

Every spring, well, every *late* winter and *early* spring, calves populated the barnyard of our farm in northern Minnesota. It was calving season. Newborns, literally, kicked up their hooves and frolicked around the barnyard as they tried on their new bodies and explored their budding energies. As the earth moved from the darkness and cold of winter into the light and warmth of spring, brown and gold bovine bambinos embodied a similar movement into new life.

Depending on the spring—cold and wet versus warm and dry—and depending on the cow—a new cow or a veteran—and depending on the mysterious calculus of chance in the universe, there were as many types and characters of new life as there were calves. The healthy and strong thrived whether it was freezing or sixty degrees, whether snow squalls whipped around the barns or the sun pierced the cracks and holes of the weathered red barn, whether the herd was actively playing amidst the burgeoning fields or settling in to chew their cud as the day's light waned on another chapter. They were vigorous, and it didn't take much to facilitate their flourishing.

However, there were those who were not as fortunate. They were born inexplicably with two strikes against them. Their entry into life was vastly more precarious. Oftentimes, it was tragically brief, a candle in the wind. We spent time creating pens with heat lamps to warm the compromised. Formula supplemented the weak who struggled to nurse. There were even times when a calf would enter our house and spend time there in the hopes that it could be nursed back to health and strength. The cruelty of nature and the dispassionate ultimatum of the world became a familiar experience. Denying the fragility of life was not an option. It stared you squarely in the face.

While the power and exuberance of the other calves was exciting to see, there was always a particularly poignant place that the weak held. Even though we knew the odds were stacked against them (or, perhaps, precisely because of this) there was a soft spot for these little ones laboring to transcend the lottery of their life. They made a mark on you by revealing the vulnerability that we all share. Yes, some can hide it better than others. Weak calves wore it unmistakably in their frames. This recognition of vulnerability led, ultimately, to compassion. Thus, working with animals in this state was always a wrenching experience. You journeyed with the animal to what was often a grim end.

These memories return as we are about to observe the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, our patron saint and the saint associated with Creation and God's creatures. The particular memories mentioned above may seem a bit strange. Aren't we celebrating life with St. Francis? Don't we cherish our animal friends during this observance? Yes and yes. Yet, bear with me a moment to make a connection.

While Francis was born into the strength and power of a wealthy family in Italy, his renunciation of this life and his even more astounding embrace of poverty is a part of his life that stands out. Indeed, I think whatever it was that moved Francis to such bold—and baffling—action ultimately sensitized him to the needs of others and the reality of those who live on the margins of society, even—and especially—the animals. In essence, his life stood as an expression that the conventional wisdom of the world need not be the only wisdom. Paradoxically, conventional wisdom, in Francis' vision, may be more off base than what we think is irrational. Ironically, siding with the vulnerable allows one to enter more fully into life.

Of course, Francis learned from the model of the one who transformed his life and changed him: Jesus. Jesus' life and ministry seems, more often than not, to challenge the structures and strictures of power, propriety, and popularity. Jesus forced people to consider other ways of being and entering into those ways of being, not just dismissing them. Ultimately, Jesus and Francis both teach us the power of vulnerability. They become vulnerable and, thus, are able to enter more fully into the vulnerability of others. Furthermore, this self-emptying allows them to engage others and the world with a quality that transforms the world. Compassion bubbles over. And in the process, they teach us how to become more fully who God created us to be.

May we celebrate on Sunday the gift of creation and the creatures we love. May we also continue to practice the difficult insight that Jesus and Francis and the tiny calves of the past offer: vulnerability lies at the heart of our being.