

Vulnerability
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton
UUMSB
August 15, 2021

I learned from an old boss the power of saying out loud, “I made a mistake.” Especially in a professional setting, it was disarming. Often folks operate from a place of fear and are more likely to ignore or explain away mistakes when something goes wrong, I know that is sometimes my impulse. But being a little vulnerable, owning what happened can change a conversation, and can invite others into authentic relationship. To lift up the curtain a little bit, I have tried to bring this vulnerability to my work here, especially in worship, to help us all remember that we are all making mistakes all the time, and what is most important is how we respond to those mistakes. By being vulnerable when I make a mistake, and naming it aloud, I hope I am giving permission to all of us to show each other how we are learning, also to remind us that worship is something we do together, not a show that those of us in the front of the room are putting on for those of you who are seated. Now this is not to say that every little mistake needs a spotlight, but rather, that we can *practice* letting go of ego around mistakes, and learning what more can open up when we do.

Our reading this morning is from the *Tao te Ching*. I go to this text often in worship, and as we explore potential meanings, I wanted to name that I have only just scraped the surface in learning about the broader historical and cultural contexts of the *Tao te Ching* and Taoism, so my understanding is more literary than that of one immersed in the practice. H.G. Creel defined the *tao* or the *way* in 1956, “While it always seems to be in flux, the balance of its forces is forever the same, so that in a larger sense it is unchanging. And it is absolutely indivisible. Since it is indivisible, it follows that it cannot be described in words or even comprehended by thought. It also follows that apparent lesser objects, like you and me, exist only as inseparable parts of the great whole, and we are as old, and as young, as the heavens and the earth.”¹ The *way* is both a process and the sum of all actions and matter. I appreciate how the *Tao te Ching* focuses on the individual, the person learning from the Sage, and also on society as a whole. It is micro and macro. A major theme of the text is learning through apparent opposites. Chapter 36, which we heard earlier, calls up common lessons like the soft overcomes the hard, the weak overcomes the strong and that you get to where you need to go through its opposite.

What is ultimately to be reduced must first be expanded.

What is ultimately to be weakened must first be made strong.

What is ultimately to be discarded must first be embraced.

What is ultimately to be taken away must first be given. (BBW)

Vulnerability requires strength, and strength requires vulnerability.

When practicing vulnerability, there may be a feeling of risk. Audre Lorde, the great poet and activist, wrote, “Those fears are most powerful when they are not given voice, and close upon their heels comes the fury that I cannot shake them. I am learning to live beyond fear by living through it, and in the process learning to turn fury at my own limitations into some more creative energy.” When one person takes a risk, it can make it easier for another person to do so as well, to try something new that might deepen ones connection to others, or the universe, in community. We don’t have all the answers -- for everything from the meaning of life, to what is

¹ H. G. Creel, “What Is Taoism?” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1956), pp. 139-152

going to happen in the next moment, and when we are real with one another about that, when we are vulnerable, there is an opportunity for deepening connection and relationship, not only with other people, but with the ultimate questions with which humans struggle.

Brené Brown, the researcher and storyteller, has a well-known TedTalk on vulnerability. She shares that when we are afraid of vulnerability and don't embrace it as necessary and fundamental, we often try to numb that feeling. But you can't selectively numb emotion, so when someone numbs the hard stuff, they numb joy, gratitude, and happiness, and are miserable and can set themselves up in dangerous cycles. She also names that when people are afraid of vulnerability, they can seek to make things that are uncertain, certain. I'm right and you are wrong. The more afraid, the more vulnerable folks can feel, and the more they seek certainty, polarizing their positions, especially around ideas and belief, like religion and politics.² We have certainly seen many examples of this in the past few years, particularly right now around responses to the pandemic. We are all vulnerable, some more than others, but all of us are in this together, and some are responding to that fear and vulnerability by seeking certainty through polarizing behaviors intended for community safety, like wearing masks.

Vulnerability can be that act of opening of ourselves to others, showing more of ourselves in order to connect with one another, and with all that is. Vulnerable is also how we describe those who are impacted by a lack of power, resources, security and safety. There is emotional vulnerability we might choose as we interact with others, and there is systemic vulnerability based in power and privilege. We have talked about how the experience of this global pandemic has highlighted how radically interdependent we are with one another, and the Earth, It has shown us ways that all are vulnerable, no matter our status, but also the pandemic has shown how the most vulnerable in global society have been disproportionately impacted. The UN climate report this week similarly reminds us of our collective vulnerability, and the disproportionate impact that those with the most wealth and power on our planet are having on those with the least. We have a tough road ahead, and so we have an opportunity to embrace our vulnerability, to lean in to our interdependence and interconnection as what will ground us in *why* we need to work together to help us all live differently on this earth, and what will call us to make justice-filled choices, what will help us hold those accountable who would let the earth burn rather than give up an ounce of power or wealth.

When we are vulnerable *with* one another, we open ourselves to the possibility of more loving and genuine relationships and to seeing behind the veil of separateness that holds us apart. We are all interconnected, we are made of the same stuff. We are parts of the mystery of the universe out walking around, we are as old and as young as the heavens. We are vulnerable, strong and weak, soft and hard, and we are in this together.

So may it be. Amen.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzIF7o>