

“THE SHADOW SIDE OF VULNERABILITY”

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Appleton, Wisconsin
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March 15-16, 2014

Call to Gather:

Lay Minister Marti Wheeler shared about a painting she purchased from former Fellowship member Cynthia Johnson. To Marti it evokes sharing one's vulnerability. (See end of sermon for copy of painting.)

Reading: from *Dragonfly in Amber* by Diana Gabaldan

“Babies are soft. Anyone looking at them can see the tender, fragile skin and know it for the rose-leaf softness that invites a finger's touch. But when you live with them and love them, you feel the softness going inward, the round-cheeked flesh wobbly as custard, the boneless splay of the tiny hands. Their joints are melted rubber, and even when you kiss them hard, in the passion of loving their existence, your lips sink down and seem never to find bone. Holding them against you, they melt and mold, as though they might at any moment flow back into your body.

But from the very start, there is that small streak of steel within each child. That thing that says "I am," and forms the core of personality.

In the second year, the bone hardens and the child stands upright, skull wide and solid, a helmet protecting the softness within. And "I am" grows, too. Looking at them, you can almost see it, sturdy as heartwood, glowing through the translucent flesh.

The bones of the face emerge at six, and the soul within is fixed at seven. The process of encapsulation goes on, to reach its peak in the glossy shell of adolescence, when all softness then is hidden under the nacreous layers of the multiple new personalities that teenagers try on to guard themselves.

In the next years, the hardening spreads from the center, as one finds and fixes the facets of the soul, until "I am" is set, delicate and detailed as an insect in amber.”¹

Sermon

In early November, several minister colleagues came over to London for a visit. One of these colleagues was Don Southworth, the Executive Director of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. He was here a few weeks ago for our sanctuary dedication. Don stayed with me for a few days after the others left. We made a quick trip to Liverpool to check out Beatles stuff, and to have dinner with a British Unitarian minister named Jane. Don met Jane on previous trips, and they really clicked. I met her on a retreat in September. I liked her instantly. She led a

¹ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/9074-babies-are-soft-anyone-looking-at-them-can-see-the>.

beautiful evening vespers service; her voice cast a peaceful spell over the room. But we really didn't have much of a chance to talk. There were rumblings at the retreat that Jane was struggling with cancer.

Jane, Don and I had a wonderful dinner together in Liverpool. She had just returned to work after her latest cancer-related extended absence from work. She was one of several inspiring British Unitarian ministers I met who somehow keep on moving their churches forward even though they are tiny and swimming against the tidal wave of secularism in the UK. It felt like one of those times when a deep connection is made in spite of spending such a short time together. This photo a waiter took of the three of us captures the feeling of the evening. (See end of sermon for photo.) Jane's worry about a few new unexplained lumps and her not feeling very good cast an anxious note on our conversation.

After getting a pint at a nearby pub, we bid Jane goodbye as she jumped into a cab. It was the last time I'll ever see Jane. Shortly after returning to the U.S. a month later, I learned that Jane indeed had a recurrence of the cancer and that it was hopeless. She resigned from her church position, moved in with her parents, and entered into hospice care. Jane died a few days ago.

Even though I'm in the line of work where I might have to do three memorial services in three days for people I love, at least a lot of the time I live in denial of death. And even though cancer loomed large over our conversation with Jane, it's a shock to me that she is gone only four months later. While I've been settling back into life here and into this new space, Jane was dying. I'm struggling to wrap my heart around this.

We human beings are incredibly vulnerable. Not just babies are soft. We all are. Four months from now, any of us here today could have gotten really sick, entered into hospice care, and died. By July. And this doesn't even take into account the possibility of an accident coming out of nowhere and ending our life, as we heard about in Joys and Concerns. I've talked before about the late Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church's image that we are all walking on trap doors. One day, the trap door opens and woosh, we are gone. Is there anything more you need to know about the inherent vulnerability of us human beings?

So a basic spiritual question is how we're going to live with this fact of our vulnerability. Are we going to express our vulnerability or are we going to wall it off? In a sermon last year, I made a case for expressing rather than walling off our vulnerability. Today I want to temper that sentiment by saying we also need to develop a streak of steel within ourselves. I'm not sure most of us could survive without some steel within us. Maybe a few Buddhist souls could. But not most of us.

The need for a streak of steel within us is even more important if we find ourselves in a population labeled "vulnerable." You know: if we are a person of color or poor or not in the majority in terms of our gender and/or sexual identity, for example. As a straight, relatively affluent, white male in the U.S., I am emphatically NOT in a vulnerable population. This is the nature of my straight, affluent, white male, American privilege. I don't generally have to worry about where my next meal is coming from or whether there's going to be a roof overhead when I

go to sleep tonight or my partner assaulting me or getting beat up because someone thinks I'm gay or shot if I listen to loud music or wear a hoodie.

A few weeks ago I saw the movie *Twelve Years a Slave*. As most of you probably know, this is the true story of a free African American New Yorker who in 1841 was kidnapped and sold into slavery. One day Solomon Northup was free, the next he was in transit to a slave auction in New Orleans. As his years in bondage stretch on, you can see Solomon develop a streak of steel. You can see him encapsulate himself. You can see the hardening spread. This has to happen in order for him to survive in one of the worst ordeals imaginable.

In recent years, we Unitarian Universalists have often lifted up the need to express our vulnerability as a virtue. So I ask: Is expressing our vulnerability always a virtue? Was expressing his vulnerability going to be a virtue for Solomon Northup in bondage? Is it an absolute good?

Don't get me wrong: I'm not against expressing our vulnerability. In my sermon on vulnerability last year, I noted that without vulnerability, genuine connection with our deepest self or with other people is not possible. Vulnerability is a gateway to connection. I affirmed Brené Brown's assertion that vulnerability is the birthplace of authenticity, accountability, joy, creativity, belonging, love, innovation, inspiration, spirituality and adaptability. I stand by what I said in that sermon. But I wish I had been a bit more nuanced and balanced. Being vulnerable with others is not always a good thing. We need to express our vulnerability, and we need to make sure that streak of steel is there, too. We need to be aware of when exercising our vulnerability muscle isn't such a good thing.

I can think of three circumstances in which expressing our vulnerability is not a good thing. The first I've already alluded to: when we are in an oppressed position and being vulnerable exposes us to increased danger. Being vulnerable of course is always a risk: for example, in being vulnerable with a partner or another family member, we risk their misusing whatever we shared to hurt us. To connect deeply, we need to be vulnerable anyway. But when we are in a situation of oppression, the risk in expressing our vulnerability is not necessarily worth it. It's an extreme case, but would it have really made sense for Solomon Northup to show his vulnerable side to the man who enslaved him? Those among us who are privileged need to beware of preaching a gospel of vulnerability to others who are not so privileged. (I should add here that if a person is in a relatively privileged position, chances are good that the person would do well to get in touch with his or her vulnerability.)

A second circumstance in which expressing our vulnerability is not a good thing is when expressing our vulnerability is motivated by a desire to manipulate others. Let's say I majorly screw up at home. It's good to admit that I've done so, to admit the exact nature of my wrongdoing. As I do so, it might be good to show my vulnerability—unless in so doing I'm consciously or unconsciously trying to diminish or pre-empt my partner's anger. I need to avoid expressing my vulnerability with the unspoken message of "See how vulnerable I am. Now don't be a meanie and stay angry." I have seen folks use their vulnerability as a way to manipulate others. I've been manipulated by folks who have used their vulnerability in ways like this. And, if I'm honest, I can think of times when I've done the same to others.

The third circumstance in which expressing our vulnerability is not a good thing is when it's little more than a symptom of self-centeredness and even narcissism. Rather than opening ourselves and giving space for others to share their vulnerability, we hog the floor. "See how vulnerable I am? I'm sharing my deepest feelings with you. And while I'm at it, let me share this other vulnerable piece of me. And then that piece. I'm just a wonderfully vulnerable person." And you never get a word in edgewise.

So there's a need to express our vulnerability skillfully. I'm using "skillful" in the Buddhist sense. Here are good questions to ask yourself before expressing your vulnerability: Is there a power difference between the other person and me, with me at the low end? If so, will my sharing my vulnerability expose me to unnecessary danger? And what is the motivation for my expressing my vulnerability? Is it to open myself to genuine connection with the other person? Or is it so I can manipulate her or him, or keep the focus on me?

Returning to Solomon Northup in *Twelve Years a Slave*: his story shows the complexity of expressing vulnerability. I've argued that not expressing his vulnerability when he suddenly found himself enslaved was a good idea. (Spoiler alert: skip to the next paragraph if you don't want the movie's ending divulged.) But then Solomon was freed and returned to his family after twelve years of hell. The movie doesn't focus on what happened then, but it hints at the difficulty both he and his family would have in his reintegration into the family. How easy would it be for him to express his vulnerability again? This trait—hiding his vulnerability, his softer self—that had served him well in bondage wasn't going to serve him so well in freedom. Skillful expression of vulnerability for him meant hiding and walling it off for twelve years, and then recalibrating and expressing his vulnerability again. Not an easy task. Of course most of us will never find ourselves anywhere near this sort of situation, but I think the story lifts up the need for skillful expression of vulnerability even in our more ordinary lives.

How might we skillfully express our vulnerability in a marriage or other form of life partnership? I think we need to be wary of expressing our vulnerability if there is a power differential between partners us and our partner—especially if we are on the receiving end of any sort of abuse present in the relationship. And we need to share our vulnerability deeply and openly if the relationship is truly mutual. This is incredibly difficult. The writer Diane Ackerman captures this truth well in her *A Natural History of Love*: "After all," she notes, "love requires the utmost vulnerability. We equip someone with freshly sharpened knives; strip naked; then invite him (or her) to stand close. What could be scarier?" But the depth and power of the relationship is directly proportional to the extent to which we can take the leap of faith in expressing our vulnerability. At the same time, we need to avoid expressing our vulnerability as a means of manipulation or to keep the focus on us.

How might skillful expression of vulnerability manifest itself in how we raise our children? (I'm using "children" here very broadly--not just our biological or adoptive children, but I'm also including our grandchildren and any other children whom we mentor.) Child-rearing is all about teaching and reinforcing impossible and paradoxical balances. Expressing vulnerability is no exception. We need to help nurture our kids' small streak of steel. They're going to need the steel. We also need to help them learn how to express their vulnerability openly and honestly.

We need to help them be able to put up the walls around their vulnerability when they need walls, and to tear down the walls when they don't need them. We also need to teach our children not only to express their vulnerability, but to listen to others sharing their vulnerability.

And how might a spiritual community like this one help us express our vulnerability skillfully? The most important thing we need to do is create safe space for the expression of vulnerability. This is part of why our Journey Groups and other small groups become ever more important as we continue to grow. I hope that our services remain safe for sharing, but this is certainly not an intimate setting in the same way as a small group. Deep mutual sharing is better experienced in small groups built on trust. If you haven't connected with a small group here, I encourage you to do so. It will require an investment of time—a rare and valuable commodity, I know—but I think it will deepen the spiritual power of this congregation for you. We also need to continue working to build and maintain safe space in our children's religious education classes, youth programming, and the Lawrence University campus ministry. These should be places where we help our young develop their small streaks of steel and learn to express their vulnerability skillfully.

I've come up with what I'm calling the Vulnerability Courage Prayer: "God, grant me the courage to have a streak of steel when I need it, the courage to express my vulnerability when I need that, and the wisdom to know when to do which."

I'll close with a brief YouTube video from my colleague Jane:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CE6gNaERK-A>.

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