

Preparation for Vulnerability

We can start by admitting we are all vulnerable in some, or even many, ways. We can also probably admit we feel safer if our vulnerabilities are kept hidden. It takes courage and trust, in others and ourselves, to accept and be open about them. A vulnerability therefore can become an origin of strength.

This is an understanding of vulnerability that is radically different from the dictionary definition. Merriam Webster defines vulnerability as “The quality of having little resistance to some agency that can be harmful,” and gives as synonyms “defenselessness, susceptibility, weakness.” By a sort of cultural osmosis, we learn that to be vulnerable is to be weak, somehow lazy, even undeserving, a slight against the bedrock American value of self-reliance.

But if in fact vulnerability lays us open to the possibility of spiritual growth, we can look on it less as a shame to be hidden, or a pain to be avoided, and accept it as proof that we are fully human. Is self-reliance then an avoidance of our potential to love and be loved?

In personal relationships, vulnerability can be both a threat and an opportunity. To know ourselves well enough to recognize our vulnerabilities takes courage. To recognize what it is in ourselves that needs protecting – from pain of rejection, exploitation, or even just embarrassment – can be a harrowing journey. Our job is to balance the need for self-protection with our need to connect and trust. Acknowledging our vulnerabilities enables us to deal honestly with the protective impulses that isolate us from ourselves and from our potential to grow into openness. Vulnerability is an essential engine of personal and spiritual growth. To engage with possibilities beyond our normal comfort level takes compassion for our anxiety, and courage to move through it. But the openness to possibilities that follow such an effort may feel like liberation.

Vulnerability, when met with kindness, teaches us to trust. The more we can trust, the more our vulnerabilities can be transformed into compassion for ourselves and others. When vulnerability is met with derision or unkindness, it’s hard to find the resilience to remain open. The more unkindness, the more we need to strengthen ourselves with a deliberate of acts of compassion. Finding that compassion, and the courage it creates, is the work of becoming an adult, a whole person secure in our own worth.

But what if vulnerability is not honored? A woman in Taliban Afghanistan, a child bullied at school, a spouse betrayed by infidelity or domestic violence are all horribly vulnerable. The development of compassion can be a spiritual discipline. To find opportunities to give kindness to ourselves and others, in spite of our own unkind circumstances, can be a self-reinforcing road to growth. Practice in art, music or crafts, finding any areas of competence can create the confidence to survive and overcome vulnerability, to survive and grow. Does acknowledging, honoring and supporting the suffering and vulnerabilities of others help us deal with our own vulnerabilities?

Allowing ourselves to admit to vulnerability, to open our wounded parts to scrutiny and to remain true to who we are without becoming hardened, requires a delicate balance. When we sign up for a covenant group, we commit to “share as deeply as I can” in group meetings with people who are initially not well known to us. For many of us, sharing comes with a sense of unease and vulnerability. We trust each other to accept and protect our secrets and shy places. This is brave and sacred work we do here.

Consider these quotes as you reflect on vulnerability.

What happens when people open their hearts? They get better. *Haruki Murakami*

We are never so vulnerable [as] when we trust someone – but paradoxically, if we cannot trust, neither can we find love or joy. *Walter Anderson*

Feeling vulnerable, imperfect and afraid is human. It's when we lose our capacity to hold space for these struggles that we become dangerous. *Brené Brown.*

[In a tech environment, some types of] vulnerabilities posed the highest possible risk of damage from a breach or attack, and the greatest likelihood that unpatched vulnerabilities could be exploited by bad actors. *Jerry Gamblin, Kenna Security, discussing cybersecurity vulnerabilities*

To “listen” another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that one human being ever performs for another. *Douglas Steere*

When you are aware of what you are doing, placing your trust in someone or something takes a lot of courage. It's an act of bravery. It acknowledges that you are not alone in the world and there is a connection between you and all things. *angel Kyodo Williams*

I am a rock / I am an island ...

Hiding in my room / Safe within my womb / I touch no one and no one touches me.

I am a rock / I am an island.

And a rock feels no pain / And an island never cries.

Simon and Garfunkel

Questions to Ponder

1. How do you understand vulnerability? How does it differ from helplessness?
2. How did your family deal with vulnerability – acceptance, denial, shame, humor, coping skills ... ?
3. Reflect on a recent challenge to your vulnerability, and if and how you were able to deal with it.
4. Think about an experience when you supported someone expressing vulnerability. How did that experience feel, and what was the result?
5. Our society encourages self-reliance and competition. How can we balance self-reliance with vulnerability in our personal growth?
6. How has facing vulnerability affected you? Are there vulnerabilities you have decided to live with?
7. Consider your experience with sharing in this covenant group in particular. Are there any actions that could be taken to increase your comfort level with the group?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the Gathering, reflect on your experience and perspective on vulnerability. The Words of the Day sentence is “To me, vulnerability means ...”