

Fragility

Please note: this is located under *Essays Related to the Early Church* simply because this heading has more parking space available.

This subject is as wide-ranging as you want it to be. Take your choice. Not only that, for most people the very mention of the word is embarrassing...perhaps shameful is a better word...because it belies a weakness we should avoid at all costs. In fact, we consider it a severe character defect, especially in a man. Essentially we're all fragile and try our best to conceal it as well as to avoid manifesting it. If you're a glutton for punishment and want to push this further, go out and claim that all women are fragile. While that's strictly taboo nowadays, quite a lot of people subscribe to it but only under their breath.

Such an attitude is unfortunate, and that's putting it mildly. When coming to grips with fragility we're stymied—even terrified—because we don't know where to begin. Even the smallest event can unsettle us and do so at the drop of a hat. And so we go about living with a certain dread of what lies around the next corner. At the same time we don't want to reveal too much of ourselves because others might take advantage of us. That's a topic worth pursuing in another context but doesn't apply here. Instead, I'm interested to see the commonality of fragility...that we all have it... and instead of hiding from it, see if we can put it to our advantage. In a nutshell, we need to move from being passive to taking action. This is more difficult than at first glance because it challenges our innate laziness.

Because fragility is so amorphous and pervasive, it takes some effort to actually find a point where to begin talking about it. That posed a problem when I started to think about this essay. Actually I almost decided not to go ahead with the project at hand. Then I discovered a universal principle hiding behind fragility, the perfect disguise, really. That consists of the pervasive violence throughout the world. Nothing new here. We tend to think of such violence as existing "out there" and in "other people." As for ourselves, of course it doesn't apply but only with the exception of a mild dose here or there. It turns out that always we're the victims. Could this be a trick we play in order to cover up a fragility which has been exposed to public view in one way or another? Not in all cases, of course, but in a way more unsettling than we prefer.

As for such violence we read about it each day while not bothering to see a resolution. Yes, courageous people step from time to time but later on it pops up somewhere else. So putting this aside for the moment, I decided to take a more gentle approach, as it were, and consider a recent personal experience that doesn't deal directly with violence but might be connected with the roots of it. Who knows. It might turn out to be one of those tiny entry points mentioned in the last paragraph. It won't take long to see if what emerges has wider application. So with that out of the way, let's look at one starting point which might enable us to see more clearly what our fragility is all about. The goal isn't to effect a cure but to be

aware of it. If I were to go at it directly, this fragility would vanish at once only to reemerge somewhere else later on. Instead, a more indirect approach is called for.

Shortly before this article I decided to write about Diotima's address to Socrates which can be found in the **Symposium** by Plato. If interested in that, you can look it up on this homepage. However, that article isn't the point here. Part way through I discovered that I had done some work on the same subject but had forgot about it completely. After feeling both embarrassed and guilty for time wasted, I decided to take a step back, consider the content of both and combine the two after which I had post the text. End of story.

Around the same time I did the same with regard to the Letter to the Hebrews, this being a more extensive project. As with the Diotima text, I overlooked the fact of having done an earlier document on the same subject. However, this time around I wasn't as bothered. Hebrews is a personal favorite text of mine. I wished to explore it more deeply from the vantage point of *lectio divina*, so away with the moaning and groaning. The second approach turned out to be different, even from the get-go. I realized this even at the outset but couldn't quite put my finger on it. Scrambling to fix the problem wasn't an option but to forge ahead with the current document. So after some rummaging around a bit, I realized that while the goal may be worthwhile, my attitude was not quite aligned with it. Something is wrong somewhere and in need of a fix.

Back when I was tempted to give up part way into the project—but not quite desperate enough to abandon ship—I found myself trying to extricate myself from a self-imposed conundrum. Admittedly we're dealing with a small issue in the larger scale of things. However, there's a danger in overlooking such situations because if we don't, we'll be ill-prepared to examine wider applications which are bound to emerge. So regardless of how big or how small, the pattern is the same. This sameness makes it easier to deal with them not should they arise but when they arise. No getting around that for sure. So the problem centered around a feeling that I had wasted time on a second article while being completely ignorant of the first crack at it. Not only that but it happened again with the Letter to the Hebrews document described in the paragraph above. This double oversight, if you will, riled me to no end...the classic tempest-in-a teapot syndrome. The pettiness of it all was made worse when I considered what was going on in the world at the time: massive loss of life in India due to the pandemic, the Gaza-Israel conflict, and not to mention the problems that friends and neighbors are undergoing. To top it off, by the time I was reviewing this article, these problems disappeared completely from the media. On to something else.

Still, this tiny (I used that adjective deliberately) problem was part of the world in which we live. The frustration and embarrassment presented two courses of action. One: I could simply walk away and do something else or two: I could examine all the details of the situation to see if it mirrored the experience of other people. A quick note as to solution number one. Taking flight is the easy way out. However, not long afterward memories of not sticking with

it would hang around a long time. So if you have a modicum of honesty, you'd go with option number two and play it out for all it's worth. Keep in mind that all this is done in secret, away from the public eye. While that may be true objectively speaking, what goes on inside necessarily has ramifications for the world outside. In other words, the two may seem different...even opposed...but essentially they are not. Everything is public, so might as well get used to the fact.

Detailing this experience is helpful to observe how our innate fragility raises its head. I was going to add "ugly" but on second thought did not. It can be a healthy experience provided we take a firm stand to view it as passing...not permanent...because if we don't, in an instance our inner demons will rush to the surface and gobble us up. This may seem a bit fanciful. In the general scheme of things they're reluctant to manifest themselves except in a major crisis. When one comes upon us, it seems that they're lurking just beneath the surface of our daily awareness. So often they catch us off guard. Totally. This seems ominous and in fact is as such. So instead of fright and flight, the option proposed here is to be aware of them plain and simple. The solution is so easy and at hand that we deny its existence.

The experience of composing two articles built upon two earlier similar ones of the same topic as just detailed (and their value, of course, is minor) is one way we can view that fragility common to us all. Even recalling the experience discloses an innate pettiness, a sure sign that we're as fragile as heck. Indeed, here is the portal through which the demons of self-denigration enter, for they activate a whole underground system of memories we'd rather forget. Once they come to the fore, they're difficult to put back in the bottle. Everyone knows this experience. At first you feel like rushing to a nearby friend and get this off your chest. It seems sensible but on second thought, not such a good idea. The reason? You're not allowing sufficient time to wallow in the mire you've just created. Yes, wallow. It's an apt word. We should not try to extricate ourselves all at once but allow the muck to cover us. Cover us indeed but not drown us. Only when we give it power over ourselves strange to say...and this is close to miraculous...we manage to come off okay. Sounds suicidal but turns out to be just the opposite.

Giving ourselves permission to wallow in our fragility enables us to overcome that strange but fairly common phenomenon when we consider ourselves directly responsible for any criticism that comes our way. By that I mean unfounded attacks or accusations whether large or small. They hurt indeed regardless of their size and to brush off the small ones is equivalent to putting your head in the sand. They do hurt and are more frequent than the big ones. Assuming responsibility for such criticism is an unnecessary added burden we bring upon ourselves, yet we persist in heaping them on. The reason? I'm not sure, but it may have something to do with how we were raised. Only in recent decades have we gained the tools to explore this phenomenon and are in desperate need for more. However, we must deal with the present. That means we have to avoid projecting what others think on to our

fragility. It's like pouring gasoline onto smoldering embers which if left alone, go out on their own. We all experience this but seldom is it talked about.

It's difficult finding words to describe such a phenomenon because our default position is to feel responsible for any and all accusations that come our way. When we encounter them we prefer a grin-and-bear-it attitude, allowing them to pass by without examining them. We get nowhere with this attitude; it's more a cop-out to our default state of mind. Here's where we are truly fragile which simply is another word for this vulnerability; it has a true glass-like quality about it, ready to be fragmented into a thousand pieces. As for the relatively minor case at hand—the pair of the two articles—there's a fear that someone will make the claim that essentially both are the same, that no difference exists despite the many hours devoted to their composition. However, it's helpful, indeed obligatory, to detect the fear of humiliation lying behind this way of thinking, the fear of having wasted so much time which could have been expended elsewhere. It's unnerving enough to prevent us from returning to the drawing board and if left to simmer, will spill over into other facets of our life.

Surely there are various ways to approach this. For example, I'm partial to the word "detection" because it connotes approaching the matter at hand in a not so direct fashion. Detecting something means you can draw closer or back off accordingly. So in a way to detect something implies coming upon it...almost sneaking up...in a gentle fashion. Also it infers the sense of sound, not sight, which is both more general yet at the time more sensitive. To search for something in a straightforward manner doesn't cut it. You tend to hide more easily from anyone who's out searching for you. Although this distinction may be insignificant, there's a lot more to it than meets the eye. Detecting our fragility means that we don't go out and fracture it like glass as already described. We allow it to remain undisturbed but in a manner not fully within the scope of our comprehension, it's in the process of being changed by reason of being observed. Such is the power of awareness.

Interestingly by detecting our native fragility it doesn't shatter but softens...admittedly a pretty good word...but only minus our intervention. Still we are intervening by effecting a kind of displacement, of shifting the ground beneath it. This approach may be envisioned by the Hebrew noun *selah* which is found chiefly in the psalms. Most articles about it are heavy on the word "probably" with regard to its definition, a way of saying that no one is certain as to its exact meaning. The common consensus suggests that *selah* has something to do with a pause, perhaps a liturgical one, allowing for brief reflection. Anyway, I'll apply it in the context at hand while respecting the original biblical use.

Looking back on my experience with redoing the two articles, things would not have worked out smoothly if I hadn't approached it in a direct sort of way which doesn't mean being head-strong. Instead, I would closed myself off from other insights to intervene. Again, this is more subtle to pick up on than at first glance. That approach means relying on personal resources to get work done. Awareness of its limitations arise only when we become

frustrated enough, that it doesn't lead to any resolution. Actually it sneaks up on us without realizing it because naturally we're occupied with laying down ideas and trying to make them connect as in a document. So when we're frustrated, we get all tied up in knots resulting in a self-induced paralysis. Now it's make or break time. Either we give up and walk away or cultivate a moment of *selah*. But how do we opt for the latter? The question itself is a problem. We don't "do" anything but somehow catch an insight from the corner of our eye that yes, a pause might be in order. The desire for one eventually presents itself. What's key here is that we're not responsible for bringing it into being.

When present within a *selah* we're reduced to a kind of dumbness, not far from the mark, but left functioning as usual. Awareness of time isn't suspended but takes on a new dimension, that is, it assumes a certain irrelevancy. Yes, we're aware of its passage but aren't clocked into it as we are in normal circumstances, good as that may be. Such an occasion is bound to come to an end but with an expectation that yes, we can access it once more. In sum, we can move in and out accordingly as the situation presents itself.

For an example, let's return to the process of writing those articles, even this one with all its limitations. I know what I wish to express and am tempted to move ahead with certain ideas, even ones that catch my fancy along the way. Nothing wrong with that. However, we need to see if this forward moment it latches on to us as quickly as it arises, not allowing for any lateral vision, if you will. At this point we become aware that we've been held hostage to a kind of linear direction. We've had an inkling of this for some time and can even visualize it, instinctively knowing it isn't one to follow even though we're following it. Instead, we are to cultivate one which can be characterized by a process described for now as coasting. It implies a gliding which is effortless and minus personal intervention. However, we don't simply glide indefinitely. The best part is it doesn't come to a dead end or any such thing but leads to a pause, a *selah*. You could say it docks with this *selah* in an effortless fashion. Some time later you realize this is quite natural and contrary to how we operate.

To grasp what's at work here requires some type of self-imposed isolation in order to minimize all the distractions around us though physical withdrawal is not necessarily required. Another way of putting this? We need to step back from the normal way we go about doing things. When we undertake a project (again, reference is made to the two pairs of articles) a reservoir of material is at our disposal. It contains all that's required for our work and as the expression goes, and then some. The best part is that we have it all within ourselves but...and this is a big but...fail to realize it. So instead of rushing in headlong (or at least following the temptation to do so), the *selah* we have in mind creates a buffer zone. Just being aware of its presence is enough, that's how much it has our interests at heart. Further consideration reveals that in some mysterious way *selah* exist independently of ourselves. When you really put your mind to it, we are incapable of inventing such a thing. It's tough to admit this but of the utmost benefit to acknowledge. We need to return to this important insight time after time because we lose sight of it so quickly.

So why does the benefit wrought by *selah* disappear so quickly? You'd think that something which has our best interests at heart would step in, wave a magic wand and make all our problems disappear. Instead, we run into an embarrassing reality we hadn't taken into considerations as of yet. That consists of getting excited at our first encounter with a *selah* (naturally so) while failing to realize that we have to dispose ourselves to abide in it. By this I mean prepare ourselves for the long haul, and get beyond the fluffed-up stage. We could call this Lesson Number Two, and it's a big one after Lesson Number One, coming face to face with the reality of *selah* itself. The biggest thing we come away with is being cautious with regard to what our imagination cooks up. We don't learn how to handle this all at once. A number of tries are needed until we build up a reservoir of remembrances which will put the breaks on our immature enthusiasm. Somehow, perhaps not in the fullest sense, this is reminiscent of the parable about the seed falling on three types of ground, the shallow one being equivalent to this enthusiastic reception of *selah*.

It seems we require a number of encounters with *selah* to discern a pattern. We desire it, have it and then a bit later it vanishes into thin air. If we can put aside memories of this off-again-on-again alteration we wrongly think *selah* favors, we discover that *selah* isn't the problem. It lies with us. *Selah* is not only fast, it's slippery whereas were pretty much slow...dullards, if we're really honest. And so we discover, very awkwardly to admit, that the quickness with which we forget interventions of *selah* is the obstacle for us taking up residence in it. There's a subtle mechanism going on here which is extremely nimble, nanosecond-like. It makes it hard to distinguish between it acting on its own and our desire for relating with it. In light of this we shouldn't be surprised at those occasions when we usurp this *selah*, that is, think they are of our own doing. Such instances of usurpation occur only after we've been affected directly by *selah* and think it's still operative while in reality it has left.

There is an objective, historical down-to-earth record of this alteration between our regular lives and the transcendent reality to which *selah* seems to be pointing. Actually it's part of our Judaeo-Christian heritage and is found celebrated...yes, celebrated...in both the Jewish and Christian liturgies. We find it in the Psalms which refers to real historical instances as in the Books of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. In fact, no other religion seems to celebrate, almost flaunt, human weakness and misery. Freely these three books talk about Israel's unfaithfulness, betrayal and all the rest. It's so remarkable that a person must have been present to witness and then record them. What really stands out, however, is that much of this happens immediately after some divine intervention of a dramatic nature. We're at a loss as to why the Israelites had forgotten such a momentous event when it happened so recently. So before we assume a self-congratulatory mode and launch into an invective against the Israelites, we find ourselves to be not different. In fact, we're doing exactly the same if not worse. Our actions aren't as dramatic but essentially are no different than these ancients. The same applies to everyone else on the planet. The big difference is that the

Israelites celebrated it. Any people or culture which fails to do this is bound to have a tragic end. They bear an unconscious resentment at this which may be at the root of anti-Semitism.

Perhaps we need to plumb deeper into this celebratory attitude with regard to our human condition and capitalize on it before looking elsewhere. By elsewhere I mean the very different approach which comes from the East, that is, the Orient. In fact, it seems quite alien to us. Here the fundamental premise is that our default condition is one which requires nothing to be added. That means the usual spiritual, psychological and moral precepts we consider necessary to obey. We possess them in their fullness *hic et nunc*. Boy, does that sound far-fetched and alien...so alien that some people rail against it with “impersonal” being the prime label of accusation. In other words, the effects of our supposedly depraved human nature are out there for all to behold, so why bother with such fantasies.

As for the insight of being whole and entire from the get-go, you wonder where it had come from. Someone somewhere at some time must have gotten the insight, experimented with it for a while and decided to share it. One thing is certain. This is a gift you don't keep for yourself. If you do, people remain in their innate selfishness which causes all sorts of problems, including yourself. No doubt problems do emerge but if it weren't for a handful of people sharing this insight among themselves, the world would have imploded eons ago. In fact, there's a Jewish story about a small group of people sharing this insight. However, they don't know each other. When one dies, another arises to take his or her place.

As for the concrete circumstances in which this original insight played out, we have no idea. Perhaps spending time watching the night sky was part of it, for various cultures throughout the world loved to do this. That meant a lot of people were up at night and asleep during the day. That means they were more sensitive to all the terrors and fears associated with night far more than we are today. Not only did the night sky show how tiny we are, but it served to govern human behavior. Whether or not this is has bearing on the current matter, it seems that already the seeds of what's described as *selah* seem have taken root early on in human history. People had no idea of what that meant but had grasped it essentially. Reflection on it's significance came later. And so this universal, timeless pause is what Christians would term as the beginning of salvation history. Earlier than that is the Jewish concept of the Sabbath which hopefully we'll take a look at in another article.

The idea that *selah* was developed during the night—and it's simply a personal insight—has some validity in that it's an ideal time for it to emerge. At that time both we and the world are in a quiet-down mode but at the same time exposed to the emergence of unforeseen events. In addition to the magnificent, unpolluted night sky, there are the unseen predators. That's on the outside. As for the inside, we have more dangerous enemies, stuff from the unconscious ready to emerge, stuff which usually prefers to stay hidden because it likes the darkness. So if we train ourselves to balance off these two sides, we in fact have the emergence of *selah*. The two are bound to conflict and produce negative thoughts and strong

feelings, so of which we never thought were within us. We think them to be incompatible with our perfect or ideal state, but it is not such. This is a trap into which we keep falling. Despite the incessant number of times it happens, never do we wake up. And so it's time to take a quick refresher with regard to the Israelites complaining as in the Sinai wilderness.

So our life is filled with these incessant alterations usually with *selah* fewer and further between than we'd like. We have to overcome an urge to break free of thinking as such, so recognizing the emergence of a compulsive attitude is crucial. To begin with, we find ourselves starting to feel—let's call the perception as it is without embellishing it—straight in the sense of being rigid. Such straightness comes on us when we're not reflective. That is to say, when we have an impulse to do something good and mentally rush forward to bring it about. We might go along fine for a while (again, the two pairs of articles being an example) but soon find ourselves being jacketed in from all sides, like we're being squeezed against our will.

We can't walk away from this as easily as we may think. Part of the reason is that we've been acting in such a way all our lives, having been taught, albeit indirectly or almost unconsciously by our parents and they by their parents, a retro *ad infinitum* process. We're dealing with what many would call our default condition, one of abject personal humility¹. Since it makes us "straight" as described above, memories from the past are able to rush upon us more quickly. In fact, they do it in a swiftness and relentlessness we can't fathom. We find ourselves open to one assault after another, not knowing how to put a crimp in this straightness to deflect it.

It's way beyond our power to alter this straightness. In many ways it's essential for our survival, keeping us on track so as not to become diverted and thus wander off into some abysmal pit of our own making. However, it needs to be "bent," to use a term consistent with the imagery we're using here. This is the most we can do; we're powerless to stop it, for this is akin to stopping the forward urge of life itself. So while many believe (and rightly so) that our distant ancestors loved watching the night sky for reasons already stated, perhaps they were doing it to counter both the humdrum nature straightness as well as its challenges they experience during the day. As we'd expect, they knew what they were doing but couldn't articulate it properly. Surely to live in accord with straightness was intense, for people considered it a gift just to have survived a given day.

Now with several millennia of this way of behaving drilled into us—and we've had absolutely no control over it, let alone real awareness of its influence until now—we're in a better position to step away without forcing ourselves. If we tried to extricate ourselves, there would be no difference between the straightness that's all encompassing and ourselves, let alone what we've inherited from previous generations. We'd proceed with blinders on while

1 Wrong! We've come to take this as Gospel truth. The real default position is the one proposed from the East, that we're made whole and entire.

seeing no prospect for change and worse, that there's no need for change. Actually to conceive of an alternative under these circumstances would be to engage in downright foolish behavior. In those cases when we see it being played out, we simply let it do so. No amount of intervention is going to save the day.

Such is the environment which our fragility has created as we do our best to keep at bay all the forces seeking to overturn us. These assaults can come in a variety of ways. The most prevalent one is boredom where we're faced with the same old assaults each day. We get to know the pattern early on and succumb to how it not so much wears us down but keeps us in a permanent state of submission to one repetition after another. Being exposed to long periods of this same 'ol same 'ol is difficult to deal with because we have no genuine reference points. The only one operative is that straightness delineated earlier. We say to ourselves...and this is quite subtle...that nothing is going on, and that we're wasting our time just sitting here without being able to do anything about it. Actually this sitting in the actual sense of doing it is the key. It bears resemblance to our familiar straightness yet allows us the opportunity to be aware of it while not subscribing to it. The parallel consists in us being "straight" but not in motion, and being in motion is key because it keeps us from realizing any alternative. That's a mouthful, really, and needs to be fleshed out at another time.

Now that we're freed up even if it's ever so slight, we can check out any alternatives to the way we're carried along in life. Consider one such burden that plagues us. That consists of memories that haunt us and help to user us along in that straightness under consideration. These memories make the past present just about all the time and as far as we're concerned, they are horrendous as well as shameful. So to break free from such confining straightness means we need to insert a pause, a *selah*. Doing so is like the proverbial inserting a square peg into a round hole. The two just don't fit. True, but *selah* has nothing to do with fitting it. Rather, it's a standing apart from the current straightness, taking an exit off the highway that has no end, if you will.

So this diversion needs to be viewed in a way totally unfamiliar with our normal way of doing things. It doesn't shrink from the condition in which we find ourselves but looks at it directly in the face and jokes about it. The surprise—and this is a mega one—is that it offers us an unanticipated advantage over God which includes the way we and others operate when it comes to spiritual matters. We are free to taunt him in a kidding way. No doubt he really get a kick out of this and can't get enough. How do we know this is true, that we're not deceiving ourselves? It comes down to a new-found sense of mobility, of quickness to maneuver around what we had thought could not be avoided. God is quite mobile himself, so by being such we're imitating him. When we imitate him he can't help but drop everything else and pay attention to see how well it's coming off. And so our fragility turns out to be the ideal vehicle for getting his attention.

Another point before coming to a conclusion: any discussion, any talk about presence or better, lack of presence of God, becomes irrelevant because this newly discovered mobility which rests upon the unlikely foundation of fragility is our new *modus operandi*. Another way of putting it is that constant in-your-face humility is where the action is at. Now we're able to discard all traditional ways of looking at things, good as they might be.

Returning for a final (and merciful) time to the two articles, one on Diotima and the other on the Letter to the Hebrews, the task is to keep forging ahead accordingly. What else is there to do? However, now we've discovered that we have the ability to take frequent pauses. They consist in simply hanging around for a few minutes or longer. No limit is put on their frequency nor their length. In other words, we've hit upon the gift of *selah* without manufacturing it.

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