

I LIKE MY SHELL
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS *Some of Us* ~ Jay Atkinson

We gather in this community....
Some of us are struggling with sorrow or grief, but are afraid to reach out for help.
Some of us are sick of ourselves and others, but don't know what to do about it.
Some of us just want to be ourselves, but it seems that other people won't let us.
Some of us want to make the world a better place, but feel overwhelmed by the forces of inertia and self-interest.
Some of us aren't sure what we need but hope we can find it here.
We gather in this community, sometimes in fear, sometimes in trust, sometimes in pain, sometimes in joy, but always in hope that we can support and strengthen one another in our common quest for healing and wholeness.

You are welcome here.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Franklin In The Dark* ~ Paulette Bourgeois

(Franklin the Turtle is afraid of his shell, so he goes looking for some advice. In the process, he learns that everyone is afraid of something, and that they find ways to manage by having some reassurance at hand.)

READING *Marble Jar Friends* ~ Brené Brown

...from Brené Brown's book, "Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead", pages 47-48.

MESSAGE

Do you remember the first time you felt betrayed and unsafe? If you are a person who is aware of having a protective shell, do you make a connection between its existence and the hurt/wounds/betrayal that you've experienced...perhaps way back in childhood?

You can relax. We are not entering some kind of probing spiritual therapy session. While no space can ever be completely 'safe', let me assure you that you have permission to engage in this exploration at your own discretion. But our theme for the month ahead is vulnerability, and you should know that exploring vulnerability means getting into some potentially tender places.

You might wonder why such a personal theme has a place in a community such as this. Our purpose statement begins with the words "grounded in love" and also says that we "foster personal transformation." Being open to love, and open to change, requires, well, openness. And being open can feel to be a very vulnerable place.

There's lots of 'talk' out there about how important it is to be willing to be vulnerable in order to make deep connections, to be in authentic relationship, to be able to feel compassion and acceptance, to be 'whole-hearted.' Dr. Brené Brown is the current vulnerability guru, and many of you have read her books, and seen her TED talks. I'm a fan of her work, and last

spring I used her book "Daring Greatly" as the basis for a sermon. You can find that sermon on our website if you're interested.

Yes, the ability to be vulnerable is being touted as a good thing....a life affirming thing...and I believe it is...but I also believe we need to acknowledge that sometimes we need to protect ourselves. In fact, knowing that we have the ability to protect ourselves may allow us to be more vulnerable. And so today, we begin speaking about vulnerability by speaking about our shells...shells that are much loved, much needed, maybe even polished...by some of us.

My mum lived with MS, and for many years lived alone with the assistance of family and health care workers. We advocated for her to stay in her apartment for as long as possible, because it offered her a quality of life that she would lose by moving into a long term health care facility. The social workers didn't agree with us; they valued safety over quality of life, and so sometimes it was quite a battle. At one point, within her hearing, they called her a vulnerable adult. This quite tickled my mum's sense of herself, and she took to introducing herself to new health workers...a bit tongue in cheek ..."I'm Kathy, and I'm a vulnerable adult."

At least I think it was tongue in cheek. I suspect that in fact, sometimes she felt quite vulnerable. How could you not, when you can't walk, or transfer yourself, or do toileting by yourself, or pick yourself up when you fall? How could you not if you had been widowed too young, when that husband had been a constant caregiver? On the other hand, my mum had her mind, and pretty good use of her hands and arms. She had several children who could come running when she needed it, she had a "Lifeline" around her neck, she had enough income, and a church-full of supportive friends. Beyond that, and perhaps most importantly, she had a strong faith...a belief that all would be well, that all things work together for good.

Indeed, she was vulnerable. But she had plenty of protections at the ready...including, once in a while, an emotional shell that helped her to cope.

Isn't this true for all of us. The world can be a dangerous place. On a mega-scale, war, environmental devastation, and evil seem to lurk just outside our doors. On a more personal level, we are vulnerable...to being wounded, to disease, to sunburn and insect bites, to financial insecurity, and to broken hearts.

It makes a lot of sense for us to take reasonable precautions about those things that could affect our physical safety and health. All animals have some way to protect themselves for their own survival...be that a shell, or the ability to hide through camouflage, or to fight using defensive barbs, horns, or talons. Some can run, or fly, or climb, really really fast. Some can emit poison or inks or disgustingly strong smells.

Humans are, as it happens, not quite so physically well-equipped. Yes, some of us have the strength and temperaments of gladiators. And some can run. Those can feel like pretty limiting options... fight or flight.

We have gathered and created all kinds of other measures to protect ourselves...warm houses with locked doors, sunblock, pension plans, and even the possibility of arming ourselves with weapons. All perfectly reasonable...at least for some, some of time.

But that's really not what I'm talking about. (And, as a sidebar...living inside a shell is also one way the experience of Autism or Alzheimer's is described...but that is not the kind of shell I'm

talking about either.) What I want to explore are our emotional and spiritual 'shells' ...that invisible shell we've created in order to protect ourselves from emotional hurt, and from vulnerability to being bamboozled in any way.

They say these shells develop in childhood. When we have experiences of the world being unsafe, or learn that adults around us can't be trusted to show up for us...a shell becomes a very necessary means for a child to cope. When we are wounded, or are hurt...scars develop...on our skin and also around our hearts... and those scars can build into protective walls that unintentionally cut us off from engaging in the world.

The problem with such shells is that while protecting us, they also make us close down, shut the door, lock down our hearts, get rigid, or turn away. They can become impermeable and semi-permanent. They become our default position...and thereby increasingly difficult to remove or modify. With a hard emotional/spiritual shell in place, we cannot only not feel love, we cannot express it. With a shell surrounding us, we protect ourselves from hurt and pain (sort of) but also block out the experiences of joy and connection.

What I'd like to say to you, to myself, is simply...open up! Throw away the shell! Our lives would be so much better if only we would!

Right? Isn't that the message that we keep hearing? But, if you're someone who regularly relies on a shell, that message feels threatening and even shaming.

Did you know that the turtle's shell is unique in the animal kingdom? In all other animals, shells are formed from bony scales on the surface, but with a turtle, their bones are actually on the outside of their bodies. The current thinking, based on recent discoveries of older fossils, is that turtles were initially water dwellers, without shells, and as their underbellies were exposed to predators, adapted to protect themselves. In other animals, the bones (the ribs) are needed to help ventilate the lungs; but turtles developed a new way to breathe through the use of a muscular sling. And...if I'm understanding the scientific report properly... it appears this developmental process...from bones on the inside to bones on the outside, took some 40 million years or more.¹

Of course I'm not proposing that we try to make ourselves evolve to the point of having visible protective shells on the outside rather than hidden on the inside. Nor am I suggesting that it's going to take millions of years for us to change. What's fascinating is that turtles found a new way to breathe. If turtles could find a new way to breathe, isn't it possible that we can find new means of protecting our hearts in ways that don't close us down to love? We can 'put a person on the moon', as they say; surely we can learn how to regulate the opening and closing of our heart's door.

Like Brené Brown's conversation with her daughter about marble jar friends², it is recommended that we help children adapt to bullying and threats by learning effective ways to protect themselves. We can help them to create a 'trash can' where they can throw hurtful words and comments. We can help them to wear an 'emotional raincoat' that repels 'slings

¹ <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/05/130530132431.htm>
<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/11/081126133307.htm>

² 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.47-48

and arrows.’ We can assist them in finding those things that will both comfort their fears and keep them safe...like the animals in our story this morning³...things like water wings, and earmuffs, and parachutes, and snowsuits, and nightlights. We can show them that not all people will be marble jar friends, and that it’s okay to make those distinctions. We can help them to use their powers...“walk away power” and “mouth closed” power, along with their power to set firm boundaries.⁴ All of us have these powers. We can help children learn about them, and we can also help ourselves.

Basically this is resiliency training...and resiliency is all about diversity and possibility. A key to resiliency is found in having options....a virtual toolbox of possible ways to protect ourselves when necessary. Our shells, developed in childhood, are just one of those protections...but in fact, we have a lot of resources, either our own personal ‘powers,’ or turning to our friends and communities, or through the use of professionals.

Here’s one option. I looked at website about ‘Emotional Fitness Training.’⁵ In an article about shrugging off nastiness, Katherine Gordy Levine suggests that we rate the danger we feel we’re in on a scale of 1-10. Anything danger above a 5, she says, does require that we have a protective shell of some kind, and may also involve taking specific measures. But feeling vulnerable and actually being vulnerable to harm are two different things. Doing this exercise, you may find that you rate some perceived dangers at 4 or below, where no hurt is likely and hence no need for the shell, or maybe for any kind of protection.

Okay. Sometimes, maybe more than sometimes, we don’t need our shells. But this implies that we need shells that are not permanent, shells which we can manipulate or remove at will.

I am a person who likes my shell. I’ve come to rely on it. I have compassion for myself through knowing how it came into being. I also know that I wish it weren’t always my default posture. I love my shell; still, I’d really like to alter it in some fundamental ways.

Maybe it needs a big zipper and to be made of stretchy fabric. Maybe I could equip it with a quick-release latch and some well-oiled hinges. Maybe I could find just the right magic words that would melt it, dissolve it, in an instant...that is, as long as there were accompanying words to bring it back into being.

Another thing my shell could use is some strong allies. It needs to know that it doesn’t have to do it all, and that sometimes it is simply the wrong tool for the job. A shell might not be so quick to snap into place if it knew there were others tools at the ready...tools like good boundaries, like the practice of non-attachment, like physical distance... tools like positive self-talk, like curiosity, like self awareness...even tools like the availability of law enforcement or therapy. Our proposed Covenant of Right Relations could be seen as one of these tools.

And, I think my beloved shell could use some ‘lightness’. Just a few days ago I saw a video of an armadillo playing with a small stuffed toy. In its armoured little body, it jumped around, and curled itself around the fuzzy pink toy...charmingly contradictory. Maybe I could encourage my shell to play...to laugh...to hang out with its marble jar friends...to take itself less seriously.

³ *Franklin in the Dark*, by Paulette Bourgeois

⁴ <http://thriveforchange.com/lets-talk-about-bullying/>

⁵ <http://emotionalfitnesstraining.com/2014/08/26/three-ways-to-shrug-off-nastiness/>

There are mean people in the world. There are predators and extremists who would do damage. We cannot stem all of the hurt that might come our way, so of course, we want, even need, to protect ourselves...sometimes. Shells are one means of protection, and sometimes they're exactly the right thing. We can be grateful for their existence.

On the other hand, shells can really get in the way of relationships and connections. Unexamined shells, un-self-regulated shells, make it impossible to give and receive love. Hard shells, even though they may be invisible, turn us into creatures that can't quite live into the best of what it means to be human.

If turtles could learn a new way to breathe, can we not also learn how to protect our tender hearts without also closing out love? When you feel your shell close around you, ask yourself if it's needed. Consider taking an alternative route. Visualize some alternative. Consider taking it off, or softening it, or wearing a more lightweight version. Bring into your awareness all that you hope to gain by opening your heart...more connection, more joy, more love.

Like my mum, we are all vulnerable adults. We are vulnerable to hurt and all kinds of harm. Yet we are adults...adults who have the resources and the means to protect ourselves when necessary. We are adults who have the capability to choose to engage with the world in the most life-giving ways possible...ways that allow us to love and be loved...ways that allow us to be seen as our authentic selves without fear.

And when we sense that sweet and alluring possibility of greater love and connection, even though we might feel afraid, let us open ourselves to that possibility, remembering that, if needed, there is always a shell, or nightlight, at the ready.

Amen.

READING *A Litany for Survival* #587, Singing the Living Tradition

CLOSING WORDS ~ *Jane Ranney Rzepka*

When all is quiet and we are small and the night is dark, may we hear the tender breathing of all who lie awake with us in fear, that together we may gather strength to live with love, and kindness, and confidence.

Go now, always supporting and strengthening one another in our common quest for healing and wholeness.

Amen.