

Kissing the Boo Boo
9/29/18

When I was a student chaplain during seminary, I met a woman I'll call Carolyn, who was in the hospital for surgery. Much like the woman in Remen's story, Carolyn was completely alone. I wrote a theological reflection about my encounter with Carolyn as part of the chaplaincy program. Here is some excerpts:

The patient is "Carolyn" a Caucasian woman in her late 70's, married for the second time, Catholic. She was admitted for surgery for a herniated disc in her neck and was wearing a neck brace. She was admitted the day before my visit. Carolyn is thin, has long black hair and deep brown eyes. Her face is very lined all over and her hair is thinning and was uncombed. She had recently manicured nails with a pale pink polish.

Carolyn's first husband died when he was just 35 years old. Her second husband has medical problems. She lost one son. Her daughter is married to an attorney and doesn't visit her. Her other son, was an important executive at Disney until he became ill with diabetes and couldn't work. He has become a computer expert and got a law degree and is making his way back into the workforce.

I introduced myself to Carolyn by saying my name and that I am a Chaplain and wanted to know how we could provide help for her spiritual needs while she's here. Carolyn said she didn't need anything. She said, "I pray all the time. I don't believe God gives us anything that we can't handle."

She spoke quite a bit about her family and her troubles in her life. She said, "I've had a lot of headaches in my life." "We lost one of our sons." Of her daughter, who doesn't visit her she said, "My daughter is selfish, she doesn't care [about me.]" About her injury, she said, "I didn't take care of myself." About her son she said something like "you can overcome troubles and start again."

Carolyn was very gracious. She offered her hand when I introduced myself and held it lightly in greeting. She said she was very glad to meet me. She had an air of gentility in contrast to her disheveled appearance. Her voice was low and husky and at times hard to hear. She had a glass of juice with a straw and said that she was supposed to drink all of it in the next hour. She had a pitcher of juice as well. It was hard for her to get the straw to her mouth as she only had easy use of one hand. She refused help with it and continued to struggle. At one point she poured juice from the pitcher onto the table, missing the glass altogether. I cleaned it up for her. She was concerned about getting a call from her husband. Apparently she hadn't heard the phone ring earlier, so I adjusted the volume up for her.

I felt conflicted in the conversation with Carolyn there was such a dissonance between her condition and her statements. She seemed to be alone, her husband couldn't come to visit because of his own problems and she really wanted to talk with him. Her demeanor and words

were very stoical and brave. She was not a person to allow anyone to help her and this felt sad to me. Her statement that God doesn't give anything to anyone they can't handle is one I've heard before and usually affirm. However when she said it, I felt no sense of comfort or relief in it—only determination and will. She seemed to be keeping up appearances even in handling the juice. I did not get the sense that she was fine on her own.

I feel sad in reflecting later about this encounter. I wanted to offer her some sense of support or empathy, but it was so important for her that I see her as capable and undaunted by her troubles. She seemed to value the idea of lifting oneself up by the bootstraps. This to me is a very hard way to live and a limited way because I have learned that I can be more self-reliant the more I allow someone else to help appropriately.

Carolyn believes that God listens to her prayers and will provide for her. But she has little faith in other people to be a support or help to her. Her sense of God doesn't extend to other people and the gifts they bring. Carolyn believes that her 'help' must come from the transcendent – through her prayers -- rather than through her experiences in life with others.

(this ends the description of Carolyn.)

What I liked about the little video of Julia asking for a kiss was that she seemed secure in her worthiness to be helped by Mom and she was attentive to the fact that one kiss wasn't enough – it took two and then she was fine and ready to move on to the next adventure. In the way of healthy children, she had no shame or blame about hurting herself or asking for a kiss. Although she was fully prepared to kiss her own elbow and probably would have if she could reach it. There are parts of our psyche, no matter how capable and mature we are, that we cannot reach on our own. We need others in order to fully respond to our own needs. We don't always let ourselves in to our really vulnerable places and I think shame is what prevents us.

If we grow up in an atmosphere of shame and blame, we become fearful of letting others in. We equate vulnerability with weakness, with unworthiness. But, as human beings, we *need* to connect with ourselves and others and so if we can't do that, we have to mask that need in whatever way we can. Like Carolyn we can form an image of ourselves as superior and above any need for comfort or companionship. Shame keeps us from letting our ideas, insights, and needs be known for fear of other's thinking negatively about us. It's a terrible prison and one that we all are locked into to varying degrees.

Brene Brown is a very popular shame and empathy researcher. Her video of a TED talk went viral because of how much people are afflicted with shame. In her book, *Daring Greatly*, she writes, "To feel is to feel vulnerable. To believe vulnerability is weakness is to believe that feeling is weakness. To foreclose on our emotional life out of a fear that the costs will be too high is to walk away from the very thing that gives purpose and meaning to living. " "...Vulnerability is the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experiences."

Brown uses the word wholeheartedness to describe what it is like to be resilient when you feel shame, disconnection, fear, a need to cover up your feelings. She developed guideposts for wholehearted living—specific work to develop resiliency. She writes, “Wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness.

What do we need in order to cultivate a life of courage, compassion and connection? I like that Brown uses the word ‘cultivate’ because it implies developing something further that already exists or has the potential to exist. We have within us all that we need to live wholeheartedly, fully engaged, and fully alive. If we didn’t we couldn’t even conceptualize these qualities, they would be completely foreign to us. But they are not. Every encounter with others or within ourselves that leaves us in pain, identifies a place to work on ourselves. We can either cover up or numb ourselves to the pain or allow ourselves to be vulnerable to what is going on within us and to wonder about it.

I’ve had experiences in my work of being intensely criticized by others and feeling quite defensive and hurt by it. The shame that was triggered by what was said was excruciating. In one particular case, I was criticized for seeming aloof, for being defensive and uncaring. This was a real double whammy because I was being criticized for the very thing that I used to protect myself from criticism. I was really backed into a corner by this. This was a beautiful situation although I didn’t feel that way at first. It was beautiful because it forced me to be vulnerable. After sitting with this for a few days during which I rationalized that ‘the critics’ were abusive and unreasonable, I began to find an opening in my heart for what was shared with me. Not because I wanted to please the others, but because I could begin to see the truth of it. It was very scary and yet also quite exciting. It was exciting because I could see that if I could change my ways, open myself up more, allow myself to be known, I could actually feel so much freer and enjoy my work and life more. I saw the light beyond my defensiveness.

This realization came about first because others challenged me--were willing to share their negative perceptions with me but second because someone I trusted helped me to clarify what was being said. I think it’s unlikely that I would have seen what they were saying on my own. Like Julia’s elbow, I couldn’t have reached those defended parts of myself without help.

It’s also interesting that it doesn’t matter what the motivations were of those who brought the criticism to me. It wasn’t about validating their thinking but uncovering the truth within me. However, after this awakening, I was able to engage with them so much more fully and joyfully.

It takes so much energy to refuse to engage, to go it alone, to have to be above the need for others help, to be fearful of making mistakes or being criticized, to have to hold ourselves back. In the process of defending, we lose ourselves and there is no lonelier place than that. Life, free of shame, holds the promise of much greater joys than we can even imagine right now.