

## Wednesday Night Study Series – “The Gifts of Imperfection”

**Prayer of Surrender:** Spirit of Truth, CARRY ME where you will; BRING TO ME what You will; TAKE FROM ME what You will; AWAKEN IN ME what You will. The Christ MAN is around me. The Christ MIND is in me. The Christ POWER flows through me. And, the Christ MYSTERY exists as me. I believe it. I perceive it. And, now I receive it! I am surrendered. Amen. And, so it is!

### The Shame Storm

Practicing courage, compassion, and connection in our daily lives is how we cultivate worthiness. The key word is *practice*. Mary Daly, a theologian, writes, “Courage is like a habit. You get it by courageous acts. It’s like you learn to swim by swimming. You learn courage by couraging.” The same is true for compassion and connection. We invite compassion into our lives when we act compassionately toward ourselves and others, and we feel connected in our lives when we reach out and connect.

Once I was invited to speak to a group of parents at an elementary school about the relationship between resilience and boundaries. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. The second I walked into the school auditorium, I felt this really strange vibe from the parents in the audience. They almost seemed agitated. Little did I know that the principal had been having a problem with parents hovering in the classrooms during the school day and had made this meeting mandatory for them to attend, telling them I was going to “fix the problem.” These parents were not receptive. Instead, I felt row after row of people glaring at me. So, I did the worst thing possible. I started talking louder and getting really animated, trying to impress them. I didn’t get a nod or a slight grin or anything. It was a disaster.

When the shame winds are whipping all around me, it’s almost impossible to hold on to any perspective or to recall anything good about myself. But the greatest gift about my research work is that I can recognize shame when it’s happening. I also know that the very best thing to do when this is happening feels totally counterintuitive: Practice courage and reach out! We have to own our story and share it with someone who has earned the right to hear it, someone whom we can count on to respond with compassion. We need courage, compassion, and connection ASAP.

Shame hates it when we reach out and tell our story. It can’t survive being shared. The most dangerous thing to do after a shaming experience is to hide or bury our story. But here’s the tricky part about compassion and connecting: We can’t call just anyone. It’s not that simple. If we share our shame story with the wrong person, they can easily become one more piece of flying debris in an already dangerous storm. We definitely want to avoid the following:

1. The friend who hears the story and actually feels shame for you. She gasps and confirms how horrified you should be. Then there is awkward silence. Then...you have to make her feel better!

2. The friend who responds with sympathy (I feel so sorry for you) rather than empathy (I get it, I feel with you, and I've been there). If you want to see a shame cyclone turn deadly, throw one of these at it: "Oh, you poor thing." Or, the incredibly passive-aggressive southern version of sympathy: "Bless your heart."
3. The friend who is so uncomfortable with vulnerability that she scolds you: "How did you let this happen? What were you thinking?" Or she looks for someone to blame: "Who was that principal? We'll kick his butt!"
4. The friend who needs you to be the pillar of worthiness and authenticity. She can't help because she's too disappointed in your imperfections. You've let her down.
5. The friend who is all about making it better and, out of her own discomfort, refuses to acknowledge that you can actually be crazy and make terrible choices: "You're exaggerating. It couldn't have been that bad. You rock. You're perfect. Everyone loves you."
6. The friend who confuses "connection" with the opportunity to one-up you: "That's nothing. Listen to what happened to me one time!"

Of course, we're all capable to being "these friends" – especially if someone's story gets right up in our own shame grill. We're all human, imperfect and vulnerable. It's hard to practice compassion when we're struggling with our own authenticity or when our own worthiness is off balance. When looking for compassion, we need someone who is deeply rooted, able to bend, and most of all, we need someone who embraces us for our strengths and struggles. We need to honor our struggle by sharing it with someone who has earned the right to hear it. When we're looking for compassion, it's about connecting with the right person at the right time about the right issue.

I called my sister, and she was amazing. She listened and responded with total compassion. She had the courage to tap into her own struggles with worthiness so that she could genuinely connect to what I was experiencing. She said wonderfully honest and empathic things like: "Oh, man. That's so hard. I've done that before. I hate that feeling!" That may not be what someone else would need to hear, but for me, it was the best.

She wasn't uprooted and thrown into the storm created by my experience. She also wasn't so rigid that she snapped with judgment and blame. She didn't try to fix me or make me feel better; she just listened and had the courage to share some of her own vulnerabilities with me. I felt totally exposed and completely loved and accepted at the same time (which is the definition of compassion for me).

Trust me when I tell you that shame and fear can't tolerate that kind of powerful connection surging between people. That's exactly why courage, compassion, and connection are the tools we need for the Wholehearted journey. To top it off, my willingness to let someone I care about see me as imperfect led to a strengthening of our relationship that continues today – that's why I can call courage, compassion, and connection the gifts of imperfection. When we're willing to be imperfect and real, these gifts just keep on giving.

**Affirmation:** I am ready to bravely own my story. I accept myself, my imperfections and my uniqueness. I will find the courage to be vulnerable, honest and open. Amen.