

Preparation for Wholehearted Living

Our lives are full. Whether balancing family, work, health challenges, relationship struggles, or all of these, we are often multi-tasking. Many of us wear different masks in our lives, juggling varied responsibilities, striving for perfection in all areas. Moving through life at a frenetic pace or mindlessly going through our days, we hope to be everything to everyone, but often come up short. This can leave us feeling depleted and often inadequate.

Poet David Whyte tells of his question to an old monk: “Tell me about exhaustion.” The old monk replies, “You know that the antidote to exhaustion is not necessarily rest?” Whyte, confused, asks, “What is it, then?” The monk responds, “The antidote to exhaustion is wholeheartedness.”

Research professor and author Brené Brown explains wholeheartedness as living a life with authenticity, love and belonging, and a resilient spirit. It’s letting go of the need for certainty and perfection, and opening up to gratitude and trust. Living a wholehearted life is embracing your whole self, inadequacies and all. It is knowing that you are whole, even if you make mistakes, or don’t finish everything on the to-do list. This takes vulnerability, which is really the work of a lifetime. Putting yourself out in the world and having the courage to be imperfect is scary, but necessary for an authentic life. Having compassion for ourselves and for others leads us toward a life of connection.

The concepts of wholehearted living have been around for a long time in religions and spiritual practices. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh compares the complicated process of finding our authentic beauty to a lotus flower emerging out of the mud when he says, “No mud, no lotus.” Pema Chödrön, a Buddhist nun, teaches, “Compassion isn’t some kind of self-improvement project or ideal that we’re trying to live up to. Having compassion starts and ends with having compassion for all those unwanted parts of ourselves, all those imperfections that we don’t even want to look at.”

The word *shalom*, found throughout the Old Testament, has many meanings, one of which is well being or wholeness. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches how to live a life full of love, wisdom, and faith. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Matthew speaks of finding your true authentic self when he says, “Don’t hide your light under a bushel.”

As we age, this seems to be a more natural process for some. We may naturally begin to shift the focus from caring what others think about us, to considering what makes us come alive and thrive. As Franciscan friar Richard Rohr explains, “the first half of life is discovering the script, and the second half is actually writing it and owning it.” For some, this happens around middle age, or when some significant event pushes us to reconsider our lives. Others never explore this second part of life, as it involves facing fears, taking risks, and staying present through difficult emotions. John Flavel, seventeenth-century Presbyterian clergyman, says, “There are some men and women who have lived forty or fifty years in the world and have had scarcely one hour’s discourse with their hearts all the while.”

Wholehearted living is a process, a lifetime journey. Below are some of the characteristics that Brown suggests wholehearted people share, adapted from her Ted Talk on Vulnerability.

- A sense of worthiness – they believe they are worthy and know they are enough
- Courage – to tell their stories and be themselves
- Compassion – for themselves and others
- The ability to connect with others
- Practicing gratitude
- Leaning in to joy
- Practicing vulnerability and letting themselves be seen
- Living and loving with their whole heart, knowing there are no guarantees

If we fall, we don't need self-recrimination or blame or anger – we need a reawakening of our intention and a willingness to re-commit, to be whole-hearted once again. *Sharon Salzberg*

To share your weakness is to make yourself vulnerable; to make yourself vulnerable is to show your strength. *Criss Jami*

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. *Rilke*

The thing that is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up on being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself. *Anna Quindlen*

Vitally, the human race is dying. It is like a great uprooted tree, with its roots in the air. We must plant ourselves again in the universe. *D.H. Lawrence*

Just don't give up what you're trying to do. Where there is love and inspiration, I don't think you can go wrong. *Ella Fitzgerald*

Questions to Ponder

1. Search YouTube for the Ted Talk, “The Power of Vulnerability,” by Brené Brown.
2. Review the characteristics for wholehearted living above. Which ones resonate with you? Which ones do you struggle with?
3. How do you numb uncomfortable feelings such as vulnerability? For instance, some people turn to food, alcohol, or work to avoid vulnerable feelings.
4. What are some ways you have developed to live wholeheartedly?
5. What are some ways you are able to let go of perfectionism?
6. How has this process changed for you as you have aged?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the gathering, think of a few words, phrases, or metaphors that describe ways you practice wholehearted living. The prompt for the Words of the Day activity will be to complete this sentence: “I practice wholehearted living when I ...”