

Vulnerability Protected:
Respecting the Rawness of Vulnerability, and giving it the Protection it
needs
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Summary:

We will need to face and dignify our own vulnerability as well. Vulnerability, Carol sees not as poetic as some see it, but rather as something raw and even fragile. As opposed to *not* seeing it as weak, she sees *the need to dignify weakness*, also because it is part of the human condition and part of what (as Jung said) allows us own up to needing one another, and in addition makes us open to love. At points, vulnerability may need a kind of clothing – a protection – a temporary cover for some of our feelings while we become safer in a situation or decide it is too dangerous. These connections will be visited, with an eye to professional and personal experiences.

We have heard a lot about vulnerability in the past few years, and in its descriptions it can often sound poetic, with a stress on its being seen as strength, rather than as a weakness. This is particularly so in the work of psychologist Brene Brown, who speaks about the courage in “leading with vulnerability”. On the contrary, I’ve come to see vulnerability, as having weakness at its center, as something that can feel desperately raw, verging on helplessness, something that can frequently trigger humiliation. In fact, key dictionary definitions of the word include: *capable of or susceptible to being wounded or hurt, as by a weapon: a vulnerable part of the body.*

Rather than seeing vulnerability as a key to courage, I have come to see it as follows: When we know more about our vulnerabilities, when we understand them, and when we protect them, they can become what I’ve thought of as a *gateway to courage*. A small child with just enough safety and trust to say to a caretaker, “Don’t yell at me, you’re scaring me” and have that listened to and attended to – may be readier the next time to be clearer about his or her needs or fears.

When we tell people that vulnerability is a wonderful thing, we sometimes send them directly into re-wounding, if not outright physical danger. The “highly sensitive person”, as described by Elaine Aron, is potentially at greater personal risk than the less sensitive person, when subjected to emotional hardship and insensitivity. But there are all kinds of situations in which people need clothing for their feelings, and preparation for scenarios that may be dangerous.

The layers are what can be most striking, whether to vulnerability or to feelings in general. We are a culture of many words, one that often encourages “just doing it”, while claiming stake to an almost complete (or its appearance) state of happiness and calm, even gratitude at any cost. We, on political levels, have come to hate the leader who hesitates, or who needs time to think, and we are led to think of ourselves as winners, as sure, and as righteous all at the same time.

My bent has been to work with the shadow, the underbelly – the parts inside us that we hate or fear, or have come to want to throw away. Carl Jung spoke about the shadow being terribly important – also because we tend to explode, when we have things festering inside us. Or instead, we have the tendency to project our “bad parts” onto other people and blame them for everything. Sometimes it is hate that we hate; sometimes it’s fear and sometimes it is vulnerability.

I have come to feel that many people do yearn for some level of emotional honesty and get fatigued by having to play a forced role. But unless we can communicate how urgent it is to be honest, and how freeing it can be, and how raw and contradictory our emotions may be when they first come into awareness, vulnerability may continue to be unpopular in a culture that is so appearance driven. In addition it can also be unpopular to explore or even identify emotions that are not as yet accorded a sense of dignity.

I’d like to share some experiences from my work, and a couple from my life as a wife of another psychotherapist, the latter being not as easy as it sounds to many people. Rather than that being a source of empathy, being a spouse to someone with a professional field in common, well be part of an anger dance, where one partner feels better equipped to analyze the other, which too often is really a form of name calling – try on the term “borderline” as one example.

A young adult male patient of mine grew up in a religious background where scholarship and debate were considered the end all be all. Both his parents complained about him often; they said he was unable to express himself, which frustrated them. In the sessions where he began to feel I was

interested in his take and willing to wait for it, it was dramatic that he could in fact grasp very complex emotional issues and concepts. He, though, had felt like a “loser”, for some years, having internalized the idea that he should be able to solve things in his head, and that feelings were a sign of being a loser.

The therapy included some arguing between us about this subject, since Alex, the young man in question, had internalized the propaganda about strength meaning being a good debater only. Sensitivity became a kind of anthem in our work, something we spoke about and one day after he went to a rally about human rights related to police brutality, he reported thousands of people who “at least appear to be sensitive too. Maybe I’m not the only one.”

When he agreed to family sessions, it was his idea to bring up the sensitivity question, and to say out loud that he had felt very vulnerable but was beginning to feel like he could defend himself by NOT PARTICIPATING IN DEBATES HE WASN’T GOOD AT AND DIDN’T BELIEVE IN. He had been able to practice articulating his self-protection and as such he felt safer in his own skin and fortunately his parents were receptive.

Another teenage boy was someone I worked with together with his mother after it came through that anything that implied anger, against him or from him, made him cry. He felt vulnerable all the time, and at first I tried to normalize the situation, suggesting we all have angry feelings; this made him cry more. In the sessions we delicately talked around the issues, tenderly since his nerves seemed so raw. Gradually we got used to the friendly and sensitive atmosphere in the room, and Joey began to joke around, making fun of his father, and then telling his mother when she annoyed him and telling me when I had gone too far in what felt too critical of either parent. The goal had not been hostility towards his parents, but his being able to own hostility as well as warmth towards them and others as well.

A male friend of mine, Jeff, who is gay, liked a guy who seemed very interested in him over several weeks and then at a public gathering during a weekend together, treated Jeff as if he were invisible. When we talked, Jeff seemed stuck; he was tiptoeing around Stefan, and acting as if nothing had gone wrong. Somehow I intuited that vulnerability was at stake and asked Jeff if he felt ashamed. He said he did, and it became clear that his vulnerability seemed messy, unattractive – too helpless. I asked him (I guess we co-created this) how he’d feel about putting some clothing on some of his emotions that seemed particularly raw. He liked it so we played with the

images and talked about a shirt on the most helpless layer of emotion. Obviously we didn't really go shopping, but in playing with this notion, the tenor of protecting his vulnerability, his not having to show all his cards or all his sense of humiliation or aching, helped him ask some questions in a direct way that felt okay to him.

I've mentioned three males, and even though women are expected to express their feelings more easily, there is also a huge pressure – politically especially – for women to appear “like men”, or strong and set to win.

We can't be whole people, or live in a society encouraging wholeness and resolution of conflicts unless we can acknowledge all of ourselves. And this means to acknowledge how much we can contradict ourselves, in terms of both feelings, and opinions. Again we have not been encouraged to think of contradictions as normal, even if sometimes they can be annoying.

But here too we need to establish an atmosphere in which we can safely announce on some level that we are confused, and keep having different feelings and thoughts. I know my own friends, in the recent days after the ISIS attacks in Paris and then in Mali, have been struggling with their own sadness, anger, sorrow, and diverse opinions about immigration, as one part of a very complex subject. There have been differences in the same person—myself included-- about issues regarding Islam, and I admit also to being somewhat confused still.

For me, it's not about vulnerability being a form of strength or weakness, but about it being dignified. Then it's about helping people be in that state more safely, and become better prepared to face those less friendly, or those who don't yet understand, even those who won't understand. And in addition we will have to give and get help to frame vulnerability, the importance of emotions so that we can at least start to get that even if emotions can be very messy they still contain information that is important, and they often influence the way we do everything else.

If we don't let them in, they can easily control us, sometimes without our even knowing.

Carol Smaldino, CSW, is a psychotherapist living between Colorado and Italy (for 30 years she practiced in Port Washington, NY). Her work has centered on the deeper and often hidden parts of our psyche - particularly the shadows where we hide some of the unwanted feelings that get rejected or shamed. The notion is the more we get to integrate our feelings in safer

ways, the less harm we do to others or ourselves. The more respect we have for the range of our emotions, the less we will have to project our violent or weaker parts onto others, people, nations, groups. Accordingly, we will need to face and dignify our own vulnerability as well. Vulnerability, Carol sees not as poetic as some see it, but rather as something raw and even fragile. As opposed to not seeing it as weak, she sees the need to dignify weakness, also because it is part of the human condition and part of what (as Jung said) makes us need one another, and makes us open to love. At points, vulnerability may need a kind of clothing - a protection - a temporary cover for some of our feelings while we become safer in a situation or decide it is too dangerous. Carol works with these connections, with an eye to professional and personal experiences. She works long and short distance with individuals, families, groups, on translating concepts of relationship and dignity into practical and authentic changes, while moving away from dependency on power toward reliance on mutuality and relationship. Carol is a regular blogger for Huffington Post, mostly on matters connecting emotions with politics. Dignity Press will publish her book, *A Human Climate: Talking out Loud about the Contradictions Within*, in the Summer of 2016.