

Vulnerability and Love

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Are we willing to stop over the edges of our vulnerability to love more deeply?

Reading

Excerpt from *Daring Greatly* by Brene Brown (p.10)

Wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness. It means cultivating the courage, compassion, and connection to wake up in the morning and think, “No matter what gets done and how much is left undone, I am enough.” It’s going to bed at night thinking, “Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn’t change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging.”

Sermon

I was pretty proud of myself. The get-to-know-each-other session of our first Coming of Age retreat had just finished and I thought it had gone pretty well. The two teenaged young men I was mentoring hadn’t rejected me outright and I had gotten them to talk about some of their interests – music and video games. The youth had an hour of free time and the mentors were slowly gathering on the patio outside the lodge which overlooked a big lake.

I was just settling into my chair when another mentor sat down next to me. Her day job was family counseling and we were lucky to have her as a mentor. Right away she turned to me and said, “Jim, why is it that fathers never tell their sons they love them?” That caught me off guard and I didn’t know how to respond. My friend clearly respected my opinion and must have assumed I could give her profound insight into the male psyche, particularly those cold hearted, non-communicative, distant fathers who are so uptight they can’t open up enough to even tell their sons how much they love them.

The problem was, I was one of those fathers. I couldn’t remember ever telling my son I loved him. So I wasn’t sure what to do. I followed my usual “honesty is the best policy” approach, I admitted that I didn’t tell my son that I loved him and I had no idea why I didn’t. As expected, I got a look of utter disbelief from my friend and I was relieved when she changed the subject.

I was left to ponder. My son and I have always had a close relationship and I love him very much. I know it’s important to let our children know they are loved and I was pretty sure my son knew he was loved, so why couldn’t I say it? Come to think of it, I don’t recall either of my parents ever telling me they loved me. Sure they might have signed a card or letter “love mom

and dad”, but I’m pretty sure they never said it either. What special occasion were they waiting for? Why were they so hesitant? Why was I so hesitant? What was I afraid of?

That’s when I found Brene Brown’s ted talk titled “The Power of Vulnerability”. Dr. Brown’s thesis goes like this. Human beings are hard wired for connection. We crave being loved and need healthy connection in our lives to be whole and well balanced. In her research Brown discovered that being vulnerable is the most essential element for connection. Those willing to be vulnerable form deeper connections which lead to more joy, love and happiness. Brown calls this the secret to being wholehearted.

Well, being wholehearted sounds like something we would all want to be – at least I want to be wholehearted. So why then was I not willing to be vulnerable? Why wouldn’t I tell my son how much I loved him? Again Brown’s research provided an answer. She discovered that those willing to be vulnerable held a deep inherent belief they are worthy of being loved.

They believe they are worthy of being loved. These folks understand that being vulnerable is simply a part of the recipe for happiness. Despite the potential for getting emotionally hurt, they believe they are worthy of being loved and will try again.

So did I really believe that if I told my son I loved him, he might not repeat it back? I didn’t think so. In fact, I believe I’ve been called to ministry precisely because I have love to offer our broken world. But maybe, just maybe, I wasn’t being quite vulnerable enough. Maybe I was afraid that those who know me best, those who can recite all my faults and foibles without any hesitation might not love me? But think about it for a minute. If I couldn’t open my heart to vulnerability among close family members, was I ready for the broken world? I wanted my life to be an example of wholeheartedness. I did not want my children to stand in front of a group like you long after I’m gone and state that they couldn’t recall me ever telling them I loved them.

Well, I decided it was time to get over self-doubt and insecurity about being loved. By the time the coming of age program ended, I had told my son I loved him and that I was very proud of the man he was becoming. It honestly was a turning point in our relationship and we became even closer during his teenage years. Now that’s not something you normally hear about parents and their teenagers. I am so happy I took the chance to be vulnerable.

Not long after this story with my son, I entered seminary and I started to wonder what vulnerability looked and felt like in a faith community. A friend of mine in seminary probably understands this better than I do. You don’t know him, but he agreed to let me tell you his encounter with vulnerability.

He grew up in the South in a loving home. Given that his family was very involved in their Southern Baptist Church, it was no surprise that my friend decided to attend a conservative Christian college. College went well for him; he was smart, personable, and outgoing. He did well in his classes and made friends rather easily. Eventually, he fell in love and once their relationship became more serious, they each agreed to be tested for HIV.

Because he was a student, he went to a free clinic run by a religious organization to be tested. Back then the results of a blood test took a while to process so a quicker mouth swab was used as a preliminary test. A technician ushered my friend to a closet sized room in the back of the clinic to give him his results. In a very matter-of-fact tone she told him the test was positive.

As you can imagine, my friend felt a wave of emotion trying to drown him. He was shaking and bawling uncontrollably. After what seemed like a very long time, the technician finally asked, "Don't you think God is sending you a message about your behavior?" My friend looked up at her bewildered. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. She had just given him the news that he would likely die young after suffering a horrible illness. How could she be so judgmental and condescending?

My friend had never been more vulnerable and in need of loving connection and he didn't know where to turn. His family didn't know he was gay and he was in the closet to everyone at school as well. All he knew was at that moment he did not want to be with that woman at that clinic. He ran out of the building with tears streaming down his face and got in his car. He just started to drive and drive without any particular destination in mind. He was confused, he was suffering, and he just wanted to run away. He kept driving across town crying and crying. His tears were so thick that he couldn't even make out the street or the cars around him. Since he was afraid to get in an accident and have to explain his situation to police, he looked around for a place to park and realized he was in front of a Unitarian Universalist church. He recognized it because he had attended an event there once. He knew enough about the church to assume he would be safe. He parked his car, got out and stumbled inside. No one was around at the entrance so he just wandered further into the building, looking for privacy. He found a small room with a copier, went in, and collapsed on the floor sobbing bitterly.

After a few minutes, the office administrator heard him crying and came into the room. She just knelt by him on the floor. Over the next hour, he shared his pain and burden with her while she listened compassionately and comforted him. She stayed with him until she felt it was safe to get help. She asked if she could call the minister and he agreed. When the minister arrived, he sat with my friend for another hour until he felt he had done all he was capable of doing. He helped my friend check into a hospital. You see, there is a high rate of suicide right

after someone tests positive for HIV. Fortunately, my very vulnerable friend received the loving connections he needed to get him through those initial days.

Just so you know, his blood test later came back negative; the preliminary test had been false. My friend did not have the virus that causes AIDS, but nevertheless his life had been in grave danger because of his fear of not being worthy of love. But he took a chance that saved his life. He took a chance that someone at the Unitarian Universalist church would love him. He took a chance at being vulnerable and opening himself up to a complete stranger that found him in the copy room. Perhaps deep down he did believe he was worthy of love and took the chance.

The office administrator made the decision to be vulnerable as well; to be a compassionate connection when my friend needed it most. She could have panicked and run out of the room to call someone else. If she had done that, my friend probably would have left. Even though she was not professionally trained to handle such a crisis, she knew how to open herself up to another vulnerable human being and demonstrate that he was indeed worthy of being loved.

This, is Brene Brown's definition of being wholehearted.

And this, my friends is what we are called to be as Unitarian Universalists. Our faith community is held together not by common doctrine or statements of belief, but rather by a covenant of love. That's it. We covenant to be wholehearted with each other. We covenant with each other in the belief that we are worthy of being loved and it is our mission to remind each other of that fact through our words, our actions, and our willingness to be vulnerable. The strength of our community lies in the heart of that vulnerability. It can be scary, and unpredictable, and messy at times, but when we can be vulnerable, we can be our best.

It is my hope that you feel comfortable being vulnerable here.

I do.

I want you each to believe that you are worthy of being loved.

I love you.

As a closing, I'd like to refer back to the song I played earlier, *You Walk With Me*. As I mentioned it was from the musical *The Full Monte*. I'd like to recommend the movie version to you as a follow up on the topic of vulnerability and love. If you've heard of *The Full Monte*, you probably only know it's about a bunch of average guys who decide to put on a strip show for one night to raise money. That's what all the publicity stressed to sell tickets. The show is actually about six guys who have hit rock bottom in life and are questioning whether they are

worthy of being loved. As they work up the courage to follow through on their leader's crazy idea, they each become more comfortable with being vulnerable. They let those they love most back into their lives and allow themselves to feel worthy. The final song in the musical is "*Let It Go*". Of course it has more meaning than letting their clothes go. In the end, they only have the confidence to pull off the strip show because they know they are worthy of love. They let their fear go. Those they love most are in the audience cheering them on. The movie is from the 1990s and is a bit old, but you can rent it from Amazon. I highly recommend watching the film with someone you love sometime between now and Valentine's Day.

And now I'd like to invite you to take a moment and think of the names of people with whom you can be vulnerable. Write them down on your order of service and take it with you. Then think about times this congregation has been there for you when you were vulnerable. If you feel comfortable sharing, I will bring the microphone around for you. Thank you for being vulnerable with us today.