

Vulnerability as a path to community

**BY THE REV. DR.
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Spirit of Life

“I’m fine.” “I’ve got it covered.” “Nope, I don’t need any help; I’ve got this.” These are all phrases that I have both spoken and heard spoken to me in response to questions like, “How are you? Is there anything you need? Could I help you with ... ?” Many of us have internalized the cultural ethos that insists human need equates to weakness and that independence or self-sufficiency are righteous goals of life. This mindset, deeply rooted in “up from the bootstraps” cultural narratives, is doing us all great harm; it’s also rubbish.

The truth is that there is not one of us who does not need help. There is not one of us who can do all that needs to be done on our own. Needing others is not a sign of weakness, it is simply a characteristic of our shared humanity. And the problems that we face — as individuals, families, congregations, organizations and communities — are faced better and more effectively together. If we rely only on ourselves, we limit the resources available to us — resources of time, creativity, compassion, collaboration and the list goes on. However, there is a certain kind of sacred magic that takes place when we risk coming together, acknowledging our vulnerability so that we can access our shared strength.

Years ago, Rabbi David Wolpe illustrated this principle with a story. A boy and his father were walking along a road when they came across a large stone. The boy said to his father, “Do you think — if I use all my strength — I can move this rock?” The dad replied, “If you use all of your strength, I’m sure you can do it.” The boy began to push the rock. Exerting himself as much as he could, he pushed



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and pushed. The rock didn’t budge. Discouraged, he said to his father, “You were wrong. I can’t do it.” The father placed his arms around the boy’s shoulder and said, “No, you didn’t use all your strength — you didn’t ask me to help.”

We are all vulnerable. If our experience of the COVID pandemic have taught us anything, they have reminded us of this. When troubles come — as they will — we can more resourcefully deal with them if we don’t spend all of our energy pretending that we’re fine and if we reach out to offer what we have in generosity while receiving what we need in grace. Vulnerability, far from something to eschew and deny, is a path to community than can uplift us all. In fact, when the most vulnerable among us have a chance to thrive, we all do.

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