**Vulnerability and Community: Unprecedented Itineraries Beyond the Buffered Self**

**Abstract**

In this essay I suggest the “buffered self,” as construed by Charles Taylor, as an important source of contemporary social constructions of difference. In particular, I demonstrate how the buffered self contributes to the rise of able-bodied and able-minded identities as hegemonic norms. I then consider anthropological and communal alternatives to these limiting norms, drawn from the work of Julia Kristeva, Jean Vanier, and Hans Reinders. I argue that these alternatives suggest that welcoming human vulnerability is essential for an inclusive and authentically human Christian faith formation.
Introduction

At a minimum, reading Charles Taylor’s magisterial *A Secular Age* with a hermeneutic informed by disabilities studies is helpful for recognizing the opportunities and pitfalls in this secular age for people with disabilities. Far beyond this, however, and careful not to isolate and objectify those who identify or have been labeled as disabled, the particular lens of disabilities can also be utilized to garner a more generalizable grasp on the conditions of secularization, helping to nuance and elaborate the experience for all. Important questions arise around how we construct postmodern personal identities in which we can embrace the human condition of vulnerability in our sense of self. Relatedly, questions arise about how the embrace of vulnerability enhances our capacity to form authentically human community. In this essay, I argue that the manner in which we approach people with disabilities, and their experience of being excluded and made vulnerable in the late modern secular context, can illuminate answers to such questions and point the way to more inclusive and genuinely human Christian faith formation.

While the primary emphases of this essay remain the experience of physical or intellectual difference in the face of postmodern identity norms, and the manner in which religious education might fruitfully take up the issue of human vulnerability vis-à-vis this experience, a broader scope to the argument is also helpful. The potential of the experiences of disability and vulnerability to address more expansive questions about our shared humanity come about as they are drawn into dialogue with other aspects of human identity. Toward that end, this essay begins with a brief dialectic between disabilities studies and critical race theory. While this disabilities/race conversation is not the primary focus of this essay, it provides an important jumping-off point for the essay to link the disabilities perspective to a broader vision of human experience.

As a white, able-minded, able-bodied, male, I recognize that my position does not afford an insiders view or a true experiential grasp of the issues I address in this essay, especially so as they pertain to the social and institutional oppression faced by people because of their skin color or physical or intellectual capacities. By no means do I intend to equate the evil of racism with that of ableism in a manner that does not honor the immense complexity of each issue on its own, the particularity of the personal experience of each, or the intersectional forces that are brought to bear on anyone who identifies as both non-white and differently-abled. As a religious educator concerned with educating towards a celebration of human diversity and an embrace of human vulnerability, I find such issues extremely pressing. Indeed, some of the most urgent questions posed by such complex issues are likely outside the purview of the merely social or political and squarely within the spiritual or religious. It is towards these deeper waters that this essay attempts to navigate.

This essay will proceed towards such questions in four parts. The first portion offers a brief exploration of the social construction of normed identities of race and ability. In this opening portion of the essay, I seek the resonance between questions of whiteness and those of disabilities studies. In the second portion of the essay, I set the norming of abled identities within the overarching construction of a “buffered self,” drawn from the work of Charles Taylor (Taylor 2007). In particular, I explore the manner in which the buffered, or more firm inner/outer boundary, leads to the privileging of self-sufficiency and a general stance over-against the other. In a third portion of the essay, I draw out alternative anthropological considerations to the buffered self from the work of Julia Kristeva, Jean Vanier, and Hans Reinders. From these three
thinkers, a more relational, inclusive, and communal anthropology begins to emerge. The final portion of this essay examines some ways that Christian religious education can take up the alternatives to the buffered self offered by Kristeva, Vanier, and Reinders in service to more inclusive pedagogical commitments. Particularly, taking up Vanier’s way of the heart provides those concerned with faith formation with tools for a constructive critique and an alternative to the rise of the buffered self. Focusing on the universal anthropological reality of vulnerability affords a more robust welcome of people with disabilities, including a general welcome of human diversity, leading to a more open and fecund climate for authentically human religious education.

**Part I: Normate Identities**

There are indeed some striking parallels in the manner in which social and institutional oppression of people based on their skin color and social and institutional oppression of people based on their physical and intellectual capacities unfolds in the context of North American society. This must be said, however, with a clear awareness that it is an exceedingly complex web of issues that allows for such suppressive marginalization to take root and expand. It is not helpful to offer an overly generalized link between the constructs of race or ability/disability or to make a facile conflation of racism and ableism. Both racism and ableism function in society, however, as similarly “normalizing processes that are interconnected and collusive.”¹ The interconnection and collusion around these two identity markers warrants a closer look.

One important place to look for racist/ableist collusion is in the manner in which both racial and ability/disability identities are socially constructed. For instance, in naming the socially constructed identity of *white America*, philosopher George Yancy notes that it plays a major (indeed, perhaps the primary) role in perpetuating racism through the “dimensions of its oppressive rule, its deep historic racist white imaginary, and its normative structure.”² Yancy provides an important contemporary viewpoint about racial norms in twenty-first century North America. As he notes, however, the *white imaginary* has deep historic roots. These roots are intimately bound with European cultural and religious imperialism that was imposed upon people of color and “forced them to think that the only way to be human and civilized was to be white and Christian.”³ Even in such a brief treatment of the issue of racism, one begins to sense the complex social, cultural, and even theological/religious threads that entangle racial identities.

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Rosemarie Garland Thomson discusses a similarly tangled construction of the identity of abled over against disabled. She describes abled identity with the term normate, to designate “the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings […] who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them.”

Anyone not readily identifiable as this normate is cast as an outsider, sub-human even. In this equation, the person identifying as or being identified as disabled “operates as a code for insufficiency, contingency, and abjection […] thus establishing the contours of a canonical body.”

This issue, taken up in greater detail below, is a primary catalyst for the development of falsely “simplistic binaries like disabled/nondisabled and sick/healthy.” Such binaries leave aside the complex social patterns that assign a negative charge to certain physical or intellectual difference and portray the difference as purely biological or entirely centered within the person who holds the difference. Such binaries effectively uphold an “ideological screen of normality.”

The oppressive mechanism of both racism and ableism is tied up with the very identity of the oppressive group and operates on a systemic level. The striking resemblance in the power dynamics that uphold privilege through the construct of the norms described by Yancy (racist) and Thomson (normate) evinces the interconnection and collusion of the two. Tying both cases together, one comes to recognize that “normative cultural standards such as Whiteness and ability lead to viewing differences among certain individuals as deficits.”

Religious education can provide powerful alternatives to such a devaluing of difference and diversity, especially as it asks deep questions about human identity. It is to such questions and alternatives that we will turn below. Prior to this turn, however, I invite you into a brief thought experiment that I think particularly illustrates the fact that racism and ableism are indeed cut of much the same cloth. Robin DiAngelo has written extensively on the subject of what she terms “white fragility.” This thought experiment takes some liberty with her keen insights and invites you to substitute ability/disability language in place of her race language. Take a close read of the beginning of her definition of white fragility and see if the resemblance rings true:

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5 Ibid, 136.


White [able bodied/able minded] people in North America live in a society that is deeply separate and unequal by race [physical and intellectual capacity], and white [able bodied/able minded] people are the beneficiaries of that separation and inequality. As a result, we are insulated from racial [disability] stress, at the same time that we come to feel entitled to and deserving of our advantage. Given how seldom we experience racial [disability] discomfort in a society we dominate, we haven’t had to build our racial [disability] stamina. Socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority that we either are unaware of or can never admit to ourselves, we become highly fragile in conversations about race [ability/disability].

Could there exist a sense of “ability fragility”? When confronted by someone who does not meet our normate standards of physical or intellectual capacity, is it possible that we lapse into a similar pattern as that named by DiAngelo in the race dynamic? There is a deep-seated vulnerability awakened through such encounters across race or ability boundaries. As religious educators take up alternative anthropologies to Taylor’s “buffered self” that foreground the importance of embracing our human vulnerability, a counter-narrative to racism and ableism can emerge. Such a counter-narrative can prompt us to “break with the conditioning of whiteness [ability]-the conditioning that makes us apathetic about racism [ableism] and prevents us from developing the skills we need to interrupt it.”

I propose that a key skill for such interruptions is learning to welcome our vulnerability, whether around race, ability/disability, or any other identity markers that afford us undue power.

Part II: Disabled and Buffered Identities

Underneath the socially constructed identities that lead to racism or ableism lies a much more expansive dynamic. One manner in which this can be grasped is through a close examination of Taylor’s grand review of the process of secularization. Taylor endeavors to uncover the “different kinds of lived experience involved in [...] what it’s like to live as a believer or an unbeliever.” For Taylor, it’s not so much that unbelief has simply replaced belief via a “subtraction story,” in which belief has been “sloughed off” and humans “liberated” from naive belief by more mature unbelief. He finds a far more complex story, one in which human societies (at least in the Western North-Atlantic context) have transformed from “a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.” While this complex story is important in and of itself, even more so is what difference it makes to how we live life as a

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10 DiAngelo, White Fragility, 1-2.

11 Ibid, 144.


13 Ibid, 22.

14 Ibid, 3.
believer or an unbeliever. Taylor is after this lived experience and the “social imaginaries” it both fosters and thrives within, the complex “common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.”

Taylor recognizes that the lived experience and social imaginaries of unbelief that are possible in our secular age are ones wherein “there are mingled together both authentic developments of the gospel (affirmation of human rights and ordinary life) […] and also a closing off to God that negates the gospel.” This closing off to God is in tandem with the construction of a social space that Taylor names the “immanent frame” wherein a “natural order” contrasts a “supernatural order”, “an immanent world over against a possible transcendent one.” It is what develops as a result of the negation of the gospel that forms an important background to the status (or, lack thereof) that people with disabilities have within late modern, secular societies. While people with disabilities most certainly enjoy more universal access to the good things of life through the emphasis within late modern secular culture on human rights, they still face an uphill battle in the face of the negating of authentic gospel values, values that hold a far more liberative potential for them.

For instance, secular rights discourse has a hard time emulating the depth and motivation of gospel values that flow from the goodness of creation affirmed in Genesis. For all of its good intention and effectiveness, which is certainly well and rightfully attested to, secular rights discourse can never claim such a thorough and grand affirmation of the goodness of creation and the goodness of our creaturely relationship to God, and one another, that a faith perspective provides. Nor can a purely immanent frame lend comparable motivation for living such a social ethic. The World Council of Churches (WCC) captures the important nuance offered by beginning with the Christian affirmation of the goodness of creation. In its statement on the place of people with disabilities in the Christian community: “The Gift of Being: Called to Be a Church of All and for All,” we read that “in reflecting on disability, this affirmation lays the ground for anything else that can be said [about disabilities].”

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15 Ibid, 172.


17 Taylor, Secular Age, 542.

18 For a more in-depth treatment of this notion see: Jürgen Habermas, et al. An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010). In particular, Habermas’ own essay in the collection takes up how the “strict rational morality” of “enlightened reason” can provide good motives, but can not inspire or compel one to moral action in the face of threat, and cannot “keep awake, in the minds of secular subjects, an awareness of the violations of solidarity throughout the world, an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven” (18-19).

Closing off gospel values also makes it difficult for the secular affirmation of human rights to enact solidarity of the same depth as that of the Christian community, which affirms that people with disabilities have a central place in that community, and that “humanity, in all its frailty has both a value and a creative role to play in cosmic transformation.”

Space here does not permit a full survey of the gospel values that might prove liberative for people with disabilities, and it is not the intention to hold them over/against secular rights discourse in an over-simplified binary. However, as we will explore below, the rise of the secular has a long way to travel yet towards liberation and full inclusion of people with disabilities, and Christian values in this regard could help it along the way.

Late modern secular human identity coalesces around the notion that “human life is better off without transcendental vision altogether.” This understanding of human life leads to a disenchanted modern buffered self, for whom “disengaging from everything outside the mind is a real possibility.” It is a sense of self that is radically different from the pre-modern and more porous self. A firm boundary between the inner self and outer world has been set. This modern buffered self has no need for the transcendent, as this person sees him/herself as “invulnerable” and as a “master” for whom “ultimate purposes are those which arise within me, the crucial meaning of things are those defined in my responses to them.”

Taylor contends that the buffered self arises from a close relationship between the disenchantment that marks our late modern secular age, wherein “demons, spirits, magic forces […] no longer impinge,” and no longer pose a threat, and the instrumental rational agency that now “carries out an analogous operation on desire.” This rational buffered self rejects as illusion and fantasy all such enchanted spiritual imaginaries of old. The experience of being a buffered self is one of “self-reliance, self-sufficiency, autarky, autonomy”; we live within “Freud’s sense of the proud loneliness of the ego,” taking little regard of “the interspaces between human beings.” A particularly dangerous aspect of this rise of the buffered self is how

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22 Taylor, A Secular Age, 38.

23 Ibid, 38.

24 Ibid, 475.


it sets us against one another. As Taylor writes, the buffering is not only “against a zone of bodily life,” the firm inner/outer boundary, but also “to some degree against the other.” As our inner/outer boundaries became more firm, and as we came to privilege our inner self-sufficiency, we came to have less perceived need for anything-or anyone-outside of our inner self.

**Dangers of the Buffered Self for People with Disabilities**

The rise of the disenchanted late modern milieu and its buffered sense of self give rise to a self-sufficing and an “exclusive (of God) humanism,” “accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing.” With no room for the Transcendent, or for that which goes beyond this earthly life, we also lose our capacity “to give any human meaning to suffering and death, other than as dangers and enemies to be avoided or combated.” When this happens, there is a risk that flourishing becomes a totalizing paradigm by which to measure any and all human thought and activity. The Transcendent can stake no claim in this mindset because flourishing in this life is the end game. Where, then, does this leave people with disabilities who are quite often deemed by rational, able-bodied people to be suffering to such an extent that the collective imagination cannot conceive of any sort of flourishing in a non-rational or disabled life? Such a limited concept of flourishing leads, inevitably, to the suggestion that “disability prohibits a full life,” or, the even more pernicious mindset that “disability is a fate worse than death.”

**Confrontation with Mortality**

Philosopher Julia Kristeva contends that people with developmental disabilities become fragile and vulnerable in a very unique manner in such an exclusive humanism. In an essay in which she formulates a philosophical and ethical response to people with disabilities, Kristeva notes that disability confront us with a difference that is not the same as other perceived differences such as race, ethnicity, or sexuality. The difference in disability, according to Kristeva, is as it “confronts us with mortality.” Disability is seen “as a deficit, which […] lets me die if I am alone […] without human help,” and therefore finds no place within an exclusive humanism that seeks to avoid suffering and death at all cost. In such a milieu, the social imaginary cannot conceive of any sense of flourishing in the lives of people with disabilities, and people with disabilities become objects of avoidance as they confront others with their mortality. A deep-seated and unconscious fear of death is provoked and confronted by the non-disabled in

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27 Ibid, 142.
28 Ibid, 18.
30 Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 2.
32 Ibid, 122.
their encounters with people with disabilities. Kristeva describes this as an abyss between “two merciless worlds: one of disability, with its suffering and its protective but also aggravating isolation; the other, a society of performance, success, competition, pleasure, and spectacle that doesn’t want to know.”

Kristeva’s psychoanalytically grounded reading of the situation helps us to understand how a dynamism of hostility is set up: the confrontation with the person with disabilities is a reminder of mortality – and our own often unrecognized or denied disabilities. The reminder of mortality is projected onto the person who prompts this reminder. This, in turn, leads to the rejection of the person upon whom the “dangerous or unpleasant” reminder is projected. The unconscious fear of mortality becomes reified in exclusionary stereotypes and practices, to the disastrous detriment of people with disabilities. Perhaps the most concise way to summarize the bleakness wrought by exclusive humanism in the lives of people with disabilities is what Hans Reinders notes: “disabled people are rarely chosen as friends, except by other disabled people; people without a disability […] remain ignorant of what it is to live with a disability,” and, echoing Kristeva’s contention above, “many apparently want to keep it that way.” It is a sentiment not dissimilar from DiAngelo’s notion of white fragility, noted above. In both instances the stamina required to meet as equals across identity differences is lacking.

**Part III: Alternatives to the Buffered Self**

The WCC document on people with disabilities cited above, “The Gift of Being: Called to Be a Church of All for All,” notes how the goodness of creation, and particularly of the human person as “very good” (Gn 1:31), is the ground for any statement we might make about disability. The goodness of creation, in all its rich variety, is an immensely helpful way to begin to imagine our general human condition beyond the late modern secular buffered self. Grounding our humanity in the goodness of creation is a wise start, and further enhanced when we think about how we each reflect the imago Dei, being an image of the divine in our own personhood.

The WCC statement goes on to remind us that our creaturely relationship with our maker, and the affirmation of the value of human life, is offered “regardless of the state or condition of our bodies and minds [for] in God there is diversity, but no division.” Grounding the imago Dei in the goodness of creation and in God’s restorative grace through Christ Jesus’ saving and uniting act, is both theologically sound and essential to a more inclusive anthropological consideration of physical or intellectual diversity, and, indeed, any number of the richly diverse identities we hold as humans. Further, God’s grace in and through Christ Jesus must be realized


36 Ibid, 320.
in conjunction with the Holy Spirit, giving us a Trinitarian and, thus, highly relational possibility for understanding the *imago Dei*. In other words, we are made in the image and likeness of our God who is a Triune loving relationship, and every human being reflects and is made for such loving relationships, and never for anything less – regardless of ability or disability.

As we open up an account of our divinely imaged and highly relational creatureliness that is inclusive of the diversity of abilities, we also begin to sense how this offers an alternative to the over-rational self-sufficient buffered self that exists over against other buffered selves. To explore and nuance some aspects of an inclusive *imago Dei* -based anthropology, we will turn now to the work of Jean Vanier, the founder of the communities of L’Arche, as well as return to Kristeva and Reinders, who have both been influenced by Vanier. All three of these thinkers are engaged in holding up the importance of welcoming vulnerability into discourse on the *imago Dei* and anthropology. Within the work of Vanier, Kristeva, and Reinders, a more relational, inclusive, and communal anthropology emerges.

**Inclusive Anthropologies**

**Jean Vanier’s Communities of Vulnerability**

Since 1964, Vanier’s L’Arche communities have spread around the world in a witness to the power of humanizing and mutual relationships between people with and without disabilities. L’Arche summarizes the inclusive nature of its communities as places where “mutual relationships and trust in God are at the heart of our journey together. We celebrate the unique value of every person and recognize our need of one another.”37 This mission is lived in family-like homes and animated by a spirituality which Vanier attributes to the Holy Spirit, whom he says “created L’Arche [...] to reveal to an age obsessed with achievement that the essential value of each person lies not in the intelligence, but in the wisdom of the heart.”38

L’Arche takes up two important and related counterpoints to the buffered self and its corollary fracturing of human community. First, it recognizes that “weakness and vulnerability in a person, far from being an obstacle to union with God, can foster it. It is often through weakness, recognized and accepted, that the liberating love of God is revealed.”39 Second, and flowing immediately from this first point about vulnerability, L’Arche is founded on the belief that “since the deepest need of a human being is to love and to be loved, each person has a right to friendship, to communion and to a spiritual life.”40 Welcoming vulnerability, and then building community precisely from within that radical welcome, is the very core of the way of life of L’Arche. Importantly, it is a way of life that brings people with disabilities from the margins of society to the center of its communities, while also recognizing that vulnerability and

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40 Ibid.
the need for community are facets of life that cut across any of the typical exclusionary disabled-enabled binaries; these are our shared realities.

The over-rational self-sufficiency of the buffered self, and its stance against the other, stand little chance within the communities of L’Arche. Vanier writes that living in community “means letting down the barriers which protect our vulnerability and recognizing and welcoming our weakness.”\textsuperscript{41} When we live in this manner, and when we form human community around this value, we are walking along what Vanier calls \textit{the way of the heart}. Along this way, “sharing weaknesses and needs calls us together into oneness [...] we welcome those who love us into our heart.”\textsuperscript{42} Ultimately, from these loving relationships, which begin in vulnerability, “new life flows [...] we no longer have to prove our worth; we are free to be ourselves.”\textsuperscript{43}

It is Vanier’s conviction that the members of the L’Arche communities with disabilities “reveal to us our own brokenness [...] our difficulties in loving, our barriers and hardness of heart.”\textsuperscript{44} But, the other side of this coin, inseparable from the experience of vulnerability, is that if those with disabilities are “so broken and so hurt and yet still such a source of life, then I too am allowed to look at my brokenness and to trust that I too can give life to others.”\textsuperscript{45} The lived experience of community among people with disabilities in L’Arche revealed this way of the heart to Vanier, and it stands as a highly appealing alternative witness to the buffered self.

\textit{Julia Kristeva’s Irreducible Singularity}

Kristeva, whose dire warning about the uniquely exclusionary manner in which people with disabilities are perceived in our late modern western societies was described above, articulates an ethic of inclusion that resonates with the embrace of vulnerability by Vanier and L’Arche. Kristeva advocates for a “radical change in mentality” regarding our approach to people with disabilities, one that includes a recognition that the “consciousness of our finitude and its accompaniment are in effect fully a part of human singularity.”\textsuperscript{46} For Kristeva, honoring the “irreducible singularity” of each person with a disability (indeed each person regardless of physical or intellectual capacity) is a key element of countering the systemic societal exclusion, noted above, which function in an overly “integrative, collective, and standardized” manner.\textsuperscript{47}

The welcoming of vulnerability, so central to L’Arche, finds expression in Kristeva’s ethic when she notes that “the singularity of being - which goes as far as including the deficit


\textsuperscript{42} Jean Vanier, \textit{Becoming Human} (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 89.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 90.

\textsuperscript{44} Jean Vanier, \textit{From Brokenness to Community} (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), 28.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 28.

\textsuperscript{46} Kristeva, “A Tragedy and a Dream,” 123.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, 115 & 121.
itself, in as much as it is revelatory of the finiteness and the boundaries of living being - is not a privation, a failure, or a sin.” The particular and personal vulnerabilities of people with disabilities find a much more positive place in their overall identity when included within their unique singularity of being in such a manner. We must be careful, however, in attending to the unique vulnerabilities of people with disabilities that we do not allow the deficit or finiteness revealed therein to become the defining quality of their being. It must be included, as Kristeva notes, but we must also recognize that “disability can imply community and sharing” as well. This is the important stream that flows from the confluence of thought of Kristeva and Vanier.

*Hans Reinders’ Anthropology of Friendship*

The work of theologian Hans Reinders also helps to articulate aspects of an alternative to the overly-rational self-sufficient buffered self. Reinders situates human value in a communal anthropology informed by the notion of friendship as it flows from God’s extension in love of the offer of friendship to humans. He surveys the relational landscape of people with disabilities and finds that there are very few freely chosen friendships between people with and without disabilities. For Reinders, this is evidence of an important theological imperative inherent in the question of “why?” that people pose to God when confronted by disability. This question of the purpose of disabilities far too readily arises in “notions of our humanity that put selfhood and purposive agency at center stage,” and leave people with disabilities on the periphery of our human community. The able-bodied and able-minded seem to have a limited imagination regarding the value of a diversity of abilities. For Reinders, one essential piece of the answer to the *why* question, and thus of theological inquiry about disabilities, is friendship.

Reinders is concerned with acknowledging God’s providence at work in the experience of disability. This providence is evidenced, especially so for Reinders, as people with disabilities teach us about friendship. In an examination of Vanier’s L’Arche communities, Reinders finds that the members of those communities with disabilities teach the members without disabilities how to see that “there is no refuge in the illusion of strength [but, rather] being with persons with intellectual disabilities enables them to enjoy God’s friendship.” The gift of people with disabilities to counteract the dangers of an overly-rational self-sufficient buffered self is precisely in this gift of friendship.

To this notion of friendship, Reinders adds a pneumatological reading of God’s providence. He writes that providence is “the active presence of God, mediated by the Spirit, to

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48 Ibid, 125.
51 Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 27.
52 Ibid, 348.
guide us in learning to see the new life that is around us, and is there to be seen.”

Seeing this new life in regards to the friendships between people with and without disabilities is essential. For Reinders, the new vision brought on by the Holy Spirit is a vision that changes us “from hopelessness,” in the face of disability to “trusting the reality of friendship and love.”

Centering our anthropological and communal considerations on friendship across perceived identity differences will necessitate that we find ways to navigate and embrace our vulnerability. Staying enclosed in our buffered selves is not an option in this regard.

**Part IV: Religious Education Towards an Embrace of Vulnerability**

The anthropological and communal considerations of Vanier, Kristeva, and Reinders provide helpful tools for religious educators to craft a constructive critique and alternative to the rise of the buffered self. Focusing on the universal anthropological reality of vulnerability not only affords a more robust welcome of people with disabilities, and human diversity in general, but also provides an open and fecund climate for authentic human connection. Uncovering the gifts that people with disabilities offer the human family in the area of identity formation and community building, and what benefit such consciousness has in this particular secular time, is a fruitful task. Aspects of such a task fall squarely within the purview of faith education, and could promote a particularly inclusive character within that endeavor.

**New Itineraries**

In the concluding chapter of *A Secular Age*, titled “Conversions,” Taylor names a number of “new and unprecedented itineraries” that show us how to live the Christian life in the late modern secular age in such a manner as to chart “a way through the particular labyrinthine landscape we live in, its thickets and trackless wastes, to God.”

Such new and unprecedented itineraries take up the Christian message and witness and carry it forth in expressions wherein “the paradigm itineraries that [the church] gathers can’t be identified with those of any other age.” These represent some of the opportunities that have arisen for a Transcendent perspective and communal self in the postmodern context – over against the perils of the buffered self. These represent, too, important touchstones for religious education in the secular age.

Taylor contends that the church and the Christian faith can still articulate possibilities and speak authentically to late modern secular lives. In Taylor’s language, such new and unprecedented itineraries point towards the experience of “fullness” that a life of faith might offer. The lived experience of fullness, as Taylor puts it, is the belief that “in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be.”

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53 Reinders, *Disability, Providence, and Ethics*, 190.

54 Ibid, 189.


56 Ibid, 766.

57 Ibid, 5.
perspective, of course, “God is the ultimate hunger of our hearts, the source and satisfaction of the fullness we desire.”\textsuperscript{58} It is this awareness that lies at the heart of Christian religious education.

Amongst those new and unprecedented itineraries to God, Taylor names Vanier and the communities of L’Arche. It is precisely in the way that L’Arche reveals the wisdom of the heart that it may have caught Taylor’s eye as an \textit{unprecedented itinerary} through the \textit{trackless wastes} of late modern secularity towards God, or at least towards partial fullness. It is in Vanier’s \textit{way of the heart}, wherein we find our most authentic selves and community with one another. Here, too, lie key pedagogical considerations for faith formation in and for the conative wisdom of Christian faith. It is \textit{only} through becoming vulnerable that fullness of life is truly found.

Taylor names one of the greatest “malaises” of the postmodern buffered self as the loss of meaning and our “fractured culture,” characterized by the “galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane” that arose within secular postmodernity.\textsuperscript{59} The malaise of this fractured multiplicity and loss of meaning can be alleviated, to a good degree, when the walls of the buffered self are let down in a milieu that welcomes vulnerability. An important task of religious education in the face of this postmodern malaise and fracturing is to foster the welcome of vulnerability. Religious education that helps buffered postmodern selves become less buffered and more other-oriented can’t help but lead to more cohesive and inclusive spiritual communities. Religious education that can re-imagine human vulnerability as Vanier, Kristeva, and Reinders do, as a possibility rather than a problem, will be a great antidote to the secular age’s loss of meaning.

Pope Francis offers some clues as to how important such an approach to faith formation is for the life of the church. In \textit{Evangelii Gaudium}, Francis utilizes the geometric metaphor of a polyhedron (a figure with typically more than six plane faces) as a model to discuss the ecclesial tension of the global and local church. In order that the global “not stifle,” nor the local “prove barren,” Francis offers the balance afforded by a polyhedron, “which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness.”\textsuperscript{60} It is a metaphor that aligns well with Francis’ general efforts to make the church a more inclusive and synodal church. It is also reminiscent of Paul’s ecclesial metaphor of the body in which “there are many members, yet one body” (1 Cor 12:12-31).

An important consideration for religious education is how it moves us towards the unity-in-diversity suggested in the metaphors of both Paul and Francis. How much more inclusive would our faith formation become were such a model of church the goal? And, conversely, how much more likely would such a church become were we to take the welcome of vulnerability seriously? Our approach to faith formation would do well to take up the wise counsel of Paul and Francis (along with Vanier, Kristeva, and Reinders). If we do take their lead, then we need to consider both how best to foster an inclusive and highly relational community in the church and,

\textsuperscript{58} Thomas H. Groome, \textit{Faith for the Heart: A “Catholic” Spirituality} (Forthcoming, 2018), 17.

\textsuperscript{59} Taylor, \textit{A Secular Age}, 299-300.

crucially, how we might broaden that sense of community to include and learn from those who might be most vulnerable in today’s societies.

For Christian faith to truly take up its potential as a strong antidote to the buffered self, to embody the rich diversity of identities of humanity, and to sound the clarion call for the full dignity of all people, the welcome of vulnerability must be foregrounded. Education from and for a faith that reflects this communal welcome of vulnerability is rooted in God’s call to the church to be the embodiment of this community of vulnerability. Our very faith depends upon this, for, as Francis writes, “in every one of our brothers and sisters, especially the least, the most vulnerable, the defenseless and those in need, God’s very image is found.”61

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