

Authority + Vulnerability = Integrity

John 18:36-38a

(Pilate and Jesus have very different notions of a “king’s” authority.)

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If you spent 6 months sometime during your life researching African elephants, then likely for the rest of your life you’d pay attention to news reports about African elephants. Well, for a number of months, years ago, I researched the concept of “authority” because I was asked to lead a discussion on authority with United Methodist clergy in Ohio. Events over this past year often drew my attention to the ethics of “authority,” so I wanted to share with you some of the reflections that came to mean a lot to me. I decided that Labor Day week-end was a good time for this topic.

After looking at the subject from various perspectives, I emerged with an equation that made sense, at least to me: **Authority + Vulnerability = Integrity.**

We could point to business leaders, politicians, or religious leaders to reflect upon this equation, but it’s usually safest to look to the world of sports! Tiger Woods provides us with one example. Everyone knew Tiger was authoritative in golf. However, evidently most of us, and perhaps he himself, thought Tiger was not vulnerable. So when his vulnerability was revealed to the populace as well as to himself--it was shocking.

Referees and umpires, whether in soccer, baseball, or elsewhere have authority. What they say goes. Yet, within the past few months millions watched a first base umpire blow a call and consequently, a pitcher’s perfect game. Similarly, millions of us witnessed several wrong calls by referees at the soccer World Cup this summer. The difference between the baseball umpire’s error and the World Cup referees’ errors was that the umpire saw his mistake, after the fact, felt terrible, and to everyone’s surprise apologized to the pitcher publically. He was willing to name his vulnerability, and what happened? His integrity in the eyes of fans grew. In contrast, the soccer refs, collectively, seemed to hold doggedly to their authority, admitting no vulnerability. In fact, the soccer organization FIFA turned off the huge video in the stadiums so referees’ errors would not be so obvious.

Regardless of our line of work or our area of volunteerism, we all take on authority.

My first serious thoughts on authority, and vulnerability, came when I was serving my first church. It was 1978. I had just been serving the church for several months, and I was missing a number of phone calls. People would tell me that they had tried calling the church, but I was not there. The secretary was only in the office in the mornings, so when I made pastoral visits, usually in the afternoon, no one was at church to answer the phone. I thought that I should receive the calls people were making, so I asked our Administrative Board to purchase an answering machine. (If you are not old enough to remember 1978, believe it or not, telephone answering machines were relatively new then.) I came to the meeting prepared with a cost analysis. At the Ad Board meeting I was told that we did not need the machine. The church members had

gotten along quite well for 80 years without one. For the four years I served that church, we had no answering machine.

A couple years later at that same church, two older women made a request of me. These women were devout Christians and had been in the church for years. One woman's son was a minister and the other one was Japanese American, born into a Buddhist family, but she had chosen to be Christian. They came, together, asking me to baptize them--again. You see, each of them had been baptized, but under unusual circumstances when they were too young to have any recollection. They had searched the scriptures, and it was clear to them that it was acceptable to baptize them as consenting adults, again. I called my District Superintendent to discuss their request, as I was dutiful. You see, in the United Methodist Church, we clergy are to tell parishioners that one baptism is fine--we do not baptize people "again." (I know clergy who failed their ordination exams just because they indicated openness to baptizing people "again.")

My District Superintendent, in effect, my "boss," told me it was my decision, but that he thought it was very important for me *to hear the needs of the women and to be open to God's guidance.*

Both of these events were challenges to my ministerial authority. In one case, I was working cooperatively with the Ad Board. In the other case, I was in a sense "alone with God."

Did I baptize the two women? I did what my caring "boss" suggested: I listened to the needs of the women and was open to God's guidance. I baptized them.

The definition of authority I find most useful is so long that I put it on the cover of our bulletin. Even though it's long, I think that it is beautiful: "Authority is a relational bond that leads persons to give assent without coercion or persuasion because they find security in the real or imagined strength of others. Authority inspires obedience because persons consider those in authority to have legitimate power based on their ability to act for the common good."¹

I had assumed that receiving telephone calls was a necessity for a dedicated pastor who wanted to act for the common good. This is what working together taught me: the Administrative Board *also* had authority, based on *their* ability to act for the common good. When I witnessed their decision, I realized that I was *vulnerable*. (I admit that my realization of vulnerability followed a brief period of anger.) I still do not completely understand their point of view, but we respected each other and we each gained *integrity* as we sought honestly to hear each other's perspectives. I learned, too, that they did not expect me to be "super-pastor," knowing immediately what people wanted.

In baptizing the women, again, I claimed my authority, knowing I was not following the precise guidelines of Methodism, because I truly believed the spiritual well-being of the two women superseded those guidelines.

At our ordination we clergy are told, by our Bishop, this phrase: "Take Thou Authority." Over the years, we can easily feel alone with our authority. However, this taking on authority is not only given to ministers. Teachers take on authority. People who clean houses take on authority. People at ESRI, lifeguards, Administrative Assistants, strawberry pickers and volunteers--those who serve as Office Angels, for example--every one of us, in our various roles of "labor"--whether paid or volunteer--takes on authority.

I believe we have a choice. We can accept the ethos that is sometimes prevalent: "I have authority. I ought to be respected. I ought to be considered right. And I ought to

do this job by myself--just like I'm imagining my colleagues are managing by themselves." Or, we can choose an alternate path. We can acknowledge the fact that we are *vulnerable even while we "take authority."*

We enjoy life and are a lot happier—and perhaps we are more ethical—if we think of the *GOAL as having integrity rather than having authority--for authority without integrity does not build up community. A community of faith needs to be built up. All communities, even families, need to be built up.*

I encourage you to ponder your own situation to see whether this equation fits for you: Authority + Vulnerability = Integrity. Think of this not only in relation to your labor pursuits, but also in your relationships--as parents, friends, and colleagues...

There are many notions about vulnerability, so let me tell you how I think of it. Vulnerability means "sensitive to influence." Vulnerability refers both to sensitivity to external sources as well as sensitivity to one's own inner dimensions: one's emotions, dreams, intuition, etc.

MOST IMPORTANT: Vulnerability is strength; it's not a weakness. To be sensitive to others and to ones own inner wisdom is strength.

Now let us imagine that our Staff Parish Relations Committee were to write on the annual reports about Karen or me as ministers, "pastor is sensitive to criticism." I venture to say that we might be slightly embarrassed. We would wonder, "Did I cry in public?" "Was I defensive when someone suggested a new idea?" Certainly a Staff Parish committee may mean that, but let's hear the comment again, "Pastor is sensitive to criticism." With new ears, we can hear that as a *compliment*. When criticism is given, the pastor sensitively hears and attends to that criticism. It's the same with family members. A sister could be appreciated because she is "sensitive to the influence, including any criticism," of her siblings. The sensitivity that's related to vulnerability is not being "thin-skinned," but more like being "attentive," "empathic"; it's being "open." Parents can be responsive to the reactions of our children while still having authority.

I am using the term "integrity" to mean not only honesty and sincerity, but also to convey a kind of spiritual wholeness.

So, this equation (Authority + Vulnerability = Integrity) means:
Having strength to promote the common good **plus** having strength to be sensitive to influence **yields** a sincere and genuine wholeness.

It takes courage to be vulnerable.

It takes courage to take authority.

Some of us, in our various roles, have difficulty taking authority, whereas some of us have quite a challenge being vulnerable. You probably know which you have more difficulty with--taking authority or being vulnerable. Yet, to have integrity in our labors and relationships, like it or not, we really need to have both. We need to balance the equation. We cannot shy away from taking authority whether we are artists, parents, or salespeople, and we are likely to be rather lonely if we do not acknowledge our vulnerability, whether we are artists, parents or salespeople.

Jesus was authoritative, but he did not live out his authority as people expected a "king" would act. He was responsive. You might say he was a "humble" "king" who related vulnerably to people who were supposedly "above" him as well as "below" him. Jesus was a man par excellence of integrity.

Tiger Woods, and millions of people, seemed to think that Woods was not vulnerable. So, when his vulnerability was displayed so dramatically, not only millions of golf enthusiasts, but also perhaps he himself was surprised. He admits now he has internal work to do to balance his equation and we hope, especially for him, that he achieves integrity. Jim Joyce was the baseball umpire who made a huge mistake and called a runner safe who was clearly out, when reviewed on the video replay. His wrong call ruined the pitcher's "perfect game." Joyce displayed immense integrity, however, as he publically asked the pitcher's forgiveness. In contrast, the referee of the U.S. vs. Slovenia game disallowed a goal made by the U.S. midfielder² without any explanation to anyone. That referee's integrity is shaky, given his apparent unwillingness to acknowledge his vulnerability.

You and I are Tiger Woods striving for integrity as we are forced to deal with our vulnerability. You and I are Jim Joyce, with integrity as we honestly face our vulnerability. And you and I are the vulnerability-denying referee when we insist we are right just "because we say so."

We are less famous, thank goodness, but we all deal with this equation in our own labors and relationships. Fortunately we have each other, so as we are responsive to each other we can be wiser as families, as faith communities, even as countries than we would be if we were acting for the common good alone.

May we "take authority." No matter how difficult that may be, we are expected to do that in our various roles. Yet may we take our authority humbly, responsively. If everyone did that, there'd be a whole lot of integrity goin' round.

¹ Richard Sennet

² Midfielder Maurice Edu