

WHEN DID VULNERABILITY BECOME DESIRABLE?

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William “Moose” Skowron was a major league right handed first baseman who played in seven world Series with the Yankees and in one with the Dodgers during a career that spanned thirteen seasons from 1954 to 1967. I don’t know when he acquired the nickname “moose;” maybe because he was solidly built at 5’11” and 195 lbs. Growing up in southern Connecticut I watched most of my baseball on station WPIX out of New York, which televised all of the Yankees’ home games. Moose enjoyed a respectable career with a lifetime batting average of .282, hitting 211 home runs and batting in 888 runs. But Moose exhibited a serious batting flaw. He would flail at pitches thrown in the dirt off the outside corner of the plate, often resulting in strike outs at crucial times of the game. This vulnerability wasn’t much of a problem with the power hitting Yankees. There was often a runner on third base when Moose came to the plate, so pitchers were reluctant to throw a pitch in the dirt for fear that it would elude the catcher and result in the run scoring from third.

Following a series of trades, Moose ended up with the Los Angeles Angels in the last year of his career. Owned by Gene Autry, the Angels came into the American League as an expansion team in 1961. When I moved to southern California in 1963 the Angels were still playing in Dodger Stadium, and as an expansion team with little success, were playing second fiddle to their hosts. I started going to Angels games and soon became a fan. The following years were not very successful for the Angels until amazingly in 1967 they found themselves in the heat of an August pennant race with the Boston Red Sox. Having swept the Sox in a three game series, the Angels were just a game and a half out of first place and starting a three game stint against the Minnesota twins. The Red Sox had already lost in their game that day, so if the Angels were able to beat the twins they would be virtually tied for first place, a first in franchise history.

The Minnesota game was close, and in their last at bat in the top of the ninth the Angels found themselves one run down with two outs and the bases loaded. And guess who stepped up to the plate as a pinch hitter. Moose had been used sparingly in his last season with a batting average of only .220 and a paltry 10 runs batted in. Moose had worked the count to two balls and two strikes. I had a foreboding about what was about to happen. Moose was vulnerable and, even in the days before computer assisted scouting, the Minnesota pitcher was fully aware of Moose’s weak spot. But would he throw that dangerous outside pitch in the dirt with a runner on third? I held my breath. I’d like to say that 13 years in the majors had instilled restraint in Moose. But no. The pitcher threw that outside curve and as fate foretold, Moose went after it as it bounded in the dirt. Strike three.

The Angels never got any closer to the Red Sox in 1967 and it wasn’t until twelve years later that the Angels made the American League playoffs for the first time.

Vulnerable is ultimately derived from the Latin noun *vulnus* ("wound"). "Vulnus" led to the Latin verb *vulnerare*, meaning "to wound," and then to the Late Latin adjective *vulnerabilis*, which became "vulnerable" in English in the early 1600s. "Vulnerable" originally meant "capable of being physically wounded," but since the late 1600s, it has also been used figuratively to suggest a defenselessness against non-physical attacks. In other words, someone (or something) can be vulnerable to criticism or failure as well as to literal wounding. When it is used figuratively, "vulnerable" is often followed by the preposition "to." Moose Skowron was vulnerable to outside pitches in the dirt.

Historically, and up until recently, "vulnerability" has been viewed as a quality to be exploited for someone or something's benefit. In the "Hobbit," by J. R. Tolkien, Smaug the Dragon is an evil presence not adverse to wanton destruction. But Smaug was vulnerable. He had one physical weak spot. When Bilbo Baggins confronted the dragon in his lair, he discovered a bare patch on the left side of Smaug's chest. Bard fired a black arrow into the vulnerable spot on the dragon's belly. Roaring in fury and pain, Smaug fell from the sky and plummeted into the flaming ruins of Lake-town, his death marked the end of dragons in Middle Earth.

As the Game of Thrones played out in the Battle of Winterfell, it seemed that the Night King of the White Walkers was invincible. Dragonglass couldn't kill him. Fire from Daenerys Targaryen's dragon couldn't slay him. All seemed lost. But wait, it seems that the Night King was vulnerable after all. With the fight looking all but lost for the good guys as the Night King's zombie army continued to cut down the few remaining survivors, Arya Stark unsheathed her dagger of Valyrian steel and plunged it into the Night King, a blow that finished him and his White Walkers for good.

Nowadays it seems that "vulnerability" is not what it used to be. It has morphed from the practical realm of exploitation to a basic spiritual question of how we're going to live with the fact of our vulnerability and whether we're either going to expose ourselves by expressing it or wall it off. And apparently the definition of "vulnerability" has changed without the knowledge of editors of various dictionaries, who still define the term as follows:

Longman Concise English Dictionary

Vulnerable. 1. Capable of being physically or mentally wounded. 2. Open to attack or damage, assailable.

Now we have this:

"Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path."

— Brené Brown, **Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead**

And this:

“It’s very hard to have ideas. It’s very hard to put yourself out there, it’s very hard to be vulnerable, but those people who do that are the dreamers, the thinkers and the creators. They are the magic people of the world.”

— Amy Poehler, Yes Please

Fortunately I’ve discovered a UU minister who has endeavored to reconcile the classic versus new age views of vulnerability. He is Rev. Roger Bertschausen.

“THE SHADOW SIDE OF VULNERABILITY” A sermon by Rev. Roger Bertschausen, Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Appleton, Wisconsin, March 2016

Rev. Roger Bertschausen leads with the following statement:

“In a [recent] sermon, I made a case for expressing rather than walling off our vulnerability. Today I want to temper that sentiment by saying we also need to develop a streak of steel within ourselves. I’m not sure most of us could survive without some steel within us. Maybe a few Buddhist souls could. But not most of us.”

“In recent years, we Unitarian Universalists have often lifted up the need to express our vulnerability as a virtue. So I ask: Is expressing our vulnerability always a virtue?”

“Don’t get me wrong:[he continues] I’m not against expressing our vulnerability. In my sermon on vulnerability last year, I noted that without vulnerability, genuine connection with our deepest self or with other people is not possible.”

[But] *“Being vulnerable with others is not always a good thing. We need to express our vulnerability, and we need to make sure that the streak of steel is there, too. We need to be aware of when exercising our vulnerability muscle isn’t such a good thing.”*

Bertschausen adds: *“Let’s say I majorly screw up at home. It’s good to admit that I’ve done so, to admit the exact nature of my wrongdoing. As I do so, it might be good to show my vulnerability—unless in so doing I’m consciously or unconsciously trying to diminish or pre-empt my partner’s anger. I need to avoid expressing my vulnerability with the unspoken message of ‘See how vulnerable I am. Now don’t be a meanie and stay angry.’ I have seen folks use their vulnerability as a way to manipulate others. I’ve been manipulated by folks who have used their vulnerability in ways like this. And, if I’m honest, I can think of times when I’ve done the same to others.”*

Bertschausen continues: *“Here are good questions to ask yourself before expressing your vulnerability: Is there a power difference between the other person and me, with me at the low end? If so, will my sharing my vulnerability expose me to unnecessary danger? And what is the motivation for my expressing my vulnerability? Is it to open myself to genuine connection with the other person? Or is it so I can manipulate her or him, or keep the focus on me?”*

Rev. Bertschausen concluded his sermon with the following: *“I’ve come up with what I’m calling the Vulnerability Courage Prayer: “God, grant me the courage to have a streak of steel when I*

need it, the courage to express my vulnerability when I need that, and the wisdom to know when to do which."

In this new age when sensitivity to other people's feelings and vulnerabilities holds sway, I can only imagine how Moose Skowron, Smaug and the Ice King would have reacted. I can see the three of them in a 21st century focus group:

Moose Skowron: *"You may admire my credentials as a ball player and you might think I'm pretty good, but I need to level with you. I'm vulnerable to curve balls low and outside in the dirt."*

Smaug the Dragon: *"For as long as I can remember I've devastated villages with my skillful use of pyrotechnics without letting you know that all along I've had a soft spot in my tummy."*

The Night King of the Ice Walkers: *"For eight seasons of Game of Thrones I've been terrorizing the North without revealing my medical condition. This was unfair. I've always been allergic to Valyrian steel."*

Of course these confessions are ludicrous, but perhaps no less so than the modern tendency of some individuals and groups to voice their vulnerabilities as a plea for redress rather than nurturing their resolve to deal with them. Indeed, so many people expressed vulnerability to a recent article in our own Unitarian Universalist World magazine that the editor promised to employ "sensitivity readers" to shield them.

I'll conclude with a quote that appears to sum up our modern understanding of vulnerability:

"Vulnerability is the only authentic state. Being vulnerable means being open, for wounding, but also for pleasure. Being open to the wounds of life means also being open to the bounty and beauty. Don't mask or deny your vulnerability: it is your greatest asset. Be vulnerable: quake and shake in your boots with it. The new goodness that is coming to you, in the form of people, situations, and things can only come to you when you are vulnerable, i.e. open."

– Stephen Russell, Barefoot Doctor's Guide to the Tao: A Spiritual Handbook for the Urban Warrior

End of Jim's remarks.

Discussion Questions.

Is vulnerability an endearing trait?

Can a hero be a super hero without being vulnerable to something?

Who is your favorite super hero, and why?

In what situation or group, if any, do you feel comfortable in confiding your vulnerability to something. Is it helpful to do so?

If someone confesses their vulnerability to something, does that make you feel superior?

Why do you suppose we've come to understand "vulnerability" as an opportunity rather than a weakness.

In soccer, when player A causes a collision with player B such that player B falls to the ground and writhes in agony, the offending player A will often fall to the ground and try to out writhe B in an effort to prevent censure or expulsion. Is this a vulnerability war?