

Inexhaustible vulnerability

By [Eric Atcheson](#)

March 7, 2016

I turned 30 earlier this year, and I can see the difference age has had on my body—and not just on my bald head, because, as my loved ones and old friends would tell you, that started over a decade ago.

My body takes longer to heal after I injure it on the soccer field. My muscles stiffen up more quickly when I'm sitting down for long stretches. And once every few months, I notice a silver hair in my beard that is promptly evicted.

I didn't like turning 30, even though I know that, assuming I live out a normal lifespan, I have far more tomorrows ahead of me than yesterdays. I think I didn't like it because I, like most young adults, had to come to grips with my own mortality—that I am not invincible, that I cannot simply work and work and work and then sleep when I am dead, and that my mind must consider more things in my life than simply tomorrow's to-do list.

I'm an older, more experienced pastor than when I arrived here four and a half years ago, and my experience makes me a better pastor. But it also makes me a more-tired pastor.

Because ministry necessitates vulnerability. And vulnerability is exhausting. It really, truly is. Because while many things about ministry **have** gotten easier for me as I have gotten older, being vulnerable hasn't.

"It must be so nice to be able to just take a day for yourself to write your sermons."

Yes, but what I am writing are words that I will share publicly, and those words must be words of authenticity, of genuine meaning.

"It must be so strengthening to be to have quiet time for reflection and prayer with God during your office hours."

Yes, but in between visitors, phone calls, e-mails, preparing lessons and newsletters, and the occasional printer jam, it isn't so much quiet time some days as it is

controlled chaos.

"It must be so meaningful to be there for people in the hardest moments of their lives."

Yes, it absolutely is, and it's incredibly rewarding in its own way. But behind those moments is the sleep I lose over my people, the emotional anguish I feel for them in their pangs of loss and sorrow, and the need I feel to help them in ways beyond *only* praying for them.

From the outside, before seminary, I saw so very little of any of that. I confess there was a part of me who wanted to be the passionate preacher and engaging teacher—and indeed, those are among my gifts in this ministry—but I had no idea just how prone, how exposed, doing that week in and week out makes a person. I really didn't.

While that may sound like regret, though, it is anything but. Vulnerability is what makes this vocation rewarding. It is what makes my line of work worth doing. The minute I stop being vulnerable is the minute I need to start studying for the LSATs instead of for next week's sermon. I take so much more meaning in my vulnerability than I used to, and for that, I will remain forever in my profession's debt.

I just confess I did not know how much its perpetual state can take out of you. And that I took for granted my own youth in sustaining it.

Fortunately, I have mentors, I have colleagues, who have been in ministry for decades and who truly do embody this inexhaustible vulnerability, this ability to be oneself before dozens, hundreds, of people a week for decades on end and still wake up the next morning wanting nothing more than to do it all over again. I cannot say how important it has been for me to have these role models in my life.

But not all of us do. Not all of us have a Paul to our Timothy, a Deborah to our Barak, or an Anna to our Mary and our Joseph.

For the church to have a future with its newest clergy, pastors like me who have been in professional ministry for less than a decade, that has to change, and keep changing. We have inherited a church that largely still doesn't know what to do with us. And that's fine, we never said we were easy to deal with. We are a fierce, opinionated, plugged-in people.

But we need to keep inheriting and balancing that tradition of vulnerability, lest we get swept away by it and burned out. I'm a little bit older now, and a lot wiser, since I started this work. And I hope and pray that I will continue to be able to be so vulnerable and so raw, so true to my people, for many more years in ministry to come, that even if the rest of me tires out, that this holy and sacred vulnerability upon which my ministry—and yours—is built will indeed remain inexhaustible.

Originally posted at [The Theophilus Project](#)