



Soul Matters

The Path of Vulnerability



**Small Group
March 2023**

Welcome to The Path of Vulnerability

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.*
- Wendell Berry

This month is a tricky one for us UUs. Let's be honest. Berry's celebration of vulnerability and limits is just not our thing. We are, after all, the religion of human potential, goodness and power! We don't sing at impeded streams; we break through them. We don't put up with confused minds; we keep at it until we become un-baffled. When we no longer know what to do, we just turn to each other and figure it out together.

There is something deeply inspiring about viewing ourselves as so capable and strong. But there's a shadow side, too. In pursuit of being our best and most powerful selves, we often fear leaning into vulnerability. It becomes a problem. The thing we need to protect ourselves from.

But it is a protection that betrays.

The theologian C.S. Lewis gets at this in his reflection on the vulnerability of love:

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to keep it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable."

In other words, there's a big difference between breaking and being broken open. Yes, leaning into vulnerability is frightening. But often, it also unlocks a door, allowing grace to drift in.

For instance, a loved one dies and, to our surprise, our hearts aren't just crushed, they are cracked open, illuminating beauty just a little more clearly. The absence we thought would haunt us actually unveils how deeply we loved, and how lucky we are to have loved.

Or what about when we're finally honest about the fears and burdens we hide? In that leap of courage, we discover that telling our truths doesn't just make us feel weak or exposed; it opens our eyes. We become able to see that others hide their pain and fear, too. And with that, the faceless crowd becomes a sea of fellow travelers. All of us connected. All of us aware of how much kindness is needed, even when the other's pain is not easy to see.

It's all about understanding that vulnerability isn't weakness, but a softer form of strength.

Remembering that isn't easy. But it is necessary. It's maybe our *most real* work, as our friend Wendell Berry would say.

Our Spiritual Exercises

Option A: Your Shared Vulnerability

Almost by definition, our vulnerabilities are rarely shared. Part of that is fear. But another part - maybe the biggest part - has to do with thinking “no one would understand.” So not only do we feel fear and the need to hide, but we also feel *alone* in that.

In 2018, the Rubin Museum did something to address that sense of isolation. They created [a community art project](#) in which visitors to the museum were asked to write one thing they were anxious about and one thing they were hopeful about. Hope and anxiety are, of course, two different ways of expressing vulnerability about [the unknown future](#) we face. The goal was connection and to receive the gift that we are not alone.

So, this month, tap into that gift with these steps:

1. Read through the list of anxieties and hopes listed in the second half of this article: <https://rubinmuseum.org/spiral/is-your-hope-my-anxiety>.
2. From the list, identify the 4-5 hopes and 4-5 anxieties you most resonate with. Write them down.
3. Then, without reference to the list you just collected, add at least 2 hopes and 2 anxieties of your very own to your lists.
4. Having collected this list of a dozen anxieties and hopes, reflect on them with these questions:
 - How does my list make me feel?
 - How many of these am I keeping secret?
 - What voice in my head is convincing me I need to keep them secret?
 - Is that voice connected to the truth of my present reality or from my past?
 - Which three do I really want to share with someone I trust?
 - What do I need to make that sharing possible?

Option B: Your Most Vulnerable Creation

Many of us have them: something we created but have felt too vulnerable to share, maybe with the exception of a few trusted folks. These creations usually say a lot about us, so we feel both the desire to share and the desire to keep them safely hidden. These creations take many forms: a piece of art, a poem, our singing voice, a set of photos we keep in our study like an altar, or a collection of some kind, from stamps to coins to bottle caps or dishes.

This exercise invites you to share this “rarely shared” creation with your small group. Along with the story of what led to you not sharing it more widely. And how it feels to share it with your group.

NOTE: Your vulnerable creation might feel too private or vulnerable to share with the group. If so, feel free to just share the thoughts that arose from even considering sharing it.

Option C: Writing Our Way Through Vulnerability

Heartbreak. Grief. Trauma. Anger. Powerlessness. Exhaustion. There are countless ways that today's social challenges leave us feeling vulnerable, and stuck. The climate crisis, racial injustice, political polarization and economic inequality leave us feeling as though we are trapped in a storm of dizzying and depleting emotions and will never find our way out. This exercise offers us one way to address that: Writing our way through it.

During the month of March, our friends at [Good Grief Network](#) are generously giving Soul Matters members special and free access to their workshop, *Writing Through It: Exploratory Journaling for Tumultuous Times*. The program and process are easy to engage.

1. You first need to join [the private "Mighty Networks" digital community](#) set up exclusively for Soul Matters small group members. It's simple to do.
Just click this link:
https://goodgriefnetwork.mn.co/share/0Tetk5rQFB9Yzc35?utm_source=manual.
2. Once signed in, you just need to wait until March starts. In the first few days of the month, you will start receiving three emails a week with a writing prompt in it. You can respond to that prompt at your convenience, even a day or two later if you wish. The prompts are designed to help you recognize, name, feel, and process your complex emotions about the state of our world and society.
3. To enhance your journey, each email will invite you to sign into our *Writing Through It* online space on Mighty Networks to read other Soul Matters members' responses and, if you feel called and comfortable, to share yours. This shared online space allows you to practice communal reflection and the courageous act of allowing yourself to be seen.

Option D: Take in a Vulnerable Movie

There are six movies listed in the "Movie & TV" section in the Recommended Resources of this packet ([on page 9](#)). All of them explore vulnerability through a unique lens. As your exercise this month, pick at least two of the movies and watch them this month.

But here's the catch: You first need to do some very simple research about them, such as watching a trailer or reading a review. Then based on that, pick the two that feel like they have a connection to your own experience of vulnerability. Then after watching both films, do some reflection work and figure out your personal take-away(s) from the movies. To help figure out that personal take-away(s), we encourage you to ask yourself, "How are these movies trying to offer me a word of comfort or challenge?"

Option E: Questioning Courage & Vulnerability Culture

Led by the widely read and widely celebrated Brené Brown, "courage & vulnerability culture" has become the unquestioned frame of reference for vast swaths of the self-help, research and therapeutic communities. But maybe a bit of questioning is needed. Spend some time this month with some important questioners and their appeal for us to take another - and more careful - look. Here are three of the voices we suggest:

- [The Dangers of Courage Culture and Why Brené Brown Isn't for Black Folk - Dr. Carey Yazeed](#)

- [Is vulnerability a privilege? - Jeff Couillard](#)
- [The Risks & Dangers of Brené Brown's Vulnerability for People of Color - Different People Podcast](#)

Option F: Ask Them About Vulnerability

One of the best ways to explore our monthly themes is to bring them into the conversations you have with those closest to you. It's a powerful way to deepen our conversations and our relationships. Below is a list of "vulnerability questions" to help you on your way.

Come to your group ready to share what surprised you most about the conversation(s) and what major gift or major insight it gave you. And as always, keep a lookout for how your inner voice is trying to send you a word of comfort or challenge through these conversations with others.

Vulnerability Questions:

- Was vulnerability celebrated, encouraged, modeled, shamed or punished in your family of origin?
- What did your family of origin teach you about asking for help? Does that teaching still shape you today?
- Has vulnerability gotten easier or harder as you've grown older?
- What was your greatest "leap of faith"?
- What is your favorite failure? I.e., which of your failures ended up leading you to a gift?
- Has a past betrayal ever left you more protective than you need to be?
- What scares you?
- What's your take on the often-shared quote, "Hurt people hurt people"?
- How would your life be different if you had trusted in vulnerability earlier in life?

Option G: Which Vulnerability Quote Calls to You?

Sometimes we read a quote and it perfectly captures what's going on for us right now. Or allows us to view our current circumstances in a new light. With this in mind, spend some time this month reading through the quotes in the Companion Pieces section below to ***find the one that best illuminates your journey with vulnerability.***

We encourage you to use the same discernment practice with these quotes as you do with the packet's list of questions:

- **Read through the list of quotes** a few times, noting which ones "shimmer" (i.e., call to you or have an emotional gravitational pull for you). It often helps to circle or star these quotes that stand out.
- With each reading, **narrow your focus** in on those that stick out, until you finally **settle on the one quote** that pulls at you the most.
- Then make space to **reflect** on the gift, challenge or insight your chosen quote is offering you.
- Some of us may want to **go further** and capture your reflections with journaling or creative expression.

Come to your group ready to share your quote and the journey it took you on.

Your Question

Don't treat these questions like "homework" or try to answer every one. Instead, make time to meditate on the list and then pick the one question that speaks to you most. The goal is to figure out which question is "yours." Which question captures the call of your inner voice? Which one contains "your work"? And what is that question trying to get you to notice or acknowledge? Often it helps to read the list to a friend or loved one and ask them which question they think is the question you need to wrestle with!

A note about self-care: *Often these questions take us to a vulnerable space. It is OKAY to ignore the questions that may be triggering – or lean in if that feels safe.*

1. Was vulnerability celebrated, encouraged, modeled, shamed or punished in your family of origin? How do you wish it had been treated?
2. How would your life be different if you had trusted in vulnerability earlier in life?
3. What has life taught you about leaps of faith and leaping into the unknown?
4. Are you tired of pretending that you are strong?
5. If asked, would your best friend be able to name your greatest fear? Your greatest failure? Your favorite thing about yourself? If not, is there work for you to do somewhere in that?
6. Has vulnerability gotten easier or harder as you've grown older?
7. What is your favorite failure? I.e., which of your failures ended up leading to unexpected success or to a gift?
8. What's one thing this month that you could do to stop hiding that truth you're so scared to share?
9. Are you good at asking for help?
10. What's your take on the often shared quote, "Hurt people hurt people"?
11. What's one thing you could do this month to address your fears about financial vulnerability?
12. Has a past betrayal ever left you more protective than you need to be?
13. Which kind of vulnerability scares you the most: Saying "I need help," "This is me," "I'm sorry," "I'm tired," "I disagree," or "I like you."
14. How do you mask your vulnerability? What led to that form of protection? Are you sure it's not doing more harm than good?
15. As you look back over your life so far, what vulnerability story makes you smile?

What's your question? Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to find it.

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. We will not analyze these pieces in our group. Instead, they are here to companion you on your journey this month, get you thinking and open you up to new ways of imagining the path of vulnerability.

Word Roots & Definitions

“According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the word **vulnerability** is derived from the Latin word *vulnerare*, meaning ‘to wound.’ The definition includes ‘capable of being wounded’ and ‘open to attack or damage.’ Merriam-Webster defines **weakness** as the inability to withstand attack or wounding. Just from a linguistic perspective, it’s clear that these are very different concepts, and in fact, one could argue that weakness often stems from a lack of vulnerability—when we don’t acknowledge how and where we’re tender, we’re more at risk of being hurt.”

Brené Brown, from [Daring Greatly](#)

Wise Words

Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability and authenticity.

[Brené Brown](#)

I have more compassion than if I had never been wounded or if I had never been betrayed or I had never been harmed... those disappointments have made me gentler with other people and their disappointments, the stuff that they have to carry around and endure.

Elizabeth Gilbert

It’s the backwards law in action: in order to become more resilient, more formidable, you must first bare your flaws and weaknesses for

the world to see. In doing so, they lose their power over you.

[Mark Manson](#)

Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable.

Brené Brown

Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet confinement of your aloneness to learn anything or anyone that does not bring you alive is too small for you.

[David Whyte](#)

Honestly, sometimes I don’t have the strength to be strong because I am truly tired of fighting. There are days I want to rip off this superwoman cape because I no longer see the point of being “a strong Black woman.” I am tired of the internal pain that I pretend doesn’t exist. Yes, I get tired of being resilient.

[Dr. Carey Yazeed](#)

The secret of vulnerability is not everyone is meant to know. Practice a sacred withholding. Stop giving all of you away.

Cole Arthur Riley

Tis a fearful thing to love what death can touch.

[Yehuda HaLevi](#)

You will lose everything. Your money, your power, your fame, your success, perhaps even your memories... *But right now*, we stand on sacred and holy ground, for that which will be lost has not yet been lost, and realizing this is the key to unspeakable joy... Impermanence has already rendered everything and everyone around you so deeply holy and significant and worthy of your heartbreaking gratitude. Loss has already transfigured your life into an altar.

[Jeff Foster](#)

Heartbreak is the beautifully helpless side of love and affection.

[David Whyte](#)

Instead of asking ourselves, "How can I find security and happiness?" we could ask ourselves, "Can I touch the center of my pain? Can I sit with suffering, both yours and mine, without trying to make it go away? Can I stay present to the ache of loss or disgrace - disappointment in all its many forms - and let it open me?"

[Pema Chödrön](#)

I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.

James Baldwin

I'm beginning to realize that all of my big "negative" emotions - anger, intolerance, crankiness... the list goes on - have their root in my feeling vulnerable. So, I've been practicing feeling the vulnerability rather than the secondary feeling... If I'm able to say, "I'm feeling vulnerable," rather than, say, "YOU'RE MAKING ME MAD," then there is much more room for connection and healing.

Rev. Megan Foley

It is an act of resistance in our culture to say: everyone needs care at different points in their life and everyone provides care to others.

[rev. emilie boggis](#)

The difficult thing is that vulnerability is the first thing I look for in you and the last thing I'm willing to show you. In you, it's courage and daring. In me, it's weakness.

Brené Brown

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road.

You must see how this could be you...

[Naomi Shihab Nye](#)

Just because I'm feeling vulnerable doesn't mean I am vulnerable... Often my feeling of vulnerability has much more to do with events from my past than it does with what's happening now.

Rev. Megan Foley

Self-revelation is the most vulnerable-making thing of which human beings are capable, and yet in that vulnerability we find our deepest freedom.

[Maria Popova](#)

Faith minus vulnerability and mystery equals extremism. If you've got all the answers, then don't call what you do 'faith.'

Brené Brown

Grief is the necessary current we need to carry us into our next becoming... It rises on a salty geyser of tears, streaming down our cheeks until it moistens the soil where we stand, preparing us for new growth. Have you ever noticed how beautiful a person is after they've wept? It's as if they are made new again by the baptism of tears.

[Toko-pa](#)

One of the most important things you can do on this earth is to let people know they are not alone.

Shannon L. Alder

Music

There are two different playlists for each of our monthly themes: one in Spotify and another in YouTube. They are organized as a journey of sorts, so consider listening from beginning to end and using the playlists as musical meditations.

Click [here](#) for the Spotify playlist on [Vulnerability](#). Click [here](#) for all [Spotify playlists](#). Click [here](#) for the YouTube playlist on [Vulnerability](#). Click [here](#) for all the [YouTube playlists](#).

Articles

Vulnerability Is the Path - Brené Brown
<https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=2158>

The Dangers of Courage Culture and Why Brené Brown Isn't for Black Folk - Dr. Carey Yazeed
<https://drcareyyazeed.com/the-dangers-of-courage-culture-and-why-brene-brown-isnt-for-black-folk/>

To support her work, click [here](#).

Earth at 8 billion: Consumption not crowd is key to climate
<https://apnews.com/article/science-africa-pollution-climate-and-environment-1c70df435acda74301ff2df96a86dd43>

“While more people consuming energy, mostly from the burning of fossil fuels, is warming the planet, the key issue isn't the number of people as much as how a small fraction of those people are causing way more than their share of carbon pollution...”

World on brink of five ‘disastrous’ climate tipping points, study finds
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/sep/08/world-on-brink-five-climate-tipping-points-study-finds>

Videos & Podcasts

The Bengsons - Hope Comes
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8AegG5en2g>

Feeling Through
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1CqzntEZZ8>

Award-winning short film on opening ourselves to the vulnerability of kindness and compassion. About the film: [here](#) and [here](#).

The Power of Vulnerability - Brené Brown
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzIF7o>

“The Myth of Normal” - Healing in a Toxic Culture & How Capitalism Fuels Addiction
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvSL6RZCkyl>

On a culture that leaves us vulnerable to trauma.

The Unnerving Conclusions
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/28/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-lynn-vavreck-john-sides.html>

On the vulnerability of our politics.

Got Climate Doom? Here's What You Can Do to Actually Make a Difference
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/10/opinion/climate-change-personal-actions.html>

On the argument about how to best address our vulnerability to the climate crisis.

Men and Boys are Struggling. Should We Care?

<https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/men-and-boys-are-struggling-should-we-care/id1081584611?i=1000589866749>

Your Suffering Is a Bridge - James Baldwin

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/CeUUWaejNi-/?igshid=MDJmNzVkMjY%3D>

Books

You Are Your Best Thing: Vulnerability, Shame Resilience, and the Black Experience

Edited by Tarana Burke & Brené Brown

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/0593243625?tag=twentysomet05-20&linkCode=osi&th=1&psc=1>

An anthology on vulnerability, shame, resilience, and the Black experience.

The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief

Francis Weller

Review:

<https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2017/04/19/the-wild-edge-of-sorrow/>

Hunger

Roxane Gay

Review:

<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/roxane-gays-complicated-hunger>

Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling

Richard Reeves

Related [article](#), [book review](#), [opinion column](#), [PBS interview](#) and [podcast interview](#).

Movies & TV

[Lucky](#)

On the value of relationships and the vulnerability they require.

[Aftersun](#)

On the tender dance of parents and children showing their vulnerabilities to one another.

[Mare of Easttown](#)

On the vulnerable truth that everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about.

[Nomadland](#)

On surviving in a nation that's become hostile to ordinary citizens in need of help.

[The Father](#)

On the vulnerable path of dementia.

[Requiem for the American Dream](#)

On the vulnerability created by the modern concentration of wealth and power.

More Monthly Inspiration from Soul Matters!

Our Facebook Inspiration Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>

Our Instagram Page:

Find us as “soul_matters_circle”

Music Playlists:

Click [here](#) for links to the [Spotify playlists](#) for each month.

Click [here](#) to check out the [YouTube playlists](#).



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