

*“The Lost Art of Getting Lost”*  
*First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto*  
*A Sermon preached by Stephanie Gannon*  
*on 24 January 2016*

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

There was once a teenage girl who seemed to have the perfect life. She was pretty and wore nice clothes. She was a straight A student who went on to become valedictorian of her high school class. She was considered by many to be brilliant, responsible, and kind. She was on the tennis team and played the flute in the high school marching band. Along with her younger brother she also worked a part-time job at a local seafood restaurant after school. She worked hard at everything and was thought to have an amazing work ethic. Her father was a successful businessman in their local community. Her mother was very attractive and good at entertaining and keeping up appearances. They lived in a beautifully-appointed house on the bay and seemed like a happy and successful family in every way.

Inside, though, this girl was crumbling. For four long and tortuous years, from ages seventeen to twenty-one, she was on a vicious cycle of bulimia. She would starve herself at school all day, depriving herself of food. Then she would come home and binge eat. Before and after school she would exercise fanatically—Jane Fonda’s aerobics videos at 5:30am, training for the crew team very early in the morning in college, hours on the stationary exercise bike before bed. On and on it went.

She felt completely lost and alone in her struggles. She was ashamed of her body, her needs, her lack of ability to open up and be loved. She had no one to talk about what she was going through—no teachers or counselors whom she felt she could trust, no close friends, no minister or religious community she felt would accept her for who she was—broken, unsure, and in need of love.

Her family didn't talk about feelings; instead they numbed them with alcohol and material consumption. School wasn't much better. She hated her high school's upbeat motto of "Accentuate the positive!" that didn't speak to her experience. She was lost in a wilderness—a dark place of depression that she didn't know how to escape from. She kept pushing herself to be perfect on the outside while her inner state was extremely fragile. Closed off from others, she was becoming invisible and silent in more ways than one...

*I was that young woman, and this story captures something of my difficult time in late adolescence. Sometimes I look back and wonder how I made it through. I did survive, but it wasn't easy. Thankfully I had a lot of inner resources. I coped by delving into graduate studies and becoming a thriving intellectual and scholar in literary studies, receiving ample praise and support from my professors. Throughout my twenties I lived my life in books and ideas, avoiding as much as possible the messy world of people and relationships. I felt safer hiding. It was far less threatening. I didn't have to deal with my fears or shame at being unworthy. Yes, my light was dim, but that was really all I knew. I was stuck in survival mode. That seemed enough.*

I didn't yet know the power of vulnerability. I only saw it as a form of weakness. My formative environment and the highly competitive American culture I belonged to insisted that I put on a mask of always having it together. I kept pushing myself to overachieve to demonstrate my worthiness. I constantly compared myself to others and was highly judgmental of both myself and everyone else. I was really good at blaming others for their many faults and dismissing them as stupid or intellectually inferior. Deep down, though, I found myself never enough and kept striving for a success that always seemed out of reach.

Does this sound at all familiar?? It's the world that groundbreaking social work researcher Brene Brown describes so vividly in her books. How many of you have watched her incredible TED talk on vulnerability?<sup>1</sup> You and 20 million other people, right?? She talks about how shame is universal. We all compare ourselves to others and feel unworthy at times. It's natural given the

---

<sup>1</sup> Brene Brown, TED talk: [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_browna\\_on\\_vulnerability?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_browna_on_vulnerability?language=en)

“not enough” culture we’re in. She teaches us to see our imperfection as a precious gift to be grateful for rather than as a liability to hide or avoid at all cost.

Brown defines “vulnerability” as allowing ourselves to be seen and describes the various ways we avoid feeling the discomfort and uncertainty that comes with it. These methods of numbing include addiction, overconsumption, and the proverbial “busyness.” Maybe you’ve used some of these strategies yourself. I know I have many times over the years.

Brown traces the word “vulnerability” back to its Latin root *vulnerare*, meaning “to wound.” The dictionary definition includes “capable of being wounded” and “open to attack or damage.”<sup>2</sup> She contrasts this to the word “weakness,” which is defined as the inability to withstand attack or wounding. In my view Brown persuasively argues that vulnerability is *not* a form of weakness.

As an example, she tells the story of preparing to give her huge TED talk in Long Beach, California. She was extremely anxious and afraid of failing in front of that intimidating audience of movers and shakers, but rather than give into her fears she leaned into her discomfort and made herself vulnerable and open. No script. Eye contact with her audience. She even went so far as to request that the house lights be turned up so that she could connect with people more directly. As a result, she instantly connected with her audience. And if you’ve seen the talk you’ll know that her humour played a significant role as well. By exposing her most vulnerable self, Brown took a big risk and ended up making a huge impact on millions of people around the world. As she writes, “[V]ulnerability is life’s great dare.”<sup>3</sup> Her experience transformed not only herself but countless others.

Of course that’s great if vulnerability isn’t a form of weakness, but how does that relate to resilience, our theme this month? Where is the resilience in this tender place that makes us feel so exposed or naked? At first glance, this

---

<sup>2</sup> Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012) 39.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

notion seems counterintuitive, but Brown's research closely links vulnerability with courage (deriving from the French root *coeur*, the word for heart).

Among the many myths she debunks in her book *Daring Greatly* is the one that we can go it alone. Individualism may be one of the most powerful myths in our culture (or at least American culture). Brown argues convincingly, though, that the "vulnerability journey"<sup>4</sup> isn't the kind we can do by ourselves. As she says, "We need support. We need folks who will let us try on new ways of being without judging us. We need a hand to pull us up off the ground when we get kicked down in the arena (and if we live a courageous life, that will happen)."<sup>5</sup> I don't know about you, but doesn't church sound like an ideal environment for the kind of safe, supportive space Brene Brown is talking about? Isn't our spiritual home where we should feel most comfortable daring to ask for help?

Take a moment to look back at the last few years of your life: When did you feel most vulnerable or in the wilderness? Was it when you got laid off? Lost someone you were close to? Received a frightening diagnosis? Went through a bad breakup? Who did you share that experience with? Did you feel comfortable talking about it with people here at First? Why or why not? What held you back from opening up more?

Here at First we have our wonderful theme-based Journey Groups, which hopefully provide welcoming spaces for sharing our most vulnerable selves. We covenant in the small groups to maintain confidentiality, to refrain from giving advice or asking questions, and to listen actively without judgment. Over time group members develop trust with one another so that deep and meaningful discussions take place. As someone who's facilitated such groups a number of times, I can attest to how almost invariably people would make themselves vulnerable, and our caring relationships would be deepened in the process.

And last Sunday we heard a lovely presentation from Allan Brand, who heads up the team of Pastoral Care Associates. They are here to offer support

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

and a compassionate ministry of presence to those in our community needing extra support of varying kinds.

We have these built-in structures, so to speak, within our congregation for holding us in our most vulnerable moments. Yet do we take advantage of them?

I want to challenge you a bit this morning. As Unitarians, our default position, at least historically, has been as helpers and social reformers. I don't mean to diminish this part of our past, which is something for us to be proud of. I do, however, want to remind us that part of this history, certainly within the legacy of the New England Brahmins, is bound up with a certain culture of elitism and privilege, which probably went hand-in-hand with a degree of invulnerability and perhaps even perfectionism. Today our liberal faith attracts primarily highly educated professionals and intellectuals, i.e. an elite group of people. Rev. Mark W. Harris traces some of this history in his book *Elite*<sup>6</sup>. Historically we haven't always been known for taking "vulnerability" journeys like the ones Brene Brown describes (hardly!) and this may still be a dominant influence in our denominational culture. Just a thought.

Now I know it's an unfair experiment, but I wonder how my young adulthood would have been different if I'd had communities that let me be vulnerable and real. I certainly wouldn't have suffered nearly as much. When I finally discovered a community of people that let me fully be my flawed, lovable self it was so healing and transformative. I was in my late twenties and an exchange student at the University of Heidelberg, where, through a good friend who was studying theology at the time, I joined an intentional Christian community based on integrating people with disabilities into intergenerational apartment houses. That experience changed my life and eventually set me on the path to ministry. Pretty significant!

What I learned in that loving religious community and continue carrying inside me today is the passionate conviction that when we connect to our hearts and most vulnerable selves we more deeply connect with others. It's what Brene Brown articulates so well: "[O]ur worthiness, that core belief that

---

<sup>6</sup> Mark W. Harris, *Elite* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2011).

we are enough, comes only when we live inside our story. We either own our stories (even the messy ones), or we stand outside of them—denying our vulnerabilities and imperfections, orphaning the parts of us that don't fit in with what we think we're supposed to be, and hustling for other people's approval of our worthiness."<sup>7</sup> Living inside our story—really risking that— isn't easy. We'll resist it and will come up against all sorts of societal pressures that also stand in our way. We can *choose* to take that risk, though, especially in loving communities such as this one, creating greater meaning and beauty in all of our lives in the process.

May our community foster the kind of resilience that celebrates our most vulnerable selves. When we learn that we're not alone in the struggle and can ask for help, we're all strengthened. Community grows. Courage grows. We are collectively more resilient, and our love is that much greater. We discover that we can keep going out and loving even more. I know firsthand that it's a risky business, but am convinced that it's thoroughly worth it.

Blessed be and Amen.

---

<sup>7</sup> Brown, 132-33.