

Rumbling with Vulnerability

Today we are starting our new Fall Faith series, based on Brené Brown's new book, *Dare to Lead*. We've done some of Brown's books in the past and this one got by far, the most interest of any of the topics in our June survey. Brown is a researcher, not a spiritual master so why did this book fit for our Faith series? I think there are two reasons. First of all, I think our world is hungry for leaders right now. And we'd like them to be people with a grounding in faith and values. I think people in New Thought and specifically Unity have been willing to overlook many of the weaknesses in Marianne Williamson as a political candidate because we believe practicing principle would be so refreshing in a political leader. What we might not have thought is that we are the leaders we are waiting for. I believe we are living in a spiritual imperative that calls us to show up as a spiritually grounded leader everywhere we are. In our families, in our workplace, in our community work, in our spiritual communities—we are the leaders. The second reason I think this is an appropriate faith series is because of something Brown says, "Who we are is how we lead." Or as Mary Englebriet paints in one of my favorite pictures, "Everywhere you go, there **you** are!" Leadership is just one more example of our 5th Unity Principle: You have to live the principles, not just recite them. You have to be able to walk the talk. I can read every book on leadership there is and if I don't practice and live the leadership skills we'll talk about, I will not be a competent or beneficial leader.

When I worked in the corporate world I would often say, "Leadership is not a position, it is how you show up." Most corporations are hierarchal or have organizational charts of power and authority and it is assumed that the leaders are the ones in the positions of most power and authority. In a crisis we often discover that is someone or teams of people without power and authority who show up as leaders. 21-year-old Satchel Smith, a desk clerk employee at Homewood Suites in Beaumont, Texas manned an entire hotel by himself after he and 90 guests got trapped inside due to flooding from Tropical Storm Imelda. Satchel didn't show up on the Org chart. He was never in a position of authority over other employees. The guests that day certainly consider him a leader.

Those of you familiar with Brown's work know that she works with two concepts we typically avoid—at all costs. Edwene Gaines says if you have to eat 3 frogs, swallow the biggest frog first. So today we will explore the two big frogs in Brown's work: Vulnerability and Shame!

Some of you who have never heard of Brown's work may be tempted to leave right now. I encourage you to stay! This really is transformational work!

Let's start with what **is** vulnerability? In military strategy, it might be being open to attack. We tend to think of vulnerability as being open to being wounded or hurt. Here is Brown's definition: "Vulnerability is the emotion we experience during times of uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure." Here is something she also said, "To love is to be vulnerable." How many of you have children? The moment that child was conceived, you became vulnerable—because we don't have control over what happens to those we love, even if our dna created them. If you have a pet, you are vulnerable. If you have a spouse or close friends, you are vulnerable. Unity and Jesus teach us **we are love**, so when we are aligned with our true Self, our spiritual self, in our humanity, we are vulnerable. Let me repeat that. When we are being our best selves, we are vulnerable! Well that's a spiritual paradox we didn't expect!

That paradox alone seems to dispel the myth that "Vulnerability is weakness." It takes courage and discipline to be our best selves. So what about the other vulnerability myths Brown outlines? If you want to take the class we'll go deeper into the material. For now I will summarize what Brown says are the 6 Myths of Vulnerability: "I don't do vulnerability" "I can go it alone." "We can engineer the uncertainty and discomfort out of vulnerability" "You need to trust to be vulnerable and we need to be vulnerable to build trust. If you have trust issues, this translates into, well I can never really be vulnerable because I don't trust. And because I am never truly vulnerable, I will never be able to build trust. I tend to agree with Brown that trust and vulnerability are not lump transactions—all or nothing. Instead they are micro-transactions that work together in layers. You build trust and experience vulnerability in the little details of our relationships over time. The last myth is Vulnerability is disclosure. I want to just say one hyphenated word about that, "Over-Sharing". The work includes healthy boundaries!

The first really hard question we have to ask in this work is "Are we self-aware?" Brown says, "Leaders must either invest a reasonable amount of time attending to fears and feelings or squander an unreasonable amount of time trying to manage ineffective and unproductive behavior." And at least half of the ineffective and unproductive behavior you end up trying to manage is **your own!** Spiritually, we might say we have to show up conscious rather than unconscious and mindful rather than being on auto-pilot. From lots of the discussions we've had, when we go unconscious, what takes over?

Our lizard brain! Our reactive behaviors are those ineffective and unproductive behaviors we have developed over time as ego told us those behaviors would protect us from harm. Brown calls these behaviors from a leadership perspective “Armored Leadership”. Armored Leadership means propagating the false dichotomy of victim or Viking; crush or be crushed. We might have learned there are winners and losers; kill or be killed. So what have we learned to do as a spiritual practice? Take a breath. Give yourself the space to become conscious and mindful about what is taking place inside us and what is unfolding outside us. Then consciously CHOOSE a response. In Daring Leadership Brown calls these healthy choices practicing integration. She then lists the elements we talked about in Braving the Wilderness: strong back, soft front, wild heart. Living our values with clarity is the strong back. Living with compassion and empathy is our soft front. Living our dreams and taking risks is our wild heart. ALL of this requires self-awareness and we know that takes a commitment to staying awake, to self-assessment and a daily, moment to moment practice.

Leadership implies that there are others, working with us, observing us, following or we might believe fighting us. So the second difficult question to ask is “Are we willing to connect?” Which brings us to the second big frog: Shame. Don’t leave. We got through vulnerability. Brown defines shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging and connection.” Shame makes us feel unworthy of connection. Here is the maybe uncomfortable reality: shame is universal. From time to time we all feel shame. Be honest. We may have heard shame and guilt used together but it is important in this work to distinguish the two because one can be helpful and the other is not. Guilt is feeling bad about something you’ve done. It is acknowledging that we acted out of alignment with our values and it motivates us to adjust our actions, apologize and make amends for being out of alignment. Shame, on the other hand, is feeling we are bad. It initiates a tape in our heads that says, “You are not enough. You never will be. You are broken and therefore no one will love you or value you and you will never really belong.” Shame is an ego, sense consciousness, humanity based false belief we all experience. Brown says, “Shame is not a compass for moral behavior. It’s much more likely to drive destructive, hurtful, immoral, and self-aggrandizing behavior than it is to [drive] healing [behavior]. Where shame exists, empathy is almost always absent.”

I want you to pause for an honest moment and think of something that triggers shame in you. No one has to say it out loud. Now I want you to think about how you responded and the behaviors that the experience generated. Brown has a list of behaviors that indicate there may be shame driving our actions and beliefs. Those behaviors include perfectionism; gossip; comparison; discrimination; bullying; blaming and cover-ups. I will share a simple example. I left home at 18. I had a government stipend from my father's death and I was expected to manage the money to pay for college tuition, books, housing, food, car and car expenses and anything else that came up. I had never had a bank account. The first year went ok because I lived in the dorm and wrote very few checks except for my car payment and college fees. I couldn't have my car on campus so my mom and brother used it and my brother was on my mom's car insurance. I never had health insurance. At 19 I moved, changed colleges and lived in a tiny apartment but I was writing checks for rent, utilities, college fees, car payment, car insurance and food and the occasional beer. The first month at my place I bounced about five checks all over town. I did not understand the concept of unprocessed checks. On the date I got my statement, I thought that's how much money I had in the bank. I didn't know how to read the statement and reconcile checks I'd written with checks that had cleared the bank. I blamed my parents. I set up a standard of perfection for myself that clearly revealed me as a failure. I had to keep this a secret because if anyone knew my complete incompetence they would never love me or have any respect for me. I figured out banking; I went around town with cash and paid off the bounced checks but for many, many years I lived in a shame consciousness about my finances.

Brown says "Shame resilience is 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 shame experience with more courage, compassion and connection than we had going in. We move from shame to empathy because empathy is the real antidote to shame."

Ah, there is a way out. Empathy is our ability to care about and connect with how another person feels. Self-empathy is our ability to care about and connect with how we feel. In both cases, with love and without judgment. Brown talks in her book about empathy misses. The bad news is that we have all felt empathy misses. Times when the other person might have been trying, sort of, to connect as we shared our emotions and maybe shame but misses the connection in a way that makes us feel worse...if that's possible.

One of my favorite descriptions of a miss is the “boots and shovel”. This person is too uncomfortable with vulnerability and so dismisses the feelings you have and responds with, “It can’t be that bad. You know you’re awesome. You’re amazing.” Brown says, “He’s hustling to make you feel better, not hearing anything you feel and not connecting with any emotion you are describing. It is pretty disconcerting reeks of [male bovine excrement].” Maybe we are uncomfortable because we were the ones speaking the boots and shovel language.

The good news is that empathy is an emotional intelligence skill we can practice and improve at. It’s not a case of either being born with empathy or not. We can learn and practice empathy. How? Nonviolent communication and Connection Practice are two techniques grounded in empathy for self and others. You can simply try to 1) listen to others 2) be mindful of your own emotions as you seek to understand another 3) let go of judgment 4) reach out. Empathy is not complicated but it may not be easy all the time.

If you want to learn more about what I’ve touched on today, read the book Dare to Lead. Go to the website for the book for videos, an audio program, and other resources. Come to class on Wednesday nights as we move through the book and resource materials. Class is 5 Wednesdays, beginning this week. The class syllabus is downstairs with a sign-up sheet so we have materials. We really prefer to keep the class consistent so please join us at the beginning if you want to participate.

Let’s end with an affirmation. *I am a self-aware leader, courageously rumbling with vulnerability.* Maybe you don’t believe this about yourself. Plant the seeds of belief and live into it. You don’t have to be all the way there to speak the confidence and wisdom and self-discipline into manifestation. **I AM a self-aware leader, courageously rumbling with vulnerability.**

Next week we’ll explore what is the difference between Armored Leadership and Daring Leadership. Which do you want to be?