

"Connection Beyond the Body; Meaningfulness Beyond Survival"

By Kendra Trufahnestock

July 30, 2017

A Reading:

VULNERABILITY

is not a weakness, a passing indisposition, or something we can arrange to do without, vulnerability is not a choice, vulnerability is the underlying, ever present and abiding under-current of our natural state. To run from vulnerability is to run from the essence of our nature, the attempt to be invulnerable is the vain attempt to become something we are not and most especially, to close off our understanding of the grief of others. More seriously, in refusing our vulnerability we refuse to ask for the help needed at every turn of our existence and immobilize the essential, tidal and conversational foundations of our identity.

To have a temporary, isolated sense of power over all events and circumstances, is a lovely illusory privilege and perhaps the prime beautifully constructed conceit of being human and most especially of being youthfully human, but it is a privilege that must be surrendered with that same youth, with ill health, with accident, with the loss of loved ones who do not share our untouchable powers; powers eventually and most emphatically given up, as we approach our last breath.

The only choice we have as we mature is how we inhabit our vulnerability, how we become larger and more courageous and more compassionate through our intimacy with disappearance, our choice is to inhabit vulnerability as generous citizens of loss, robustly and fully, or conversely, as misers and complainers, reluctant, and fearful, always at the gates of existence, but never bravely and completely attempting to enter, never wanting to risk ourselves, never walking fully through the door.

...

‘VULNERABILITY’

From CONSOLATIONS:

The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words.

© David Whyte and Many Rivers Press 2017

Note: The sermon is preceded by the song “The Color Purple” <http://colorpurple.com>

What do you see when you look? What in this world inspires you? Call it what you will. We don't need to use Celie's language. Celie is the main character in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, a 1982 epistolary novel, later adapted into a film and musical. This epic tale spans 40 years in the life of a family in rural Georgia, beginning in the 1930's. At age 14, Celie is forced by her abusive father to marry an equally cruel farmer she calls Mister, and soon separated from all that she loves. This song from the musical captures a moment in which a vibrant and loving Shug Avery helps Celie learn to love herself as she is, find her voice and strength to overcome, eventually branching out to full independence by sewing pants for women. Quite a statement in those times. What people find so inspiring about this story is obviously how one unlikely,

underprivileged, soul rises out of such adversity but also how she tunes into self, into what talents she possesses, what and who she loves, to blossom into deep contentment and zest for the whole spectrum of life's experiences.

It is the second piece – tuning into self - on which I would like to focus today, challenged as I was to add something new to this summer's theme after all the inspiring sermons given before me. Inspiration comes from the Latin word "inspirare" – to breathe into, as in the divine breath of life. I, too, am moved and feel alive when out in the natural world and could've written a whole sermon on that theme. A mountain may be majestic, an old oak tree mighty, but these greats do not have to ponder their existence, their purpose, or shape. They simple are.

When it comes to the human variety, however, the world is our oyster, as they say. We talk with our children from young ages about whom they want to be when they grow up. The possibilities seem almost endless and many, many factors begin to influence children as they grow. I find myself having adult versions of that conversation in my office every week. For anyone who doesn't know, I am a psychotherapist in a group private practice here in Harrisburg.

I come across much that moves me in my work, as you can imagine. One of my favorite experts in the field is Dr. Dan Siegel (<http://www.drdansiegel.com>), Interpersonal Neurobiologist and founder of the Mindsight Institute out of UCLA. (I chuckled when, in preparation for this sermon, I looked at his website and found the motto: Inspire to Rewire.) Attending one of his trainings in DC recently, I listened to him describe spirituality and psychology as both essentially boiling down to the same two fundamentals for human well-being: connection beyond the body, and meaning beyond mere survival. Plug in just about any client's case and find that one or both of these pieces is missing if they are coming to see me. Many of therapy's remedies center around connecting deeply together, the whole being greater than the sum of its parts, and exploring ways to bring meaning into life beyond basic necessities. (And yes, I recognize that those with whom I work in this setting usually are privileged enough to have necessities met. Maslow's hierarchy of needs and all that.) Meaning, inspiration are loftier goals not all have the luxury of pursuing.

Take the story of Celie, for example: in the beginning, she was fearing for her safety and needed out. Through connection with Shug, she sensed greater worth, trust in another, and possibility. Once safe and emancipated, she found meaning in her work, putting her talents to use, selling her creations for other women to buy as they climbed toward their own empowerment. Connection beyond her own body and meaning beyond survival.

Emotion is contagious. Neurobiologists can now show us, through the discovery of mirror neurons, that brains literally share experience. In the classic initial study, researchers showed that if a chimp watched a person drink from a cup, the chimps' brains lit up in the same way they would if they had been drinking from the cup themselves. Just by watching. What you do affects me and I, you. As a therapist, I can sense intense emotional change inside my own body hour by hour, as different clients bring before me a whole kaleidoscope of human experience. One hour may be with someone who is quite checked out to their life, hardly registering an emotional pulse at all, and I feel sleepy, bored, struggling to attend. The next hour may be with someone grieving deeply and I feel a deep heaviness, a heartache, and tears will flow down my cheeks as I

see their tears flow. And then I may be with an anxiety-ridden person and sense a jitteriness, second-guessing myself, and so on. Hopefully, if I can hold on to my own center, I can help clients regulate strong emotional states as they sense my calmness and compassion. Together, we work on fully integrating their experiences to a meaningful narrative. Connection beyond the body and meaning beyond survival.

Outside of the office, I can sense it, too. What does a blacksmith, a child immersed in an art project, and a public speaker all have in common? I came across the blacksmith in Ashville, NC, at the Biltmore Estate. Not just any blacksmith, mind you. This blacksmith was put on this earth to do this work. He was as beautiful to watch as a ballerina on stage. His tapping so expert, rhythmic hammering one could set to music, graceful, seemingly effortless movements, and a cadence to his speech chimed perfectly to share his gifts with the captivated audience. You could feel his sense of meaningfulness that he was experiencing, as he shared with deep pride how he learned the trade from a long line of talented folk in his family.

Ever tune into a child so immersed in an art project that you could sense they had lost all sense of time and space? Certainly, it doesn't happen with every artsy venture and I am not that adult who tolerates messes very well. But when that magic moment happens, the child loving what they are doing, deeply inhabiting that moment, which is perhaps more rare in children with their busy minds and bodies, I can literally sense a warm, tingly kind of feeling come over me, almost like goose bumps but deeper, like sunshine from within.

By the way, Dr. Dan Siegel, the interpersonal neurobiologist, calls this ability to feel sensations within your body, *intraception*. He developed a handy tool – the Wheel of Awareness, to teach people how to develop this skill and overall brain health. We have our 5 senses that everyone knows about – touch, taste, smell, sight, hearing. Our 6th sense is *intraception*, the ability to notice bodily sensations, which, interestingly and by no means a coincidence, is often particularly difficult for those who have suffered trauma. He includes a 7th sense - awareness of our thoughts, and our 8th sense - awareness of connection to others.

I shared about the blacksmith and the child immersed in art. Now my third observance – the public speaker. When I am listening to Brené Brown (<http://brenebrown.com>) give the keynote address at the Psychotherapy Networker's annual symposium in DC, I can sense in my body how captivated the audience is, holding a couple thousand people “in the palm of her hand.” She defines vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” and that it is “the core of all emotions and feelings...the birthplace of love, joy, belonging, trust, intimacy, creativity, and all the good things.” She inhabits her own vulnerability as she speaks, choosing to show up and be real as she describes overcoming addiction, feeling shame, wanting to self-protect. She inspires the rest of us because she is in an inspired state herself.

So...what does a blacksmith, a child immersed in art, and a public speaker all have in common? They have a wholehearted experience with what they are doing in the present moment. They are connecting with others and by way of doing work that is meaningful to them. Because they feel it, I feel it. Because of what Dan Siegel has discovered in the field of neuroscience, he says we need to begin thinking of a new, more scientifically accurate pronoun: MWE. Brain science shows us that Me & We happen simultaneously.

Maybe I am a vulnerability junkie. Here's my moment of risk...I love my work as a psychotherapist. I love bearing witness to other people in self-discovery, facing their darkness with growing courage, kicking shame to the curb, wrestling with what has been, what could be, and becoming the truest self they know how to be. And when it's a couple, I get to witness some of the most vulnerable, difficult conversations human beings can have. I go along for that emotional ride with approximately 25 people a week. How lucky am I? I am a facilitator of increasing vulnerability, ever encouraging people to lean into the feelings most of us want to avoid. And when I see someone get out of their own way, truly be as real with their partner, themselves, or me in a moment as is humanly possible, IT HAPPENS. I get that feeling, deep in my bones, like sunshine from within. I am witnessing beauty. In fact, Irish poet David Whyte, describes beauty as "bringing together inner and outer recognitions, the far horizon of otherness seen in that face joined to the deep inner horizon of our own being. Beauty is an inner and an outer complexion living in one face."

What often makes me sad is how little people seem to know about what meaningfulness feels like and what in the world has ever or could ever make them feel it. Children feel it. They are wide open to their experiences, in a state of wonder, moving toward that which speaks to them. We know that "seeing through the eyes of a child" offers adults gifts to which we are no longer privy. We were all once children ourselves. So where did that gift of sight go? How did we lose what was once so naturally ours? I do not think losing wonder is simply a byproduct of aging. I certainly don't think it is inherent to human development. Is there some magic age in which we have arrived? Figured it all out? Learned all we need to know about life's mysteries? Of course not. I am quite suspicious of our culture's messages, our current modes operandi, our system of education, for veiling mystery, clouding our curiosity, perhaps even teaching us to lose our way, fall into an autopilot trance. And that could be a whole other sermon...

Back to my confession of being a vulnerability junkie, or maybe an intimacy junkie. That certainly sounds more appealing. Esther Perel, a cutting edge therapist in NYC (<https://www.estherperel.com>), simply breaks the word intimacy down to In-to-me-see. When someone allows me the privilege of seeing into them, I feel alive – inspired by their bravery. I think this has led me to be a little rusty in the small talk arena. I move toward whatever feels most genuine in myself or another person as we engage. I also think that I forget other people do not have these kinds of deep encounters nearly as often as I do. So, inevitably, I'll attempt polite banter and either ask questions that quickly lead to a topic the other is a bit too uncomfortable revealing or I'll be in my head, trying to think of other more mild-mannered material, and my mind will literally go blank. Not a single lighthearted idea will surface. The thing is, I'm not afraid to go deep, to be real, to reveal myself to another and I get a lot more practice than the average person. I wish others could join me there, learn to fear it less, develop more courage to share and especially to stay with difficult discussions. There is so much to learn, even and perhaps especially in the face of conflict. John and Julie Gottman, expert researchers and clinicians in the couples therapy world, state that the purpose of conflict is to deepen understanding. If conflict arises, there is something two people have yet to understand – about the other, about the self, something. If we could all learn more about how to engage, go toward feelings we've been taught to avoid, we would deepen understanding of self and other at every turn. Vulnerability leads to genuine connection and expanding our understanding of self and other feels meaningful. Connection and meaning.

Brené Brown says that the truest measure of belonging is dissent. And guess what? So do Unitarians. We say we do not have to think alike to love alike. So let's practice making room for difference and do not shy away from exploring it when the opportunity presents. And it isn't only in conflict that vulnerability arises. In fact, guess what Brené says is the most vulnerable affect? JOY. When you truly feel joy throughout your body and express it wholeheartedly with others ~ Wow... that's vulnerable. Because immediately fear sets in, doesn't it?

“What if the other isn't into this like I am? What if they think this is stupid or at least not as amazing as I think it is.”

Imagine if all of us reconnected to and felt brave enough to share our wonder, our joy, our creativity. What if we all got “woke.” Woke not only to injustices, as they've been saying in the news, but woke to *all of it*...the whole spectrum of life experiences. If we could truly feel whatever our own versions of meaningfulness are, truly have an embodied experience of what speaks to us, we'd have a revolution, folks. And your version of meaningfulness – it need not be grand. Celie ends up sewing pants. AND she finds her way to a belief that she has all she needs inside of her to lead of bountiful life. It doesn't matter what you do but that you love what you do. Like the majestic mountain and the mighty oak, **be** simply, fully, wonderfully who you are. Seek what inspires you, connect with it deeply, *risk* sharing it with others, knowing that in doing so, you are spreading inspiration like wildfire.

Benediction: In the words of David Whyte:

What shape waits
in the seed of you
to grow and spread
its branches
against a future sky?