

Thick Skin, Tender Hearts
A sermon by Rev. Heather Concannon
preached at the Unitarian Universalist Area Church
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I am in the fifth grade
And sitting across from the guidance counselor for the fourth time that month.
“you just need”
An adult tells me for what feels like the hundredth time
“to grow a thicker skin”.

The guidance counselor and I
Whose name I have by now long forgotten
Were well acquainted at the time
As I dealt with the unrelenting taunting and teasing
From another girl in my class.

Kelly was mean.
(Names have been left unchanged to implicate the guilty)
She teased me, called me names,
Orchestrated painful recess exclusions,
Spewed homophobic slurs and other insults at me,
Made fun of me for whatever she could think of—
My good grades, wearing my hair in two braids,
the role I had had in the second grade school play...

She was a bully.

Between the second and sixth grades
Kelly and I were assigned to the same homerooms
And, despite many years of petitioning the school to move one of us to different classrooms
To put some distance between us—to no avail—
It seemed that our elementary school fates were bound together.
I tried so many things, over the years.
Ignoring, crying, retorting, telling teachers,
Teachers tried, my parents tried...
The administration, I have to say,
didn't seem to try very hard.
And things would ease off, for a while
But then it would start again,
The teasing, the taunting, the name calling, the insults.

“just ignore her”
Adults would tell me.
“you can't let her see how she's affecting you, that'll only encourage her”.
“you just need” I heard over and over, “a thicker skin”.

Now, I was a kid who would cry pretty easily

(I still can cry pretty easily, when I'm frustrated, or tired, or angry, or upset).
And that propensity to have my eyes well up with tears
When Kelly would tease me
Probably got the results she was looking for, as the adults around me pointed out.

How many of you got messages like this, as a child?
“have a thicker skin”
“have a stiff upper lip”
“don't let them see you cry”
“sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me”
“be strong”
“be a man”?

I think back to those messages,
Fully aware, as an adult, that those messages
likely would have been even stronger, even louder, even more punishing,
If I had grown up as a boy,
And I think: there has to be a better way.

Because those words *hurt*.
The teasing, the name calling,
It all *hurt*.
It taught me that the tenderest parts of myself--
The places where I most was unsure of myself, and my place in the world--
If they weren't hidden away
Could be turned on me, used to hurt me.
It was dangerous, to let my tender parts show.

And looking back, of course,
I can see that this story is as much about Kelly's pain as it is about mine,
But as children, we aren't quite yet wired for that kind of abstract thinking and empathy,
Or maybe I have just grown a thicker skin.

In the spring of fifth grade,
The guidance counselor came in to each fifth grade class
To tell us that Kelly's mom had died. Cancer.
She would be missing school the next few weeks.
I had had no idea.
How could I have?
She and I had never shared anything personal about our lives.
And I wonder, now, how much pain she must have been in
How tender that all everything must have felt, for her,
Desperately trying to discharge some of that pain, to externalize it,
And wonder—where were the adults who were failing to see this lost girl's tenderness?

I find it so interesting
That the word “tender” can mean two things
One being gentleness

And the other being painful.
The root of the word “tender” means “soft” or “easily injured”
Or “stretch”
Which makes me think of my skin
How tender, how painful, how easily injured I felt
When I was bullied,
And of all of those adults who kept telling me
I needed a thicker skin.
Which is a weird analogy, when I stop to think about it,
Because thick skin—literal thick skin—only comes from scars
From places where there was once an injury
Where pain once occurred
And has been made stronger in the broken places.

After Kelly’s mom died,
I felt so bad for her
That I vowed to stop hating her
To have more compassion and empathy for what she was going through.

I wish I could say that that vow transformed the pattern
But a few weeks after she returned to school
The teasing ramped up,
The taunting started again,
The names were called,
And we landed, once again, on our own and together,
back in the guidance office.

My story with Kelly ended
When she was held back at the end of 6th grade
And after years of asking to be separated
We finally were.
And, I’ll admit, I celebrated her being held back, though I felt guilty about it.
I knew it would be a hard thing for her
But the pain she had caused me made me
So much less empathetic to her pain
Less tender feeling toward her
After all those years.

I wonder what in Kelly’s life
Taught her that you need to cut other people down
In order to have self worth.
I wonder if she got the love she needed, though I suspect not.
I wonder who she shared her most tender parts with.

Brene Brown says:
“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.”

So often, we feel closer to other people when they are vulnerable with us,
Yet we hide our own vulnerability, for fear that our tenderest, most unprocessed parts
might be “too much”, “too intense”, or too close to the bone.
Have you ever heard the phrase “vulnerability hangover”?
It’s when you share something vulnerable, and as soon as it’s out of your mouth,
Immediately regret it, start second guessing, or feel like you shared too much?

In our culture, we are encouraged to lift up the beautiful, the shiny,
The instagram-worthy
The promotions, the perfect hair days,
The first day of school pics, the perfectly plated meals,
The coordinated outfits, the smiling kids.

We are discouraged from sharing the mac-and-cheese-and-frozen-peas-for-the-third-night-in-a-row
dinners,
our doubts about our relationships, our career paths,
our loneliness
the hard work we are doing in therapy, the fights with the people we love,
the times we’ve messed up and don’t know how to fix it.
To share these things, it seems,
would be too vulnerable, too tender, too *real*.

But let me just say:
I have never gotten closer to another person by being perfect.
I have gotten closer to people when I have shared what is most real and tender in my life, and when
they have shared theirs.

The story of hiding our tenderness
Is a story of loss.
It is a story of losing the chance to authentically connect with other people
From our most tender places.
And I believe that this story is making us lonelier.

Researcher Robert Putnam, the author of “Bowling Alone”
found that in 1985,
Americans reported that they had, on average,
about 3 people with whom they could
“discuss matters important to them”.
By 2004, that number had dropped by about a third,
down to 2 people with whom people feel
they can discuss important matters.
More heartbreakingly, though,
researchers also found that the number of people
Who say that they have no one
with whom they can discuss matters of importance

and confide in is around 1 in 4 Americans.

1 in 4 people do not feel that they have anyone
they can share their most tender parts with.

Most of you know that
Nearly two years ago,
My dad died by suicide.
I'll be honest, the "why" question is, for me,
the hardest part about being a suicide loss survivor.
And, while I have so many questions
That will never be answered
It is clear to me that my dad was very lonely
And that he was struggling with a depression that he could not name
That he could not ask for help.
He was an exceedingly shy, gentle, and kind man
Who had not been encouraged in his growing up
To talk about his feelings
Who has absorbed the messages
That it was weak to ask for help
That he needed to hide the most tender parts of himself.

After my dad died,
One of his siblings said to me,
"You're so strong. Stay strong, okay?
We'll get through this together".
And I remember saying to him,
"Yes, I'm strong. But let's all also stay soft.
Let's never let this not be a tender and painful experience".
Because to stay "strong"
Without also staying soft about it all
Felt like it would discount the pain,
It felt like it would discount the loss,
Do a disservice to our tender, broken hearts.

I wonder, in this world that discourages our tenderness:
What would it look like to love, honor, and care for the most tender parts of ourselves?
So that we can love, honor, and care for the most tender parts of other people?
I feel like there's so much we can do
Starting with being in community—
In this age of isolation
Communities like this can be an antidote to isolation.
We can start by bringing our whole selves to community
Work to create a community where it is *safe enough*
for people to bring their whole selves into the community.
We can't just say "Be more tender" without being real about what that might risk:
Relationship, reputation, overexposure—tenderness does not always feel safe in this world.

But we can work to create a culture where tenderness, where realness, where vulnerability is celebrated and honored.

We can model being tender—

especially with boys,

especially if you are a man.

In our religious education classes,

we start with go-around check ins every week,

Because it is a chance for the kids to practice

building empathy, compassion, understanding, and connections,

Which are lessons that are as important than anything we might teach in a curriculum.

We can listen openly, and without judgement when others share with us,

We can flex our courage muscle—

because vulnerability is a practice of courage, my friends,

And we can try to share a tender thing we've long needed to share

Because we believe

that the chance for connection and being seen for who we are

Is worth the risk.

In the late 90s,

Shell Oil Company began to move into deep water drilling.

And they built a 1.5 billion dollar oil rig,

The size of two football fields

To drill for oil in the deepest parts of the Gulf of Mexico.

Named the Ursa.

Now, whatever our feelings about the fossil fuel industry might be,

This is a story about the humans who work on the oil rigs,

Which, as you might be unsurprised to learn,

Was almost entirely men.

And oil rigs are an exceptionally dangerous place to work.

Most of the workers on the oil rigs have known folks who have died on the job

Horrific accidents are not uncommon.

Often workers were given just a few minutes after witnessing an accident or a death before being rushed back to work.

And the culture of the oil rig, at least according to the men interviewed for the Invisibilia podcast,

Was a hypermasculine culture

Where the dominant ethos was to never show any weakness

And don't let on if you aren't feeling well,

Or if you don't know how to do something.

The man who was put in charge of this new project, the Ursa,

Was a man named Rick Fox,

Who, on a whim, hired a leadership coach

A French woman named Claire Nuer.

And through the course of her leadership work,

She decided to put everyone—oil executives, managers, team leaders, team members, everyone, grudgingly,

Through her program.

And over a year and half, while this new rig was being constructed, the team that would work on this new oil rig did hours upon hours of team building exercises, Drawing, Journaling, telling their life's story to a room full of people who they had worked with for years but had never had a meaningful conversation with, sharing honest feedback with one another, sharing what they appreciated about one another, and so on.

And on the Ursa,
That especially giant oil rig, with new technologies that none of them had ever worked on,
With higher oil flow rates and deeper water and more dangerous conditions,
They saw an 84% *decline* in the accident rate.
Productivity exceeded the industry's previous benchmark.
Professors from Harvard Business School & Stanford decided to study it
To see how this dramatic shift occurred.
And they discovered that when the men became more open with each other, it wasn't only feelings they were sharing, but information- technical information
Being able to communicate openly and admit mistakes and learn publicly made everyone safer.

Previously, the men who had gone through this program
Had spent a lot of energy trying to preserve an image of themselves as technically competent and emotionally shut off.
But once the culture shifted to one of more openness,
There was also a culture of vulnerability
In admitting when they had made a mistake
Or when they needed help.
Just as critical as the technical structures, the researchers found,
were the invisible emotional structures of the community.
The vulnerability that they had learned to share
Saved lives.

Friends, I think we could all gain something
By taking the risk
Of admitting just how tender our fragile hearts can be.
Both how gentle, and how easily bruised.
How we can be strong and soft, at the same time
Just like the tender skin that surrounds our fragile bodies.
Soft, and strong.
Because our tenderest parts are what connects us to other people,
Those places that allow us to be the most authentic, real, held, and connected.
Let us embrace our tenderness
Let us make space for the tenderness of others
And most of all, let us share our tenderness
Healing ourselves and the world.

May it be so, and amen.