

How Vulnerability Can Be a Strength by Viral Mehta

"What is the relationship between strength and vulnerability?" This was a question for Jacques Verduin, a remarkable activist who has long been working with inmates at San Quentin, a prison notorious for its toughness. We often think of vulnerability as weakness, but Jacques had a unique perspective. In response, he described his very first workshop, which focused on addiction recovery. Before it even started, one of the prisoners was already testing him.

"So what drugs have you done?"

When Jacques admitted to having had relatively limited experience, the man balked. "What are you going to teach us about recovering from addiction, when you haven't been where we've been?"

Jacques's tentative response only destabilized his position further, and they sensed his weakness. "It looks like you are nervous," another prisoner remarked.

They were calling him out, and in that moment he decided that instead of trying to sweep his vulnerability under the rug, he was going to wholly embrace his reality in all its fragility. Jacques admitted to them that it was true: He was nervous, this was his first workshop and he really wanted to have it be helpful to them. Not only did his frank admission dissolve his own tension, it also silently gave permission for others to enter the same space. It fundamentally shifted the workshop, according to Jacques.

So the relationship between strength and vulnerability is counter-intuitive: His efficacy and strength as a facilitator relied fundamentally on how authentic he was, including with his own shortcomings, doubts, challenges and fears. On the flip side, strength without such vulnerability actually prevents deep learning. By instinctively operating with just our strengths, we remain within the confines of our comfort zones.

Stepping outside is far from comfortable, and can even be painful. And when we experience something painful, the tendency is to dissociate ourselves from the feeling, to become numb to it. We fragment our reality and stop being in relationship with this part of our experience, meaning that we don't learn from it, let alone transform it. Instead, if we embrace our vulnerability, we can fully accept the discomfort and learn to observe our entire reality deeply and intimately -- just the way it is.

It may seem like such opportunities are rare, but they're surprisingly accessible. Here are a few statements that crack open a beautiful vulnerability within everyday situations:

"I was wrong." It's hard to say this at any time, but especially hard at work -- we

often fall prey to the myth that we are paid to be right. I remember reading a story about someone who made a multi-million dollar mistake at work, and subsequently went in to his boss's office to resign. The boss was wise, though. "Why would I let you go now, after having spent millions of dollars training you?!" By owning up to our mistakes, we open ourselves to learning from them.

"I don't know." Not knowing is itself uncomfortable. Confessing it to others is doubly so. But it is also one of the most liberating things we can embrace. When I admit that I don't know, I use up less energy in pretending to know, and give myself more space to explore the mysteries of an inherently emergent reality.

"I am sorry." Whether intentionally or unintentionally, our actions can be hurtful to others. When this happens, the tendency of both parties is to disconnect and create a separation. By apologizing, I might think that I'm losing ground in a relationship. In reality, I am building a proactive bridge of empathy -- and a possibility for a greater and truer connection.

"Thank you." In giving thanks, we might fear that we are betraying a need for support. In reality, we display more confidence and less insecurity when we graciously acknowledge what we have received. It also serves as a tuning fork, making us aware of the abundance of gifts we continually receive from our surroundings. At a deeper level, in expressing gratitude, we wake up to our fundamental inter-dependence.

"I love ..." In a recent commencement address, author Jonathan Franzen spoke of the dangers of remaining on the surface of life, of just "liking" instead of loving. In his words, love is what forces you to "expose your whole self, not just the likable surface, and to have it rejected can be catastrophically painful." But there's a pay-off. In his own experience, love "became a portal to an important, less self-centered part of myself that I'd never even known existed." Love helps us go beyond our limited notions of self.

As with all tools, these statements become meaningful only when used sincerely and appropriately. Being vulnerable in a way that gets taken advantage of, or in a way that is unkind to myself is counter-productive. Even when used wisely, it's still not always easy.

The word vulnerable itself comes from the Latin *vulnerare* which means "to wound", and so at the root of vulnerability is my own sense of wounded-ness. To be authentic in a moment in which I feel wounded, I have to honestly acknowledge the places where I feel hurt and then muster up the strength to just be with the pain. This takes tremendous courage.

Literally speaking, courage comes from the Latin *cor*, meaning heart. So when I open up to any experience fully, with courage -- our whole heart -- it naturally opens me up to a deep love. The blind musician Facundo Cabral said it beautifully: "If you are filled with love, you can't have fear," he said, "because love is courage." True vulnerability, in its most profound form, is an act of love.