



Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Sunday, May 11, 2025

“A Radical Culture of Vulnerability and Care”
with Rev. Sara Lewis

Humans thrive in relationship to each other and have evolved for mutual care, and yet our culture’s emphasis on individualism leads us to fear dependency. How can we embrace our own vulnerability and create a culture of more radical care for all?

Chalice Lighting

Cherishing Our Differences

by Cindy Fesgen

We are all capable
In different ways
With various strengths and talents.

We are all holy
Part of the universe
And the interdependent web.

We light this chalice
Cherishing our differences
And holding each other in sacredness.

Opening Words

A Litany of Wholeheartedness

by Dawn Skjei Cooley

Because there have been times when shame has crushed our ability to be wholehearted

We let go of who we ought to be and embrace who we are.

Because we have not always had the courage to be imperfect

We let go of who we ought to be and embrace who we are.

Because we have struggled to have compassion for ourselves or others

We let go of who we ought to be and embrace who we are.

Because we have been afraid of our own vulnerability

We let go of who we ought to be and embrace who we are.

Because we are sometimes too scared to live authentically

We let go of who we ought to be and embrace who we are.

Because we want to be whole-hearted people, confident in our worthiness and our belonging

We let go of who we ought to be and embrace who we are.

Reading 1

From Lean on Me: A Politics of Radical Care

by Lynne Segal

In one of the more recent feminist critiques of the Kantian tradition, the Italian philosopher and feminist thinker Adriana Cavarero describes the model of the self in play here as that of “homo erectus”, upright manhood. Women, with their supposedly softer, more caring inclinations, are always a threat to these men’s principled autonomy and independence, stoking their fear of any return to what they see as childhood states of dependency and submission. ...

Being overwhelmingly male, philosophers historically have viewed any such need for others with a certain apprehension ... acknowledging any need for others, Cavarero observes, undermines men's 'egocentric verticality'. ... And if women were generally viewed as the dangerous sex, it was mothers in particular who personified the original or primal threat to mature manhood.

Descending from philosophical abstraction to the highly concrete, Cavarero also comments 'Kant did not love mothers, children, or nannies, and, like most male philosophers, he was an unrepentant bachelor, easily bothered by crying children.'

Part 1: Vulnerability

When I was a harried young mom, trying to get through grad school while solo parenting an infant, I developed really bad elbow pain. I went to the doctor and was diagnosed with "nurse's elbow" from the strain of carrying my child on my arm all the time, and was advised by the doctor to quote "just stop picking up the baby until it heals". Yeah, that was gonna work.

Shortly after that, feeling like a helpless and hopeless failure and watching nature documentaries in the middle of the night while breastfeeding my baby I saw something about a group of baboons running from danger and the narrator said something like "it is very difficult for the mother baboons, carrying the babies, to keep up with the group". I screamed in frustration, or at least that's what I remember feeling. I probably didn't really scream, as that would have upset the baby. But no kidding, it's pretty hard to keep up with the group.

Parenting is a deep dive into vulnerability, with added personal physical vulnerability for the parent who does pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding. But all who dedicate themselves to caring for these tiny helpless humans become closer to vulnerability themselves. As Dr Emma Svanberg writes in *Parenting for Humans*: "We talk about what's at stake, with the implication that it's ALL on our shoulders (and usually a mother's shoulders). But somehow we don't really talk about how becoming a parent turns us inside out, and leaves us raw and shattered – all while having to function as well as we can for a very vulnerable human being."

Children and parents aren't the only types of humans facing vulnerability, however. As we age and enter elderhood, we become more vulnerable. And each time we are sick we may experience temporary vulnerability. Disability and chronic illness bring another kind of vulnerability. Vulnerability is a universal human experience, something we move into and sometimes out of through our lifetimes but will never escape completely. We will need help and care sometime.

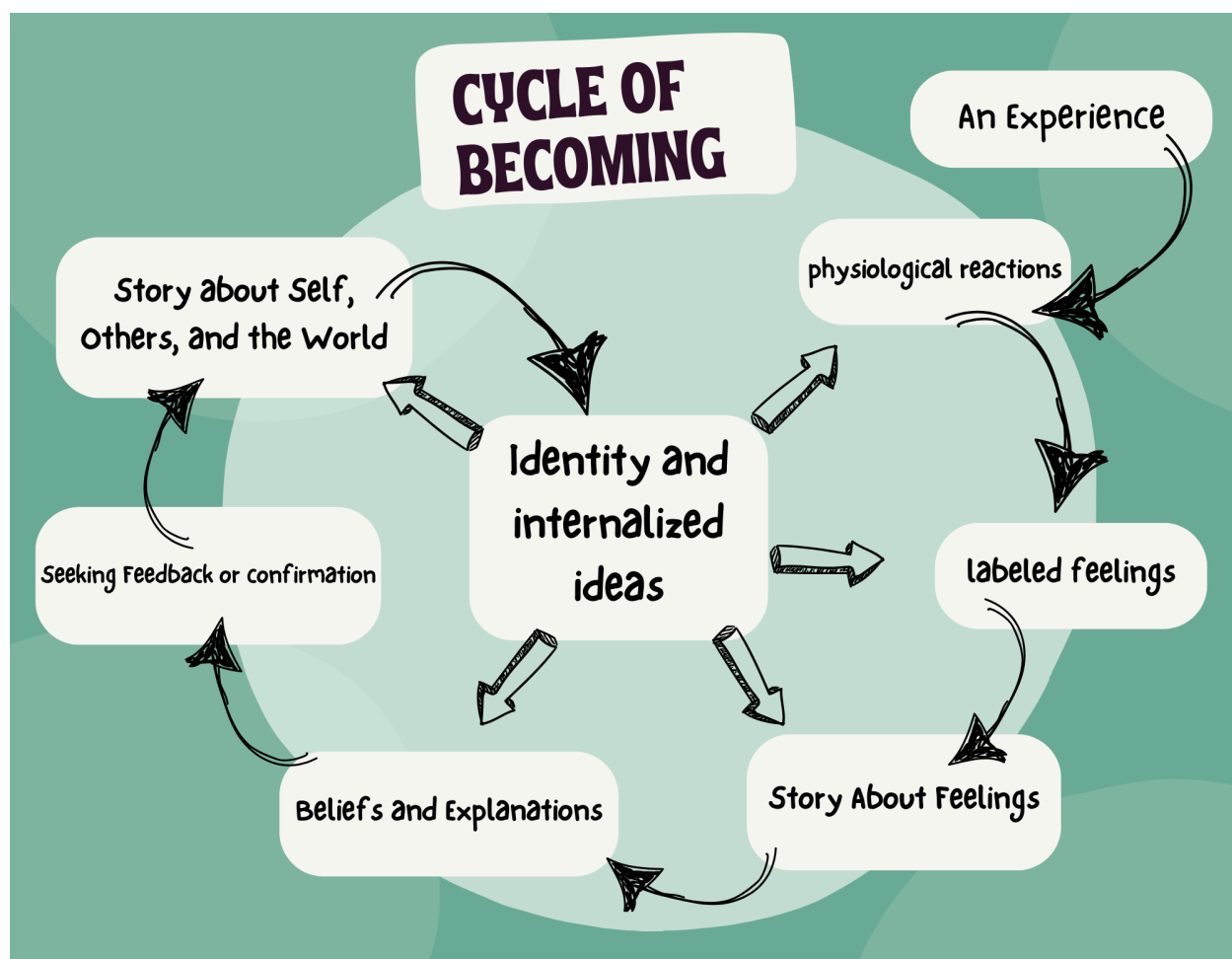
This is at odds with the prevailing story we live by in Western culture, the story of the individual. It is a story that has been told over and over again, whether by a philosopher, a capitalist, a religion, or a movie, the story of the individual overcoming challenge through the strength of their own character and effort and achieving independence. These characters are most often male, but not always. Even if our stories are about groups or a team, the actual teamwork is more about being collectively bad ass and less about caring for each other.

This story of individualism and competition and contribution leaves little room for any of us to be vulnerable or to need care, and places very little value on providing care either. It's a convenient story for those in power, pushing humans to become labor and resource rather than community.

Living under the influence of these stories, most of us avoid vulnerability. Vulnerability is scary, even encountering the vulnerability of others is frightening or uncomfortable, because we don't want to think about vulnerability at all. We want to believe in overcoming vulnerability, in the heroic journey and the strong vitality that will never crack or fade. So we may avoid looking too closely at what makes us all vulnerable, at examples of vulnerable people, and at our own particular vulnerabilities.

This was definitely true for me, growing up in a family culture, a dance culture, and later a military culture that all emphasized fighting through pain and weakness. For me, the show must go on and never drop out, never fall back and you can sleep when you're dead became a big part of the interior narrative that told me I could never take a sick day, never need to rest. And then I got sick. Or I couldn't make my body do the thing it was supposed to do. Or I was tired. Or I just needed some help. And it was terrifying, because in the story I knew this meant I was useless and would be cut from the show, the team, or the group. I've had to work hard to overcome this internalized idea, and I'm still not all the way there.

Part of what has helped me do this work is a greater understanding of how we develop these internalized ideas and identities. The understanding I have now is an amalgamation of several models, so this is partly Buddhist teaching, partly constructivist learning theory, partly Jungian psychology, partly trauma informed neuroscience, and partly my own experience. Let me explain this process as I understand it.



We start with an experience, just the raw thing whether it is a sight, a sound, a sensation. The next step happens really quickly, in the reactionary parts of our brain-bodies, and we respond in some way that will be mediated by our nervous system and how well regulated it is. Next our conscious thinking brain will give this experience and reaction a name or a label. "I'm in pain" or "this tastes good". Even though all of this happens pretty quickly, there are still filters in place that are built by our past experiences and our current state and our overall temperament, so our label of the experience is already subjective.

And then we pass this label through the stories we have about it. Stories about where pain comes from, who deserves to feel pain, whether we are just "too sensitive" to pain, etc, will shape our experience of pain. Stories about who deserves pleasure, where pleasure comes from, and the dangers of pleasure will all shape our experience of pleasure. Stories about God or the universe will shape our experiences of wonder and awe. Most often, though, we aren't really conscious of the stories we carry. We don't think about them much, they just are, so this filter is another one that often goes unnoticed.

Next we come to the step that more of us are aware of, the conscious analysis and creating beliefs and explanations for the experience we've had. This is where we pause and really "think" about the experience in the way that we are most used to understanding "thinking".

Then, most of us will seek some confirmation or feedback about the explanation we just formed. We might try to do the thing again and see if the same result occurs, or look around us to see if others are reacting in the same way, or talk about what we've experienced with another person. We'll also look for feedback on whether our reaction is going to be accepted and responded to in a way that we like. If we cry, does someone comfort us or say "don't be a baby", for instance.

But here's the kicker – the feedback we receive in our confirmation checks is also filtered through stories that we carry. These are stories about our own role in the world in comparison to others, stories about who can be trusted and who cannot, stories about whether the universe is an orderly or a chaotic place, and more. We may not realize that we are carrying these stories, but they will also be filters for all of our understandings.

Having passed through all of this process, this experience may now become internalized as part of our ongoing sense of self or our ideas and understandings about how the world works. And that sense of our identity and understanding of how things work then changes each of those filters for the next experience. It can become a self-fulfilling negative spiral. It can also be a learning and growing spiral. And we can become aware of this cycle and pause and observe it, which helps us choose. As the popular quote by psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl goes:

Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

But what does this have to do with vulnerability and all the rest I was talking about before? Well, here's an example. I grew up with a story about needing to be strong and carry on, and I was born with an anxious temperament and overreactive fight or flight response. So I would have an experience of illness, get anxious and ready to fight, label my experience as weakness, pass it through a story about weakness meaning rejection, build a belief system like "no pain no gain", look around to see if others approved of me if I pushed harder, pass their reactions through my story about my own insecurity in comparison to others, and then internalize this whole thing as an identity of being not-quite-good-enough and needing to work harder.

Or. Or I could become aware of these cycles and stories through lots of internal work, spiritual practice, life experience, therapy, etc. And I could start to shift the cycle bit by bit.

Being more aware, I could place an emphasis on supporting and regulating my nervous system and trying to lower that fight or flight tendency. And when I have an experience of illness or pain, even if I get anxious, even if I still knee jerk label the experience as weakness, I can shift the story about what weakness is. I can tell a new story to myself about how hard experiences build compassion and understanding, or about how bodies being bodies is just a value-neutral fact of biology. I can deliberately pause before rushing to explanations and beliefs about this experience. I can choose how I seek feedback and who I will seek feedback from. And I can tell new stories about my place in the universe and my worth in comparison to others.

That sounds super simple when I just lay it out like that, but it's not. This is a lot of work, it's a long process. It may be a process of meditation, journaling, therapy, creative expression, medication, or more. The tools are numerous and your mileage may vary.

It's a slow process, but bit by bit when we do this we can grow more capacity for holding hard experiences without internalizing them into our beings. We can be more open and vulnerable, from a place of wholeness. We may label that place non-attachment, security, boundaried strength, or wisdom.

Whatever the story or label that works for you, may it help you be whole and human in all the vulnerable ways that we are.

Reading 2

“Meditation on Courage and Vulnerability”

by Douglas Taylor

I am learning to let down my guard. We all know about the deep instinct to respond to difficulty and stress with either fight or flight, with force or swift retreat, with decisive attack or prompt withdrawal. When faced with stress or difficulty or challenge, I am learning to let down my guard. I am learning to be vulnerable. I am seeking the courage to be open.

I would have my vulnerability be a choice made from my courage rather than my fear. I would have my vulnerability be my strength.

May my strength be not found as a hard shell of defense or a sharp weapon of attack. May my strength, instead, be found in an open stance of kindness and empathy, like a tree bending gracefully in the wind storm. May my strength be found in a willingness to join in the suffering of others, like a forest of trees together in a storm. May I choose to be receptive rather than protected, sharing rather than shielded.

In this way, may I face my own suffering and the suffering of others with a nimble capacity to respond with compassion. In this way, may my vulnerability be an invitation for others to meet me in the open field with a yearning for understanding and peace. I know this is a risk, I know I may be hurt, I know things may not go well.

But still, I will seek the courage to set aside the closed fist, the stinging retort, the barbed judgment of others. I will seek within myself the strength to stand exposed and unguarded before the world, in the wind, open to difficulty; not because I cannot be any other way but because I have chosen this better way.

I am still learning to be vulnerable. I seek the courage to be so vulnerable. May I have others who can help me to be so courageous. May my example serve others as well as myself. And may my strength be our strength in sharing this life openly with others.

Part 2: Mutual Care

One of my favorite sayings, a quote from Karl Marx but he took it from the Bible, is “from each as they are able, to each as they require”. I have lived my life by this principle, giving all that I am able and looking to see what others require. But a couple years back a therapist called me out on this when she pointed out that I was only paying attention to half of the philosophy. I was only casting myself in the “as they are able” role and never in the “as they require”. I was acting as though I had no needs of my own, and then getting burned out or angry when I ended up experiencing unmet needs.

I’m not alone in this tendency. Sociologist and author Brene Brown has written and spoken extensively about how a common response to the anxiety of the world is to perform invulnerability. It’s a performance, because it’s never really true and no one can be completely invulnerable, but acting as though we are feels protective. Unfortunately, this is one of those counterproductive strategies that may feel protective in the short term but ultimately hurts everyone as we end up having to ignore our own needs and stuff down our own feelings, and it hurts our ability to be in true relationship with each other. And it feeds our culture of burn out as we all try to push through heroically on our own.

And how do we respond to the chronic state of burn out, especially for those who are giving care? We tell everyone that they need to do more “self-care”. And how do we define self-care? What comes to mind with that phrase? Bubble baths, vacations, getting up early to go the gym? Too often, we define self care as a method for recharging our batteries, preferably as quickly as possible, so that we can go back to being productive. Therapist and author Pooja Lakshmin puts in this way in the book *Real Self-Care*:

“Faux self-care is a method—in the moment, going for a run might improve your mood, but it does nothing to change the circumstances in your life that led you to feel drained, energy-less, or down. On the other hand, the work of real self-care is about going deeper and identifying the core principles to guide decision-making. When you apply these principles to your life, you don’t just feel relief in the moment, you design a system of living that prevents the problems from coming up in the first place.”

A big stumbling block for doing that deeper work of self-care is acknowledging our own limits and needs. Real self-care looks a lot like knowing when to say no, knowing when to say “I need help”, and knowing how to give yourself more compassion when you are struggling or feeling vulnerable.

If we are practicing real self-care, which means real self-knowledge and vulnerability, then we can return to the “from each as they are able to each as they require” with a healthier sense of mutual care. In mutual care we are all going to sometimes be able to provide care for others, and we are all going to sometimes require care from others. When we are struggling, like I was in our story skit today, we can accept help. And when we see someone in need, we can provide the help.

For some people, mutual aid has been the way of resilience and survival for generations as they faced systemic oppression, and some of our American subcultures are better at this than others. But in the overall dominant American culture, we are not good at mutual care and many of us lack practice in it. So here are some extremely practical suggestions if you want to get better at mutual care:

First, practice pausing before you give automatic responses to people. “How are you?” “Fine”. “Do you need help?” “Oh, no thank you”. Those well worn patterns may just roll off your tongue without much thought. So pause thoughtfully when someone asks you how you are. If it feels right to give an honest and true answer, be real. Pause thoughtfully when someone asks if you need help, and if you could use some help and it feels right, be honest in your answer.

Second, get better at offering real concrete and specific care. A blanket “do you need any help?” may be hard for a person in distress to figure out how to respond to, but a “would it help if I carried that for you?” or “I have an extra cart, would you like to borrow it for awhile?” are much easier questions to answer. If someone is sick or grieving or stressed out, offer to do their laundry or bring them their groceries or walk their dog for them.

Third, try to lay down the whole idea of being a burden. People are not burdens. In other words, try not to feel guilty for needing or accepting care and help. Be grateful, sure, but not guilty. Appreciate the care and the caregiver, and also know that it is a blessing to be in relationships of care, a blessing for both of you.

Fourth, accept that people have different priorities and that the exact kind of care and help you think they need may not be what they want. Often, we offer to do something or help because something is bugging us. If I offer to “help” my kiddo by getting their car washed, is it because the dirty car is bothering me or is it a genuine help for them? They might need a completely different kind of help and I need to listen and respect that. People need to retain their empowerment to choose what they want, even as they are helped.

But even mutual care isn’t going to be enough, relying as it does on loose networks of relationship. We need to have a culture of community care, and that is exactly what is being eroded in this current political moment, although the process of dismantling social safety nets and public goods started long before the last election. A culture of community care is one in which we say “they are all my kids” and we fund childcare, nutrition, education, and other needs of children as though we meant that. In 2023, one in seven children in the US lived in poverty. And we are seeing cuts to programs that provide care and help to these children.

A culture of community care would be one that prioritized healthcare for all, housing for all, and affordable healthy food for all. We know what is happening to those programs right now too. A culture of community care would prioritize public transportation over private vehicle ownership. A culture of community care would prioritize access and disability justice. I could go on, but the bottom line is that a culture of true care would be one that acknowledged that we are all vulnerable and will all need care, and we should build a society that can care for us all.

So here’s the homework assignment. You didn’t know you were going to get homework when you came to worship on Mother’s Day, did you? Well, you are today, but there’s no deadline, no one to turn this in to, I won’t be grading anyone. Do it on your own time.

First: examine your comfort level with vulnerability and try to build some courage around being vulnerable.

Second: give yourself some real self care and compassion rather than pushing yourself to do it all alone.

Third: increase your skills and habits around offering and receiving mutual care. Let someone help you. And help someone else.

Fourth: show up and fight for those structures and that culture of community care. Even if some of us will survive an austerity culture of individualism, that's not enough. We all have to not only survive, but thrive. Nothing less is acceptable when all are inherently worthy and loved. So call your legislators, show up at those protests, and ceaselessly advocate for the idea that we are all connected and responsible for caring for all of us. All of us.

That's your homework. It's not an easy assignment, but I believe it is a vital one. As you tackle it, I offer you this blessing:

May you know yourself whole, holy, and loved, just as you are

May you have the courage to ask for and receive help and care when you need it

May you be filled with love and care for others, and may your head, hands, and heart know the work that is yours to do

May you know yourself as related to all others through vast networks of love and care

May it be so, blessed be and amen

Closing Words

Love Holds You

by Carrie Holley-Hurt

Love holds you.

Love bears witness to all your inherent dignity and worthiness.

It witnesses how you try, succeed, and fail—and it does not flinch.

Love will not let go.

Love holds all of you.

Reflection questions:

- What stories have you learned about vulnerability from your life and society?
- How have you experienced the web of mutual and community care?