



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Embracing Vulnerability”

© by Kate Blane and Dan Everett

Presentation delivered on July 9, 2017

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

“When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving your joy.” Khalil Gibran

“To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing our life depends on it; and when the time comes to let go, to let it go.”

Mary Oliver

“It is not the amount of action but the depth of experience that makes life rich and fulfilling.”
Sadguru

Reflections:

Dan: Good morning! Once again we are delighted to provide summer filler for UUFA. And as usual, we will be doing this performance IN STEREO. This year, we found our way to our topic via an unusual pathway.

Kate: It all started when we were visiting our daughter’s elegantly appointed kitchen and admiring her tasteful wall-hanging full of useful bits of good advice for a happy and loving life. The hanging reminded us to “Wake up Early,” “Chase the Light,” “Nap in a Field,” “Write a Letter,” “Drink Black Coffee,” and “Find Beauty in it All.” These evoked pleasant feelings as well as being pretty non-controversial: good things to do to enhance the quality of a day. But then we saw, in bold print, big letters in the center of the wall hanging: “Embrace Vulnerability”

Dan: This caused us a “Whoa- just a minute” reaction. Was the wall hanging telling us to embrace physical vulnerability—death, sickness, harm to children and loved ones, job loss? Also, many in our community are vulnerable to social injustice—our undocumented immigrants, minorities, LGBTQ community. Why would we want to embrace THAT?

Kate: What’s more, many of us see our current political climate as opening a new dimension of vulnerability. Many of us are frightened about what is happening in our country and in our world. The dictionary definition of “vulnerability” includes bad things that need fixing, such as computer vulnerability, financial vulnerability and so forth. More things we don’t particularly want to embrace.

Therefore, Dan and I felt the need to think a bit more about this. Why on earth would we actually embrace vulnerability? Couldn’t we just accept vulnerability which seems much more plausible? Otherwise should we start driving without our seat belts?

Dan: Rather than rejecting this wall hanging’s admonition as an unrealistic homily, we decided to make this the subject of our UUFA sermon and bring you all in on our quandary as well! We went looking for a respected expert on vulnerability, and the person we came across was Brene Brown. She is a professor of social work at the University of Houston and author of three #1 *New York*

Times bestsellers on courage, shame, and vulnerability. You can find her on several TED talks, and Roy Reynolds also referred to Brene Brown and her book *Daring Greatly* in his June service. She seems to be the go-to person on this subject.

Kate: The vulnerability Brene Brown writes about most is emotional vulnerability. For her, embracing vulnerability is not knowing victory or defeat; it's understanding the necessity of both. Whenever we engage in love with another person or an activity, we run the risk that we will fail. We face uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure every day. This is not optional. We live in this imperfect world, and we are imperfect human beings. Therefore we will sometimes succeed and sometimes fail, that both are part of being human, and failure need not be feared.

Dan: One way of understanding our situation is like a flower under a tea cup. In this metaphor the flower contains our essence, our special values we have to give and contribute to the world, The teacup is what protects our flower from embarrassment, feelings of unworthiness, shame, discomfort, hurt and ridicule; but the teacup also hides so much of the beauty in our flower. Embracing vulnerability becomes the lever to tip the tea cup up a bit, so that we can reveal more of our flower's virtue while still protecting it enough to survive.

Kate: Brene Brown says that allowing this emotional vulnerability, this tipping of the tea cup, so to speak, is essential to personal connectedness. As human beings we are hardwired for connection—our relationships with each other are where we find our ultimate well being and meaning. Most people on their deathbed don't say, "I wish I had made more money." What they say is, "I wish I had spent more time with family and community."

Vulnerability is also a wisdom teacher and a compassion teacher. As we experience life's difficulties, we develop more understanding and compassion for what others are going through. When our oldest daughter was struggling with infertility and her heart was breaking, an older friend wrote to me that "when the heart breaks, in time it will heal and when it heals, it will heal with more openness."

Dan: Recognizing and deeply experiencing our emotional vulnerabilities CAN BE painful. When we speak of these emotional pains with a trusted friend, and it needs to be someone we trust, we become more bound to one another. For is it not true that we feel more connected to people who share ups and downs with us, rather than just ups? We recognize our common humanity. Think of all those tedious Christmas letters that just seem too full of rah rah wonderful family news. A more meaningful Christmas letter might share something about some difficulty we have experienced. By experiencing emotional vulnerabilities we understand and empathize better with others.

Kate: As you know, Dan had a recent bout with a physical vulnerability in the form of a major bike accident. Every day he would tell me, "I am going to rethink my life," which turns out to come from a Star Wars scene. Those of you who are inveterate Star Wars junkies, like us, remember the Jedi knight Obi Wan Kanobi with his remarkable ability to influence the minds of the weak. Not to say Dan's mind is weak, but he did get a hard knock!

Anyway, one day a youthful Obiwan encounters a punk kid in a bar. The kid comes up to Obi Wan and the conversation goes like this:

Dan: "You wanna buy some death sticks?"

Kate: "You don't want to sell me death sticks."

Dan: "I don't wanna sell you death sticks."

Kate: "Actually, you want to go home and rethink your life."

Dan: "I wanna go home and rethink my life."

Kate: I told Dan that I would be curious about what insights he came up with, since he seemed a happy, contented, and satisfied human being. He said that investing more time in his social networks was one. He had been touched by all those who reached out to him. To invest more time in social networks ... for again, we are hardwired to connect—is where we find our meaning and connection, and men usually come to this conclusion later in life anyway.

Dan: So how do we accomplish this task of embracing vulnerability, tipping our tea cup to release more of the creativity in our flowers?

We resist emotional vulnerability because it reminds us of dark emotions—fear, shame, disappointment, guilt. Guilt happens when there is something wrong with what we’ve done, which happens to us pretty frequently. But shame happens when there is something wrong with who we are. It damages our very core and makes us believe we are not worthy or loveable. We fall into shame because we live in a culture of never enough; we can never be smart enough, pretty enough, rich enough, or sexy enough. Everyone is expected to be extraordinary, and we are not.

Kate: One of the most important things for us to do with our children, grandchildren, and ourselves is to teach what Brene Brown calls “shame resilience”: how to resist the inevitable shaming experiences that happen in life. This means to learn that all of us at some time will fail, and be embarrassed, and struggle with disappointment, for we are imperfect human beings. Shame resilience is absorbing deeply that we are worthy and loveable and to give ourselves and others compassion. We can welcome all of our emotions, particularly the unpleasant ones, as teachers for helping us build shame resilience.

It’s time for us to experience the *Delight of Being Ordinary*—the name of a recent book I read, for to be human is mostly to experience what everyone experiences. Our journey is to develop the capacity for realizing the extraordinary quality of our ordinary lives.

Dan: Shame is the enemy of emotional wholeheartedness, and Brene Brown has spent much of her career on finding strategies of shame resilience. She has identified a number of “shame resilience strategies” for accepting vulnerability and developing our wholehearted selves. We see these resilience strategies as ways to be aware of when we are sliding into our cultural habits of shame and choosing to recognize ourselves as having the capacity to do something different. We can start with the practice of AUTHENTICITY: being our true selves and letting go of what people think. How often do we pretend to follow what we think is expected? Our energy is better spent to be our unique selves and to apply our own unique passions.

Kate: At the same time we can engage the practice of LETTING GO OF PERFECTION AND THE PRACTICE OF SELF COMPASSION: If we are trying to accomplish love or anything else wonderful, it’s probably not going to work correctly the first time. We need to accept ourselves as works in progress who will fail, and disappoint ourselves and loved ones.

TO CULTIVATE GRATITUDE: Letting go of our culture of scarcity, our expectations that we are never rich enough, smart enough, pretty enough, sexy enough. We ARE good enough to have meaningful love and connections. Let’s let go of comparing ourselves to those who are better and more accomplished than us, for it serves no purpose. Instead, let’s be thankful for all the wonderful but often overlooked things in life; food, air, clean water, trees, singing birds, or own unique gifts.

Dan: Finally, Brene Brown has identified some mental disciplines to liberate our minds and enable ourselves to see those special creations our minds have been trying to recognize:

TO CULTIVATE INTUITION: Letting go of certainty and our need to know and predict everything. It is being aware of subtle cues that might not be verbal, visual or obvious to navigate relationships and situations in a more positive and sensitive way.

TO CULTIVATE PLAY AND REST: Letting go of working ourselves to exhaustion as a way of proving ourselves worthy. To laugh, sing, dance and be creative and not worry about looking “cool” or professional.

Kate: TO CULTIVATE STILLNESS: Letting go of constant anxiety as a lifestyle. We know that our society has gotten so much quicker with demands for instant emailing, texting, and returning calls. In this accelerated culture, it is important to cultivate stillness that restores us either through

mediation or a sit spot, a walk or a day off from all demands.

TO CULTIVATE MEANINGFUL WORK: Letting go of all the things we think we are supposed to accomplish and focusing instead on what we really want to accomplish—what really gives us meaning and value. This might be through volunteer work or artistic creativity.

Dan: Can we really embrace vulnerability, truly become more wholehearted people? After a few weeks of reading Brene Brown's work, we have become convinced that these are truly valuable and meaningful goals. Her techniques of embracing vulnerability, such as authenticity, stillness, gratitude, rest, meaningful work, and letting go of perfection can become part of our spiritual practice. Every day is a practice, something we can try but won't achieve perfectly.

Every once in awhile, when we run into an embarrassing failure, can we confide to our closest friends that we tried our best and believe our effort was good enough? When our children, grandchildren, our friends, and ourselves feel shame, hurt or disappointment, can we remember that to fail is to be human and that all of us are worthy of love and friendship?

Kate: We have ended our journey this morning with a bit of understanding of what it means to embrace vulnerability and why we might want to attempt this. Now we will see whether we can use this goal to make a meaningful difference in our lives.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. What has given you the feeling of the most shame or disappointment in your life?
2. How can you give yourself self-compassion around this?
3. What project do you wish to undertake but are reluctant to do or are held back by vulnerability?