

## Vulnerability and Solidarity

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching  
Sunday, August 18, 2019  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Farewell Blessing Ritual for High School Graduates  
Hymns: #1000, Morning Has Come; #16, 'Tis a Gift to Be Simple; #1064, Blue Boat Home  
Special Music: Teach Us How to Love (voice, piano), written by Mark Miller after the murder of 5 and wounding of 9 Dallas police officers in 2016.



Photo by Randy Fath from United States, unsplash.com

### Sermon

The novelist Madeline L'Engle has written: "When we were children, we used to think that when we were grown up we would no longer be vulnerable. But to grow up is to accept vulnerability.... To be alive is to be vulnerable."

There are so many moments of personal vulnerability in life. Applying for a new job or starting up at a new school. Waiting to hear a medical diagnosis. Looking at a pile of bills and wondering where to start. Riding a bicycle, even with a helmet.

We are vulnerable in the process of being born, in growing up, and in being old. Adults make themselves vulnerable in rearing a child. People are vulnerable in being partnered, or in being single. Vulnerability is our primary human condition. As a species and as a population on this planet, humans control the destiny of many other beings. Yet as an infant, the individual human being is utterly dependent on others. For years after we are born every one of us needs to be fed, cleaned up, kept

warm, and carried from place to place. Even if we grow up loved, cared for and protected, our human development involves challenge and frustration, trying, failing and starting over. Vulnerability. Growth involves learning to accept others and ourselves for who we are, learning to accept what we cannot change. This too is vulnerability.

A friend of mine in her mid-60s is in good health and lives alone. Recently in a telephone conversation her adult child seemed to be trying to manage her as if she were a lot older and less healthy than she feels. As those two stubborn personalities faced off, it felt stressful. "Oh my goodness," she told me, "this is the person I'll be trusting to choose my nursing home! Talk about feeling vulnerable!" Indeed, she pointed out to me that many folks in their later years in the United States don't have much choice about where they will live and receive care when they are not able to live independently. Those of us who don't feel the vulnerability of limited choices--or no choice--are fortunate indeed.

At any age or stage of life, speaking the truth about who you are can be an experience of stress and vulnerability. Stating our opinions, needs, wishes, hopes and longings can challenge a sense of comfort or belonging. How will I be received? Will I even be heard?

In these times of political polarization, fueled by name-calling and violent speech, you may feel vulnerable just by expressing your disagreement with another person. Of course, all along it has been more dangerous for some folks to voice disagreement than for others. For example, those of us who are perceived to be male or white or heterosexual might be going less out on the limb to express dissent than a person of color might be, or a woman, a queer person or a child might be.

Depending on the time and place in which we live, some folks have experienced more vulnerability than others. Indeed, we can count ourselves as part of a rare and privileged fraction of the generations of the human family if we can take it for granted that we are safe and protected from war, hunger, epidemics, repression and cruelty. Children in particular have been vulnerable to the danger and unfairness of the world. For much of human history they have been the primary victims

of oppression. The writer Toni Morrison said: “Everywhere, everywhere, children are the scorned people of the earth.”

In this country, as adults or children, we are privileged if we do not feel the burden of suspicion because of the color of our skin. We are fortunate if we don’t have the chronic stress of struggling to pay the rent, pay medical bills and buy food. Last week’s 100-degree-plus heat wave in Sacramento felt oppressive to me, but in truth the distress lasted as long as it took me to go from one airconditioned space to another. The heat was not my constant, all-day experience, as it must have been for those who must work out of doors or those without homes who live on the streets or the parkway.

Many U.S. Americans, including me, have been able to presume non-vulnerability for years. Shielded from evidence to the contrary, we could presume that life is fair, that the world is a safe place, and that things are getting better. “Of course, bad things happen randomly sometimes, or they happen to you if you don’t follow the rules.” That the kind of thing I heard in the time and place in which I grew up. In my home, those who protested against the status quo, and those who dared to question our national complacency, were viewed *not as truth-tellers* but as troublemakers.

These days, however, it’s harder to deny widespread vulnerability. We have a growing awareness of systemic racism, economic inequities, health-care disparities, family and institutional abuse, and the chaos of climate change. We are bound together by our vulnerability. Pema Chodron, the American Buddhist teacher, says we become aware that “we can no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence.” When this happens, we can try to hide and wall ourselves off, or instead we can cultivate “a tenderness for life.”<sup>1</sup>

Comedian George Carlin pointed out that sleeping is a time of being vulnerable. He wrote: “People say, 'I'm going to sleep now,' as if it were nothing. But it's really a bizarre activity. 'For the next several hours, while the sun is gone, I'm going to become unconscious, temporarily losing command over everything I know and understand. When the sun returns, I will resume my life.'” He is funny; and he makes a good point about sleeping.

Yet these days we might face more vulnerability by the prospect of getting out of bed in the morning.

As you and I go through the coming days, we might consider a practice of reflection about personal vulnerability. Every few days, we can take time to look at our comfort zone and consider the edge of that zone, the place that makes us feel vulnerable. We can think about stretching toward that edge. We can give ourselves praise for the courage to face our fears and vulnerability. Give thanks for the courage to grow. If we’re lucky and wise, we can ask for advice and encouragement from those who care about us, those who can be there for us if things disappoint us.

Just as important as reflecting on vulnerability is cultivating solidarity with others. At the end of a day or the end of a week, let’s take time to consider how much we have relied on others. We can appreciate the ways in which our needs have been supplied by other people and other beings, how we have been able to trust others to be kind and reliable. Let us notice every blessing of human support, and give thanks for it.

If you sense a lot of difficulty and risk as you live in these times in this country, perhaps it can be reassuring to reflect on your sources of support. Remember those you can trust, give thanks for them, and reach out. Doing this might make it seem easier to get out of bed in the morning.

To cultivate human solidarity, we can offer support or protection to other people. Let’s try to take some time, every day or every week, to reflect on the opportunities we have to offer support, kindness, patience and trust to others. We can accept opportunities to show that we are worthy of trust. Let’s consider the places where we can show trust, patience, generosity and courage for the sake of other people.

Human solidarity can’t eliminate human vulnerability, but sometimes it can protect vulnerable humans. The poet Adrienne Rich has written: “If you are trying to transform a brutalized society into one where people can live in dignity and hope, you begin with the empowering of the most powerless. You build from the ground up.” There are so many ways we can support this empowerment. As you heard earlier, this month in our Sunday services we give half of the offering to

an organization in Sacramento called Opening Doors. It helps refugees to become settled in our community. It supports people who survive human trafficking as they seek healing and make steps toward strength and self-sufficiency. As an organization that strives to empower the vulnerable, Opening Doors is doing the work of building human solidarity.

The practice of solidarity can be an antidote for isolation. To this day, Amish communities in the United States have been pooling their labor and resources when a neighbor has needed a barn raised or a house constructed. They trust and rely on one another. In recent years, governmental agencies have been urging all of us to get to know our neighbors. Doing this can help in the case of a personal emergency or a local disaster, or just to keep watch on somebody's home when they are gone. In my neighborhood, I have dear friends who live just a few blocks away from me. However, in five years in my house, I still haven't met all of the nearby neighbors, those whose houses I can see from my front door. Of the ones I have met, I don't have their phone numbers, and I'm no longer sure of all their names. In this regard, I am in denial of my own vulnerability and my mutual dependence with other people.

A week or two after I had moved into my house, the woman who lives across the side street from me came over to introduce herself and her boyfriend, who visits a lot. In the five years since then, we've mostly just waved while coming and going. "Hi! How are you?" *Fine, thanks. How are you?* Yet a few months after I met her, I was awakened in the middle of the night by the doorbell. I cracked the door open enough to see her standing there, looking upset.

"I'm sorry, but I've locked myself out," she said. "I've also left my phone in the house. Can I come in and call my boyfriend so he can bring a key?" I said yes, and then I waited with her until he showed up. In spite of her embarrassment, desperation had pushed her through her vulnerability to reach out for help. Likewise, I accepted my own vulnerability by answering the

door after midnight. How fortunate, and how wise, that she already had extended herself to greet me when I was her new neighbor.

You know, as I think about it, our home, our car, our keys, our phone—these possessions distinguish us as individuals. They make us look self-sufficient. Yet we are so vulnerable—to a misplaced key, a phone that's lost its charge, or to a real disaster. Unless our neighbors are mistrustful, hostile, or biased against us, reaching out to them is one way to reduce vulnerability. It's a one step toward human solidarity.

The antidote to the chronic human condition of our vulnerability is the human gift of solidarity. We want to trust that strangers will be kind and patient with us. We want to trust that those who are close to us will encourage us in stretching ourselves; and will show up to support us if things go wrong. Trust is a spiritual need, and it's necessary for human solidarity.

Stretching ourselves through feelings of vulnerability in our lives is how we practice being real neighbors, brave citizens, gutsy coworkers and honest family members.

We often experience vulnerability by making a courageous choice to stretch ourselves or go to the edge of our comfort zones. It makes us vulnerable to open up to others, to depend on them and trust them, and invite them to trust you. Yet it's also vulnerable, perhaps more vulnerable, to stay isolated from others and avoid reaching out.

We may not always realize how much we depend on others and how much we trust one another in our ordinary and everyday interactions. To trust is to be vulnerable. Yet in a world where human fragility is always present, we need a tenderness for life and a tenderness for one another.

Mutual dependence and mutual trust are key to sustaining ourselves, enhancing life, and building a better world.

So may we strive to live. So may it be.  
Blessed be and amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart*, quoted at Spirituality & Practice website. Accessed August 17, 2019.

<https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/quotes/quotations/view/11406/spiritual-quotations>