

The Gift in Vulnerable Moments

Jesus said: “I came that you might have Life and that more abundantly.”

A Time Magazine featured what was called “The Angelina effect.” When Angelina Jolie went public with her double mastectomy and reconstructive surgery, she did so to encourage women with the same genetic defect for cancer, to do the same. To declare this breast surgery when you are a woman who is a star, whose income directly comes from great beauty, is a risky thing to do..She said “I do not feel any less of a woman. I feel empowered that I made a strong choice that in no way diminishes my femininity.” In her brief description of her breast reconstruction she said; “The results can be beautiful.” She reassured her children, saying that they could see the small scars, but that other than that “everything else is just Mommy.”

There is no doubt in my mind that this decision was one of great personal courage because it was to overcome the sense of vulnerability that all of us have. Angelina for the good of others had to ‘dare greatly’.

When I read this article, I thought of Theodore Roosevelt’s words:
It is not the critic who counts; not the person who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the person who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly...who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly. Theodore Roosevelt

When you are a performer or in any form of leadership you have to put yourself out there for all to see.

When I was about 7 years old, I was a boy soprano. At that age I really felt vulnerable and was easily shamed. My parents put me in a contest where other children were to sing. We were all given numbers. I was given a 9 which in my child’s mind was a six. So when number six was called I dutifully went up to sing. Before I started I was told that I was

not to sing. It was another child's turn. Mortified I left the stage and returned to my parent's seat and started to cry. I thought to myself if I keep this crying up, I won't have to sing and sure enough each time they tried again for me to come up I was still crying. I thought to myself this crying stuff really works!!

The best book I have ever read on vulnerability is Brené Brown: Daring Greatly. She says that “vulnerability is the cradle of the emotions and experiences that we crave. It is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, accountability and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.”

And you say What!!!???

I think that we all know that loving another person is a risky business. We can be deliriously happy or get hurt badly. Nothing about love is certain. But, can you imagine life without love?

But if we want love in our lives we have to be vulnerable. Being safe all the time simply does not work. When it comes to Life, being safe is like holding our number upside down and crying louder each time it is called by Life. So, what is the answer to loving Life? **Vulnerability**- the willingness to put yourself out there and risk losing everything in order to gain what can mean the world to you.

As we get older, we can put on masks to protect ourselves or even armor. Getting hurt is no fun and so we learn to be careful and hold a mask up to the world or even armor plate! And this covered behavior kills our passion, puts down our purpose and we start to disengage. We want to control outcomes and people. Power becomes important, as does financial independence all in the name of avoiding being vulnerable.

Feeling vulnerable does not feel good to us at all and yet paradoxically it is often the only way forward. Paradoxically because we know what happens when we share an unpopular opinion or political position, or

when we ask for help and it is interpreted as incompetence or inexperience. We can be dumped on big time!

We also think that being vulnerable is weakness. Have you ever started a new job and been afraid to ask for help because you are supposed to be the expert that has been hired? And so, you don't ask for help and you don't do a good job with the high expectation and people think that they hired the wrong person when all the time you *are* competent but afraid of asking for help with the little things that you don't know.

I once talked to a lawyer who said that when you come out of law school you know the most law you will ever know, but you don't know how to apply it because you don't have the experience. So yes, you are a qualified expert but you need connections. You can't get those connections without help no matter how brave a front you put on. If we are afraid to admit vulnerability then it will be a problem to ask for help. To get there we will have to drop the importance of others' opinions of us.

I love the title of the book "What you think of me is none of my business."

When do we feel vulnerable? When we get fired; when we are waiting for the cancer or not diagnosis; when we get into a bathing suit especially when we are out of shape; after a public failure of some kind or a public attempt to shame us; when we present our art to the world and there is no market for it. Why do we feel vulnerable? Because we are caring about what others think of us all the time and we don't want to be shamed or ashamed or to be considered a failure!

But when we fail and try again is that weakness? When we get the wrong number called and go up again and sing our heart out is that weakness? When we get fired and start all over again is that weakness? When we get into that bathing suit and enjoy the water anyway is that weakness, **or is it courage?**

I always had a fear that the day would come when I had a carefully prepared sermon and would lose it before I went into the pulpit. I would have dreams about this often, waking up in a cold sweat with this nightmare scenario.

Now I know this about myself- that I can preach with or without notes but I always feel that the presentation is stronger with the notes than without in most cases. If it is a subject with which I am really familiar that is different. I do not want notes at all and have great freedom. But for new subjects I always have notes.

However, one Sunday eventually came when I realized that I did not have my notes with me. I was sitting on the dais at the front and had no idea where I had put them down. I was flummoxed. The nightmare was coming true. I would not be able to go on etc. just like the nightmare.

I told the person next to me that I had lost my notes and he asked whether he could go and look for them (which was kind). Then the courage suddenly came. “No I said, I can do it without them”. So, for the next few minutes my brain went into high performance gear to try to remember the opening, the quotes at least in gist etc. I decided to abandon the pulpit and walk to the center of the church and preach. I did so. I got through it and I think that folks thought I was just innovating. But I felt so naked!

Brené Brown writes from her research that this feeling naked is the heart of vulnerability.

“Vulnerability is like being naked on stage and hoping for applause rather than laughter. It’s being naked when everyone else is fully clothed.”

The very interesting thing is this. We enjoy seeing vulnerability in others but we don’t want to be vulnerable ourselves!

I think that this is part of the attraction of Facebook. Some people are really very open on Facebook and are willing to write anything or be pictured in compromised photos. And we admire the person who is really out there and has no mask. But we are also aware of the dangers as well. If we are applying for a job a visit to Facebook can kill the application right there. I can remember a Presbyterian meeting where someone was a candidate for ministry and was hauled on the carpet for

his honest theological doubts which he had shared on Facebook. He was being vulnerable in public and I liked his honesty. So I got onto the floor and defended his right to do this. Afterwards he understood just what the cost was. If you want a job don't use Facebook to express your doubts. It was a narrow thing, but he did get through. I thought afterwards that it took courage to put it out there, but there was a price.

But being vulnerable does not mean crashing through boundaries either your own or others. That comes from lack of self esteem and is a whole other subject.

Sharing your precious dreams with others before they are hatched or germinated is not wise either, unless you really trust the person you are sharing them with. For there is a dark side to human nature. All of us have a dark side and a light side. The people you want as friends are the ones who choose to live by their best side. These folks are in the arena with you as you sweat blood and tears. They understand the struggle and do not sit in the bleachers with their duck guns leveled at you; they are the ones who pick you up after a failure or a disgrace of some kind.

They are the ones who are ready to believe in you and give you a new start. They are the ones who love your decision to have strong boundaries and your choice to be vulnerable. If you can, be such a friend! ***For me the most amazing 'aha moment' with Brené Brown's***

Research, came when she identified the strategy that most of us use to avoid feeling vulnerable. In order not to feel vulnerable we **numb ourselves as best we can**. We get addicted, we go into debt, we get obese and we drug away the pain. Numbing sells a lot of beer and alcohol and prescription drugs.

There is another widely used strategy which is now an all-American disease. We try to cope with life's ambiguities by trying to make the uncertain certain.

Brené Brown says that when it comes to religion, instead of religions becoming a search for faith and mystery, we say "I'm right and you're wrong, so just shut up." Or worse we resort to violence in the name of God.

In politics she says we are so numb that there is no discourse or reasoned discussion anymore. It is now a blame game. Blame is defined psychologically as a way to discharge pain and discomfort. This is a dangerous cycle that we have got ourselves into largely due to the fact that we do not under any circumstances want to let others see us as we really are. It is too terrifying. So we numb out joy, gratitude, and happiness in the avoidance of vulnerability.

Ahead of Angelina Jolie, Rowena Kincaid actually put pictures of herself on Facebook going through chemo. She started off with glorious beautiful black hair that had body. She underwent chemo and lost it all in stages. Rowena, with courage, put it all out there on Facebook, she says in order to encourage others undergoing chemo. There is a picture of her there completely bald.

At Knox I am so glad that we have a very successful wig ministry for people who lose their hair during chemo. The wig tides them over until their hair regrows. People who receive wigs are so grateful. But as the Scots often say: the best-laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft a-gley! And some strategies despite the best laid plans, go awry!

For instance, Kathleen Kelly hid her fear of being bald in public with a beautiful very convincing wig. It was a great strategy until the day came when it was windy!

Kathleen Kelly writes that she did not know whether Jim had asked her out as a date or for a friendly get together.

They were walking along together and it was very, very windy.

Kathleen asked herself; “Do I hold onto my hair? No because he will know that I am wearing a wig.” This she says was not the best decision she ever made.

The wind suddenly whipped her hair off her head showing her bald head to the world.

Jim was walking ahead unaware of the chaos unfolding behind him. After what seemed like minutes he did turn around and he was suddenly in on her secret.

She turned to run after her hair but decided that was not such a good idea with her new hip replacement, so she quickly said “Would you get my hair? (What a way to impress a new boyfriend!)

Jim took off after it. “Please God she said, don’t let it go into the street.” As it was it looked sort of like a squirrel running through the piles of dirt.

“I’ve got it” Jim said.

“Terrific!” she thought, just glad the whole thing was not on YouTube.

Jim came up to her and returned her hair and his eyes seemed to say “Here’s your hair. I didn’t see anything.” He looked however like he was dying for her and wishing that she did not have to go through this. Kathleen started to laugh and could not stop. Tears flowed down her cheeks. She shook out the dirt and tried to reposition the wig back on her head.

She said “Jim did you know that I had had cancer?”

He said “Yes.”

“Did you know I was wearing a wig?” “No” he said...

They continued their walk until they got to their destination where Kathleen went into the ladies room and saw that she had the wig on the wrong way around. She sat down on the floor of the washroom and laughed herself silly for the longest time before she came out again.

Here she had wanted to appear as a 28-year-old, going out on a date without having to tell someone that she had had breast cancer and a

bone marrow transplant. She had gathered all her courage to accept this invitation from Jim. And now this!

To her total surprise this turned out to be one of the best decisions she ever had made. She experienced from Jim true acceptance and compassion. It **had** been a date. And after the wig blew off the chemistry was still there and remained so.

Brené Brown would describe this sort of decision that Jim and Angelina and Rowen made as ‘living life in a wholehearted way’. Now Kathleen and Jim laugh at what actually brought them closer together.

The world religions all instruct us that life is to be more abundant. But that abundant life often has lessons that come about through vulnerability. For instance, the One who said “I came to give you life and that more abundantly, also became vulnerable.

Scholars think that Jesus was naked on the cross. They say:
“ While a crucifixion was an execution, it was also a humiliation, by making the condemned as vulnerable as possible. Although artists have traditionally depicted the figure on a cross with a loin cloth... the person being crucified was usually stripped naked.

The Buddha plumbed the depths of vulnerability suffering for authenticity until his bones were so evident they poked through his skin. Socrates allowed himself to be vulnerable to death in order to live an authentic life.

How do **we** live abundantly and yet be open to the gifts that can come from vulnerability?

We let **Brené Brown become our teacher. She says:**

“Let your true self be seen. Love with your whole heart. Realize that there are no guarantees. Practice gratitude and joy, believe that you are enough.

What is often the gift that comes from our most vulnerable moments?

Rediscovering our true authentic self!

How very cool is that!