

DARING GREATLY: THE CALL OF VULNERABILITY
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Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS *A Place of Meeting (excerpt)* ~ Eileen Karpeles

Out of wood and stone, out of dreams and sacrifice, the People build a home.
May this house be truly a place of Meeting -- meeting one with another in warmth and joy and openness; meeting one with another in courage and love and trust.
May all who enter here trust one another so surely that they dare to share the deep fires that burst into anger as much as the sweet springwaters that swell into laughter; the slow erosion of wounded tears as much as the soaring song.
May these walls know silence as a hundred hearts search inward each for its own small spark of hope that might otherwise be snuffed out in the noise.
May the rain fall lightly on this house, the sun shine warmly, the winds blow softly, and bless it as a place of joy and peace.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Snail and Buffalo* ~ Jim Latimer

...the story of two very different beings who become friends through the process of showing themselves fully to one another.

RESPONSIVE READING *The Invitation* ~ Oriah Mountain Dreamer

READING *from Daring Greatly* ~ Brené Brown

Today's service is based on the work of Dr. Brené Brown, whose research focuses on shame and vulnerability. This reading comes from her 2012 book, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*.

The perception that vulnerability is weakness is the most widely accepted myth about vulnerability and the most dangerous. When we spend our lives pushing away and protecting ourselves from feeling vulnerable or from being perceived as too emotional...rather than respecting and appreciating the courage and daring behind vulnerability, we let our fear and discomfort become judgment and criticism.

Vulnerability isn't good or bad: it's not what we call a dark emotion, nor is it always a light, positive experience. Vulnerability is the core of all emotions and feelings. To feel is to be vulnerable. To believe vulnerability is weakness is to believe that feeling is weakness. To foreclose on our emotional life out of a fear that the costs will be too high is to walk away from the very thing that gives purpose and meaning to living.

Our rejection of vulnerability often stems from our associating it with dark emotions like fear, shame, grief, sadness, and disappointment - emotions that we don't want to discuss, even when they profoundly affect the way we live, love, work, and even lead. What most of us fail to understand, and what took me a decade of research to learn, is that vulnerability is also the cradle of the emotions and experiences that we crave. Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.

I know this is hard to believe, especially when we've spent our lives thinking that vulnerability and weakness are synonymous, but it's true...

If we want to reclaim the essential emotional part of our lives and reignite our passion and purpose, we have to learn how to own and engage with our vulnerability and how to feel the emotions that come with it.

MESSAGE

Daring Greatly

~ Rev. Stoneberg

I feel quite vulnerable offering this message to you. One reason is that while I have found Brené Brown's work to be quite compelling, and relevant to our religious community, when her book was read by the non-fiction bookclub a few months ago, it was not generally well-received. That was a vulnerable place to be...to recommend a book...to find a message important...and to not have others agree. Can I be vulnerable enough to claim to find something worthwhile when I stand alone? Can I be vulnerable enough to preach about it anyway? (Well, here I am.)

Another reason I feel vulnerable in offering this message to you is because I find Brown's work personally relevant. Shame has occupied a large place in my psyche and history, and while I've made huge progress in addressing it in my life, it still hangs out in me. So, to talk about shame with you is to expose what I perceive to be my own weakness. I know I struggle with shame, and one of the traps of shame is that it tells me I'm alone in that struggle. I feel vulnerable.

Perhaps that's why the concept of community is core to my personal theology, and not just community, but beloved community. I believe that participating in, and belonging to community is critical to being able to lead a life of purpose and meaning. As Brown says, we are hardwired for connection....but still, I wonder if I can be vulnerable enough to expose my need for community.

I did a search of my past sermon topics, and 'community' shows up in the title of only one...and that was a sermon questioning whether or not we really want community. Looking back at it, I find it pedantic and quantitative...in it, I tried to list all the reasons community is important. I'd done my research and then spewed out my results, but something was missing.

In her first Ted Talk¹, Brown tells of a similar experience. Her research as a social scientist began in the area of human connection and belonging. She learned that in order for connection to happen, that connection for which we long, we need to allow ourselves to be seen...in other words to be vulnerable. But when her findings pointed to the presence of shame and to the need for vulnerability as the major roadblocks to connection, she found it extremely difficult to be willing to incorporate these into her work...research that she expected, wanted, and had been trained to do, in exacting and controllable ways.

It's not easy to welcome vulnerability into our lives. We'd rather have things be controllable and predictable. At least I would. But would I welcome being vulnerable if I believed it would lead to feeling worthy?

¹ http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability

Brown equates a sense of worthiness with having a strong feeling of love and belonging. She calls those who live out of a deep sense of worthiness (and I know this includes some of you) "whole-hearted people."² And here's the thing...the only distinguishing characteristic that she could find between people who are Wholehearted and those who struggle to find love and connection, is that the Wholehearted *believe* they are worthy of love, connection and belonging. They believe that what makes them vulnerable is also what makes them beautiful.

Her understanding of the wholehearted is based on these fundamentals:

First, love and belonging are irreducible needs of all men, women, and children. We are hard-wired for connection.

Second, a strong belief in worthiness doesn't just happen – it is cultivated (which also implies that there must be people and places and practices that do this work...the work of cultivating worthiness)

Then, the main concern of the Wholehearted is living a life defined by the courage to be seen, compassion for themselves, and a desire to connect.

And finally, a willingness to be vulnerable emerged as the single clearest value shared by the Wholehearted.

So, if we want to live wholehearted lives...to be wholehearted people...to believe we are worthy...Brown's findings tell us that we need to focus our lives on connection, and that being connected calls us to be courageous and compassionate...and vulnerable.

As Ruth read earlier, vulnerability is neither good nor bad, it just is. Vulnerability is NOT weakness. Being vulnerable means to be unprotected, which really is only a problem if we we're under attack, or if we believe that being vulnerable will hurt us. Granted, there are times when we need our shields. Still, vulnerability is not the problem...rather, it's the fear of vulnerability that makes us put up all kinds of shields... and then we get so comfortable behind those shields, we wear them all the time, even when they're unnecessary. But, quotes Brown, "Far from being an effective shield, the illusion of invulnerability undermines the very response that would have supplied genuine protection."³ Genuine protection is found in worthiness...which we achieve by being unshielded.

You see, being vulnerable is the only way to be open and receptive, to welcome the impact and the unfettered experience of all that we encounter, and to allow ourselves to be seen. Being vulnerable is the only way to feel everything.

One of the principle reasons we put on all this armor is because we feel shame...because we don't believe we're worthy of being seen. Shame is the fear of disconnection – the fear that something we've done or failed to do makes us unworthy of being in relationship. Shame is the intensely painful belief that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.⁴

²² Brown, Brené, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way we Live, Love, Parent and Lead* (Gotham Books: New York, 2012), p.10

³ Brown, p. 40

⁴ Brown, p.69

So, feeling shame discourages us from entering the connection arena. We decide we should wait until we are perfect or until we're fully shielded, but the reality is we can never be perfect and never completely bullet-proof, so...we remain standing outside the possibility of connection.⁵ What's even more 'crazy' is that while we continue to try our best to attain those things, no one wants to be in relationship with someone who is perfect and impermeable.

So what does mean for US, here in THIS community?

It means that our first principle becomes really, really important. IF we believe that building connections and then living those connections is key to a whole-hearted life, and IF we accept that we cannot fully enter into those connections and relationships without a deep sense of worthiness, then our message of the inherent worth of every being is a saving message. IF we can build a community in which each person is affirmed as a being of worthiness, then this PLACE can be a place of healing and hope.

And, oh my god, we fail at this. We fail at this every day. And, that's okay. Seeing and accepting our cracks and faults is part of being vulnerable. But we must see our failings simply as that...failings which we can do our best to correct...and NOT as indications of our unworthiness. We may DO things that are mistakes. WE are not mistakes. Our community may mess up, but we are not a hopelessly messed up community.

It seems to me that in order to cultivate worthiness in ourselves and in one another, we need to be able to cultivate this as a place where we can be vulnerable. What an incredible gift we could offer to each other...and to ourselves...and to the world...if we could grow here a culture of worthiness...to be able to together, in good and loving company, combat the societal messaging that tells us we're not enough, that we're never enough.

We CAN be a community where vulnerability is not only accepted but encouraged. I think we already have a sense, an idea, that we are this place...but I'm not sure that we trust it, or that it's available to all who enter. But if we would be true to that idea of who we are...and grow our values of worthiness and belonging...the resulting authenticity would allow us to take off our armor here, and in other arenas of our lives, and to broaden and deepen the connections we make everywhere.

How do we do that? Well, I think we already do it in our covenant groups. And to some extent, we do it during our services when we light candles or bring pebbles of joy and concern. I see it happening in many interpersonal relationships and in the work of our Circle of Care. But we can do more.

We can do more by setting our intention to be vulnerable and then to allow for vulnerability (and imperfection) in ourselves and in others. And I think we'll be able to do this if we really lean into, rely on, our commitment to the inherent worth of each and every person.

We need to un-attach behaviour and personality from worthiness. We're going to mess up, we're going to be annoyed by one another, we're going to break covenant with one another, we're going to act out of fear...and we need to own those things and be accountable for our mistakes...but NONE of that can have any effect on our inherent worthiness. Not yours. Not mine.

⁵ http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame

Brené Brown's book, *Daring Greatly*, begins with an examination of a culture of scarcity.⁶ At first, I didn't understand why. But on reflection, I see that shame is linked to feeling we are 'not enough,' and we get the 'not enough' message from living in a culture of scarcity. So, I got to wondering how we might foster a culture of abundance and worth here at UFP, in order to banish the presence of shame in our hearts and in our midst.

I don't have the full answer, but I'm thinking on it, and I suspect that part of the answer is to be more intentional in our covenant with one another. I'm going to talk about that in a couple of weeks, because I believe that creating such a culture would be transformative for this community.

Surely, banishing shame doesn't happen overnight. And being able to be vulnerable is easier when it's mutual...and it requires trust.⁷ Brown tells a story of her daughter's classroom, where there is a marble jar on the teacher's desk. Marbles are added when the class is collectively making good choices, and when the class is acting out, the teacher takes some marbles out. When the marbles reach the top of the jar, the class is rewarded with a celebration party.⁸ Brown likens this marble jar' to the process of building trust...we put marbles in the jar each time we care for one another, pay attention, listen, show respect...and as you can imagine, there are times we take marbles out of that jar. Trust is built, or destroyed, one marble at a time.

One thing that emerged in Brown's research as most dangerous in terms of corroding the trust connection...losing our marbles...is disengagement.⁹ Disengagement. Checking out. Being unwilling to enter difficult conversations. Not asking for what we need.

Disengagement is unfortunately quite easy to practice in a voluntary association such as this. It's easy to walk away from community, or from any relationship, when the going gets tough, or when we're being called upon to do some hard work. This might be particularly true for religious community, and especially true within a society that encourages us to be self-serving. But paradoxically, it would seem that we cultivate worthiness when we persevere, when we stick with it and work through it, and challenge ourselves to be vulnerable.

When we can be vulnerable enough to speak of shame and to shame, we disempower it. That begins with learning to recognize shame, to treat it with compassion, and then to courageously own and share our stories. If we can do this, we can break the pattern – by deciding, and showing our children, that the solution to being stuck in shame is NOT to build up our armour and retreat, but rather to join hands, the whole-hearted and the struggling, and to pull free together.

⁶ Brown, Chapter 1, "Shame: Looking inside our Culture of Never Enough"

⁷ Brown, p. 41

⁸ Brown, p. 47

⁹ Brown, p. 52

In order to know our worthiness, let's cultivate a community where we encourage vulnerability, a place where we can be fully seen. In order to fully experience love and belonging, let's foster a deep and sure belief that we ARE worthy of love and belonging.¹⁰

Worthiness, connection, and belonging go hand in hand. If we are called to affirm inherent worth and dignity, then we are also called to the practice of vulnerability. May we allow ourselves to be deeply seen and may we love with our whole hearts. In community, this community. I am enough. You are enough. We are enough. So very enough.

Amen.

CLOSING WORDS

For a New Beginning ~ John O'Donohue

In out of the way places of the heart

Where your thoughts never think to wander
This beginning has been quietly forming
Waiting until you were ready to emerge.

For a long time it has watched your desire
Feeling the emptiness grow inside you
Noticing how you willed yourself on
Still unable to leave what you had outgrown.

It watched you play with the seduction of safety
And the grey promises that sameness whispered
Heard the waves of turmoil rise and relent
Wondered would you always live like this.

Then the delight, when your courage kindled,
And out you stepped onto new ground,
Your eyes young again with energy and dream
A path of plenitude opening before you.

Though your destination is not clear
You can trust the promise of this opening;
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning
That is one with your life's desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.

And now receive this blessing:

May the rain fall lightly, the sun shine warmly, the winds blow softly, and may you be blessed with joy and peace and courage. You are so very worthy.

Amen.

¹⁰ Brown, p. 145