



CHRISTA ANBEEK

Embracing Vulnerability

*In search of communities
with a heart*

**RADBOUD
UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

Translated from Dutch by
PAUL RASOR

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This publication was supported by: Sormani Fonds, Vrijzinnige Fondsen, Vera Gottschalk Fonds and Vrijzinnig Protestantse Stichting voor Behoud en vernieuwing van het vrijzinnig gedachtengoed.

Embracing Vulnerability

Published by RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Postbus 9100, 6500 HA Nijmegen, The Netherlands

www.radbouduniversitypress.nl www.ru.nl/radbouduniversitypress

radbouduniversitypress@ru.nl

First published as: *Kwetsbaarheid omhelzen. Op zoek naar gemeenschappen met een hart.*
Utrecht: Uitgeverij Ten Have, 2023

Design: VILLA Y, Andre Klijsen

Print and distribution: Pumbo.nl

ISBN: 978 94 9329 673 2

DOI: 10.54195/HBNO3892

Free download at: www.radbouduniversitypress.nl

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Translator's Notes

I am pleased to offer this translation of Christa Anbeek's newest book, *Embracing Vulnerability: In Search of Communities with a Heart*. Anbeek is one of the leading liberal theologians in the Netherlands, and I have long thought that her work deserves to be more readily available to English-speaking readers. I hope this translation will be a step in this direction.

Christa Anbeek's theology is grounded in experience. Starting with experience has been a characteristic of liberal theology ever since Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) argued that religion is grounded not in reason, but in a kind of pre-cognitive mystical experience he called a "feeling of absolute dependence" or a consciousness of being in relation with God. Theology, then, is about interpreting and explaining that experience.¹

Anbeek's experiential theology has a very different starting point. Anbeek begins not with any kind of mystical or personal subjective experience, but with the reality of disruption, often radical disruption, in everyday life. Or more precisely, with the vulnerability that manifests itself through experiences of disruption. These experiences can happen to individuals, groups, including religious groups, an entire society, or even the whole world. "Disruptive experiences knock the ground out from under your feet," she says. The question then, is: "Who are you when nothing is as it was before? Who can you become, and who can help?"

Anbeek invites us not to deny or run away from our vulnerability, but instead to embrace it: "I have long argued that we should not avoid life's all-encompassing fragility, but rather embrace it. Fragility, uncertainty, unpredictability, dependence, and porousness, however difficult they often can be, are sources of deep insights. Disruptive experiences bring us into borderlands. They make our vulnerability manifest, but also reveal new perspectives and creativity." Anbeek argues that we can find our way through these disruptive experiences in communities with a heart, communities that can arise spontaneously when people who have suffered these disruptive experiences find each other and begin to share their stories.

Our experiences of radical disruption, and the stories we tell about them, are always embodied experiences. They take place in particular contexts and particular times and places and are therefore unique. Yet sharing our experiences with each other opens possibilities for moving forward, for rediscovering ourselves in community. Here, Anbeek touches on themes that we also see in some American feminist theologians such as Serene Jones, whom Anbeek discusses at length, and Sallie McFague. McFague says:

At the most basic level, experience is embodied; we are bodies that experience [...] Experience begins with feelings of hot and cold, hunger and satiety, comfort and pain, the most basic ways in which all creatures live in their environments. We live here also and this basic level connects us in a web of universal experience making possible an ever-widening inclusive sympathy for the pains and pleasures of creatures like and unlike ourselves [...] Experience is always embodied for human beings not only in relation to the natural world but also culturally, economically, sexually, socially, and so on. It is radically concrete [...] Even physical reality is experienced differently depending on one's cultural, economic, racial, and gender situation. There is no experience-in-general.²

Anbeek would not disagree with this. Yet there are important differences. McFague builds on the concept of embodiment to construct a way of thinking about God and the world through the metaphor of the body – the world as God's body. Anbeek, on the other hand, finds God language, and especially abstract concepts such as God-beyond-God (Tillich) or the Good (Iris Murdoch), unhelpful. Anbeek says: "If this beautiful but often bewildering earthly life and shared world are our starting points, where do we end up theologically? The *theological reversal* I have chosen, following the lead of anthropologists, means that I do not want to approach reality through familiar concepts such as 'God' or 'the Good.' What does theology look like if we take the encounter with life itself as the source of theological reflection? What do I hear, see, feel, smell and taste? How am I changed by what I encounter? And how can I give this theological meaning?"

We can also see similarities between Anbeek's experiential theology of vulnerability and liberation theology, which begins with the lived experience of oppression. As with experiences of disruption and vulnerability, the experience of oppression is always particular. Liberation theology speaks

from the perspective of a particular community's experience of oppression; it does not try to speak for everyone. Its fundamental commitment is to overcoming oppression in the world. Yet liberation theology is rooted in a biblical faith and linked to a God of justice, a God who acts in history on behalf of the oppressed. The move from the experience of oppression to the experience of God is one Anbeek does not make. We might say that for Anbeek, embracing vulnerability does not lead to God, but to community, communities with a heart.

Anbeek treats scholarly sources and personal experience with equal seriousness. She draws on theologians and philosophers, including Buddhist philosophers of the Kyoto School, anthropologists and sociologists, and other academic sources. She also draws on her own experience as a Remonstrant minister, a university professor, a spiritual advisor in a psychiatric institution, among other professional positions, as well as her experience as a mother, a grandmother, a lover, a friend, and on the experiences of others. Experiences of disruption and vulnerability emerge without warning in all these settings. This book is therefore at once scholarly and deeply personal.

Remonstrants

The Remonstrants, and especially Anbeek's relationship with the Remonstrants, play an important role in this book. This small, liberal religious group may be unfamiliar to non-Dutch readers, so I will briefly introduce it here.

The Remonstrants, officially known as the Remonstrant Brotherhood, emerged out of a theological dispute in the Dutch Reformed Churches in the early 17th century. Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) rejected the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, which held that God unconditionally elects some people for salvation. Arminius argued that human beings had free will to accept or reject God's grace. After Arminius died, his followers formalized his views in a document known as the *Five Articles of Remonstrance* in 1610, seeking to moderate the strict Calvinism of the time. A group of Calvinists led by Franciscus Gomaris (1563-1641) wrote a *Counter Remonstrance* in 1611, defending the traditional views. Years of argument followed. To settle this dispute, a national synod known as the Synod of Dort was held in the Dutch town of Dordrecht in 1618-1619. The Synod concluded by rejecting the Arminian views and adopting what has become

known as the Canons of Dort, sometimes referred to as the Five Points of Calvinism, as the official doctrine of the Reformed churches. Among other things, the Canons affirmed the absolute sovereignty of God as well as the doctrine of double predestination. The Arminians were ultimately expelled from the Synod and some were forced to flee the Netherlands. The Remonstrant Brotherhood was founded in Antwerp in 1619, and the Remonstrants have been in continuous existence since that time. Today they number around 5,000 members and friends.

References and notes

A comment on my treatment of Anbeek's sources is also in order. Several sources used by Anbeek are available only in Dutch. Here, I have left the original titles intact in the bibliographical list of references but have provided English translations in brackets. Page number references to these sources in the notes are to the Dutch originals.

In some cases Anbeek has relied on Dutch translations of material originally published in English. Here, I have substituted the English-language originals in the list of references. Page number references to these sources in the notes are to the English versions. Where Anbeek has used English language sources, I have left the titles and note references unchanged.

Finally, I want to thank Christa Anbeek for inviting me to do this translation and Radboud University Press for agreeing to publish it.

Paul Rasor

June 2024

Author's preface

Some guidance for the reader

Dear Reader,

By taking up this book you have begun an extraordinary adventure. This adventure can, by turns, be moving or bewildering, intriguing or broadening, disconcerting or enjoyable, but it will require effort. In this preface I offer you some guidelines along with some words of warning.

To put it all in context, I should tell you that, in the 1980s, I decided to study theology. This decision appalled my non-church family, but their reaction was not enough to dissuade me. During the first years of my studies, both my parents and my brother died unexpectedly. This had a profound and lasting impact on my development as a theologian and philosopher of religion. Since that time, my research has focused on situations of radical disruption, and in particular on the resources and obstacles offered by religious visions and practices in these situations.

Forty years have now passed since my early years as a student of theology. The world has changed and so have I. What has not changed is the appearance of ever new serious disruptions that affect individuals, groups, societies and even our entire world. These disruptions pose great challenges.

Over the years, the vulnerability of everything that lives and the disruptive experiences in which that vulnerability manifests itself have become increasingly important as sources of my theological and philosophical reflections. Abstract theological and philosophical concepts have faded into the background. As a professor in a small liberal seminary, this provoked questions and reproaches. Am I really a believer? Why do I mention God so little? What is the meaning of Christ for me? What is my understanding of grace? And what of freedom?

During my years as a professor at the Remonstrant Seminary, my most pressing question was: How can liberal theology and faith communities play a meaningful role in contemporary situations of radical disruption? Today, as International Grail Professor of Women and Care for the Future at Radboud University, my research is guided by a related question: How can we help create inclusive and inspiring communities in situations of severe disruption,

communities that give voice to marginalized groups such as women, children, animals, trees, and water?

In choosing the form in which I cast my quest, I drew inspiration from American author Phillip Lopate and German philosopher Theodor Adorno. In *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Lopate explores the various characteristics and techniques of personal essays. A personal essay should be distinguished from a formal essay, an essay that has an academic tone and intentionally presents a question or sets forth a theoretical position on a scholarly topic. A formal essay is never an adventure, but a personal essay always is. It is written in the first person; its tone is at once intimate and bold. It is a kind of conversation, one that is honest, self-revealing, gentle and personal, and it uses the author's own ignorance as a starting point. The personal essay is an extremely flexible and adaptable form. It possesses the freedom to go anywhere, in any direction. The essayist attempts to surround something – a subject, a problem or a mood – by approaching it from all angles, circling and diving like a hawk, each seemingly digressive spiral actually bringing us closer to the heart of the matter. Above all, the personal essayist must be a good storyteller; he or she brings topics together through free association.³

Adorno saw rich, subversive possibilities precisely in the “anti-systematic” properties of the essay. Lopate, drawing on Adorno, puts it this way:

In our century, when the grand philosophical systems seem to have collapsed under their own weight and authoritarian taint, the light-footed, freewheeling essay suddenly steps forward as an attractive way to open up philosophical discourse.⁴

According to Adorno, a personal essay evokes resistance because of the intellectual freedom the writer allows herself. The essay does not allow itself to prescribe its own domain; rather it moves between scientific clarification and artistic creativity. As such, it is intangible and quite often evokes annoyance.

Instead of achieving something scientifically or creating something artistically, the effort of the essay reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruples, on what others have already done. The essay mirrors what is loved and hated instead of presenting the intellect, on the model of a boundless work ethic, as *creatio ex nihilo*. Luck and play are essential to the essay. It does not begin with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to discuss; it says what is at issue and stops where it feels itself complete – not where nothing is left to say. Therefore, it is classed among the oddities.⁵

Adorno's diagnosis that the great philosophical systems have collapsed under their own weight and authoritarian taint applies all the more strongly, in my view, to theology. The abstract intellectual edifices of many twentieth-century theologians, such as Paul Tillich and Wolfhart Pannenberg, no longer convince many people and call instead for a new theological discourse. My own narrative and personal approach to theology is an attempt at this.

In the thirteen personal essays that comprise this book, some of which stem from lectures and readings I have given over the years, I take up questions that have been posed to me as a professor of the Remonstrants and the International Grail, questions that continue to engage me. These essays are thus intended primarily as a journey of discovery for myself. What do philosophy and theology have to offer in the face of deeply unsettling experiences? How can I relate to old classical theological concepts, and what new philosophical reflections and analyses can help save us and our earth community from destruction?

As a reader, I invite you to become my traveling companion on this quest. However, a warning is in order here. Over the years, my theological reflections have become narrative and personal. They are private and not generalizable. They go back to my own disruptive experiences or the disruptive experiences of others. These experiences are all tied to specific people, places and times and thus have limited force. Yet it is precisely these experiences that are the focus of this book. My essays are characterized by their intimacy. I confide everything to you: my thoughts, memories, despair, despondency, irritations, sometimes complaints about others, but also moments when I was lifted up, when I felt joy over the delights of life. I connect all of this with philosophical and theological reflections of others and myself. You, the reader, are of exceptional importance here. Traveling companions, friendships, dialogues, being able to be silent together in bewilderment or wonder, and searching together for reflections that offer new perspectives have shown me that I still have not given up my theological quest.

To you, the reader, I wish a fascinating reading experience full of discoveries. To help keep you from getting completely lost, there is an endnote at the beginning of each of the four sections of this volume with a brief summary of the main points of the essays in that particular section.

Finally, I would like to thank Radboud University Press for trusting in my unconventional scholarly work.

Christa Anbeek, June 2024

Introduction

Humans, animals, plants, rivers, air, earth, seas and mountains – robust, strong and resilient – are not indestructible. The survival of nature itself – of which we are a part – however breathtaking, dazzling, overpowering, awe-inspiring and often endearing it may be, cannot be taken for granted. We are threatened by multiple disruptions.

I have long argued that we should not avoid life’s all-encompassing fragility but rather embrace it. Fragility, uncertainty, unpredictability, dependence, and porousness, however difficult they often can be, are sources of deep insights. Disruptive experiences bring us into borderlands. They make our vulnerability manifest but also reveal new perspectives and creativity.⁶

Disruptive experiences are part of every life. We are fundamentally relational and vulnerable beings. American philosopher Judith Butler points to our bodies as sites of boundary experiences. “The condition of primary vulnerability, of being given over to the touch of the other, even if there is no other there, and no support for our lives, signifies a primary helplessness.”⁷ This innate, fundamental helplessness, or openness, or permeability, is necessary for us to develop and flourish. We become someone through relationships with others and can, therefore, be disowned by others. Experiences of grief and violence make painfully clear how intertwined we are, how mutually dependent on each other’s benevolence.

Embracing vulnerability does not come naturally. Disruptive experiences are often accompanied by loss, pain, suffering, and isolation. We enter an in-between place where old certainties no longer exist, and new ones are yet to be discovered, a no-man’s-land full of dangers and risks where we need to find new pathways.⁸ In *Mountain of the Soul* [De Berg van de Ziel, 2013] I explored this kind of in-between place with Ada de Jong, who had lost her husband and three children in a mountain accident. Along the way we looked for ways to survive. A painful journey, which at first did not seem to produce much. Exploring the abyss into which her husband and children, along with her own life, disappeared was exceptionally challenging and required a lot of courage. Her courage was perhaps prompted by the fact that the loss involved

her children, whom you carry with you even in the darkness of death. Her future had been stolen. Who are you then? Who can you ever become?⁹

Many of my books focus on disruptions affecting individuals. Only later did I turn my attention to disruptive experiences that affect groups or an entire society, or even the whole world. Realities such as Covid-19, climate change, the refugee crisis, growing inequality, and a new war in Europe bring with them disruptive experiences that impact whole groups of people. Old certainties have ceased to exist; new ones have yet to be discovered. Radical uncertainty and chaos are the new order of the day.

Churches and philosophical groups are also vulnerable and may find themselves in in-between places.¹⁰ Over four hundred years ago, in 1619, the birth year of the Remonstrants, the followers of Arminius (1560-1609) were expelled from the Synod of Dordrecht. Arminius held that people could not be predestined for eternal life regardless of how they lived. Without free will not to sin, God becomes the creator of sin. This is contrary to God's goodness. His opponent Gomarus (1563-1641), in line with Calvin (1509-1564), defended the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty. People are powerless to influence the choice between eternal life and eternal damnation. Years of prolonged conflict followed. Theologians on both sides took up the cause and wrote *Remonstrance* and *Counter-Remonstrance*. Theological disputes were marked by mockery and bullying. The president of the Synod, Johannes Bogerman (1576-1637), settled the controversy by raising his arms and angrily shouting "ite, ite!" "go away, get out." Abroad in Antwerp, the exiled ministers proclaimed their brotherhood in Christ.¹¹ Four hundred years later, the Remonstrants still exist, but the future is extremely uncertain. About five thousand friends and members remain, but there is no new growth. What worked for a long time no longer works. In 2013, I was appointed as the first female professor of the Remonstrant seminary. My assignment was to help discover a new future for the Remonstrants.¹²

The international Grail Movement was founded more than 100 years ago by Jesuit priest Jacques van Ginneken (1875-1945). During its early years, it was known as Women of Nazareth. Women's special gifts were to be used for the conversion of the world. In 1923, Van Ginneken was appointed professor of linguistics at the newly founded Catholic Theological University in Nijmegen. He inspired several young women students to join his lay movement. They reenergized the movement; their big dream was to establish a

women's university in Java. This dream remained unfulfilled, and the university never came to be. However, their inspiration, energy, creativity, piety and cooperation helped Grail movements flourish in many countries, focusing on projects for women's welfare and development.¹³ Over time, the emphasis shifted away from conversion toward the transformation of the world. A century after its founding, the International Grail faces new challenges. Old certainties are gone, new ones are yet to be discovered. How can it adapt to the changing times? At the university where it began, renamed Radboud University in 2004, a chair in Women and Care for the Future was established, hoping to inspire young women once again. My research assignment as the new professor was:

In situations of disruption, how can we help create inclusive and inspiring communities that give voice to the marginalized, such as women, children, animals, trees and water?

While the International Grail and the Remonstrants are different in many ways, both recognize that old certainties no longer work. They are not alone in the space between old and new. Countless other churches, faith communities, associations and even political parties face the challenge of reinventing themselves. These disruptions bring with them disorder, fear, homesickness, suffering, and displacement, along with endless discussions and internal conflicts. What is our identity? What vision moves us? What contribution can we make to the present and future world – a world that has, itself, fallen into disruption?

Disruptive experiences knock the ground out from under your feet. Who are you when nothing is as it was before? Who can you become, and who can help? These questions engage me in both my work and my private life. My own loss experiences have been a rich source of research, as have experiences of others. Children and loved ones died, young people became psychotic and could not finish their education, relationships were destroyed by addictions, a family fell into a ravine. Everywhere I went, I was confronted with disruption.

Disruptive experiences, whether of individuals, groups, churches, societies or the whole world, differ greatly. They are bodily experiences, tied to a specific place and time. They take place within a certain social context and are affected by power relations.¹⁴ Disruptive experiences are diverse, multifaceted and concrete. They bring you into an in-between place, a borderland, somewhere between the old and the new. Fear, uncertainty, suffering

and isolation play a huge role in this unknown territory. It's no picnic to be forced to leave the familiar behind and wander around in a place where you don't know your way.¹⁵ You become a pioneer. Over time, I came to recognize that these in-between places also contain opportunities. Sensibility is heightened. This can intensify suffering, but it can also sharpen our awareness of beautiful things. Desire and creativity are enhanced. Pioneers are open to connection and cooperation with others. You can go farther together than alone.¹⁶

Communities with a heart

Disruptive experiences bring people, groups and entire cultures to borderlands, also called liminal zones. These are full of risk, but they also offer unique opportunities. The search for who you can become is an art that requires minimizing risks and taking advantage of opportunities. How can we draw on sensitivity, desire, creativity, openness and cooperation to transform disruption into new dreams and possibilities for connection and coexistence? What partnerships can we build in borderlands?

Pausing to reflect on disruptive experiences and trying to discover what they are showing us is the first step. What is at stake? What has been lost? What pain, fear and uncertainty are caused? What beauty is revealed, what precious moments? Whom do we encounter in the in-between places? What dreams are born? What opportunities present themselves? How can we take advantage of these opportunities to design and create something new together?

Facing disruption squarely, examining it more closely and starting anew takes courage. This is the second step. The root of the French word *courage* is *cœur*, "heart." Courage is a matter of the heart. It is not about valiant individuals. We need each other to calm our anxious and insecure hearts and to discover together what more is available to us: a multitude of perspectives, creativity, insights, knowledge from experience, and possibilities for renewal.

In circumstances of profound disruption, people often help each other spontaneously. They let themselves be touched. They come to each other's aid and declare their solidarity. But the opposite also happens. People turn away. They pretend it doesn't concern them or retreat into themselves.

How can we make our hearts beat together? How can we help and care for each other? Where do communities with a heart emerge and how can we strengthen them?

In this book I invite the reader to join a meandering search for communities with a heart. What building blocks do I find, and where do I find them? How do they help us embrace our all-encompassing vulnerability and bring about transformation? What theological and philosophical reflections help us along, or perhaps distract us, as we try to build something new?

Route

The search for ways to embrace vulnerability in communities with a heart consists of four parts, with several essays in each part. Part 1, *In-Between Places*, deals with various liminal zones or borderlands. What do these borderlands look like and what chaos lurks within them? What unsuspected opportunities are hidden in them? Initially, I examine ideological groups in in-between areas, particularly the Remonstrants. What vulnerabilities can be seen in a faith community at risk of disappearing? Anthropologists and sociologists of religion show how religions worldwide have fallen into transitional areas. They suggest ways to prevent total demise and give the forces of renewal a chance. The abstract analyses of these scientists prompt me to return to personal stories of dislocation. What can we learn from vulnerable people in borderlands? What building blocks can I find for communities with heart?

In Part 2, *Theological Reversal*, I explore how borderlands provide inspiration for dancers, poets and dreamers. In uncertain in-between places, they express their despair and hope. They attend more closely to their own in-between areas. What's at stake?

A complex meeting of a research group on changing religiosity leads me to decide to prioritize fieldwork, like anthropologists. I want to explore how (groups of) people in vulnerable situations live and what choices they make. What places of promise do I find when I look around? My philosophical and theological search for communities with a heart begins with the ordinary, often messy and vulnerable condition of living together.

This is exactly the opposite of how I was educated theologically forty years ago. Most theologians and philosophers drew a sharp distinction between

ordinary, often tainted, imperfect and finite life, and God, the Ultimate, the Good, the unnamable, perfect and infinite. Theology created a gap between vulnerable life and religious faith. Instead, I want to embrace vulnerability in my search for communities with heart.

In Part 3, *Beckoning Vistas*, I consider women philosophers' analyses of being carried and born. Experiences of early life lead to a phenomenology of fundamental vulnerability that does not stop at birth. We are thoroughly dependent on each other to grow into acting persons. This brings with it important responsibilities; we must care for each other. Power imbalances play a role in how vulnerable we are. Experiences of being violently overpowered lead to being lost and broken ourselves. Sharing stories about what happened with others who listen and can retell our story is important for creating new connections and meaning. Drawing on women philosophers, religious scholars and theologians, I discover an interesting theological route toward communities with heart. Instead of abstract concepts such as God, the Infinite, and the Good, we find *concrete persons, intimations of transitional areas, and verbs*. These suggest a direction.

In Part 4, *Breathing Space*, I undertake a closer examination of breathing: air, flow, life force. Breath brings me back to my teachers in sitting Zen meditation. Something ineffable reveals itself in silence. Breathing is essential to speaking, and speaking creates direction and meaning, according to a linguist and philosopher. But not everything that breathes speaks, or does it? How can we learn to listen beyond the human?

Short days and long dark nights at the end of the year offer time and space for old and new reflections. The world has changed, and so has the place of religion. How can seekers of meaning find direction and connection? And what can the spiritual treasures buried under the dust in old storehouses mean here?

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor argues for an *ecumenism of friendship*, deep and patient conversations between young and old, rich and poor, religious and nonreligious. His proposal raises the question of who has a place in this house of friendship. A richly varied group of sentient beings take their seats at the friendship table. They consider how we can embrace vulnerability in communities with a heart.

In the *Epilogue*, I review what the search for building blocks for communities with a heart has led to. I bring together eight cornerstones: facing disruptions openly, being silent, speaking boldly and practicing multi-voiced listening, minimizing risks and optimizing opportunities, dreaming, setting direction, working cooperatively, and being willing to fail and start over. I conclude with a brief reflection on what these cornerstones can mean for philosophical and ideological groups in in-between places.