

Pedagogy of Vulnerability

There are many in this world who experience the vulnerability of hunger, poverty, pain, violence, and war on a daily basis. They do not have the luxury of choosing the experience. They live vulnerably, close to the vitality of their lives, every day. To have the safety to be able to feel fully is a privilege and those of us who live with greater physical comforts have that privilege. Threats to physical safety, service inaccessibility, or limited financial resources can make it much more difficult (but not impossible) to navigate vulnerability deeply. With privilege comes an increased number of choices to explore and deepen into the human experience. John O'Donohue (1999), the late Irish philosopher writes, "We are privileged, and the duty of privilege is absolute integrity". Because culturally we continue to be silent around issues of shame and vulnerability, it is clear that we are not maximizing our privilege toward greater emotional health. And in Western culture, where many of us are quite comfortable and have plenty of choices to engage emotionally with our lives, we often choose not to. It is only those who have chosen to traverse the edgy territory of vulnerability who come to know its profoundly transformative power.

We cannot be laid bare all of the time. There are moments of expanding and contracting, or opening and closing like a flower. There is a time to reveal and conceal oneself. Vulnerability must be respected. Being open to what rises up from the depths is transformative in its own right and some situations are more conducive to welcoming vulnerability than others. When many of us have been taught to hide our vulnerability, to invite it forth is edgy work, and great care must be taken. Loving those we guide is tricky, but essential, in the transformative process. In fact, it is love that instigates change, and shows up when we are willing to be vulnerable. The rawness of what has been hidden, sometimes for decades, must be handled with humility and respect. It is important for teachers and mentors to commit to the exploration of their own vulnerability, know their limits, and to check their agenda when guiding others into this vital

territory. When people choose to engage vulnerability as a learning community, the guides must be prepared to walk with whatever shows up.

Sometimes we don't choose to be in contact with our vulnerable nature. Life delivers that reality to us. Life is unpredictable; the death of a parent, a life-threatening illness, an addiction, or the loss of a job can often leave us standing on very different emotional ground. We do not have a choice as to when, if, and how these situations will happen in our lives but we do have a choice as to how deeply we wish to engage the fragility of these human experiences. When we choose to dance with each experience fully, we begin to know in our bones the rich, textured learning that comes from diving into the depth of that experience.

We cannot know the truth of who we are without experiencing vulnerability. It is a natural human experience. Vulnerability is not pathological. Rumi, the 13th c. Sufi poet writes, "Kiss the snake to discover the treasure". Many of us run from the snake, not because we do not long for the treasure, but because we were never taught to kiss it. In fact in this country, through word and deed, many of us were taught to run. Activist and teacher, Joanna Macy writes "Many of us who grew up in the dominant society or operate within it, hide our pain for the world, even from ourselves". Today we are told through painkillers, food, sex, the enticing distraction of social media, and more to move away from that deep, vital space within us. As we continue to experience less and less of our lives, we slowly become emotionally illiterate. Our lives become less vital. As we become more skillful at hiding, the masks that we wear then start to become rigid and slowly over time, we begin to forget what is truly living within us.

The experience of discomfort is a rich site for learning and transformation. Megan Boler, author of *Feeling Power: Emotion and Education*, writes that to engage discomfort pedagogically leads us to "inhabit a more ambiguous and flexible sense of self". We can know ourselves more deeply, and experience a deeper sense of belonging in the

world, when we jump fully into the deep waters of vulnerability. The Welsh poet David Whyte writes,

*Those who will not slip beneath
the still surface on the well of grief
turning down to its black water
to the place that we can not breathe
will never know
the source from which we drink
the secret water cold and clear
nor find in the darkness
the small gold coins
thrown by those who wished for something else.*

The small gold coins are found when we are willing to be vulnerable enough to find them. This process of discovery is tricky because the only way to learn from vulnerability is to dive into its depths but the discomfort, fear, and even despair, can deter so many of us. With many options to ignore, negate, divert, and distract from it, some days it might seem easier to sit on the couch or take a nap than to summon the courage it takes to dive in.

*The dog chased the cat again this morning.
And the cat ran.
She always does.
Today I said to her,
Why don't stop in your tracks
and face her head on?
She looked at me for a moment,
and then moseyed off toward the bedroom,
maybe to contemplate the courage it would take,
or simply to just take a nap.*

Once we kiss the snake and recover the treasure, it is hard to not want to return to the landscape of vulnerability. Transformation involves breaking

free from the old to step into new ways of being, which requires stepping out of one's comfort zone. Taking a new way to work, trying different foods, or telling the truth to the one person we never could, all have the potential to take us into new and potent learning. The known is not bad, it can be a place of rest and nourishment, but when I set up camp in the familiar, complacency can slip into one's life, often unnoticed.

O'Donohue writes that the unknown is the language of the soul. Choosing a new way is to engage the soulful territory of vulnerability where we come to know new parts of myself, and the world. Here is a story from a Springhouse community member:

Recently I went hiking in my favorite place, where trees line the paths, a creek moves underneath ice, and a buck stands on the side of a mountain at full attention. The place is alive. I began walking on the path that I always walk on, distracted in thoughts about the emails that I still needed to send, and phone calls that I needed to return. And all of a sudden my attention was drawn to a new path. The inner dialogue began:

*Should I take it or should I just go the way I always do?
I don't know where this new way goes. What if I get lost? What if I can't
find my way out? What if there are wild animals in that part of the park?
What if I die?*

In spite of the fear, I watched my feet as they changed direction, one foot in front of the next, onto the new path. I found myself winding around bends I had never experienced, seeing deer that I had never seen, and facing irrational fears that I did not know lived inside of me (like a mountain lion was going to attack me on the hillside). Choosing the new path invoked the experience of vulnerability and there was no more mulling over emails and phone calls. My attention to the moment was heightened because I had chosen to step into the unfamiliar.