



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

---

“Authenticity in Our Age,”  
a sermon given by Dawn Fortune, Student Minister  
on March 18, 2012

I studied last semester with a brilliant professor of pastoral care and ordained minister named Brita Gill-Austern. Brita has a wonderful approach to ministry and authenticity. Ministry, she says, is like the hokey pokey. More than one skeptic raised an eyebrow in class that day, and more than a few of us were doubtful when she invited us to stand in a circle and do the familiar dance that accompanies the Hokey Pokey song. Obediently, if somewhat reluctantly, we self-important, over-dignified graduate students put first our right hand and then left hands in, finally jumping fully into the circle of our mostly middle-aged bodies, by this point fully engulfed in giggles, and understanding a bit about ministry. Done well, ministry can very much be like the hokey pokey: you put your whole self in.

Ministry takes the whole self. And ministry comes in many forms. It can be preaching and teaching and being a prophetic voice, and it can be a ministry of presence, of silent witness in times of hardship or transition. In all of it, we are called to put our whole selves into the experience, and to do it with authenticity.

Authenticity is born in a willingness to be vulnerable. Researcher-storyteller Doctor Brené Brown says that vulnerability is our “most accurate measure of courage.” For many, vulnerability means weakness. I think that is a myth that we tell ourselves, and at great cost. I think vulnerability is a sign of enormous strength in the same way that bravery is not the absence of fear but the courage to act while being afraid. Vulnerability is the courage to be authentic and let people see our true selves even when we don’t know how they’ll respond. Even when we are afraid they might reject us. There are a couple of YouTube videos featuring Doctor Brown. One was from a couple years ago<sup>1</sup> and one was released just this week<sup>2</sup>. In the first video, she talks about vulnerability and authenticity and in the more recent one she talks about shame.

And all three are really connected. Shame is at its essence a fear of separation from anything- from community, from love, from ... shame is different from guilt in that guilt is related to behavior and shame is related to identity. Guilt is “I did something wrong.” Shame is “I am something wrong.” And Brown parses the difference between the way men and women process shame.

In the brain, in the thought process, the birthplace of creativity and innovation is the same place that is the birthplace of fear, shame and discomfort. If we try to medicate the unpleasant

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4Qm9cGRub0>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_listening\\_to\\_shame.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame.html)

feelings, we always end up medicating the pleasant ones as well. Thus in an effort to not feel anxious, we do not allow ourselves to be happy. And the harsh truth is that no one has ever died from feelings alone. They can be scary and they can be painful but feelings are not fatal in and of themselves.

I love to watch young people at a skate park. I think there is much to learn there because young people, whether they are on skateboards, roller blades or bicycles, understand that failure is a part of learning. They try a trick and they fall, and they try a trick and they fall, and they do it again and again. Sometimes, it takes weeks to master stunts. There are a lot of bruises, scrapes, and upset parents. They understand that this pain is the price of success and there is no shame in failing or changing your methods to find a better way. They also know that some people, for whatever reason, might never master a particular trick. It just works out that way.

Failure also does not have to be fatal. In fact, it is a vital part of growth. One of the common themes in people who are by any measure successful is that they failed. Many of them multiple times. Failure is a part of the process of success: it is a vital part of the process of learning.

Yet somehow we as adults are reluctant to try anything that we are not really sure we can master immediately. It is this fear of failure, this fear of shame that paralyzes us to the point where it prevents us from trying. Remember that shame is identity-based, not action based. The kid at the skate park knows that although they may have failed at mastering a trick they have not failed as a person because of it. I think this is a lesson adults could really stand to learn: that failure is ok. I understand that as adults, the stakes are higher. We have responsibilities, families, and people for whom and to whom we are responsible. I am not advocating that we take reckless risks, but I think there are things we can do that allow us to be vulnerable without excess risk, and that still allow us to step into our own authenticity.

How much of what we do every day is because someone else expects us to do it? I'm not speaking of our jobs necessarily. But how much of how we dress, behave, what we say, the niceties we use – and while some of them are good manners – how many of them are really, really what we want to do? And how many are what someone else expects of us.

I wonder what would it look like if for one day we were honest about what we want, honest about what we feel, honest about what we like? When someone asks “how are you?” And you are not feeling great, what would it be like to let them know “my mother died a year ago and I'm sad today.” What would it look like for us to be really honest with the people we love and to say “you know sweetheart, I don't like it when you do that, it makes me feel small.”

Authenticity brings with it a certain amount of moral authority. Our reading today demonstrated that. Jesus spoke with moral authority. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King spoke with moral authority too, as did Mohatma Ghandi. None of them claimed to be perfect. All spoke from a place of vulnerability at one time or another. Jesus spoke from his heart, as did Martin, and Ghandi. The people who heard them all felt they had a heart connection to these men.

The world watched – and they let it watch – as they wrestled with the moral issues of their day. The world watched, and as it watched, we came to know these men in a way that felt personal. When they spoke, the people of their time listened because they felt they knew them intimately – because they were being vulnerable and letting it show.

We are surrounded every day by inauthentic things. We are bombarded by advertisements, political slogans and bureaucratic excuses that smack of impossibility and just plain fakery. Honesty and integrity are rare birds. Vulnerability and authenticity? They very nearly seem to be signs of weakness, the mark of a sucker and a chump.

But I am here this morning to tell you unequivocally that vulnerability takes enormous courage, and that authenticity cannot be had by any other means.

Think about times when you've seen people be vulnerable. Not in the movies, but in real life. When someone is the first to say "I love you." When you confess that you've made a mistake – a BIG mistake – and are asking for forgiveness. Are those moments of weakness? Of course not. We see them as they are: moments of incredible courage. For bravery is not a lack of fear – that's insanity. Fear is a lifesaving response to danger. Courage is being afraid but assessing the situation, taking a breath, and stepping up anyway.

I often tell people in my work with justice and discrimination that the most offensive words in the English language are "you people." Those two words instantly set up an "us" vs. "them" division. "You people" is the language of separation. It is the language of differences and division.

I think that the two most powerful words are "me too." These are words of empathy. They communicate connection, understanding, and a kind of emotional solidarity. "Me too" says "I know how you are feeling, my heart knows what your heart feels."

This week let me invite you to fail, knowing that it is not an indictment of your personal worth but an important step in the mastery process. Take that first step. Go on, out there on the skinny branches. I'm not asking you to climb Mount Everest, and I'm not suggesting you mortgage the house to fund the start-up costs of this great idea you just thought up during the offertory, but to stand up and do the thing that scares you a little bit.

And don't lie. Don't try and tell people that you are not scared. Tell the people at the poetry reading that you are shaking in your boots. And then read your poem. That's authentic and vulnerable but it is nothing like weak. It is the kind of thing that lets people touch our hearts and lets us connect with one another and isn't that why we do this thing on Sunday morning? To connect with one another and grow together?

So this week, go, put your heart out there. Let others see that maybe you aren't as completely put together as you hoped they believe. Let people see your vulnerability and let them know your courage. Say "I'm scared but I'm going to try."

Do it. I know you can.

Blessed be and may it be so.