



## Be Vulnerable and Authentic

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

At about the age of nine or so, I met someone at school who was very popular and we became friends. At some point early in our relationship he said this about another kid we knew:

"My parents said I am not allowed to be friends with kids of divorced parents like him. Kids of divorced parents are all screwed up, they said."

As our friendship developed, I said nothing about my own parents being divorced or that I lived with my mother and my stepfather.

This popular boy quickly ingratiated me into the highest social scene there was for nine year olds in our school. It included some very pretty girls who attended our school who came from quite wealthy families and lived in large homes with pools.

For weeks my new friend and I discussed how much fun it would be to have these girls over to one of our homes. My friend, whose father was an engineer for General Motors, lived in a large house several blocks from me. He had several brothers and sisters and felt having girls over to his house might create problems. My house was sort of in the middle between the two girls and him so we decided we'd have them over to my house.

I lived in a small house. The paint on the outside was all peeling and inside was frequently a mess. I didn't care too much about any of this because I had my own area of the house, the basement. The upstairs of my life was not the most pleasant place in the world. My stepfather had cancer and was in a lot of pain, bleeding, changing bandages, and fighting with my mom; my stepfather would sometimes beat up my mom, there was a lot of substance abuse, and the police even were there on occasion to break up disturbances.

However, in the basement I had made for myself a place of peace in what was a normally chaotic environment. It was finished quite nicely. I had set up a small desk and a fish tank. When the girls came to my house, we'd have them come in a side door so they could go straight down the basement.

Eventually the day we'd planned for the girls to come over had arrived. Prior to this, my friend and I had bragged to the girls about the basement to get them excited about visiting, telling them that it was large and really nice.

When the girls got to my house, I saw their faces fall. They came in the basement, looked around, and wanted to leave right away. They said something about the house being really small and that it was "sad." One of the girls went upstairs to the kitchen and saw an overflowing ashtray on a table with a bottle of liquor next to it, a kitty litter box in the middle of the room, and several days of newspapers on the floor.

She came back downstairs and told her friend, "We need to go."

The next day in school things were strange. The girls did not talk to me anymore. Then the unthinkable happened: One of them told my friend that her parents had told her about my parents being divorced. He confronted me about it.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

"Because I was afraid we wouldn't be friends if I brought it up," I told him.

From that moment on, my friend and all of the girls stopped talking to me completely. There was no explanation whatsoever; they simply stopped. I was enormously hurt and confused.

I made other friends in time, of course, but felt I had been rejected because I was not the person people wanted me to be:

(1) I was not the child of married parents, and

(2) I was not wealthy like the others.

At some point in our lives, most of us get the message from family, friends, or others that we need to act a certain way and be something we are not so that we can be accepted and connect with others. When I was younger, I allowed myself to be open and vulnerable. Gradually, as I grew older, I started to get the message that I had to be a different person from my real self in order to connect with others. This was incredibly confusing and something that is very harmful on many levels – and we all do it.

How many of us are not being our true selves, or getting out there, because we feel we need to be something we are not? Or, if we are not phony, how many of us instead learned to numb ourselves with food, drugs and other things so we don't have to feel vulnerable?

The summer after my friends stopped talking to me, I was at a soccer camp away from my family. One afternoon I was called out of practice to a pay phone in one of the dorms. My grandmother was on the line to tell me my stepfather had died. He had been dying of cancer for years but his condition had worsened quite recently. He was in his early 40s.

I went back to my dorm room and started crying. I was alone and terribly upset. Shortly after, my roommate arrived back from practice. He looked surprised to see me crying. At the time I was sort of a tough kid in the camp. I was extremely competitive at soccer. I had challenged a few kids to fights and they had backed down.

"What's wrong?" my roommate asked.

"My stepdad has cancer," I told him.

For a long time thereafter, I wondered why I had not been more forthright about what had happened; my stepfather had just died. Nevertheless, I had minimized everything because I was afraid if my friend knew the truth I would not be accepted. I could have told everyone in the camp that my stepfather had died. Instead, I decided to remain tough and project a strong exterior.

The next day, in front of the entire camp, one of the boys I had challenged to a fight announced he now wanted to fight me. He was wearing glasses. I was still too upset so I made some excuse about not wanting to fight; I was defeated because I refused to fight. It was very difficult – I was very hurt by my stepfather having died but I was too embarrassed to let anyone know how vulnerable this had made me.

Something very few people understand is how to be vulnerable. We all have aspects of ourselves that we're afraid to share because if we do we won't be accepted. We numb ourselves to fit into a mold we think others want to see.

The reason so many of us are afraid to be vulnerable is because we fear that if other people see who we really are we won't be worthy of a connection with them. Connection is what it's all about for everyone. We all desperately want to connect with others: we need connection in order to survive and to live. Everything we do in our lives is about connection.

Connection is extremely important and what life is all about. If a baby isn't held and loved during the first few weeks of life, it can die. It is called "failure to thrive" syndrome. If people are excluded and not liked by others, they often go crazy and even kill themselves. When someone does something wrong, we put them in jail and isolate their connections to the people in the outside world.

Because connection is so important, we will do anything to either:

(1) feel connected, or

(2) make sure we don't feel disconnected.

My mother was in her mid-30s when my stepfather died. She was left with my half-sister (my mother and stepfather's daughter) and me to watch over. She had to work and still take care of her social life, meaning she frequently had her friends over for parties. Our house was often quite a mess; dishes would often stack up for days. Our neighbors were uncomfortable living next to a single mother family. They built a giant privacy fence so they would not have to see us.

I had earlier received the message from the girls my friend and I had invited to my house that the life I lived -- that is, my small, often unclean house -- made me unworthy of connection. I quickly came to believe that I could only have friends and socialize with other kids at home if my house was always spic and span. After school I would often come home and work for hours cleaning: washing the dishes, vacuuming the rugs, putting things away. I also started doing the yard work to make sure things looked good on the outside as well. I seemed to feel on some level that I could only be accepted if everything inside and outside of our house looked perfect.

Because I had so much concern about being ostracized and feeling disconnected, I didn't socialize with other kids as much as I would have liked. I found friends who also had single mothers, but theirs had to be as completely overwhelmed as was mine. I chose to be around people who shared my weakness – and my friends chose me for the same reason. My best friend at that time was someone whose house was always a mess: his mother was a waitress and dated lots of questionable men. I chose to be around people who shared my weakness – and my best friend chose me for likely the same reason.

Even when I started to blossom intellectually, I still sought out people with same sorts of weaknesses in their backgrounds. When I was in high school, many of my closest friends were stoners and the people who got kicked out of my school. I was friends with people like this because I felt that if I stepped up and was around a different sort of person I would not have that connection.

When I got to be 13 or so, clothes became incredibly important and I needed to dress just like other kids did. I was ridiculously self-aware about putting the opinions of others ahead of my own opinions. I could not step outside of their opinions about brands, colors and so forth. I was ridiculously self-aware and putting the opinions of others far ahead of mine.

What was so sad about all of this, though, was that I realize now in retrospect that I was not allowing myself to live because I was afraid to be vulnerable. I was afraid to show the world who I really was. I avoided people and social situations where my true self would be seen. I did not want my true self to be seen.

My half-sister (whose father was the one who died) followed a completely different route than I did. She never hid who she was or who her parents were, or what happened to anyone. She was open with everyone she met. Instead of closing herself off, she just went with everything. Instead of feeling like she needed to be anything else, she was herself. Because of this, the world opened up to her in a different way: everyone was friendly to her, and people sympathized and watched out with her. Everyone was friendly to her and nice to her. She was vulnerable and not closed off.

There is a difference between what men and women feel they should be – especially in families. Perhaps I felt the pressure to step in and be a father of sorts and be strong. Men are taught not to show their emotions and stay closed up. By contrast, it is more socially acceptable for women to show their emotions and perhaps their ability to let out their emotions explains to some extent why they often live longer.

When we are not vulnerable, we are closed off. When we are closed off, we are trying to prevent ourselves from being hurt. Most of us are constantly running from pain. We close ourselves off and, in doing so, miss the pleasure that comes from allowing ourselves to be vulnerable.

If you want to have a good and successful life, you need to be vulnerable. Everything you do that you are afraid to do will ultimately result in you experiencing 80% pain. If you do act and show your vulnerability, you will experience 20% pain – but your life will also ultimately be 80% happiness. Eighty percent happiness is more important than 20% pain.

In the dating world, it is very difficult for most people to approach someone new, chat them up, and ask them out. When you do this, you are going to experience the pain of rejection some of the time. You are also going to experience pain some of the time if the person goes out with you and then does not like you. But in the long run the bit of pain you experience when you are rejected is nothing compared to the life of happiness that comes from being open and vulnerable to others.

I met a beautiful family recently. The man is somewhat nerdy, a bit boring, but very nice. His wife is drop dead gorgeous and very outgoing. One day the man saw her jogging down the street, ran up to her and asked her for her phone number. She gave it to him and they ended up getting married.

"How many girls did you do that with before one said yes?" I asked him.

"More than I can count!" he replied.

He is one of the happiest people I know. A great deal of his happiness is because he found the woman he did. He found her because he allowed himself to be vulnerable. Vulnerability is incredibly important and something that can change your life.

It takes courage to be vulnerable. Life's greatest rewards go to people who are vulnerable. Those who aren't vulnerable are

those who just stand on the sidelines watching. These are often the people who've had bad experiences like I did when I was younger and then live their lives in fear, clamming up or trying to be someone different. These people are not living. It takes courage to be vulnerable.

The fear of disconnection and exclusion is extremely strong for most people. Because so many people are so afraid of exclusion, they fear putting themselves out there and trying to be more. Many people – like myself when I was younger (and even to some extent today)—are afraid of putting themselves out there because they fear that if people really knew who we were they would feel they were not worthy of connection.

In order to connect with people you need to allow yourself to be seen. The fear that we are not worthy of connection is something that keeps us out of connection. In order to connect with people, you need to be authentic, and willing to let go of who you think you should be so that you can be seen for who you really are.

To eliminate fears of being rejected, many of us try to order our lives in such a way that we cannot possibly be seen as unworthy of connection. We strive to go to certain schools, get certain professional or social titles, do certain types of work, belong to certain clubs, and know certain people. Being vulnerable means that we can admit that even without having attained these external goals we are still worthy of connection with others.

All my life, I have watched people going to extremes to attain goals that they believed would make them worthy of connection with others. Examples of this include:

- When I was in high school, I saw people who believed their lives were ruined because they did not get into an Ivy League college.
- When I was in law school, I saw people who believed their life was ruined because they did not get jobs with a top firm.
- Most recently, I've seen people go to extremes to be friends with celebrities because they need this social connection for their self-esteem.

None of these goals have had anything to do with being “worthy” of connection with others or being happy.

There are four things that will not make people happy.

- Money --  
Money will not make people happy. How many people do you know who have lots of money and are not happy? Happy is happy – money does not make you happy. Too many people strive for money because they believe it will buy them connections to others. The connections that come from money are shallow and meaningless. These connections will not create happiness. Money isn't happiness; only happy is happy.
- Fame --  
More than a few people believe that fame will make them happy. This is not true at all either. When you think about famous people like Lindsay Lohan, do you think they are happy? They are not happy. If fame made all stars happy we would not be reading about how they are unhappy so many of them are, mostly stories about how their fame is the cause of their unhappiness. Fame isn't happiness; only happy is happy.
- Status --  
Many still think that status will make them happy. This status can be a matter of who one knows, what their professional titles are or their job might be, where they live, what kind of car they drive, the social groups to which they belong, and more. If happiness is related to this sort of thing, what happens when you lose your job or title, or lose an important friend? If you are truly happy none of this will matter. Status isn't happiness; only happy is happy.
- Following The Rules of Society --  
Most rules in society help us to be good citizens and can serve as valuable life lessons. However, some people think that blindly following the rules of society will make them happy. Dressing the way they should, doing the sort of job they think they should, following the rules of the religion you think you should. This never makes people happy. Following rules without substance doesn't make happiness; only happy is happy.

The key to happiness and success is none of these four things. Instead, being truly happy is about being authentic, vulnerable and the person you are deep down. The people who are the happiest are typically the most authentic with who they are and who they want to be.

Because I am in the career business, I spend a lot of my time speaking with people who are quite talented but quite obviously living the wrong lives – and who have numbed themselves to being the sort of person they think they should be. These people are doing jobs they do not like. They are in marriages they do not like. They are spending their free time doing things they do not like. They are living the lives they think they should, not the lives they really want.

The bravest people in the world are the ones who take risks, make themselves vulnerable, and try things even when they aren't necessarily certain now what the outcome will be. They take a risk and go somewhere where there are not necessarily any rules.

Far too many people are looking for rules but these rules can be limiting. For example, many people enter certain professions because there are rules about how much they pay to people entering right out of school or how fast people entering that profession will rise and so forth. Being a nurse, attorney, engineer and other professions are professions with rules attached to them that, to some extent, determine how someone will do over time. People following these sorts of rules attached to a profession, however, are doing so for the wrong reasons. If the rules don't seem to apply to their individual circumstances, this will make them unhappy over time. Many of these people may have wanted to do something quite different with their lives and because they are following the rules they end up being unhappy.

Most people in the world are ignored and are not being seen. There are only a few things that can truly make someone stand out. The greatest people in history are those who:

- (1) Were authentic,
- (2) Got themselves out there and made themselves visible and
- (3) Spoke the truth with love.

These are the people who cannot be ignored.

What Jesus spoke about and did is still read about today because he got out there, was authentic and said things that were

true. The works of Shakespeare are read hundreds of years later because he got out there, was authentic, and spoke the truth (“to be or not to be”). We read and follow people like Jesus and Shakespeare and remember them forever because there is something genuine about them and they speak the truth. You cannot ignore people who speak the truth, are authentic and get out there.

The rarest thing out there is the truth. The rarest people out there are the ones who can act and speak with the truth. Very few people actually know how to live.

Most of us are lost and confused in life to a great extent. Yet very few are willing to show they are lost and confused. Because so many people hide being lost and confused, very few people ever see who they are. When others can't see who they really are, it's hard for others to connect with them, leaving them even more lost and confused.

To be happy and connected with others, you need to represent humanity. You can only do this when you are vulnerable and authentic.

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