

§ TWO

Turning Toward Vulnerability

STRENGTH IN OPENHEARTEDNESS

My experience has been that all intimacy must travel through the gate of vulnerability. And we are vulnerable by our very nature. We are born the physical epitome of vulnerability—entirely dependent on others taking care of our vulnerable selves, protecting our vulnerable bodies, and providing for all of our needs. Throughout our lives, we maintain this physical vulnerability and dependence on others. No matter how physically strong and capable we may be, we are still remarkably fragile: easily injured, susceptible to a panoply of illnesses and disease, subject to the relentless processes of aging, and, of course, thoroughly and irrevocably mortal.

In addition to our fundamental physical vulnerability, our evolutionary heritage has gifted us with an exquisite sensitivity to social rejection. And so we are by our nature incredibly socially vulnerable. Relatively recent research has demonstrated that we experience social rejection literally as physical pain; the same areas of the brain activate in response to both exclusionary and bodily injury. Evolutionary psychologists posit that an exquisite sensitivity to social rejection conferred extraordinary survival benefit, in that being

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sensitive to even subtle signs of others' displeasure protected individuals from engaging in behavior that could get them banished from the group. And, of course, individuals bereft of a social group are much less likely to survive or procreate. So

sensitivity to social rejection kept our ancestors well inside the social fence, where they were safe, had access to resources, and were able to have babies who themselves grew to adulthood and had babies of their own, on down the ancestral lines to us. So we come by our sensitivity to rejection quite honestly.

As a result, we are constantly scanning the social environment for signs that we are acceptable or unacceptable. And, to the degree that we receive signals that we are unacceptable, we experience pain and stress and are *very* highly motivated to return to the good graces of the group. This force of our nature is so strong that we will do things that are clearly against our better judgment, adopt habits that are detrimental to our well-being, and even believe things that are demonstrably false. Avoiding rejection by others is such a powerful motivator that we will do, say, and believe almost anything in its service. The threat of relational disconnection may be at the root of all emotional pain.

So we are, by our most fundamental nature, vulnerable to each other both physically and psychologically.

How We Are Shaped by Others

My theory of intimacy posits that our sensitivity to signs of rejection results in our learning a lot about what is and is not acceptable about us over the course of our lives. In our families of origin, in our interactions with other children at school (mostly middle school, if we're being honest), in basically all social interactions throughout our lives, we have been constantly and relentlessly shaped by the reactions and opinions of others.

Think of all the little and big things that each of us has been teased about, rejected for, judged for, or left out or harmed because of. We carry all of that rejection—as embarrassment, shame, self-criticism, hiddenness, and inauthenticity—as lessons learned.

And what are some of the things we might learn? I'm too short. I'm too tall. I'm too skinny. I'm too fat. I don't have enough money. I'm unattractive. I laugh too loud. It's not okay to be angry, or sad, or even too happy. It's dangerous to love who I love or say out loud that the label I received at birth has always been wrong. I need to be careful how I dress or move. I have to make sure my hair looks a certain way. I can't be too needy. I'm boring. I'm

awkward. I'm not funny. I'm not charming. I'm stupid. I'm lazy. I smell bad. I'm too dark. I'm not dark enough. I'm too emotional. I'm not emotional enough. I can't sing. I can't dance. I can't draw. I can't write poetry. I can't write anything. No one wants to hear what I have to say. I'm a failure. I'm worthless.

We learn so many, many lessons about what is acceptable and unacceptable about us. As a result, we do our best, we exert a tremendous amount of energy, to make sure that we only ever show the things about ourselves that are least vulnerable, while relentlessly hiding and protecting the things about ourselves that are most vulnerable.

It is this collection of vulnerabilities, both existential and particular, that we bring to our relationships in the search for love and intimacy, acceptance and care, family and security.

Our innate sensitivity to rejection, our vulnerability to pain, leads us to turn away, to create separation, to believe that we are other. It isn't, however, our vulnerability, in and of itself, that leads to our breakup with the universe. It is our turning away from our vulnerability, our rejection of our vulnerability, our lack of faith in the strength we have to experience the pain and suffering associated with having our vulnerability harmed; it is self-protectiveness (as understandable and maybe even necessary as that is) that turns us away from intimacy. Because intimacy is not for the faint of heart. But all intimacy must travel through the gate of vulnerability.

When Our Vulnerability Is Met

We are also, by our nature, intimate and relational. We are of the nature to seek, form, and nurture relationships. We pair-bond. We form attachments. We fall in love. We love and are loved in turn. Left to our own devices, we will inevitably seek out relationships, including and especially romantic and intimate relationships.

By necessity somewhat oversimplified, my psychological theory of relational intimacy goes something like this. Our usual way of moving around in relation to others requires us to hide and protect as much of our vulnerability as possible. We lead with a false and inauthentic self that has been acquired through hard experience to protect us from the harm of others. But this hiddenness requires active suppression. We have to exert effort

to keep our vulnerabilities out of sight and out of reach. But keeping our vulnerabilities hidden is like pushing a beach ball under water. We can do it. We can hide the ball from view. But not without effort. Not without deliberateness and attention and the expenditure of physical and emotional resources. This type of effort is neither pleasant nor infinitely sustainable.

Because inauthenticity is burdensome and effortful, we tend to leak, to slip up, to accidentally let some glimmer of our vulnerability slip through into sight. When this happens, an opportunity for genuine connection emerges. Let's take as an example the quintessential image of a first date. At some point during your evening of striving relentlessly to put only your best foot forward, your date says something genuinely charming and hilarious, and you burst into laughter. Not the polite laughter that you've cultivated to protect yourself, but *that* laugh, the unprotected one, the full-throated, unselfconscious, authentic, real, belly laugh. And now you've done it. You've slipped up. As soon as it happens, you start to feel ashamed and exposed. You try to reel it back in. You brace yourself.

And here, one way or the other, *this moment of vulnerability will be met*, and one of two things can happen: You will either be met well, or you won't.

If the other person reacts in any way that can even vaguely be interpreted as mocking, rejecting, or critical, you will pull it all back in and redouble your efforts to save face and do whatever you can to protect yourself and present only the least vulnerable, most defended self. Getting this reaction decreases the probability of that behavior occurring again in that context. In this case, it is a confirmation of what your history has already taught you—your real laugh is unacceptable and will be rejected by others. And, even more deeply, we reject ourselves—we create separation, pull away from our authentic experience, trying to keep this separate self safe.

But, on the other hand, if the other person responds to your laughter with shared laughter, with delight or warmth, if they brighten and try to keep your laughter alive, then your own delight can be immeasurable. You may also experience relief from both the threat of rejection and the anxiety that exposure created. Any such sequence in which our vulnerable behavior is reinforced by another person results in our becoming freer to engage in that authentic behavior again. In this case, we become more likely and more comfortable releasing our true laughter in the presence of this one special, accepting human being. As the barrier comes down, our true and intimate self is freed. And this is the arising of true relational intimacy, as we begin

to feel just a little bit safer being exposed, just a little bit safer being our true and authentic selves.

Events that make us feel safer teach us, at a bone-deep level, that it's okay for us to show up fully. To let down our defenses. To let ourselves be

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seen for who we actually are. And because suppressing our true authentic self is effortful and separating, as soon as we get any sense that it is okay to let go, we are inclined to want to let go. And doing so genuinely

feels like relief. It comes with a kind of "Oh, thank God!" and a desire to lean in. In the analogy, it is that moment of letting go of the beach ball that we have been so effortfully pushing into hiddenness beneath the water. When we release the beach ball, it doesn't just come floating serenely to the surface. It shoots up joyously into the air. Though we may still feel anxious and a little hesitant, having been met well once and having experienced the joy and relief of a moment of acceptance, we start to drop our armor as rapidly as we can. We throw ourselves into intimacy. Into love.

Our true nature wants to shine forth and be known. Intimate events lead to more intimate events. If our partner continues to meet us with warmth and acceptance, we begin to feel safer and safer, and we revel in it. And maybe we return the favor. To the degree that we can share our vulnerabilities and meet each other kindly in that space, we begin the process of weaving a genuinely intimate relationship.

But at a cost.

The Cost of Vulnerabilities

Of course, the price of admission is a kind of psychological nakedness. This comes with its own discomfort. It is not uncommon for people to feel some regret at sharing too much. Some people refer to this as an *intimacy hang-over*. Because most of our history has taught us that our vulnerabilities, if exposed, will be harmed, it can feel terribly unsafe to find oneself without armor, or at least with less armor than we're used to having.

So it can require real courage to stay exposed. More often than not, we try to pull back, at least a bit. We hunt around for the bits of armor we left

scattered about and try to piece some of it back together, fitting it all back into its familiar places. Some of us resolve this moment of anxiety by literally retreating. We think, “Maybe, if I never see this person again, I can return to feeling safe and unknown.” But, in so many ways, it is simply too late. Once exposed, we remain exposed. We cannot slink back into hiddenness. Vulnerability never really becomes invulnerability again.

However, if we want this intimacy, if we are encouraged by this sense of acceptance, we will find ourselves pulled further toward relationship, creating ways to spend more and more time inside this bubble of acceptance and intimacy.

Because vulnerability never returns to invulnerability, now we must learn how to navigate this delicate path of intimacy with another vulnerable, fallible human being.

Both are made vulnerable, and both are navigating intimately close emotional and physical proximity. Figuratively and, at times, literally naked with one another, we cannot help hurting each other. Mostly by accident. Mostly thoughtlessly, without malice, out of ignorance, lack of skillfulness, blindness, reflexivity, reactivity.

The real price of admission is that we enter into a relationship in which this carefully cultivated intimate other becomes the one person in the world who can hurt us the most deeply. Our intimate partner becomes the person who, through no fault of their own, stings our vulnerability the most frequently. They inflict pain, hurt, injury and disappointment, misunderstanding and confusion.

To our partner, in turn, we become the person who most frequently steps on their toes, disappoints them, pushes their buttons, stings them—in terms of raw frequency, more than most and, probably, sometimes more than anyone. Although we commit to moving with care and gentleness, things will get bumped and broken.

The cost is that, after falling into intimacy, we must maintain it right there in the heart of our buttons, our frailties, our insecurities, our low self-esteem, self-criticism, and reactivity.

Falling into love is effortless and delightful. Falling into intimacy is simple, if counterintuitive. But then walking the intimate path? Well, that’s where the rubber really hits the road. That is where the real practice of intimacy begins.

Setting the Intention to Turn toward Vulnerability

In Zen and in our intimacy practice, we are regularly reminded of the existential truth that we are, by our very nature, vulnerable. Each of us is vulnerable to the inescapable effects of aging; the inevitability of illness, death, and loss; and our embeddedness within the law of cause and effect. There is no escaping any of this. We are of the nature to be vulnerable.

We acknowledge this shared vulnerability together so that we can support each other in not turning away from our common humanity. So that we might, together, turn toward each other and allow our nature to be our nature, with compassion and grace. Ultimately, it is by turning toward that we invite true intimacy.

Inviting True Intimacy

An *intimate* relationship is a very particular kind of relationship. It requires clear-sightedness and intention. As you learned in Chapter 1, we must deliberately set ourselves on the path of intimate relationship as a practice. It does not unfold naturally any more than the path of awakening unfolds naturally in the absence of intentional and committed practice. So, for most couples, though they may begin with the easily-fallen-into type of intimacy, with time they begin to turn away from each other in an effort to limit their exposure to the intensity of true openhearted vulnerability. They eventually settle into a kind of emotional *détente* in which they find an emotional distance at which they can be maximally comfortable and minimally exposed:

close, but no closer.

Of course, that doesn't really work. When we seek comfort by protecting ourselves from our partner, we still experience our vulnerability, we still hurt, we still experience the pain of being stung. We just keep it to ourselves, encase it in a toxic shell of self-pity, and lose ourselves in the space between the Scylla

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and Charybdis of withdrawal and attack, fight and flight, the cold shoulder and the hot insult.

But it is by *turning toward* that we invite true intimacy.

In an ordinary relationship, we continue to turn away. But in a truly intimate relationship, in a relationship intentionally set on the path of intimacy, we do not turn away. Like recalling together our shared existential vulnerability to aging, illness, death, and causality, the practice of relationship helps to call us to meet with compassion the facets of ourselves and the truths of the human experience from which we have come to instinctively withdraw. We stay. We lean in. We turn toward. We open our hearts, more and more. We encourage ourselves to know ourselves deeply and clearly, in all our flawed glory. We orient toward knowing our intimate partner deeply and clearly, in all their flawed glory.

So the spirit of relational practice is choosing the path of fearlessness and courage, the path of staying with the raw humanness that we would otherwise turn away from. Yet at the same time it is a path of gentleness and care and commitment to tenderness. Therefore, it is a practice of noticing the desperate urge to protect our hearts, to turn away or attack, and choosing instead the discomfort of stillness and of turning toward with care and courage.

We make a promise to ourselves and to each other, a vow to discover and notice where and how we separate from vulnerability, and we nurture our intention to turn toward and become intimate with vulnerability.

Paying Attention to Vulnerability

So how do we actually engage this practice in our relationship on a day-to-day, moment-to-moment basis?

As I noted before, this is a practice of presence (which, in this case, necessarily emphasizes not turning away) and attention. When we say that attention is the most basic form of love, we perhaps usually picture ourselves paying more attention to our partner from a place of calm and loving benevolence. If we're honest with ourselves, we might notice that we imagine providing this kind of loving attention from a place of power, with us in the *up-power role* and our partner in the "needing attention," *down-power*

role. Attending lovingly and actively to our partner is at the heart of how we nurture a sense of loving and being loved.

However, this is not exclusively what I am pointing to in this spot. I am also pointing to the much more emotionally challenging practice of paying close attention when we are *not* calm but are instead very upset and frighteningly down-power. It is under these much more intense circumstances that “attention is the most basic form of love” becomes a true practice of intimacy. And, of course, this begins with the practice of *not* turning away, precisely when every fiber in our being is pulling us to do so.

NOT TURNING AWAY

This practice of attention involves turning toward and paying close attention to what your vulnerability feels like in your body and in your heart, and what arises in your mind. At this point, you are practicing attention and stillness, and this attention and stillness is enough.

The practice is straightforward. Simply reflect quietly or write your answers in your journal:

- Where do I experience my vulnerability in my body?
- What does it feel like exactly?
- Can I feel the constriction that might be myself protecting itself without judgment or shame?
- What are the thoughts that are arising in my mind?
- Are they familiar?
- What happens when I believe them?
- What happens when I allow myself to be less certain?
- When feeling the discomfort of vulnerability, what do I want to do? Leave? Change the subject? Lash out?

All of this inquiry is for the sake of noticing, exploring, and getting to know your own and your partner’s experience of vulnerability without judgment, with acceptance and compassion. Sometimes turning toward is simply not turning away.

Skillful Action: Practicing Vulnerability

Once we have set our intention and then deeply engaged the practice of attention, we can experiment with engaging in skillful action. How do we put turning toward intimacy with vulnerability into practice?

As we get to know the contours of our vulnerability with determination and patience, we begin to free ourselves from our habitual action patterns and open the possibility of moving differently, maybe even more skillfully, right in the midst of feeling vulnerable.

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THE VULNERABILITY TRIO: BE, SAY, ASK

As you begin to notice that your instinct is to shut down or run away, instead try the following.

1. Practice simply staying present and allowing yourself to receive the experience of vulnerability. Committing to one or more of the mindful attention practices in Chapter 1 and making them a regular, daily practice is essential to your growing ability to experience your own reactivity with stability and clarity. An ongoing practice is also the necessary foundation upon which everything else in this book is built. The practice here is to simply be with uncomfortable urges, to sit in nonjudgment and notice what comes up. This practice of stillness is enough.
2. You can also experiment with communicating about your experience of vulnerability. Maybe say to your partner something like, "I'm feeling pretty exposed and vulnerable right now, and I'm trying to stay present."
3. You might invite your partner to share their experience of vulnerability with you. You might say something like, "My love, can you share with me what is feeling vulnerable right now?" And then you can meet whatever your partner shares with loving attention and understanding.

Of course, all of this is much easier said than done. And you will, at first especially, not feel confident or skillful. But if your intention is transformative practice, then you must set out on the path, even shakily and unsurely. We dive much more deeply into how we might engage skillful practice in each of the remaining chapters in this book.

The Heart of the Matter

Vulnerability is not for the faint of heart. It is not something we achieve once and can then rest. It is a practice. And, like any true practice, it will play roughly with the ego. But, also, like any true practice, it will, if we let it, reveal to us to our true selves, our strength, our interconnectedness, our worth, our home, our boundlessness. If we want true intimacy, we must practice turning toward our vulnerability and our partner's vulnerability with attention, acceptance, and an unwavering commitment to kindness and care—for ourselves, for each other, and for all beings.

Mindful Mantra

When I am stung, may I be stung with grace.

When I am hurt and angry, may I not seek comfort in separation.

May I hold this pain and breathe into this anguish.

May I keep my heart open, be still, and do no harm—to myself or my beloved.

May I turn toward my own ache of vulnerability with mercy.

May I turn my loving attention to my dear one. So that I might hear their cries, touch their hurt, honor their pain—bear witness and offer up compassion for us both.

May I walk the path of intimacy with openness and courage.