Power, Empowerment and Surrender in the Context of Paediatric Spiritual Care.

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Abstract

The dynamics of “surrender” is here put in dialectic with the dynamics of “power” observed in situation involving children and their caregivers in a paediatric hospital setting. Following a qualitative research method used in practical theology, three case studies are presented and then interpreted in the light of both social sciences and Christian theology/spirituality. In the power/surrender paradox, there will always be a need for discernment for each situation and each encounter if the caregiver wants to better care for the children and continue to acknowledge their contribution to the life experience and wisdom of adults. Power and surrender both need to be embraced in order to grow in a fruitful spiritual life.

Keywords

Children’s spirituality; paediatric care; power; surrender; practical theology.

Introduction

Reflecting on power in the context of care inescapably involves a relational dimension including the quality of the relationship to self and of the relationship to everything that is
not self: others, environment and the immanent/transcendent. The reflections on power which follow are thus deeply rooted in spirituality (Hay and Nye 1998, 9). However, in remembering children I encountered a few years ago in the context of paediatric spiritual care, I become more aware of relational dynamics that the word “power” does not adequately describe. Observation and analysis of case studies made it apparent that “vulnerability” and “surrender” would have to be dialectically paired with “power” if these dynamics were to be better understood. It was on the basis of this realization that I thought of a title for this paper. I wanted to call it “The power to surrender”.

But when I shared my anticipated title with English-speaking colleagues who are not theologians, their reaction was a strong shock. To them, it spontaneously called to mind horrors and tragedies from the pages of history; the fight for honor and dignity, and ultimately, the fight for life itself. It harkened back the famous words of Churchill’s speech on June 4th, 1940: “We shall never surrender.” Surrender, then, is spontaneously associated with defeat, loss and humiliation. There are situations in which the exercise of power leads to abuse and to a loss of the recognition of a person’s human dignity. In this context, surrender is of course unacceptable. However, despite the negative connotations suggested by the word in many contexts, I am struck by the way in which the theme of surrender is emphasized by so many of the great religions and spiritual traditions of the world, whether in the form of Buddhist detachment, in the spirituality of Native North Americans, or in Islam, the very name of which means “surrender”. Christianity’s many spiritualities also engage in a path of “abiding in God” and “giving up one’s life”. Do these spiritual traditions simply mislead us, or is there a path of wisdom that moves beyond reason and that deserves to be examined more carefully?
This paper will not seek to confirm any specific hypothesis, or to resolve the question of power and surrender. Rather, I intend to explore the complexity of the dynamics of power on the basis of the observations I was able to make during encounters with children. This posture prompts the practitioner as well as the researcher to recognize both the need to be aware of what is at stake in the power/surrender paradox and the need to exercise discernment in each situation and each encounter. I am convinced that such awareness allows for better care of children and for a heightened appreciation of their specific contribution to the life experience and wisdom of adults.

After a few words on methodology, I will present three case studies. From there, I will move on to briefly explore a few ideas current in the social sciences, as I try to draw a rough portrait of a constellation of realities which emerge when one examines power and surrender in a dialectic mode. The next section will draw attention to ways in which Judeo-Christian spiritualities and theologies regard power and surrender. Finally, in a contextual interpretation, I will seek to correlate the case studies with the social sciences and the theological elements raised before arriving at an open conclusion.

Methodology

Practical theology can be understood as a way of theologizing, a way of “practicing theology”. It attaches importance to human experience recognized in different praxis as a central locus of possible meanings. It is then both empirical and hermeneutical (cf. Nadeau 2004). The method used here consists of four stages: observation, interpretation, transformation or intervention and prospective. Since the objective of this article is to reflect on children’s spirituality, it will focus on the first two stages and simply hint at some attitudes that need to be valued among the care givers
(intervention) in a shared desire of becoming better human beings (prospective). The method is inductive and does not intend to demonstrate nor to prove any hypothesis but rather to unfold, from the problematic identified through observation, different meanings which emerge from the correlation of the observation data with the social sciences and spiritual or religious Tradition. While the invitation I received to reflect on the theme of “power” set the agenda from my initial research, the inevitable connection between power and surrender suggested itself strongly from the observations I made in the field.

Case studies are commonly used inClinical Pastoral Education (CPE). Along with narrativity, they provide excellent tools for observing experience within the framework of practical theology (Shipani 2012; Ganzovoort 2012). These approaches carefully consider the interaction between the researcher and other subjects involved in any given situation. Theoretical grounds for hermeneutical interpretation have been widely discussed, especially on the basis of Ricoeur’s work (1986, 1990) followed by that of Groome (1991) and Geffré (1997) and, in a postmodern context, Brown (2012).

Three Children

Beginning in the early 1990’s and stretching over a period of eight years, I worked first as an on-call chaplain, and later as a team member on the regular staff of a pediatric hospital. I encountered many children in very vulnerable situations, especially in the emergency room and in the intensive care units as well as on medical wards specialised in the care of children with degenerative sicknesses. So as I started my reflection on power and its connection with the spiritual care of children, some images and memories came to mind. But before introducing the children, let me just warn that even if similar
stories are commonly encountered by hospital chaplains, they may be experienced as deeply challenging. The ultimate concerns addressed here are not only theoretical; children, care givers, and also readers are inescapably confronted by them. And our personal response is also a matter of power and surrender.

Chantal\textsuperscript{1} was a child I met in my first week at the hospital. She was about 6 or 7 years old. Chantal was fighting leukemia and had just gone through a bone marrow transplant which left her in complete isolation since during this procedure patients are particularly vulnerable to infection. Concretely, that meant that in order to visit Chantal, one had to first enter an anteroom, dress up with a gown, a cap, shoe-covers, gloves and a mask before accessing her bed room which was large, and filled with her toys and personal belongings scattered on the floor, on her bed and everywhere. So while doing regular ward visits, I entered Chantal’s bedroom, all dressed-up from this depersonalising process. It was only seconds - I had not finished introducing myself – before a slipper was thrown at me with energy. Chantal shouted at me to get out. I was literally taken aback from all her fierce ire. I responded that I wanted to respect her will, and would come back another day, said good bye and left the room. At the time, I was a beginner and I was in shock. Chantal’s attitude was not only rude, it was very violent. The colleague who supervised me on that first week was actually happy with what happened, and brought new light to the situation. Chantal suffered from a severe illness and a challenging treatment, and the difficult procedure she was going through was not as conclusive as expected. She had to cope with doctors, nurses and all kinds of

\textsuperscript{1} All names are fictitious.
specialists, with their care and worries, besides being isolated and denied normal contacts with her family. Ultimately, she also had to face a very threatening condition against which she had very little power. I was the only person, the only reality on whom she could have a little control. By leaving the room while keeping open a voiced communication, I gave her a power that she deeply needed. Chantal had to surrender to a heavily medicalized environment in order to survive. My surrender to her cry apparently offered her relief and empowerment.

I met Maria a few years later. Maria was a very lively 8 or 9 year old girl of South American background. Her parents were educated landed immigrants. Maria’s family was very supportive and her parents often visited her. But Maria was fighting against a resisting infection that seriously threatened her life while she was already affected by cystic fibrosis. Her parents were not ready to talk with her about the possibility that she might not recover and the staff respected that but also wished that the opportunity to ask questions be offered to Maria. Maria was getting more and more suspicious that secrets were kept from her and that they concerned her health. During this period, I was asked to visit her regularly. One day, as I entered her room, she was sitting on her bed and invited me to play with her. As I sat in front of her, she told me: “Today, I want to play “the judge”. So, I am the judge.” “OK”, I responded. “What do you want to judge Miss Judge?” “Hep, hep! No! I am the judge. It is ME who asks the questions.” So I nodded yes, and waited for the judge to talk. “Do you promise to say all the truth and just the truth and all that stuff?” Her request was both playful and solemn. I raised my hand: “I promise.” And I continued to wait patiently, as I was ordered. Maria pondered for a few seconds, and then changed her mind, pretended she was a
princess and played at something else with me. Maria took power and authority to hand. 

But she did not verbalize the crucial question she was facing. I believe that she trusted that she could count on someone, and then chose not to address the issue upfront. I also suspect that she pretty much knew what was at stake. Young people with cystic fibrosis often get together, and as they become supportive of each other, they soon become acutely aware of their fate, their life expectancy being greatly shortened by their sickness. In a sense, Maria claimed power, then surrendered it in playing at something else.

A last experience I would like to present involved Maxime, a 15 year-old boy, landed immigrant from Haïti. Maxime was the eldest child of his celibate mother. He had been known from the staff as he came in and out of the ward for treatments for many years. When I first met him, he was dying of AIDS. Maxime was suffering terribly even with very strong doses of medication. He was receiving excellent palliative care, but there was very little more to do and doctors and nurses were hoping that spiritual relief could help alleviate his atrocious pain. The scene was impressive. The personnel was around his bed, caring for him while he was screaming in agony under the oxygen mask. His mother could not come, having already spent many hours at his bedside, and also having to care for her youngest children. But through the years, the staff had become a significant part of his extended family. As soon as I arrived, the staff explained to me with how much force Maxime was fighting. The Kubler-Ross ([1969] 2008) process of dying was not “fitting” since this was nothing close to a serene dying. They were worried and very deeply affected with sorrow and a feeling of powerlessness. Was Maxime fighting for life? Fighting against pain? Fighting against the treatment? What could be done to
relieve the pain? He was wide awake and didn’t seem angry – rather determined, resolved. He was indeed very strong. I sat close to him and briefly introduced myself listening to him, attentive to get any detail that would give me a clearer picture of what was going on for him spiritually. He looked at me. I saw a picture close to his head, on a pillow. Looking closer, I realised it was a prayer to Jesus expressing faith and confidence. And all of a sudden, all that I had heard and seen about and from him merged into the realisation of this 15-year-old, still a child, but expected to be the man of the house for his siblings, facing poverty, immigration, sickness, in a life of resilience and fighting, with no man figure to look for but this one of Jesus to whom he confided.

Maxime was a fighter. He fought for life. He fought for dignity. He fought against prejudices. He fought to be recognised and loved. I said to him: “Maxime?” He looked me in the eyes. “You love Jesus very much?” His eyes brightened up immediately. Then I said: “He must be very proud of you!” And this fantastic smile appeared on Maxime’s face, more radiant than his screams.

Maxime’s screams did not stop nor was his pain relieved before he died, not peacefully. But I believe that he did die serenely, feeling that he was holding on to the right attitude, holding on to live up until the very last second. He faced death courageously. At first glance, he did not surrender. But then, he did die. Isn’t dying another form of surrender? His dying was everything but a failure.

The Questions and the Question

Many questions or issues can be raised about power from what has just been related: on the power of science and technology, on the power of play, imagination and creativity, on
the power of families and relationships but also on the power of silence and secrets, on
the power of speech and expression, reflecting and interpreting, on the power of
normative models or theories of human experiences, on the power of prejudices, on the
power of dignity, on the power of spiritual life, on the power of the ultimate realities, on
the power of what we all eventually have to face – our own death, on the power of what
the most vulnerable of us, the children, experience when they face death, and so on...

Bearing in mind those ultimate experiences lived by children and also the
significance of the articulation between power and surrender in the Great Religions and
also in the current Occidental contemporary secular spirituality, I would like to explore
different facets of the interpretations of this articulation, both from a humanistic and then
a Christian perspective.

Power, Capability and Care

In recent years, human sciences have considered as a premise and a significant
value both in publications and in field work with children that they are considered as
active agent of their life, even from the youngest age. For example Geneviève
Bergonnier-Dupuy edited a book (2005) dedicated on that question, and which asserts
that “today, the child is commonly considered as an actor of its own development, an
agent capable of appropriating the world.” It is this capability and its recognition that
give children power.

According to Ricoeur’s perspectives on agency, power could be described as a
capability (1995, 29). The degree of power that children experience is related to
children’s degree of subjectivity and agency. Their lack of power can as well be related
to their lack of capability and/or to the lack of recognition of their agency from adults.
There also exist situations where their perceived power or the power that adults recognize in them is lesser or greater than their capability to respond to a situation. “Capability constitutes the ultimate referent for the moral respect and the recognition of man (sic) as a person who has rights,” says Ricoeur (30). So not only is there a need for children – and for anyone – to enact their subjectivity in order to experience and show their power, but there is also a need that their right capability be recognized by adults so children actually have a space to “exist” and to “connect” with others in the human community.

Children’s “agency and responsibilities” have been explored in the footsteps of Levinas by Roger Burggraeve and more recently by Annemie Dillen (Burggraeve 2010; Dillen 2011). Their work addresses the asymmetry of the relationships between adults and children – more specifically between parents and children. It considers the importance of the “otherness” of children. Children, even from the youngest age, are capable of expressing in a unique manner with or without speech what they feel, that they are in need, that they are connected, that they experience life and participate in transforming it and being transformed by it. On the other hand, children don’t have the capability to care for themselves. They are dependent on adults for their survival, for their well-being, for their growth and development.

It is a paradox that children have and do not have power, not only as a consequence of social culture or policy but most of all because of their being children. Children have specific needs. “Their weakness is intrinsic”, says Alain Renaud. “while the weakness of oppressed groups rather corresponds to an extrinsic weakening resulting from the oppression itself” (2002, 428). Children’s dependence on adults does not result

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2 My translation.
from human action, but rather from their own being as children. It is only when they grow up that they can “get out” of this situation. Before that, a subrogated adult should defend their rights.

It is in that context that children’s rights have been explicitly reaffirmed on the international level (OHCHR). But the observation and reflection on practices aimed at responding to the special needs of children has led philosophers, ethicists and jurists to conclude that justice and rights are not sufficient for their care. Children do not have the power to impose the respect of their rights. But furthermore, they need that their care be given graciously.

The survival and also the happiness of children, at the present time and in the future, depend on our capacity to accomplish without constraint (that is to say without any reference to the fundamental rights of children) a certain number of obligations towards them, says Renaud (2002, 443).

Kindness and benevolence cannot and must not be put under the law. Hence it is in ethics rather than in the law that care can find solid grounds. “Solicitude refers to the sense of responsibility that we feel towards others, including in the absence of any claim from them in the name of some right” (427-428). Solicitude addressed to children needs to be inclusive of their agency as well as their not being fully responsible human beings. Children’s care needs to support and empower children in their being gradually raised in time to the full responsibility of self and others.

**Power, Relationships and Vulnerability**

Power understood as a capability is to be understood in relationship with self but also in relationships with others or with what is not self. Children experience power in a
variety of forms. Power as a capability can be “performed”. Self affirmation or resilience are forms of power. The Oxford Dictionaries suggest a few definitions of power, one of which is: “The capacity or ability to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of events” (Oxford Dictionaries). Leadership and authority are forms of power, as well as domination, oppression and abuse (Freire 1970)\(^3\) and can be contrasted for example with vulnerability or frailty, as well as obedience, submission and even victimisation. All of these terms need to be articulated and distinguished from one another, but they show that power as such is neither good nor bad. It has no moral value in itself. It is the attitude or the action that results from power or the lack of it that can be assigned a moral value, good or bad which often needs to be articulated within specific contexts. While oppression and victimisation are always bad, authority and obedience are at different degrees expected in parent/children, in the best cases as a means for the children to develop their power over themselves and over the very diverse attractions of what is not true self.

Little one-year-old Gabriel is very much attracted by everything related to music, whether it be his father playing the guitar or his grandmother playing the piano. And he is keen in trying to imitate them. At lunch time during a family party, while his mother was feeding him some purée, he keep turning around and showing the “not attended” piano with his fingers, trying to escape his chair. But his mother, talking to him, kept him

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\(^3\) Paulo Freire’s definition of oppression evidences one of those dynamics of power. Any situation in which “A” objectively exploits “B” or hinders his [sic] pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression. Such a situation in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity, because it interferes with man’s [sic] ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human (Freire 1970, 40-41).
in his chair and insisted that then was the time to eat, and she peacefully continued to offer him a full spoon. And Samuel pursued his meal with appetite.

Education is about helping the children develop this capability of discerning and acting according to one’s true self in relationship with self and others. But there are also situations where obedience is not aimed at care of the child and rather reassure the parents that they have control “over” their children in a given situation.

In extreme cases, the power some parents unfortunately may find and use over their children can become destructive, when they abuse them. They are then powerless in educating their children since they do not have the capability to relate properly to them and guide them towards an authentic expression of their agency, towards their true and responsible self.

Relating to children constantly confronts us adults with the fact that we are not almighty. We experience our limits. In the presence of sick children, we can experience powerlessness. Powerlessness brings me back to my second internship, where I was placed in a neonatal ward. And there was Chloé. Chloé was a premature baby born at approximately 28 weeks of pregnancy. She was kept in an incubator and wore a little cap and tiny mittens to keep her warm. She was also “wired up” with many tubes and connected to numerous machines, almost disappearing under them all. But she was kept in a quiet corner of the open ward, protecting her a bit from the business of the critical care given to the other babies also present. When I looked at Chloé, I could see her translucent skin like delicate tissue paper. And I could see her heart beat under her frail chest. It was as if I could see life fighting under my eyes. It had the force of a light breeze. There was nothing to do. And I felt powerless. It took me a long time to surrender
and to realize that a quiet and caring presence is all that counts. But in more ordinary daily life, so many parents talk about powerlessness and the feeling of inadequacy. We are all very vulnerable.

In recent years, public interest has grown on vulnerability. People such as Brené Brown likely have contributed to this awareness. As of February 19th, 2014, her website indicates that “her 2010 TEDx Houston talk on the power of vulnerability is one of the most watched talks on TED.com, with over 12 million views.” In this video, she explains how years of grounded theory researches led her to recognize the characteristics of what she calls “whole hearted people”. Whole hearted people have courage, compassion and connection in common. Moreover, they all fully embraced their vulnerability, which Brown defines with “uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure.” This perspective gives a positive value in the fact that human beings are limited in their knowledge and in their capacity of action. Human beings can be touched and affected in their hearts and souls by self and others’ experienced realities and feelings. When they acknowledge that they are not almighty, they become more whole hearted.

According to Brown’s title “The power of vulnerability”, power is not to be denied. But our power, our capability to become fully human and to influence and transform our social and physical environment is tightly connected to our ability not only to assume but to embrace vulnerability as a lovable part of who we are. Can embracing one’s vulnerability be considered a form of surrender? Brown reminds her audience that in order to do so, it is important that we always acknowledge our worthiness. This affirmation is fundamental to our being: each of us is worthy of love. As adults, it is necessary to be open to vulnerability to experience being loved, but it is also necessary
to experience that we are worthy in order to open ourselves to more vulnerability.

Worthiness and vulnerability are intertwined.

**Power, Environment and Worldviews**

I would like to suggest that the necessity of power is inherent to our existence. In physics, power is “the rate at which energy is transferred, used, or transformed”, according to Wikipedia. This can also be said of our inner experience. When “I don’t have the strength to get up this morning”, the energy and the time – hence the power it takes for me to get up is greater than on other more pleasant mornings. Different situations in life are nurturing and replenish our strengths. In happiness, we can experience life as a flow. (Csikszentimihalyi [1990] 2008). But our environment, others and even our self constantly request us to respond to their dynamic states. It takes power to assume the authorship of our lives. It takes power to face the chaos of daily events, the unpredictability of time, to sustain a routine or to engage in creativity.

Four year old Emma once told me about the recent bruise she had on the forehead. She explained to me: “The wall hit me...” I was surprised and smiled. “Did the wall hit you or did you hit the wall?” “No, no!, she replied. It is the wall who hit me!” In her own words, Emma expressed that our environment sometimes prompts us to resist, to react or to interact with it. It calls upon our strength, our being. There are days when everything seems focused in preventing us doing an action while on other days, the same activity just flows in. I have witnessed and participated in treatment teams when each and every procedure seemed to go wrong as if we all needed to fight against an opposing “energy”. Nature can make us experience its strength with magnificent glory or with threatening force. For children in paediatric care and their families, sickness or serious injury can be
experienced as the threatening enemy that is to be fought against if the children want to live. Vulnerability is here omnipresent.

It is a fact that personal and collective perceptions and interpretations of our environment also have an influence on our experience of power and vulnerability. This is also true for children. Worldviews can be reassuring while they help give meaning and direction to encountered situations, they can be comforting when they refer to the benevolence of human beings or of a god; or they can be sources of anxiety and terror when they call attention to the evil made by human kind or when they refer to the mighty power of the numinous. How we understand our place and role in life and society, how we make sense and relate to ourselves, to others, to environment and to the Ultimate reality we perceive – our spirituality – plays a major role in the dynamics of power and vulnerability in our life. So it is time now to reflect a little further on spirituality, and more specifically on Christian spirituality.

**Vulnerability, Surrender and Christian Spirituality**

Shortly exploring power and surrender in the Christian spiritual traditions is an extremely challenging task when one considers the richness of the various spiritual schools, the nuances and the accents brought by the sensitivity of the centuries and of the cultures, and also the many facets of the ever changing human soul. My intention here rather than offering a systematic argument, is mostly to hint at some elements of the Christian traditions that can shed some new light on our reflection.

Contemporary theologies of childhood cannot escape from children’s vulnerability and what it brings anew regarding humans’ self understanding and the Christian’s faith in a “vulnerable” God. David Jensen, in *Graced Vulnerability*, has
beautifully engaged in an advocacy theology and unfolded “an ethic of care for the vulnerable children in our midst” (2005, XIII). Anne Richards, in a chapter entitled “Nakedness and vulnerability” from her book Through the eyes of a child, also leads us both with delicacy and courage into a profound reflection on our ultimate destiny, in which “the naked child is (...) simultaneously the figure of untouched purity but also of dread of exposure of human wickedness” (2009, 41). So how to respect and value children’s vulnerability while protecting them from brokenness and harm? How to let them have the freedom to learn to become their unique and responsible self? How to embrace our own vulnerability without becoming blind and deserting our responsibility towards others, particularly children?

In a personal blog entitled: “Towards authenticity, awareness and acceptance”, Anne L. Simmonds, on December 5th, 2011, argued that “spirituality is inherently vulnerable” and posted a quote from Brown: “Faith minus vulnerability equals extremism; spirituality is inherently vulnerable. In vulnerability we find what gives life purpose and meaning”. Angela Shier-Jones authored a chapter from the book Through the eyes of a child (Richards and Privett, 2009) in which she points out how vulnerability is related to this faith attitude of openness that allows the space for the work of God’s Grace. In the perception of one’s completeness, or absolute wholeness, no space is allowed or left for anything “other”. Surprise, marvel or gratitude are strangers to the feeling of mightiness. On the contrary, vulnerability is a relational posture hospitable to what is “other” and beyond oneself. This may be one important reason why obedience and humility are so important in many of the spiritual Christian schools of the first centuries of Christianity. Another reason focuses on the edification of a
brother/sisterhood. Rules of life destined to communities of Christian men or women address this facet of spirituality.

It is quite remarkable that right after having mentioned, as most important, the aim of loving God and one’s neighbor, and referred to the Acts of the Apostles, Saint Augustine’s rule calls members of Christian communities to humility. Individuals are different but equal. Humility is recommended for everyone. In his rule, Augustine (354-430) also comments on obedience, which supports the development of humility. All are subjects to the superior – who has power over each member of the community. But even the superior has to grow in humility. In paragraph 46, Augustine specifies:

The superior must not think himself fortunate in his exercise of authority but in his role as one serving you in love. Let him be raised above you in honour, in the sight of men (sic); but, in the sight of God, let him humbly consider himself beneath you.

Saint Benedict (480-547) also thoroughly insists on humility in his rule – it is by far the longest chapter of his rule. Benedict talks about humility without weakness. Humility is here considered as a mean or as a path towards the discovery and the growth of a more authentic self (see Jedrzejczak 2006). In today’s words, it is a path towards freedom from the tyranny of the ever demanding and unsatisfied ego. Francis of Assisi was a master of humility. Francis de Sales, in his Introduction to the Devout Life, also recommended going as far as loving “our weaknesses, our limits, what is broken or even crooked in ourselves” explains Theotimedesavoie in his blog on the Saint (ThéotimeSavoie April 14th, 2013). Parallels can be made here with the invitation mentioned earlier to embrace one’s vulnerability.
Albert Nolan, a contemporary Dominican theologian, in a reflection inclusive of the quest held by post modernity and the sensitivity of today’s occidental people, reiterates the importance of getting to know who we are, beyond the numerous masks of our egos. He points out that our ego makes us believe that we are separate beings, independent and autonomous. Following the footsteps of Christ rather leads us in a path of humility: “Humility concerns truth. It is the recognition of the truth in ourselves” (Nolan 2009, 154). Nolan presents the child as the one to imitate while he considers children as humble, capable of trust and of gratitude, and full of joy.

In all these writings, humility is not firstly presented as a feeling but as a relational dynamic. Humility is enacted in attitudes of listening, in responses of obedience, in gestures of care. Far from being a resignation of one’s responsibility, humility is considered a means to grow on the Christian spiritual path. This is consistent with our previous reflection on the dynamics of different forms of power.

I would like to add a quick remark here to highlight the importance of the “letting go” in contemporary occidental secular spirituality. Chantal Delsol, a French philosopher, points out after Michel Hulin, the incommensurable difference between a letting go (le lâcher prise) related to the quest of the oceanic feeling and the Christian fiat rather related to a voluntary adhesion of the person to someone (God) (Delsol 2011). The relational postures here are completely opposite. Firstly, the self is disengaged and tends to disappear in the letting go, while the fiat requests the participation, the agency of the self. In the relationship to others, letting go moves the self away from liability and responsibility, while the fiat places the self as co-participant in the transformation of the world. Also, the letting go is directed to emptiness and oblivion, nothingness, while the
fiat recognizes the presence of God and relates to God in a way inclusive of one’s power and vulnerability.

Bible stories, which tell the relationship between a people and its God – and the relationship between God and his people, as seen by this people, are full of dynamics of power and its use and misuse. Active attitudes of trust, of abiding, or of surrender for example can be found throughout many of its books. The first verses of psalm 131 for example (before 3rd century B.C.) are iconic of a loving surrender to God embodied in the trust of a child in the arms of a benevolent parent.

*My heart is not proud, LORD,*

*my eyes are not haughty;*

*I do not concern myself with great matters*

*or things too wonderful for me.*

*But I have calmed and quieted myself;*

*I am like a weaned child with its mother;*

*like a weaned child I am content.* (Ps 131, 1-2)

Here, abiding in God or surrender to God is not experienced in a confrontational context. It has nothing to do with rendition but has everything to do with trust. So it is necessary to underline here that there is a need for trustworthy adults on whom children can lean, and also a need for adults to be in touch with their vulnerability, to rely on others and to nourish their capability to surrender to God in a way that never denies their responsibility over their life and the lives of their neighbors. And here come the challenges and the complexity of the human heart. Because humans need other humans to learn humility and surrender, while the persons on whom they rely in order to do so are also human and also apt to fail to their ego.
The Bible also tells us about the human beings we are called to be. In the very first pages of Genesis, the human dignity is highlighted in the narrative of creation in *Imago Dei*, a creation that needs to be completed in “God likeness” (Gn 1, 26). André Wénin, a biblical scholar, describes the main issue of the relational dynamics subjected to potential violence at stake in the Genesis narratives in the need to consent to the “limit” set by God, a limit that God also respects in the liberty offered to God’s creatures (Wénin 1998; Causse, Cuvillier and Wénin 2011). From the beginning, human beings are called to rule over the creation. When Cain wants power for him alone, God invites him to “*rule over the sin crouching at his door*” (Gn 4, 7). In French, the word used in the translation of both occurrences of the Hebrew verb is “dominate”. Human beings need to learn the proper use of power. It is needed of their life, both personal and communal.

It is true that our beliefs and values sometimes require that we stand and fight for them – although it is important to remember we often are (our ego is) our first enemy. Saint Paul in his letter to the Ephesians talks about truth, righteousness and faith in terms of war vestments, which is in great contrast with a vocabulary of vulnerability. However, on all occasions, the strength does not come from self, but from God (cf. Ep 6, 10ss). It should never be aimed at destroying God’s creation but rather at supporting the emergence of an authentic relational “being-with” self, others and God.

It is worth it to go back to the Gospel and notice that while Christ’s words had authority – in contrast with the scribes (cf. Lk 4, 32 and par.), Matthew has him say: “*Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls* (Mt 11, 29)”. Jesus got angry and used power against the merchants at the Temple (Mk 11, 15-17). But when Jesus heals, he constantly refers not
to his own power but to the faith of the people who come to him. Also in John’s Gospel, Jesus’ parting words are of friendship: “I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (Jn 15, 15). He does not relate to his disciples with superiority but offers mutuality.

Therefore the relationship we are called to imitate from Jesus is also one of mutuality. This also concerns caregivers. I find it particularly interesting to notice that new theologies, including feminist theologies and environmental theologies or eco-theologies, concerned with relational dynamics, revisit the idea of domination. These theologies speak today about equality, mutuality and stewardship.

**Back to the Three Children**

So where have we been led through this path of reflection, what have we learned from this journey?

Personally, I am more and more inclined to believe that the source of true power and authority in our lives is to be found within our most authentic self. This would be true both for adults and children. I would also be inclined to consider more attentively that while both children and adults can access this source, both, by “powers” from inside as well as from outside themselves, risk losing touch with their authentic self. In different ways, both need some guidance to develop the capability to find their way throughout those powers good and bad, so they can truly become who they are called to be, truly human.

In order to do so, as children and adults, we need to relate to ourselves and be open to our richness, our strengths, our gifts, but also to our vulnerability, in humility. We need to develop our responsibility towards ourselves, towards others and towards the
environment. And we need to develop this capability in good times as well as in adversity. We belong to the world. We are co-participants in the becoming of the world. Nourishing and developing our spiritual life is then inescapable if we want to care for others and if we want to become more fully ourselves.

Looking back at the children I have introduced to you in the beginning, new insights may now appear.

Even in the depths of suffering, Maxime, the nurses and doctors, and also myself tried to stay engaged in a relationship where our limits and our vulnerability were resolutely present. But it is because the caregivers could somehow embrace their vulnerability and surrender in humility that we could find the power to stay present to Maxime. I believe that Maxime presided at his death the way he wanted it to be. He followed his path opened to relationships: a relationship to Jesus Christ, whom he trusted and whom he wanted to be proud of him; a relationship to the staff and to me, with the intensity of his eyes; and a relationship to himself. He still was a vulnerable child, but found the power to be the author of his life, in his own and personal way. Maxime, already conscious of his vulnerability, found, through his spiritual life, the power to be his authentic self.

It is also in a relationship that Maria found the power to play the judge, to be the judge of her life, and to face the reality she was confronted with. Surrender and power were intertwined within her personal experience and also in our conversation. Maria knew I knew the truth – and here truth was a power that she could begin to open to. And my participating in her play, my surrender to her will might have given her a sense of control she needed while she experienced the vulnerability of her life. At the same time,
she obeyed her parents; she intuitively respected her parents’ wish that the threat she was facing be not lightly outspoken. In some contexts and for some people, not speaking about adversity is a way of resistance that gives them the power to continue to hope. It needs to be deeply respected. I believe that not speaking about a reality might be different than denying it. Naming reality is also a valuable way of gaining power over this reality. I believe that in her play, Maria both respected her parents and acquired that power – that capability to name – even if she did not use it. She already knew she was vulnerable, as well as she was capable of trusting: firstly her parents and also the staff, including myself. She articulated power and surrender together both with complexity and playfulness.

The outcome of my meeting with Chantal is more unclear. And today, I don’t believe it is necessary that the situation be otherwise. Considering the pressure she was under and the degree of compliance she was asked, Chantal’s expression of ire was a healthy response. Not only was it natural but her resistance is needed for her survival. High levels of both power and surrender were asked of her. She had already painfully experienced her vulnerability. And she was fiercely fighting to get more power. The paradox here is that in order to do so, her response was to refuse to relate. Actually, she did relate, but aggressively. Maybe she was trying to set a limit so she could try to find and be herself. In order to relate to me, Chantal needed first to trust me. Was I trustworthy? Children and relational paths are complex. Spiritual paths always need not only to be nourished but also to be discerned. A community is needed. God is needed.

Chantal, along with children like Maxime and Maria, reminds me that power and surrender are not accessories to our life. If we want to deepen what it means to be fully
human, we need to embrace our personal and collective whole reality – including power and vulnerability, life and death. We need to be concerned not only with our being relational, but to sustain our capability to engage in mutual relationships which are life-giving, which are empowering and help us to become the human beings we are called to be. We need to embrace both power and surrender.

References
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