

The Web of Bravery
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Rev. Linda Simmons

Brené Brown is an American scholar, author, and public speaker, and currently a research professor at the University of Houston College of Social Work. Over the last fifteen years she has been involved in research on a range of topics, including vulnerability, courage, shame, and empathy. She is the author of: *The Gifts of Imperfection* (2010), *Daring Greatly* (2012), and *Rising Strong* (2015).

In her most recent Tedx Talk called, “Listening to Shame” Brown discusses the “vulnerability hang over” she had after her first TedX talk, “The Power of Vulnerability” when she discussed how really whole hearted people share certain traits, and that she didn’t have those traits. Some of the strongest traits of really whole hearted people include embracing vulnerability and not controlling and or predicting. Well, Brown is a researcher and she was attached to controlling and predicting and eliminating vulnerability (she says as a 5th generation Texan her motto was “Lock and Load”).

So, when her data uncovered that being vulnerable and letting go of control and outcomes are the best and surest ways toward wholeheartedness or an existence in which creativity, innovation and change had room to thrive alongside of peace (who doesn’t want that), she had a kind of break down, which she admits during her first TedX talk.¹

This horrified her after her talk. She wanted to hide, and steal the video before it got to you tube where she feared it might reach 1,000 people. Well, it reached 4 million people.

One day, while in a sporting goods shop, a woman yells out, “Vulnerability Ted; Vulnerability Ted.” Brown tries to hide, to shake her head in denial that it’s her, to move away as the parents around her are moving away from her, but the women keeps shouting, “Vulnerability Ted; Vulnerability Ted” until she reaches her and says, “It’s you, you’re the shame researcher who had the breakdown.”²

Brown looks at her and says, “It was a fricking spiritual awakening.”

Then the woman said, “We watched your TED talk in my book club. Then we read your book and we renamed ourselves 'The Breakdown Babes. Our tagline is: 'We're falling apart and it feels fantastic.'”³

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame/transcript?language=en

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ <http://www.onbeing.org/program/brene-brown--the-courage-to-be-vulnerable/transcript/7257>

Brown goes on to tell us that vulnerability is not weakness, that it is emotional risk. It fuels our daily lives. It is our most accurate measurement of courage. According to Brene Brown, hiding costs us innovation, creativity and the ability to move through change well. Hiding costs us our joy and our health and our connectedness.

Brown's research revealed that vulnerability and courage go hand in hand. Courage is built on the capacity for vulnerability. Brown says that people who have this courage or wholeheartedness or ability to be vulnerable seem to engage with the world from this place of innate worthiness. You know, they seem to say, yeah, I'm screwing things up and I'm imperfect and I'm afraid, but I'm still worthy of love and belonging. Their love and belonging isn't on the table, it isn't negotiable. She thought this was because they lived charmed lives and then realized that they didn't, that what they shared in common was a series of traits that they consciously chose and other traits they pushed away from.⁴

Turns out wholehearted, vulnerable, courageous, creative people move away from perfectionism, judgment, exhaustion as a status symbol, productivity as self-worth, attachment to what people think, over-performing, proving themselves, and a quest for certainty. Do you recognize any of these traits within yourself? I sure do! These are the traits that Brown saw an abundance of within herself, and then had her spiritual awakening or breakdown as the case may be.

Wholehearted people live lives of vulnerability and vulnerability is the keystone to courage and creativity and wellbeing. And this vulnerability does not come with playing it safe right? It can only come with being out front, with risking something that is not easy to risk.

There are many professions and ways of life that put one out and face to face with vulnerability and offer lessons of whole heartedness. Many of us here live in those worlds in one way or another.

Unitarian Universalism itself also calls us into the places where other's rights have been trampled throughout history, asking us to be courageous, all the way back to the 4th Century and the Council of Nicaea when the Arians stood and said the Jesus was not equal to God and were made heretics and became the hunted. We count them as our brothers. We have always been a faith that has been built around using our strength to give voice to those whose voices were not being heard.

And we are being called again.

Tom Ryan and I spoke last Sunday about helping immigrants obtain legal documentation here and while they were undocumented, assisting them with understanding their rights, offering them refuge, being good allies. We as a social justice committee voted to sponsor the event happening at St. Mary's today at 4pm:

⁴ <http://www.onbeing.org/program/brene-brown--the-courage-to-be-vulnerable/transcript/7257>

Called, "Preparing for President Trump: How can immigrants protect themselves and their families?" As an aside, I asked Tom if we could change the language and make it less provocative, and he said that it was the bishop's language and could not be altered. Those Catholics! As I mentioned during announcements, we voted as a Social Justice Committee to sponsor this event.

From this pulpit last Sunday, Tom challenged us by saying that we had to meet immigrants where they were, without pretending that we all agreed on issues like gay rights, abortion, women's rights, etc. He told us that we had to learn to see and support people where they were for who they were without trying to make them into us; to do so would be immoral, he told us.

This is the true definition of pluralism. It sees the other and the self and makes room for difference without trying to melt it into some melting pot where we all come out as some version of each other. Pluralism allows for difference. It is moral.

But then the questions arise. How can I support the right for immigrants to gain citizenship when I know that when they do many of them will vote against the rights of gay marriage? How can I do my work as a moral human being and see the humanity of another, knowing they will not vote for the rights of my humanity to be upheld?

This is a deeply moral question and I have prayed about it for many days. Here is what I have come to: I have to do what is right even when I know that someone else may not do right by me as I do it. There is no other moral choice. This is the definition of moral courage. It has to be. There can be no gray areas about this one.

And, when gay people stand for immigrants when their own rights have so long been erased and they have been murdered and outcast and left to die horrible deaths from AIDS for years without government supported medical intervention, let them do so with pride, do so with voice, do so with clarity, with signs that say: I am gay and I support immigrant rights. Let immigrants know that gay people have fought for them. Let immigrants know that gay people have stood for them. Let immigrants know that gay people have risked their own comfort and security for their comfort and security.

I know this is risky and I know I am not gay so you can say this is easy for me to say. But I am a woman and there are rights that I have fought my whole life to support: the right to choose is just one. My work is to say, I am a Unitarian Minister and I support the rights of immigrants to stay in this country, to become legal, to be citizens and I am a woman and I believe a woman has reproductive rights and I support you and I do this because there is no other moral choice and I will stand on the side of love no matter what because that is the bottom line of my humanity without which I have nothing left.

This is how we grow an American heart. Not only by saying, welcome, we are good citizens and we are good liberals and UUs and we test the legal through the moral lens but by admitting that it is damn tough work to love people who may not see you fully- and to still fully be you while loving them. And to still fully see them while loving them and to even allow that when you allow them to fully see you, they just might have the courage to love you too.

This is the work of whole heartedness. This is the work of bravery. This is the work of courage and I task us all with living into it! Risk is not taken to save anyone else. It is taken to save ourselves, to stitch ourselves back into the web of existence of which we are part as a vital member of this existence, as leaders, as workers, as servants, as weavers of justice. This is what feeds the wholehearted, this is what talks back to smallness and shame and all of it that would keep us silent and small and in the shadows of life.

That piece of Brene Brown's theory always bothers me, that the whole hearted just know they are loved beyond question, just know their right to exist is beyond question. I do not believe it. I think those questions come and go, that they live in and between us at all times and it is this work, this courageous showing up, this courageous, wholehearted making ourselves known as allies and supporters and putting ourselves at risk of criticism and conversations we don't want to have- it is this showing up again and again that creates the possibility of believing that we are worthy. Whole heartedness is not a condition that one is born into or that is won once and for all by choosing the right things to participate in and stay away from. It is a way of life that slips into and out of one's fingers each time we face ourselves and each other with courage and vulnerability and survive with enough of ourselves in tact to go on and do it again and again and again.

I think that is what Unitarian Universalism is ultimately for, to teach and promise and repair us inside of wholeheartedness.

And so my dear brave hearts, walk strong, live your vulnerability with courage and stand in the storm and be a shield for others whose storm weariness is greater than yours. And then come home here. We do not all agree here but we do all know how to love here. We do all know how to see you here. And we have enough hope to make you whole again here. Come home here and we will remind you that you can be wholehearted once more.

How else can we learn to create a world worthy of us all?

Amen.

Postscript: After giving this sermon, I recognized, thanks to the words of another, that some may have felt that while listening that I was suggesting that all immigrants do not support gay or reproductive rights. Of course, this is not true.

There are many immigrants who are gay- indeed immigrants who left their countries due to persecution due to being gay.
Apologies for not more clearly stating this within the text of the sermon.