

On fragility, from caution to courage

Donna Schaper | Jul. 2, 2013 Eco Catholic

Fragile is a word that keeps following me around.

In a recent evaluation, one of my members said that my congregation is delightfully fragile. He meant tender, not fixed; he meant open, not closed; he meant safe for vulnerability. It was a compliment, not a complaint.

Then at a conference on developing a new spiritual narrative for the 21st century, it resurfaced: "We live in a fragile universe, which some say has only five more years to fix itself." I thought that hyperbolic, but then again no one has ever accused me of not excelling at denial.

At another conference the same week, on developing a multipath, multiracial movement for justice, in a "healthy eco-system" workshop, I learned the word "anti-fragile."

It took me a while to get it. What it means is the biological strength of a constantly adapting and evolving system, which is often led by the smallest disturbance or intervention in it.

The "weird" things proved strong for adaptation, if for no other reason than that they strengthened the system for its next evolution. Decentralized, chaotic movements for social change might be better than a unified whole. Each religion might contain the whole truth "and actually need the others to disturb them in that pursuit.

Each of these versions of fragility "the vulnerable safety, the emotional fragility so many feel, even the twist of diversity being strength in human organization" reminded me of what I know about insects. They are small but mighty, especially when they show up as mosquitos at your barbecue at dusk, or as ants on your kitchen counter.

They also remind me of what I know about cancer and its "free radicals." Or family systems therapy, where the therapist turns toward anyone in the room but the IP, or Identified Patient. Or my husband's constant admonition that I memorize his cellphone number, an obvious way to be less fragile, but which I do not remember to do. Had I had it memorized before Hurricane Sandy, when he was in Florida and I was swimming in New York, things would have gone much better.

I am reminded of a related biological notion, the "chaotic attractor," meaning that changes in the cosmos attract each other to change, especially through the disturbance of equilibrium.

Fragile followed me around long enough that I made a decision. I am banning the term "community organizer," or my favorite French translation for it: the "animateur." I am going to start training people to be "chaotic attractors," those with alternative energy sources that are not wind or solar but fragility and the capacity to disturb.

Fragile people are not generation last but instead generation one. We are prepared to let our gorgeous fragility fully into our human consciousness, in such a way that we stop trying to tame the cosmos and learn to trust the way it tames chaos to order, only to disturb it, as a way to find equilibrium.

I can already see the T-Shirt: *Chaotic Attractor Seeks Positive Climate Change*. Too long, I know. But even our mistakes can contain a message.

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