



Sustainable Empathy

BY ANA LEVY-LYONS, SENIOR MINISTER,
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Traveling home at the end of a really hot day, I got to Grand Central Terminal and made my way down to the 7 train like I always do. There was obviously a problem with the train because the platform was packed solid with commuters waiting, tight like sardines, sweating in the intense heat. I could barely get onto the platform there were so many people. I asked around and nobody knew what was going on and there were no announcements forthcoming and no station agents in sight. So we all just waited uncomfortably, absorbed in our smartphones.

For some reason I looked up and noticed this guy slowly trying to make his way through the crowd. He touched someone on the shoulder and I thought he had met up with a friend, but then he moved past her and kept going. And as he threaded his way through, he lightly touched each person on the elbow or arm as if he knew them and had now arrived at his destination. There was something intimate about the way he moved through the crowd. As if he knew all of us. I found it so interesting to watch and I developed all kinds of theories about what his deal was. Maybe he wasn't a New Yorker; maybe he was from another country with a different sense of personal space. Or maybe he was a politician, skilled in the art of connecting, just for a split second, with each of hundreds of strangers. Maybe I was witnessing the secret of great leadership.

I turned back to my Blackberry and then looked up again as I heard a gasp. Somebody was falling in the midst of the crowd. People were catching him and

lowering him to the floor. It was that same guy! People were shouting, "Get help! Get help!" and so I started to make my way toward the stairs to try to find an MTA person. But before I got there, it seemed that the guy was already coming to. He was getting back up, helped by those around him, saying, "That was the strangest feeling." He had simply passed out from standing for so long in the heat.

All of my theories about this guy had been wrong. As I had been watching him make his way through the crowd, he had probably been feeling his grip on consciousness slipping away and he had been trying to almost hold on to people as he passed by. The intimacy I had noticed was actually borne of vulnerability. And the people around him responded to his vulnerability with intimacy: somebody offered him a bottle of water, while somebody with a stethoscope offered to listen to his heart. He had been vulnerable and so his boundaries were down, his edges were soft and his heart was open.



I think many of us have had experiences like this—times when we're sick or heart-broken or in pain or we've witnessed something awful. We feel like our channels are open for connection with others, even strangers. We become transparent. Paul Simon sings, "Losing love is like a window in your heart / everybody sees you're blown apart / everybody sees the wind blow."

These days our grief compartment is pretty full. It seems like a parade of tragedies has gone by this year, each one calling us to feel something and to do something, each calling us to vulnerability and intimacy. Shootings, storms, building collapses, wreckage after wreckage. Is this pile of debris Bangladesh or Oklahoma? Is this grieving mother from Newtown or Damascus? It's like a "denial of service" attack on our hearts—we can get so overloaded that we shut down.

These days our grief
compartment is pretty full.

Quest

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**Courage is vulnerability.
Vulnerability is courage.
Like shadow and light,
neither one can exist
without the other.**

—Wai Lan Yuen

A monthly for religious liberals

THINKING ABOUT VULNERABILITY

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And how could we not? We didn't evolve to be able to digest such a steady diet of tragedy. We didn't evolve to be intimate with strangers far away. Before the information age, the 24-hour news cycle, instant online communication, tragedies would be few and far between, as far as anyone knew. And they would always be local and they would always be personal. They would get filtered through your local religious community, interpreted by your clergy person who would know everyone involved and frame the event for you out of a short playlist of possible theological explanations. Usually some version of "God works in mysterious ways."

Today, all of that is different. Unless we're really unlucky, we usually don't know the people involved in today's tragedies, and neither do our clergy. Pat answers about everything happening for a reason simply don't fly any more (if they ever did). We know about every major tragedy in the world within hours, if not minutes. We also know that in the backdrop of prime time are innumerable ongoing tragedies in distant places: atrocities, starvation, constant war. We know enough to be outraged that the media doesn't place these "less newsworthy" tragedies in the foreground as well. And we also know that in the backdrop of those stories is yet another: the ominous creak of the suffering of the earth itself—icebergs melting, species going extinct, crops failing, beehives falling silent.

It all starts to blur together. Even the words start to lose their meaning: "tragedy," "injustice," "assault," "devastation." These words get worn thin through repetition. They have less and less impact each time we hear them, and I think for many of us they have virtually no impact at all anymore. We can't possibly hold it all. We can't possibly walk around all the time like that guy on



the train platform, exposed, vulnerable, acutely aware of our dependence on others. And we can't walk around all the time like the crowd who reached out to him, seeing vulnerability in our midst and extending ourselves intimately to help. We simply can't sustain a level of emotion and action commensurate with the influx of horrors of our time.

As religious people, we want sustainable empathy.

And yet we don't want to get inured to it all, either. We don't want to go numb. We don't want what is sometimes called "empathy fatigue." As religious people, we want sustainable empathy—a supply that flows through us without depleting us. We want to plug into the Source of Compassion itself that some of us call God—compassion that flows evenly to all creatures and never gets used up. And I think this is the right metaphor: plugging into something larger than ourselves instead of trying to generate it all from within.

One of the best ways to plug in like this spiritually is actually to unplug a little from everything else. For instance, when we watch the unfolding of a new tragedy on TV we can learn the basic outline of what's going on, but we don't necessarily need to keep tuned in to know the exact death toll at every given minute. We don't need to see endless interviews with parents, spouses, children, neighbors. We don't need to hear the bystanders telling us over and over again what the explosion sounded like and what shook and what was going through their heads at the time. None of this is really information. Most of it is just filler that's manufactured to draw the story out. It just puts another demand on our hearts. And it doesn't accomplish anything. Give

yourself some space from things that pull unnecessarily on your heartstrings. And this goes for violence and destruction in fiction as well. Cut back on or cut out violent movies, TV shows, computer games. If you want to be able to sustain empathy, don't take the onslaught of real violence and suffering that you witness and then pile on pretend violence and suffering. Studies show that media violence will inure you to the real thing. If we want sustainable empathy, we need to be a little protective of our capacity for empathy, shield it from unnecessary deployment, and be intentional about recharging it from the source of compassion in the universe. We all want our empathy to fuel a response to the suffering of our day that is powerful and effective, not overwhelmed and paralyzed.

Psychologist Wendy Mogel has an interesting take on this. She argues that our secular society doesn't really equip us well to be able to respond with empathy and action. She talks about how as children, when a tragedy occurs we are often given nothing to do but nurse our own feelings. In her book *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*, she writes:

An especially troubling aspect of modern childrearing is the way parents fetishize their children's ... feelings and neglect to help them develop a sense of duty to others. I saw an example of this when a child died at a secular high school where I lecture. The day after the tragedy adults were stationed around the campus so the children would have someone to talk to if they felt bad. There were no... sacred good deeds to be done on behalf of the dead child, no organized lessons in social obligation. In the religious community the students might help to prepare and deliver dinners to the family or escort the younger brother home from school. The emphasis in this secular community was to keep the children's self-regard intact and their mood elevated.

Do we worry too much about what we're feeling and not feeling, and not little about what we're doing and not doing to make things better? The empathic impulse is only consummated in empathic action. If we frustrate the impulse too many times and give it nowhere to land, it will eventually just slink away.

On the other hand, with the sheer volume of tragedies in our world, you have to be selective. You can't respond to everything, nor should you try. You need to pick a fight. Something that's yours—close to your heart—something you care about so much that you feel vulnerable around it. Maybe that fight is big and global like climate change or labor in Bangladesh. Maybe it's a little closer to home like LGBT rights or helping to make our streets safer for everyone. Maybe it's even closer to home, working to keep your own family out of poverty and raise kids who are compassionate and kind. Don't underestimate this last one: teaching the young people in your life how to respond to the suffering in their world is part of your sacred response to the suffering in yours. Whatever fight you pick, it should be something for which you can sustain your level of engagement over the long term.

As Universalists we have faith that there is a source of boundless compassion in the universe. We experience it in our vulnerability and our intimacy and we realize it in our action. We don't know whether everything happens for a reason, but we do know that as human beings we have a stake in what happens. We have a responsibility to preserve our own capacity to care about it.

And though we may not always walk around like the guy in the subway station, aware of our vulnerability, and though we may not always behave like the crowd, rescuing the vulnerable in our midst, we know deep down that we are interconnected with all of existence. The fate of the world is the fate of each one of us. ■

On the Mend: Brokenness and Healing



BY
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A friend of mine slipped on the ice and broke her ankle one winter and was laid up for weeks and weeks. As I expressed my sympathy for her misfortune and suffering, a surprising phrase slipped out of my mouth. I said to her, "I didn't realize you were breakable!" But of course, we all are: our breakability comes with being human. Even the strong ones among us—the ones who, like my friend, are always there taking care of others—even the strong ones are breakable.

Any one of us may be in some condition of brokenness and in some stage of healing. It comes with the territory of being human. We are often "on the mend" from the slings and arrows life throws at us: the injuries, both physical and emotional; the illnesses, both mental and physical; the diseases in our individual bodies or spirits and in the culture at large; the losses and the old wounds.

Any one of us may be healed of some malady. A sickness vanished, a disease in remission, an injury healed and the bandage or cast removed, or an insult forgiven, an intractable grudge released, a second chance offered and received.

Broken hearts, broken bones, broken trust, broken ties—there is much brokenness in our lives and much to be mended. What does it mean to be broken? It means to be fractured or damaged and no longer in one piece, no longer in working order. The pottery has cracks in it. The machinery is broken down and doesn't function proper-

ly. The system isn't working. The person is not feeling whole.

Sometimes broken things can be fixed. Sometimes broken people can be healed. Sometimes the brokenness in our lives can be mended through a process of transforming our relationship to what is broken.

I've been dealing with chronic pain from injuries sustained in a car accident a while back. As car accidents go, it was not terribly severe, but my injuries persist, much longer than I expected. I have had ample opportunity over the last year to explore my relationship with brokenness and the long journey of healing.

Just for the record, I do *not* believe that we draw every experience into our lives for a purpose. But I *do* believe that we can learn from every experience in our lives, if we want to. The meaning I attach to my car accident is pretty basic, but worth stating. Accidents happen, sometimes out of nowhere and often when they are not our fault. One minute we can be fine and the next minute we can be injured or sick. Life and health are fragile.

On the physical level, I got hit by a driver who ran a red light. On the emotional level, I was blind-sided by my vulnerability. On the spiritual level, I received the message that perhaps I was driving myself too hard and it was time for me to slow down.

Healing from the accident involved learning and growing in some new ways. I learned about my pain threshold, pain meds and pain management. I learned to ask for help with things I suddenly could not do around the house and the church. I learned more about posture and office ergonomics than I ever imagined needing to know.

I learned to readjust my identity. I was not an able-bodied person for the time being. I had to drop out of dance class (my truest love) and go swimming instead, panting for breath at the end of each length of the pool. The illusion

of my independence was revealed to be just that—an illusion. As I kept adjusting to a “new normal,” I learned to lower my expectations of myself. This, it turns out, was not a bad thing.

Most profoundly, I learned (again and again) that healing takes time. The first several months after my accident, I prayed for healing. When that didn't seem to be working, I changed strategies, and prayed for patience. Right about the time I started asking for patience, a congregation member gave me a Teilhard de Chardin prayer, called “Patient Trust,” which gave me some needed reassurance:

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.

We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.

We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.

And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability—and that it may take a very long time. And so I think it is with you.

The prayer continues, but what I needed of it is contained in these first few lines. It gave me such permission—to trust in the unknown, to understand and let go of my impatience. It named where I was at in my healing process: in the intermediate stages. Here I was in the seemingly interminable intermediate stage, but it was a worthy and essential in-between place. The prayer gave me assurance that instability is normal and that progress takes a long time. Even for me.

My car accident is not the first time I have been broken. But it is the most recent, and my freshest learning about being human. The thing about being breakable, as every human being is, is that just as you are vulnerable to being broken *down*, you are also given the opportunity to be broken *open*.

You've probably all heard the phrase: “That which doesn't kill you makes you stronger.” Well, yes, but only if you work at it. It doesn't happen automatically. You can be broken down by life—by accidents and injuries, by chemicals in your brain going awry, by cells in your body turning against themselves. You can be broken down by individual illnesses or by sickness in society, like racism or sexism or homophobia.

You can be broken down and stay that way. Or you can be broken *open*, and move through the intermediate stages of healing—learning about yourself and others, growing in compassion—and emerge stronger in the broken places.

Dr. Jeff Kane writes in his book *The Healing Companion*: “There is a crucial difference between curing a disease and healing a person.” He points out that every time we get sick, we have on the one hand a name for the ailment, and then on the other hand we have our experience of the sickness. If we are lucky enough to get a diagnosis, we have a name for the illness, but then we also have the meaning that we attach to the diagnosis. He quotes the ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus: “People are not disturbed by events, but by the view we take of them.”

Decades ago, when my mother was hospitalized with a recurrence of cancer, she went through kidney dialysis. It made her intensely cold and uncomfortable. The nurse applied heated blankets, but mom was still shivering. She asked my dad and me to each take one of her feet and cover them with our warm hands.

As I concentrated on sending warmth into her foot, the heat coming from my hands grew. Mom said, “Wow, where did you learn to do that?” I replied, “It's *chi*!”—that universal life force running through all of us.

My hands were warm with *chi* energy, but they were also full of love for my mom and compassion for her suffering.

My family and I couldn't cure her cancer, and neither could the doctors, but we could try to ease her suffering. We could offer ourselves as conduits for healing. We could remember that she was more than her illness.

I am more than my injuries and so are you. We are more than our wounds and scars, whether they be physical, emotional, mental or spiritual. We are breakable and we have each been broken in some way, shape or form. It's part of being human. It's part of what makes us human.

How we carry our scars and relate to our wounds is up to us. Our scars are potent. They carry lessons that we may not have learned even yet. I trust that we will know when to learn from them: when we bump into them again and again; when we get tired of the same old messages playing in our heads, the same patterns keeping us from living fully; when they send us down the wrong street again and again; when we notice ourselves reacting to situations in the same painful ways. Maybe then we can see our injuries as golden opportunities—not as shameful or something to repress, but as teachers.

I believe our wounds and scars are holy. Because our brokenness is what makes us who we are—imperfect human beings encountering an imperfect world.

But just as I know we are all broken in some way, I also trust that we are all “on the mend.” I know I am, and I hope and trust the same for you. Even though I really don't know if I'll ever literally get back to dance class, I carry these words from Rumi, the Sufi poet, to inform my healing process, and I offer them in closing:

*Dance, when you're broken open.
Dance, if you've torn the bandage off.*

Dance in the middle of the fighting.

Dance in your blood.

Dance, when you're perfectly free. ■



Vulnerability and Compassion

BY MICHAEL S. HOGUE,
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The pragmatist philosopher-activist Jane Addams in her first book, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902), examined the great gap that she believed was then opening up between “old” and “new” ways of thinking about poverty. Addams gave witness to the moral compassion within what she called “the neighborhood mind.” She attributed this compassion, in part, to the recognition among the poor of their common material precariousness.

In contrast to the affluent, whose privilege masks this precariousness, the poor were in constant, daily contact

with tenuous economic life, and as a result, according to Addams, they tended to be exceptionally gracious and hospitable toward one another—going out of the way to help each other, often to the detriment of their own interests. Note that her argument is not that the poor are intrinsically morally superior...but that the experience of shared vulnerability is fundamental to the expression of compassion. Forming solidarities across differences requires recognition and experience of shared vulnerabilities.

The point is not that vulnerability as such is good...but that some degree of vulnerability is intrinsic to human experience and that recognition of this fact is foundational to the sympathies of choice and purpose around which solidarities are formed. Not all vulnerabilities are the same. And vulnerability is not evenly distributed in our world.

Some is degrading. Some can be avoided. Some is unjust. Some is unavoidable.

Thinking through these things is theological work because the way we imagine vulnerability and solidarity and their relations is influenced by religious symbols and rituals that shape our political reasons and desires. If this is so, and if we are living in a world in need of more imaginative, border-crossing solidarities, then the tasks of a progressive political theology are twofold. We must critique what keeps us from seeing these things and resist the religious ways of being that format a divisive, alienating politics. And, constructively, we must advance religious ideals that are sufficiently critical to discriminate the forms and types of vulnerability and sufficiently imaginative to bring to life the forms and types of solidarity that the injustices within our imperiled world demand. ■

Facing Vulnerability



BY THOM BELETE,
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Why is it so hard to be vulnerable? Vulnerability is both necessary to create the real connections we crave as human beings, and it involves the risk of being rejected for the true and vulnerable selves that we might share with others.

In *Daring Greatly* author Brené Brown has an entire chapter on habits that we cultivate to avoid being vulnerable. Let me share a few of them and you can see if any of these patterns might appear in your own life. One of the habits she mentions is the practice of “foreboding joy,” which basically means that in the midst of experiencing something that we should find joyful and fulfilling, we instead activate a message in our mind about all the things that can go wrong. By hedging our bets we distance ourselves from

connection. We give fear power over our vulnerability.

Another way of resisting vulnerability is to practice numbing. Numbing can be anything we use to replace our authentic connections with other human beings. Numbing can take the form of an addiction, a compulsive behavior, or any tried and true way of distracting ourselves from our interconnections. A third way of resisting vulnerability is perfectionism. Perfectionism isn’t the same as having high standards. It insists on having control over all the variables before you open yourself up. It is an attempt to remove all elements of risk.

Reading this chapter on ways we armor ourselves against vulnerability, I found myself feeling, well, vulnerable. To tell the truth, I realized that I turn to all three—foreboding joy, numbing, and perfectionism—but especially perfectionism. Man, she had me nailed. In reading this book I saw how I practice perfectionism in ministry as a way of resisting vulnerability.

For instance, a situation will come up in which I have to respond to something difficult or challenging, or a question will come up that’s hard to answer. And the voice inside of my head will say, “Thom, you *should* know the answer to this question. Only a fraud wouldn’t know the answer.”

And the voice inside of my head will demand that I not only offer an answer, but that the answer must carry the wisdom of the ages, must be brilliant, must be original, must be spoken poetically and with confident assurance. No fumbling. No hemming and hawing.

In the quest to come up with the perfect answer, what I sacrifice is vulnerability, which might arise were I able to admit that I struggle with such challenging questions. In the discomfort of my imperfection I forget that connection is increased by my vulnerability to wrestle openly. We can only struggle our way through hard moments when we are vulnerable to the reality of all we don’t know. ■



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
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CHURCH OF THE
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Over ten million people have now watched online a 20-minute talk called “The Power of Vulnerability.” It’s a talk by Brené Brown, a researcher on the topic. (http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html)

Brown’s book, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* is also a mega-bestseller. The huge number of us clamoring to learn from her indicates that she has hit a deep vein of longing, both for reliable data and for help with an unavoidable fact that we all figure out sooner or later: despite all our efforts to deny and ignore it, we are vulnerable. As system after system fails us and this planet, I think we’re coming to the end of our rope trying to be—or at least pretending to be—invulnerable.



Brown defines vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.” Her research shows that in order to live a whole-hearted life, people must embrace their own vulnerability. And, further, that the most courageous, compassionate, loving people are also the most conscious of their own vulnerability.

What is it about genuine vulnerability in others that opens our hearts? And why does our own vulnerability terrify us so much? Again, to quote Brown, the crux of the problem is this posture: “I want to experience your vulnerability but I don’t want to be vulnerable.”

As I’ve lived through more and less vulnerable seasons in my life, I know that my greatest growth and spiritual strength has been when I am a front row witness to my own vulnerability.

These times have not been easy ones, but I continue to draw from them over the years. Being my own witness has not come easily; no one taught me how to stay with my vulnerability in healthy ways back in childhood when I was most vulnerable. I’ve had to piece the ability together with help from friends, professional healers, the earth, prayer, and duct tape.

What’s interesting to me is how vulnerability might reveal itself differently for each of us. We all have unique vulnerability spectrums. For instance, public speaking is the #1 fear identified by people in survey after survey about what terrifies them. It ranks ahead of death! For me, speaking publicly—after all these years of doing it—is not super frightening. Particular situations evoke fear that I won’t have anything to say, or that I’ll botch it up somehow, but the actual act of speaking no longer brings me to my knees. (Believe me, it used to!) Over time, I’ve developed confidence there.

But to be stranded with a tech issue? That leaves me terrified! My confidence is low, and then I start to hear the mean voices in my head, voices that shame me about my vulnerability, voices that say, “You are a fraud. How can you head up an online sanctuary and be such a technological klutz?”

One of my favorite pieces of Brené Brown’s research is her data that shows how to climb out of such pits of self-loathing, comparison, or fear. She says that people who allow vulnerability to serve them as a gift learn to cultivate the conscious practice of gratitude in those vulnerable moments. I, for instance, might stop calling myself names long enough to remember how lucky I am that CLF employs a Minister of Technology, Linda Berez, to help me out, or that problems with gadgets and devices are problems of the privileged, indeed. Or remember gratefully how generous most people usually are about tech problems.

Practicing gratitude unlocks the stuck door and gets me back into life.

I’ve always intuited that gratitude is the path toward a fulfilling life, but having research documenting it makes me feel less alone in my vulnerability. As I cultivate the ability to bear sitting in the front row for my own difficult and vulnerable moments, I want to know that you are there beside me, sharing your own vulnerable and courageous journeys! To know that we are accompanying each other on journeys of vulnerability—whether from prison cell, school campus, military base, suburban home, urban loft, or mountain top—develops courage in me which is not possible to develop alone.

I see in our community, every day, your courage to live authentic, imperfect, “good enough” lives. I see your courage to risk loving what you love; to risk making mistakes and then getting back up; to risk blessing the world, when so many voices tell us nothing we do really matters. I see you making these choices and it gives me more courage to do the same myself.

So, above all, in those moments I am stuck, I call up my very deep and real gratitude for your companionship, for your care for each other and for me, for this spiritual community quilted together with scraps and fragments of daring, vulnerability, mutual care, and—despite loss, fear, grief and pain—abiding faith that we will go on. ■

We hope you think of the CLF as a community where you can draw strength and find comfort. Supporting the CLF with a financial contribution secures this sanctuary for you and so many others finding refuge here. We truly need your support. You can easily make a gift online or by using the enclosed envelope. Thank you! ■



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REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Imagine that you are standing in front of a group of colleagues, or your entire class, about to give a presentation. There are people in the room who can make decisions about your job opportunities or your grade, but more than that there are a whole bunch of folks watching who will decide in their own minds whether you are smart, whether you are entertaining, whether you are the sort of person they admire.

How do you feel?

Imagine that there is someone you really like, someone you think is cute, someone you've had enough chance to talk with to think that they're funny, and that they have some of the same interests as you. You're about to ask them if they would like to go out to dinner, or if they want to go to the upcoming school dance. You're about to put your heart on the line, about to risk rejection, maybe even look like an idiot.

How do you feel?

Imagine that you have just walked into a church that you are hoping could possibly be your spiritual home. But you don't know any of the people there. Worse than that, you don't know how people usually dress for services, whether you will know how to sing the songs, whether the minister will say something hurtful about your beliefs or identity, whether you will know when to stand up, or whether anyone will even speak to you after the service.

How do you feel?

How you feel, I imagine, is vulnerable. Partly scared, partly hopeful, on the edge of something that might change your life through triumph or humiliation, connection or rejection, being welcomed in or being pushed out.

Vulnerability can be a terrifying experience, like walking a tightrope



across an enormous canyon. Your heart beats faster, and your mouth gets dry while your palms get wet.

It's the sort of experience

that you probably want to avoid like the plague. *Except* that those moments of vulnerability are absolutely the most important bits of your life. Without walking into those vulnerable moments there's little chance for your life to change, because every change comes wrapped in loss or the possibility of defeat as well as the possibility of something amazing.



And we are vulnerable so often: every time we raise our hand to speak in class; every time we voice an opinion in a meeting; every time we speak to a stranger; every time we tell a loved one that we were hurt by something they said or did. We're vulnerable when we admit that we don't understand and whenever we ask for help. We're vulnerable any time we walk into a group of people whose race or age or religion or ethnicity is different from our own. We're vulnerable any time we create, and allow someone else to see our creation.

Basically, we're vulnerable any time we put ourselves out there in the world, hoping for some real connection with another person. If we're never vulnerable, the important parts of who we are and what we can do never see the light of day.

So we need ways to practice—little ways of putting ourselves out there and finding out that connecting is wonderful and rejection probably won't actually kill us. Which is part of why I love Halloween. Yes, Halloween. Think about it. The tradition of Halloween is that you dress yourself up

and spend the evening approaching people—many of whom you don't know—to ask them to give you something.

Over and over you walk right up to someone's door, not knowing if anyone is home, if they really want to see you, or if they will smile and drop something delicious in your bag. That's a pretty vulnerable experience, and we offer it even to tiny little kids. And sometimes they're shy, hiding behind older siblings or parents, reluctant to be seen.

Basically, we're vulnerable any time we put ourselves out there in the world, hoping for some real connection with another person.

But on Halloween you get to keep trying, keep showing up on doorsteps. Sometimes it turns out really scary, and a witch pops out from behind a door or a spider drops near your head. But for the vast majority of visits the person at the door is happy to see you, admires your costume and gives you candy. And even the scary things turn out not to be as dangerous as you might have thought at the time.

Of course, there are other ways to practice being vulnerable, and it's surely something we need to do more than one evening a year. We need all the moments when we choose to talk to a stranger at a bus stop, or share a drawing or a poem we created, or express an opinion that's different from what the teacher or the boss said. But maybe Halloween is a good time to remember that each person who walks up to our door or our church or our office or our group at lunchtime is doing something just a little bit vulnerable and brave, and that it matters that we offer them a smile of welcome. ■



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The Transformation of Silence

In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear—fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge or annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live.... And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. ■

by **Audre Lorde**



Excerpted from "The Transformation of Silence into Action," a speech by Audre Lorde originally delivered at the Lesbian and Literature panel of the Modern Language Association's December 28, 1977 meeting. Republished by Crossing Press in 1984 in her book Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches.