

LL18-The Power of Vulnerability

Hi I'm Doug Weiss,
and I'm Alvean Lyons, and this is Love Life.

Alvean today we have a topic that was suggested by one of our listeners and it has to do with the subject of vulnerability.

The question that was posed is: how does vulnerability open us up to other people? I want to turn to you first. I know we usually have a turnabout is fair play policy so I want to turn to you first for your thoughts.

Well I would say.... you know I love analogies.... so I would say that vulnerability is very much like soil in that every relationship is seed in soil.

You'll never know the potential of a relationship, as in what happens in that connectivity, that seed, if in fact you are not open. So vulnerability is soil that is available rich and ready for the possibility of whatever the seed has the potential to create. When we allow ourselves to be open it is the only environment in which a love connection relationship can actually grow.

We all know that no matter how good that seed is, nothing can grow inside of bad soil, so if I'm not open then I don't even create the possibility for anything to be able to come of this connection.

I think vulnerability is a difficult proposition for men, and I don't often line up on the men versus women issue because I think that the differences, and there are differences, are often over exaggerated. But I think men in general have a difficulty with allowing themselves to be vulnerable. And I'm not just talking about opening yourself up to someone, but I mean allowing yourself to..... OK I'll say it I cry at movies for example. Sometimes even a chick flick.

You know things move me and I'm not afraid to express that, but I had to learn to do that. I had to learn to be able to say to my guy friends, I love you. I had to learn that it was OK sometimes for men to hug. All of those are kind of touchy feely kinds of things. They don't come naturally to men. Part of that, I suspect, is societal; it's cultural. And part of it is something else, I'm not exactly sure what, but kind of an inborn hesitation about allowing people to see weakness.

I would say that there is a lot that is connected to the societal piece that you're

talking about and society begins inside of our homes and many of us nurture our young boys to not show emotion, to be a big boy. Big boys don't cry you know. You can handle this, you can work through this, it's no big deal. We're often teaching our men to stuff their emotions. When they're boys and then when they become men we want them to access the emotion we've trained them out of utilizing. And so while there are innate biological differences between men and women, as you so duly noted, they're less than what we purport them to be. But many of them have been stifled in the way that we have nurtured those relationships which is part of the reason, very often you will hear men, particularly in healthier marriages refer to their wives as their best friends. Many women don't refer to their husbands as their best friends because very often the first truly vulnerable relationship a man has is with his wife, and it's the first time that there's somebody who knows you and sees you and recognizes your weaknesses and chooses not to run the other way. Where for women, we test that out in girlfriend relationships all the time. So it's the socialization that teaches us not to be emotionally naked with one another that is first experienced inside of the context of marriage for a lot of men.

I do think that we get a lot of reinforcement as men to go the other direction. Let me think about phrases like man up, what does that mean? I sort of have a sense of what that means, but there's another connotation there that it's not OK to feel vulnerable. I was watching a movie the other day that was really interesting. You can make fun of these archetypes but in the movie there was a scene with a young boy and he was being bullied in school. The father says to him when he's around the mother, words can't hurt you. He said the appropriate thing. Then sort of sotto voce off to the side he says and then give him a right hook. So there's this is duality I think when we signal. We say one thing and we signal another, and sometimes those signals, as you say you said so well, are subtly conditioning us to a cultural role model that that walls us off from other people.

Absolutely, I mean I'm the mother of a son. My son, is a sixteen years old and I remember when he was younger teaching him that home is the one place you can be one hundred percent of yourself. You can access all of your emotion but do not cry in public, and I hated that I had to tell him that, but I knew that the emotion I teach him to access at home will not be processed the same way

publicly. So you're going to have to say hold onto it until you get home, and home should always be the safe place where you can be all of who you are. Everybody needs to have a place where they can let it all rip, but do understand that socially in the world that we live in people are not going to process it with that kind of grace and that kind of understanding. If something hurts you publicly, and you decide to start crying out there in front of a bunch of teenage boys, it's not going to work well for you. So, their reality is that we do live in a society that reinforces both overtly and covertly that men are not to be vulnerable. I even hear women say I don't ever want to see my man cry. For me, I find it's so sexy. I find it's so beautiful when my husband tears up, that I melt. It is just so beautiful when he just lets himself go like that, and because I know that he is such a masculine man and much of the stereotype of what it means to be a man so I'm acknowledging it is a stereotype he's so much that, that to know that with me he will be everything that he won't be publicly just feels like he opens up his chest and allows me to step inside. That for me is the ultimate intimacy. It's not about sexuality but it's about true nakedness that I just find absolutely gorgeous.

Well I have to say that among the many lessons that I've had to learn in life, the lesson about vulnerability was a revelation. When I made that leap, when I let go and allowed myself to express how I was feeling I met such an overflowing wealth of support. Not just from the women in my life, but from the men in my life as well. You know it wasn't something that I expected, I was surprised by it. And as is often the case when we have a positive experience, that leads us, however tentatively, to try again to see if that was an exception or is in fact the rule. I found without exception that when you allow yourself to feel, and feel deeply, and express that feeling in an appropriate way to those in your life that people are receptive. You will unquestionably find the same well of support, the same genuine outpouring of response. But I think that too often we allow our fear, we allow our conditioning as and men and women to control us. I was thinking about the comment I made earlier about crying at the movies and Peggy tells a wonderful story about her father who was a veteran in the Navy, and was at Pearl Harbor. Peggy grew up with three sisters so four girls in the house and whenever Heidi came on T.V. they said Daddy don't watch because they knew he would fall apart.

I think it's a beautiful thing, I really do, and I totally agree with you that when we

allow ourselves to be open that we are often met with the greatest reward. That's true connection.

Well, that's this episode of Love Life. We're happy to have been with you. Thank you for listening. We want to thank Todd Washburn our recording engineer and Barbara Hamm Lee, our producer, who keeps us on the straight and narrow. We hope that you'll join us again next week for another episode of Love Life.