

**Towards Shame-Free Communities * May 11, 2014
Midcoast Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**

“Regardless of our willingness to do vulnerability, *it does us*. Experiencing vulnerability isn’t a choice — the only choice we have is how we’re going to respond when we are confronted with uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.”
~ Dr. Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*

I know that we’re supposed to be skeptical of the advertising world.
I know that Madison Avenue preys upon our emotions, promises things that are undeliverable, and is continually perfecting the art of separating us from our money in the interest of big corporations.

I know all of that — and still, I’m going to begin with a commercial from Johnson’s®.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yotq4zr0dRc>

I’m not a mom — I feel called, really and truly, to be an honorary Auntie rather than a parent — but still: that commercial **got** me. Because, babies. But also because of its message: *you’re doing okay. You’re figuring it out. We’ll learn how to do this together. You know how much I appreciate you, right?*

These are messages that new moms (and dads) are desperate to hear: if you make a mistake, you’re not a bad parent; you’re learning. You’re not supposed to know what you’re doing. You’re loving, and you’re loved. You’re doing okay.

If you’re a mom, did you hear enough of this when you were sleepless and spit up on? Or did you hear the other message? — you know the one; our culture serves up heaping platefuls: *you’re not doing it right; you could be doing it better; that’s not the way I would do it; what on earth were you thinking?*

My colleague Lisa Schwartz told me about her moment of being on the ugly end of how new mothers are often shamed for their choices: Lisa, her 5-week old infant, and her mother-in-law were eating at a restaurant with a filthy restroom — but the baby had to nurse. “When I put the blanket over her and held her in The Position,” said Lisa, “the room went chilly silent, and my mother-in-law said, “I have to get some air,” and walked out. (This was 26 years ago.)” Is it any surprise that she still remembers it?

If you were feeling nervous, tired, exposed, and on a steep learning curve — which is to say, vulnerable — which message would you want to hear? “You’re doing okay” or the chilly silence in a room of disapproving looks?

Which message did you need the last time you took the risk of learning something? What did you need the last time you felt shaky about taking on a new role or responsibility? Or that time you were worried that you weren't good enough? (Nobody else here knows that feeling, right?)

New mothers are hungry to hear the words, "You're doing okay, mom" — and *all* of us are hungry for the about same message: *you're doing okay. You are enough. You're loved, just as you are.* I believe that most of us long for opportunities to let down our protective armor and engage, connect, and show up as we really are.

Dr. Brené Brown is a research professor who studies **vulnerability** and **shame**, and how they intersect. Her compassionate voice has transformed her readers, like me, and the over two million people who have watched her famous TedTalk¹.

Brown defines shame as the fear of disconnection — "the fear that something we've done or failed to do, an ideal that we've not lived up to, or a goal that we've not accomplished makes us unworthy of connection."² Whereas guilt is believing that we *did* something bad, shame is the belief that "we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging."³ She writes,

"most of us, if not all, have built significant parts of our lives around shame. Individuals, families and communities use shame as a tool to change others and to protect themselves. In doing this, we create a society that fails to recognize how much damage shame does to our spirit and the soul of our families and communities."⁴

Shame doesn't make better parents; it doesn't make better workers; it doesn't make better people, period. Shame diminishes. It corrodes relationships; cutting people down to size makes trust impossible. When I feel shame, my creativity and courage wither up.

What would it be like to intentionally create communities and relationships in which we refuse to shame one another? How would we be different if, instead, we "dared greatly" to be vulnerable with one another, wholeheartedly opening ourselves to connection? What if we believed that we are, each of us, enough? No matter how flawed or human we are, we are enough, and worthy of meeting one another in our real-ness?

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzIF7o>

² All quotes in this sermon are from *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. This quote, p. 68-69.

³ p. 69-71.

⁴ http://www.mothersmovement.org/features/bbrown_int/bbrown_int_1.htm

Brown defines vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.”⁵ We don’t have a choice about experiencing those things; life peppers us with them on a daily basis. What we have a choice about, she clarifies, is how we respond to feeling exposed and uncertain. “If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives,” Brené Brown says, “vulnerability is the path.”⁶

In our wider culture, vulnerability sometimes gets confused with oversharing (or “TMI,” Too Much Information): revealing to another person sordid details or inappropriate confessions. That’s not what Brené Brown is talking about (that’s just ew.)

“Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage,”⁷ she says. It’s stepping to the edge of comfort, when we’d rather protect ourselves — and inviting trust by being real.

The more I practice being vulnerable, the more freeing it is. I didn’t realize, until I began to lean into risk and courage and feeling exposed, that carrying around protective armor is exhausting. Setting down frees up a lot of heart- and soul-space.



A couple of years ago, when I still lived in Southern California, I took my car Millie on a road trip from New Mexico to Santa Barbara. I thought we’d have an adventure together. I should have been more specific with the Road Trip Gods (by asking for “a *fun* adventure”). On the last day, at dusk, I was six hours from home. Merrily, I resolved to push through, visions of home dancing through my imagination. Until one of my tires went flat on a desolate stretch of Arizona freeway.

I don’t respond well to car breakdowns under good circumstances. When I’m alone, in a strange place, with nearly no cell phone battery? I get anxious. Reeeeeeally anxious.

By the time AAA arrived, it was nearly dark. As I drove 45 miles per hour on the donut tire, semis roaring past me at 80 miles an hour, my adrenaline and fear climbed. I wish I’d gone straight to a motel to confront tire-shopping with a fresh mind in the morning. Instead, I let uncertainty back me into the corner called “quick fix.” I drove straight to a tire shop that was open, and the mechanics showed me that the other three tires were shot, too.

Scared isn’t a good platform for decision-making. Neither is impatient, lonely, and homesick. The tire guys were keen to sell me four new tires. I bought them. After all the

⁵ p. 34.

⁶ p. 34.

⁷ p. 37.

waiting, the fretting, and anxiety, this “adventure” had drained me — and I found a cheap motel nearby.

When I called my parents to update them, my dad asked how much my new tires had cost. When I told him, he yelped. Or howled. “Tell me you didn’t pay that much,” he wailed.

A reminder, dear ones, that when we feeling bad about ourselves and our decisions, we don’t need to be told that we’ve made a mistake. We don’t need advice. When we feel uncertain or exposed, most of us just want to be reminded that we’re still okay, that we’re still worthy of connection.

And: most of us, when we realize that we’ve been preyed upon by greedy people, would rather not sit with the pain of our uncertainty. It’s so much easier, and more satisfying, to turn on the Big Voice.

You know what Big Voice is, don’t you? It comes free with the set of protective armor. Big Voice can be anger, or revenge, or giving someone a piece of your mind. It’s cutting someone down to size. It’s shaming another person. The problem is, the other person puts *their* armor on, too, and it’s hard to get anywhere. I slept little that night, fantasizing about the colorful language that I’d throw at the tire store owner the next day before I drove out of town.

If the Road Trips Gods were not with me in Arizona, a different force was. When I woke up in the motel, a voice slipped between the seams of my armor: what would it be like to be brave instead of tough? What did I have to lose, except pride, by going to the tire shop owner *not* to shame him for fleecing me, but to tell him who I was beyond a stranded driver with a credit card?

To this day, I’m grateful for the courage and vulnerability that accompanied me back to the tire store. The owner recognized me; I saw *his* armor go up. I sat in his office as a trio of curious mechanics hovered in the doorway, and said what I’d been rehearsing:

Last night I was freaking out about my tires. You saw how scared I was. You also saw my expensive jacket and bag — which were given to me free by a friend who works for that company. I want you to know who I really am. I’m a church pastor. I rent a house with another minister, to save money. That car is the first car I’ve ever bought; it took a long time to save up the four thousand dollars it cost. I believe that you took advantage of me. I didn’t deserve to be charged what you charged me for those tires. My faith says that we’re all in this together, and that we need to look out for one another. What do you believe?”

The owner looked down at his desk, looked at his employees, and asked, “How much of a refund do you think is fair?”



Our culture tells us that, when we feel powerless, we’ll find power in our armor, in our Big Voice, and in cutting down other people by shaming them. That’s power over others; it’s a zero-sum game.

I believe that there’s a more effective power available to us: **our connective power**. That power to connect is rooted in being open, taking risks, and stepping into vulnerability.

This is who I aspire to be, as your minister and as a citizen of the world: willing to say when I don’t know something; comfortable taking risks; confident thinking outside of the box; brave enough to have hard conversations when they’re called for. (Fortunately, courage is contagious: we really do make each other strong.)

I want to belong to communities, like this Fellowship, where we make each other strong, not take each other down, seek out flaws to pounce on, or point to each other’s failings.

I want our congregation
to encourage creativity, with all the courage it demands;
to honor vulnerability rather than shame the vulnerable;
to respond to new ideas and invitations with curiosity;
to create connection.

I challenge you to live this way for a few days this week:

Watch (in yourself or in others) for “armoring up.”
When you feel brave enough to set it down, or turn off your Big Voice,
instead be brave. Practice vulnerability.

Refuse to shame someone, even if they’ve wronged you.

And... the next time you see a parent struggling, or having a tough day, approach them calmly, look in their eyes kindly, and say, “You’re doing okay. You’re really doing okay.”

May it be so.