

Vulnerable in the Midst of Fear

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On October 1 of this year, a gunman open fired on the Route 91 Harvest Music Festival in Las Vegas, NV. 58 people died and 546 were injured. This event was just another in a series of events that brought tragedy, violence, and heartbreak to our collective humanity. I had to fight everything I could to not retreat into solitude. I went onto Facebook to see how colleagues were doing and they were just as lost as I was. As my minister's message stated that week, I was afraid and raging against the routineness of these events as well as our responses to them. The patterns we, as a society, fell into with offering thoughts and prayers to condemning the use of thoughts and prayers to fighting about gun control.

That week I had also started reading Brené Brown's book, *Braving the Wilderness*. It was what my soul needed to help me survive during that week and not be overcome by grief, fear, anger, and apathy. It is the premise of the book that what we need to do to heal our society is to become more connected with strangers. She argues we have retreated too far into our spaces of like-minded people and this has led to greater loneliness and disconnection.

This is reflected in the work of Bill Bishop in his 2009 book, *The Big Sort*:

*As people seek out the social settings they prefer—as they choose the group that makes them feel the most comfortable—the nation grows more politically segregated—and the benefit that ought to come with having a variety of opinions is lost to the righteousness that is the special entitlement of homogeneous groups. We all live with the results: balkanized communities whose inhabitants find other Americans to be culturally incomprehensible; a growing intolerance for political differences that has made national consensus impossible; and politics so polarized that Congress is stymied and elections are no longer just contests over policies, but bitter choices between ways of life.*

That was in 2009, it has since gotten worse. According to Bishop, in 1976 less than 25% of Americans lived in places where the presidential election was a landslide. This meant we lived in communities with people who held differing views. In 2016, 80% of U.S. counties gave either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton a landslide victory.

In addition, in 1980 approximately 20% of Americans reported feeling lonely. Today, that percentage has nearly doubled.

Just to put this in perspective and emphasize why this is important, in a study on loneliness, researchers found the following: living with air pollution increases your odds of dying early by 5%. Living with obesity, 20%. Excessive drinking, 30%. Living with loneliness, increases our odds of dying early by 45%.

It's Brene's hypothesis that we got to this place because of fear. *Fear of vulnerability. Fear of getting hurt. Fear of the pain of disconnection. Fear of criticism and failure. Fear of conflict. Fear of not measuring up. Fear.*

This brings me back to my response to the Las Vegas shooting. As I was reading Brene's book, I started to realize how paralyzed I was because of my fear. I had been asked several times over this past year to respond in a public way to the tragedies or rallies or vigils. My name was becoming more and more well known by being the paper as well as by word of mouth. When I was asked to speak at the vigil in response to the events in Charleston, SC in August, I was absolutely terrified. The fear that was built in my being was paralyzing my ability to minister, to be present, and to connect.

I had created in my mind this person or persons who owned guns and were plotting to do me harm. It was reinforced by the shots I heard daily from the gun-range only blocks away from my home. In October, I had to do something different and Brene Brown offered a solution. I had to step into that fear, be vulnerable, and make connection with those I feared. I asked people from the congregation to connect me to gun owners.

I talked to gun owners in the congregation as well as friends and relatives of people in the congregation. People ranged from casual gun owners to hunters to law enforcement to a lifetime member of the NRA to a member of a militia group. I started with those who I knew first and then worked my way to those I did not know at all.

In each conversation, I made sure the person I was talking with knew the following context: 1. I was there to listen and be curious. 2. I was not going to try to convince them of anything. 3. I wanted to hear their history with guns and their solutions to the gun violence. 4. I grew up with guns in my house because my dad was a police officer and I was in High School Army Reserve Officer Training Corps, where I fired rifles and an M16. 5. Finally, I was not there to be convinced about their views either.

All but one of these meetings were face to face. Due to distance, I could only talk on the phone to one participant. I learned a lot about guns, gun laws, family history, the NRA, the Constitution, militias, and much more. I came away with a wealth of knowledge and understanding about guns.

More importantly though is not what I learned about guns, but what I learned about the people in those conversations. They were people with very real lives just like my own. One had a ministry created on principles very similar to our own UU values. Each had family they loved and cared for deeply. They shared memories of family outings to go hunt or how they were taught to respect their guns. All had a deep sense of what safe gun ownership meant.

My last conversation was with a person who belongs to a local militia group. We could have talked for several more hours, not necessarily about guns. Instead, we started talking about theology. Imagine my surprise when the person started to share with me how they defined God as love, connection, and the interconnectedness of us all. The person was sharing a theology, which is essential to my ministry. This person chose to leave the street ministry they did because they became disillusioned with the church. We both agreed that if Jesus were to walk among us today, he would be overcome with heartbreak due to the actions being done in his name. I walked away from that conversation with gratitude and a new sense of peace.

Each of those conversations and connections were healing. I was no longer envisioning this dehumanized version of a gun owner. Instead, they were people in my congregation, in my community, and in my country. I was no longer paralyzed by the fear I had created.

Brené tells us:

*Terrorism is time-released fear. The ultimate goal of both global and domestic terrorism is to conduct strikes that embed fear so deeply in the heart of a community that fear becomes a way of life. This unconscious way of living then fuels so much anger and blame that people start to turn on one another. Terrorism is most effective when we allow fear to take root in our culture... And it's not just global and domestic terrorism that embeds fear in our cultures. Pervasive, random gun violence, and systemic attacks against groups of people, and the growing vitriol on social media—all of these send fear, like hot lava, flowing across our communities, filling in the holes and eventually working to ravage already fragile and broken places.*

One of the tools that helps fuel this fear is when we start to dehumanize others. We take away the individual humanity of each person and put a label on them or lump them into a group of people with a label. This defies the very meaning of each of our seven principles from the worth and dignity of every person to justice and compassion to the interconnected web. None of us are immune to labelling others. Some say it is how we have been able to survive as a species. However, when all we look at is a label we are not challenging ourselves to be our best selves. We lose the ability to see the worth and dignity of every life, including our own.

The way to counteract this is to step into connection, to look for the worth and dignity of an individual's humanity. Drop the assumptions, the labels, and the fear. Brené reminds us it is hard to hate someone close up. If you remember last week, I mentioned I believe sacred space happens when people come together and that is where I see the work of God or Love or Mystery, whatever you want to call it.

Not only do we need to step into individual connection, but Brené states, we also need to seek out instances for us to experience collective joy and pain with others. We had the ability to create an experience of this last week when we had the small groups. Just the other day, I experienced this when I was in a movie theater and in a pivotal scene in

the movie all was silent, everyone was holding their breath, and the silence was broken by someone saying, "Why didn't they do that in the first place?" We all let out our breath and had a laugh together.

We have opportunities every day to experience what Emilie Durkheim called, "collective effervescence." I love that phrase. I picture a group of people collected together with a bunch of bubbles. This idea that at moments we can set our differences aside and as humans recognize the joy or pain of life. These moments can happen in a grocery store while standing in line to check out; sitting on an airplane waiting for it to take off; at an opera or concert; and it can happen between a couple of people or hundreds.

We hinder our ability to step away from dehumanizing and into connection by relying on technology to be our major source of interaction. Social media increases the ability for people to dehumanize others. Our phones and computers are used as crutches or blinders to keep us from seeing the other people around us. Before the movie, I was waiting to see to the other day, I looked around and the norm was for a person to have their phone out looking at it. Hardly anyone was interacting with the people they were near. I am just as guilty of this, especially on an air plane. I know what my phone is going to show me, I don't know what the person next to me might say. Unfortunately, this is the behavior that leads to loneliness, fear, and disconnection.

What if we changed the way we used technology and social media? What if we started using them as tools for deeper connection, like setting up a coffee date or scheduling a time to talk to someone? What if instead of hiding behind our phones we stepped into trying to connect with people throughout our day? What does it look like when we value real face to face human connection over what we might miss on our phone or Facebook?

In addition to changing our relationship with technology what about going deeper into those conversations we have with one another, especially those we have agreed to disagree. Do you know why someone believes what they do, whether it be about guns or liberalism or Trump or whatever topic you want to put forward? I like the one person's comment in the video we watched about trying to understand the 8 why's. It is magical when you invest this time, when you say tell me more...not only are you investing in the person in front of you, you are also investing in healing our collective humanity. Each of us have this ability at our fingertips we just have to take the time to nurture it. In this season of gathering as families, friends, and new acquaintances, we have the ability to listen to understand, engage in deeper ways, and be curious. Set aside the labels, the history, the assumptions, and see it as an opportunity to grow into a deeper understanding of yourself and others.

When I stepped into that place of vulnerability in midst of my fear, I received the gifts of story, connection, understanding, love, and joy. I no longer feel paralyzed by fear; I no longer need to hide. Instead, I can step out into the world knowing I have in my hands

the decision to be afraid of my world or to be grateful for it. May we all know this as truth. Amen.