

4.8 Accepting Vulnerability – Demonstrating Generosity

Leading in education makes room for vulnerability, present in life-giving relationships, pastoral care, and processes such as supervision, mentoring and coaching. Leaders recognise the importance of mutual support and encouragement and create hospitable environments in which students and adults feel able to be vulnerable, thus deepening their connection with one another. They lead generously, supporting an economy of grace and collaboration within and between institutions, and they look outwards, using their limited resources, time, money and expertise in line with their vision.

Accepting Vulnerability

Vulnerability can lead to being hurt: in the sting of the short term, and the lingering pain of the long. Through vulnerability, leaders show that they care, and that their teams matter, but it is risky. It is an appeal for understanding, trust, gentleness, and a matching response, but these may not be given. Yet, when the risk is taken and the response does match, there can be a quantum leap in trust, solidarity and energy. We do not always expect our leaders to be vulnerable, yet the releasing realism of this stands at the heart of the Christian message.

Jesus lived vulnerably. He was born poor, soon became a refugee, and during his ministry had no fixed home. He went around teaching, healing, forgiving, and controversially relating to those who were marginal, powerless, or outcast. He gathered disciples, offered them teaching and friendship, and opened himself to their misunderstanding, denial and betrayal. He challenged the rich and powerful, and those who dominated the religious and political institutions, exposing himself to their enmity. He wept over Jerusalem and at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, and pleaded with his disciples to watch with him as he agonised in Gethsemane. The humiliation and violence of the cross bring all this to its greatest intensity.

That might seem to prove the failure of a life of vulnerable love, but the good news of the gospel is that it is not the last word. Through his resurrection, the sharing of his Spirit, and the transformation of his followers he inspires others to risk living

in humble service and love, challenging the dominance of invulnerable toughness, violence, hardheartedness, ‘might is right’, and those who fail to recognise the preciousness and dignity of each person. This includes those who are weak, sick, bereaved and mourning, poor, very young, very old, or very different.

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) distils the wisdom of this way, in which it is conceivable to turn the other cheek when struck, to love enemies, to pray for those who persecute us, to be free of anxiety about food, drink and clothes, and to do to others as we would have them do to us. The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-11) headline not only the importance of risky vulnerability but also the overwhelming blessings that come to those who persevere in this way:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek [the Greek word, *praeis*, also means gentle and humble], for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God”.

1. What can we learn as leaders from the example of Jesus’ vulnerability in his story?
2. To what extent do you think your team is vulnerable with one another, and what difference does it make to your relationships when they are? What are the challenges of a lack of vulnerability for the trust of a team?
3. How do you resonate with Paul’s image of ‘treasures in jars of clay’? What could you draw from this picture for yourself and your colleagues?
4. Where is the balance between having the highest standards, and also developing self-compassion in your leadership?

There is no suggestion that such exposure in, for example, gentleness, a passion for justice, or showing compassion, is cost-free or always successful in the short term, but there is a trust that it leads to comfort, full life, deep peace and joy, and communities where all can flourish. And the tragic costs of the alternatives, such as hardheartedness and invulnerability, brutality, indifference, injustice, mercilessness, and endless bitterness and conflict, are far, far greater. To be with Jesus as he says, “I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:29), is to lead one’s life in a different way.

Paul’s frank letters are themselves an exposure to rejection and disappointment, as he appeals

passionately to his churches and agonises in his love and pastoral care for them. And this was backed up by his willingness to expose himself to imprisonment, floggings, and multiple dangers, adding: “...we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side but not crushed; perplexed but not in despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” (2 Corinthians 4:7-8). Such concern, empathy, and fellow-feeling to the point of identification are marks of a leader whose exercise of authority includes being in vulnerable solidarity with his or her community, shown by pastoral care, mentoring and other sensitive school practices.

Demonstrating Generosity

The remarkable description of an economy of generosity given by Paul in 2 Corinthians 8-9 succeeds both in being inspired by the gospel (2 Corinthians 8:9) and being realistic about available resources and what can lovingly and fairly be achieved in that situation. In the culminating encouragement of generosity, the giving of money is taken up into a whole ecology of mutual support, thanks, prayer and love. God is both the source of abundance and “loves a cheerful giver”. There is trust that “the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully”. (2 Corinthians 9:6-15)

Being generous runs similar risks to behaving vulnerably, since there is no guarantee of a positive response, let alone active participation in the desired ecology of mutuality and interdependence. Meanness, selfishness, and refusal to share or risk can block the dynamics of generosity and restrict the community’s flourishing. Perhaps the scarcest resources of all are time and high-quality attention, and the leader is constantly having to make difficult decisions about diary priorities, just how much time should be given to whom and to what, and how patient to be. As with other desirable activity, practical demonstrations of generosity need to be weighed against other claims on time, energy and resources, but there is a great

difference between those schools where leaders are open to generosity whenever possible and those with a tighter, more anxious, or more restrictive attitude. The creation of an atmosphere in which volunteering, doing more than the minimum required, taking time with each other, hospitable relationships, warm encouragement, forgiveness, and other signs of generosity found among pupils requires a similar atmosphere among teaching and other staff.

A school takes decisions about relations with parents, the local community, nearby and overseas schools, charities, and many other bodies it is involved with. The quality and spirit of these engagements are key elements in demonstrating how important generosity beyond the interpersonal level is for how our society can flourish, and in modelling for pupils what good citizenship and courageous advocacy looks like.

The counterpart to generosity is gratitude, and, as Paul knew, the practice of giving thanks “in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:17) creates the atmosphere in which generosity thrives. School worship is a place where this can be expressed regularly, and where the abundant generosity of God in creation, history, and the gift of each person can be appreciated.

1. How does it feel when someone is generous towards you as an individual or organisation? How could the attitude of giving help our entire system to flourish?
2. What do you have to give? Do you know anyone who is in need?
3. What are you grateful for as a leader, and how could you foster a discipline of thankfulness as part of your meeting patterns? What is the relationship between gratitude and generosity?
4. What does the concept of a ‘generous God’ mean to you, and how might that shape your actions as a leader?