

Daring Greatly:

Vulnerability & Courage—Part 1 of a Series

Sunday, March 3, 2013

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Sacramento, California

Hymns

#1010 in *Singing the Journey* (“When I Breathe In...”), #21 in *Voces del Camino* (Ven, Espiritu de Amor), these in *Singing the Living Tradition*: #100 (I’ve Got Peace Like a River); #361 (Enter Rejoice and Come In), #194 (Faith Is a Forest).

Pledge Drive Testimonial “From Year to Year, Generation to Generation,”-Mimi Lewis

Pastoral Prayer [printed below, after sermon]

Sermon

Engage with others. Engage with life, even when you’re uncomfortable. This is the message of Dr. Brene Brown, author of the book *Daring Greatly*.¹ She is a research professor in social work. She says this: *in order to have a more abundant life, what we need is to put ourselves out there, show up, engage with life and with others.* In other words: *Be vulnerable.*

What is vulnerability? It means going beyond our comfort zones, taking an emotional risk, doing or saying what our soul calls us to do. It means acting without certainty of success, choosing to try what is worth trying, even if we might fail.

“To be alive is to be vulnerable,” Madeline L’Engle writes: “When we were children, we used to think that when we were grown up we would no longer be vulnerable. But to grow up is to accept vulnerability.” (43). Our efforts to shield ourselves from vulnerability only make us weaker, and more lonely.

¹ Brown, Brene. *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*. New York: Gotham Books, 2012. All page citations are to this book.

Performers make themselves vulnerable. Anyone who puts themselves in front of others and has something to offer takes a risk.

An older friend is a well-known and popular preacher in our denomination. In his early years of ministry he met the singer Sammy Davis Junior. These two talented men found many similarities in their experiences of connecting with an audience and a congregation. Among other traits in common, they revealed to each other that they both got upset stomachs before going on. My friend avoided breakfast every Sunday. Sammy Davis Junior said he threw up, every concert.

Vulnerability is not for celebrities only. It’s a part of ordinary life.

Here are some examples of how we show it: Expressing disagreement.

Asking for help.

Traveling.

Going on a date.

Asking someone out on a date.

Starting a business.

Cooking dinner for others.

Creating art.

Introducing yourself and

greeting a person you don’t know.

Playing a competitive sport.

Trying out something new.

Going home for the holidays.

Standing on the street corner, asking for spare change or food.

Taking a lesson or a class.

Giving a gift and watching as the person opens it.

What are other times of vulnerability that you can think of? [Congregational responses]

For the past three semesters I have spent one day a week at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley; I’m in a Doctor of Ministry program there. This semester I’ve joined the chapel choir. I’ve sung before in community and church choirs. Let me tell you, it’s always out of my comfort zone. I feel out of place, ready to be excused at any moment. I’m not a trained singer. I don’t read music. I can carry a tune, if I have a strong tenor or two near me. I thank them profusely for letting me stand next to them. I praise them. What I want to say is, “Please help! Please don’t shun me!”

For last week’s chapel we learned four songs fast. As the director rehearsed us through a tricky line, I opened my eyes wide, eyebrows

arched. “Yes?” She said, looking at me. “Have a question?” No, I said. *Just listening*. I could have said, *No, just scared*. In spite of the discomfort of choir practice, I’m learning things there and getting ideas for services back here. It’s fun, even if not the kind of relaxed fun I have watching a play or a dance performance, where other people are making themselves vulnerable.

Brene Brown writes about the results of her research: “[Every] single person I interviewed spoke about struggling with vulnerability. It’s not as if there are lucky people among us who can openly embrace vulnerability without reservation, hesitation, or fear.”

Brene Brown asked people what situations they could think of.

Losing a job.

Waiting for a biopsy to come back.

Calling a friend whose child has died.

Exercising out of doors when you’re not feeling great about your body.

Admitting I’m afraid.

Accepting accountability. Asking for forgiveness.

Having faith. (36-7)

Brown wants to be clear what vulnerability IS NOT. It is not weakness. On the contrary, to take a risk is to show courage.

Brown wants to make clear: Vulnerability is not “letting it all hang out,” it’s not “oversharing.” Brown says: “Vulnerability is about sharing our feelings [and ideas] with people who have earned the right to hear them.... We don’t bare our souls the first time we meet someone....” Boundaries are important; taking time to develop trust is important.

Of course, there is no guarantee when we eventually do dare to stretch ourselves. There’s never a guarantee. Brown says it’s a “chicken-or-egg issue: We need to feel trust in order to feel vulnerable and we need to be vulnerable in order to trust.” In families, communities, congregations, relationships, it’s a “slow process that happens over time” (47).

One of the reasons we have a written covenant in this congregation is that we have a baseline, a guide post. We can see how we agreed to be here with one another and for one another.

Attending any worship service as a newcomer is an exercise in vulnerability. Often what brings people to seek out a spiritual

community is facing a personal challenge or a transition in life. We all feel vulnerable in transitions. We’re stepping on a new path, having to learn or do new things, feeling uncertain. So the choice to check out a congregation is a brave choice. We bring with us needs and gifts, but we don’t know if our gifts will be welcome or our needs validated. We don’t know if our expectations are unrealistic and we will be disappointed. We don’t know if we will fall in love with a group of people, or feel like an outsider. Will we encounter frustration, or stretch ourselves and grow beyond our wildest expectations? It’s an adventure to show up as a newcomer. And every adventure is about vulnerability.

Brown asked the question “How does vulnerability feel?” Some responses she got: “It’s taking off the mask and hoping the real me isn’t too disappointing.” “It’s where courage and fear meet.”

The root of the word *vulnerable* means “capable of being wounded,” so of course it can feel frightening. A lump in the throat. Sweaty palms. Shaky hand. Shallow breathing.

It looks cool *only* in the movies! One person said it feels like “going out on a limb... a very high limb.” Others: “letting go of control,” “taking off a straitjacket.” One said: “It feels so awkward and scary, but it makes me human and alive” (37-39).

All this has to do with engaging with life, connecting with others. We human beings are hard-wired for connection, Brown says. Connecting is risky, but when we avoid it, we disengage. We give up what makes us human, what helps us to grow and thrive.

She admits, of course: “[We] are totally exposed when we are vulnerable.” This is why “vulnerability is the first thing we look for in others, and the last thing we want to show to others” (114). Let’s take the time to notice when we feel a harsh rush to judgment toward another. Do we want to lash out, want to run away, want to punish? Brown says the urge to blame or shame another is a way to distract scrutiny from our own vulnerability, sense of weakness or shame, a protection mechanism. Let’s pause to examine our own discomfort. Let’s be gentle with ourselves and with others.

Parenting. It looks to me like courage. To parent a child is to expose yourself to doubt, uncertainty, and making mistakes.

A parent struggling to respond calmly to a child's inconsolable screaming or disobedient mischief may not feel strong and brave in the moment, but to an observer the courage is evident. On Friday a friend who has 9-year-old twins posted this on Facebook: Truly, sometimes trying to herd two nine-year old humans out of the house in the morning involves a level of patience and mindfulness that I have yet to cultivate. And I am humbled."

Even the feeling of joy involves emotional exposure. We can feel joy, and then feel dread that it won't last, or that the rug will be pulled out from under us. In moments of joy, all of us can feel the "uncomfortable quake of vulnerability," as Brown says (123). She calls this joy a "foreboding joy." We dare not be too happy, lest we be disappointed. We dare not love this person, this child, this job, lest we lose it. We dare not love this new president, lest he or she let us down. Brown says we must be daring, be open to the joy. And she prescribes a research-proven antidote to the foreboding and shielding from our joy. It's not a pill but a practice. The practice of gratitude.

In the research she has conducted, gratitude was highly correlated with the experience of joy. And not just the idea of gratitude, not "merely having an attitude of gratitude" (124). People had specific practices, such as "keeping gratitude journals and gratitude jars [or] implementing family gratitude rituals" (124). I have one. In the mornings, I begin my prayers and meditation with gratitude for specific things, and I mention them. Some days I am not in a good mood, but still I try to pause, to give thanks. Other days I'm "in the groove," and it seems easy. I feel pretty lucky: healthy, employed, only minor aches. Yet when I'm sick I get whiny and feel sorry for myself. So, how will I handle any big health challenge down the road? I don't know. This is why I practice gratitude now. It's my inoculation against foreboding and worry. Gratitude is my multivitamin for keeping an open heart when times are tough.

Brown has spoken to people with sad stories: parents who've lost a child, survivors of genocide, lots of hardship. And those who find purpose and joy in life claim that gratitude is what works. It keeps away despair and resentment.

Practice gratitude. Practice vulnerability. Each time I try something new or muster up the

courage to have a difficult conversation, a friend tells me, "That's money in the bank, Roger." It's as if every step of daring is an investment of courage for future steps. Money in the bank. It's a building up of confidence and worth.

What's more: Our expressions of courage have a multiplier effect. To others, what feels like vulnerability to us looks like courage. We spread courage around, encourage others, just by showing up, by being vulnerable.

Brown says, "vulnerability is the path" to connection and growth, and "courage is the light" that helps us travel that path.

Credit yourself for your courage.

Give thanks for your courage.

Brene Brown asks: What are the things worth doing so much that it's worth attempting them even if you fail? This is what it means to dare greatly!

Brown writes of her own struggle to be vulnerable, try new things, take more chances, and set new boundaries. She counts on the support of her spouse, close friends, and a therapist. As a mother, she says: "I want our home to be a place where we can be our bravest selves and our most fearful selves. Where we practice difficult conversations and share our shaming moments from school and work.... And when we fail, we'll fail together, while daring greatly" (56).

This is what I envision for our congregation. I was us to make a place where we can be our bravest selves and our most fearful selves. I want this to be a place where we practice difficult conversations, share moments of risking and failing. And when we fail, fail together while daring greatly.

There are plenty of times when we all choose protection over engagement, when we stay in our comfort zones. I am trying to take notice of my own protective devices and my moments of shrinking back rather than stretching myself. Not condemning, just noticing.

I'm reminding myself I am enough. I'm trying to take steps worth taking, risking to be my biggest, best self. I'm asking friends to pray for me, listen to me, and support me. I'm taking notice when I make even small movements out of my comfort zone, and I'm giving thanks for being vulnerable.

So I invite you...Notice when you are going to make yourself emotionally vulnerable. Give yourself credit. Plan how you will support yourself.

Ask for support from others. Remind yourself that you are enough. Choose to take a step—not a step that is guaranteed or certain to succeed, but a step in the right direction, a step that’s worth taking even if it does not work out.

Reflect on those moments when you have put yourself in an uncertain situation, risked your sense of protection, stretched your comfort zone. Reflect on this weekly--or daily! Give yourself credit for being vulnerable. Give yourself credit for engaging with life, for your daring. Ask yourself if it was a brave thing to do. Give thanks for trying. I thank you for your courage.

This is what we can do for one another. In community, we can do this.

With kindness to ourselves and mutual support with others, let us dare to show up in our vulnerability and our courage and our beauty. Let us speak and act as our values call us to act.. Let us live as, deep in our souls, we long to live.

So may it be. Blessed be. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer at the Start of Women’s History Month

I invite you now to settle your bodies and notice your breathing for a time of contemplation in shared word and silence, and with music following.

Spirit of Life and of Love, fall fresh on us this morning. Stir in us gratitude for all our blessings. Grant us courage and wisdom for the living of our days.

We appreciate the diversity of sorrows, concerns, milestones and celebrations among us in this fellowship of seekers. On our hearts may be those who have passed away. Let us tell their names aloud into the space of our sanctuary. To these, let us add: all those dying from gun violence, especially the young men of our neighborhoods and our nation. Two shepherd boys killed in Afghanistan, by accident by NATO forces. The young taxi driver from Mozambique, lynched by eight police officers in South Africa last week. We mourn every loss, and lament those taken by violence.

Let us call to mind all who need our healing thoughts and our care: those among us with financial troubles or job worries, people with active addictions and those in recovery, those who are hungry for food, and hungry for love;

Those with troubling medical conditions, those burdened by pains of the body, mind or spirit.

In particular, we mention these people: Marie, the mother of Jeff, who is the partner of our member Kevin, is in her last days of life, receiving palliative care. Michelle, our member whose cancer has brought her to the point of hospice care, but who rallied herself last Sunday for one last visit for a service with us. A mother requesting prayers for her son in residential treatment.

Either whispering to ourselves or speaking aloud, let us now add other names and the needs on our hearts into the space of our sanctuary.

May healing and peace come to all who need it.

Life has its joyful milestones as well, and reasons for celebration and gratitude. In particular, Fran, turning 90 last week. Let us now speak more of the names or events on our hearts into the space of our sanctuary.

May one another’s good news give to all of us reasons for gratitude.

As Women’s History Month begins, we call to mind all those women, girls and transgender persons who have changed our world and our lives: Margaret Fuller, Transcendentalist leader. Olympia Brown, Universalist minister. Malala Yousafzai, 15-year-old Pakistani student shot by the Taliban for going to school, who survives and vows to continue her activism. Harriet Tubman, fugitive slave and slave rescuer. Marie Curie, chemist and physicist. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, president of Liberia. Let us speak some of the names on our hearts into the space of our sanctuary.

We pray for the women and girls who are victimized and oppressed. We grieve those taken by violence. We give thanks for the activists, agitators, mothers, teachers, artists, domestic workers, factory workers, philanthropists, diplomats, ...and everyone whose dignity and courage continue to inspire others.

May peace and healing prevail in places near and far, starting in our own hearts.

May we have the courage to accept ourselves as we are, with compassion, so that we can accept others for who they are. Spirit of Life and of Love, fall fresh on us this morning, and bless us in the days to come. Help us dare to be the people that we are called to be. Blessed. Be.