

The Poetics of Vulnerability: An Artist's Experience of Exploring her Creative Edge

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Abstract: This article is an exploration of vulnerability and the experience I had as an artist inhabiting the art of writing poetry; a creative medium that is new to me. I begin with a brief examination of vulnerability as it is defined today culturally and move towards a personal exploration of what vulnerability feels like within an intentional and unfamiliar creative process. Through this process I learned from vulnerability– things like navigating open space, respecting how growth unfolds, that vulnerability is an integral part of loving an living life fully, the relationship between vulnerability and love, and the magic that happens when bodily experience aligns with word. This article is an exploration, and affirmation, of vulnerability as a deep site for learning and growth and a requirement, if we are to love deeply.

Keywords: vulnerability, poetic research, creativity, transformation, love

I learned very young to hide my vulnerability. Don't cry (you might never stop.) Don't be angry (it's not nice.) Don't be nervous (stay comfortable.) Being truthful about how I felt would have been like planting a new sprout in the middle of a busy Manhattan sidewalk and expecting it to live. Vulnerability was a landscape that I avoided at all costs and I created masks as I grew up to hide the truth of who I was. I learned how to please authority, to wear hip clothing in order to be accepted, and to shine in front of the class so that I got the most attention. I hid who I truly was because revealing my shaky inner truth felt dangerous and weak.

Dr. Brene Brown, who became well-known recently through her TED talk on vulnerability, has shed new light on how this country navigates emotional vulnerability. Brown (2012) writes "The perception that vulnerability is weakness is the most widely accepted myth about vulnerability and the most dangerous" (p. 32). Because of this collective denial of vulnerability, not only do we not know its profoundly transformative power, we do not have many guides to lead us safely into emotional vulnerability (Plotkin, 2008). It is obvious that in this country we are craving this guidance, when Dr. Brown (who expected about 500 hits) received over 1 million hits worldwide on her talk on vulnerability. Jean Vanier (1998), French philosopher writes, "We have disregarded the heart, seeing it only as a symbol of weakness, the centre of sentimentality and emotion, instead of as a powerhouse of love that can reorient us from our self-centredness, revealing to us and to others the basic beauty of humanity, empowering us to grow" (p. 78). Vanier writes that the vulnerable heart is a re-orienting powerhouse of love. Vulnerability is how love happens. We cannot love deeply if we are not willing to be vulnerable. Loving is risky, powerful business. Leaving limiting cultural messages behind that tell us otherwise, and reclaiming the power of loving vulnerably, takes the focused discipline of a warrior. When we come to know that what society has deemed "weak" is actually a place of empowerment, we begin to move towards the human experience of wholehearted and authentic living.

Pedagogy of Vulnerability

I want to say here, that I realize that there are many in this world who experience the vulnerability of hunger, poverty, pain, violence, and war on daily basis. They don't have the luxury of choosing the experience. They live it everyday. To have the safety to be able to feel fully, is a privilege (Boler, 1999), and those of us who live with greater physical comforts have that privilege. To be sitting comfortably in my home, or to have the financial resources to go on a retreat, allows me to explore my emotional landscape in ways that others might not. Threats to physical safety, service inaccessibility, or limited financial resources can make it much more difficult (but not impossible) to navigate vulnerability deeply. With privilege comes an increased number of choices to explore and deepen into the human experience. John O'Donohue (1999), the late Irish philosopher writes that "We are privileged, and the duty of privilege is absolute integrity" (p.101). Because culturally we continue to be silent around issues of shame and vulnerability (Brown, 2012), it is clear that we are not maximizing our privilege towards greater emotional health. In a culture where many of us are quite comfortable, where we have plenty of choices to engage emotionally with our lives, we often choose not to. It is only those who choose to traverse the edgy territory of vulnerability who come to know the profoundly transformative power of loving deeply.

Life is unpredictable and can take us into raw and vulnerable places without warning. The death of a parent, a life-threatening illness, an addiction, or the loss of a job can often leave us standing on very different emotional ground. We do not have a choice as to when, if, and how these situations will happen in our lives but we do have a choice as to how deeply we wish to engage the fragility of these human experiences. When we choose to dance with each experience fully, we begin to know in our bones the rich, textured learning that comes from diving into the depth of that experience. That depth is what many of us call love. I hit rock bottom in my alcohol and drug addiction at 19, faced a cancer diagnosis at age 24, and lost both of my parents in my early thirties as I was birthing my first son. I know vulnerability because life directed me towards it; many times without any warning. And though its landscape is as varied as each person's description of it, it is the place where I feel most alive and honest. When I am aligned with the truth of the moment, I can feel my heartbeat. I know I am alive. It is from this shaky place that I am empowered, with my feet planted firmly in the love that comes from embracing my vulnerability fully.

Not only can we not deeply love, we cannot know the truth of who we are without experiencing vulnerability. It is a natural human experience (Brown, 2012.) Vulnerability is not pathological. Rumi, the ancient Sufi poet and mystic writes, "Kiss the snake to discover the treasure" (Barks, 2002, p. 85). Many of us run from the snake, not because we don't long for the treasure, but because we were never taught to kiss it. In fact in this country, many of us were taught to run. Activist and teacher, Joanna Macy (1998) writes "Many of us who grew up in the dominant society or operate within it, hide our pain for the world, even from ourselves" (p. 31). Today we are told- through pain killers, food, sex, the enticing distraction of social media, and more- to move away from that deep, vital space within us. As we continue to experience less and less of our lives, we slowly become emotionally illiterate (Greenspan, 2003), less connected, and therefore less loving; mostly to ourselves. As we become more skillful at hiding, the masks that we wear then start to become rigid and slowly over time, we begin to forget what is truly living within us.

Discovering the treasure that Rumi speaks of has compelled me toward, rather than away from, being vulnerable. I crave the raw experience of being alive and I find it when I get outside of my comfort zone. When I notice that I am coasting through life, my soul gets restless. Again, I have the privilege of coasting through life, but comfort is not always what it is cut out to be. The experience of discomfort is a rich site for learning and transformation. Megan Boler, author of *Feeling Power: emotion and education*, writes that to engage discomfort pedagogically leads us to "inhabit a more ambiguous and flexible sense of self" (p. 176). Throughout my life, I have had guides, teachers, ministers, therapists, and monks who have affirmed the gifts that arise from being uncomfortable. I know myself more deeply, and experience a deeper sense of love and belonging in the world, because of jumping fully into the deep waters of vulnerability. To learn from vulnerability is to dive into its depths, but the discomfort, fear and even despair, can deter so many of us away. With many options to ignore, negate, divert, and distract from it, some days it might seem easier to sit on the couch or take a nap than to summon the courage it takes to dive in.

Once we kiss the snake and recover the treasure, it is hard to not want to return to the landscape of vulnerability. Transformation involves breaking free from the old to step into new ways of being, which requires stepping out of one's comfort zone. Taking a new way to work, trying out Ethiopian food, or telling the truth to the one person we never could, all have the potential to take us into new and potent learning. I find myself often packing my metaphorical

(and sometimes literal) backpack in search of a raw and real landscape— whether it is signing up for a year of dancing my prayers, sitting out next to the Snake River by myself with a bear 20 feet from me, or trying on a new creative medium like poetry for a month, I long for the vitality that traversing the unknown brings to me. The known is not inherently bad, but when I set up camp in the familiar the lackluster quality of complacency can slip into my life, often unnoticed.

O'Donohue (n.d.) writes that the unknown is the language of the soul. It is also the language of love. Loving is vulnerable because so much of the journey is unknown. Choosing a new form is to engage the soulful territory of vulnerability where I come to know new parts of myself and the world. Recently I went hiking in my favorite place, where trees line the paths, a creek moves underneath ice, and a buck stands on the side of a mountain at full attention. The place is alive. I began walking on the path that I always walk on, distracted in thoughts about the emails that I still needed to send, and phone calls that I needed to return. And all of a sudden my attention was drawn to a new path. The inner dialogue began: *Should I take it or should I just go the way I always do? I don't know where this new way goes. What if I get lost? What if I can't find my way out? What if there are wild animals in that part of the park? What if I die?* In spite of the fear, I watched my feet as they changed direction, one foot in front of the next, onto the new path. I found myself winding around bends I had never experienced, seeing deer that I had never seen, and facing irrational fears that I did not know lived inside of me. Choosing the new path invoked the experience of vulnerability and there was no more mulling over emails and phone calls. My attention to the moment was heightened because I had chosen to step into the unfamiliar.

Invoking Vulnerability by Choosing a New Artistic Form

I am an artist. The creative process heals me by moving my inner resistances, reminding me of my inherent beauty and wholeness, and reconnecting me with the unifying experience of being deeply loved. O'Donohue (2004) writes “When we discover our creativity, we begin to attend to this constant emergence of who we are. Our creativity is excited by what is new, different and concealed within us” (p. 143). I find great safety and challenge in the language of creative expression, and there are particular artistic forms that I am more comfortable with than others. I have danced around the world. I have performed and written music, and I play the piano, guitar, and harmonium. I am a writer and have written on a blog for nearly a decade. As a guide and educator, I have consistently witnessed how artistic expression offers healing and transformation to others. Because there is so much to discover within one medium, I enjoy working within the bounds of those that I am comfortable with—dance, music making, and creative non-fiction writing. But I also crave trying on new forms of creativity to learn more about myself, the artistic medium itself, and so much more.

Poetic Inquiry: Living My Learning, Learning my Living

Living wholeheartedly is courageous and heart-centered. It is about learning how to be hospitable to vulnerability and to the fragility of human life. I live fully when I embrace life with my whole body— letting the lightness of my breathing mingle with the heaviness of my matter. I live wholeheartedly when I am brave enough to live at the point where it all comes together— where the invisible meets the visible; where I open to life on life's terms. I live wholly when I can listen not only to my thoughts but to the singing of my taste buds. The art of poetics invokes and holds this wholeheartedness. Living and loving deeply is vulnerable which is why I can think of no better artistic form to frame this particular inquiry on vulnerability than poetics.

Poetry ushers me into the authentic expression of my life. Scholars today recognize and value this form of inquiry within the academy (Day & Guiney-Yallop, 2009; Leggo, 2006; Pelias, 2004; Snowber & Wiebe, 2009). The poetic scholar Carl Leggo (2006) writes “As a researcher I am a poet...I do not stand outside of experience in order to observe experience like a video camera recording an objective reality” (p. 76). When we join the academic world as researchers, scholars, students and teachers, we do not become robots or machines like the video camera Leggo speaks of. We are living, breathing human beings— breath and body, body and breath. We are not separate from life, but integral to it. Poetry honors this relationship, and reaches out to and from the human heart, embodying through artistic form what it means to be alive. Because of this intimacy with life, poetry is a very powerful mode of inquiry that invites us into the vitality of life, and then pulls us out in brave ways through its concise form. Poetry emerges from experience. It embodies the vastness of the infinite, and paradoxically, requires the focus of the poet to choose just the right word. Poetry at its best, speaks to both the personal and the universal. Rather than describing something from a distance, poetry is emergent from the experience itself (Leggo, 2006, p. 72). Poetry honors intimacy and relationship within the poet, as well as the one between the poet and the world around her. Poetry is transformative and is often a place where we can “uncover” and “recover” the self (Snowber & Wiebe, 2009). Poetics speak with clarity to the human experience (Prendergast, 2009) which makes it the ideal form with which to invoke and express, the human experience of living and loving, through the act of welcoming vulnerability.

Poetic inquiry is well-respected in the field of arts-based inquiry and its strengths are noted. Much work has been done, and continues to be done, to explore this mode of inquiry more deeply (Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009). Poetry allows for inquiry to remain circular and expansive, and welcomes those moments where we experience the “extraordinary in the ordinary” (Leggo, 2006, p. 87). It allows for the student to “connect artistic ways of knowing and rendering with lived reality” (Snowber & Wiebe, 2009) and invites the researcher to “go deeply” to the place where alchemy rises. There is a time for destinations, answers, and conclusions in learning, but poetic inquiry welcomes and affirms the magic that can happen in the moment. Within the academic world, where the mind-body split is apparent even today, poetic inquiry is brave and refreshing.

Wholeness, intimacy, love, and presence are all words that are slowly being reclaimed within the academy by brave and innovative scholars worldwide (Knowles & Cole, 2008; Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009). Many of us have been educated in a linear fashion; sitting in rows, searching for that one answer, and then carrying that answer to the destination of the teacher. It is difficult to hang out with more circular ways of knowing and teaching when one has spent decades immersed in this systematic approach (Tompkins, 1996). When I jump to abstractions, rather than attend to the details of the moment, I fear intimacy. I fear my experience. When I teach and I find myself engulfed in explanations, searching for answers that don’t exist, I am clear that I have abandoned the landscape of the creative unknown. I see the curtain close over the hearts and eyes of my students and I know that I have lost them. I swirl in generalizations and whitewash the diversity of human experience. No theory will save us from this. I have lost me and the only thing that will bring me back is bringing my attention back to the moment. It is in that moment where love lives. Poetry does this both in its detail and its universality, and it “allows me to go deeply” (Day & Guiney-Yallop, 2009) into my own experience.

In her article on vulnerability, scholar Dr. Celeste Snowber asks “What does the poetic have to teach us about living and teaching in all of our vulnerabilities?” (Snowber & Wiebe, 2009). This is the question that has guided the inquiry described in this article. Poetry invites me to face myself and to get intimate with the real me. Poetry has played a very important role in my personal healing and through my teaching, but I would never describe myself as a poet. When my pen touches the paper with the intent of crafting a poem my breath begins to shorten with resistance and my inner critic starts bellowing with judgement. When I encounter a poem I am suddenly faced with my insecurities, inadequacies, and blockages. To stop and take a new road artistically feels very uncomfortable to me. Dr. Lynn Fels (n.d.), arts-based researcher, writes that “such moments [of stopping] are uncomfortable” but having the courage to pause allows for new learning. I knew that engaging poetics would allow for me to grow in new ways, and it was just a matter of having the courage to try something new.

Thirty days ago I decided to begin a journey I called *The Poetry Project*, where each day I would write a poem and post it on my blog. I approached this inquiry as an artist, but I am also deeply affected by my roles as mother, teacher, and student. As a mother, I have cultivated love and patience for the creative process, as well as a heightened attention to the ordinary. As a teacher, I encounter the deep need to convey words that awaken, and I notice how often I feel that I fall short of that intention. As a student, I take advantage of the freedom to both explore and inquire, as well as the boundary of an assignment to keep me focused and committed to the poetics of vulnerability. The remainder of this article is an exploration of what taking on a new creative form can invoke within this artist. This inquiry is an attempt to explore the landscape of vulnerability with a deliberate and intentional artistic assignment, and to then share the pedagogical insights gathered from this deep and rich inquiry. Shaun McNiff, a pioneer in arts-based research, writes “the most meaningful insights often come by surprise” (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 40). I was surprised throughout this project—by my willingness to expose my engagement with a new artistic form to others, by the response that I received from readers, by the rich learning that can take place when I make myself vulnerable, and by the wider conversation I found myself in because of the inquiry itself.

What I Learned Along the Way

The Space Between

To choose words and put them out into the world poetically leaves open space between the reader, the writer, and the poem itself. The poet is invited to trust that the words chosen for the poem align with the truth of the felt moment. Jean Vanier (1998) writes that truth flows from the experience of our bodies. I learned throughout this process by staying close to my bodily experience, particularly through the vulnerable moments. Staying present to the creative process, and to the inner critic, was challenging for me at times. To hold the tension between what was trying to come forth, and what was trying to stop it, felt as if the truth was leaking out through a filter that was not big enough for it. Anne Lamott (1994), spiritual writer and teacher, writes that what the writer often starts with is not her true soul or center of character. When the noise of the inner critic became louder than that of the creative soul it became difficult, if not impossible, to find what felt like the right poetic words. But when they found me, I knew it because they spoke to my life—the life of the poet— but they also spoke to the heart of the whole. David Whyte (n.d.), the Welsh poet writes, “...all poems are an emblem of courage and the attempt to say the unsayable; but only a few are able to speak to something universal yet personal and distinct at the same time; to create a door through which others can walk into what previously seemed

unobtainable realms, in the passage of a few short lines.” Ultimately my level of poetic authenticity was gauged by my gut. I knew when I was coming from the truth and I knew when my inner critic had bullied me into something else.

Holding this dichotomy of the personal and the universal felt strenuous at times. I found myself directing my attention to the reader rather than to the moment, and I longed to insert myself into the empty space between the reader and me; trying to control how the poem landed on the other. This control tightened the space between all parties– the poem, the poet and the reader– and made whatever was created much smaller than if it were allowed to breathe into the space around it. Space allows the poem to land on the reader spontaneously, in a way that is relevant and meaningful to the reader. But it is the poet first who must tap into that openness so that the truest words can be found.

The body of the earth
radiating soul out from beneath...
 the rhythm of your beating heart
 the apple oatmeal crisp
 the deep blue ocean eyes of our children
Innocence and enchantment align in these things.
From this magic,
wonder is reclaimed.
Wholeness is born.

This particular poem above, which was the first poem I wrote for the project, holds words like– apple oatmeal crisp, children, radiating, magic, wonder, and wholeness– words that generally fall lightly on a soul. I noticed that this poem, relative to the others that came later, was very easy to share. As I took greater poetic risks, my vulnerability heightened because the potential for connection is greater. There were times that I wanted to delete, hide, or mask what was true in the moment. But because I know deeply the rich pedagogical landscape of vulnerability, I often decided not to filter. The nakedness that I felt in taking this risk was palpable. Because of this, writing a poem every day like I had planned, did not work. When I shared more deeply in a poem, the space between me, the reader, and the poem became much harder to bear. Vulnerability, love, and connection are all sisters; part of the same family. The vulnerability that I felt trumped my commitment to the assignment that I had given to myself. By being honest with myself about my own limits, and creating the boundaries that were needed to take care of myself, I found later, that poetically I had much more to give.

Wrestling with the Form

Boundaries are inherent in the learning process. We come up against them constantly both inside and outside of ourselves. An assigned project, the human body, deadline dates for an article, intentions we have set– these boundaries give us a container to explore an experience more deeply. Healthy limits give birth to intimacy. The banks of a river, or the pitcher that holds the morning’s orange juice, are needed if we are to fish or have a drink. These limits also change to the degree that the form grows. The banks of a river that spill over with an abundance of rain, no longer suffice as they once did. When the form of one thing becomes too small or too big for another, that particular form no longer serves. A new river bank, way of being, or assignment is needed.

In the Hebrew scriptures, in the book of Genesis we find the story of Jacob who wrestles intensely with an angel throughout the night on Mount Peniel. Jacob, the son of Isaac, tells the

angel that he will not leave until he has been blessed with a new name. He limps away from the encounter with a hip joint out of socket and a new name, Israel. Jacob is changed by that struggle on every level. Wrestling is such a physical act as there is resistance and friction between forms; one body against another, one opinion encounters another, or the back and forth between two possibilities. Form rubs up against form which causes change to both, and because of this friction, resistance generally has negative associations attached to it. But like a seed pod that protects the life within it, this wrestling helps the seed to grow, until its shell is no longer needed.

Haiku is a short form of Japanese poetry with its root word meaning “cutting.” In creating a haiku, the process of discernment is severely refined because there are stricter limits to the form. Words must be cut out and chosen to fit the form. Within these poetic limits, I often found myself rubbing up against the form, and going out of its bounds without even knowing it.

Leaves shake in the wind.

One dead branch rises from center.

Cutting through the space.

I wrote this poem above on the third day of the project, and when I went back to read it, I noticed that I did not adhere to the traditional form of seven syllables in the second line. This neglect for form reminded me of an experience I had many years ago. At one time, I regularly engaged in the spiritual practice of walking a labyrinth. This involves following a maze-like path from the outside in where the walker ends up in the center and slowly winds her way back out. There are many ways in which to walk a labyrinth; like symbolically carrying one of your troubles in, leaving it in the center, and then finding your way out renewed. One of the days that I visited the labyrinth at an old stone Protestant church in downtown Colorado Springs, I was moved from within to do it differently. Rather than walking in the lines of the pathway inwards, I danced. I danced all over that labyrinth, crossing lines, finding center and then hopping all the way back out. *I got to know the lines on that labyrinth so well that I no longer needed them.*

This however was not the case with this haiku. My addition of one syllable had more to do with ignorance of the form, than familiarity with it. A form can be abandoned prematurely, not because it is no longer needed, but because it is uncomfortable in some way— like taking a scab off of a wound before it is ready. When we outgrow form, there is no more fight or friction; like the dance on the labyrinth or a scab falling off on its own. A new way is being born because the old is dying off. Occupying a form to its fullest capacity causes the old form to naturally slough off, like a snake rubbing its way out of dead skin. The snake does not run midway out of the process, just like the emergence of a butterfly from the cocoon takes time. It must succumb to the death of its shell before it can slither its way into new space. Then the process of growing into new form begins once again.

Navigating Nakedness Prematurely

The butterfly emerges wet, naked, new, and vulnerable to her surroundings. *The Poetry Project* began as an exploration of my relationship to the wilderness, and surprisingly I found that the more deeply I focused on the Earth body, the more deeply I entered into my own body. John O'Donohue calls this experience “clay returning to clay” (2004, p. 17) and writes that we have forgotten that we belong to the earth of our bodies and to that of the planet. They are one and the same. To be in relationship with the living planet means to be in relationship with what is real—what is here and now. To be in touch with matter, with embodied experience, means to be in touch with change, cooperation, loving intelligence, death, birth, and the slow rhythm of the universal soul. If we choose to, we can be in touch with all of it. David Abram (2010),

environmental philosopher and cultural ecologist, writes that when we “shelter ourselves from the harrowing vulnerability of bodied existence,” we “by the same gesture...insulate ourselves from the deepest wellsprings of joy” (p. 7). Connecting to the Earth connects us immediately to the vulnerability of our own bodies and to the connection we have with each other. As I wrote directly about the planet, I found my writings weaving their way back into the personal, details of my life. Paulo Freire (1997), the great Brazilian educational philosopher and activist, writes “The more rooted I am in my location, the more I extend myself to other places..no one becomes local from a universal location” (p. 39). We reach the universal by tapping into what is local, and for the poet, that locality begins with the body. I am the one who separates myself from the larger Earth body, and when I stop to create space to align more deeply with the organic and natural intelligence of creativity, that flow fuses together any division I thought was ever there. The result is loving connection.

When we choose to be in relationship with vulnerability, we choose to be in relationship to our whole lives, not just the parts we like or feel good or comfortable. It is like jumping into a pool. When you jump in, you jump in. You can choose what part of the pool you jump into, but the water permeates everything. Dr. Brene Brown (2012) said in her Ted talk on shame, that she did not learn about vulnerability by studying vulnerability. She learned about it by studying shame. They come in partnership– the light and the dark– and we cannot have one over the other, no matter how hard we try. Heaven and earth, body and breath, fear and love–we know one because we know the other. Vulnerability is akin to wholeness- it is the full bodied experience of being alive. Some might call this love. To learn from these fertile waters, we must be willing to wade into them. Here is an abridged version of a poem I wrote about my experience with anorexia-nervosa as a undergraduate student in the early 1990s.

To be able to control one small thing
like the amount of food I put in my mouth,
led to elation.

Not feeling was the order of the day.
My body starved as I spent more and more time
in the la-la land of my thoughts.
Ribs poking through my skin,
cheek bones rising beneath my eye sockets,
jeans falling off my body,
"Wow Jenny, you look so skinny."
Mission accomplished.

The socially-approved boniness of my body drugged me.
The illusion of control turned my desperation into arrogance
leading me further and further away
from the reality of my humanness.
I was on top of the world not in it.

When I published this poem on my blog, the edginess within me was palpable. In his book, *Ensouling Language: On the Art of Non-Fiction and the Writer's Life*, author Stephen Buhner (2010) writes “If you wish to be more than a typist of words, you have no choice, you

must extend awareness further than society wants to go” (p. 36). After writing this poem, I found myself nervously checking my blog and my Facebook page, to see if anyone had responded. I knew by my overanxious response that I had “left the certainty of dry land” and entered the “deep interior life that flows beneath the shallow surface of reason” (Buhner, 2010, p. 37). I have left “dry land” many times in my life in all kinds of ways, but the nakedness that I felt this time was different. I felt like I had left dry land too soon. The nakedness did not feel productive, it felt like vulnerability on steroids. When the form that protects what is precious is shed too soon, the process of transformation is aborted (Greenspan, 2010). Here is an abridged version of a poem that emerged from this unprotected interior place.

The vulnerable is cracked open raw.
And sometimes it needs a shell.
The caterpillar in its chrysalis.
Those things are hard on the outside
if you have ever felt one,
they move and squiggle
when they are ready to be shed.
The pod that is home to the potent little seed,
The shell on the oyster, on the turtle,
on me.

Knock on it–
the shell that is,
and know deeply that it isn't pathological.
It protects what is real.

Because I left the cocoon of safety too soon, my retreat back into it was longer. It was days again before I could sit down to write another poem. I needed time to recuperate, and recover from what Brown (2012) calls a “vulnerability hangover.” But I was curious: who forced this poem out of that dark creative womb prematurely and why? Pushing someone off of the cliff before they are ready to fly is not the pathway to transformation. It leads to death.

Choosing a new form is vulnerable enough but sometimes the overachiever in takes the unloving route, and goes for more rawness than my Ego is ready for. I was not ready to reveal what was still evolving me. I tried to breathe on the cocoon and my writing came out too soon; not ready yet to flap its wings. Pushing relentlessly hurts my soul. There is a time for revelation and a time for retreat. I did not honor what was being born in this new poetic form. Like taking a scab off before the skin underneath has healed, I pulled this particular poem out too soon, and the wound that inspired it was no longer protected.

There is a difference between the vulnerability that I can grow from and the seed that still needs its pod. Buhner says “It was feeling that brought you to writing” (p. 39) and it is essential to respect that feeling as it incubates, before revealing it to the world. My Ego had other intentions with this poem and my mask entered unnoticed. I pushed this poem out into the world because I felt vulnerable already from this project, and one of my primary tactics to avoid vulnerability, is to seek attention. This poem is true in word but not in its delivery. It speaks to my experience of anorexia but the intention was misguided. Buhner writes “It is only when that deeper part [within you], that part that is exceptionally sensitive to untruth..says the work is true,

that the work really is right, that it really is done” (p. 39). I wanted attention from the readers to distract me from the vulnerability I was feeling as a result of this project. So I pushed a poem out of me before it was time, and I felt naked prematurely.

When It Rings True

When the words that come out align almost perfectly with what is happening within me, magic happens. And sometimes that magic hurts and comes totally unexpectedly. When I sat down to write a poem on this day, I did not expect my father’s deepest wound to weave its way onto my paper. Here is an abridged version of that poem.

My Dad pooped in a bag for years
and years and years
almost his whole life,
as long as I knew him.
We never talked about it.
Not until he died.

Facing one's shit on a daily basis
must get old.
Unless you don't.
Denial ain't just a river in Egypt
but it ran like a river through my house.
The silence that covers the shit and the shame
was almost too much to bear.

I took the bag off of his paralyzed, lung-cancered body.
His deep blue Irish eyes met mine,
locked in trust,
and through my squinched up nose
I summoned every ounce of Love I had for that man,
and shot it through the eyes that I got from him.
He trusted me with his shit,
and freed me from the dark thoughts that plagued him
and me.

We are stinky, sweaty, succulent creatures.
It is the messy stuff that will save us,
humble us,
keep things real,
and return us to the deep dark Earth
that never judged the poop in the first place.

Natalie Goldberg (1986), author and teacher, writes “Writing practice means to deal ultimately with your whole life” (p. 4). Writing in a new form allowed me to see my life from a different perspective. I explored very painful parts of my life in ways that I did not as a writer of creative

non-fiction. Poetics is more refined than other forms of writing. There is less space to explain, discuss, defend, or justify in a poem and in fact doing so, takes the power right out of the art.

Paying attention to the details of life is required in poetry, and this attentiveness to the ordinary only intensifies vulnerability. Brown (2012) said that she became a researcher to avoid intimacy and she said that revealing that fact to the audience was terribly vulnerable for her. It is easy in academic writing to avoid the details and go for the abstract (Pelias, 2004). But like Freire said, we cannot get to the local through the universal. To know life more intimately, we must be willing to attend to the details of our own lives. Through these details, we connect not only to ourselves but to each other and to the planet. When I align with what is true from me, I can see that truth in the lives of others— whether that be a broken heart grieving the loss of a loved one or the bark on a tree that hides and protects what lives underneath. Either way, I can relate to it and it is through that relationship that I know life more deeply. John Tarrant (1998), director of the *Pacific Zen Institute*, writes that integrity (from that Latin *integritas* meaning wholeness) is “right relationship with eternity” (p. 198). Wholeness, integrity, vulnerability, love, and alignment all have something to do with one another. When I allow myself to be open to my life experience (vulnerability), I experience alignment with “eternity”, which Tarrant calls integrity. And when I learn to value all of my experiences, I come to know wholeness or love. It is through the vulnerability, being open to shaky inner ground, that I deepen into relationship with myself and the life I am immersed in.

Closing Thoughts

I was surprised by what surfaced for me in this short self-assigned project. Although I expected learning to happen, I was surprised by the meaning that emanated from simply choosing a new creative form. By stopping and invoking vulnerability through poetics, I learned a great deal about myself. Attending to the space that this project created awakened me to my need to control the creative process; to abandon the open, vulnerable space for something known. I also learned that choosing the truth over safety continues to be the most fruitful place of learning for me. I learned that pushing my creativity out prematurely, in order to mask my vulnerability, is unloving and caused me excessive discomfort and insecurity, resulting in the need for deeper self-care. Some knowings were also confirmed for me through this project like this one: whether the form is new or old, when I trust that I am immersed in the intelligence of creativity itself, immersed in the loving pulse of this life, I am at my best. I can feel it.

I walked in the woods today
while the geese honked above me.
My attention drew upward,
and I was reminded of Mary Oliver's words:
The wild geese,
high in the clean blue air
are heading home again.

The geese formed a perfect V,
flapping their wings in sync with each other.
Who says wildness has no rhythm?

I cut part of my fingernail off last week
while chopping chard.
The pain didn't come at first,

but then it came on like a vengeance.
I washed it, wrapped it,
bandaged it,
and continued to chop.

My finger is healed,
the nail is growing,
the blood is where it should be,
and there is no pain.

Life rallies towards wholeness
by honoring brokenness.
Everything eventually
rises up for the greatest good
of what they belong to.

Today I marvel
at the unfettered
and glorious intelligence
of this life.

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