

I read a non-fiction story in the New Yorker recently about Apollo Robbins, the famous pickpocket. The story begins at a convention for magicians in Las Vegas with the magician Penn Jillette being introduced to Apollo Robbins, known as a pickpocket with almost supernatural ability. Jillette was holding court at a table of colleagues and he asked Robbins for a demonstration, ready to be unimpressed as he did not hold pick pockets in high esteem. Robbins said he felt uncomfortable working in front of other magicians and pointed out that since Jillette was wearing only shorts and a t-shirt, he didn't have much to work with.

Jillette persisted , “Come on, steal something from me.”

Robbins offered to do a trick instead. He asked Jillette to take off the ring he was wearing and put in on a piece of paper and trace it. By now, a small crowd had gathered. Jillette took off his ring, put it on the piece of paper, unclipped the pen from his shirt, and prepared to draw. At that moment he froze and looked up. His face was pale. He uttered an expletive I will not repeat here.

Apollo Robbins, the famous pickpocket, held up a thin object: the cartridge from Jillette's pen.

When I began writing this sermon about vulnerability, I thought of this story. In some ways, we are all waiting to be pick-pocketed if we let our guard down. All waiting for someone to take something dear to us if we are not vigilant, waiting for someone to take advantage of our open hearts if we dare utter what we care about, what truly carries meaning for us.

The word vulnerable means to be susceptible to being wounded or hurt; open to moral attack or criticism, open to assault. It comes from the latin root vulnera: which means, to wound. Given this definition, which of us would make ourselves vulnerable if we could help it?

A friend of mine who had stage four ovarian cancer years ago, told me that she did not tell anyone outside of her family about this for 4 years. She finds that most of us do not know how to be present with another's vulnerability. She decided to protect herself from what she felt was our lack of understanding in the face of vulnerability.

I cannot judge her for this. Many of you here know what it is to tell someone close to you that you consider sensitive some very difficult news and hear responses that include hints that it is really your fault one way or another: you did not pray enough, eat right, live right, embody peace, meditate, love god using the right formula.

The words we crave in those moments, the words of, “I love you. I'll be here with you through it all. Is there anything I can do to help? Do you have enough food at home? Can I drive you to one of your appointments?” rarely come or come too late after the words that feel blaming have done their wounding work.

How do we learn to be vulnerable if we do not know the way from here to there in a world that tells us that if we are vulnerable people will take advantage of us. Judge us. Laugh at us. Reject us. Blame us. Abuse us. Scapegoat us. Trample on our rights.

It seems we need an almost magical feat to rework our relationship to the word and act of vulnerability.

Some say that magic is not about pulling quarters out of people's ears or cartridges out of people's pens but about living into the shape of a new consciousness, a new way of knowing the world and ourselves in it. In this case, I see science as one of the greatest magicians around.

Science more and more tells a story of interconnectedness, mystery and possibility. I've been reading about geology recently. Usually, when we read about the earth and its ecosphere, we learn about powerful forces outside the reach of humans. We live on a planet that acts on us, over and above us and we are helpless in the face of this, or so we believe.

Recently, I listened to an interview with Scientist, Dr. Erle Ellis who was asked, How big is the effect that humans have on the planet? Ellis posits, along with many others, that we have entered a new geological era, the anthropocene (the age of humans), in which humans are the strongest force of nature shaping the planet.

No longer do we live in a time when the earth shapes us without our input. We are now shaping the earth, literally in this new geological period. Scientists are saying that the influence of humans is greater than the work of plate tectonics, or the rise of mountain ranges.

It is more difficult to believe that through the proper use of our wills, our minds, our intellects, we can protect ourselves from each other. The anthropocene tells us this is no longer possible.

We are one of the strongest forces in our biosphere and so affect each other lives every day. How we live into this matters.

We are interconnected now in a way we have never so clearly been and we must take this connection seriously, for the sake of all life and the planet and nature which has to be looked at now as something we nurture, like a garden.

I have another friend who had cancer and told others around her often. She needed to do this, she told me later, in order to reenter her life, in order to heal. She received some comments that hurt, even when they were intended as kindness. She suffered when this happened and she grew in compassion for herself and others. She risked dipping her bucket into the waters of life so that her own thirst, her own need to be part of life even scarred and broken by cancer, might be quenched.

The definition of vulnerability as wound is no longer meaningful; it no longer helps us make sense of the world we live in. Vulnerability must now mean: interconnection, the effect that human beings have on each other's lives and all other life. The anthropocene is the age of vulnerability.

What are we being called to do, to be, to become in this new age? Could it be that we are running an old mental program that no longer works?

Could it be that we are more and more unable to satisfy our needs because we no longer live in a time that responds to isolation and an individual exertion of will as forces of creativity? Could it be that it is time to redefine vulnerability and how we live into it?

Brene Brown, author of the book *Daring Greatly*, is a scientist working at the University of Houston. She did a research project in which she asked many questions of folks in her search to determine what nurtures wellbeing.

She writes, "What I'm looking for are these kind of very wholehearted people. And the word actually came to me because I go to an Episcopal church and, in one of our prayers, there's a phrase, "I have not loved you with my whole heart." "I have not loved you with my whole heart."

Brown began her research using only women as subjects. This changed after a man approached her during a book signing and asked her why this was so.

He said to her, my wife and daughter would rather see me disappear on my white horse than fall off of it. Brown started including men in her research after that. She found that we are not so different, men and women, in our avoidance of what makes us feel vulnerable.

Once her research was complete, Brown correlated her data and created two lists. One list she calls the bad list and the other the wholehearted list. On the bad list are the things wholehearted people avoid or push away from.

This list of traits went something like this: perfectionist, productivity as self worth, quest for certainty, exhaustion as a status symbol, need to prove oneself frequently.

Anything sound familiar on this list? I certainly resonate with more than one of these, I am sorry to say! And I am sorry to say this because I want to live my life wholeheartedly. I want to live in this world with an open heart, not foolishly of course. Brown does not advise that we go around howling out our secrets as a way of life. Not at all.

She suggests that living without fear of vulnerability creates joy. When we embrace showing up fully as part of who we are and are willing to take this risk, we live happier, healthier lives.

The first item on the list those she calls wholehearted is the word creativity. I marveled at this. Brene Brown says that to truly engage in a creative life, we have to stop comparing ourselves to others and coming up short.

We have to learn to see our beauty for what it is, part of a whole picture that includes the beauty of many, many others. Finally, she said that you can't be creative without being vulnerable, willing to put yourself out there, willing to risk failure and success and knowing them both as worthy teachers.

Brene Brown's book is not easy to read. I want to be someone who is wholehearted. Don't you? Sometimes I am, even a lot of the time I would say that I am. But I become afraid too. Weary and worried that someone else is really more worthy than I and perhaps he or she is the one who should be up here preaching to you today! And then I dust myself off and shake off the fear and show up. That is part of it for Brene Brown.

Showing up over and over again, just as we are, and learning what is ours to learn- all of it, including that we may not have done the best job that has ever been done and accepting that we did what was ours to do, with the tools we had to do it and that we did it wholeheartedly. That's being vulnerable. That brings joy.

Phew. Sounds like it takes a lot of stamina to me. If you are wondering if you have the personal strength or not to live into your own vulnerability in the age of the anthropocene about now, you are not alone, I am sure. I was ready to put this one to bed thinking that with all there is to do in life, with all the work and focus and effort to remain connected, healthy and strong, there was just not enough time to be vulnerable too.

And then I heard Matthew Sanford being interviewed on Krista Tippett's radio show, *On Being*. Matthew became a paraplegic at 13 when the car his dad was driving hit some ice and rolled over the embankment. His dad and brother did not survive. His mom and sister did, with minor injuries. Matt woke up at 13 to the news that he would never walk again.

Matt is a yoga teacher now. One of the first things Matt said during the interview with Tippett was, "The world gets lighter and easier when you include more of yourself here."

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Matt goes on to say "And now, just now, after 15 years of yoga, I understand this word deeper and deeper, and that is "surrender." And it comes from being more present, surrendering into the world, feeling more.

Matt goes on, The idea of being willful and being able to attack any problem with a lot of will ... that makes you feel a type of control over the world that can make you feel less vulnerable. You can have as much control as you want but the world is so big, life does its own thing to us on some level."

Matt says his yoga work begins with watching how people move and then helping them do this with less will so that they can find the silence, the vulnerability, the peace inside of life.

Vulnerability as peace was a new concept for me. Maybe giving up the desire for control does come with the gift of some peace. We have to lean in further and well, surrender, when surrender is not a giving up or giving in but an act of courage.

And so we have come full circle. Here we are, a room full of Unitarian Universalists, meaning that for many of us the most well developed muscle is the will of our intellects, and I am suggesting that maybe with less exertion of will and more surrender to vulnerability, we can be happier, more peaceful, feel more alive. And this is where magic comes back in. True magic, magic that changes lives, is magic that changes the way we see the world and helps us find the courage to show up in the world differently.

I offer you this invitation. Open your heart. Tell someone something true and dear to you. And see what happens. I cannot promise it will go well and that you will get what you want from that person. But I can promise that you will be entering a new era, geologically, culturally and personally, that has the power and strength to surround you like a web until you feel held enough, whole enough and strong enough to show up in this new place and time with all your

beauty and possibility and give what is yours to give. Pearls are the outcome of living within the pain and still giving ourselves completely to the journey. Drop down your buckets. The water of life is all around you.

Amen.