Communality and Vulnerability

Joe Osburn

The thoughts I want to offer in this article about the role of communality in the life of vulnerable people draw heavily on the teaching of Dr Wolf Wolfensberger, the writings and example of Jean Vanier, and my own involvement with families over the years.

To begin with, we need to acknowledge that anyone who lives is vulnerable, in the sense that human life encompasses both the risk and the reality of some kind of hurt. No one on this earth ever lives a life free of any painful experiences. Thus, some vulnerability is a normative part of the human condition. At the same time, let us also acknowledge that some people are far, far more vulnerable than others. In fact, the entire life existence of some people is one of "heightened vulnerability" which means not only that they have probably already been wounded in the first place, but are also more likely to be wounded again and again, and with wounds that are deeper, life-defining, and inescapable. For example, some people are likely to experience the rejection or even abhorrence of other people throughout their lifetime. Thus, not only do many people experience a greater *degree* of vulnerability but also a totally different *kind* of vulnerability, one which transforms the course of their lives, and creates fundamental existential differences between them and their fellow (normatively-vulnerable) human beings.

Therefore, when I use the term "vulnerable people", I am not talking about everyone. I am talking, rather, about groups and individuals who are especially likely to be wounded in some way because of life conditions or personal qualities that are not valued in and by society. Included are people who are poor, elderly, chronically ill, physically or mentally impaired, and many others.

If one believes in heightened vulnerability, then one would have to conclude that devalued people are and always will be vulnerable, regardless. This conclusion has two big implications for people who are genuinely concerned about certain individual vulnerable people. One is that they have no sound basis for complacency about any social arrangement for vulnerable people, including all the living situations, work schemes, and educational structures, all the laws, systems, departments, agencies, and programs. The other implication is that they should always be inclined to look critically at any such social arrangement for vulnerable people. Unfortunately, the very kinds of social arrangements so often looked to with great hope by so many people often have long records of poorly addressing the needs of vulnerable people (or of inflicting great harm upon them), such as the following sources:

The Government - which has become more depersonalised, in spite of many people's belief that it is the one thing they can always count on. Also, government is notoriously fickle, as is now being exemplified by governments all over the Western world racing to dismantle their long-established social supports, thereby abdicating both their rightful role of protecting their most vulnerable citizens, and even the very ideal of doing so.

The Law - which is quite limited, in that it cannot enforce goodwill in people's hearts and thus "good laws" may often accomplish little more than unintended negative responses toward the people they are meant to help (e.g. "backlash").

Professionals - whose allegiance is always demanded by the social structures which sanction their professional roles, even when that ultimately brings harm to vulnerable people. Families talk about how hard it is to find a "good" doctor, therapist, social worker, teacher etc., by which they often mean nothing more than one who will listen, really listen, to them.

Business - an icon of the new "economic rationalism", which glorifies the creation of great wealth for corporate managers of nursing homes, prisons, psychiatric centres, community residences, schools and hospitals, and commodifies vulnerable people.

The Community - which, in human service parlance, is meant to convey the idea of an open, integrated lifestyle in the midst of others, sharing common access with fellow citizens in valued opportunities to live, work, go to school, recreate, shop and so forth. Community is often contrasted with "institution", which connotes an existence in a closed, controlled setting, separate from the valued world. At best, one might be able to say with some degree of confidence that vulnerable people are generally better off in the community, but community presence in and of itself is no guarantee of their safety, nor of their well-being, nor especially of their experience of the good things in life.

In spite of major flaws in so many relied-upon social arrangements, there is also a natural tendency to seek out good and to push for change. In part, this is a question of strategy.

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Where do we put our energy? What might be most good? What might we be able to rely upon most? The strength of any social arrangement depends on how the people involved care for one another. For vulnerable people, the strongest social arrangements are <u>always</u> found where valued (relatively non-vulnerable) people have made personal relationship commitments to them. Therefore, one of the very best strategies must be to form small communalities of committed people around vulnerable members.

There are many examples of such communal arrangements. Some are very small and local. Others are larger, such as the l'Arche movement of handicapped and non-handicapped people living together, inspired by Jean Vanier. Many parents have come to realise that the best answer to their question, "What will happen to my child after I'm gone?" is to build up long-term relationship commitments between their child and family members, friends, advocates, and other valued people who, by intention, form a communality of interpersonal relationships committed to the person's welfare.

Ideally, such communalities can have the following qualities:

- A communality of people who have made intentional relationship commitments to one another can engender and nurture in its members a longing for one another's well-being.

- As relationships are developed, an authentic interpersonal identification can take place between members of the communality, in which members invest themselves in other members.

- In communalities, members achieve "standing" in one another's lives, in which there is much latitude for trust, credibility, and acting on behalf of one another.

- Communalities are joined together in a genuine interdependency in which the communality itself is the first line of defence for vulnerable members.

- Communality rests upon mutuality among members based on an understanding that all are in-this-together, that each member has certain obligations to the other members, and that all have something essentially important to contribute to one another and to the community as a whole.

In spite of the fact that some communalities may be small, and comprised of ordinary, imperfect people, they often are very resilient and have great power to address the needs of their vulnerable members. Reasons for these strengths include: most communalities have very clear reasons why they exist; while they are not free of the conflicts-of-interest that plague virtually all social arrangements, they are much freer of them than most others; and they are very good at renewal, which they accomplish in some of the following ways:

- **Taking stock and learning.** Good communalities are always asking themselves "how are we doing? how can we do better?". Informal means of doing this are used almost daily and are often nothing more complicated than just talking things over with someone. On a formal basis, this kind of questioning is often done through external evaluations.

- **Explicit commitment.** One very powerful means of strengthening the communality is to provide regular occasions for its members to explicitly renew their commitment. For example, in some communities where this is done, members may make commitments of one year, three years, or a lifetime.

- **Hospitality.** Many or most communalities are not "closed" in the sense of being self-absorbed or unwelcoming to outsiders. On the contrary, they are open and welcoming because the multiplicity of members offers so many points of human contact and natural opportunities for inclusion.

- **Celebration.** Good communalities are very keen on having fun, on recognising and imparting joy, and are able to find good reasons for getting together to do this (birthdays, commemorations, trips, meals and outings of all kinds). In these ways, communalities develop and mark their own customs and traditions.

At their best, communalities make manifest the inherent value of being in relation to people who are likely to be rejected and devalued. Their existence is irrefutable testimony that the value of at least these (and, by extension, all) vulnerable people is recognised and deeply appreciated, and thus has a claim on all of us. Such an example indeed offers hope where it is much needed.