

Chapel Talk
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John McGiff

Your Vulnerabilities are your Greatest Strengths.

As an undergraduate at SUNY Purchase, an art school just north of NYC, I took many classes that taught me the techniques of making images, different processes like building sculptures in clay and bronze, paintings in oil and watercolor, prints made from wood, and copper plate as well as drawings from every imaginable material. I soon discovered, however, that I didn't care about technical virtuosity unless it helped me to tell a story. I wanted my work to be the result of an interaction- with a place, a person or an idea. Art became the medium through which I filtered my feelings and reflections and what it led me to was the understanding that I didn't understand much- about the nature of light and color, about how to appreciate and capture a person's genuine character, or about how to translate my sensations into true expressions of what I saw. I realized that the language of art was meaningless to me unless I could harness it to a patient and deliberate attitude about looking at the world around me. But try as I might, I couldn't sit still. At the age of 19, my emotions, seemingly propelled by outside forces, would swing up and down as wildly as the Griffin, a roller coaster that Olivia and Aidan rode this summer that had a 200 ft vertical drop with no floor to grind your feet into. I didn't make a habit of screaming as loudly as they did each time they rode that crazy thing, but I knew I wasn't in control of my life and that I needed help in unraveling the forces that worked to unmoor me so. I began seeing a psychiatrist named Saim Akin, a Turkish gentleman from Istanbul and I became part of a peer therapy group of young dancers, artists and writers, all of us committed to getting a handle on what made us tick. During our group sessions, Dr Akin challenged us to drop our natural inhibitions and to be frank with one another- to be willing to share our most personally difficult moments with the belief that by revealing this human, fallible side with others it would not diminish us but would, in fact, make us feel more balanced and confident. Besides our weekly meetings we also engaged in several 12 hr long marathon workshops designed to wear down our social

barriers and what a miracle unfolded as I found that I respected my peers the more I knew about their griefs, their hopes, their regrets and challenges and that they returned this new estimation of me in kind. Dr. Akin chanted this mantra to us with regularity: "Your vulnerabilities are your greatest strengths." At first I couldn't wrap my head around this idea because the phrase sounds like a contradiction: strength is perceived as the power to dominate and vulnerability is an opening in one's protective armor, so how could one possibly be understood as the other? How can courting the softness in our nature lead us anywhere but into trouble, and how can strength be anything other than the forceful expression of the will to succeed? We sense that if we show our vulnerability then we are more likely to die- and death has so many guises for us- fear of failure, of defeat, of rejection. We hear our leaders talk about the qualities that we need as a nation to survive in a hostile world and vulnerability is certainly not a quality that is publicly embraced. Qualities of resilience and fortitude are repeatedly held up to us as model virtues but I would argue that we turn just as forcefully to figures that reveal an openness in their nature, an honest fallibility, imperfection.

At the tenth anniversary of her death, the Princess of Wales has not faded a bit from our collective imagination. Many of you were too young then to remember the incredible response of millions of people who had never known Princess Diana except through her appearance in the media. It's estimated that over 2.5 billion people watched her funeral. There were mountains of flowers piled at the gates of Buckingham Palace and the tears of untold strangers watered the streets of London. The recent movie, The Queen, brilliantly captures the global fascination and grief that followed Diana's death. Her life was conducted on the public stage and, partly because of the openness of her nature, and partly because of the intrusiveness of the media, we were able to witness her daily struggles in their entire human dimension. She was the emissary of a royal family that didn't approve of her outgoing, confessional nature or her passion for reaching out to others. As her brother mentioned in his funeral oration, Diana connected with people through their shared sense of suffering, whether this was with land-mined victims throughout the world or the aids victims she publicly embraced. Every where she went, Diana was followed by packs of aggressive paparazzi news photographers – not just on

her cultural missions but also to the ski slopes with her family, to the beach, to the gym, to the shops, dinner. As she dealt with rejection by her Royal in-laws and her marriage fell apart, the entire world tuned in to watch. There was *The Divorce*, a succession of abbreviated relationships, her efforts to see her sons who remained in the palace or at boarding school- all splashed across the tabloids on a daily basis. In a review of a book written by two of the photographers whose sole job it was to trail 'DI', it reads:

“ Mr. Saunders and Mr. Harvey describe how their entire professional life revolved around photographing the Princess of Wales, day after day no matter what she did or what she said. With words that evoke the brutal language of sexual assault, they use ‘doing Di’ to mean taking pictures of Diana; ‘to bang’, ‘to blitz’, ‘to hose’, ‘to rip’, ‘to smudge’, ‘to whack’ are all ways of saying to take pictures rapidly.”

Our appetite for watching other people go about the business of their private lives from the relatively safety of our offices and homes has become ever more obsessive, given the availability of images and video on the Internet. The motives behind this tidal wave of national voyeurism are not, however, really that different from what has always been our fascination with what the neighbors are doing and how others are managing to get by. We parade the lives of celebrities across our global retina like the ancient Greeks followed their gods, loving and betraying each other up and down the slopes of Mount Olympus. We not only draw strength from the example of others but they show us who we are in all of our troubling and marvelous idiosyncrasy. It wasn't in spite of her mistakes, but because Diana owned up to them in public, that we were able to embrace her and to respond to her death as to a loss of grace and love in our own lives.

Another of our cultural icons that represents the vulnerability at the core of our human nature is the god/man on the cross. When Christianity was a young religion back in the 6th Century, some of the first images of Christ were of a rosy-cheeked robust young man standing on top of the blue world, radiance and authority surrounding him like a golden aura. These mosaics can still be seen in the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy but they faded from the public imagination pretty quickly as the Germanic tribes took over the toppled Roman Empire. For over 1500 years, the two images of Christ that we

have etched in our hearts and minds are of a baby in his mother's arms and of a suffering man being broken on a cross. It is not his righteous indignation at the moneylenders in the temple, nor his superhuman powers that allowed him to restore sight to the blind and life to the dead that we find most powerful. We look instead to his fear in the Garden of Gethsemane and his anguished doubt on the cross as he faces death. We turn to what we need- the image of vulnerability and suffering which finds the strength and courage to prevail in spite of doubt. It is essentially this act of faith that we worship: someone saying "yes" in the face of the world saying 'NO'. An individual triumphing in their affirmation of life's value against all odds. *Here*, I would argue, is where we need resilience- in the struggle to stay open and positive when confronted with the many guises of failure and not to grow rigid, unreachable, closed to the voices that surround us.

Just as it is the private moments of Christ's life that we cherish the most (as an infant in his mother's arms and as a dead young man in this same mother's lap) so we seek out the private moments in our modern icon's lives. The spectacle of the paparazzi 'hounding' Diana on black motorcycles doing 120 mi an hour down the city streets of Paris well after midnight, and the terrible photos of wreckage in the tunnel, this riveted attention on our hunger for images that bring us closer to the secret lives of public figures. These 'shots' allow us to share vicariously in the fortune, romance, tragedy and shame of other lives but they also help us to visualize the drama and the possibilities that our own lives are pregnant with.

Doubt, not being certain-

This willingness to live with doubt is not easy.

The fact that my wife still loves me after 20 years of marriage, having weathered all of my imperfections with open eyes, I still find something of a miracle. But really, ask yourselves who your true friends are, and I bet they are the persons that you have let see your failings and uncertainties as well as all the stuff you're great at-

To be vulnerable is to be open to connection, to be susceptible to feeling,

To be vulnerable is to be capable of listening- to birdsong, to music, to the voices of other people.

To be open in this way means you are willing to move out of your small comfortable circles; to be curious about those that are ‘others’; to take the risk of trying something completely new.

I decided to become a painter because I knew I would never completely master the language-it would give me fits until my dying day. But I am also a painter because I am vulnerable to light; color floods me with joy and I am a live wire for how the sun hits the 10,000 things of the world.

The following Hero Portraits are the fruit of my meditations on what it is to be a person. These are portraits of folks that I know, (some of whom you know as well), from whom I have heard stories and for whom I have developed an appreciation. Because I use photography as my chief visual resource, one could say that my point of departure is a relatively objective one- I start from an individual’s projection of themselves onto the camera’s eye, and this act of recording is an invitation to present themselves, genuine face forward, to the world. I want to be precise in my observations of anatomy and character but I am also interested in communicating the spirit that animates the body. The saturated color palette that I use heightens the momentousness of this ‘glance’ and denotes the sacred realms of gods, heroes and heroines. Color denotes symbolic space. This is the imperfect dream world we inhabit.

I call this series the *Hero Portraits* because, in their singularity, each person gazes out at the viewer as if to god the maker. None of us will live forever and, to a certain extent, we undertake risk everyday when we open our eyes and put our feet on the floor. Living as fully as you can is an act of courage, in times of war and of peace, because the opportunity of our life constantly challenges our imagination and ambition. As we rise to these challenges over months and years, applying ourselves not in spite of, but with a clear view of our limitations, we are acting heroically. We are called on to make 100’s of choices every day- small and large-practical/social/intellectual/moral—and this sum constitutes the unfolding of our personal destinies. I do not idealize my subjects’ physical

presence and the fact that they are all painted on plywood further emphasizes the vulnerability we all share to the workings of time.

The persons in these portraits shine in their imperfections, their idiosyncrasies, as much as in their dignified human stature. They are you and you are they. I want to convey this fierce individual drive to establish oneself and plant one's root in the earth- this is the story I am interested in telling in the paintings. The courage to persevere in spite of doubt, to maintain an open nature in the face of difficulty, this is what makes us truly human.

As Leonard Cohen sings:

“Everything has a crack in it, that's how the light gets in.”