

January 19, 2020

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Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, 2 Corinthians 6:11-13,
Philippians 2:5-8, Matthew 26:39-42

The Message: “How I Learned to be Vulnerable at Avalanche School”

A party of eight set out to ski the southern slope of Microdot Peak in Alaska. All were experienced skiers. Some had spent more than 100 days in the backcountry that winter. They were all graduates of Avalanche School. They’d refined their safety assessment and prediction skills. A few had triggered and survived avalanches. One had witnessed an avalanche fatality. They were familiar with the creation of snow slabs by a combination of snow and wind that can change shape with the stress of a skier, carving over the surface.

“A slab can detach from the stable snowpack beneath it and careen downhill into a many-ton, half-frozen wave, before settling into a substance resembling cement.”

They tested the snow by drilling down into the slabs on their way to the summit. Four reached the bottom safely. The fifth triggered a slab avalanche that carried him 700 feet over a rock ledge, partly burying him and two others. There were no fatalities that day, but not because of the decisions that the skiers made.

Everything I learned about surviving an avalanche I learned from Heidi Julavits in her recent New York Times article, “What I Learned in Avalanche School.”

What she learned was that humans cause avalanches. The decisions expert skiers make cause avalanches. And the first thing she learned was that just attending the course increased the likelihood that she would die in an avalanche. Why? Here is what she learned:

1. The experts must know what they’re doing, and so it’s safe to unquestioningly follow them. The Expert Halo
2. What worked in the past will work in the future. Consistency
3. Failing to remain vigilant when faced with the known. Familiarity More people die in avalanches when they know that the risk is high.
4. Every moment you don’t turn around for home, it becomes harder to do so. Commitment
5. Powder Fever: it will never be better than it is now. Scarcity
6. Everybody’s doing it, so it must be O.K. Social Facilitation/Peer Pressure

To avoid all these traps, the broad solution is

1. group decision-making,
2. constant communication
3. the regular practice of emotional vulnerability, most often felt as anxiety about being rejected, shamed, or judged as inadequate. It has been defined by Brene Brown as “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” (2012).

“It’s not easy being green.” Kermit the Frog of Sesame Street fame has been singing that song in our heads for 50 years this week. It stuck because in it, Kermit expressed an emotional vulnerability rarely shared openly, let alone in children’s programming, where characters like Elmer Fudd and Wile E. Coyote who barreled ahead in life oblivious even in the face of perpetually repeated insurmountable obstacles.

Not many of us willingly place ourselves in the position of being publicly vulnerable. Being exposed to criticism and embarrassment or even danger and hurt isn't something many of us would want. Preachers do it every Sunday if we bring our sins to the scripture, which is the most honest form of preaching.

Kermit made it okay to be vulnerable. So did Mr. Rogers.

But, perhaps emotional vulnerability is something that goes back farther. I started to think about all the times that people in scripture have made themselves vulnerable. And after a cursory survey and a brief google, I had over forty passages -- and realised that I couldn't have /Dirk read all of them!

What I learned in avalanche school is that, in order to live out our faith, vulnerability is to some extent a given.

Jewish leaders in the Hebrew scriptures often fit the pattern of Call

- Refusal of the call on the basis of some perceived vulnerability
- Rejection of the call, usually because of bad decisions
- Learning that despite their weakness, a Call is a Call
- God will accompany them no matter what.

1. Abraham was too old,
2. Moses was a nobody,
3. Isaiah believed every word he spoke was sinful and likely stuttered.

In the Christian scriptures, it's clear, over and over again, that it is Christ who makes himself vulnerable. In every possible way:

- physically,
- emotionally,
- spiritually.

From the shortest verse in the bible: "Jesus wept." to the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus opened himself to questions, tests, taunts, jeers, accusations, capture, beating, and ultimately execution of those in power who opposed him.

That wasn't all. That would be true of many rebels with a cause. But the person we follow opened himself for a reason: to heal the world.

In Matthew's Gospel, the first thing Jesus does after calling the disciples is to open himself to heal "every disease and sickness among the people."

When we love as Christ calls us to, we open ourselves up to having that love rejected by others, especially our enemies, and when we forgive time and time again, we also expose ourselves to having people take us for granted.

Emotional availability, honesty and compassion factor into any worthwhile relationship. While our vulnerability shouldn't be taken advantage of, when we open our hearts to others and are completely honest with them, we can experience the fullness of a loving relationship.

In a similar way, our understanding that we need to be entirely honest with God is a crucial part of getting close to God. It can be scary admitting to things which would usually leave us open to

rejection, but with God that's not something we have to worry about. God offers us a refuge from all that.

Being forgiving and loving can leave us exposed to hurt but they're two things we must continually do...

Luke 6:27-29 - But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either.

Being emotionally vulnerable is an essential human value for surviving in avalanche country. But being spiritually vulnerable is also absolutely essential for surviving as a member of the body of Christ in our world.

There are times we may feel extremely weak, but we can be assured that God's strength is always on hand and it surpasses our own...

2 Corinthians 13:4 - For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him.