



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

Evasive Manoeuvres: The art of invulnerability

Clay Nelson © 4 July 2021

If the penny hasn't dropped yet, the title is facetious. I've been musing this week about how good we are at avoiding being vulnerable. Each Sunday I invite you into small groups to discuss a question. I explain the groups should be small, ideally four or five. That is an opportune size to practise being vulnerable. Some of you have figured that out, and create groups of six to twelve. Easier to hide in a larger group. It is also easier to stay in our heads if we have to say something — we are rational UUs of course. Sharing emotions and feelings is outside our comfort zone.

Now I'm not throwing stones from my glass house. I recognise the behaviours because I am a master in the art of invulnerability. You may call me Sensei. My mental jujitsu will keep others at bay unless and until I choose to let them touch me.

Brené Brown, who wrote today's reading, shares a story in her book *Daring Greatly*, that I identify with. It is her first conversation with her therapist.

I looked right at Diana, my therapist, and said, "I frickin' hate vulnerability." I figured she's a therapist — I'm sure she's had tougher cases. Plus, the sooner she knows what she's dealing with, the faster we can get this whole therapy thing wrapped up. "I hate uncertainty. I hate not knowing. I can't stand opening myself to getting hurt or being disappointed. It's excruciating. Vulnerability is complicated. And it's excruciating. Do you know what I mean?"

Diana nods. "Yes, I know vulnerability. I know it well. It's an exquisite emotion." Then she looks up and kind of smiles, as if she's picturing something really beautiful. I'm sure I look confused because I can't imagine what she's picturing. I'm suddenly concerned for her well-being and my own.

"I said it was excruciating, not exquisite," I point out. "And let me say this for the record, if my research didn't link being vulnerable with living a wholehearted life, I wouldn't be here. I hate how it makes me feel."

"What does it feel like?"

"Like I'm coming out of my skin. Like I need to fix whatever's happening and make it better."

"And if you can't?" "Then I feel like punching someone in the face." "And do you?"

"No. Of course not."

"So, what do you do?"

"Clean the house. Eat peanut butter. Blame people. Make everything around me perfect. Control whatever I can — whatever's not nailed down."

"When do you feel the most vulnerable?"

"When I'm in fear. When I'm anxious and unsure about how things are going to go, or if I'm having a difficult conversation, or if I'm trying something new or doing something that makes

me uncomfortable or opens me up to criticism or judgment. When I think about how much I love my kids and husband, and how my life would be over if something happened to them. When I see the people I care about struggling, and I can't fix it or make it better. All I can do is be with them. I feel it when I'm scared that things are too good. Or too scary. I'd really like for it to be exquisite, but right now it's just excruciating. Can people change that?"

"Yes, I believe they can."

"Can you give me some homework or something? Should I review the data?" "No data and no homework. No assignments or gold stars in here. Less thinking. More feeling."

"Can I get to exquisite without having to feel really vulnerable in the process?"

"No."

"Well, shit. That's just awesome."

Let me echo that, "well, shit," I wish I could have understood at least that much in just one therapy session. Instead it took way too much of my life to get to exquisite.

As a kid, I played chess with my father on Friday nights. When first learning the game, I would be check-mated in less than ten minutes. As time went on the games went longer but they always ended the same, in my defeat. Then one week I had to stay home from school sick. My mum bought me a book about chess to occupy me. Something clicked. I realised I had been spending my time trying to protect all my pieces, but especially my king. What finally made sense was defence was never going to win. To win I had to take risks, make sacrifices. That Friday I chalked up my first win. Same thing the next Friday. Then we stopped playing chess on Fridays. I don't know if he was a poor loser or just felt the lesson was learned. Perhaps so, but that was just the introductory course. Next was middle school — the beginning of adolescence. As it was for Brené, school was hell for me. She describes it and its consequences this way:

"By middle school, which is the time when most of us begin to wrestle with vulnerability, I began to develop and hone my vulnerability-avoidance skills. Over time I tried everything from "the good girl" with my "perform-perfect-please" routine, to clove-smoking poet, angry activist, corporate climber, and out-of-control party girl. At first glance these may seem like reasonable, if not predictable, developmental stages, but they were more than that for me. All of my stages were different suits of armour that kept me from becoming too engaged and too vulnerable. Each strategy was built on the same premise: Keep everyone at a safe distance and always have an exit strategy."

The problem with this strategy is it didn't make much room for my strong empathetic nature. I needed connection. I was hardwired for it. It gave me meaning and purpose. It was a choice between being safely invulnerable that also came with loneliness and purposelessness thrown in for good measure or vulnerable which meant suffering. It meant leaning into the discomfort of ambiguity and uncertainty, and holding open an empathic space so people can find their own way, perhaps through connection with me. Vulnerability, in a word is, "messy". And, I so like to be tidy. Again, well, shit!

There is reward for being vulnerable however. It is freedom to be who you are. It is liberating. That is the exquisite part. Connection, purpose, meaning and wholeness will follow close behind.

I could have chosen a different title for this talk. It could have been "Letting Go, part two," since I'm not sure we fully did last week, since the groups were larger than usual. It turns out vulnerability requires letting go:

- Letting go of what people think

- Letting go of perfectionism
- Letting go of numbing and powerlessness
- Letting go of scarcity and fear of the dark
- Letting go of the need for certainty
- Letting go of comparison
- Letting go of exhaustion as a status symbol and productivity as self-worth
- Letting go of anxiety as a lifestyle
- Letting go of self-doubt and “supposed to”
- Letting go of being cool and “always in control”

I know I’m asking a lot, but take a risk. Being vulnerable requires practise. If we can’t be vulnerable here with one another, we aren’t yet the beloved community I believe we to be. Besides, if not here where? If not us, who? If not now, when?

Meditation / Conversation starter:

When was a time you felt vulnerable?

Was it excruciating or exquisite?