

## **Vulnerability in Three Parts**

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### **Vulnerability Part 1: Bill McKibben**

We live in a culture of never enough, right?

Never enough...

Never good enough, never perfect enough, never thin enough, never powerful enough, never successful enough, never smart enough, never certain enough, Never safe enough, never extraordinary enough...

And in that kind of culture it can be hard to try new things, to take risks, And try something without being assured success.

I want to tell us about one person who didn't plan on the life he has.

He didn't plan on being an activist; he was a writer.

Indeed, he admits that rather than being out talking to anyone

He would rather be home typing on his typewriter.

But a handful of years ago he had just come back from Bangladesh

Where he was doing some reporting on Dengue Fever, a mosquito born disease...

That is spreading like wildfire in Asia, because mosquitos really love

The warm, wet world we're increasingly living in....

And while he was there he got bit by the wrong kind of mosquito

And developed Dengue, but because he was healthy and well fed,

He didn't die.

But in the hospital where he was he saw rooms and rooms of people dying

From the disease...

And he thought, how unfair is this?...

That when you look at some of the biggest burners of carbon,  
Bangladesh is so small that they don't even have a number on the scale –  
Hardly anyone has car, no one is connected to the electric grid,  
But here this man is watching all these people die...  
And watching this, seeing these, broke him open...

So that when he got home, after recovering, this writer,  
This Methodist Sunday school teacher, this person who would  
Rather be home typing on his laptop,  
Knew that writing and speaking and teaching wouldn't be enough,  
Even in this Never Enough culture.

So he called up his writer friends and said let's go to our capitol city  
And let's sit on the steps with our signs, pointing at how unfair climate  
Change's effects are, and we'll get arrested, and we'll get written up in the paper,  
and they said great idea...  
And then they called the police, to check-in what the police would do,  
The police said...absolutely nothing, you can sit there as long as you want,  
We won't arrest you, which wasn't the point....

So this man and his writing friends decided to walk...walk from  
Their towns all across the state, and because the state was small,  
They could do it...in 5 days, and they got 1000 people to join them,  
And they met with politicians, and professors and scientists and artists...

And the next day when this man opened the newspaper to the front page,  
He says that, next to what he say in Bangladesh, it was one of the saddest days  
Of his life,  
Because there in the headline it has said this protest in response to Climate Change  
Was the largest in the entire country at the time, 1000 people,  
which told him that how much work he had do, and how unsure of success he was,  
and how uncomfortable he was going to have to be, and how vulnerable he had to  
be...  
as he set to making a movement we know as 350.org,  
which organizes for climate justice world-wide, including participating  
in the science marches all over the country yesterday.  
His name? Yes, Bill McKibben.

Sarah, a song...

## **Vulnerability Part 2:**

Brene Brown, who gave us our opening words, and gave us a wonderful TED talk that all of us should listen to on this theme of vulnerability, Says that she hates vulnerability.

*“I define vulnerability, she says, as uncertain risk and emotional exposure.*

*I hate uncertainty. I hate not knowing.*

*I can't stand opening myself up to get hurt. I really hate vulnerability.”*

Amen? Amen.

Friends, despite my own wrestle matches with vulnerability, a month ago I shared on WBUR an essay about losing my brother Nick from an opiate overdose a year and a half ago, which I have talked about here and there in worship with us, but that until this essay, hadn't fully shared how that loss has informed my ministry with you.... namely, how in parish ministry, how easy it is to think I should how the answers... the high pulpit, the pews facing me, the robe and stole and 'Reverend' in front of my name, all building toward the presumption that I speak with holy clarity and conviction,

but that after my loss, how full of doubt I was...

Should I have prayed more? I wondered. Never mind the sermons I have given challenging this kind of quid-pro-quo theology.

Why didn't I how bad things had gotten for him? Never mind that Nick was a master at hiding his addiction from everyone, including himself.

Why couldn't I save him? Never mind that the powers of salvation weren't included with my divinity school degree, and that addiction is a disease.

Why did God let this happen?" I whisper at night, never mind that long ago I gave up the belief that God decrees who lives and who dies, for reasons beyond our understanding.

The part of me that hates vulnerability would be easier if I kept these midnight questions private.

After all, hiding from grief in our culture of "Aren't you over it yet?" and "Can't we talk about something more pleasant?" isn't so difficult in a beautiful, bucolic Suburbs.

But this I've learned... that my vocation asks me to be better than I might otherwise be, and that you don't ask me to pretend,

I'm learning how to be present with the pain, as I want us to with whatever Hurt you have.

After that essay came out, and we talked about vulnerability and addiction in our worship planning meeting, Sarah mentioned a song by Trent Reznor, covered by Jonny Cash,

That speaks honestly, openly, directly, painfully to the emotions that I know Nick  
And so many others had in response to their pain.

It pulls no punches...but it's important to hear...

### Vulnerability Part 3: Amazing Grace

For our last expression of vulnerability I found myself thinking this week  
Of the hymn, Amazing Grace, written, as I think we know,  
By John Newton more than 300 hundred years ago...

As an expression of his slow conversion experiences from being  
The captain of slave trading ships...to a village vicar who, apparently,  
Was unique and popular for the ways he spoke plainly and directly  
To his congregation about sin and failure and forgiveness and redemption,  
including his own.

He finished every sermon with the line: *I'm here to break a hard heart and to heal a broken one.*"

This week I'm thinking of this song especially as it relates to our own  
denomination, Unitarian Universalism, which you may have heard is experiencing  
Its own vulnerability in recent weeks with the resignation of our President, Peter  
Morales,  
and two other top staff stemming from hiring practices that have resulted  
in precious little racial diversity in our Association.

One statistic that brought it home for me was the one that *tells us that 83% of the service workers at the UUA are people of color, while 86% of the people in management and executives are white.*

What's also true is that in our denomination we have precious few ministers of color, even as we seek to celebrate diversity and hang banners that say Black Lives Matter.

Why should we care what happens in Boston at some religious headquarters most of us will never visit?

What does this have to do with our vulnerability?

And my answer is this: *we come here to this beloved community that is not honestly as fully reflective of the racial diversity around us...to practice Becoming the people we want to be.*

The temptation, and it's in me so I'm guessing it's in you, is to think we're so progressive, so forward thinking, so good and well-intentioned... that the work that needs to happen in the world is less IN HERE, IN US, that it is OUT THERE.

But if the definition of vulnerability, as Brene Brown says,

Is 'uncertain risk' and 'emotional exposure,'

Then what our denomination's turmoil is telling me now

Is that I need look harder at how it is the people who like me have a better Chance at opportunities in our congregations and in leadership than people Who are black and brown.

Next Sunday after worship we will join hundreds of our congregations in

Talking and sharing more of vulnerabilities on this issue of white privilege,  
Particularly as it relates to the ways we create and sustain our religious  
communities.

Will you join me?

Good, because we can't do this alone,

Which is why we need each other in these vulnerable times,

And we need Grace.

Let us sing...

## **Benediction:**

*One: Above all else, we want you to know that are loved and loveable.*

All: You will learn this from our words and actions – the lessons on love are in how I treat  
And how I treat myself.

*One: We want you to engage with the world from a place of worthiness. You will learn you  
That you are worthy of love, belonging, and joy every time you see me practice self-  
Compassion and embrace my own imperfections.*

All: We will practice courage in our community by showing up, letting ourselves be seen,  
And honoring vulnerability. We will share our stories of struggle and strength.

*One: You will learn accountability and respect by watching us make mistakes and make  
Amends, and by watching how I for what I need and talk about how I feel.*

All: Together we will cry and face fear and grief. We will want to  
Away your pain, but instead we will sit with you and teach you how to feel it.

*One: Together we will laugh and sing and dance and create. We will always have  
Permission to be ourselves with each other. No matter what, you will always belong  
Here.*

All: As you continue your journey, the greatest gift we can give you is to live and love with  
With our whole heart and to dare greatly.

*One: We will not teach or love or show you anything perfectly, but we will let you see us,  
And we will always hold sacred the gift of seeing you.*

All: Truly, deeply seeing you.

## **Call to Ministry**