

vulnerable2024  
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Bio: Barbara Wolf Terao grew up as a Unitarian Universalist in Northfield, Minnesota. She and her husband, Donald, raised their two daughters in Evanston, Illinois and now live near their children and grandchild on Whidbey Island. Barbara has been a teacher, psychologist, land ethic leader, and television host, and writer. The message of *Reconfigured*, her memoir? When your life calls, listen. Barbara's articles and essays have appeared in *The Seattle Times*, *Orion*, *Association for Humanistic Psychology* journal, *Writer's Digest*, *Art in the Time of Unbearable Crisis*, and other publications, as well as on her Of the Earth website and Substack (<https://barbaraterao.substack.com/p/quote-and-tote>).

Title: More Than a Box of Chocolates: Heart-Opening Vulnerabilities and Their Gifts

Brief description: Researcher Brene Brown asserts, "Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change." While many of us tend to hide or deny our vulnerabilities, we all have them. What benefits might they hold for us? What is the soul trying to tell us? Exploring five varieties of vulnerabilities, Barbara Wolf Terao unearths gems from our deepest selves for our consideration.

#### MORE THAN A BOX OF CHOCOLATES: HEART-OPENING VULNERABILITIES AND THEIR GIFTS

I've counted all the varieties of vulnerabilities and there are a million. I'm focusing on five.

As social science researcher Brené Brown wrote in her books, vulnerability is universal. It's a big part of being human and connecting with others.

Writing is my creative path and, as Brown said in one of her TED Talks, "Without vulnerability, you cannot create." With that in mind, I decided to explore types of vulnerabilities and the gifts they offer to us mortal souls.

At what age do we become aware of our fears and frailties? Here's a poem by Billy Collins that suggests an answer: "On Turning Ten" (in *The Art of Drowning*, pages 49-49).

#### POEM

**1.** To start with **Physical vulnerability**, Shakyamuni Buddha identified four universal types when, as Prince Siddhartha, he ventured beyond the palace walls: birth, old age, sickness, and death. These are known as the four sufferings we

experience over the span of a lifetime. From birth on, we're often dependent on loved ones, caregivers, and others for protection, sustenance, and healing.

The Latin root of “vulnerable” is “vulnus,” meaning to wound, either emotionally or physically. As we become adults, we usually prefer to avoid pain and injury, though it's not always possible. We are born dependent on others, grow to be independent individuals, and eventually, if so inclined—as Shakyamuni was—we recognize our interdependence with all beings.

Somewhat like the metaphorical fall in the poem I read, I had a literal fall off my bicycle when I was young. At my middle school the next day, I was limping through the halls, wincing with pain. I'd been taking my body for granted and did NOT like being slowed down—or feeling fallible. A friend named Gregg noticed my struggle and helped me get to class for the next few days until I could walk properly again. From that experience, I gained more gratitude, because I discovered that health and fitness are not guaranteed, and that accepting help from others is not so bad.

I think one reason Gregg had empathy for me was because he himself had been injured in a snowmobile accident the year before. He knew something about the sufferings of the body. "Pain is the first proper step to real compassion," wrote Whidbey author David Whyte in his book, *Consolations*. "It can be a foundation for understanding all those who struggle with their existence. Experiencing real pain ourselves, our moral superiority comes to an end; we stop urging others to get with the program, to get their act together or to sharpen up, and start to look for the particular form of debilitation, visible or invisible that every person struggles to overcome."

For me, and perhaps for those who've experienced COVID, illness was a deep dive into vulnerability. Though we may have been healthy, strong, and capable in the past, we find ourselves in need of care. We face our frailty, whether we want to or not.

For more than a year I had to rely on others for help. When people said I was brave in dealing with cancer, I didn't feel brave; I was just doing what was required to survive. I think complimenting my courage was their way of acknowledging how illness and injuries make us vulnerable—and how scary that can be.

Perhaps some of you noticed the image on the screen of a cup that had been broken and was mended with gold. That's called Kintsugi, a form of Japanese art related to wabi sabi, an artistic appreciation tinged with melancholy of objects that are

imperfect and impermanent. I like it because it reminds us there is beauty in our broken places.

Which brings us to:

**2. Emotional vulnerability** is a big one! As Pastor Jordan Rice of Renaissance Church in Harlem said, “Vulnerability means intentionally putting yourself in a position that allows yourself to be hurt but for the purpose of gaining something better.” For instance, some people have mixed feelings about falling in love—euphoric on the one hand, and apprehensive of being hurt on the other. The risk of emotional exposure is real.

At times, we are made to feel bad about ourselves. For some people, this kind of damage is systemic. (In *You Are Your Best Thing*) Yolo Akili Robinson, founder of Black Emotional and Mental Health Collective, wrote, "Shame is not your name. Shame is not my name. ... Sometimes I wake up and have to remind myself: I am unlearning generations of harm and remembering love."

The more we slow down and process our feelings, such as in a journal or with a trusted listener, the more we understand ourselves and can make proactive decisions moving forward. Author Eszter Czirjak wrote that "In Western culture, we strive to suppress what are considered negative emotions," yet feelings like sadness are an "an alert from our soul."

(Robert A. Johnson, *We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love*. p. xii) "Carl Jung said that if you find the psychic wound in an individual or a people, there you also find their path to consciousness. For it is in the healing of our psychic wounds that we come to know ourselves."

Give yourself a chance to be heard. We may as well get comfy with our faults, foibles, and quirks, or at least have a sense of humor about them! As we recognize our range of feelings, we expand our self-awareness and enhance our emotional intelligence.

As usual, Mr. Rogers (Fred Rogers of "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood") said it best. "Anything that's human is mentionable, and anything that's mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone." (This is a quote in his biography from when he testified before Congress about the value of public television.)

Such gifts of vulnerability! We realize we are neither perfect nor invincible, yet, as in wabi sabi, in our rusty, crustiness, we are stunningly beautiful. We can reach out for help, and life is often richer when we do. Several of my acquaintances became friends during my illness. When they brought me food, I got to know them better, and found out what good cooks they are!

For those of us going through such challenges, it helps to have patience and compassion for ourselves. Author Toni Bernhard recommends simply taking three slow, conscious breaths, finding “when I exhale on that third breath, a feeling of peaceful calm comes over me,” and she can refocus on what she wants to do.

**3. Next is Interpersonal vulnerability** which, unless we live alone in a cave, is inescapable. Sometimes interactions with loved ones, coworkers, doctors, and others are difficult and even painful. Dare we remove our armor, lower our shields, and open ourselves to possibilities of better and deeper connections?

When we feel safe enough to be open with people, we no longer need to numb or hide our emotions. Vulnerability is sometimes equated with weakness, yet acknowledging weakness strengthens what I call the “empathy muscle,” increasing our compassion for others.

We are worthy of love and belonging. When we lead with our hearts and let others know we love them, we may be rebuffed or disappointed in the outcome. Or we may be joyfully surprised! That’s what happens when we live wholeheartedly. As Brown observed, we connect by allowing ourselves to be seen. “Connection is why we’re here,” she said.

Poet Wakayama Bokusui wrote: "How many hills and rivers must we cross/ to reach a land without loneliness?/ We set out again today..."

**4. Spiritual Vulnerability** As I'm not a pastor, I'll stick to one example here: Faith, which can be a risky proposition. Do we dare to accept not knowing? Do we rely on certainty? Do we dare to believe? Or, if we've been raised with established doctrines, do we dare to NOT believe? Taking a position can make us feel either hemmed in or unmoored and vulnerable.

One day when I was a teen, my father casually pulled me aside to show me a book. The way he spoke to me I could tell the book was important to him and had influenced his life. Dad was a mathematician, so I wasn't surprised to see a title that had something to do with objectivism. Telling me about the book, he

explained the value of logical positivism and empirical data, which made me cautious for years about believing in anything not tested in a laboratory!

Though I retained my critical thinking skills and a healthy amount of left-brained skepticism, there came a time after Dad's death when I had to admit I'd strayed pretty far from his logical approach. This became clear one day as I was lying on the floor receiving a Peruvian healing treatment from a woman in Wisconsin. As she smudged me with Palo Santo smoke and set two stones on my chest, tears formed in my eyes as I sent a silent message to my deceased father: "I'm sorry, Dad, but I believe in things I cannot see." I needed to listen to my intuition and move beyond my family's perspective.

Anyone or anything can be a spiritual teacher. Mark Nepo wrote ("Because of My Not Knowing" in the anthology *Living the Questions*, p. 74), "It's as if everything is holy so that we, in our limitations, will find it wherever we stop, fall, stumble, or give up. ... The moments that hold mystery, whether dressed in pain or wonder, wait for us to discover them, as if a message was carved in stone for you before you were born, and a storm has washed it ashore just in time, and you need all the help you can get to decipher its meaning."

**5. We have *existential vulnerability***, because life seems fleeting and death is inevitable. Learning we have illnesses, we realize we could die from them. With our newly sharpened awareness, we savor our precious days—and treasure our loved ones, who are also mortal. While we're still here, we can take steps to optimize our time together. Yet, when a dear one dies, as psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross observed, "You will be whole again, but you will never be the same."

When we feel ready, if we have the luxury of time, we can plan for the end of our own lives. As long as we are awake and alive, we have choices. Even when we can't control our circumstances, we find ways to control how we respond to them.

We are not meant to be puny and stifled. We're meant to be wild and whole! While we're here, life is still full of possibilities.

Though the child in Billy Collins' poem anticipated the loss of his inner light, it still shines! It's undimmed. And we have more opportunities than ever to shine with the gifts of compassion, self-awareness, and gratitude. Thank you.