

How the Light Gets In

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD June 7, 2026

Perhaps you are familiar with the music of folk poet Leonard Cohen. Perhaps the lyrics of “Hallelujah,” “Suzanne,” or “Bird on the Wire” echo in your mind. This morning, however, we turn to his song “Anthem”: “Ring the bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” It is a striking image for the spiritual focus on vulnerability. What if these cracks were not seen as faults or weakness, but as fertile ground where strengths enter? It is our broken pieces – the pieces of uncertainty, insecurity, and grief that have created this rift. It is often these fragile and very vulnerable places where we love takes root, compassion deepens, and wisdom blossoms. The cracks—like the lines and wrinkles that come with time—can become signs not of diminishment, but of a life fully lived. Rather than weakening us, they can become the very places where resilience is formed and strength is deepened, as life continues to enter and transform us where we have been opened. In this way, Cohen’s “cracks” embody vulnerability itself: the moments when we are no longer sealed off, no longer fully defended, but open to love, truth, and transformation. It is here that the carefully constructed self begins to soften—and to open.

As a chaplain, I served several communities filled with people who bore deep cracks. I lamented with a teenage mother struggling with addiction as we sat over a shared meal. I discussed death with a young adult bound towards brain surgery. I discussed theology with an unhoused single mother worried about her children’s next meal. These suffering people asked me deeply human questions about life and death, theism and atheism, survival and demise. Entirely vulnerable, they invited light to enter through their cracks. The people I served allowed me the honor of witnessing them for just who they were. These relationships we shared – authentic and vulnerable - were some of the most profoundly beautiful connections I have ever made. In these spaces we recognized the shared human frailty. We deepened our empathy, realizing that we all carry cracks. Author and professor Brené Brown teaches that what makes you vulnerable

makes you beautiful.¹ In a world that often hides cracks, Brown invites us to remain rooted, not in perfection, but in beautiful authenticity. Note – vulnerability need not arise from serious illness or housing insecurity or addiction. Vulnerability arises in each one of us as we consider sharing our insecurities, our fears, our trepidations, our hopes.

I am reminded of a metaphor of a closed fist. When we are prepared to fight, when we are determined to protect ourselves, we clench our fist. Nothing can enter it – it is closed and impenetrable. Only when we open our fists – only when we choose vulnerability over self-protection – can we receive a gift. The same is true of the human heart. Only with a true openness – when we are fully vulnerable because we are no longer impenetrable – can we welcome genuine connection. To me this shares an alignment with a quote from scholar and theologian C. S. Lewis: “To love at all is to be vulnerable.” To love is to embrace loss. Yet, Lewis continues, a fully protected heart becomes “unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.”² At first an unbreakable heart may sound appealing. Yet a heart fully protected is a heart that cannot love. It is a heart that erects walls.

To live without vulnerability is to live with a mask. We create a façade based on what we think we are expected to be versus the imperfect, cracked blessing of who we are. Perhaps this mask is a career choice. Perhaps this mask is makeup and clothing. Perhaps this mask is humor. Perhaps this mask is aggression or detachment. Whatever this mask may be, maintaining this façade is exhausting. The cost of hiding behind a mask is profound. We navigate the world as someone we are not instead of allowing ourselves to be seen for just who we are. We trade authenticity for approval, imperfection for beauty. Who we truly are – entirely imperfect and entirely flawed – is so much more beautiful than any façade we can construct.

Brokenness is part of the human condition, yet we are often taught to pursue perfection. We strive for the perfect body, face, job, home, and family, and in doing so we can grow increasingly aware of our weaknesses and insecurities. In this way, our masks begin to form—

¹ *The Power of Vulnerability* by Brené Brown

² *The Four Loves* by C. S. Lewis

carefully constructed versions of ourselves meant to protect what feels so very fragile. Yet shedding these masks is an act of courage. It makes us vulnerable, but it also allows us to be truly known by others. In that honesty, we are invited into deeper connection, and into a more authentic life—one that can lead to greater meaning and contentment.

Releasing ourselves and inviting true vulnerability takes courage. It is to acknowledge that you could be rejected, misunderstood, or disappointed. Vulnerability is a risk. And yet what is worse: being rejected for just who we are, or being accepted for who we truly are not? It is courageous to be fully seen – hopes and fears, insecurities and strengths alike. Is authenticity worth the risk? It is only when we are known for just who we are – humanly flawed – that we know true belonging and love.

So what does it mean to be accepted as you truly are – fully seen? We have an innate human need to be authentically seen, known, and accepted. And to be fully seen – this is so profoundly life giving and beautiful. It is the freedom of living truthfully: the courage to be open and honest about our doubts and fears. It is the freedom to remove that mask we have so meticulously created and to be loved not for our façades, but for the authentic selves we so vulnerably display- anxious, insecure, vain. Brené Brown teaches that true intimacy comes from being fully seen and accepted as we are.³ Not only accepted, but cherished. Author and educator Parker Palmer writes, "The human soul doesn't want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed —to be seen, heard and companioned exactly as it is."⁴ I think of our Story for All Ages. The little boy did not want to talk about his troubles, or be mad about what had happened, or try to reconstruct what had once been. He simply needed to be listened to.⁵ This is the true embrace of a vulnerable heart: being witnessed.

While serving as a chaplain in a university hospital, I met with a woman who was about to undergo major surgery. Her fears about the looming procedure and her awareness of mortality brought her into a deeply vulnerable space—one in which she wanted, for the first time in her

³ *The Power of Vulnerability* by Brené Brown

⁴ *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* by Parker Palmer

⁵ *The Rabbit Listened* by Cori Doerrfeld

life, to talk about God and what the divine might mean for her. She had not been to church since she was a child. She wondered, could she - in this moment - connect with a God she had never worshiped? We sat. We talked. And together, we prayed to the spirit of life. During my time as a chaplain, I repeatedly received requests for prayers, for presence in an interfaith chapel, for conversations about God, for discussions on scripture. These so very vulnerable people were searching for a true and abiding faith.

What is so striking about these stories is how very vulnerable faith is in and of itself. Faith requires that we be vulnerable. Whether we pray, meditate, or seek meaning, we do so without absolute assurance of the outcome. It is not certainty but reaching for meaning in the midst of uncertainty. There is so much we simply do not know. Faith invites us to live with open hands rather than clenched fists—to trust, to hope, and to love despite what remains unresolved. It is a vulnerable way to live, but perhaps it is also one of the most rewarding.

Faith is vulnerable. We have so many unanswerable questions – questions that we learn to live with, not with despair, but with a grounding peace. We do not know what follows death. We do not know whether there is some sort of divine purpose for our existence. We do not know whether our prayers are received in any ultimate sense. And this is ok. Still, we can live as if heaven were found, here, in this life. We can create our own purpose and meaning. We can pray anyway. It is a vulnerable way to live. But it is still rich with purpose and meaning.

Faith is a vulnerable practice because it welcomes and embraces mystery. We offer our devotion to that which is ultimately beyond our understanding, whether the expanse of nature or an unknown entity. Even in prayer or meditation, we do not know how to name what we encounter, or to fully describe it. There is so much more beyond our finite and fleeting understanding. Meaning itself is a mystery. We know wonder instead of certainty, and trust that mystery is not to be solved, but experienced.

Many of these questions are especially resonant in a Unitarian Universalist context. And yet each faith tradition carries with it an understanding of vulnerability. Often, it is not seen as a

weakness, but as something that makes spiritual growth possible – something that cultivates compassion and wisdom within us. Vulnerability is a doorway to transformation as we encounter the sacred. I use the word “God” in these reflections because it is the language of these traditions. I invite you to hear it through the lens of your own understanding of the sacred.

Rabbi and author Shmuley Boteach elaborates on Jewish themes of vulnerability through the practice of Sukkot. During Sukkot, the sukkah—a temporary shelter built only for eight days with a roof open to the sky—reminds us of impermanence. This metaphor teaches us that we may try to build a sense of security, hidden behind thick wooden doors, surrounded by walls of brick and stone - invincible and immune from all danger. We build a sense of security in wealth, investments, or status. Yet all of this is ultimately fragile. We are vulnerable. Even when material life feels secure, health itself remains uncertain. In Jewish understanding, security is not found in permanence or in control, but in, quote, “love for God and the blessings that God bestows on all of [our] endeavors.”⁶ In our vulnerability, we rely upon God. I offer a second Jewish teaching: “A broken heart is a whole heart.” A whole heart is one that has known cracks—it has loved, grieved, failed, hoped, and lived fully. It is a heart that has not been sheltered from life's joys and sorrows but has allowed itself to be touched by them.

In Christianity, God is not understood as distant from human suffering, but entering it through the person of Jesus. Through the incarnation, God experiences the joys and sorrows of any human life. In Jesus, God knows profound love alongside grief, companionship alongside betrayal, and life alongside death. In this way Jesus is vulnerable alongside humanity. This understanding shapes how many Christians view God – an entity that is not detached from struggle but is loving and in solidarity with suffering. Christianity also speaks of the relationship between love and vulnerability. Jesus loves even though he knows he will be rejected and abandoned. But he loves anyway.

⁶ *Judaism for Everyone* by Shmuley Boteach

Buddhism embraces vulnerability through its recognition that we cannot fully know nor control the ultimate nature of things. Despite vast knowledge of spiritual matters, the Buddha did not center his teaching on questions about God, nor any speculative questions not directly tied to the end of suffering. All we need to achieve enlightenment is awareness of our own experiences. Buddhist monk Ajahn Chah noted the simplicity of this practice, noting that the only sacred text we need to read is the text of our own heart – returning to direct experience rather than doctrine or certainty.⁷ In Buddhism, vulnerability is a willingness to relinquish control and certainty. Control and certainty lead to suffering, while openness creates space for peace, compassion, and wisdom to arise. Thich Nhat Hanh wrote: "No mud, no lotus." The lotus flower, a symbol of enlightenment in Buddhism, grows in murky water. In the same way, our vulnerabilities are not things to hide, but realities that can deepen our humanity and open us to growth.⁸

Have courage, dear ones, for the road is not easy. Yet it is authentic, and authenticity is worth the risk. Leonard Cohen reminds us, "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." May we, in all of our tribulations, cultivate a compassion and love that is often born and deepened in the midst of life's brokenness. May we have the courage to embrace our vulnerability and to remove the façades we have so carefully constructed, for beneath the mask is where our truest beauty lives. May we allow ourselves to be fully seen and fully known in our vulnerability—our weaknesses and our strengths, our failings and our accomplishments, our wounds and our joys. May we know peace amid uncertainty, and may we embrace the mystery that calls us beyond ourselves. And may we move forward with open hearts, knowing that though there is no certainty, there is faith. There is beauty. There is hope. There is love.

May it be so, and Amen.

⁷ *Food for the Heart* by Ajahn Chah

⁸ *No Mud, No Lotus: The Art of Transforming Suffering* by Thich Nhat Hanh