

PRAISE FOR *VULNERABLE FAITH*

“Using an array of examples that is both wide and deep, Jamie Arpin-Ricci draws us into a very deep place. This place of questions, trembling, fear, hope, faith, is at the heart of our vulnerability. It is in this very place that we most intimately find God and one another”

—**Fran Rossi Szpylczyk**

Catholic blogger, contributor to *Homilists for the Homeless*

“Jamie is an expert storyteller who with compassion and imagination seamlessly weaves together the old and the new, the saint and the sinner, the practical wisdom of the Twelve Steps with the timeless wisdom of the Scriptures. But his greatest feat in *Vulnerable Faith* is showing how transformative spirituality can be woven into the context of restorative community, where it belongs. Using the life of Saint Patrick as his guide, Jamie paves a way for all of us—on our own and in community—to approach a vulnerability worthy of our redemption. *Vulnerable Faith* is a primer on authentic community, a personal devotional book, and an insightful look into the human heart, all in one.”

—**Amy Hollingsworth**

author of *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers* and *Runaway Radical*

“Jamie Arpin-Ricci knows only too well that spiritual growth and transformation are the result of God’s grace. I heartily recommend this book to anyone interested in teaching that has stood the test of time.”

—**Albert Haase, of m**

author of *Catching Fire, Becoming Flame: A Guide for Spiritual Transformation*

“Arpin-Ricci has found a unique way to blend the life struggles of St. Patrick to help us restore our own dilemma of neglected discipleship. Referencing the Twelve Steps model, the reality of Patrick’s life, and the need for Christ in our own lives slowly unfolds into an understanding of how Christ fulfills shalom in all the areas of our lives. We all need this book.”

—**Randy Woodley**

author of *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision*

“The artful retelling of the story of St. Patrick is done with imagination and care. Each chapter’s installment of the story of the beloved saint is followed by theological reflection that probes and prods the reader toward holiness. This book is a fine resource for clergy, congregations, and missional communities.”

—**Elaine Heath**

author of *We Were the Least of These*

“In this age of self-reliance and faux invincibility, the spiritual discipline of vulnerability is a rare thing indeed. Gently and yet provocatively, Jamie Arpin-Ricci uses the life and teaching of St. Patrick to show us that it is only through accepting our common weakness, our brokenness and our unequivocal need for grace that we can find the opportunity for fullness of life and true freedom.”

—**Michael Frost**

author of *Incarnate*

“With creativity, skill, vulnerability, and insight Arpin-Ricci reintroduces readers to the risk of Christian faith, the hope of prophetic witness, and the true reward of costly grace for our time.”

— **Daniel P. Horan, of m**

author of *The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton*

*missional living
in the radical way
of st. patrick*

vulnerable
FAITH

JAMIE ARPIN-RICCI

FOREWORD BY JEAN VANIER



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**To my best friend, partner, Kim.
Your love, patience, and support
allow me to be vulnerable.**

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FOREWORD



I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a heart of flesh instead.

—EZEKIEL 36:26



he people in L'Arche with whom I have lived in community for over fifty years, men and women with intellectual disabilities, have taught me what it means to live vulnerably. For our greatest vulnerability is our need and longing to love and to be loved. And our fears of rejection, humiliation, and anguish solidify into hard walls, into compulsions and addictions, and even into hatred and the incapacity to meet those around us. Our fears turn our hearts to stone.

A heart of flesh is a heart that is vulnerable, one that is at risk of being wounded. But a heart of flesh is also capable of tenderness, a heart that can love.

This is the promise of transformation so beautifully illustrated in this book carefully titled *Vulnerable Faith*. The weaving together of the life of St. Patrick, the wisdom of Alcoholics Anonymous, and the real experiences of men and women offer a thorough and engaging orientation to what Etty Hillesum might call “coming to terms with life.” Hillesum was a young Jewish woman living in Holland during the Second World War. As the war and the presence of Nazis in her town intensify, she shares an amazing journey of inner transformation and freedom.

By “coming to terms with life” I mean: the reality of death has become a definite part of my life; my life has, so to speak, been extended by death.... It sounds paradoxical: by excluding death from our life, we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into our life, we enlarge it and enrich it. (An Interrupted Life, p. 155).

Coming to terms with life means embracing the essence of our humanity, which is vulnerable. Life implies death. Loving one another implies the possibility of humiliation or rejection. This is reality. But to live in fear is not to live at all. And so we must be vulnerable so that we are free from fear, free to love.

Alcoholics Anonymous has always inspired me, too. It is also about freedom, by accepting vulnerability. It is a program that helps people to reveal the beauty that is within them. In a way, our life at L'Arche is similar. We are men and women with and without disabilities, living together to make known the value and gift of each person through our relationships with one another. Many of the people we welcome,

the core-members*, have been terribly hurt, humiliated, rejected in big ways by being put into institutions, or in little ways by the looks of passersby that say, “You are weird,” “You don’t belong,” “You are less important.” They often have thickened layers of protection, which can be expressed in violence or depression, pushing away or closing up to those who try to become friends with them. Community building is also peace building, overcoming these barriers so that we can meet one another.

People that come to L’Arche to help often live the destabilizing realization that to meet one another implies a profound change in one’s self. In the journey that community implies, the distinction between assistant and core-member becomes unimportant because we are all unique parts of one human body. Each of us is wounded. Each of us has been hurt in some way. Each of us has felt humiliation and rejection. And each of us has walls of protection that impede us from being in relationship with one another.

This book begins with a similar realization that the journey of recovery within AA is not unlike the journey of growth to sainthood and martyrdom, and is not unlike the journey of growth in love, for it is fundamentally a human journey. It begins with an acceptance of vulnerability and charts a growth in the faith that is needed to live this. It should never be said that “coming to terms with life,” or community, or recovery, is easy. But it is essential if we are to live as children of God, as peacemakers, and with hearts open to loving.

* Core-members are the men and women with intellectual disabilities, truly at the core of our communities.

The urgency of the invitation to each of us in *Vulnerable Faith* cannot be ignored. In a world of terror and hatred, of protection and retaliation, it is a bold and important reminder to Christians of the radical nature of our witness as followers of Jesus. He is the Word made flesh, the vulnerable incarnation of God's love for each and every one of us. And it is in a relationship of mutual vulnerability with the One who loves us that we will be able to grow to freedom, that God's desire and our hope of shalom will be realized.


—JEAN VANIER

INTRODUCTION



*The virtues necessary to be a martyr
are no different from the virtues
necessary to be a faithful Christian.*

—CRAIG HOVEY¹



he disheveled and exhausted priest awoke from what little sleep he'd been able to cling to. Even at this early hour, sweat had begun to soak into his filthy striped prison clothes, promising another day of nearl unbearable heat in the confines of the prisoner bunker. Movin slowly, with the care and pains of a man twice his age, he got to his feet and stretched. As usual, he was the first one awake. He appreciated the few moments of silence each morning before he began his daily ritual of caring for the other men and serving their needs, from cleaning them of their own filt to administering the Eucharist. He took a deep breath and steadied himself for what was to come.

On this morning, however, the silence was different. Even with most of the other nine men condemned to starve to death in the bunker already dead, the silence was so complete, it was as if he was alone. Bending down on one knee beside the remaining, still human forms, he placed the back of his hand on each of their faces, their skin uncharacteristically cool in the growing heat of the summer day. He sighed heavily, slipped onto both knees, and quietly prayed for the last of his deceased companions.

His prayers were interrupted by the screeching protest of rusted hinges as the bunker door was opened, several armed guards stepping quickly inside, their rifles at the ready. A though the emaciated priest could have put up a fight, even if he had wanted to. *They are afraid*, thought the priest, *of me*. His heart filled with pity and compassion for his captors. He smiled kindly at them, hoping to ease their obvious anxiety.

“Wipe that smile off your face, prisoner!” Captain Fritzsche, the deputy commander of the concentration camp, barked as he stepped around the guards. This was the man who had condemned the men to die of starvation in order to deter other prisoners from attempting to escape. His cold pragmatism chilled the priest to the bone.

“It has been two weeks and you seem to be the last man alive. Characteristically stubborn and defiant, as usual,” the captain sneered at the kneeling priest, who bowed his head and

said nothing. “Do you think you have accomplished anything here? Do you think taking the place of one condemned man—who will die anyway—will give meaning to your life?” The deputy commander waited for a response, but again the priest said nothing.

“Very well,” he added, “this bunker is needed for more important matters. Prisoner number 16770, I hereby sentence you to immediate execution. Bring the needle!” A camp doctor entered nervously, a readied syringe in his hand. Approaching the prisoner, he glanced back and forth between the priest and the captain, not sure how to proceed. Without a word, the priest raised his arm, offering it to the doctor, nodding to him with a look of such compassion that it was as though he was forgiving the man for what he was about to do.

This is how Father Maximilian Maria Kolbe, OFM, was martyred, giving his life to spare that of a Polish army sergeant, Franciszek Gajowniczek. Gajowniczek went on to live to the age of 94, seeing his family grow and expand over generations. He never failed to tell others of the heroic act of love that saved his life and the man who gave him his future, his life. On the 10th of October 1982, Pope John Paul II canonized Maximilian Maria Kolbe at St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City to be remembered and venerated forever, a martyr for Christ.



WHAT A MARTYR REALLY IS

Few stories are more inspiring to Christians than those of martyrs—women and men who willingly, even joyfully, suffer and die for the sake of faithfulness in following Jesus. From the stoning of St. Stephen to the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, church history is filled with example after example of this peaceful, yet unwavering witness of Christian love in face of suffering and death. We marvel at their courage and selflessness, revere their memories, and hold them up as examples of what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ.

Yet, despite our veneration of their faithful sacrifice and contrary to what we might say about their example to all Christians, all too often we view these men and women as so exceptionally holy that, while we can revere them, we are unable to practically follow their example. Whether we articulate it consciously or not, we view them through a lens of religious exceptionalism—the conviction that they are spiritually superior in ways that transcend the normal rules and expectations that come with living a human life today, therefore exempting us from the responsibility of even trying to follow their example.

For some, our failure to move past this is rooted in a genuine belief in our own mediocrity, even brokenness. Knowing ourselves like no one else could, we believe that we are far too flawed, afraid, lazy, timid, angry, jealous, or selfish to ever amount to anything more than the status quo of Christian faithfulness. For others, a feeling of resignation stems from an awareness of what true faithfulness would

demand of us—the cost of true discipleship, which we, honest at least with ourselves, know we aren't willing to pay. In truth, both excuses are not so different or unrelated. Regardless, they produce the same result: a failure to embrace the calling of every believer to follow the way of the martyrs, the way of the Cross.

It is understandable why we balk from this responsibility, especially since the details of the martyrs' fates focus largely on the graphic realities of the suffering and deaths they experienced. I can say for myself that, apart from some significant transformation happening within me, it would seem unnatural (or at least unlikely) for me to respond to the prospect of such an end with eagerness, let alone joyful enthusiasm. Therefore, it is also easy to understand why we could misread the willingness of these saints as somehow demonstrating an absence of such fear as though it is a unique characteristic of their exceptional individuality.

However, when we explore the lives of the martyrs we see a pattern emerge. We begin to recognize in their stories, not an absence of fear, but a liberty from that very fear, just as present for them as for anyone. They somehow possess a freedom from the bondage of the fear of death that, by the Holy Spirit, empowers them to face martyrdom so heroically. As we discover the human persons within their hagiographies, with all the usual idiosyncrasies and imperfections of human experience, we are forced to admit that we cannot fairly hold them to a different standard than we hold ourselves. We are confronted with the invitation to participate in that same liberating transformation as fellow disciples of Christ.

Th s fundamental truth was echoed by Pope Francis:

Both in the past and today, in many parts of the world there are martyrs, both men and women, who are imprisoned or killed for the sole reason of being Christian. But there is also the daily martyrdom, which does not result in death but is also a loss of life for Christ.²

In other words, the Church—the Body of Christ, every believer from pope to postman to parent—shares in this “martyrological” vocation. Pope Francis continues:

Even though not every individual Christian will be killed, there is no way to distinguish those who will from those who will not. Even though not every Christian will be remembered as a martyr, every church that locates its identity in the cross is obligated to cultivate the virtues necessary to embrace all of its members to die for the cause of Christ. Every Christian is a member of a martyr-church.³

Yet, how do we “get there”? How do we become the kind of people who embrace this transformation and step into the fearless love of selfle s service to God and neighbor? Again, we can look to the lives of the saints, not only those who suffered a martyr’s death, but all who embraced this “daily martyrdom” in life. People like St. Thérèse of Lisieux and her Little Way; Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, whose Catholic Worker movement continues to share life with those on the margins even today; Kent Annan and John Engle who serve tirelessly with Haiti Partners, facilitating educational transformation amid a

devastated nation; Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity who selflessly pour out their lives among the world's forgotten and rejected; Mark Van Steenwyk and the Mennonite Worker community sharing life in Minneapolis's impoverished neighborhoods. In the lives of women and men such as these, we discover a work of transformation in hearts and lives—and this sort of transformation just might be accessible to us as well. Rooted in the fabric of Scripture and enlivened by the Spirit, it is a matter of following a journey with Christ that leads us from an isolated pretense of sin into Spirit-empowered communities of Christ. And with Christ, united as His Body together, we go about the work of seeing God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

It may sound easy when articulated in this way, but nothing could be further from the truth. Embracing the challenges surrounding such a faithfulness requires a lifetime, one that needs far more grace than discipline. Few things have been more intimidating in my life than having to sit down and write a book about this kind of vulnerable faith. After all, to have any credibility, people should really “practice what they preach.” And no one is more familiar with my own inadequacies and failings than me. Yet, it is in the face of my own imperfection that the stories of the martyrs and heroes of the faith become all that much more hopeful for me.



THE CASE OF ST. PATRICK

Again, as we look at the lives of faithful servants of God, we see patterns. Their journey of transformation seems to follow a course that is reflected in the heart of Scripture. While this road of transformation can be seen in the lives of many individuals and communities throughout history, few have inspired me more than the life of St. Patrick, patron saint of Ireland.

From his selfish, carefree youth to his capture as a slave, we see Patrick's sinful pretense torn away, confronting him with the true emptiness of worldly pleasures and privileges. From the feelings of abandonment in enslavement, which led him finally to absolute surrender to God, to his miraculous liberation and return home, we see the power of hope and the promise of resurrection. Yet, most poignantly, it is in Patrick's return to the land of his captors as servant and missionary that the transformation of the Holy Spirit is best seen. Each of these points in his life illustrates a movement of grace that we will explore. At the beginning of the forthcoming chapters, we will glimpse these events in Patrick's life, as we did with Father Kolbe. While using the historical information we have, I will take some creative license (in areas such as dialogue) as I attempt to bring these stories to life in a more dynamic way.

Finally, while I promise that I will not give you "Five Easy Steps" to anything, there are steps that I will look to throughout the book. Namely, I draw deeply from the wisdom of the twelve-step program

of Alcoholics Anonymous (often referred to as AA). The twelve steps explicitly parallel the process we explore in this book, fleshing them out in ways that are helpful. I will mention these parallels in the hope of demonstrating their wisdom. They are particularly helpful because they integrate guiding principles with concrete actions, refusing to let them be abstracted into mere ideals. Core to their process (and adapted for this context), the twelve steps involve admitting that we cannot control our brokenness; recognizing the need for God's intervention to give us strength; reflecting on all our failures, past and present, with the help of others; seeking reconciliation and making restitution whenever possible and beneficial; embracing a new life devoted to the principles learned; and compassionate reaching out to help others on the same journey. One could argue that these spiritual principles are necessary for everyone. Few movements reflect the kind of vulnerable faith we need like Alcoholics Anonymous.

Finally, I wanted to write this book because I believe with the German Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer that "cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church,"⁴ in other words, a grace without price or cost, a grace taken for granted as though it is owed to us. Does anyone today doubt that the Church in the global north faces a crisis of this sort? Cheap faithfulness is taking the name of Christ as our identity without requiring the renunciation of self and selfish ends. It is seeking full intimacy with God yet giving little, if any, commitment. It is about negotiating terms with Jesus, as though we have anything at all to bring to the table. It is an abuse of love