

Vulnerability: Pros and Cons

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

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WELCOME

Sometimes it can be valuable to allow ourselves to be vulnerable — to let down our defenses. And other times, depending on where we are in a power dynamic, we need to stick up for ourselves physically and/or emotionally.

So are there times when we can convert a vulnerability into a strength? And are there times when it takes strength to be vulnerable?

Look to this flaming chalice. Is this flame easily extinguished? It is. Is it exceedingly powerful? It is. In seconds this little flame, this wisp of something that doesn't seem physical at all, can alter our physical and spiritual surroundings in a big way.

I invite you now to imagine yourself as this flame. Increase your oxygen intake, breathe more deeply if you need to wake up. Or decrease your oxygen intake, breathe more slowly if you need to calm down. If you really want to be in charge of yourself in this moment, both physically and emotionally, do both: breathe in, breathe out in rhythm as we join together in voice and in spirit in our covenant: Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

GATHERING SONG #108 My Life Flows on in Endless Song

CHILDREN'S FOCUS Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, Alternate Lyric

It's a charming old story in which a vulnerability becomes a strength: the embarrassing red nose that lights the way and saves the day. Our kids now are going to take it one step further with a version that speaks to both self-empowerment, and our capacity to grow in respect for one another when we mess up and apologize.

... Then how the reindeer loved him as they shouted out with glee: "Rudolph, the red-nosed reindeer you'll go down in history."

But Rudolph he didn't go for that he said "I see through your silly games. How could you look me in the face when only yesterday you called me names?"

*Well all of the other reindeers man, well they sure did feel ashamed,
"Rudolph you know we're sorry, we're truly gonna try to change."*

NEW MEMBER CEREMONY

MESSAGE

Patricia, Courtney, Rhys, Barbara, Shari [who just became members of BUF]...what have you gotten yourself into? You've come in front of all of these people and stated clearly that in choosing to be a member of this congregation, there is something that you came *for*, something you want or need – that you are not entirely self-sufficient. Moreover, you've stated that there is something that you *come with*,

something you're ready to share. Wow. Apparently you trust us not to take advantage of either your weakness or your strength.

Feel free to laugh nervously, now, if necessary. But essentially that's what's going on here isn't it? A *profound moment when vulnerability meets respect*. Based on my experience, I am confident that the welcome you have just received is in fact an expression of respect ... an implicit promise from this congregation to receive your gifts with gratitude — because we too are in need. An implicit promise to abide with you, despite your limits — because we too have something to share.

Now even tho we just expressed our mutual hopes and expectations out loud and in public, I'm calling this an *implicit* promise for three reasons.

One, because we've been speaking of generalizations. We've said a few very beautiful words to one another, but the countless details of how this promise will play out can't be contained in just a few words. Number two, I call this an *implicit* promise because the words can only imply what is to come, the reality will be not be in words we say but in deeds we do with and for one another.

And third, I call this an implicit promise because from up front even if you were watching very closely, you couldn't be sure -- among all of the people out there — who was actually speaking, and who was just mouthing the words. And as for the congregation, well, we do have your signature in the membership book, but it was just a blank page you signed — following many hundreds of other BUF members going back decades. So do we even know what you've consented to? Was it as serious (or trivial) as clicking “yes” when you register for iTunes: I hereby declare that I have read and am bound by whatever it says on that link to thousands of words of gobbledygook that no one ever reads?

And so BUF members, old and new, how about we call this moment a state of *mutual* vulnerability? You newbies may feel vulnerable because things are still a little unclear. And you longer-term members may feel vulnerable because you love this congregation. You've invested a lot into BUF relationships. You've invested a lot into our shared mission. So you don't want anyone to come in here and screw it all up.

So: mutual vulnerability...meeting mutual respect. The essential components, perhaps, right here and right now...the essential components of human relationship.

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My friend and colleague Rev. Roger Bertschausen writes: “Vulnerability is a gateway to connection, the birthplace of authenticity, accountability, joy, creativity, belonging, love, innovation, inspiration, spirituality and adaptability.”

Connection, authenticity, creativity, adaptability, spirituality, accountability. And more.

And yet, Roger and I are straight white middle class males. Is it easier for us to crow about the magic of vulnerability when we don't feel particularly vulnerable from day to day?

For the past few weeks, I speculate that a lot of American men have been feeling unusually vulnerable — because the obscene prevalence of harassment and sexual assault against women is finally getting a fraction of the attention it requires. And some consequences are being meted out. And some are wondering: “Am I

next? Should I be next? Is there something I've done recently, or a long time ago, that I can't remember, or I've tried to forget, or I didn't understand?"

I'm feeling vulnerable. But I'm not asking for sympathy. It's a good thing we're being shaken up, and at least for a moment we're hyper-aware, so we get a glimpse of what it feels like to be hyper-aware. It's a good thing because it's obviously necessary for us to stop and re-evaluate our manly assumptions about what words and acts are welcome. And to figure out that we're not going to be given any easy answers. That the terms for being in respectful relationship are going to vary from one relationship to another ... even one moment to another. So we may need to pay better attention.

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I'm not asking for sympathy for myself or for men in general. If I was asking for sympathy, that would be one of the bad kinds of vulnerability. The fake kind, the whiney manipulative kind, the "poor me I am so vulnerable so come on let me off the hook" kind of vulnerability.

... Which is somewhat related to another bad kind of vulnerability, which again starts off with "poor me," then continues: "poor me, poor me, poor me please don't interrupt because I'm feeling very vulnerable, poor me, poor me, hey come back I need you."

And there's one more bad kind of vulnerability: irresponsible vulnerability. Putting ourselves in unnecessary danger. Maybe putting *ourselves* at risk in such a way that *others* could suffer the consequences. Putting ourselves at risk *voluntarily* in such a way that puts our families at risk *involuntarily*. Putting ourselves at risk because we don't care ... in such a way that people who don't even know us may find themselves at risk because *they do care*.

[These three bad types are also borrowed from Roger Bertschausen.]

Unfortunately, it's hard to define an unnecessary vulnerability. Because highly risky behaviors can have tremendously valuable results. I think about Gandhi fasting, and very nearly dying. Doing this on multiple occasions — in some cases to influence his adversaries, in some cases to influence his allies. Was this worth the risk? Was it manipulative? Was it the right thing to do?

I think about World War II era Europeans who sheltered Jews, and the 1960s freedom riders — whites and blacks riding the bus together across state lines, knowing that when they walked off together they would be beaten by angry crowds with baseball bats. I think about military personnel who get up every day to look for landmines and IEDs — to set them off on purpose before someone sets them off by accident. I think of

those at Standing Rock reservation last winter who were determined to be an immovable object in front of an unstoppable force.

I think of refugees fleeing for safety, intentionally beginning a journey which is still another threat to their lives. In all of these cases people knew what could go wrong. In some cases it did go wrong.

Now you might say, oh but I thought we were talking about emotional vulnerability, you've suddenly changed the topic to physical vulnerability. That's different.

Well, yes and no. Being on the defense is not just a physical thing. How we are present to the world physically is deeply tied to how we are present emotionally. And therein lies a method, I think, for us to consciously, intentionally, mindfully adjust our presentation, our inner feelings, and our physical reality.

I think this can go either way. Let's say I'm having trouble getting into a healthy frame of mind, but I do have the wherewithal to adjust my physical reality by going somewhere else, wearing something else, or simply adjusting my physical posture.

And though at times the connection between the physical and emotional are not always clear, there is a bridge when we really need it. That is, what we say, or sign, or sing. Are these forms of expression physical or emotional ways of being in the world? Yes, they are.

So when we speak, or sing, or write, or I suppose even tweet, even if at first we do so tentatively, we begin to shift our physical state, our emotional state, or both. If we speak more or less vigorously, it shifts how we feel.

Maybe the connection is more limited when we write more or less vigorously, but really, when I write rapidly and press the pen, or snap the keyboard hard, I wonder if my heart rate changes. And if I really wanted to calm down, or amp up emotionally, might I be able to influence this by deliberately writing faster or more slowly? Or by smacking or lightening up on the keyboard?

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In all of this, the point is not that vulnerability is good or bad. Maybe it's like eating, or sleeping, or mindfulness. The point is to know where, when, how, and how much.

Because we can let down some of our defenses and still have some defenses. We can *have* clear boundaries and *express* clear boundaries, but that doesn't mean we close ourselves off entirely to new ideas, opportunities, or support.

So how might we discover the balance? Is there some formula, or algorithm? If there is, one piece of it might be that if we are highly privileged, we probably have the capacity -- probably have the responsibility -- to be more vulnerable ... instead of, for example, letting the poor and the dispossessed bear a disproportionate share of vulnerability for earthquakes, industrial toxins, and climate change.

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I grew up learning in church that one of the greatest moral virtues was longsuffering. I saw my mother modeling this. I have no reason to believe that she was ever physically or emotionally abused, but she put

up with a lot as a wife and a mother. She juggled 9 kids during the day, worked nights as a nurse at our small rural hospital, then came home and gave shots to the cows.

I'm not going to call her a martyr (in the unflattering sense of that word) because I don't think that she felt that she was sacrificing, or wanted us to feel guilty. She didn't resent what she gave or what she gave up. I'm almost certain that she was kind and attentive to her patients — even if, when she came home, she spoke disapprovingly about the unwed mothers whose babies she delivered. And she got so mad about head injured motorcyclists who didn't wear helmets.

So I won't say she did it all nonjudgmentally, and with a smile, but she was a good provider of my basic needs and a good model of hard work and perseverance. And yet, in pursuing this virtue, she succumbed to her generation's vice of swallowing her feelings, deferring to her husband, and passing along -- to both her daughters and her sons — the idea that longsuffering — no matter what we say about it — is really meant for women.

For example: at that time divorce carried tremendous stigma. I remember conversations with my parents: I would ask, "OK, but if a woman is being abused, is it still a sin for her to get a divorce?" And they answered yes, she should tough it out, that vulnerability is inherent to any relationship, it's part of the nature of love and commitment..." And when I pressed the question further, asking about divorce in the context of ongoing, life threatening abuse — somehow they changed the subject.

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The Virgin Mary in particular was portrayed as a model of longsuffering virtue — from the physical rigors of giving birth in a manger to the emotional pain of watching her son die. And by all means Mary was admirably tough. Next Sunday our choir is going to sing a Ceremony of Carols, by Benjamin Britten, which speaks of the miraculous juxtaposition of vulnerability and power present there, that night, in the stable.

It reminds me of a pair of stained glass windows in the church I served in Wisconsin before coming to BUF. This was a very churchy sanctuary with heavy stone walls, high vaulted ceilings braced with heavy dark timbers, and enormous stained glass windows above balconies at both front and back.

The front window depicted the nativity. People who were familiar with Unitarian Universalism were often startled walking in there for the first time. It was built as a Universalist Church in 1914 when the Universalists were more explicitly Christian, and the aesthetic was inevitably a function of the traditional community.

As the congregation grew more humanistic over the next few decades, there were some members who wanted to eliminate or cover up the windows. Some sat in the side pews because they didn't want to look at the nativity scene every Sunday.

But one gifted writer, Jim Olsen, penned an essay about being there as a non-christian and he looked at that window for a very long time. (He wrote the essay in the 1950s; I officiated at his memorial service almost 60 years later.) Jim wrote about how he experienced the enormous stained glass window above the back balcony, which depicted the three kings, in juxtaposition to the nativity scene up front... noting how with all their power, the kings came to bow at the feet of this powerless infant.

Now that's not a particularly original interpretation. What was original is that Jim didn't fawn about Jesus, as God, being greater than any earthly power. Rather, as a humanist, Jim saw the nativity scene to represent

the birth of any and every child, everywhere in the world — every-one being a miracle of such magnitude that despite the physical vulnerability he (or she, you really couldn't tell thru the swaddling clothes) called our hearts to open, called us to lower our defenses and set aside our pretenses ... so even these smart fancy rich men were humbled. Which was significant because both the physical building and the church as a community was started by smart fancy rich men — the lumber barons who then ruled northern Wisconsin.
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David Whyte writes: “Vulnerability is not a weakness, a passing indisposition, or something we can arrange to do without; vulnerability is not a choice. Vulnerability is the underlying, ever present and abiding undercurrent of our natural state.

“The only choice we have as we mature is how we inhabit our vulnerability, how we become larger and more courageous and more compassionate through our intimacy with disappearance.”

May we choose, then, to inhabit our vulnerability “as generous citizens of loss.”* In our presentation to the larger world, beginning in every here and now, may we present respect to vulnerability, and vulnerability to respect.

*continuing the quote from Whyte

WOMEN'S ENSEMBLE

MEDITATION / SILENCE (3:00)

We've been speaking this year about mindfulness: giving our conscious attention to our immediate experience. Times of silence are good times for mindfulness practice. But for the next few minutes I suggest, instead, that you set yourself up for some extended mindfulness for the week ahead. Take a little time now to choose a person or a situation or a blessing in your life to which or to whom you can commit yourself to being more mindful to in the coming week.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

In every gift, physical or emotional, here and everywhere else, in every gift we give we receive the gifts of vulnerability.

SENDING SONG #225 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

Jelaladin Rumi, a 13th century Sufi mystic poet, spoke of receptivity, or being vulnerable enough to receive a dose of wisdom. He said: Make every atom of you an ear -- that you may hear at every moment what the Source is whispering to you.