernment Board is a challenge for some congregations. It is hard for people to let their own creativity and abilities and passions out. It's hard for people to admit they can lead. And yet this simple element of the governance is important. It's subversive of a congregation's desire to put overmuch on the 'minister' and it requires some risk on the part of people to step up and offer their idea. In the originating congregation the Discernment Board came alive quite quickly. What took time was for the congregation to own and celebrate the bubbling leadership within their midst. But this is not the case in all congregations.

The governing group might have to prime the Board a bit if it feels stagnant. Look over the congregation and recall who has a particular gift or has had an experience that might be shared. Has anyone been on a trip? Anyone want to talk about passive solar housing? Anyone making art? Anyone interested in the Affirming Process? Anyone said recently they liked a particular movie or read a book they'd be willing to invite people to discuss? Does anyone grow orchids or volunteer in schools? Anyone want to learn something and would be interested in learning that with others? Some groups that are already operating might be the kind that could be posted as a way to open the group to newcomers. It's important not to fall into the old 'duty' push toward action but you can invite one or two people to offer a gift or interest you know they have. And then walk

them through it, highlight it in announcements, make sure there's an Elder to inquire about supporting the venture.

As the Discernment Board becomes more lively, the reason for its name becomes clearer. With emphasis on people's gifts and passions, and their desire to share those in community, duty and "should" fall away. A sense of individual and congregational vocation will be encouraged. After a while the congregation can look at the Board and say, "ah, this is who we are". If the Board doesn't become active, if it remains nearly empty, then too the congregation can say, "this is who we are right now; what does this tell us".

Ministry Area Gatherings

As you can see in the earlier part of the chapter *Small Town United* chose six areas of the congregation's life that they felt needed ongoing tending. The selection of these areas was. based on listening to the life of the congregation as it was when we began. They may continue to suit the congregation or there may need to be addition or subtraction. In any case, as in so many areas of life, permeability to the other is vital. Ministry Area Gatherings is an element the Executive agreed it would approach differently after reflecting on its experience. The difference would be to delay the start of Ministry Area Gatherings until the new governance was underway for a minimum of six or eight months.

Beginning them sooner meant there was too much newness to absorb and the first gathering did not go well. Once more time had passed, and people had lived into GSP for a while, they were ready. The Ministry Area Gatherings became opportunities for anyone to present an idea in which the involvement of more than one area might be helpful. For example, the Faith Formation area might have an upcoming gathering they felt would be

enhanced by working with the Communications area. Or Justice and Outreach might want to work with Faith Formation on to plan an event. Pastoral Care and Inreach might ask for Communication's cooperation in preparing recordings of worship for those shut in. People might also just talk to one another about what, in their area they were excited or concerned about. Some members of Executive were always present at these gatherings asking in some way, "how can we as an Executive help you to do what makes your heart sing?"

Presbytery

The connection of our governance with Presbytery occurred at several points: first when we informed Presbytery that we were working on a new way of governance which we intended to seek approval from the congregation to implement as a trial period; second, after having been given the go ahead to enter into a trial, a meeting with the Pastoral Relations/Pastoral Oversight Committee in which I and a member of the Bubble Group and now of the Executive offered a complete description of the governance and the way in which we would evaluate it; finally, once the trial was over and the congregation elected to implement this governance in a more permanent way, the congregation sought and received that approval from the Presbytery.

Other than that, the Presbytery showed no interest in the new way of governance, though another of its congregations did adopt GSP and several others have requested presentations and/or materials. This was much different than the response from the Conference at its Annual General Meeting.

Conference

Once the GSP was well underway in its originating congregation and beginning in another, I responded to a call for presentations at the Annual General Meeting of the Conference which was using Open Space Technology as its organizing structure that year.

As described earlier in the dissertation I dithered about this but finally decided to step up and offer my experience as a resource. This is the way I began my presentation.

> Rooting Deep, Bubbling Up: Governance as Spiritual Practice
>
> As I imagined offering this space my sense was that there would be many initiatives that seemed to have broader, more urgent scope. But this conversation, though it may seem like a pebble when many are lifting boulders is about setting the energy of individual faith communities free which they must be, to enter and support broader conversations; the conversations to which they are called. I believe, and this model demonstrates, that it is often when we find a shared practice, that we set the body bubbling. Even in ways that may seem tiny and at times tenuous, the most lively and amazing things can happen.
>
> This governance shape is for small and mid-sized congregations. Like any spiritual practice this one requires time and commitment. But . . .
>
> This is governance that unlooses the corsets of certain structures. It lets us breathe.
>
> This is governance that is context sensitive; your model won't look exactly like ours but it will express two core principles. It will create a livelier body and a much thicker annual report in which circles or bubbles of service abound.
>
> While it fulfills all the responsibilities mandated by the Manual and maintains an M & P Committee and Trustees it does not require that a host of committees be maintained, something that in smaller congregations can exhaust leadership.
>
> This is governance that is shifts congregational culture.
>
> This is governance that has faith formation at its heart and encourages leadership throughout the body from the newcomers and the long-established.
>
> This governance is supple and responsive. It doesn't happen over-night and it needs good listening and commitment, but it has been developed in the context of a congregation, put in place and lived into. For me the congregational response and the response from those who participate in its leadership core has been deeply moving and hopeful.
>
> This is pebble dropped in the waters of our conversations about change.

I also related this to my doctoral work on pastoral leadership practice and emphasized its responsiveness to context. Close to 40 people signed up to receive further material. It was

well attended and much to my surprise, later in the Conference when all the presentations were put up on the wall and we were given dots to attach to the ones we thought should be presented again, GSP was strongly represented. I offered a second presentation and, after that, I, and those involved, were invited to make suggestions for how the word could be carried forward. One was that ways be found to disseminate the formative ideas and shape of GSP and that grants be sought to support this. The other was that written descriptions of the presentations that had been offered be sent to those who had attended. This I did with the following words.

> In a few days I will be sending you, as promised, some concrete information on the Governance we had conversation about.
>
> Before sending the specifics of the Governance, as it was developed and lived into, [. . .] I want to re-iterate an element of this governance that can be lost if we imagine it as only structure. It is, as the title of the conversations I invited you into at Conference spoke, as much *a way* as a model; it is - governance as spiritual practice.
>
> It arose out of my intentional study of pastoral leadership viewed and interpreted through a particular lens, that of vulnerability inhabited with courage, creativity and compassion. It takes the risk of being a *way*, rather than an arrival. That does not mean that there is no structure developed to enable our work; there is a carefully considered structure. It does mean that the structure has an organic quality. It grows up around the two core principles and will be realized by each congregation in its own way. What remains essential is its core and the commitment it takes to remain oriented to the core.
>
> I hope the specifics that you receive will offer a shape that may be transferable to your setting. But more than that I hope this *way* will meet your faith community in a place on the journey where the invitation of this governance can be accepted. And that it will be for you and your community one of the turnings into holy liveliness.

This letter expresses well the relationship of this way both to change in the church and to my dissertation. I was very concerned that elements of GSP would be dropped to streamline it, for example the Grounding Gatherings diluted. If congregations chose to do that it might

work as a governance, but it would not be what I described, Governance as Spiritual Practice. It was important that the distinction be understood.

Following the Conference presentations, I was invited by individual congregations, to offer presentations. I began to consider grants that might support the unfolding of this governance. I spoke with EDGE's[361] Manager of New Initiatives and within a few days of that conversation made an online presentation to a larger group of the EDGE network. I was encouraged to apply for an Innovations Grant[362] which I did successfully. I had resisted involvement with EDGE for some time. A large part of this, given my understanding that language both shapes and is shaped by culture, was my concern with the very market-based language of the EDGE network. I saw evidence of the way this language had informed their direction in their initiatives and publicity. So, I was determined in my presentation to use a different language, and I did. Imagine my delight and surprise when one of the elements of response to my presentation was that the group had been energized by my language. I am grateful to EDGE for the grant which enabled me to further develop materials in the form of a workshop and a printed resource. Both support members of congregational governance groups as they offer leadership in Grounding Gatherings. There are other ways of deepening this work that I hope to give attention to once my doctoral work is complete.

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[361] EDGE: A Network for Ministry Development within the UCC. EDGE At edge-ucc.ca they describe Embracing the Spirit (learning network and innovation fund, the Social Innovation Fund, and the Social Mentor Network. EDGE determines Innovations Fund grantees using the Quadruple Bottom Line Resource and Assessment Tool.

[362] Innovations Grants are, "[. . .] about providing funding to ideas that haven't received seed funding in the past". Amounts granted are between $500 and $5,000.

Conclusion

Fourteen months after its trial period had begun, a motion to adopt Governance as Spiritual Practice as an ongoing way of governance for the congregation passed resoundingly. After this meeting I, and those who shaped this governance with me, received words of excitement about, and gratitude for, what had unfolded among us. This itself I believe is a testament to the way this governance and the honouring of vulnerability that made it possible opens the pores of a congregation to its own deepest self and with the Spirit's movement through that porous self to its particular way of courage, creativity and compassion.

This congregation had journeyed through many challenges, the decision to sell their historic building, the acquisition of another building to repurpose as space for their faith community. They had lived with delays and disappointments and the anger of members of the community. They had come through anxiety and fatigue to a place where they could get up and dance; literally. This is one of my joyful memories from this congregation. After a series, Dances of the Heart, I planned an opportunity for some dancing in worship, a simple circle dance with a grapevine step pattern. I had, days before, asked six people to dance this early in the worship and I danced with them. Later in the worship, I invited anyone who wanted to join the six to feel welcome. One after one, person after person they all got up. Chairs were pushed aside and a large circle began to move in the space, laughing as they felt the music and found the steps. I am smiling as I write this. I am grateful.

Eventually it came time for me to move from this faith community. That decision has been described elsewhere. I loved these dancing people. It was hard to go, but I felt comforted that they had healed from the more rigorous parts of their journey. They were

better able to listen inside for who they were; to be permeable to Word and Spirit and one another. *Governance as Spiritual Practice* is still the way of governance within the congregation and I hope it will continue to contribute to their energy for ministry and mission.

This creation and practice of this governance deepened my pastoral leadership. It allowed me to live into what I believed about permeable leadership and the gifts of vulnerability to emerge from and generate courage, creativity and compassion. It required me to trust my own deepest instincts, to let what needed to devolve do so without fixing, to live in the fluidity of change without grasping at answers too quickly, to listen deeply to the congregation, to be willing to risk some people's anxiety over a leadership that didn't display itself in easily recognizable ways, to over and over again communicate that leadership and with it my confidence that the congregation was enough, that all of us were enough to respond to God's call in the world. In the final of the dissertation I will pick up some of the threads from this and other chapters, leadership, anxiety, self-knowledge and acceptance, joy and rest.

Finally

When it came time for me to leave the congregation which I loved and in which I had grown so much, the congregation that had grown and deepened right along with me, I received many gifts. Many lovely words were said. But, as a person who believes so deeply in the honouring of our vulnerability, with its call to really live in the questions, this small tribute, accompanied by a brooch made of layered felted circles, stands out.

> Catherine, as you leave, we can think of nothing better to give you than overlapping circles. Circles, the symbol of our new governance and of the things you taught us.

- That going with circles doesn't mean going in circles.
- That the pieces do not have to be the same shape or size or colour or fabric
- That putting round things in neat, square boxes, can be dangerous, too.

So, go with circles into whatever comes next.

And, I have.

Chapter Nine

Boundaries and Thresholds

As I write this chapter, I'm reading Richard Wagamese's first novel, *Keeper'n Me*. Keeper, an older Anishinabe man is talking to Garnett, a young man who has returned to his Anishanabe community after years of separation brought about through the Sixties Scoop. Keeper in this conversation is talking about finding balance. He describes eagle as a teacher.

> That bird's soarin' on air. Air's movin' all the time. When he's floatin' around up there so graceful he's floatin' on movin' air. That bird knows when that movin's right for soarin' an' when it's not. Eagles don't soar all the time. Sometimes gotta work hard to stay up there. When he's learnin' to fly he's learning to see the way the clouds are movin' [. . .] learnin' to feel the air against his body. Learns when it's gentle enough to soar or wild enough to make soarin' dangerous. Learns to see and feel so he can know when he can balance against the air an' float around like we always see him do. [. . .] Us we only see the freedom, we don't see the work that went into it. [. . .] It's slow coming that balance.[363]

Inhabiting vulnerability in a way that comes through and generates courage creativity and compassion is slow coming. It requires the movement of time and practices for learning the currents, the currents of your own inner life as a person and a leader and the currents of your community and context. It requires a commitment to living in a way that consistently honours vulnerability in each choice and challenge, in the words you speak, the silence you hold, the actions you take and the prayer to which you dispose yourself. It requires looking at what we call success from the inside and asking, even if the metrics of it are good, are those metrics permeable to the Spirit, the deeper motivation, or do they distract? In my case, and in the case of many of you who are pastoral leaders, it means asking whether our success in consistent with the narrative of a

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[363] Richard Wagamese, *Keeper'n Me*, (Toronto: Anchor Books, 1994), 85-186.

vulnerable God, seen in the life of Jesus Christ and in the currents of the Spirit. Is it, or does it offer, fullness of life?

In fact, this leadership often doesn't look like soaring; it has in common with the eagle's flight its silence and its hidden work. The leader's life is most often seen in the people's experience of change within themselves as community rather than in any particular programs of the leader. I know this removes a particular kind of affirmation that we often long for and this can be difficult. We need to have compassion for ourselves; sometimes we are affirmed in ways we might not have imagined.

There is a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye which ends, "I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,/or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,/but because it never forgot what it could do".[364] This is the way of well-inhabited vulnerability. Sometimes it becomes highly visible, famous in a widespread way; more often it does not. Never judge whether you are growing in the honouring of vulnerability by the measure of external appreciation. It may or may not appear. But know that an individual or a company of those who practice this permeable way consistently can help change a culture.

I want to pick up or introduce here one of the cross currents that can threaten or distract from consistent vulnerable movement in the life of the leader and also to suggest practices that may help bring a leader or a faith community back to the inner grounding for which we all long.

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[364] Naomi Shihab Nye, "Famous," *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems*, (Portland:Far Corner Books, 1995), 80.

I also want to address the great opportunity in time and space, found in the in-between, transitional and liminal. I want to pay attention to boundaries and thresholds as they relate to vulnerability.

Boundaries

While I use the word permeability to describe the openness that pastoral leaders practicing a robust vulnerability need to cultivate, I want to be clear that this is not an abandonment of all boundaries. Brené Brown writes, "vulnerability without boundaries is not vulnerability. It might be fear or anxiety. We have to think about why we're sharing and, equally important, with whom. "*What are their roles? What is our role? Is this sharing productive and appropriate?"*[365] These words are about the oversharing that has always been a temptation and which social media and celebrity culture tends to amplify. They can also inform the situation that sometimes arises when a minister arrives in a congregation to find the former minister unwilling to recognize a boundary between their former role as minister to that congregation and their present role. This is particularly difficult when the former minister remains in or near the congregation. The denomination, the regional staff, and our educators in training programs, need to take responsibility for preparing pastoral leaders for letting go.

I offer some fictitious examples that may coincide in some way with your experience of leadership. Imagine receiving a call from the President of the United Church Women [366](UCW) in your congregation. She is perturbed because the former

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[365] Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead,* sec. 1, Kindle.

[366] The UCW officially came into being on January 1, 1962. Its purpose was: To unite women of the congregation for the total mission of the church and to provide a medium through which we may express our loyalty and devotion to Jesus Christ in Christian witness, study, fellowship and service. (*ROP*

minister has called them to arrange a reception for a funeral she is planning to preside at. The funeral is in the church building which houses your congregation and is for a member on the congregational roll. This is the first you have heard of it. What do you do?

In this case I imagine a call to the intruding minister is the best practice. At this point, to change the funeral arrangements might only distress the grieving family, but a boundary can be described to the former minister; the boundary that has been crossed and the boundary going forward. There is first a need to explore your own feelings with compassion, to look at the needs of the congregation and your situation creatively and to speak with courage in describing that boundary. Being 'nice' is not always whole-making, nor does permeability mean receiving everything indiscriminately.

In another scenario, imagine the beginning months of a ministry, you the leader listening to the congregation, sensing, as eagles do, the currents. Imagine your efforts to describe your own way of leadership, to create a container of care, made of your own particular materials, in which newness and transformation can be evoked and nurtured. Imagine it is revealed to you by a member of the congregation that all the while you are seeking to nurture this fragile new thing a former minister has begun inviting a kind of shadow council to weekly meetings in a location away from the church. You realize the tear this has made in that container you are weaving for emergence and transformation. You experience the energy draining through that opening evidenced by the anxious calls for attention to some area of congregational life large or small.

1960, p. 304) https://www.united.church.ca/sites/default/files/resources/handbook_ucw Accessed December 5, 2018.

Though you don't truly know the motivation for those gatherings, nor, you suspect, does the former minister himself, this gathering is a strategy of invulnerability, an inability to set a boundary that is born in the former minister of some inner work resisted. You are frustrated by the dis-ease this group generates and fatigued by the extra work of reassurance it necessitates. To set a boundary here, like the eagle you will need to sense the currents. You may choose a conversation with the minister and/or you may feel able to speak with your Ministry and Personnel Committee[367]. Since the incursion is well underway already you may choose instead to use the knowledge of your situation to turn with more informed energy to strengthening the threads of the container for emergence.

You will need to pay attention to the way this violation of boundaries affects your ministry and your inner porousness. Make sure you attend to practices that keep you open and free of resentment in the face of something you may not be able to change. Continue to articluate your way of leadership for the congregation in various ways. Tend your own integrity and work to maintain the integrity of the container for emergence within the congregation. Through your own spiritual practice and your own articulation of your leadership to the congregation you will gradually draw the edges of the tear created by the former minister's boundary breech together until the drain of energy is staunched.

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[367] Ministry and Personnel (M&P) Committees in pastoral charges are responsible for supporting, overseeing, and supervising ministry personnel and lay staff. https://www.united-church.ca/leadership/supporting-ministry/ministry-and-personnel-committee-resources , accessed December 5, 2018.

Just as emerging life needs a container for two sometimes surprising elements to come together to create a new thing[368], we need boundaries to encourage and live well in vulnerability. Certainly, there are exceptions, times when the former minister folds her or himself seamlessly into the new ministry. More often I suspect there is a problem. We all need to ask ourselves, as we prepare to leave a congregation, what is our role now? Is it productive and appropriate? We need the support of the denomination both as we are educated for pastoral leadership and through our Office of Vocation[369] in concert with our Regional Minister[370] in asking good questions and preparing ourselves to ask them too. We need, especially as we retire, to explore the part pastoral ministry played in our identity and how we are going to explore and live honestly and healthily with that part of our identity in an altered way. We need to be permeable to any sense of loss in order to reflect on it and live wisely with it. In these large transitions we need to be open to the

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[368] In preparation for a seminar on emergence theories I listened to a number of podcasts and was intrigued by the necessity of containers for the novel mingling that issues in new life. I wrote in response to my reading, "There is talk of containment, something to hold what's happening. Chemical gradients usually involve membranes. The material coming in through the membrane, waste products going out, building order by tapping the energy from some source. And how do we contain the energy. I am fascinated by the permeable membranes. In my thinking of vulnerability, I have described our need to be permeable. If we tighten our pores against harm, we also tighten them against gift and as this would close us off from the sacred so it closes us off from others and from energy and emergent life itself." This reflection was on the podcast, *Emergence of Life* Bruce Weber**. The original link is now inactive.** http://www.zygonjournal.org/podcasts.html

[369] Office of Vocation. As of January 2019, the ICC Office of Vocation, will through its appointed ministers, "[. . .] support the processes for the discernment and training of ministry personnel, the determination of their fitness/readiness for accreditation, the fulfillment of continuing education standards, and the formal processes for oversight and discipline of ministry personnel". This is described more fully at https://www.united-church.ca/news/office-vocation-ministers-appointed Accessed December 5, 2019.

[370] "Regional Ministers: (title may change) will assist the Regional Council to serve, support and provide oversight, and pastoral relations support to the Communities of Faith, encouraging and supporting Ministry Personnel toward health, joy and excellence in ministry practice." https://marconf.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Staffing-Announcement-for-Region-14-1.pdf Accessed December 5, 2018.

advice of trusted others and in some cases to seek professional help in the transition. We need also to consider rituals and practices that can help us frame leaving one pastoral charge for another, beginning a new ministry or crossing the threshold into the vocation of retirement.

I include here a practice I engaged as I prepared to leave people I loved in a ministry setting that had been unusually complicated. I needed a way to host the emotions that moved in me without feeling overcome as I prepared to leave this pastoral charge for another. Each day I took a picture. Some days the emotion came first and I looked for an image; some days the image came first and revealed the emotion. Most days I added words or a word. While I've included only a few of the pages from my transition journal you can see there the varied emotions of the transition time.

I've made the decision to accept the appointment at [. . .] Pastoral Charge. I've tried over and over to discern a clear answer. It remains cloudy. Still, it is time to stop testing the board and dive.

Buds Before Time

Today I was discouraged – isolated. I drove home this morning, Saturday. Enjoyed the Advent evening at with the one I love . . .. I feel the time coming when we will be far apart geographically. I have no place to live yet. I am uncertain of so much. I am in between. I am in the place to which John the Baptist comes.

In the afternoon I notice through the kitchen window that the lilac bush has begun to bud in the mild winter days. I think of buds that come too soon. How do these buds relate to my wonderings, my fears about ministry in [. . .] Don't project how you feel now into what will be in [. . .] my spiritual director tells me. And I look at the bush and compare this to budding too soon. The time to imagine what [. . .] will call from me is not yet. Now is the time for mulching the roots of my ministry here.

Anger

The Paperwhites are growing. Even as I leave this place all over the congregation small signs of my hope are sprouting in people's homes. I feel a moment of possibility. I want to stay.

All the while Margaret Silf was speaking, a flock of papier maché birds floated above. The day away, listening to Margaret was restorative. The lovely absurdity of these birds was as well.

Boxing Day, I gather with those I love, in the manse whose walls have always suited my bones and my heart. This day has been a boundary time. Tomorrow packing will begin in earnest.

One of the first 'adult' gifts I gave my grandmother. I must let it go in anticipation of the move. What else must I let go?

Every morning I come out to meet this beauty. Every morning it saves me again. I carry it through the day.

I am here. I have begun.

This was a valuable threshold practice during the time I undertook it and has remained of value each time I look back on it. It honoured all the elements of the threshold and in marking them with image and word I was freed. The emotions were not erased; they were given place, reflected on, and folded into a creative experience of transition. I would recommend this or a similar practice to anyone moving from one charge to another, from one ministry to another, from the vocation of pastoral ministry to the vocation found in retirement.

Boundary-making can be complicated by the fact that, as we prepare to leave sometimes congregations ask us to stay close, to help with this or that. It is difficult from their perspective to see that it may not be helpful to a fledgling pastoral relationship for a former minister to be involved. It's easy to imagine more is better. Here I'm not speaking generally about ministers as members of a congregation. I have often had 3 or 4 or even 5 ministers within a congregation I was leading. But they had led other congregations or had been away from the congregation long enough to dis-establish their earlier role or they had exercised their ministries in education or community-development. They were very clear on boundaries. They had found a role within the congregation that was important but was not that of pastoral leadership.

At all times, but particularly when it is difficult for a faith community to let go of the minister they loved, or one they had a troubled relationship with, it is the responsibility of the departing minister, the professional, to create the boundary. Though this responsibility is sometimes abdicated, it belongs to the one who carries the life of a particular faith community in their heart even after he or she leaves the pastoral role, to describe the boundary, why it exists and how they will live into it.

It is an act of love and vulnerability to free a congregation from your continuing active presence when the time comes for you to leave. Leaving well is itself an act of ministry, a way of vulnerable pastoral leadership. While it may bring a sense of self-affirmation to feel yourself needed or sought out after leaving, permeable leadership is called to be vulnerable to the emotions and spiritual currents of loss, love, anxiety and ambiguity that crossing this threshold of changing roles and relationships engenders.

Here is the way I told one congregation I was leaving.

A Word from Catherine

How often in my time with you I have told you how beloved you are, how precious your longing, how important to listen for your deepest desire. I have encouraged you to risk in order to be who you most truly are. And I have said, don't be afraid, we were made for this.

These were not just words for me; I lived into them with you. I believe we are always called to listen, to risk and to live out of the word we hear, the one that is just for us. We have practiced this together.

Now it is my time to risk in another way; to answer a call out of pastoral ministry at least for a time. Our time of covenant comes to an end in [. . .] and I need today to tell you that I will not apply for the called position that will then begin. I have come to this over a long, hard time of discernment and I stand in this pace with both grief and gratitude. I have been so

gladdened by the way you have deepened your lives together as faith community. I will miss being in the midst of that. I will miss being with you.

I will ask Presbytery to place me on its rolls, [. . .], as retained in search of call or appointment and I will examine what calls may come. But I believe my call at this time is not to pastoral ministry. I have no plans to leave [town] but I will not involve myself in any aspect of congregational life for at least a year after you have covenanted with your new minister. This is the best practice of the wider church and I uphold it; to do otherwise would create distraction from the formation of relationship with the person who will answer your call.

As I struggled to come to this decision what finally was gift to me was the clear message my body has been giving me over the last year. It is time to pause, and to pay attention to my health. So, I will take the risk of stepping into open space to see what is waiting there to be discovered.

A comfort to me has been words my spiritual director gave me. I share them with you. "The love you feel for your congregations will not stop when you leave. It will be an energy of love that has been set loose among them. Who knows what will come of it

This began ninety days[371] of intentional openness to my own emotions and of preparing the congregation for openness to their own. In setting a boundary I was able to help myself and the congregation learn to live in the changing reality and prepare to mark the threshold in a way that was whole-hearted.

In time, relationships with certain individuals within your former congregation may re-emerge, but time does need to elapse, and clarity between the role of friend and that of pastoral leader does need to be clear. This I believe is difficult work for the UCC which sometimes confuses compassion with 'niceness' and inclusivity with the blurring of boundaries. As a denomination we are clear, or try to be, when it comes to boundaries that protect those in our congregations from emotional or physical violation by ministry personnel or others in positions of leadership. We, along with anyone in the congregations working with vulnerable sectors of the faith community or the community

[371] The usual period of time of notice, designated for the conclusion of a pastoral relationship within the UCC. Exceptions can be made.

more broadly, have regular police checks and ministry personnel are required to take boundaries training[372]. But we struggle with distinctions and roles in other ways, as can be seen most recently in our varied responses to Gretta Vosper's continuing role as ministry personnel within the United Church. Does it mean we are inhospitable if we recognize distinct roles and theological positions within a common humanity? Can we truly be permeable to the other without respecting our distinctions? Can we deeply honour immanence if we are not porous to transcendence? Can we have meaningful dialogue if there is no recognition and honouring of the distinctiveness of our individual or communal being?

Boundaries are important in vulnerable leadership. While this attention to examples of what might seem an insignificant boundary, that between a minister and their former congregation, may serve as a canary signaling the danger of blurred boundaries in the larger scape of the denomination. It bears repeating, "vulnerability without boundaries is not vulnerability. It might be fear or anxiety or a need for affirmation, but it is not vulnerability. We have to think about why we're sharing and, equally important, with whom. *What are their roles? What is our role? Is this sharing productive and appropriate?*[373]

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[372] *Personal and professional Boundaries for Church Leaders: Introduction*. "This introductory course is required for all Ministry Personnel and Licensed lay Worship Leaders." The necessary but narrow focus of this course on boundaries can be seen in the course description which states that this introductory course and supplemental course meet the requirement for mandatory training in the *Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response Policy, accessed May 30, 2019,* http://united-in-learning.com/.

[373] Brown, *Dare to Lead,* sec. 1, Kindle.

Thresholds

All through my pastoral leadership I've been conscious of thresholds. This is clearly visible in my preaching, the liturgy I shape, the pastoral care I offer, the way I lead and my personal spiritual practice. Increasingly, I realized how essential it was to recognize and to mark our thresholds. Often the inability to recognize and set boundaries is fed by a fear of recognizing the losses and joys and possibilities of these threshold times. Without the help of ritual and symbol, whether private or communal, we are often unable to remain open to life's passages. Without a narrative, the Word in which to set the moments and movements of our lives, we struggle to remain porous enough for those moments to be infused with deeper meaning. We've seen what might happen when the threshold of leaving a congregation is crossed with an impermeability to its gifts and challenges; we become unable or unwilling to draw a healthy, life-giving boundary. We turn to strategies of invulnerability.

The Word marks thresholds. Jesus prepares for his ministry through baptism (Luke 3:21 – 22 and through wilderness time (Luke 4:1 -13) and with a translation of the tradition through his own living presence and context (Luke 4:16 – 30). There are other threshold times in his ministry, one of the most poignant his time of prayer on the Mount of Olives (Luke 22:30 - 24), some of the most mysterious, his resurrection appearances and his ascension. In whatever way we understand and incorporate these narratives into our theology and into our life, we can recognize these instances as thresholds, liminal spaces marked by particular actions. We can see the narratives describing ways of marking the meeting of immanent and transcendent.

Some thresholds are joyful. I've spoken of the entry of one congregation into its new space and raised questions of its imperviousness to the first anniversary of that long-

awaited event. A large joy is worth revisiting. Reaching a goal or receiving a gift are worth celebrating. Brené Brown speaks of "foreboding joy"[374]. Brown writes,

> [. . .] the concept of foreboding joy as a method of minimizing vulnerability is best understood as a continuum that runs from "rehearsing tragedy" to what I call "perpetual disappointment. [. . . }]. We're trying to beat vulnerability to the punch. We don't want to be blindsided by hurt. We don't want to be caught off-guard, so we literally practice being devastated or never move from self-elected disappointment. [. . .] When we spend our lives (knowingly or unknowingly) pushing away vulnerability, we can't hold space open for the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure of joy.[375]

Allowing joy can heighten our sense of vulnerability. We recognize the importance of lament and the expression of grief, but I want to make a case for joy as something we may be afraid to express as well. May you make a joyful noise in your own leader's heart and may you encourage the expression of joy in your faith community, joy in the midst of this ambiguous life.

We are perhaps more used to attending to sorrowful thresholds: saying good-bye to a building in which so many communal or personal touchstones were set, bringing to a close a UCW group, or relinquishing the struggle to sustain a Sunday School. Today within the UCC, relinquishing Presbyteries and Conferences to live into the new 3-court structure feels like loss for some and uncertainty for many. Both increase our awareness of vulnerability and call for attentiveness to the way we will choose to live with that awareness.

I was close to a pastoral charge once that had gone through a confused and painful restructuring. Even though the congregations knew some of them would have to relinquish their buildings and move toward becoming one faith community there was

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[374] Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 117.

[375] Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 121.

sadness and an anger that originated within the fabric of the larger communities. Imagine then, the confusion that arose when those guiding the transition, the minister, the Presbytery and the Conference somehow brought about the disbanding of two of the congregations rather than the amalgamation originally discussed. I don't know the whole story and I'm not interested in casting blame. What has stood out for me is that even after an excellent initial guided conversation, there was a significant lack of threshold work in this restructuring. This is a complicated story with several thresholds. There was the threshold for some of letting buildings go. There was the threshold in this case of a looming change in pastoral relations. There was the unexpected development of engineering two dis-bandings rather than the co-equal joining of several congregations. Finally, and perhaps most grievously, there is the way in which final worship services in the two congregations relinquishing their buildings was handled.

I have compassion for the incumbent minister who I imagine didn't want or couldn't bear to live in the emotions of the time between the day when the final service would be announced and the final service itself. After a long process to reach the point where two buildings would be sold there would have been much anger and resentment and sadness in the atmosphere. I know that would be a heavy burden for a pastoral leader; how much easier it might seem to just rip the bandage off. But how destructive a decision to make. Yet that is what happened. One Sunday morning the minister announced in worship in each of the points that this would be the last worship service. There was no preparation and no involvement of congregational elders. No one but the minister knew what was happening until they heard it that morning. This was devastating for some and crippling for the future of the pastoral charge.

The final worship service as a congregation was a significant threshold. In the atmosphere of heightened feelings this day required exquisite consideration and preparation. It required the risk of meeting angry response or no response to till the soil beforehand with and for a consistent, Word-infused message of accompaniment in grief and beckoning to hope that such a threshold requires. It required a great awareness of vulnerability on the part of the pastoral leader to create and hold space in which sadness, anger and grief could be honoured by the congregations. Sadly, a creative observance of this threshold with and for the faith community was neglected. Several months later the Presbytery held a decommissioning service for each of the two buildings used by the congregations but by then the damage was done.

This is where the pastoral leadership that honours vulnerability recognizes through their own spiritual practice, their own attention to the messages of body, mind and spirit that they can or cannot do what needs to be done. This was a very difficult situation. There would have been no shame in asking for help. I hope there would have been those who could have come alongside this pastoral leader to help bear the brunt of the congregations' heightened emotions and to help give notice of and invite congregational leaders to plan and participate in the final worship services. I hope that someone would have been able to respond, not by taking over, by imposing something from outside, but by supporting the pastoral leader in whatever needed to be done to host a space permeable to the Holy in that moment of the churches' lives.

Pastoral leaders permeable to Spirit and to the longing and gifts of their faith communities, learning the currents like an eagle or reading the river[376] will sense ways to

[376] Abigail Johnson, *Shaping Pastoral Leaders: Supervision and Formation in Congregations*, (Herdon: Alban Institute: 2007), 16.

mark liminal space. As we more frequently face the move from older church structures steeped with years of tradition it may help to find ways to mark that move in ways that honour the continuity of our doxology, our praise, with those who came before us. In one congregation we arranged with the contractors preparing our new worship space to find a time before the walls were painted when we might write prayers on those walls. I prepared the congregation beforehand through bulletin announcements, website and one-on-one conversations. As the day came close, I was nervous. Would this be seen as a waste of time, irrelevant to our concerns, my solitary preoccupation with the importance of prayer to till memory and open space? Would I be embarrassingly alone? Would I be disappointed? What would I learn from this?

I was so grateful as people arrived to receive their HP pencils and write on the bare walls prayers meaningful for them. We shared this desire to season our walls with prayer. The prayers were also recorded in a booklet that was available after they were painted over. In this way, though our new space had not experienced the decades of devotion that drenched the walls of the old church building we marked the desire that prayer be under all we would undertake. As we crossed the threshold into new space it was a touchstone in our life together.

There are more difficult threshold times. One increasingly common movement to mark is the demolition of a beloved church building. Even if the congregation has come to a kind of peace with its move to a new space it is hard to hear the sounds of the old structure collapsing, to see its interior open to the elements, especially if it is in a small town or village, something you pass every day, or in a location close to your home or new worship space. It can also exacerbate the anger of those in the community who

seldom contributed to the regular life of the congregation but who are angry at the congregation for letting the old building go. It is a time when the spirit of the building is speaks loudly. The rain on the roofless space feels like grief and the emptiness once everything is flattened is stark. This is a threshold that needs tending. There have been times when these words helped.

> *As I watched the windows of the building stand open to the wind and rain and sun that move through them, much of their glass now gone, I have thought how the disappearance of the building is something like the disappearance of words written on a prayer flag, the quality of the blessing released into the world as the letters on the flag fade. Washed into the rain and the sun and the wind and into life in the world. Remember the worship earlier this summer when we wrote on prayer flags, words of blessing that we associated with some person or time in that place. What blessing is there to be released into the world? The prayer flags will hang on our building as long as the demolition continues, to symbolize ways in which the blessing of all the faith expressed though that space is released into our lives and the life of the world even as each board and shingle comes down.*

Here is the prayer we said that day.

Holy One,
Sometimes it is hard to see,
As with seeds
What is growing in the world
Offering a harvest to lay over the places where torn is written on the vivid earth.

Open our hearts
to know the way things grow in secret
To the way that things linger
present even when we cannot see them
To the way blessing disperses from the past
like the word on a prayer flag;
its fading qualities as soft as smoke
touching the air

> *Sung response*
> *Let me be a prayer flag*
> *Quiet, bright and free*
> *Let your moving through me*
> *A growing blessing be*

The breeze blows through glassless windows of a once beloved building

and though some of us are only relieved
some of us feel the sad stitch in our hearts that draws us to your promise of redemption
The assurance that kin-dom[377] *work is never lost*
even in what seems to be an ending.
Even in a space that seems to be empty
we celebrate with courage what we can no longer see.
We hold it now
not tightly clamped inside us
but written on the bright prayer flags of memory and heart
Written to be lifted by the life that is now
It is in us and for the world

Sung response

We recall now those of vision and of prudence
The gentle and cantankerous
Those who carried the heaped silver trays of communion
Those who cooked turkey and washed dishes
Those who organized us and taught us to serve tea
Those who mourned and those who comforted
Those who valued the work and play of children
Those whose hearts were for mission
Those with whom we disagreed

We recall the weddings and the baptisms and the memorials
Some of them our own or for those we loved
They are not lost
They surround us with presence
The grow in us and in the world like hidden seed
The blessing of all that was spreads through us now and out into the world
like the fading of words on a prayer flag

Sung response

Holy One
We recall the builders of the great cathedrals
One generation hewing the stone for a work they would never live to see finished
Sowing the seed that would rise in some other time
We recall their belief in the pure value of the work itself

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[377] I hold ambiguity about changing a word such as kingdom into kin-dom. I use it here faithful to the prayer as I wrote it. My usual practice, as with the word vulnerability, would be when possible to use the word along with alternative phrases, such as community of God or to make clear the nature of what this word denotes. *"The way we understand words, and the way we pour meaning into them or drink the meaning from them, forms our world. We can tilt the world by turning words upside down*."

Their freedom from the need to see outcome and completion

Let us know ourselves as workers for the whole cloth of God
The kingdom
Co-workers with those who have come before
And those who will come after
Let us know the blessings of past planting
Written on lives as on a prayer flag
Let us know the blessings of the past released,
freed as a timeworn building fades

Let us imagine this as the song of our forebears
And let it be our song too

Sung response

Nothing of wood or even stone is forever
But the heart that beat in it; the soft intercessions
The fervent witness
The hope
Is not lost
It is in You, Holy One.
It is in You.

If we become caught up in the wider culture's headlong rush toward outcomes consumption, relevance, and addicted to quantifiable success we may pass too quickly over these vital times. But thresholds are important in the way of vulnerability. They call us to notice where we are and to honour the complexity and ambiguity of our life passages. If we are unable to attend to threshold times it is likely we will be unable to establish healthy boundaries and integrity of identity either as leaders, individuals, or faith communities. We may find it difficult to express our joy or our grief. If we are unable to establish boundaries, we may find ourselves erecting barriers.

Synthesis

To be able to move in freedom as leaders, we need to be open, permeable to our own emotional, and spiritual currents and to those of the congregation. Being permeable, vulnerable does not mean that we have no boundaries. On the contrary, a lack of boundaries signals an inability to live peacefully with vulnerability. Using one particular and frequent example of boundaries that are breeched I show how this impinges on the vulnerable work of a leader and suggest possibilities for addressing the incursion. I also suggest that the denomination has some work to do in recognizing the difficulties of these situations.

The attention needs to begin in training for ministry. We need to learn that the responsibility for setting the boundary rests with the one who is leaving. When it is breeched the denomination needs to offer resources for the incumbent leader and for the departing leader if necessary. Reflecting on this one instance of boundaries may help us to reflect on and practice setting other boundaries with courage, creativity and compassion.

There is a larger sense in which leaders and faith communities need to take note of permeable boundaries. That is in the question of the distinction, the permeable boundary between the Transcendent and Immanent. Sandra Schneiders makes an important distinction between a spiritual seeking that is purely responsive to immanent movement within the self and one that is in relationship with a transcendent other.

> There remains, I would argue, an irreducible difference between spirituality which is a response to revelation, which is an experience of the Transcendent who is not us (however deeply immanent to us,) and that which is generated by the human subject and remains the transcendent experience of the exclusively immanent.[378]

In my experience, this distinction is essential for the life of faith communities and it has been surrendered, forgotten, lost, in many instances. Jeffrey Seaton, in *Who's Minding the Story? The United Church of Canada Meets A Secular Age* draws on the work of Charles Taylor to reflect on the secularity and the church. He asks how the church can, in my words, be a portal for transcendence within secular culture and resist being limited by an immanent frame. Within this frame, they may come to resemble, "[. . .] United Church congregations of the Christendom era – embedded in culture, popular, and

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[378] Sandra Schneiders, "Spirituality and the God Question," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, Volume 10, Number 2, (2010):248.

successful, demographically diverse – and theologically compromised."[379] It is essential that transcendence and immanence are porous to one another.

I have found in contemplative theology and practice life-giving ways for honouring immanence and transcendence, recognizing permeable distinction, experiencing the flow of the Transcendent in our holy lives. The *Moments* are one such practice. Honouring immanence and transcendence creates a field for hope and possibility conversant with but not limited by our present circumstances.

One way in which we enable ourselves to recognize boundaries and move through transitions in life-giving ways is to learn how to recognize thresholds, marking them with rituals, gestures or practices that allow loss and hope to be honoured. Thresholds are vital, energizing moments, special and or temporal, in which we stand in the liminal, porous to past and future and to timeless transcendence.

[379] Jeff Seaton, *Who's Minding the Story? The United Church of Canada Meets a Secular Age*, (Eugene: Pickwick, 2018), 55.

Conclusion

This shaking keeps me steady. I should Know.
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.[380]

"*Those who are willing to be vulnerable move among mysteries.*" [381]

In our end is our beginning we say. At this conclusion my hope is that I have met the standards outlined in Chapter 3 for evaluating an autoethnography. I hope that it has been evocative; that I have helped you to understand and feel the phenomenon of vulnerability. I hope that this has been a credible narrative and that it is transferable to various contexts. I hope that it might be helpful to you in your own life, that it may in some way encourage transformation.

Vulnerability is a quality we share. It is not optional; it is inherent. What we can choose is how to inhabit it. We can choose to try to escape the inescapable. We can practice "strategies of invulnerability", vain attempts to protect ourselves from loss, or grief, loneliness, or invisibility, through practices of perfectionism, the amassing of power or wealth, the numbing through various addictions to any number of things, including a covert despair. But the extent to which we seem to succeed at "strategies of invulnerability" is the extent to which we do succeed at blocking love, and compassion, and a sense of belonging.

Our other choice is to learn to inhabit vulnerability courageously, with openness to complexity, ambiguity, and paradox. This is essential for whole-hearted, creative,

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[380] Theodore Roethke, "The Waking" in *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke,* (New York:Anchor Press/Doubleday,1975), Kindle.

[381] Theodore Roethke, ed. David Wagoner, *Straw for the Fire: From the Notebooks of Theodore Roethke, 1943-63,* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2006), 179.

compassionate living. Vulnerability is the milieu not only of wounding, but of desire and delight. That we inhabit it well is essential in the leadership of a faith community, both in the leader's personal life and in the way that life opens into the vocation of pastoral ministry. It is also essential in the life of the individuals who come together as a community of faith and in the communal body itself.

Though anxiety may tempt us to resist or to deny what comes through vulnerability, to so this is to diminish ourselves. It is to become, at the deepest level, inhospitable to others and the Other as they come to us in Word and silence, presence and absence, darkness and light, life and death. To protect or armour our vulnerable selves without distinction or discernment is to invite the loss of creativity, compassion and hope. To armour ourselves without self-awareness or reference to the resource of our fundamental narrative, is to truncate our own flourishing and take the first step toward violating the vulnerability of others. Richard Rohr writes of times throughout history when we projected our own sense of failure to control the world onto other individuals and groups. "We could not love the imperfection within ourselves or the natural world so how could we possibly build any bridges toward Jews, Muslims, people of color, or even other Christians? [. . .] We did not carry the cross, the tragic sense of life, but we became expert instead at imposing tragedies on others."[382]

Consideration of vulnerability has become popular, in recent years, through the work of Brené Brown. But vulnerability is much more than a societal theme; it is a theological theme and it is a theme of pastoral leadership. It is the pastoral leader's task to encourage the permeability of individuals and community to holy possibility through

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[382] Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, 1st ed (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011),62.

language and practices supported and expressed within the context of the Christian narrative. This language must be familiar to the leader and she or he must have a practice in their personal life that creates in them an ever- increasing fluency. This is not to say that fluency comes easily and steadily. It is a paradoxical growing; a stream of language arriving when one feels most inarticulate, a presence arriving from the felt absence of long stretches of prayer. What is most important is that we pay attention to the growth of fluency in and around us.

I've included in this dissertation numerous voices that speak of vulnerability's gifts and challenges. Poets and storytellers have a particular facility with this, as does the literature of contemplatives and children. But foremost for the Christian leader and community is Scripture, filled with the very ambiguities, emotions, disasters and delights we can recognize in our own lives. In this text the Transcendent infuses the gaps and disjunctions as much, or more than, the certainties. We need to engage this core narrative deeply in worship, in governance, and in the formation of all that we do together.

Walter Bruggemann writes,

> I have been thinking about the way in which the Bible is a critical alternative to the enmeshments in which we find ourselves in the church and in our society. [. . .] people live their lives by a script that is sometimes explicit but more often implicit. [. . .] At the personal level it is the practice of the script that yields [. . .] a notion of calling, a resource for security."[383]

We need to ask ourselves often, what is our "script-bestowing"[384] community.

"That alternative script as an offer of a counter-narrative – counter to the script of therapeutic, technological, consumer [market] militarism – is rooted in the Bible and

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[383] Walter Bruggemann, *Mandate to Difference*, 191.

[384] Bruggemann, *Mandate to Difference, 192.*

enacted through the tradition of the church." I *believe* in this alternative script in the sense that means I give my heart to it. Though I may assent to this or that doctrine it is to this permeable script that I devote my deeper attention. This text is one that insists on relinquishment of impervious certainties. It is a living text, not only the stories, songs and teachings expressed in the words of the Word but also the life of Jesus Christ. It is a portal through which immanence and transcendence meet and mingle.

How might this vulnerable life come to inform our denominational faith community? Much like the movements of *Lectio Divina* or AE the suggestions I propose are permeable to one another. They inform one another. It's difficult to name a starting point. We could begin in our institutions of theological formation. We could face there how hard it may be to live questions, to hold paradox, how vital it is to set boundaries, and to recognize thresholds. We could interrogate the language of outcomes. This needs to be supported by the larger faith community that is the denomination which in some areas is tied to a script of bottom lines and market impact. What might happen if the Denominational Council adopted Governance as Spiritual Practice, regularly immersing itself in "the alternative script", of Scripture as it considered the narrative of the denomination? What if the new shape of the UCC had, at the Regional Level, embedded human resources for faith formation and worship in the Regions? This would address the present and future reality of a denomination that still has numerous small congregations who increasingly will rely on lay people to provide creative ministry. This might also support imagination around new configurations of congregations that are not only practical, or necessary for survival, but also stirred and sustained by Gospel.

Though there are numerous suggestions that might be made for the wider faith community, this dissertation is primarily about how vulnerability informs pastoral leadership. Each of us, once we make the choice, will grow into well-inhabited vulnerability in our own way. We begin where we are, with our own personal experience, our own congregational experience, our own experience of the world.

What might you ask yourself? Perhaps, what brings me joy or what am I afraid of? Once you ask the question, be with your answers and then ask again. Keep asking until you reach the essential. I once went to heal for a few days by the ocean. "Next time you stand by the water" my spiritual director said, "take up some stones, each one to represent a fear or regret, and throw them prayerfully into the water". I did this with vigour and hope. I felt lightened. That evening however I was gripped by a deep fear. The next day I met my spiritual director to find she was not surprised. It was the deep fear under those closer to the surface that I needed to meet in order to heal. It was opening to that fear, arising from a deep and early wound, that heals me.

Cast your questions over and over. Cast them after meetings and while preparing the sermon. Cast them as you drive to hospital visits or as you protest injustice or as you sit with children. And then let the fear or the joy that is under them be recognized within you. Take days regularly in which you have space to be with what rises in you, without diversion. Take a week when you can. Shape your own ritual. I need to be in those spaces, and I love to create them for others.

As I end, I imagine beginnings. There are a number of future research themes emerging from this work: vulnerability and prayer; hope; ways in which the voice of small communities might inform and transform denominational self-understanding and

mission; how peacefully inhabited vulnerability might deepen the work of reconciliation, how restorative space, Sabbath space, might be provided for pastoral leaders; how the creation of autoethnographies might be used to prevent burnout or support individuals moving through the experience.

This is where we end; it is also our beginning.

You are vulnerable; you are beloved.
Your life is woven porously of those delicate, enduring filaments.
May you know it well.

Appendix One

All elements of the Appendix, except the alternate words for the hymn, are taken from a recent liturgy, the first in a series of three worships shaped around the theme, "The dances of your heart".[385] All non-footnoted material is my own writing.

Call to Worship

We are called into worship by the Beloved and in the words of the poet Hafiz.

> The earth braces itself for the feet
> Of a lover of God about to
> Dance.
>
> The sky becomes very timid
> When a great saint starts waving his arms
> In joy [. . .]
>
> For the Beloved has at last
> Opened his arms
> And is inviting my heart to eternally
> Dance.
>
> The day candle (sun) has forgotten the hour;
> The whole world has gone joyously mad.
> Look,
> The Sun's-sweet cheeks are blushing.
>
> In the middle of the night
> Desiring the rampage of the feet
> Of God's lovers.[386]

We are God's lovers and the Beloved desires the rampage of the feet of our hearts
In Christ, we are called. Amen.

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[385] Jean Wiebe Janzen, based on the writings of Mechtild of Magdeburg, *I Cannot Dance O Love,* Voices United: The Hymn and Worship Book of the United Church of Canada (Etobicoke, ON, The United Church Publishing House, 1996), 534.

[386] Hafiz, *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz The Great Sufi Master,* trans. Daniel Ladinsky, (London England, Penguin Compass, 1999), 100-101.

A more typical Call to Worship for us would be:

You in the soft waxed curve of the lily.
You in the tousled lifting of the morning.
You in the great cover of the night.
You who move in us
And call us beloved.
You who call us to love.
You Holy One
We come to worship You.[387]

Prayer of Approach

Holy One
As we come
May we bow like graceful dancers
Our hearts swept to the floor in your presence
Our bodies fluent in faith
May our sorrows be honoured
And may we rise with soft and joyful flourish
To a partnering with you.
In Jesus Christ we dance
In Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN[388]

Hymn

For the hymn Come Down O Love Divine I rewrote the words of the third verse to counter the devaluing of embodied passions in the original words.

The original words:	Rewritten verse:
O let it freely burn, Til earthly passions turn To dust and ashes in its heat consuming, And let your glorious light Shine ever on my sight And Clothe me round My onward path illuming[389]	O let it freely burn, Till earthly passions turn To their bright truth Known in Your fire's blooming. And let your holy light Shine ever on my sight and clothe me round my onward path illuming.

[389] Voices United: The Hymn and Worship Book of The United Church of Canada. Co-Chairs of Hymn and Worship Resource Committee, Nancy E. Hardy and Leonard Lythgoe. Etobicoke ON. The United Church Publishing House. 1996.

And for Advent the following example:

O Come Let Us Await Him (tune O Come All Ye Faithful)

O come all you faithful
hoping but uncertain,
O come now O come now to Bethlehem.
There where the manger
stands in straw-filled quiet,
O come let us await him,
O come let us await him
O come let us await him
with trusting hearts.

O come all you faithful,
longing but distracted.
O come now, O come now to Bethlehem.
See how the days move
softly through the stable.
O come let us await him
O come let us await him
O come let us await him
with quiet hearts.

O come all you faithful,
loss-touched but expectant,
O come now, O come now to Bethlehem.
Watch how life's straw
prepares a place for glory.
O come let us await him
O come let us await him
O come let us await him
With open hearts

Sermon

Miriam's Dance
Psalm 150, Exodus 15:20

God has spoken to the people
and the language this morning is dance.
It is in our songs and the song of the Psalmist:
Dance.
Miriam leads us this morning in the incarnate response,
the steps and twirls and dips of body and heart that blossom even in the wilderness.
Miriam is our dancer this morning,

she dances to God's call and we are her companions.

In this moment where we meet her Miriam takes a tambourine in her hand
and all the women in that long-frightened caravan of freedom seekers
head out after her
and we are with her too.
But as I lift the tambourine I hesitate,

Because we have heard a vivid verse,
set in a terrible text.

It is a burst of freedom joy,
a joy so strong it longs to find expression through the body.
It lives on the edge of the Red Sea just crossed.
But how can we share the exhilaration of Miriam and the women who companion her
and abide the words she sings,
When she tosses to us these words
Sing to YHWH who has triumphed gloriously,
who has flung horse and rider into the sea".
How can we catch these words of violence and not stumble?
How can we carry them and not hesitate?

I want the dancing but I don't want the words of Miriam's song,
"sing to YHWh, who has triumphed gloriously, who has flung horse and rider into the sea."

I want to know this as a freedom song,
not a song that celebrates the violence of God.
To pick up the tambourine and dance with Miriam
even in imagination,
I need to come to terms with her song.
Where is God in this text
and where is human understanding of God?

It seems consistent with description of God throughout Scripture that God is on the side of the oppressed
and that God is a liberating God;
liberating in response to the longing of those in contexts very different from ours;
contexts so different that we can find little correspondence with the language that they use to describe the means of their liberation.
God is liberating in contexts unlived by us.
God is liberating also in response to the longing that we ourselves feel in our bones and hearts.
Various voices mix in the text that surrounds Miriam's dance, the Song of Reeds, the song of the crossing of the Red Sea,
one voice describing God in words that rise in the text barely torn from the Baal tradition of the storm God
whose weapons were wind and flood and thunder.

And the other
a quiet emerging voice,
not so determined that their God top the gods of other nations that it must describe God in violent partial language.
This voice is found resting quietly between the more overwhelming tenor of the text,
“you led your redeemed people with your unfailing love.
With your strength you guided them to your holy pasture.
This quiet voice begins to move through the speech of violence.

Out of the violence,
even of Miriam’s song,
rises the wordless God who is the Word,
the God who cannot be captured in terms of violence
but who has called an enslaved people out of their oppression
and stayed with them even in the terrors that accompanied their liberation.
The poem at its heart praises God more steadfast than the imperial power of Egypt
or any of the repetitious imperial powers that follow it through the ages.
God is more powerful in love than all that enslaves us.
And so, with Miriam we dance.

We dance as Miriam does not only in the midst of the clashing language of the text but in the midst of the ambiguities and oppressions in this world
and in the midst of the ambiguities and clashes of which our lives are made.

All of Miriam is in the dance,

the young, discerning, confident girl
who brought her brother home from the basket in the bulrushes, gently pried from the hands of Pharoah’s daughter
and delivered to the longing hands of his true mother.
the life of the sibling,
the loving and the tangling with her brothers Moses and Aaron. In her dance is envy,
at one time an envy so bitter
it was described as leprosy,
a dis-ease that cast her from community for seven days.
In her dance is the voice of God,
coming to her in dreams and in visions,
naming her prophet of her people
not erasing, but transforming, her story.

When Miriam gets up to dance,
her whole life is in the dance,
everything hits the ground with the springing press of her foot,
everything is flung into the air with the uplifted tambourine,
everything is carried to our ears in the sharp, sweet clamour of its music.
Miriam’s life is all in the dance.
And we are her companions.

Like the voice rising out of the violence of the text,
scattering it,
comes the dance
and it carries everything we are in its freedom.
Christine Valters Paintner writes,
"like the early desert monks,
we are called to stay in the midst of wilderness for the sake of deepening into the divine mystery.
Not just to bide our time,
waiting for a way out of the messiness,
but to dance right in the midst of it,
to connect to the rhythm of life
and trust that love is the fundamental force sustaining us.. . .
It means living as if the incarnation really were true and matters deeply."

If the incarnation matters deeply then
as Miriam does we dance to the music of a God that liberates both physically from the all and spiritually from our own internal entrapments.
They are twined.
empires repetitious of Egypt,
We need attend to both.
We need to pay attention to those around us without room or sustenance to dance
and we need to pay attention to our own inner life,
turning away from neither.

Miriam dances on the edge of freedom and wilderness
and there we are dancing too;
she dances released by the primal poem of people let loose into promise.
She bends and reaches and swirls and sways,
she moves staccato and lyric.
In her energy are the blues and waltzes,
the gavottes and ballet of all she is and all she hopes.

Miriam dances the primal experience of her people's liberation
and the interior movements of her own life's heart.
And it is one.
Where in the world does the music call us?
Where in our heart do we dance?

<u>Prayers of the People</u>

As we imagine and move and think about dance this morning it seems right that our prayer have some recognition of our embodiment.
So I invite you this morning into a prayer of the hands.
As we begin, I invite you to take the index or middle finger of one hand and place it gently and firmly on the centre of the palm of your other hand.

Rest it there for a moment and then move it in a small slow intentional circle around the centre. This is a site of blessing.
This is a place in which your body may offer and sense openness to the touch of God.

Reverse this now, taking the index or middle finger of one hand, placing it gently and firmly on the centre of the palm of your other hand.
Rest it there for a moment and then move it in a small slow intentional circle around the centre. This is a site of blessing. This is a place in which your body may offer and sense openness to the touch of God.

Rest now with your hands palms upward in your lap.
Be conscious of their centre, prepared by your own intention.
Bring to mind a stress, or a decision or a blessing that lives in you.
Feel it in the palms of your hand.
And sense God's stirring there, in the palms of your hand,
in the centre the press of God's loving intention to all you bring.

Now imagine held in your palms, gently laid for a moment

Situations in the world
The ongoing work of reconciliation with aboriginal peoples

attentiveness to further practices of cultural and religious prejudice seen in our country

the sense of desperation in Greece

those in areas of BC and Saskatchewan affected by wildfires, those forced to leave their homes, those who provide them shelter and those who work to contain the fires

those who live with chronic illness

Ongoing strife and struggle in the Middle East and those who work for peace
our denomination in the days leading up to General Council on August 20th

those with whom you disagree, those with whom you feel conflict
our congregation as we grow as a community of faith

Pray that you may carry the memory of God's touch into this week,
That your heart may be informed by the wisdom given to your body
Through this simple prayer.
That you may be called over and over to the wisdom you have known.

Gently bring your palms together and give thanks.
In Jesus' name. Amen.[390]

[390] Catherine Smith, July 12, 2015

Appendix Two

Lectio Divina

The words next to the Latin are not translations but distillations of the essence of the movement.

<u>*Oratio*</u> (Read)
Begin with reading, stopping when a word or phrase "shimmers[391]*," or has a particular energy for you. This energy may be strong or faint. The intent is not to stay with the passage to its end but to let yourself be caught by whatever word or phrase shimmers. It may be a joyful shimmering or sorrowful, it may hold comfort or disturbance. It might evoke attraction or resistance. Listen with your heart."Receive the words of this sacred text as though they were a love letter written from God to you in this very moment of your life."* [392]

<u>*Meditatio*</u> (Reflect)
Savour the word that has been given you. Holding it tenderly let feelings, images and memories rise from its stirring in you. Reflect with heart, mind and body on how this touches your life, a meaning it might have for you, for the larger community, for creation. Don't force a meaning. Trust that it will emerge in God's own time.

<u>*Oratio*</u> (Respond)
Let the reflection of Meditatio bring you to the threshold of active prayer, to Oratio. What conversation with God does your reflection prompt? Does it form within you a worded prayer?

<u>*Contemplatio*</u> (Rest)
Our active spontaneous prayer opens us to Contemplatio, the deep space of silence and stillness. We let go of our words. We trust. in this stage the previous movements are gathered up, in this state of deep receptivity, all that has come before is both surrendered and held.

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[391] Christine Valters Paintner, *Lectio Divina: The Sacred Art: Transforming Words & Images into Heart-Centered Prayer*, (Woodstock: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2011), 3-10.

[392] Paintner, *Lectio Divina*.

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