

## **Vulnerability, Integrity, and the Path to Integration**

"Vulnerability is the most accurate measure of courage." - Brené Brown

Integrity, deriving from *integer* and related to *integrate*, is rooted in the idea of wholeness. It is important, for example, for our houses to have structural integrity.

In humans, integrity is usually associated with honesty. Someone with integrity is someone who does not lie. A whole person is thus one who tells the truth. If lying pits one's inner world against one's actions and words, it introduces breaks and flaws, impinging on the integrity of the human. Interestingly, *integer* entered French and they came into English as "entire" meaning whole or complete.

So, an integrated person is one who is whole, entire, consistent. The person of integrity always tries to operate from a place of conformity to truth, goodness and beauty. But why do so many of us struggle to live truly integrated lives?

My hunch is that it is because integrity requires vulnerability. If you are not willing to be vulnerable, then you will eventually come to a point when you must walk straight into conflict. Or you must admit fault. Or open yourself up to criticism. And yet, as Brené Brown says, "wholeheartedness is hard, but not fully living our lives is much harder and much more dangerous." She goes on to say "I choose discomfort over resentment."

### **The Nature of Vulnerability**

It seems obvious that vulnerability is deeply uncomfortable. Why? That is to say, is vulnerability itself the cause of our discomfort or is the problem something else entirely? Or to frame it in yet another way, by avoiding vulnerability, what are we protecting ourselves from?

As it turns out, though, vulnerability is not something we control. We are all vulnerable. As Rev. Dr. David Taylor has it, "all of us by virtue of our finite and fallible condition as human beings are vulnerable."

The question thus becomes "Will I allow others to see my finite and fallible condition or not? Will I pretend to others and myself that I do not have a finite and fallible condition?"

Fr. David continues, "In vulnerability, the second person of the Trinity becomes incarnate in the form of fragile infant flesh." And "he allows himself to be handled and manhandled and placed naked on a cross." Or as St. Paul has it, "my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made

perfect in weakness. For when I am weak, then I am strong." Fr. David then suggests seven things that vulnerability can give us permission to say:

- I was wrong
- I don't know
- I have failed
- I don't know how
- I, too, am on the way
- I am what I am by God's grace
- I am God's beloved

### **Love, Belonging, and Shame**

That is all well and good, but knowing that vulnerability is important and practicing it are two separate things.

Brené Brown notes that "Love and belonging are irreducible needs of men, women, and children." This love grows when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and honor the connection by practicing "trust, respect, kindness, and affection." However, "we can only love others as much as we love ourselves."

Failing to love ourselves before trying to be loved by others results in what the Bible calls idolatry, one idol being the approval of others. No approval of anyone else will ever lead to authentic belonging, and it is often a barrier to such belonging because it tries to justify its way into belonging. It assumes belonging is conditional and transactional and thus cannot see true acceptance when it does come. It assumes that there is always a catch.

This is the precise problem Donald Miller identifies in his book *Searching for God Knows What* when he compares the human condition to surviving a shipwreck. There are a few lifeboats and everyone is trying to get in the lifeboats. However, the lifeboat we get into is going to sink unless we reduce its weight; we then spend our time trying to justify our being allowed to stay in the boat, trying to prove our worth.

In reality, belonging often eludes us not because we are unworthy, but because we do not place ourselves in a position to be accepted for who we really are. Because we do not believe that we ourselves are loveable, we do not believe others can love us apart from what we bring to the table.

But why do we feel this way? Why do we find it difficult to love ourselves? The reason is because we are ashamed of ourselves.

### **Understanding Shame and Its Effects**

Brené Brown teaches us that we have four general negative affects toward ourselves:

- Guilt - I did something wrong/bad
- Shame - I am bad/wrong; I should be treated badly
- Humiliation - I was treated badly, but I don't deserve it
- Embarrassment - I did something; I made a mistake; we all make mistakes and it's kind of funny

Guilt motivates us to make amends, to repair the breach. Embarrassment actually can connect us to others. Humiliation may give us the motivation to fight the wrong that was done to us. But shame causes us to shrink. We thus fail to be vulnerable with others because then we would be forced to reveal the parts of us of which we are ashamed. This leads us to hiding our stories and marketing ourselves in such a way as to hide. This, by definition, is disintegration and is a lack of integrity.

This idea reminds me of Voldemort's Horcruxes. In an effort to cheat death, he breaks his soul into pieces (disintegrates). The only cure for such a broken soul is remorse, which is so painful it might kill you. Voldemort, sadly, never had any friends and he never belonged.

When we feel ashamed, we react in one of four ways:

- We move away, withdrawing from relationships
- We move toward others in an effort to please them so they will include us
- We move against, either attempting to shame others or to shame ourselves for feeling ashamed
- We move through the shame, acknowledging it but still making the choice to step into vulnerability

### **The Antidote: Empathy**

The antidote to shame is empathy. And because shame is necessarily communal (if you are totally alone on a desert island for your entire life, shame will not be a factor) and empathy is likewise necessarily communal, we cannot overcome our shame unless, after being vulnerable, we are met with empathy by others.

There are four qualities of empathy:

- Perspective taking: I can see the world as you do
- Being nonjudgmental. As Brown says, "nobody reaches out to you for compassion and empathy so that you can teach him how to behave better!"
- Recognizing someone else's emotions and understanding their feelings
- Communicating your understanding of the other person's feelings

In empathy, we never operate from a place of superiority. Jesus, although he was God and was about to raise Lazarus from the dead, nevertheless wept with his friends.

"Compassion," says Brown, "is knowing your darkness well enough that you can sit in the dark with others."

### **Protective Strategies That Harm Us**

Overcoming shame and being vulnerable is difficult precisely because we have been hurt by others in the past. We thus find ways to protect ourselves by:

- Seeing joy as evidence of something wrong. Being happy means we aren't paying enough attention to the danger.
- Perfectionism. If I don't want to feel shame, then I won't do anything imperfect.
- Numbing. In the same way that alcohol can numb pain, temporarily, so can other habits or hurts we give ourselves to comfort us.

We can also weaponize our vulnerability by oversharing either to drive someone away or to startle them so that we can grab attention from them.

### **Ten Guideposts for Integrated Living**

Brown proposes ten guideposts for wholehearted (or what I have been calling integrated) living:

- Authenticity and letting go of what others think
- Self-compassion and letting go of perfectionism
- Resilient Spirit: letting go of numbing and powerlessness
- Gratitude and Joy: letting go of scarcity and fear of the future
- Intuition and Trusting Faith: letting go of a need for certainty
- Creativity and letting go of comparison
- Play and rest: exhaustion is not a status symbol; productivity does not equal your worth
- Calm and stillness: letting go of anxiety as a lifestyle
- Meaningful work: don't be trapped by "should"

- Laughter, Song, Dance: letting go of control

### **My Personal Journey: Internal Family Systems**

I suffered abuse as a child and, as a result, developed Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. One of the things that happens in trauma is that the self becomes fragmented. In an effort to protect itself, the mind splinters. In extreme cases this results in Dissociative Identity Disorder. However, for someone like me, it was more like my single mind became a collection of modes that I might occupy depending on the context. A specific kind of therapy that I learned about from reading Bessel van der Kolk's book *The Body Keeps The Score* is called Internal Family Systems therapy, or IFS. The premise of IFS therapy is to get to know the modes or splinters in order to get a sense of how our internal world – the system – works. In IFS theory, the idea is that the internal system is made up of three kinds of parts:

- The exiles. The exiles are parts that have been excluded by the rest of the system for one reason or another. The exiling happens because the part in question was so painful that the entire system has rejected it.
- The managers. The managers are parts that spring into action when the exile starts to cause trouble. Their job is to control the exile in case things get out of hand.
- The firefighters. The firefighters are parts that seek to soothe the exile in an effort to get it under control.

The final part of the system is often called the true self or, in Christian circles, the Holy Spirit-led self. Theologically, I find it helpful to think of the Holy Spirit-led self as a partially realized eschatology. That is, the true self is who I will be once fully sanctified and beholding the beatific vision. Because of the proleptic nature of reality – the already but not yet – we have access to this true self. The true self is truly ourselves fully realized, resurrected, indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

I spent a long time in IFS work thinking of my true self as what I called the Inner Adult. The Inner Adult is characterized by a "grit your teeth and bear it" mentality. The IA would do its best to reason with the other parts, but he could also become quite frustrated. After many hours of therapy after we moved to Austin and I got a new therapist, I discovered that the inner adult is what is called a false self. That it's a part that took on the leadership duties of the true self without being able to see the whole picture.

My disintegration was, in IFS terms, a total lack of trust and cooperation among the various parts. The exile – a part of me that was around 9 years old – would find himself triggered and

would begin to feel intense emotion. Especially the part I named Inner Critic, would spring into action. The IC would shame me for feeling these emotions while the part I named Seatbelt would demand that we withdraw from all contact with others. If forced to interact, the expert would appear and overintellectualize everything. And the inner adult would keep us all on track, saying things like "You can cry after we've done this task!" and "you just need to show some grit."

At the same time, the firefighter crew would also jump into action. Booze would suggest alcohol; Food would suggest sugar; Dissociation would cause us to get very sleepy, etc. It would try to help the exile calm down by drugging him. Often the parts clashed with one another. IC hated the dissociation part and shame despised booze and food.

In Brené Brown's terms, the managers wanted perfection – never mess up again, and there will be no shame – while the firefighters wanted pain relief – ignore the emotions altogether.

But the job of the True Self is to lead the parts toward integration, to wholeheartedness. And in order to do so, the True Self had to treat all parts with empathy. The empathetic environment, infused with the Holy Spirit, fostered an environment that was toxic for shame. It facilitated the conditions in which my system could come to believe that it is lovable. In theological terms, the True Self created the context in which Fr. David's final "I am" statement could become true: I am God's beloved. And once that is in place, once God's love is accepted as the controlling narrative, then Fr. David's other statements lose the power of shame:

- I was wrong
- I don't know
- I have failed
- I don't know how
- I, too, am on the way
- I am what I am by God's grace

IFS is a very helpful heuristic for framing our lives. I do not believe it captures our ontological reality or that my parts are actually separate people. But IFS has helped me tremendously on the path to integration/wholeheartedness/sanctification.

### **Beyond Legal Sin to Healing**

Growing up in a church tradition that primarily thought in terms of sin as a legal infraction, the idea that Christ offers other kinds of healing was unknown to me. But our sins are often the result of our disease, the result of the Fall and the choices of others and the choices we make in

response. We may suffer because of how we have been harmed by others, etc. And the path to holiness absolutely requires facing sin, but approaching it from a posture of shame only magnifies the shame. This is the exact problem with certain approaches to addiction. There can be no change without the realization that we are truly unconditionally loved. From that place of being loved, we can take risks, pursue reconciliation, pursue health.

### **Moving Forward: Practical Steps**

Where do we go from here? Well, what happens next is very personal, of course. But here are a few things directly on my heart:

#### **1. Cultivating the Habit of Listening**

In order to justify my worth, I often talk over others or try to be the smartest person in the room. Not only is this bad for me, but it creates an environment where shame can grow for others. To this end, I want to practice the empathy habit: Seek first to understand and then to be understood. I recently read *The Power of Keeping Your Mouth Shut in an Endlessly Noisy World*. It is well written and quite convicting. I want to apply its precepts:

- When possible, say nothing
- Master the power of the pause
- Quit social media
- Seek out silence
- Learn how to listen

#### **2. Better Mental Hygiene**

In order to distract myself from uncomfortable emotions, I often numb myself with doom scrolling, games on my phone, constant podcasts, etc. In an effort to no longer numb myself and so I can create a space for empathy to flourish by being fully present, I want to apply better mental hygiene. I'm not entirely sure what this will be, but it will maybe be the following:

- Eliminating Instagram and LinkedIn from my phone
- Eliminating games from my phone
- Regularly turning my phone off
- Blocking email on my phone when not at work

#### **3. The Foundation: God's Love**

This is crucial: none of the above helps or is possible for me long term without first accepting the love of God. Otherwise, my tendency would be to shame my way into perfection, which would, as always, ultimately fail. So for me, the most important habit is regular prayer, regular meditation, regular surrender to God. As Thomas Merton has it:

*Real self-conquest is the conquest of ourselves not by ourselves but by the Holy Spirit.  
Self-conquest is really self-surrender.*

*Yet before we can surrender ourselves we must become free ourselves. For no one can give up what he does not possess.*

*More precisely – we have to have enough mastery of ourselves to renounce our own will into the hands of Christ – so that he may conquer what we cannot reach by our own efforts.*

As the Lord brought to my attention on my retreat this weekend: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you." Matthew 6:33. This isn't about doing anything in particular. Don't. It is about seeking.

### **Conclusion: Psalm 16**

I will end with Psalm 16:

*Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.  
I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you."  
As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight.  
Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips.  
The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage.  
I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.  
I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.*