

The Importance of Vulnerability

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Typically, the average person hears the word vulnerability and there occurs a connotation of being in danger, or at risk of undesirable circumstances. In fact, Oxford dictionary defines Vulnerability as “the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally.” Merriam-Webster defines vulnerability as

- 1: “capable of being physically or emotionally wounded”
- 2: “open to attack or damage”

Vulnerability

That sounds ominous for sure, but does it have to be a negative? Can we perhaps find a different way of perceiving vulnerability and its usefulness? When it comes to lasting, meaningful relationships, great sex, and the ultimate goal of meaningful intimacy, I will promote that vulnerability is a wonderful precursor of such, and dare I say true necessity.

To better understand what I am promoting, allow me to lay a bit of a logical foundation upon which to then build. I believe I can safely say that most, if not all, adults will agree that there is no such thing as a one-sided ‘partnership,’ or marriage. I will go even further in stating that any level of quality intimacy across a significant period requires authentic partnership.

Let us consider for a moment a business arrangement, and before my reader proclaims, “Personal partnerships, or marriages are not business arrangements,” let me simply state that regardless of one’s perspective on that premise, there are undeniable similarities. For example, two parties come together, and at some point make a mutual decision to enter into an agreement, i.e. initiate a long-term relationship, move in together, have children, get married, or any of the myriad of adult decisions. There can be no serious argument that for this ‘agreement’ to be lasting and beneficial to both sides, each party would have to understand the contract, its contents, expectations, and consequences for breach. Let us now put a finer point on my analogy.

Acceptance

Let us suppose two potential future happenstances between these parties. First, as time goes on, one party reveals that they perceived the agreement to have meant something different than perceived or intended by the other party. Second, perhaps one party simply wishes to renegotiate the agreement. Here in is the potential for conflict, even the demise of the agreement or relationship. After all,

there can be no one-sided agreement, or contract. By its very nature the word, agreement denotes two or more parties having a common acceptance. At this point, someone has exposed themselves to significant vulnerability. So how then are such understandings reached, misunderstandings resolved, or renegotiations concluded successfully?

Such circumstances require an exposure of potential disappointment, rejection, and even emotional harm. So, what then makes vulnerability a desirable aspect in a relationship?

Trust

Pure and simple, the answer is trust. Ok, right about now some readers are rolling eyes and perhaps proclaiming, “This is obvious.” But wait. Let us not assume the overly obvious. There is more to be considered. A step between must not be overlooked.

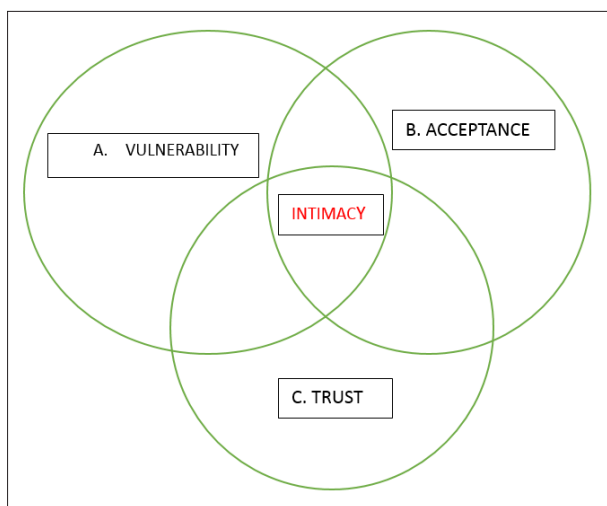
How is trust gained? Of course, we can blindly trust. We all know how that often works out. We can take people at “face-value,” and accept them at their word, and yes, that is a type of trust. However, it is not the deep, richly earned trust that leads to true intimacy. I refer to the kind of intimacy that can only come from practice over time. Not just, practice, but perfect practice. At least as perfectly as humanly possible given our flawed natures. Practicing what you ask?

Acceptance. For the purpose of my argument in favor of vulnerability, ‘acceptance’ is to mean appropriate responses that do not stifle or prevent the relationship from moving in a positive direction leading to trust between partners.

This kind of acceptance is demonstrated by receiving the partner’s vulnerability, and responding with non-judgmental considerations, regardless of the potential final outcome. This is what must be practiced. When we expose those deeply held parts of our thoughts, fantasies, desires, or even our political or religious positions or questions on such topics, we risk rejection. We are vulnerable. Yet, when we are met with compassion, a willingness to be heard, and of course the ultimate, acceptance, our trust grows.

So simply put, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, and being met with love, a listening ear, and acceptance of a partner, our trust in the partner, and ourselves grows, and true intimacy evolves. (See diagram below).

Remember, that in the absence of partnership this is highly unlikely to occur. At least the long term, growth of true intimacy is unlikely. Thus, we must consider that the dual aspect of vulnerability and acceptance leading to trust must be reciprocated because after all, intimacy is a shared state of being.



Let's dive a little deeper, and consider an example, shall we? Let's look at the concept of vulnerability from an anthropological standpoint. Anthropology is the study of humanity and encompasses human behavior, biology, cultures, various societies, and linguistics both from a current standpoint and throughout history. In short, anthropology is "all things human."

OK... don't start yawning. I am not going to attempt a college level lecture on the subject. I will instead discuss one simple example of something uniquely human that can encompass many of the aspects of anthropology listed above while demonstrating my premise. Are you ready?

Clothing. Yes, Clothing

Obviously, we do not have fur; we are not mere products of evolutionary exposure to the elements. We made choices as we developed as a species to don clothing, but why such an array of clothing, styles, fits, etc.? This single human behavior has so many psychological implications that a full dissertation could be, and probably has been written. For the purposes of this discussion and in my most fervent effort to stay largely on topic, I will apply the KISS concept. You know, Keep It Simple Stupid.

Clothing, what about it? We use clothing not only as a means of protecting ourselves from the natural elements, but also to shield our psychological and emotional vulnerabilities. We use clothing to mask our sense of insecurities, to highlight those things about ourselves that we desire to accent, and to either detract from or draw attention to ourselves.

Intimacy

What about when we are without this shield, this outer facade? What about when we have been literally laid naked, exposed to the world in all our glorious vulnerabilities? Oh boy, now we are ready for some growth, if we will listen. Listen? Yes, listen. Listen to our inner selves and to our partner and continue to take the risks of being that vulnerable as well as continuing to offer acceptance. The ups and downs of this learning process can be excruciating, but as we struggle through, we have the potential for great personal development.

Reflect to your own personal earliest experiences of taking your clothing off in front of a potential romantic/sexual partner. Do you recall the discomfort? Do you remember the great hesitations? What about embarrassment?

When we are naked, and visible to others, we have removed the one societal protection that most closely guards our psyche. By choosing to remove our clothing in the dim or bright lights of another's visibility we are simultaneously laying ourselves vulnerable. Sounds risky, huh?

IT IS! . . . However, there is the huge rewarding pay-off of the foundation for further risk taking and continued acceptance that in-turn builds the trust that leads to true intimacy.

Taking this a tiny step further, let's consider communications during sex. Exposing our naked bodies was a huge first step. Despite the number of times we have done this simple act, it is truly not a small thing at all. Now add communications during sex and we are talking a whole different level.

"Pillow talk" is easy for some, and extremely difficult for others. Perhaps it is the distraction for some, but I would argue that it is the fear of rejection thus vulnerability in most instances that is the distraction. Discussing our sexual fantasies, proclivities, and most especially any desires or mere thoughts about something out of the sphere of perceived normalcy takes courage and exposes us to the potential of rejection and emotional harm.

The man who admits his desire to receive or deliver oral sex to another male, for example, is taking a huge risk in admitting such to his female lover. While today, bi-sexual expressions for women are chic, this too was sociologically largely rejected until the late 20th century. What about the man or woman who secretly lusts after the sibling or parent of their partner? The human psyche and its partner, the libido, have a limitless range to its realm of thoughts and considerations. Sharing these thoughts, even if admitted that they are never to be acted upon, requires a willingness to be vulnerable to rejection.

This risk and reward dance between partners who are reciprocally accepting and encouraging of each other, even when they are shocked or not initially certain of their responses, leads to trust, and the repetition of this trust building leads to meaningful intimacy. Those who have discovered the level of intimacy to which I refer will attest to the validity of my promotions. Those who have yet to discover this simple, yet complex concept perhaps will find some encouragement in my proposal and take the risk to find the true Importance of Vulnerability.

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