

“Risking Our Whole Heart”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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Reading

selection from “Courage” by Anne Sexton

Sermon

It may surprise some of you that I was an extremely shy child. When we were younger, my brothers and I would visit my mother’s office in downtown Chicago. And, as we walked around saying hello to her co-workers, I would hide shyly behind her legs. Afraid to be seen or to speak to anyone. When I was a bit older, friends would call me up on the phone, and I was so shy, I’d refuse to answer.

Well, I’ve changed quite a bit since then. But the same fundamental fear still presents itself at times. The fear of being totally and completely seen. Totally and completely known by others.

This month, we explore the theme of “risk.” We ask, “what does it mean to be a community of risk?”

As I reflect on risk, I think back on my former self, that shy little girl who was afraid to be seen and known. I realize that I still have that same fear at times. It is a fear that keeps me from taking the risk of vulnerability.

These days, there is much, especially in our broader political climate that may make us feel vulnerable. The conditions all around us feel risky and uncertain, and in this environment we might have a tendency to minimize personal risk. To seek safety, predictability, and control.

Yet, what I have witnessed and experienced in my own life and in others' lives, is that taking risks and being vulnerable is a spiritual practice that leads to new possibilities, to fuller lives and courageous living.

And though these times, for some us, might draw out those fears of losing connection with others, of being known and seen at the core of who we are, these times also call on us to take risks. So, this morning, I want to explore with you this connection between risk and vulnerability and what this connection teaches us about living fuller lives.

Brené Brown is a researcher and professor of social work who has become a leading expert on vulnerability, courage, and shame.

In 2010, she appeared before an audience of 500 people in Houston, Texas and delivered a 20 minute talk entitled "the power of vulnerability."¹ The talk was video recorded and put on the web. That online video has now been viewed more than 28 million times.

Who would have thought vulnerability would be such a popular topic?

Brown's years of research led her to this overarching claim: vulnerability is at the core of whole hearted living.

The "whole hearted" as Brown describes them are those who live with a sense of worthiness and who know love and belonging.

Although Brown's research is done within an entirely secular context, I believe that it is precisely this - this "Whole hearted living" – that is our primary religious and spiritual endeavor.

Actually, I wasn't all too surprised to learn that Brown herself is a religious person. And her description for these people she found in her research who live from a place of love and belonging, this phrase "whole hearted," comes from a line in a prayer said every Sunday in the Episcopal church service she attends.

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability

Whole hearted living is a spiritual endeavor that leads us to connection. And taking the risk to be vulnerable is at the core.

As an academic researcher, Brown has a particular definition of vulnerability. One that I believe is helpful for us as spiritual seekers.

Brown describes vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.

Now, our first reaction to the word “risk” might be negative in nature. A dictionary definition of risk is to expose someone or something valued to danger, harm, or loss and to act or fail to act in such a way as to bring about the possibility of an unpleasant or unwelcome event.

Our typical understanding of the word risk makes it seem like something to be avoided. But, I think we have probably all found that simply living is risky. In most moments of our lives, we expose ourselves to uncertain outcomes. We don’t know for sure how things will turn out, but we go on anyways. In this sense, our whole lives are filled with risk and vulnerability.

In her research, when Brené Brown asked people to finish the sentence: Vulnerability is ____. These were some of the responses:

Asking for help

Falling in love

Admitting I’m afraid

Helping my 37-yr-old wife with Stage 4 breast cancer make decisions about her will

Reaching out to my son who is going through a difficult divorce

Getting fired

Laying off employees

Trying something new

In her poem, a poem about courage, Anne Sexton provides what I see as examples of risk in daily living:

the child’s first step, as awesome as an earthquake.

the first time you rode a bike, wallowing up the sidewalk.

enduring a great despair,

facing old age and its natural conclusion.

What these examples show us is that **to live** is to be vulnerable.

Risk and vulnerability are right there in the ordinariness of life.

Often, vulnerability is equated with weakness. But, it is far from it. In fact, we often admire vulnerability in others. The way we see others being courageously honest and authentic.

We name it as courage in others but a sign of inadequacy or weakness in ourselves.

Yes, it is uncomfortable. And it can lead us into difficult conversations we may rather not have.

Some of you have engaged with one another here at UCM in conversations about race and whiteness. These kinds of conversations require a great deal of risk broaching a topic that may not be something you've examined before or in great depth. And, in conversations like this one and other conversations that examine privilege and oppression, I will dare say that if there isn't discomfort then we're probably not being vulnerable enough. When these issues are being talked about, shame inevitably surfaces, and we want to get away from that as fast as we can.

In the days and years to come, there are other risky conversations we will need to have with one another - about how we are most called to take collective social action and about the future direction of this religious community. When we have differing opinions about these things, which is inevitable, discomfort can arise.

Vulnerability is uncomfortable and risky for sure. And because of this it also necessitates being in relationships of trust and respect which I hope we are cultivating here at UCM. And, I hope that you all feel that you have those people in your lives whom you trust and with whom you feel safe being seen and known.

One of the reasons I think Brené Brown's video and now multiple follow-up books have become so popular is that embracing vulnerability is a provocative counter-cultural message.

It is a far more common practice to push away vulnerability than it is to allow it into our lives.

The broader culture in which we live tells us that vulnerability is not something to strive for. We hear it in political rhetoric that emphasizes greatness and strength and asserts that we must be at the top at all costs. In our broader culture, vulnerability, equated with weakness, is to be avoided rather than embraced.

A TV show that I have been watching lately - my chosen form of escapism - is the NBC series *This Is Us*. It's a show about a family that struggles to find their way amidst loss and pain and as each of the characters grapples with their own issues of identity and transformation.

One character in the show is Randall. Randall is black, and he was adopted by his white parents basically at birth. Jack and Rebecca were expecting triplets and at the hospital Rebecca gave birth to a boy and a girl but lost the third baby. It was at the hospital that they learned that a baby had been abandoned at a nearby fire station and had been brought in. They decide to adopt the baby, whom they would later name Randall.

Risk and vulnerability are central themes of the show. Randall takes the risk of searching for his biological parents, and he tracks down his father. The scene in which he rings the bell and first meets his father you can see him making the calculation of just how vulnerable to be. At first, he berates his father for leaving him, saying, "I came here to prove to myself and to you and to my family that I didn't need a thing from you, even after I knew who you were." His father, looks him in the eye, and gently says, "You want to come in?" To which he responds, "Okay."

Randall clearly wants to know this man but is unsure of how to proceed. After this encounter, they proceed to have an incredibly tender and touching relationship made that much more poignant and urgent by a cancer diagnosis and the prognosis that his father has a very short time left to live.

In contrast to the incredible risk and vulnerability Randall displays in his personal life, his work as a financial analyst asks him not to show any signs of "weakness." Randall struggles to keep it together at work as the demands of his home life increase and feels threatened when his boss tells him some of his accounts will be

going to a newly hired analyst at the firm. We learn that Randall struggled with anxiety and panic attacks as a child and one recent episode ends with him alone in his office late at night. He has phoned his brother to let him know he can't make it to the opening night of his play. His brother, sensing something is wrong, leaves the play and goes to Randall's office. He finds him alone crouched in a corner quietly weeping and struggling to breathe.

In Randall's story, we witness the struggle many of us face to navigate a world that doesn't necessarily embrace vulnerability. Instead, our broader culture would have us hide when we are feeling uncertain or overwhelmed.

As the TV show illustrates, this tendency is especially common in large companies or competitive work environments.

But, we are not immune to this kind of vulnerability avoidance ourselves.

Have you ever responded to someone asking "how are you doing" with "I'm doing great." even when you're not?

Or, do you meticulously plan your day, your week, your month, your year to eliminate uncertainty about the future?

Or, have you ever gone shopping as a balm for receiving some bit of disappointing news?

I have certainly done all these things.

Pretending.

Making the uncertain certain.

Numbing.

All of these strategies are meant to push away uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.

Another reason I think Brown's talk has become so popular is that we're waking up to an unwillingness to live from a place of fear. Many of us are drawn to religious communities like this one because we know a fuller life is possible. A life not based in notions of scarcity, unworthiness, or fear but in gratitude, wholeness, and courage.

One of the most powerful points I think Brown makes in her work is that we cannot selectively numb our emotions.

If we are trying to shield ourselves from fear, shame, grief, sadness, and disappointment, we also cut ourselves off from possibilities to experience love, belonging, and joy.

Because while taking the risk of vulnerability can expose us to the negativity of fear and disappointment, it is also the birthplace of connection and joy.

One of the greatest examples of this in my own life has been my search for religious community. I have shared with you before that I was raised Roman Catholic, and I stopped identifying with that tradition in college.

Well, I knew I had a longing to be in some kind of religious community, and I spent a number of years searching, going to various church services. And each time that I showed up on the steps of a new and different church was a moment of vulnerability. Of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. Not knowing whether I would feel like I belonged, or whether I'd find the kind of spiritual wholeness I was looking for.

One of my most vulnerable moments as a Unitarian Universalist happened a few years ago at our denominational Justice General Assembly in Phoenix. The weeklong General Assembly closed with an action of witness at Tent City, an outdoor prison known for its inhumane conditions. I had to catch a flight that evening and was extremely disappointed that I wouldn't be able to participate. But they had set up a room at the convention center for those of us who couldn't go to Tent City to gather and hold a space of witness of our own.

My experience that week felt like an affirmation that I had actually found my way in this spiritual seeking. In this room, we mostly sang together. And as we sang I felt as if each person present was somehow peering right into me. Right into my soul. And with tears streaming down my face, I joined my voice with others:

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day, for all gathered here, and those far away, for this time we share, with love and care, oh, we give thanks for this precious day.

Gratitude.
Joy.

Hope.

This is vulnerability.

Attending to it takes courage.

The courage to tell the story of who we are with our whole hearts.

To admit what we dream for and what we need.

To risk failure.

To sit with discomfort.

The courage to just show up and to be fully engaged in the living of our lives.

Brené Brown says that when she realized vulnerability was at the core of whole hearted living, she was in for a fight. Vulnerability pushed, she says, I pushed back. I lost the fight but probably won my life back.

May we with courage grab a hold of life and live each moment with risky vulnerability.