

The Paradox of Vulnerability by Frank Ostaseski and Courtney E. Martin
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Start of Transcript

Courtney: Hi.

Frank: Hi.

Courtney: How are you?

Frank: I don't know.

Courtney: I think we can all relate to that. So, tell us what happened? What's been going on with you?

Frank: Oh, just hanging out in the hospitals.

Courtney: Yeah.

Frank: One Saturday morning in July I woke up next to my beautiful wife and I had this splitting headache, then I got up and thought it was something I went to the bathroom in my medicine cabinet got some Oxy which everybody in America has [laughter]. And it didn't touch the pain. And the pain persisted, and I said it was like having a welding torch to cut across my skull. **[01:00]** And my dear bride Banta she understood to take me to the emergency room and that's when I learned I had had a very severe stroke. What was interesting about it though is even in the midst of the pain there was some kind of background awareness that was there as a steady support even though. And so, with this way awareness I could watch my brain go offline. I could watch the ability to tell difference between night and day go offline, ability to find or make directions or find words offline. Anyway, I was hospitalized and then I had I think four more strokes in the next month, so I was back and forth to the hospital quite a lot. **[02:00]** So, I've been learning a lot.

Courtney: Yeah.

Frank: Yeah learning a lot.

Courtney: And one of the things we talked about that I really want to hear you speak to is is there anything that you used to say about sitting with other people suffering that you've now decided is bullshit based on what you've experienced [laughter].

Frank: Yeah, I tried not to bullshit people too much even then, but you know one thing was that we can take away all your pain. Took them five days to get my pain under control. I was in gut-wrenching pain for five days, but the other thing is this is the real bullshit it's no big deal. Like I remember once taking care of a guy with AIDS and he reached for something on his bedside table he knocked over his glass of milk onto the floor nice it's no big deal we can clean it up and he screamed "It is a goddamn big deal." Because every time, every experience like that **[03:00]** touches one's vulnerability, reminds us of our limitations, helps us or causes us to see the fragility of our lives; it's a big deal.

Courtney: Yeah, it's a really big deal.

Frank: So, that was a bullshit thing to say to people.

Courtney: Can you say more about vulnerability because I think that's a word particularly in our culture right now that we throw around a lot? But what does that actually come to mean for you through this experience?

Frank: Well I agree it's thrown around a lot. It's used all the time, but it's not very well defined. I mean our dictionaries define it as the susceptibility to being harmed physically, emotionally, psychologically. Brené Brown who's popularized the word 'vulnerability' speaks about it as uncertainty and the risk of emotional exposure. [04:00] And I think there's wisdom in both those things, but I have a different experience. For me vulnerability is not so much equated with weakness. I think when we equate it with weakness what happens is, we develop a kind of defensiveness and then what happens is people confuse that defense with vulnerability. Vulnerability itself is for me at least open and it feels porous.

I just saw Lucy and she'll remind us from our high school biology that the only thing I remember from it is the teaching on osmosis, how molecules move across semipermeable membranes effortlessly. You know vulnerability is more like that it's more like permeability and it opens us. For me it's one of the most beautiful human qualities [05:00] because it allows us the beauty and the horror of the world to impress itself on our hearts on our psyches on our souls. So, for me a vulnerability is openness and when people say that they're scared of being vulnerable, I think actually it's just the opposite they're; so, defended, so guarded that they're afraid that there are defenses won't protect them. In healthcare we do it all the time we've built some armoring around our hearts. And here's what happens with that you know when we cut herself off from our fear or grief or these things, we also cut our self off from our capacity to love and be compassionate and empathetic and to know we belong.

Courtney: Yeah.

Frank: So, I don't think we can be free if we if we cut off any part of ourselves. [06:00] So, vulnerable that me is inviting it all in, everything. all of it. I mean you know the fact that some people are going to make love and other people will make war. You know that there are children being shot in our schools and there are others who are speaking truth to power. That there's kids like my granddaughter making you know tense out of couch pillows and bed sheets and there are babies crying in refugee camps in Syria and we can't let all that in. We have to let ourselves feel all of that. And I think this is the truth of vulnerability I said it's connective you know.

Courtney: How does one survive letting that all in though? I think that's the fear is like what you just articulated is enough to make me want to [07:00] lie in a dark room for a long time.

Frank: It's not such a bad idea to do that once in a while [laughter]. I've been doing a lot of that [laughter].

Courtney: Yeah.

Frank: You know if we think that all we are is this personality or this brain you know awareness can hold all this. I'm not trying to be "new age-y" it's true. Awareness can hold all this it doesn't need to push anything away. It's one of my greatest gratitude's is that for 50 years I've practiced loving awareness and that discriminating wisdom [08:00] could watch my brain go offline, can help my brain to heal, can give me the capacity to withstand it tolerate forbear what you're describing. So, one of the ways they do it Courtney is they lie in bed at night and I think I'm alone and I'm scared, and I reflect on all the people who are lying in bed at night alone in pain. While you might think it would set us in fact it's this great source of strength for me there's my innate compassion emerges and gives me the capacity to be with the suffering of our world.

Courtney: That's beautiful.

Frank: So, going toward that suffering it gives rise to compassion.

Courtney: [09:00] Yeah, I also think there's something we've been talking a lot today about stories and putting language to things and I think I notice in myself that there's a version of vulnerability that I practice which is actually very well-crafted. It's like I'm going to tell you a hard thing that happened to me and I have a really good like way of telling you why it's so meaningful and redemptive. But there's a version of vulnerability which I think is what you're speaking to this true vulnerability which is I don't have a story yet. Like I'm in the middle and I'm inarticulate and I'm confused, and I'm pissed and I'm like it's the messy truly unformed unperformative version of Here I am.

Frank: Yes.

Courtney: I don't want to confuse that we're saying story can actually be I get like anti vulnerable in its own way if it's too pretty.

Frank: [10:00] Too constructed and well put together yes. I mean sitting here right now, I don't know if I'll remember your question or if I'll be able to find the words to give you an answer. That's a certain level of vulnerability, but that's the surface; that's just the surface. The real vulnerability is being human. I mean it sounds corny maybe but the great possibility the great gift and illness for the person sick and his or her caregivers is that it pulls them into the deeper dimensions of what it means to be human.

Courtney: Yeah.

Frank: And it causes us to have to deal with the paradoxes of this crazy human condition of ours you know there that we can embody fragility and strength at one moment and it we can know absolute desperation and loneliness [11:00] and also feel our self in the family of all suffering beings. There we can know our self I can feel herself to be beyond love and also to know our self as nothing but love.

Woman: We love you Frank.

Frank: You know love isn't just an emotion it's a support. When I came home from the hospital the first-time home health people came and you know I had lived on a houseboat, so they were freaked out [laughter] how you going to get across that gangplank and walking down those stairs.

Courtney: Not to mention that they were going to find you inside the boat like this man who is [12:00] sat by the bedside of so many people.

Frank: Anyway, they were freaked out [laughter]. And one of the things that's happened with my stroke is that I've lost half my vision so I can see you if I look at you but if I look here I can't see you I can only see a very narrow field in front of me. And the nature of my stroke was that one of the things that it causes is a lack of impulse control which I was actually very happy about [laughter]. But they were very worried about. And so, they said, "You have to be careful on the stairs." And everybody was worried about my tumbling and the next morning I was sitting at this I stood at the top of the stairs and I had to go down and then suddenly my I jumped into this kind of relaxed awareness. And at the bottom of the stairs I saw an image of my son who I loved so much. [13:00] And I knew I had to be careful because if I fell down those stairs it would really harm him, and I didn't want to do that. So, I made a vow to be really careful and I can tell you Courtney that love it was just as stable as the handrail. I could lean into it and it protected me, supported me.

Courtney: Yeah what has felt most loving to you since this has happened what kind of care and kind of witnessing and accompanying?

Frank: Oh, my mind dear bride Amanda has been done believable in her care. [14:00] Some people have been following it on Karen Bridge she's also a very good writer so when she can just be with me you know and we wake up in the morning and yeah, we were at Thanksgiving you know and we walked around the house saying thank you at everything [laughter]. Like you know stuff we don't think about like you turn on the tap of water and water comes out. I remember being in India years ago and the village kids used to come to my hotel, and they were fascinated by the toilet and its capacity to flush you know. So, we said thank you to the toilet you know. Everything because everything felt like it was freely given that it does and right now it feels everything is given. So, this feels like a kind of love like that that not just a care coming from friends or family, but whole world is giving us all the time and this [15:00] is a great reminder to appreciate that.

Courtney: Yeah. Do you think about what's next these days or are you in such a present state that you don't even need to project?

Frank: Well, the initial few months of the stroke I was kind of resting in what I would call a 'non conceptual awareness', no thoughts or anxiety, none. Now my brain is sorry to recover it where that recovery comes perception and with perception comes identity, with identity comes anxiety. So, sometimes I'm nostalgic for those early days [laughter]. The doctor is in the clinicians who I work with they keep speaking to me about recovery and [16:00] brains capacity for neuroplasticity and such. And I've actually found myself not so interested in that I'm much more interested in discovery what can I discover. This is now my new reality what can I discover here, and you know I have this feeling that if I stay true to him this path of integrity and love that we've been talking about here I might not recover. But I will be amazed at what I discover on the way. So, that's what's now and what's next and maybe once in a while trying to share what all this is teaching me with other people like this because it's the way I serve the world.

Courtney: Well Frank thank you for serving us today [17:00] your presence here is such a gift. [Applause].