In Praise of Weakness: On Integrating Faith and Scholarship  
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On May 31, 2008, I resigned my dream job as an Associate Professor at Indiana University (IU). I earned tenure at IU in 2004 and thought that I would stay there until I retired. My teaching load was very light (three courses to teach per year), and I had a promising research program that received strong institutional and professional support. To say the least, it was truly a dream job for a researcher. However, during my sabbatical leave in 2006, I had spent time reflecting on my life. While I had worked very hard to build my research program, I as a Christian, began to experience uneasy feelings regarding my scholarship. My uneasiness mainly came from the realization that I had wrong motives toward my scholarship. Simply put, my motivation was to make my name and scholarship greater than God. Plantinga (1996) might quickly label such efforts as “selfish intellectualism,” “worldly intellectualism,” and “idolatrous intellectualism.” While I was not familiar with such fancy terms back then, my past scholarship was indeed worldly and idolatrous, exemplifying “deadly sins of scholarship” (Plantinga, 1996). With that, I named it as “sin” and had to repent.

In the summer of 2007, I received an e-mail from Dr. De Graaf, who sent me a position announcement at Calvin College. In the spring semester of 2008, I came to Calvin for an interview. During the interview, I asked questions of the Deans and the Provost. One of the questions was: “What do you expect from your faculty here?” I heard them consistently saying: “we want our faculty grow in Christ.” I was stunned by the answer, as my IU administrators might have said, “Become a world leader in your area” or “Bring more external funding to the university.” In fall semester of 2008, I found myself teaching at Calvin. I came to Calvin College to develop scholarship that desires God’s Kingdom and makes His name great, through the gifts He has granted me.

The purpose of this faith statement is to describe how I have tried to integrate my faith and scholarship. Having been at Calvin for only two years, I consider this faith statement as an ever-evolving and on-going project. It won’t be the same statement next year, and I will continuously revise and sharpen my thoughts. That being said, I would like to begin my faith statement by introducing my existing program of scholarship. While there are continuities in my research program between pre-Calvin College and now, some important new thoughts have emerged from daily readings and reflections. I will introduce these new thoughts under the sub-headings entitled “The Changing View of Disability and “In Praise of Weakness.”

Research Program: The Two Strands

Among the many types of traumatic injuries and disabilities, spinal cord injury (SCI) constitutes one of the most devastating conditions in life. SCI brings major changes in roles, activities, and lifestyles, thus leading to a process of continual adjustment. While I have mainly focused on SCI population throughout my 18 years of research endeavors, since coming to Calvin College, I have broadened my focus to include other populations: individuals with arthritis and older adults. I have actively involved in examining the relationships between leisure and physical disability with two major research foci. One is to examine the impact of disability on the leisure
experience, and other is to examine the impact of the leisure experience on disability. In essence, leisure and disability are both independent as well as dependent variables in my research program.

**Strand 1: Impact of Disability on Leisure Experience.** I have endeavored to collaborate with colleagues across disciplines in an attempt to address three specific research questions as part of this line of inquiry: (1) how do individuals with disability perceive their return to enjoyable activities? (2) how do personal characteristics such as age, level of injury and personality differences relate to leisure experience?, and (3) what are those factors that inhibit and facilitate positive leisure experience for individuals with disability? The collaborative research results have contributed to the body of knowledge regarding leisure behavior and individuals with disability.

**Strand 2: Impact of Leisure Experience on Disability.** Existing literature on leisure and disability reports the positive role that pleasant experiences, such as leisure, play in the process of coping with disability. The second strand of my research has focused on understanding the impact of leisure, mainly characterized as positive experiences, on the coping processes associated with traumatic injuries. In this research strand, I have asked the following general question: Does leisure matter in coping with disability? Again, I have collaborated with colleagues in an effort to better examine this issue, which has resulted in numerous empirical and theoretical publications that have contributed to the existing knowledge base.

**The Dilemma**

As these two strands of my research program demonstrate, disability is the core construct of my research program. To learn more about disability, I have been examining the meaning of disability from a Christian perspective. Some insights seemed to suggest good answers, but the same answers have also led me to many new questions without clear answers. It was truly a dilemma, and, at one time, I even considered it an “intellectual crisis.” It was truly a “crisis” if I apply the Chinese language to understand the word. The Chinese word for “crisis” is made up of two words with two different meaning. One word indicates “danger,” while other word means “opportunity.” It seems that the Chinese must have seen both danger and opportunity in crisis.

**The Changing View of Disability**

The two facets of the Chinese definition of crisis seem correct in my case. On the negative side (i.e., danger), I used to see disability as functional difficulties and deficiencies that needed professional intervention. Disability always triggered my professional “instinct” to do something for good. Simply put, disability was seen as what was “bad” for the individual experiencing it.

However, the second meaning (i.e., opportunity) of the Chinese word for “crisis” emerged later. I have begun to realize that disability is NOT what is “bad” for a person with disability, but it can also be what is “good” for that person. In other words, disability is an opportunity to experience blessings. This insight came from my research with my former doctoral student, Dr. Chun, on examining the posttraumatic growth of people with spinal cord injury (Chun & Lee, 2008; Chun & Lee, 2010; Chun & Lee, submitted-a) and visual impairment (Chun & Lee, submitted-b).
What we learned from our collaborative research studies in last few years was that, out of traumatic experience such as spinal cord injury and acquired visual impairment, people reported meaningful family and social relationship, meaningful engagement in activities, appreciation for life, and numerous other positive life experiences. Particularly, when we examined gratitude in our research, we learned that people with spinal cord injury expressed (a) gratitude for everyday life, (b) gratitude for family support, (c) gratitude for new opportunities, gratitude for a positive sense of self, and (e) gratitude to God (Chun & Lee, submitted-a).

While there are multiple explanations and theories available in positive psychology to explain posttraumatic growth, I have begun to read theological books and articles related to disability to explore the concept from a Christian perspective. Through intensive literature reviews, I have learned that disability is a vulnerable reality (Blodgett, 1995; Dawn, 2001; Eiesland, 1994; Fineman, 2008; Nouwen, 1994; Raynolds, 2008) and limit (Creamer, 2009).

Reynolds (2009) argued that viewing people as “disabled” and “non-disabled” as two exclusive categories is incorrect. He said, “All people are linked indissolubly, sharing a fundamental condition: vulnerable personhood” (p. 105). By the same token, Fineman (2008) also argued for the universal and constant nature of human vulnerability. He wrote, “vulnerability is a universal, inevitable, enduring aspect of the human condition” (Fineman, 2008, p. 8). Creamer (2008), who used the term “limit” instead of “vulnerability,” argued that limits are “good or, at the very least, not evil” (Creamer, 2008, p. 95). Like human vulnerability, limits are intrinsic characteristics of humanity. She stated that a defining characteristic of humanity is the very fact that “one has limits” (Creamer, 2008, p. 92).

Vulnerability and limits are God’s created order. God created the heaven, the earth, and human. As Plantinga (2002) eloquently put it, creation is “a way things are” (p. 43). The ideas of vulnerability and limits of human are part of “a way things are.” Blodgett (1995) wrote, “… a more accurate perception of humankind’s condition admits that limitation and vulnerability are built into the way God created us…” (p. 76). Thus, our vulnerability and limits are not targets for God to save. Blodgett argued, “… There is something even more fundamentally wrong with saying we have limiting conditions from which God’s grace must save us. This is the idea that any [Italics added by the author] of us needs to be saved from limitations [Italics added by the author]. … God saves us from our sin, not from our limitations” (p. 76).

**In Praise of Weakness**

As vulnerability and limit are created order in humans, disability is not something to be pitied. It is only human sinfulness that despises disability and yet praises strength, as we live in a culture that creates a god of strength and power. Disability needs to be seen as a symbol that reminds us of our vulnerability and limits that demand our dependence on God. As our weakness is created order, dependence on God is also a created order. Trible (1978) wrote:

> “Before the Fall, Adam and Eve lived in a peculiar state of which we no longer have knowledge. They were helpless but unaware of helplessness. They were dependent yet secure. In fact, they were created to be dependent upon God, and in this holy dependence lay their security” (p. 108. Cited in Blodgett, 1995, p. 78).
There are ample Biblical evidence that point to God’s power in our weakness. Jesus’ total emptying and becoming obedient to the worst of death (see Philippians 2: 5-10) was in His total weakness. Gideon’s victory over a huge number of the Midianites using 300 men was God’s use of weakness. In 2 Corinthians, Paul wrote: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. (NIV, 2 Cor 4: 7). Later in the same book, Paul also praised his weakness:

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (NIV, 2 Cor 12: 7-10)

The delight in and joyful boasting of weakness are the treasures in the jars of clay. This may be why a participant in my research who has quadriplegia praised God in his weakness this way: “I thank God for building an awesome machine. … Even though I’m injured and my lungs still don’t work normally, I can still breathe … It’s perfect, you couldn’t ask for anything better. God’s built an awesome machine.” Like Paul and the research participant, our weakness is an important reason for our praising God. Thus, disability defined by human vulnerability and limit is a condition to praise the LORD.

The Triune God not only conceived our weakness but also designed us to relate with others. Owen (1993) noted that in our vulnerability and weakness, God had a powerful purpose. She said, “God … gave us the impetus to seek community with others, acknowledging that we are all in some way vulnerable (Own, 1993, cited in Blodgett, 1995, p. 79). We as children of God need the presence of others. We are vulnerable creatures who require the presence of others “not merely to survive, but to flourish” (Reynolds, p. 105). We need the gifts of those who depend on God in their limitations so that we might learn to be a Church of weakness, effectively participating in the sufferings of Jesus in a culture of power (Dawn, 2002). In this sense, a Christian community can be defined not by our strength and power, but by our weaknesses that are made concrete in relationships of dependence on others.

Based on these new insights into disability from a Christian perspective, I have begun to interpret and teach our weakness as an important tool to understand personal growth in the midst of the traumatic experience of disability. In addition, I have become interested in the value of spiritual community where our vulnerability and limits are freely expressed and accepted on a communal level. One of the most important challenges in rehabilitation science is to help our clients back to community, namely “community integration.” The Christian perspective on the ideas of vulnerability, limit, and our need to relate to each other in our own vulnerability and limit points to a vision for community integration programs. Disability is not what is bad for a person with disability, but it is God’s created goodness to that person if he or she begins to see the hidden treasures within the disability.
On Teaching

To me, teaching and research cannot be separated. My research informs my teaching, and vice versa. Research is more than theorizing the phenomenon, developing hypotheses from the theory, and testing hypotheses using well-designed research methods. For me, it is a continual process that requires critical thinking and careful reflection of the social world. With that, my ability to do research helps students think critically and encourages them to find answers through critical thinking. As my teaching portfolio contains details of my teaching philosophy, this faith statement highlights my Christian beliefs regarding (a) who I am as a teacher and (b) how I view my students.

A Teacher with Weakness

While personal piety is important as a Christian professor, I don’t fear sharing my own vulnerability and limits with my students. If there are sins to confess, as I happen to hit certain topics that involve my sinfulness, I tend to share them. At the same time, I don’t omit telling them about my need for repentance. My students know that I don’t speak perfect English. As a person for whom English is a second language, I am vulnerable and limited every time I interact with my students. When I write research papers, I, of course, use English (my second language) and, thus, spend a large amount of time choosing the correct words and putting them in a grammatically correct manner. It not only takes longer but also requires a great deal of effort. Nonetheless, my students know that I continue to publish my writing in spite of my weakness. I also have my own physical disability (i.e., osteoarthritis in my two hip joints). I have experienced severe distress, low self-esteem, helplessness, etc, and thankfully, I still struggle with them (immediate sense of vulnerability and limit). I openly use my personal experiences along with my data to explain vulnerability and limits associated with disability. I boast about God’s powerful intervention in my life as a person and as a scholar through my weakness. I do believe that my own weaknesses in many aspects of my life become an important medium to bless my students. I openly tell my students that, in my weakness, God’s power is at work through me. I am hoping and praying that through my effort to be unified with Christ in my weakness, I let students know that God’s power and glory work in me. Praise the LORD!

Students with Weakness

My students are unique individuals, who are created in the image of God. They are also wonderfully and fearfully made (Psalm 139: 14). I clearly recognize that each student has unique talents and gifts for use in building the Kingdom of God. Students’ gifts include “God-given capacity, personal traits, and learned skills” which are “presents from God and for serving in God’s world” (Schultze, 2005, p. 30). At the same time, I do believe that students have their own vulnerability and limits. I have observed that many students become discouraged and frustrated due to their own weaknesses. They are also tempted to pursue worldly power and strength to make up for their own vulnerability and limits. They might wishfully think that they will no longer be vulnerable and limited, as they get older and mature. But they ought to be taught that to grow up is to accept vulnerability and to be a Christian is to be vulnerable. I believe that mere recognition of personal strengths can be dangerous if students do not see their own weaknesses at
the same time. They will need to learn that they are designed to offer both their weaknesses and strengths to God to serve His world.

Many of my students will become therapists when they graduate from Calvin College. They will work at various rehabilitation centers, psychiatric hospitals, skilled nursing, and other stations to serve people with illness and disability. Thus, future therapists need to see and realize their own vulnerability and limits. Without such realization, they may not be able to see their vulnerable patients. They may be blinded to the fears, stress, pains, frustration and other negative emotions related to illness and injury. Once they realize how similar they actually are to one another as vulnerable beings, they can effectively build therapeutic relationships with clients.

**Conclusion**

As a researcher and teacher, I praise the LORD for my own weaknesses. These weaknesses are a constant reminder of my need for depending on God. I also praise the God who gave me gifts of writing and teaching. Knowing my own weaknesses and gifts, it is appropriate to celebrate them with others at Calvin College. To each of us God has given different gifts and weaknesses to serve His world. Within the scholarly organ of Christ's body at Calvin College, I realize that there is a diversity of gifts and weaknesses. Our collective gifts and weaknesses are complementary, and we need to work together to build up His Kingdom. In humility and unity, I would like to walk with our colleagues to build God’s Kingdom and work together to see God’s grace in our work.

**References**


