

THE POWER OF VULNERABILITY

We live in a world that often expects us to wear a mask. Through the “show-reel” of social media, the “pretty” pictures of the places we’ve been and the food we’ve eaten to the clothes we wear, we can show our edited highlights – the best versions of ourselves. Media, society and culture is full of expectations, frequently asking us to look and act a certain way. But whether this is true to who we really are is down to us.

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I'll be honest enough to say that there is absolutely nothing wrong with sharing with other people what you've been doing or the fun you've experienced, but this is not all that matters. The problem lies in believing the pretense that life will always be bright or beautiful. It is only more recently that people are finding the courage to share online a more realistic view of their lives and experience. From everyday 'no make-up selfies' to the painful admissions of the #metoo campaign, we are taking greater freedom to express our flaws and be unashamed of our past. I, like many others, take as a life axiom that there is strength in weakness, that vulnerability is powerful.

Brene Brown, research professor at the University of Houston and author of *Daring Greatly*, writes and speaks extensively on

vulnerability and its place in our lives. She describes it as being full of "uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure", something that doesn't come at all naturally to most of us. When we are honest about ourselves, we feel open to the judgment of others and perhaps fearful of ridicule or rejection. Some of us believe that being vulnerable is simply being weak in the sight of others but I am gradually learning that it means being strong and enables trust and love to grow in my relationships.

I used to think there was little point in sharing openly, that people could not do anything to fix the hurts in my past. But that is not the point; our vulnerability allows us to experience life so much more deeply and fully. Brene Brown said of herself during an interview with Forbes magazine:

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"My inability to lean into the discomfort of vulnerability limited the fullness of those important experiences that are wrought with uncertainty: Love, belonging, trust, joy, and creativity to name a few. Learning how to be vulnerable has been a street fight for me, but it's been worth it."

Oh Brene, how I can relate! In the relationships that matter to us the most, a lack of openness and honesty limits the potential of those relationships and it certainly limits our capabilities as well.

Just three years ago, I lost my father to a series of serious strokes. If you've ever experienced the grief that follows the death of a loved one, you'll understand I could not ever imagine my life without him. After the hectic months of arranging his funeral, I really struggled to adjust to everyday life again. I needed to step back into work, my friendships and a social life and also an environment where I was a church leader. I was supposed to be someone who was there for others, setting an example or supporting them in their own difficulties and challenges. My greatest struggle was to remain real and authentic while dealing with my own pain. I could no longer trust my feelings, my faith was bruised, and fear and uncertainty found a foothold in many of the things I knew and loved.

So, where do you go from there? For those with a faith, prayer is often the advice given but that's incredibly difficult when you don't want to talk to God or to anyone else. But I knew that I desperately needed to talk to someone, if only to share how I felt. I needed to hear the words that deep down I knew

were true, that everything I was experiencing was normal, that my emotions didn't make me a bad person or a worse leader and that God isn't daunted by my feelings. He can handle them and wants to be a part of every season of our journey, even when it gets ugly.

At this year's MTV awards, actor Chris Pratt spoke very plainly about dealing with our lives and circumstances. He acknowledged that "You are imperfect, you always will be, but there's a powerful force that designed you that way and if you're willing to accept that, you will have grace and grace is a gift". Sometimes we have to be brave enough to take the first step, to talk, to open up our lives. If you're anything like me and vulnerability is not your cup of tea, it's important to keep trying and to continue to find ways of being open with others.



Image taken from popsugar.co.uk - Chris Pratt's acceptance speech at the MTV awards
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I work for Care for the Family and being vulnerable is one of our core values. We know that it is what helps people respond and connect to us and our work. It is our openness that allows them to relate to our experience. That's why you'll hear our speakers talk openly about examples of success and failure from their own lives and families. Vulnerability is powerful and when we find the freedom to be real about ourselves we can experience so much more in our lives and relationships.

This idea is right at the heart of our Free to Be event for Christian women presented by Bekah Legg and Cathy Madavan. They share honestly about what they've been through and what they've learned because they know that we are all greater than any individual circumstance or season we may experience. We can stop being afraid of our past, of our limitations or our failings and instead choose to live our lives in freedom.

We put this principle into action even with our publicity for the event and we have chosen to use several women who work for Care for the Family to feature in our publicity. It would have been so easy to choose stock images or airbrushed photos but this was one way we could express authenticity and reality. Jo, one of the women on the brochure, shared something of her own breakthrough. For most of her life she worried about what others thought and was terrified of trying new things but in recent years she has changed:

"Freedom is a subject close to my heart. I'm trying things I would never have tried a few years ago, like public speaking and

leadership in areas of church life. When I was asked to do the Free To Be photo-shoot, the new 'Go For It' me quickly said yes before the old me had time to raise an objection."

I was also part of the photo-shoot and I really enjoyed coming alongside strong and inspiring women like Jo. It was obvious that we are different in age, experience and background and that we are all walking different journeys. But we have in common God's promises and sharing our struggles with others can stop us feeling alone in times of hurt or disappointment. Hannah, another face of Free to Be, said it this way:

"The perfect love of God helps me love those around me and step out to serve, even when it is hard to do so, or outside of my comfort zone. Where I could be scared to take the

risk of loving when I'm scared I could get hurt, or not to speak out for fear of mockery, I can stand in God's love for me and step out freely."

Just like everyone else who is part of the publicity, I identify with all the themes of the event. At various points in my life, God has encouraged and sometimes confronted me with these truths and has helped me find the courage to remain strong. Through embracing vulnerability that I can be real, I can be brave, I can love others and be loved. Ultimately, I can be me.



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