

This book, Brene Brown’s Daring Greatly, frightens me more than I care to admit.

I knew from watching her excellent TED talks that this is deep, meaningful, important stuff, ripe for sermon mining. The problem is that I’m stuck about halfway through and finding the time--or maybe the courage--to delve back into and fully engage the text is hard.

And it IS a really challenging topic to engage, in a public forum. Shame and vulnerability. We all love to talk about that, right?!

But I think we have to. We simply must begin the conversation on understanding vulnerability, and how it indicates courage; and shame, and how it absolutely does not, but rather steals courage from us in every way and leads to the heart of everything broken in our world and our lives.

Everyone knows our five core values, right? Compassion, inclusion, spiritual growth, inquiry, and celebration. I’ve long been aware that the one I have the most trouble with, the one hardest for me to live with, is spiritual growth. It annoys me that it is the middle one in our list, because that makes it CENTRAL, visually, and I wish I could just ignore it but it’s [hands] right there. It doesn’t help that much even when I translate it into mental wellness, (which sort of defangs “spiritual growth” for me, as a “woo-phobic” humanist) and I do see it as nearly the same thing, or at least an essential prerequisite, especially when you see people claiming to be spiritual who are really just a little unwell [tap forehead] which is anything BUT spiritually healthy, spiritually growing and flourishing, in my book.

Well I’ve never seen a better roadmap to spiritual growth--or mental wellness and thriving--than Brene Brown’s research. Certainly for me. But it is hard work. And hard to engage, sometimes.

So let me start with some definitions. Shame is fairly easy to define, though I didn’t know this before. Shame differs from guilt in this way. If you feel guilty, it’s “I did a bad.” If you feel shame, though, it’s “I AM bad.” Unworthy. Maybe even evil. Irredeemable. An important distinction to make. Shame and fear are the secret heart of homophobia, racism, misogyny, xenophobia, classism. Nothing good comes from shame, but guilt is a very useful, adaptive, if uncomfortable, emotion, an acknowledgement or awareness of wrongDOing. Only psychopaths lack guilt.

Vulnerability is harder to capture.

Here’s Brene Brown’s take, scattered in the early parts of her book:

“Vulnerability is the core of all emotions and feelings. To feel is to be vulnerable. To believe vulnerability is weakness is to believe that feeling is weakness.”

Hm. Spock and Data and so many other stoic superheroes come to mind there. Their greatest moments, though, dramatically speaking, are when they ARE open to feeling, experiencing, sharing some powerful emotion, right? ☺ Vulnerable. Continuing with Brene Brown:

“I define vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.”

“Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage.”

“Love is a form of vulnerability. Vulnerability is life’s great dare.”

In an interview with Krista Tippett, she describes vulnerability like this:

“Vulnerability is the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experience.”

And this:

“To me, vulnerability is courage. It's about the willingness to show up and be seen in our lives. And in those moments when we show up, I think those are the most powerful meaning-making moments of our lives even if they don't go well. I think they define who we are.”

And finally this:

“I can tell you as a researcher, 11,000 pieces of data, I cannot find a single example of courage, moral courage, spiritual courage, leadership courage, relational courage, I cannot find a single example of courage in my research that was not born completely of vulnerability. And so I think we buy into some mythology about vulnerability being weakness and being gullibility and being frailty because it gives us permission not. to. do. it.” NOT to risk greatly. NOT to dare greatly.

It’s easy to associate the word vulnerability with being weak, or foolish, or gullible, but Brene Brown shows that in the sense of vulnerability as a virtue, a moral value, a spiritual value, it is anything but. She shows this not only in her research, her books, but even more so in her excellent TED talks, especially her first one at TEDx Houston in 2010. She set out to talk about vulnerability by BEING a little vulnerable. And she found it an incredibly painful experience to recall afterward. She calls it having a “vulnerability hangover.” The thing she couldn’t believe she shared, in front of hundreds of strangers, eventually millions, online, was how research into vulnerability sent her into therapy after an experience she illustrated with a slide with the word breakdown, struck through, and the clever phrase, humorously presented, “spiritual awakening” in its place.

I wanted to show a clip from one of Brene Brown’s TED talks, since she’s such an engaging speaker, but they’re each about 20 minutes long and crafted in a way that’s hard to watch just part: I do encourage everyone to watch them in their entirety. Or listen to the podcast I referenced earlier, an extensive interview with Brene Brown from Krista Tippett’s On Being... 20 minutes in it has a segment about shame and how men and women experience it differently, the guy in the golf shirt story, that just knocked my socks off when I first heard it. Or... read the book! It may not be as terrifying as it sounds, as it is for me, though it just might unearth a few shame and vulnerability triggers.

So I’m going to try to talk, in a *vulnerable* way, but roundabout enough to not be *too* vulnerable, just a bit about parenting and armor, connection and courage, all great themes from Brene Brown’s book.

Or so my other half, Joy, tells me--the part I’ve been afraid to read on parenting is a part she read first.

* * *

I know parents are not supposed to have favorites, but I have a confession to make. I do have a favorite in our household. [significant pause]

His name is Armie.

[bring out Armie]

I mean he’s an armadillo! And he’s tie dye! And he’s from San Antonio! A native Texan like me and Brene Brown!

Well, China, actually, I think, but sold in San Antonio, and then Joy found him at a neighbor’s garage sale for a quarter.

We have a history, Armie and me.

Almost a year ago at the end of August I got to go to San Antonio to the World Science Fiction Convention. Those who know me know I have a deep and abiding love for Science Fiction, and I was very grateful that Joy supported me and encouraged me to go.

So before I even left, I did a bit of research, secretly, to see what thoughtful little gift I could get for her in San Antonio. The convention center is a short walk along the riverwalk to the mall, and in the mall is a gift shop, and online they have a catalog of stuff that’s in the gift shop. None of the things in it really appealed to me except one--a tie dye armadillo! It was perfect! Joy’s high school mascot was an armadillo, and our whole family loves tie dye. So I was all set. I had a plan to buy that armadillo when I got to San Antonio.

Only problem is, we already HAD that exact armadillo, hiding out in our rather cluttered house. I happened to discover this shortly before I left, which put me really out of sorts. Uh! Now I’d have to go to the trouble and be creative, engage creatively once again with the city of San Antonio to find a gift instead of being able to concentrate almost entirely on what I wanted most to do, which was drink uninterruptedly from the fire hose of information and fun that is a five day long science fiction convention.

I was put out.

But I went to the convention, which I really enjoyed and learned a lot from, and I was so happy and so grateful that I didn’t mind spending a few minutes, here and there, thinking about and searching for a gift, to express appreciation for a complete, extraordinarily fun, five day break from my usual parenting duties.

On the riverwalk I found a street vendor with the most remarkable necklaces and bracelets with spiders, scorpions, and all kinds of interesting things encased in glass medallions. Even a few lizards. I knew the insects would not be a big hit, but there were some flowers, too, so I found, for not too much money, a thoughtful little gift to show my appreciation: a miniature rose encased in glass.

I gave it to Joy on my return, she said “ah, that’s nice,” and... it got stuck in a drawer somewhere. I hadn’t seen it again until Joy brought it out last night, after reading this sermon. 😊

But Armie the armadillo started showing up more and more. I put him beside my bed. The kids play with him frequently. He even has a girlfriend now, a plush armadillo about his size in more traditional gray who we call Dilly.

So I love this armadillo. He is a *sacred* armadillo, and let me tell you why.

In a kind of superficial way, he’s sacred because you know the Einstein quote, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

To me this means either nothing is sacred or everything is sacred. And that sacredness, would, therefore, have to include plushie tie dye armadillos. With their own inherent worth and dignity.

This is a superficial sacredness, though, because it is a kind of superficial logic. When C. S. Lewis uses it to say, either Jesus of Nazareth was who he says he was, or he was a liar or madman, that’s the superficial logic of either/or, a kind of magician’s choice, forced choice, a rhetorical trick using “logic.” I rather like that sort of superficial logic as a rhetorical trick when Einstein uses it to make a point about radical inclusiveness in the nature of miracles or the miracle of nature. But not so much when C. S. Lewis uses it.

Our good friend Jim McKeown, who spoke here last week, has an email signature line, a quote from Laurence J. Peter, that states:

“Against logic there is no armor like ignorance.”

[Armor. Logic. And Armadillos.]

That line has always bugged me. I mean it sounds profound and yet profoundly wrong applied to me. But it finally occurred to me it could be like the great truths that Gretchen Rubin, author of *The Happiness Project*, talks about. She says the **opposite** of a great truth is also a great truth.

It is true that “Against logic there is no armor like WILLFUL ignorance.”

But it is also true, perhaps, that “WITH logic there is no armor like (oblivious) ignorance.” And that one does apply to me, much more so. Cause I’m never really again’ logic.

There is a kind of ignorance that we wear, often, like an armor, a kind of studied ignorance that protects us from uncomfortable vulnerability. For me, just as there is emotional intelligence, there has to be something like emotional ignorance, the utter lack of emotional intelligence, in certain contexts, and it is my Achilles heel. I don’t want to engage right now with what’s happening in Ferguson. I’ve remained ignorant by not wallowing in that news. I didn’t want to engage emotionally with the reports and psychological Monday night quarterbacking that have gone on around Robin Williams’s death, not at first, but I did end up reading a lot of speculations and thinking a lot about the armor of humor, an armor that I wear quite often, and about shame, and vulnerability, and what happened to Robin.

I wanted to talk about Smaug and Bilbo Baggins here, and how each experiences vulnerability in different ways, and how each has a different armor (one large and glittering and narcissistic made of stolen gems, the other armored in smallness and invisibility powered by a stolen ring), and how each has different weaponry to match, and how it enables them each to survive and thrive, or not, as the case may be.

But I have to wrap up the talk now about Armie and the rose. Frankly, dragons and hobbits would be a lot more fun.

These gifts I put a lot of creative energy into, they took on a life of their own, as such talismans sometimes do.

Armie is awesome, because--pff! Look at him! He was born or originated as an armadillo, covered in armor, but he’s been transmuted into something soft and cuddly. His armor has gone soft. His true colors show through. And they’re beautiful.

He’s a little bit dragon... and a little bit hobbit. I mean armadillos live in holes like hobbits. They have armor like dragons. And they’re also kind of furry underneath, like a hobbit. Best of both worlds. And this one could have been grey, which is how armadillos stay unseen in the twilight, unseen, like Bilbo’s favorite armor of invisibility, but instead he’s tie dye. Which, admittedly, can also be invisible in the right place.

[Hug Armie to my favorite tie dye shirt.]

But yeah, he’s sort of out of his shell. He’s vulnerable. And it’s beautiful.

Most importantly, he’s like a part of me, that I wanted to give to my family, but that they gave and give to me instead.

Armie the armadillo I wanted to give to my spouse, at a not too insignificant expense in time, trouble, and price, was something she already had, purchased for a quarter, for less than a song (a song being about 99 cents on iTunes), and so instead she gave it to me, and to our whole family, by walking next door and without giving it a whole lot of thought at all.

Unable to give that, I gave something else my creative energies led me to, knowing it was a second best, but still, I put some thought into it, and I picked: a rose, representing love, and the heart... but encased in glass. Protected. Armored. So that it can never wither and die.

But you also can’t really touch it. Or smell it. Its failure to be vulnerable makes it kind of a failure as a rose. (Not too shabby as an object lesson, though. Also, last night Joy pointed out to me that it can’t prick your finger, either.)

And how telling is that, these talismans? Don’t they sum up, in a nutshell, or a glass egg, or an armadillo shell, several of the approaches we take in either experiencing or armoring ourselves from experiencing love and connection and vulnerability?

I mean, think about all the rich symbolism for vulnerability, for representations of shame and love and connection and how men and women or men and men or women and women or any romantic partners or deep friendships play out...

So connection is like that, sometimes. Love and connection, rooted in vulnerability and stymied by shame. The whole struggle to be open and to dare greatly... we need to talk about that and think about that more.

I need to think and talk about that more.

One thing I did glean from her book, when it comes to parenting, before I got a little too close to my own little (ahem!) spiritual awakening and had to stop reading, is that we have to acknowledge and remember that children are wired for struggle, and they’re worthy of love and belonging.

And my thought is--so are their parents.

So are we all. And we all have to be reminded of that, and not overprotected from the struggles that help us grow through experiencing vulnerability, nor underprotected from the shame that comes when we forget we’re worthy of love and belonging.

I want to leave with one last thought from Brene Brown:

“...the vulnerability journey is not the kind of journey we can make alone. We need support. We need folks who will let us try on new ways of being without judging us. We need a hand to pull us up off the ground when we get kicked down in the arena (and if we live a courageous life, that will happen). Across the course of my research, participants were very clear about their need for support, encouragement, and sometimes professional help [therapy!] as they re-engaged with vulnerability and their emotional lives.”

(Wise words from a wise woman.)

Namaste! The sacred armadillo-dragon-hobbit in me recognizes the sacred armadillo-dragon-hobbit in you. [END OF TALK]

Words for Reflection was page 1 of Daring Greatly. Google “Roosevelt Man Arena” or use Look Inside to view here: <http://www.amazon.com/Daring-Greatly-Courage-Vulnerable-Transforms/dp/1592407331/>

From 20:17 to 27:12 in the audio from On Being is a segment I wanted to play during the sermon, but I thought my presentation was already too long to add that:

<http://www.onbeing.org/program/brene-brown-on-vulnerability/4928>

See also the excellent: TEDx Houston 2010: https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability
TED 2012: http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame

Oh... and I wanted to have the last nine paragraphs of this be the Spark, but didn’t get it to our Spark reader in time: http://lair2000.net/Dragon_Stories/stories/Bilbo_Baggins_And_Smaug.html