

## Daring Greatly, Part 2:

### Cultivating Resilience in

### Life's Minefield of Shame

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

With Spoken Word Artist Mahsea Evans

Hymns: from *Singing the Journey*: Comfort Me; from *Las Voces del Camino*: Ven, Espiritu de Amor; from *Singing the Living Tradition*: #108, How Can I Keep from Singing?; #151, I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free.

Pastoral Prayer: printed after the sermon

#### Sermon:

Imagine that you are at a weekend art fair, and you are one of those artists or craftspeople sitting by their creations, sitting in a tent as folks wander in and out. You've put your talents and time and soul into the work. Strangers come in, glance around, look bored and walk out. Others grimace. Some complain about the prices. What's it like to go through this? Probably a different experience for every artist.

Of course it can be reassuring when you have a deep conversation with a visitor intrigued by your work—and even better when you sell something. Yet your success is not in your sales or your status, it's in the fact that you put yourself out there.

In her book *Daring Greatly*<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Brene Brown asserts that engaging vulnerability is the key to personal growth--stretching your comfort zones, daring to show who you are. Being authentic is the key to living "a Wholehearted life."

Brown advises, however, that being vulnerable does not mean letting it all hang out or "over-sharing." It means choosing when to "go out on a limb," and with whom. It means having a support system in place when you take a risk.

Being vulnerable feels uncomfortable, but to those around us, it looks like courage.

Yet shame hinders our courage. Shame gets in the way of growth.

Shame is the fearful feeling that you are not good enough: not *worthy* of acceptance, belonging, or love. Feeling shame is not the same as feeling guilt. Guilt is the regret you feel when you have made a mistake, let others down, let yourself down, broken the law, or broken a vow.

Guilt is when you say: "I am not the kind of person who wants to hurt others. I'm sorry."

Shame says: "I'm a sorry excuse for a human being." With shame, we take any mistake or imperfection to tell ourselves that we are worthless. Or to tell others that *they* are worthless. Indeed, shame is a tragic weapon that we too often use on one another.

Shame is a bad idea and a bad habit. Having studied vulnerability, shame and courage for 12 years, Brown says: "There are no data to support [the idea] that shame is a helpful [guide] for good behavior." From this misunderstanding of shame comes the humor in a legendary cartoon of a sign posted in an abusive workplace: "The floggings will continue until morale improves."

Historically, our liberal faith was a spiritual assault on shame. Against the idea of innate human depravity, early Unitarians argued that human beings are capable of making better choices as well as bad ones. We are able to grow in character and virtue. The Unitarians said no better example exists than Jesus of Nazareth, a fully human teacher, healer and prophet. His life shows our human potential and our worth. The first Universalists preached a compatible message. They proclaimed that our worth came from a loving God. Their creator was not a judge or tyrant, but an accepting divine parent. God is love, they cheered. You are loved. No matter what mistakes you make, you are called back to love. Their answer to shame was to celebrate the love that will not let us go. You are held in love.

Given our theological heritage, it would be nice to say that by entering this congregation, all our shame-based habits would melt away. It would be great if by setting foot in this place, our self-acceptance and our acceptance of others would rise in the heart. Shame would vanish! It would be nice, but even our loud and proud human-affirming heritage is not a silver bullet for shame.

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<sup>1</sup> *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*, by Brene Brown, Ph. D, M.S.W. Gotham Books, 2012. All page number citations refer to this edition.

Brown says shame is part of our survival instinct. Part of our fight-or-flight mechanism. Sadly, neither fighting nor fleeing is useful for building connections with others. *Fight or flight* will not help us reason our way out of challenging situations. When shame attacks, it can feel deep inside like a matter of survival. Yet Brown urges us to move from just surviving toward living “a Whole-hearted life.”

Human beings are hard-wired for connecting with others, Brown says. Yet shame blocks us from having true connections. It’s frustrating. When I engage from a place of protectiveness, I can’t respond with my best self. If I react out of hurt, it’s not a productive conversation. Sometimes when another person and I are talking about something of importance, I want to shout: “I can’t have a conversation with you while you are listening to that voice in your head saying that you’re no good! Stop listening to it! What want is an open talk, just the two of us.”

One reason shame can block us is that shame is pain. It is an emotional and physical feeling. I wince when shame hits. I feel a flash of heat in my temples, a narrowing of my field of vision. A memorable experience was my first outing to learn how to water ski. I wasn’t a kid; I was 30. I was out on a lake with a person I was dating and people I didn’t know very well. Self-conscious, I felt inept around this boisterous bunch of experienced waterskiers. I tried several times to get up on the skis. Every time, I splashed and sank into the lake. They assured me that it can take many tries to learn how to stay up. I didn’t have it in me. Every time I splashed into the water, I felt a burning tightness in my gut. It was the pain of shame. It was irrational, but it was real.

Brown explains that we try to shield ourselves from shame in a number of ways. They are all self-defeating. One shame-shielding tactic is avoidance. After I got out of the water, I didn’t try to skiing again the rest of the day. I didn’t try it for years! Another time, I took offense at something a relative said, and I pulled away. Steered clear.

Another shame shield is to numb our feelings. We numb our anxiety with alcohol, tobacco, prescription and other drugs. Or we stay “crazy busy,” with never a moment’s rest or a time of reflection. But even if these tactics take the edge off our anxiety, they also block experiences of

connection. Numbing dulls our good feelings too--our “joy, belonging, ... and empathy” (312).

Another shame-shield is the addiction of perfectionism. This is the drive to do everything without flaws. “If I look perfect and do everything perfectly, I can ... minimize the pain... of judgment and blame,” Brown says.

Yet there is no “perfect.” To live as if there were is exhausting. Perfectionism crushes creativity; if we imagine a perfect outcome and fear we can’t achieve it, why even try? Perfectionism is not a cure for shame, Brown says. It’s a form of shame (131).

Other shame-shielding behaviors include hyper-criticism and shaming of other people. If we are harsh toward others, it’s a good bet that deep inside we are too hard on ourselves, too worried about our own worth. Brown says that our level of acceptance and regard for others will be no better than our own self-acceptance.

A poignant example is that of parenting. To parent a child is to expose oneself to doubt, uncertainty, mistakes, *and* the scrutiny of others. Parenting is a minefield of shame, Brown says. So much is riding on it: our kids’ success and their very survival. So many parents feel that every step along the way of a kid’s life, every ability, disability, success or setback is a reflection of their own human worth. Too many of us are quick to scowl or scold parents about how they deal with children. Even if we don’t have kids, if we feel anxious about our own lives, pointing at others is a way to direct attention away from ourselves. Yet this merely builds a wall. Instead of isolating ourselves, how much better if we can come together in kindness! How much better if we can show compassion and empathy—to ourselves and others!

Shame-shields don’t work. Avoidance, self-numbing, perfectionism, judgmentalism. They only keep us apart. Living a wholehearted life takes being connected, being real with one another. But shame is real. And it hurts. So what’s the answer?

The answer to shame is the life-long work of building shame resilience. Resilience means getting back up, embracing life again. Shame resilience means being able to go through feelings of shame with awareness and with a choice about how to respond.

Brown outlines a number of the elements of shame resilience. One is to recognize shame, and

learn its “triggers” for us. Brown has a mantra when she feels a shame attack. She says the word *pain*. Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain. She says it over and over, to see the pain and recognize the shame. She asks herself, and she asks us: “Can you physically recognize when you’re in the grip of shame, feel your way thorough it?” (75)

After we see the shame attack, Brown invites us to reflect, try to “figure out what messages and expectations triggered” it (75). We can do a reality-check on the messages we’re hearing. We can examine the expectations that are driving our shame. Are these expectations “what you think others ... want from you?” Are these expectations achievable? Attainable? Realistic? Are you measuring your worth by comparing yourself to others? Are you listening to toxic voices in your head?

Another key to building resilience to shame is to talk about it. Shame “derives its power from being unspeakable.... [It’s] so easy to keep us quiet,” Brown says. Don’t let it get away with doing its dirty work in the silence. If we practice noticing it, naming our shame, even speaking to it, “It begins to wither” (67). Its grip loosens.

Another key to resilience is to speak to ourselves with kindness. When looking at our painful moments of shame, we can try to use compassion. It is a practice we can learn. It matters how we talk to ourselves.

If you are that artist sitting in a tent at an art fair, selling your creations, Brown says, you can remind yourself: “You are far more than a painting.” Money and fame are nice, but they are not a reflection on your worth. Whoever we are, we can remind ourselves that our human worth does not rely on the appraisal of others.

Brown has learned, she says, to “talk to myself the way I would talk to someone I really love and whom I’m trying to comfort in the midst of a meltdown.” For example, say to yourself: “You’re okay. You’re human—we all make mistakes.” “I’m here for you.”

We can choose whether to follow the toxic voices that plague us, or we can respond with kindness and reassurance.

Practice resilience.

A friend of mine is the mother of two kids in elementary school. She told me this:

*The spiritual challenge of parenting -- for me -- is both to be present (which means that I'm not multi-tasking when I've given my kids indications that I'm listening to them) and also to be aware of my own emotions and psychological state. Sometimes I've yelled or been dismissive to my kids out of my own frustrations, my own sadness, my own anger about other things. And then I feel crappy. And sometimes that's shameful feeling "What a bad parent you are!"*

*And of course, I'm not a "bad" parent. But it's not the parent that I'd LIKE to be. It's been meaningful to apologize to my kids and say something like "I'm really sorry that I acted so angry at you when you wouldn't come to the table. I do need you to help the family and come to dinner when someone calls you, but I wish I'd used a different tone."*

*So I get to apologize, my children (hopefully) get to witness an adult making a poor choice and making amends, and the family covenant is re-affirmed. Everyone gets to start anew.*

Practice resilience.

Cultivating a sense of humor also builds resilience. Laugh about your imperfections, and you’ll never run out of material. The 20<sup>th</sup> century cartoon character Pogo—an opossum living in a southern swamp—said this: “We have faults which we have hardly used yet!”

But if the pain we feel is too strong at first for a laugh, we can start with breathing. Take a breath, give yourself a breath. Breathing can calm us, and give us moments to try out a new perspective on the shame. Breathing is a good start.

Practice resilience.

When we have the urge to hide, avoid, or numb our distress and anxiety, we must reach out to others. Of course, this calls for courage. It means asking for support from those we can count on, from those who can earn the privilege to know our vulnerability, those who love us in all of our imperfect human packaging. Resilience means knowing when we need support, and reaching out.

Back in my twenties I volunteered for a city council election campaign when I was living in Springfield, Illinois. My candidate was a woman

small business owner, an upstart running against a candidate backed by a political machine. A doomed campaign, but such hopes we had! One sunny afternoon I was walking door to door with campaign flyers. Once I knocked and a lady opened the door. No sooner did I say *hello* and my name and my candidate's name, and ... SLAM! In my face! Just like in the movies. Stunned and hurt, I stumbled along the sidewalk. Perhaps this is why campaign volunteers now seem to walk precincts in pairs--for moral support. Yet I was by myself. How could I keep going? No cell phones back then, no way to call a team captain or friend. I thought of going home.

Instead, for my next stop, I chose to knock on the door of a house where my own candidate's yard sign was displayed. The door opened, and I got a cheerful response. I told this lady about the door-slamming, and about my shock. She commiserated. She thanked me. She cheered me on. I had followed the impulse to reach out, and I was grateful.

Now, so many years later, I count on friends, mentors, and colleagues to listen to me through times of self-doubt or pain, to cheer me through my failures and setbacks. I started learning how to build this kind of support when I was a brand-new church-going Unitarian Universalist. In our UU congregations, I envision opportunities to practice resilience with one another, to cheer each other on. I can hear the invitations to share compassion, empathy, tears and laughter.

We can reach out. We can practice resilience together.

We hear the message: "You are more than your performance, your appearance, your job or lack of one, your mistakes and missteps."

We hear: "You are not alone!" We say it: "You are not alone!"

This is our heritage. This is our message: You are worthy of acceptance and care. You are *all* right! You deserve joy! You are loved.

We are loved. We belong. We belong here, on this earthly home. We belong together, in this human family.

Let us Practice Resilience.

When we overcome separation, we are healing. When we practice patience with ourselves and with others, we are making peace. When we show compassion for ourselves and for others, we are finding liberation. So may it be. Amen.

## Pastoral Prayer

Last names of living people are omitted for online/printed versions.

Breath of Life, Spirit of Love, we give thanks for the gift of life, and the gift of this new day. We give thanks for the world we share with human our kin and other forms of life. Our planet is fragile as well as resilient. Help us tend our home with care.

On this day, wars and rumors of war tear apart our human family together. We send prayers for peace around the globe: the Korean peninsula, the Middle East, and our own cities and neighborhoods. We remember the Holocaust on this day, which is Yom Hashoah. We celebrate the courage of women and girls around the globe who insist on their education and their dignity in the face of hostility. We celebrate the poets, artists, writers and journalists who express themselves, seek truth, and speak their own truths.

In this congregation, we extend our condolences to those living with loss. Linda's sister Mary died from a head injury sustained in a fall while on vacation. We send our love to her family. Taylor's father passed away last week. We extend our sympathy to Taylor and to his sons on the loss of their grandfather. Our longtime friend Leon Lefson passed away this past week. We give thanks for his long and active life, and we mourn his passing. We extend our condolences to those among us who have lost their beloved pets recently: Denis, Karen and family on the loss of their dog, and JoLane and her sons on the loss of their dog.

At this time we have other names on our hearts of those we have lost recently and those lost some time ago. Now into the space of our sanctuary, let us call out the names of those we mourn and remember.

May their memory be a blessing.

We lift up and extend our hope to those dealing with financial troubles, a health crisis, chronic pain, isolation and loneliness, and uncertainty about the road ahead. In particular, we extend our love and care to Anne, recovering now from pneumonia. To Jeane, in treatment for a blood infection. To Barbara, in the ICU at Kaiser with liver complications. There are other people on our hearts who need good wishes, prayers, or gestures of care. At this time we say their names, whether whispering to ourselves or speaking their names and needs aloud in the space of our sanctuary. May we find the courage to reach out. May we find the grace to listen and give the gift of our simple presence.

We recognize that life has its joyful milestones and reasons for celebration as well. Today we celebrate our Junior High Youth Group and adult volunteers on their field trip, as they visit local sites to learn about our Unitarian Universalist heritage in Sacramento. We celebrate our Parenting Group, Alliance Program, Games Night, and all the activities by which we create community. We congratulate Maxine and Bob, marking 60 years of marriage this coming week, and sharing a cake with us next Sunday. At this time let us say the names or events that give us gratitude and good cheer. Let us speak them into the space of our sanctuary. May another's good news give to all of us cause for joy.

Spirit of Love, give us hearts full of gratitude, kindness and courage for the living of our days. In the name of all that is holy and all that is human, blessed be. Amen.