



Vulnerability, Linkages, Vigilance

The great lesson of the pandemic

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Vulnerability, linkage (by our mutual dependence and solidarity) and responsibility (or vigilance) are the basis of our condition as human beings and the key to our development. These three Vs¹ should be for us the guides for reading our present well and for acting in a way that might be, at the same time, universal and practical, in our work as much as in all of the areas of life.

This essay tries to make these three initials visible in our image human beings:

- We human beings are vulnerable, weak and fragile.
- We depend on each other and we are linked to one another.
- Our conscience calls all of us to a universal responsibility (with regard to ourselves, with regard to others and with regard to the world).

I will attempt to give to our vision a broad framework that underscores the three cited features and which emphasizes that most humble and secure aspect of human existence. We need an image of a human being which is valid for the future and globally liberating, which integrates the present and the future in a way that is ever more interconnected and feminine. It should also fulfill the image which was born from Anglo-American values (individuality, self-determination and personal development) which has become a fundamental part of our way of thinking.

I write while being conscious of my social responsibility, not only as a sensitive person confronted with the pain of my era, or as a psychological counselor of transactional analysis. I also write as a Christian theologian for whom the three selected concepts are fundamental. I think about that “vulnerability of God”

in our history, which has become visible through Jesus, the crucified Son of God. I also think about the Christian ethical/social orientation, about responsible love for our neighbor, about universal fraternity and social friendship that transcend old local and political frontiers and which join us to everyone equally as sons and daughters of God.

In every vision of a human being there come together some fundamental (or perhaps implicit) orientations which mold our conduct and our convictions. We are now looking for a vision of a human being which is adapted to our situation and to our epoch, which does justice to the reality of our existence in this belated modernity.

Vulnerability

Human vulnerability can be perceived from the first glance. A human being lacks “tree bark” (that hard and thick skin which sometimes it is recommended for us to have), it lacks feathers and a shell, it is unprotected. A human’s skin is hypersensitive. That makes us radically different from all the mammals to whose genus we belong biologically. Human bodies are all structurally fragile. Add to that its progressive defenselessness and the possibility of being wounded.

Already in our infancy we are at maximum vulnerability. A breast-feeding child depends totally on being linked to others and their taking responsibility, and that relational dependence of the infant configures our being human. The same vulnerability afterwards affects the individual, above all in old age (that today includes almost a third of one’s life). I believe that those stages in life of

particular vulnerability (infancy and old age) call us to a greater comprehension of human fragility.

Leonardo da Vinci, with his figure of the Vitruvian man, imprinted on our history the image of a manly-man, supported only by himself, complete and not needing anyone else. It is the figure of a masculine body, well proportioned, well formed, in the middle of a circle and a square. He is an autonomous abstract individual who never tires or gets old, who does not suffer hunger or die. That masculine dignity that resided in the power of the man as the basis for the “free man and citizen”, has been the paradigm for our present.²

But vulnerability leaves a mark not only on an individual’s body, but also on his spirit. Siegfried Lenz, a German writer from the post-war era of the 20th century wrote a short story (*The Night in a Hotel*) in which he talks about the “soul of glass” of a young man whose father toils away and worries about him without ceasing. “I say that he is completely sane, but he is in danger. That poor greedy man has a soul of glass and for that reason he lives as one who is threatened.” (p. 3 et seq.).

The protection of every person (both the most tender and in need of being cared for in our society and those who are particularly threatened in the rest of the world) calls upon our image of a human being for aid. And today, in a world like ours with more publicity and more possibilities, it ought to be converted into a universal human right. The pain and the neediness of victims, as much that of those who arrive at our houses thanks to the communications media (refugees who are searching for some country that will take them in, victims of war and

of climate change), as also that of those invisible children who tolerate poverty or domestic violence, questions a social contract that is not disposed toward creating any universal and efficacious human rights.

The extraordinary fragility and sensitivity of human beings is like a question about their protection. In my opinion, we are lacking models for protecting people. It rather seems like the goal is not ever to need caretakers. Nevertheless, I believe that the capacity for being wounded and the necessity of protection are fundamental themes of our existence.

Linkages

Nothing of what I have and what I am, nothing of my patterns of conduct, do I owe to myself. Everything has developed from relationship and dependency. And I ought to be grateful to others, both from a biological point of view and an existential one. Although a baby may be separated from the breast of its mother, it is entrusted to the affective interchange with the persons with whom it has a relationship.

In spite of the growing number of possibilities for configuration along our journey to maturity, I maintain that our conception of autonomy and freedom should be seen as an ever-closer relationship with that universal experience of being entrusted to others and tied existentially to them. From a biological point of view, the individual human, as an animal that has few physical gifts, is only able to survive thanks to the interventions of the community.

There are images that come from the 12th century and the late Middle Ages

which are based on the visions which in her day were described by Hildegard of Bingen and which speak to us even today. For example, the so-called “circle of life” evokes an image of the world and of a human being that joins together with the rhythms of nature and its annual time cycles and corresponds to the passage of life from birth to death. There are men who swim in sync with the beating of the universe, covered by a green belt. This green belt symbolizes an important concept in the theology of Hildegard, “the green power” (*die Grunkraft*) which expresses the power of life and the power of God in which all is steeped. With the language of transactional analysis, we would simply speak about nature (*Physis*).

All living organisms or beings have their origin, they are maintained alive, they develop and they perish by means of processes of exchange, both material and energetic (“spiritual”). These are processes that take place as much in the interior of the organism as in relation to its environment. Within that dynamic interaction, we human beings can negotiate in a healthy way a series of loving and sensitive encounters which are a true experience for those who participate in them.

Vigilance

The word vigilance (responsibility) includes the disposition and the will to respond to another. That holds true both in German (*Antwort*) and in the romance languages.

This relational aspect is present in the three words of our title, but it needs to be emphasized more in dealing with

responsibility. It is certainly true that accompaniments and therapies help us to perceive and confront pernicious collective entanglements, but that attention should not lead us to a mentality which invites us to get out of our responsibility toward others and to open up too much space for individualistic inclinations. The thin skin of the human animal makes possible an enormous sensitivity which translates into the “power to be touched” psychologically. The possibility of being hurt and the capacity for empathy call us to a consciousness of our social responsibility and an obedience to our impulses toward compassion and dialog.

It is required of us human beings to be careful and to assume mutual responsibilities. We are beings provided with both great bodily necessity and magnificent resources so that we can put ourselves at the service of others in a responsible and bold manner. And this is valid in both the personal area as in the political arena. Planet Earth is calling us to a collective responsibility toward Mother Earth and for the survival of all forms of life.

In the processes of change today, we will be able to mold all the vital spaces when our ability to live together is marked more by solidarity and care than by rivalry and competitiveness, more by confidence than by lack of confidence and hostility.

Conclusion

I am advocating for a type of human being with eyes wide open toward vulnerability, linkages and responsibility. Also, with eyes wide open toward fragility, both of the planet and of each individual. We human beings are mutually responsible to the extent that we depend on each other and we are linked to each other, as much in the ecological sphere as in the areas of economics, politics, health, technology and information.

Such an interior attitude, oriented toward the welfare of everyone else and of the world, is much more valid in a present like ours that is characterized by the sacrifice of a part of humanity in the name of benefit to those who live totally as they please and this at a time when it is not technically possible that everyone can have access to the basic means of life.

And this attitude is fundamental in these days of the coronavirus which makes us feel in a special way the significance of our three words (vulnerability, linkages vigilance), these days in which each one is threatened to be contaminated by the other or to be the contaminator of another. Nevertheless, we have to find creatively the ways to maintain our contacts that allow us to continue relating to one another with caution.

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1. [Translator’s note] This article was originally written in German which talks about three Vs (*Verwundbarkeit, Verbundenheit, Verantwortung*). In the title in Castilian, the translator made use of the word “vigilancia” in order to preserve the initials. He substituted in the text the word “responsibility” for the sake of clarity and expressiveness. In English, I have not tried to maintain the initials of the German or Castilian; I am following the Castilian text.
2. See LAGUNA, José (2020). *Vulnerable Bodies. Caring As a Political Horizon*, Barcelona: Cristianisme i Justícia, Booklets no. 177.
3. Nora Borrís Borrís is German and certified in Transactional Analysis. She has been a Protestant pastor and she studied a semester of her theology curriculum in the Centre Borja in St. Cugat del Valles. The original of this article (*Verwundbarkeit, Verbundenheit, Verantwortung*) will be published in *Zeitschrift für Transaktionsanalyse* in February, 2021. Translation and condensation into Castilian by Jose Ignacio Gonzalez Faus.