

[1,000 WORD BLOG POST]

Unmask The Courage to be Vulnerable

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Childhood for me felt fairly typical. I grew up in a loving home with two precocious siblings and two parents who actively were involved in raising us. I was born a very sensitive child. I got that from my mother and remember feeling like I always had a lot of emotions and would feel them in very profound and unique ways. My mother was a mild mannered stay-at-home mom who, like me, wore her sensitivity and emotions on her sleeve. My impression of my father from my childhood lens was that he was a strict disciplinarian who was distinctly in charge. Perhaps he got that from working a lot and managing his own business. I enjoyed growing up out in the serene country in the middle of the lush Amish farmland of Lancaster County, Pa. Hot humid summers were spent slopping in a nearby stream, catching crayfish and minnows, plinking tin cans with BB guns and building forts in the woods.

Weekly attendance at a conservative Mennonite denominational church was just something we did. It was part of our heritage. It's also where I learned the acceptable norm was that everyone needed to appear to be happy, prosperous, and free from problems. Imperfection was not allowed. When dressing for church, I would put on my Sunday best outfit. Corduroy slacks. Dress shirt with extra wide collar. Sweater vest. Clip on bowtie. Buster Brown shoes. And a happy mask to reflect "everything is going great!" Check! What I wasn't aware of at the time, was that this mask was strengthened by a steady flow of subtle but powerful and influential messages regarding my sensitivity and feelings. Being vulnerable and expressing difficult emotions was not embraced, and instead should be denied and swept under the rug. To be vulnerable and express sadness, pain, fear, anger, loneliness, or shame were not encouraged in my childhood. These were signs of weaknesses and imperfection and in direct contradiction with the appearance that everything is going great.

Those subtle messages were not just perceived by my childhood soul, they were directly reinforced by things said to me in anger and frustration by father. If I was hurt or upset about something, I was told that "Big boys don't cry," "Stop crying, or I'll give you something to cry about," "You're fine," "Don't be such a baby." The seeds were sewn that would reinforce the notion that emotions were bad, and it was a sign of weakness to express them. At all costs, they were to be swallowed for the sake of appearances.

And there was indeed a cost. I grew up believing that vulnerability was a weakness and one that was unique to my gender in particular. I was born a male and identified as one. Society reinforced that false notion of vulnerability as a weakness. It was ok for women to cry, but not men. Societal norms hammered home that men were to be tough, strong, in charge and in control. And especially in control of their emotions.

I've come a long way since those early and formative years. My thinking and understanding around my feelings and emotions has changed. Dramatically. Why, you might wonder? It started about 10 years ago after watching a 2010 TEDx Talk by Brené Brown. It was titled "The Power of Vulnerability." She is a professor and researcher at the University of Houston and is known for her work on shame and vulnerability. That 20 minute video changed my life. Yeah, I know. That sounds cliché, right? A 20 minute video changed your life. Yup! It 100% did. The information she shared set me on a completely different

life path. One that allowed me to be the best version of myself, to be authentic, to be imperfect and remove the “everything is going great!” mask from my childhood.

This new path that her video put me on was one that allowed me to form healthy meaningful connection with others by changing my view on vulnerability. Instead of seeing vulnerability as a weakness, I realized that it’s the most accurate measure of true courage. It created in me a sense of worthiness. A belief that I am worthy of love and belonging. It gave me the courage to be imperfect and let go of who I thought I was supposed to be in order to be who I am.

So, what were the essential things from the TEDx Talk that I needed to embrace to allow these changes? Here are my Top 5 takeaways:

1. I needed to accept that what makes me vulnerable is what makes me beautiful. To recognize that I’m human and my imperfections and emotions were not things to be hidden behind a mask, but to hold up as what makes me unique, special and ultimately lovely.
2. I had to stop numbing vulnerability in my life. The challenge with trying to do that is that you can’t selectively numb the difficult emotions without numbing the positive ones too. When I stopped numbing my feelings, I began to feel joy, laughter, and pleasure in powerful ways. In fact, vulnerability is the birthplace of joy, creativity, change, belonging and love.
3. After years of feeling like I was unlovable, messy, and overly emotional, I was able to shift my thinking and for the first time accept the truth that I am worthy of love and belonging. And I am worthy of those things just as I am. I didn’t need to clean up and fix things to deserve love and acceptance.
4. Being vulnerable is all about being seen. Taking off that mask and really letting my true authentic self be seen by another human being. Deeply Seen. Vulnerably seen.
5. And lastly, it sounds simple, but took a long time for me to embrace. I had to believe that I am enough!

If you haven’t seen Brené Brown’s TEDx Talk, I highly recommend it! Take 20 minutes to see if it might impact your life in a similar way. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzIF7o>