

Opening Our Hearts With Courage

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Working on an oil rig is notoriously dangerous, once among the most hazardous occupations in the country. An informal code of behavior has contributed to that risk. In a piece on NPR, Angus Chen reports:

Men who worked on oil rigs lived by certain rules. They were tough. They worked under any conditions. They didn't ask questions. It was this way as far back as Tommy Chreene, 60, who started working on rigs in the Gulf of Mexico back when he was 15, can remember.

Back then, it wasn't unusual to see someone die on an oil rig...

Chreene remembers that they got 15 minutes to mourn after watching their friend and colleague die, but that was it. "I mean, that hole cost a lot of money," he says. "We got to go to work."

Even though the men faced the risk of death every day, Chreene says they never showed any vulnerability. This made the work

even more perilous, because the men didn't ask for help, didn't admit if they weren't up to a certain job.

That began to change in 1997, when a leadership consultant named Claire Nuer began working with Shell Oil. She demonstrated how changing the way that the men dealt with their feelings would ultimately lead to the new platform being built and operated more safely. She put more than a hundred oil rig workers through exercises where they were encouraged to open up to each other. Chen writes: George Horn was one of those men. He was not receptive to sharing. "This has nothing to do with an oil field. What is this for?" he says...One exercise asked them to draw their families and personal timelines and stand before the group and talk about it.

"They began to tell the story of their lives, and some of them are not real happy," Horn says.

The men told stories of failed relationships and alcoholic parents. They talked about how they were hungry as children. "It felt vulnerable. You

put your personal life out there for everybody to hear and everybody to see," Horn says.

Tommy Chreene, who had a tough reputation, broke down and wept before the group as he talked about his son's terminal illness. "I was weeping like a baby," he says. "And nobody ever come to me and said, 'Aw, you big crybaby.' "

After learning more about each other, then the men learned about operating an oil rig safely.... As the men became more open with their feelings, other communication was starting to flow more freely. "Part of safety in an environment like that is being able to admit mistakes and being open to learning — to say, 'I need help, I can't lift this thing by myself, I'm not sure how to read this meter,' " Professor Robin Ely says. "That alone is about being vulnerable."

The result of the experiment was an 84% decline in accident rates, historic increases in production, and workers who were able to embrace a different version of themselves.

This anecdote illustrates the seeming paradox that being vulnerable actually makes us safer, both physically and emotionally. Not only does vulnerability make us safer, but it turns out that it makes us happier and more connected.

This theme was also explored in last summer's Pixar movie, *Inside Out*, which focused on how feelings work. We get an look at the inner workings of 11-year-old Riley's brain, which is managed by the bouncy yellow character Joy. She understands the role of Disgust, Anger, and Fear, but she can't really figure out what Sadness is for. Over the course of the movie, we discover the role that Sadness plays in creating empathy and connection. As Brian Pagan writes, "Vulnerability isn't a weakness, it's a superpower."

Social work researcher Brene Brown, who is the author of several books about vulnerability, courage, authenticity, and shame, explains that human beings are "hard wired for connection." In her bestselling book *Daring Greatly*, Brown explains that connection is why we are

here, that it gives purpose and meaning to our lives. The primary barrier to connection, she writes, is shame. She defines shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed, and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.” To Brown, “shame is the fear of disconnection — it's the fear that something we've done or failed to do, an ideal that we've not lived up to, or a goal that we've not accomplished makes us unworthy of connection. *I'm not worthy or good enough for love, belonging, or connection.* I'm unlovable. I don't belong.”

Why would we think that? Don't we know that we are created in God's image? Don't we know how kind, beautiful, and accomplished we are? What do we have to be ashamed of?

Brown responds that while we sometimes think of shame as being associated with an unspeakable trauma, it is something that we all experience, and that far from being a dark mystery, it is associated with all the familiar places: appearance, money, parenthood, addiction, sex,

mental and physical health, and all the other commonplaces of our daily lives.

Of course, in any conversation about showing vulnerability, we need to talk about gender. (Don't worry, I'm not going to say anything revolutionary, so put those flamethrowers down.) At first glance, we might think that strength is coded to masculinity, and vulnerability to femininity, and that, therefore, it is easier for women to be vulnerable than it is for men. This is true to a certain extent. What is even more true, though, is that our society is extremely exacting of both men and women. Both men and women carry shame to varying degrees in those categories I just mentioned. We are both held up to impossible standards, in different ways, so, in some ways, finding the courage to be vulnerable might look different for men and women.

For women, there is a very strong emphasis on "having your stuff together." Not only should you have a beautiful home; attractive, high-achieving kids who are both obedient and non-conformist; organic meals; a Pilates body; and be active in the community. What really matters is that you have to act like this is not completely overwhelming. Sure, you're allowed to make wry jokes on Facebook about your home

renovation woes, or your latest mama-bear incident with the math teacher, or how much you need a glass of wine, but there are things you can't say. There is no room in our society for a woman to say, "You know what? I actually don't got this." Or "I got this, I can do this, but I don't like it. This isn't me." The shame of facing our imperfection, of acknowledging that we are not super-human, requires tremendous vulnerability, and a lifetime of pretending that we are--creates barriers to real connection.

Men also face tremendous pressure to be strong. Old stereotypes have perhaps been softened around the edges, but they still exist under the surface. There's the "old model" of manliness, in which a man is expected to provide financially for his family, have a wife who is both hot and accomplished, with children who reflect well on him. Our culture has created a kind of toxic "hyper-masculinity" which encourages some men to be physically and sexually aggressive and see gentleness as weakness to be avoided at all costs. On the other hand, modern men are also expected to be fully present with their children,

able to articulate their emotions, and supportive of full equality at home. No wonder we're ashamed of not measuring up.

Connection, therefore, involves risk. To connect with others opens us to the possibility of being rejected or judged. Vulnerability, then, is not the same as weakness. Indeed, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, being open to being truly seen by others, requires the courage to face those fears.

Many people project a type of “toughness” to protect themselves from this type of rejection. Toughness is not the same as strength.

Toughness is born out of fear. It can happen to individuals as well as to a community or society as a whole. We have been hearing a lot about “toughness” this election cycle—being told that, as a country, we’ve “got to get tough.” This is not the approach that will lead us to greater connection. We need courage, not toughness.

Brene Brown describes the kind of courage we need: “The root of the word *courage* is *cor*—the Latin word for *heart*. In one of its earliest forms, the word *courage* had a very different definition than it does today. Courage originally meant “To speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart.” Over time, this definition has changed, and, today,

courage is more synonymous with being heroic. We certainly need heroes, but I think we've lost touch with the idea that speaking honestly and openly about who we are, about what we're feeling, and about our experiences (good and bad) is the definition of courage. Heroics is often about putting our life on the line. Ordinary courage is about putting our *vulnerability* on the line. In today's world, that's pretty extraordinary.

Where does the courage come from, to open up and be vulnerable? For the oil riggers, it was not internal readiness—they were compelled to do so as part of a workplace safety initiative. Having one man model the truth-telling then paved the way for the others. Our High Holy Days also provide us with that external framework, a calendar saying "It's time to be courageous," even if we do not feel ourselves to be totally ready. Our liturgy assures us that God will always accept us, even when we do not feel worthy. Even today, on the Day of Judgment, we know that we will not be rejected.

As a community and as individuals, we also need to project to others that we do desire to see them fully, that we aren't going to judge or reject them. We are God's representatives on earth, we will embrace each other as created in God's image.

The song the choir is about to sing is called Let There Be Love. It was written by Chaim Stern and set to music by Noah Aronson. It is a setting of the Hashkiveinu prayer, the prayer that asks God for safety at night. Whether it is literally nighttime or a nighttime of our spirit, at the most vulnerable times in our lives we seek out safety and shelter. May we meet each other with love and understanding. May peace and friendship be our shelter from life's storms.