



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Falling Down & Rising Strong

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

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Two years ago, I preached a sermon inspired by Brené Brown's book The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are. I'm a fan of Brown's work. Another accessible introduction to Brown's work is her TED Talks.

What I appreciate most about Brown's work is that she courageously and compassionately addresses topics that most of us have been taught to avoid. Almost two decades ago, she told her husband, "**I want to start a global conversation about vulnerability and shame**" (xx). Vulnerability and shame?! To say the least, those are not the easiest subjects to discuss. What would you think if someone said over a casual meal, "I'd like you to be vulnerable and tell me about what you are most ashamed of." Ummm, no. For most of us, such an invitation would only feel safe under rare conditions, if at all. But Brown's work is about how and why we might own our imperfections in ways that are liberating and life-giving.

Over the past few years, she has written three bestselling books whose core themes can be distilled to the following:

1. The Gifts of Imperfection — Be you. [*not pretending to be someone else, someone less than you are, or someone you have been told you should be*] Be you. *All of you.*
2. Daring Greatly — Be all in. [*Don't hold back.*] Be all in.
3. Rising Strong — Fall. Get up. Try again. [*If you are being you and being all in, the chances are high that you will eventually — maybe even quickly — fail*]

in some ways, major or minor. And when you do — keep being you. Keep being all in.] Get up and try again. (xix)

She writes that, “**vulnerability — the willingness to show up and be seen with no guarantee of outcome — is the only path to more love, belonging, and joy**” (xvii). Notice that she *does not* say that vulnerability is the only path to success, fame, and wealth. (Far too many people lie, cheat, and steal their way to success, fame, and wealth.) She says that, “vulnerability...is the only path to more love, belonging, and joy.” And here’s the twist: there are plenty of people with high levels of success, fame, and fortune who do not know how to be vulnerable and who also do not have love, belonging, and joy.

So in the spirit of vulnerability, let me tell a story of success, failure, and getting back up to try again. I was a successful student in high school, college, and seminary. I worked hard, but I also enjoyed academic work. **There is, however, a big difference between writing papers about religion and being a minister.**

I didn’t know in advance how the transition would go from seminary student to congregational leader, so I told the search committee of the first congregation I served as Associate Pastor that I intended to stay at least three years with them in Louisiana. As it turns out, we were a great fit, and **I ended up staying seven years, four more years than I originally planned.**

I could’ve stayed longer, but I knew that staying would be the safe option, and I was feeling called to take the risk of moving from being an Associate Pastor to being a Lead Pastor. So, Magin and I moved to southern Maryland, and I began serving as the solo pastor of a formerly large congregation which had grown quite small and was seeking to grow again. **I told the search committee for that congregational restart that I planned to stay at least five years.**

In year one, I tried all the recommended strategies that I knew in sermons, classes and workshops, connecting with the community, and more. I tried all the strategies that had lead to a successful seven-year ministry in Louisiana. I read all the recommended books, and went to a top-notch national training on congregational growth. I can now see, in retrospect, that I tried many of the same approaches that have also lead to a so-far successful four-year ministry here in Frederick. But in southern Maryland, after a year of my best efforts, the congregation had grown

some — but **we were hoping for much more to build a congregation that was sustainable longterm.**

After a year of frustratingly slow growth, I did feel like I had at least gained a more realistic understanding of the context than I had before moving to the area. So I attended another top national training on congregational growth, met with the congregation to form a plan of action, and resolved to redouble our efforts for year two. But growth continued at a snail's pace, and well into my second year, I found myself telling Magin, "I feel like I at least need to look around and see if there are any other options presenting themselves." A few days later the latest issue of *Christian Century* (a popular journal widely read by mainline Protestant clergy) came in the mail, and in the back was a classified ad from a Unitarian Universalist congregation in Frederick, Maryland, which was casting a wide net in their search for a minister. (You know the rest of the story.)

Just as with the congregation in Louisiana (where I planned on staying three years and stayed seven), it turns out that we are a great fit as well. I told the UUCF search committee that I planned on staying at least 7 to 10 years — and here at the beginning of year five, leaving is the last thing on my mind. In contrast, **one of the hardest things I've ever had to do was picking up the phone to call each member of that small congregation in turn to tell them that I was leaving — not after five years, but after two years.**

They had the funds to continue paying my salary for the full five years and beyond. And I remain proud of the good ministry that I was able to offer them in many ways. But I needed to be honest with myself and with them that **the evidence was increasingly clear that I was not the catalyst for growth in that setting that both they and I hoped I might be.**

Remember Brené Brown's insight that "vulnerability — the willingness to show up and be seen with no guarantee of outcome — is the only path to more love, belonging, and joy." The easy choice might have been for me and Magin to stay in Louisiana, where I would've been the heir apparent when the previous Senior Minister retired. But we wanted to be geographically closer to family and in a location with better job opportunities for Magin. So we took a chance — with no guarantee of outcome — and it didn't work out. But, in the end, it was a path to more love, belonging, and joy.

I learned a lot about myself in these two years — not only about what I am good at doing, but also about facing what I'm *not* good at doing. I also learned a lot about being a minister. As an associate pastor, I was used to preaching only once every two months, but for those two years as a solo minister, I preached almost every Sunday. I suspect there are ways that I couldn't have seen in advance that my experience during those two years made me more attractive to UUCF's search committee than if I've spent an eighth and ninth year as Associate Pastor in Louisiana. Moreover, it was precisely my failure that helped open me to taking the risk of moving from being a minister in liberal Christian congregations to seeking fellowship with the Unitarian Universalist Association.

In the midst of that transition, Brené Brown's work is one of the resources that helped me articulate the difference between saying, "I *failed*" and "I am a *failure*" (47). **I did fail to help that congregation grow to a sustainable size, but that failure is very different from saying "I am a failure."** One is something I *did*; the other is something I *am*. Any one of us may fail repeatedly, but no one is a failure (194). That would be to deny our UU First Principle of "The inherent worth and dignity of every person." **Even when we fail, that is who each of us is: someone of inherent worth and dignity.**

Brown writes about the ways that *guilt* and *empathy* can be helpful emotions in many circumstances, causing us to feel the ways that our actions have impacted others. But *shame* is different than guilt or empathy: "**Shame is much more likely to be the cause of destructive behavior than the cure**" — because shame tries to make us question our inherent worth and dignity (128).

If you are feeling shame, Brown recommends two steps:

- 1. Talk to ourselves in the same way we'd talk to someone we love**

Yes, you made a mistake. You're human.

You don't have to do it like anyone else does.

Fixing it and making amends will help. Self-loathing will not.

- 2. Reach out to someone we trust — a person who has earned the right to hear our story and who has the capacity to respond with empathy. (195)**

You may even find that in sharing your story of shame with someone you trust that you may end up giving them permission down the line to share either with you or with someone else something that they have been hiding or repressing.

Along those lines, one of the events that Brown describes in her book is FailCon, a conference for entrepreneurial founders of start up companies “to learn from and prepare for failure, so they can iterate and grow fast.” What attendees of these conferences report is that they still associate failure with “sadness, fear, making a fool of myself, desperation, panic, shame, and heartbreak.” But **when asked about the people who are willing to be vulnerable and share their stories of failure at FailCon, the attendees see them as “helping, generous, open, knowledgeable, brave, and courageous”** (xxvi).

There’s also a flip side to that dynamic. When we refuse to be vulnerable and try to hide our failures from others, we create the conditions for *shame* to grow — and often our repressed feelings come out in pathological ways. In Brown’s words, “There are too many people today who, **instead of feeling hurt, act out their hurt; instead of acknowledging pain, they’re inflicting pain on others. Rather than risk feeling disappointed, they’re choosing to live disappointed**” (xxvii). She’s learned to see “emotional stoicism,” “blustery posturing,” and “swagger” as signs of someone moving in the opposite direction from that vulnerable path that leads to love, belonging, and joy.

Regarding that vulnerable way, one of Brown’s favorite quotes is from Theodore Roosevelt’s 1910 speech “Man in the Arena”:

It is not the critic who counts; not the [one] who points out how the strong [person] stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. **The credit belongs to the [one] who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; ...who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if [they] fail, at least fails while daring greatly.** (xx-xxi)

What might that look like for you at this time in your life? What arena is calling to you? Where might you — where might we — dare greatly?

Our UU Principles aim high. They call us to recognize and respect “The inherent worth and dignity of *every* person.” They call us to work for “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for *all*.” It’s easy to reach all your goals if you set the bar low, but **each of you — and the larger UU and progressive movement generally — challenge me to be better and set the bar higher than I ever would by myself. And you remind me that I don’t have to make this journey alone.** We are here to accompany one another on this journey.

For now, I’ll leave you with these words adapted from the conclusion to Brené Brown’s book Rising Strong:

When we show up with our whole selves,
When we are *all in*,
When we *dare greatly*,
There is no greater threat
to the critics
and the cynics
and fear mongers
Than those of us who are willing to risk falling
Because we have learned how to *rise up*.

With our wounds and our bruised hearts;
We choose *owning* our struggle over
hiding,
hustling, and
pretending.

When we deny our stories, they end up defining us
When we run from struggle, we are never free
So we own our truth and look it in the eye
And we dare to write a different ending.

We craft
Love from heartbreak,
Compassion from shame, and
Courage from failure.

Our power is *showing up*
Sharing our truth is our way home
We are not perfect,
But we are *wiser* on the other side of every fall
And *braver* every time we dare to get up and try again
We are the brave and brokenhearted
And we are rising strong.