The Power of Vulnerability

The books we are using for this series are The Gifts of Imperfection and Daring Greatly, both by Brene Brown. If you don’t want to read the books, she has a number of great videos on YouTube. If you don’t want to get the computer out, and you don’t want to read, well, you are stuck with me. Because I am going to talk about the icky stuff in her books, vulnerability and shame. Why? Why, Reverend Joy, can’t we talk about meditation and something more spiritual than vulnerability and shame? Because I love you. Because I want you to live your best life and because I believe we have to understand our humanity a little bit in order to access our divinity and let it shine. Because I believe that Daring Greatly and living with our whole hearts is what we are called to be in this world. So, really, I have no choice but to talk to you about vulnerability and shame. OK, now we’ve got that out of the way.

In her books, Brown’s research identifies 10 characteristics people demonstrate when they live “whole hearted”. People who believe they are worthy of love and belonging, people who experience their lives with satisfaction and gratitude Brown calls “whole hearted”—living with your whole heart. Whole hearted people are not people who live charmed lives without challenge or loss or sadness. They are people who possess these characteristics that allow them to move through the challenges and obstacles; to fail and try again; to grieve and find their way back to joy and laughter.

One of these characteristics is self-compassion. Love your neighbor as yourself. In non-violent communication we refer to it as “self-empathy”. We cut ourselves some slack. We give ourselves a break. Not that we “Make excuses” for things we should be accountable for, but we allow ourselves to fall short sometimes. We make it right with others and with ourselves. We pay attention to our own feelings and emotions. We speak as gently to ourselves as we do when we comfort others. Well yes, all this makes sense. Why would we not have compassion for ourselves? How could we possibly sabotage self-compassion? We have this crazy belief system running in the background of our mind. It is about perfectionism. The system doesn’t believe we are perfect but it believes we should be perfect; that we could be perfect if we tried harder and that if we were perfect, we could avoid all this shame and pain. There is a way we could be and act that would shield us from the pain of shame.

Brown describes shame as the intensely painful feeling that we are broken, not enough, not worthy of love and not able to belong. Shame thrives on
secrecy so we try not to talk about the ways we feel we are broken, how we feel disconnected and what we hope no one will ever find out or figure out about us. Our perfection program tells us there is some magic way of being that keeps us from getting into that shame predicament.

In case that perfection program sounds the least little bit reasonable, let me describe it another way. We believe that it is possible, if we try hard enough, that everyone will love and admire us; we will never disappoint anyone, including ourselves; no one will ever be mad at us; and we will never fail at anything. OK, how reasonable is that? No matter how hard we try, is that feasible? But we believe if we could achieve that, we could avoid the pain.

I got a grasp of this concept several weeks ago when I attended a training with Martha Creek. The training was in Montclair NJ. I very carefully Mapquested the trip and looked at the estimated times. I gave myself 40 extra minutes because I hate to be late. I hate walking in and everyone looks at you and wonders why you couldn’t get your stuff together and get there on time. I expect myself to always be on time and I prepare for it. I got there 40 minutes late. Now there is a list of factors that affected my timing but Martha greeted me with, “You are here at the perfect time because it’s when you got here.” My friend and roommate got there 40 minutes after I did. We talked about this in the training. Life is uncertain. Life is full of variables and we cannot anticipate all of them. Perfectionism is the illusion that if we try hard enough, we can meet every expectation. I could leave 2 hours early and an accident could shut down the highway and I could still be late. We can come in to work with a positive attitude and someone else can be having a very bad day and we will irritate a co-worker. I can be the very best I can be and I will disappoint someone. Self-compassion is the ability to notice when my expectations of myself are unreasonable and speak gently and kindly to myself. Perfectionism is the sabotage that says somehow I should have anticipated the needs of others and made myself into what they needed me to be to avoid the pain and shame of disappointing them. Self-compassion is the willingness to see my accountability, forgive myself if I fell short and make amends as needed. The need is my assessment, not the needs or expectations of others. Self-compassion is also the willingness to see that I am doing my best and that others may want or need something from me that I am unable or unwilling to give. With self-compassion, I understand healthy boundaries and I communicate boundaries with compassion for myself and for others. Are you beginning to see how we sabotage self-compassion with perfectionism?
One solid step in building self compassion: In the book, Brown cites the work of Dr. Kristin Neff in three elements of self-compassion; self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness. Try to focus on at least one element of self compassion each day. Write the element on a note and put it where you can see it several times during the day. Self-kindness is just being warm and loving in speaking to ourselves when we suffer, feel inadequate or fail. Recognize our common humanity and that these feelings are experiences for all of us, no one is alone. Mindfulness is a balanced approach that recognizes negative emotions but doesn’t dwell on them or exaggerate them. We notice, engage compassion and move on.

A second characteristic of whole hearted living is a resilient spirit. This is not something you are either born with or without; like blue eyes or curly hair. This is the ability to move through the challenges, the sadness, the flops and the flips and find our way forward. Resilience is not developed in the absence of challenge but through it. Two features Brown discovered in resilience were a hopeful determination and spirituality. Ah! She distinguishes that spirituality is not religion. Whatever our tradition or practice, believing we are part of something greater than ourselves gives us a resource to draw upon. This fuels that hopeful determination that “I can do this”. Believing in possibilities is the “hope” part and believing I need to keep doing my part is the “determination” part. Resilient spirits don’t give up when they accept how things are.

In the context of her shame work, Brown defines resilience this way: “The ability to practice authenticity when we experience shame, to move through the experience without sacrificing our values, and to come out on the other side of the experience with more courage, compassion and connection than we had going in.” How many of you would rather not? How many of you would rather not examine our experiences of shame and pain and just keep slogging along?

To experience our feelings we have to be vulnerable; we have to be willing to be imperfect; we have to be willing to look at what we are feeling and see the triggers with compassion; we have to let go of the expectations of who we should be and embrace who we are; and we have to accept the uncertainty of life and invest in the risks as a necessary part of living. That is really the power of vulnerability—to free us to Dare Greatly—to live with our whole heart. As powerful as that is, why are we not all lined up to do that?
It is work. It is uncomfortable. It brings up resistance and challenges our old beliefs and makes us consider **change**. So to avoid that, what do we do?

We numb our feelings—we take the edge off our discomfort by distracting ourselves. What are we doing to numb ourselves? Well let’s look at some numbers. We are the most obese, debt-ridden generation ever. We take more medication than ever before. We have recovery programs for every kind of addiction including alcohol, drugs, sex and gambling. We have fewer vacation and holidays than any other civilized nation. What are we doing to numb ourselves? We eat, we drink, we shop, and we work. We stay on Facebook or keep our gadgets in our hands. We believe we have kept the discomfort at bay. The tricky part is that we cannot selectively numb ourselves to only one thing, so at the same time we numb ourselves to pain and discomfort, we numb ourselves to joy and peace.

In an effort to not hear the sirens, we have filled our world with white noise and we no longer hear the birds sing. I guess that is as simply as I can put it. To drown out the pain, we drown out the joy. We just float in the static.

So what do resilient people do differently? Brown says three things came up in her conversations:

1. They learn how to feel their feelings. Self-awareness. Paying attention. Mindfulness. A lot of different words to say, notice what is going on in your mind and body. This is not to say they **like** the process, they simply understand its necessity.

2. They stay mindful about numbing behaviors. Again, self-awareness. What do you do to distract yourself from feeling the feelings? What do you do to fill the time so you don’t have time to allow feelings to arise; so thoughts don’t have enough space to become clear and defined. When we notice these behaviors, how do we respond? If some behavior is running your life, it is time to get help. If the behavior is socially accepted, like shopping or working, it can be trickier to acknowledge it is being used to numb ourselves. We have to be mindful and take action to stop distracting ourselves.

3. Resilient people learn how to **lean** into the discomfort of hard emotions. We **leap** into the pool, into joy, into happiness. We **lean** into what needs to be done; what will move us forward. Hard emotions like grief, like unworthiness, like fear, like anger, like deep unforgiveness. Leaning into a hard emotion is more deliberate, more conscious, slower.
Leaning into a hard emotion means we are willing to shine a light on it—which dispels the shame. Acknowledging it to ourselves is the beginning. We begin with compassionate self-talk. What if you just discovered a young child you love is feeling this feeling? How would you talk to him or her? Speak that way to yourself. Own the story because when you own the story, you get to write the ending. And the story doesn’t end until you say it’s over. Carl Jung said, “I am not what has happened to me. I am what I choose to become.” Lean into what you are becoming. Remember that Divine Within we can draw from as we choose our direction and as we choose how a circumstance will shape us. Leaning into a hard emotion means we ask for help when we need it. We may need professional assistance in working through some hard emotions. Deep and difficult things happen to us sometimes. Asking for help is brave and wise and consciously or unconsciously, it comes from a sense of our wholeness.

One solid step to cultivating a resilient spirit: Become mindful about the numbing activities you rely on. Just begin there. Notice what you do to distract yourself and fill the time. Spirituality is a part of our resilience and there is a simple way to engage Spirit in your mindfulness: breathe. Notice your numbing activities and before you take that 2nd or 3rd or 4th drink; before you make that impulse purchase; before you log into Facebook; before you open that bag of chips; take 10 gentle breaths. Count them. Feel your feelings and notice what is going on in your body and your mind. Then choose your next action.

Today we explored Self-Compassion and the sabotage of Perfectionism. We explored our Resilient Spirit and the sabotage of numbing and distracting activities. How are you doing so far? People who live whole hearted lives, who are willing to Dare Greatly, are not without the sabotaging behaviors, they have simply developed an awareness about them and an awareness of the benefits of conscious choices. Life is uncertain; living whole hearted includes risks; and yet, to live fully is to have the courage to live and love with your whole heart in connection with all that is. If you want to go deeper, take your Own Work home with you and consider joining us Wednesday evening at 7pm. Otherwise, I hope to see you next week when we’ll talk about Playing With All the Marbles. What could that mean?