

The Invulnerability of Being Vulnerable

Gary Clarke

The source of this title is a bit vague to me. That is, I'm not sure if I discovered it for myself or if some incredibly bright person told me. Upon further contemplation I *do* remember -- I did discover it for myself.

So what, exactly, is all this stuff about being vulnerable or invulnerable? For you, I don't know. I can only address what it's been for me and perhaps some of that may resonate. Let's see.

First let me define what *vulnerable* and *invulnerable* mean to me. Early in my life being vulnerable meant to be open to "the slings and arrows of outrageous" barbs and cheap shots. It meant being unprotected. And who wants to go through life unprotected? Ask any politician. If I didn't go to great lengths to cover my ass I would definitely be in constant jeopardy of being taken advantage of, of not getting the girl, of not being "accepted," of not getting the part (I am an actor). So vulnerable was out of the question. You had to be clever, calculating, and possibly (but not necessarily) corrupt.

Being *invulnerable* definitely seemed the way to go. I wanted to be accepted. I wanted to look good. I wanted to keep people in the dark about those things in my life that could be subject to ridicule and judgment (i.e., allowing my three boys to be adopted by my ex-wife when they were eight, nine and ten -- what kind of horrible father would do such a thing?).

Looking back, those times of my life were excruciatingly painful and provided increasing evidence of the futility of that position -- being *invulnerable* came back to slap me in the face over and over again. But the slaps didn't matter. I had to protect my image, my "identity." I *had* to look good. One of my more embarrassing revelations was discovering that instead of no one knowing what I was doing, in fact it was as obvious as poop on a white rug. "O, what tangled webs we weave..."

I've often wondered why someone, anyone, didn't point out what I was doing, but now realize that I probably wouldn't have listened anyway. Why should I have listened? *Everyone* was playing the game and it was apparently working for them. Even if I had known to ask how they were doing it, I wouldn't have. *That* would have implied vulnerability.

There was an incident early on that put a crack in my "egg of invulnerability" -- at the time I could not have defined it as such but the evidence was evident. I was a thespian "star" in high school. In fact a 20th Century Fox talent scout, Doc Bishop (who had discovered Shirley Temple), discovered me in my senior play. He invited me to the studio and introduce me around to the powers that be'd. He wanted to put me under

contract and groom me for stardom. And all I had to do was wait till I was eighteen (I was seventeen at the time) and not get married. I got married. Doc found out and slammed the door to stardom in my face...hard.

Something just occurred to me.., just now.., as I was writing the last paragraph. It is very possible, even likely, that despite his request that I not marry, I did so just out of some unconscious fear of not being able to fulfill Doc's expectations of me, whatever they may have been. That had not even crossed my mind until just now. And, at this writing, I am a tad older than 17. The things we hold on to.

It was a few years before I even considered taking another shot at acting. When I did I asked my high school drama teacher for help. She used her friendship with the director of the Pasadena Playhouse to get me an audition. I was to arrive at 6:30 the next evening, third floor at the rear of the Playhouse. But I had to make an impression. They had to know I was someone special. I had to mask anything that would make me appear incompetent or inept. I lapsed back into my cocky "high school star" mode and decided to arrive at 7:30 (stars always arrive late). I barged in to the designated room and rudely interrupted another actor's audition. I was icily directed to take a seat and wait my turn. While waiting it became apparent that these actors were good. I mean really good. Of a much higher caliber than I was used to. I began to sweat and palpitate. By the time the director called on me I was a wreck.

Now when you audition for a part, everyone knows that you read "the dialogue." Everyone knows. I knew. It didn't matter. I was so flustered I read everything -- stage directions, author's notes, commas and hyphens. The director was sympathetic and asked his assistant to take me into the next room, go over the lines and allow me to settle my nerves.

The assistant was very gracious and helpful and, when he thought I had sufficiently settled, asked if I was ready to return to the audition room. I asked if he would give me a few moments longer and he agreed. He left and I proceeded to memorize the lines of the scene. My assumption was that the director would be impressed. Ten or fifteen minutes later and I was indeed, ready to blow them away. I walked out of my room and into the audition room and, for a brief moment, thought I had opened the wrong door. I hadn't. It was the right door but everyone -- everyone -- had gone. I had been completely forgotten and found myself alone in an obscure hallway on the top floor of the Pasadena Playhouse staring at a single lightbulb clinging to the end of a frayed wire dangling from a hole in the ceiling. While I didn't realize it at the time, my cloak of invulnerability had failed, miserably. And, to top it off, I later told everyone that the audition had gone swimmingly -- more covering, more denial, more pain, and absolutely no evidence of authenticity or satisfaction. I was humbled, in spades, and I didn't like being humbled (as if it had anything to do with anyone else). I also had no idea of how to *fix* the problem. So..,

I hid. I had no desire or interest in talking to *anyone*. The incident would blow over. It would be forgotten. I'd forget. And if anyone brought it up I'd deny it and avoid it all

with my fancy footwork. Well, it didn't blow over and it wasn't forgotten. If anyone even mentioned the Pasadena Playhouse I would get that "Uh oh" twinge in my gut and grow pale. I'd try to change the subject and if I couldn't, I'd leave the room. It was months before I ventured forth again.

A small 'Little Theater' group in San Gabriel, CA was mounting an old fashioned melodrama. No one there knew me so there was nothing to hide or avoid. My Playhouse fiasco hadn't hit the papers so I felt comparatively safe. I walked into the theater with absolutely nothing going on -- nothing hidden and not trying to be something I wasn't. I was there to read for a part. If I got it, great. If I didn't, that was okay, too. I was actually able to look around and watch people, see what they were going through. I recognized "me at the Playhouse" in a few of the hopefuls. Still, the full meaning of the moment hadn't clicked for me. That I was actually experiencing a low-grade form of vulnerability had not occurred to me. What a joy it was. I couldn't wait to read.

The theater was run by five volunteers who had already cast themselves in all of the major roles, which was fine. They ran the theater, so why not? Parts that were left were one or two-line parts. The auditionees -- about ten or fifteen of us -- sat patiently waiting our turns. Our names would be called, we'd stand to polite applause and go forward, reading our one or two lines. More polite applause and we'd return to our seats hoping we'd made the cut. Then I noticed: the five theater-runners were having the time of their lives, happy, carefree, and confident that soon they'd have the cast they wanted. But the people who were there for a part, well..., definitely horses of a different color. Their faces reflected hope, fear, angst, and the very real possibility of throwing up. "How," I wondered, "could anyone possibly give an even remotely fair accounting of themselves while in that state of mind?" I also noticed that I wasn't in that state of mind.

I was in unfamiliar territory and liked it! I was following no unspoken agenda. What they saw is what they got. I was self-assured and confident, but not cocky. I knew what I knew and what I wanted in that moment. I went for it. No hesitation. No fear of rejection. However it turned out would be perfect. There was nothing to hide or be ashamed of. Had they asked me about the Pasadena Playhouse incident, I would have told them, gladly. And they would have laughed..., with me, not at me.

They called my name and I stood to the polite applause. As I walked forward I said that I would like to read the part of the villain. One of the "five" reminded me that "Tom is already..." I interrupted. Not arrogantly, but firmly..., nicely. "I understand," I said. "But if I read the part of the villain you will at least get a better idea of what I can do. And if I'm not cast in this play perhaps you'll remember me for the next one."

Tom, of all people, thought the idea had merit and agreed with my request. It wasn't an outlandish or brash, or even an unusual request. Had they said "no" I would have thanked them and been on my way. No hard feelings. Yes, definitely a new place for me. Suffice to say, they gave me the part of the villain. Tom took the part of the hero,

and Bob, who had been cast as the hero, was now the MC. And a good time was had by all.

I've got a closet-full of protection modes:

- Be physical, aggressive.
- Point out and use the weaknesses of others.
- Time your moves.
- Out-clever the competition.
- Use controlled pseudo vulnerability. (That always gets 'em.)

And on and on.

My agent sent me to a Hollywood party informing me that agents, directors and producers would be there, casting several movies; a western, a teenage drama, a gangster epic, and a family friction flick. "Damn!" I thought. "I can be *all* of those guys!" But I couldn't be just Gary. That would never do. (I had absolutely no remembrance of my "reading for the villain" episode). I arrived at the party dressed in jeans, boots, a white shirt and my best James Dean persona. I was cool, hip and a force to be reckoned with. I planted myself on a sofa and perused the scene. Thirty minutes later a very attractive lady sat down next to me. I recognized her as a prominent Hollywood casting agent. She introduced herself and I mumbled my name. She chatted on merrily and I would occasionally grunt a response and favor her with one of my seven expressions. During the course of that chat I uttered only four words, to two of which she replied, "Pardon?"

At the end of the "chat" she put her hand on my knee (Boy, I had her now!). She looked deep into my eyes and cooed, "Gary. If you're going to play the strong, silent type, you might consider having something to say when you do speak." And she was gone. Dear God! The Pasadena Playhouse all over again! Only worse.

It got better. Not good, but better. It became much easier to recognize the void when I wasn't vulnerable. It was about here that I learned about *The Wasp and the Suit of Armor*. It's like this: You can strap on your *armor of invulnerability* but invariably the *wasp of discovery* will find its way inside your "protection" and sting the crap out of you. And, should the same wasp happen upon your armor-less, unprotected body, it will probably just sting you once and be on its way, leaving you to be on yours, without that ever-present worry, "Are they going to find out?" They will. Get the damn sting over with and move on! Eventually, you begin to learn something of major importance with every subsequent sting. Well, at least I did.

One incident completely turned my life around. Forever. I do not exaggerate. I was one of the co-stars on a big TV series during the 60's, *The Virginian*, and worked with an actor named Lee J. Cobb. If you don't remember the name you'll remember the face. Look him up on IMDB. I had a problem with him -- I was star-struck..., in awe of this incredible actor. I couldn't put one intelligent or semi-comprehensive sentence together when speaking to him. He was Lee J. Cobb! He was used to speaking to bright, erudite and more articulate people than this incompetent, unseasoned upstart.

But.., I was smart enough to know what had to be done. I'd tell him about my problem. Just lay it out on the table. A man of his caliber would certainly have a pearl or two he could offer that would help a poor unfortunate like me.

After about the third month of the show, Lee, two other actors and I were driven out to the location for that day's shooting. The two actors and the driver got out of the limo and headed for the chuck wagon. Lee and I were left alone in the back seat. Lee, who loved cigars, lit one up. He hadn't yet looked at me. No matter. I mustered up my courage and spoke, spilling my guts as I told him of my feelings of inadequacy being around him. It took several minutes but I finally got it all out. I waited for his response, knowing it would be profound and powerful. I mean, this was Lee J. Cobb!! He puffed on his cigar, thinking, I assumed. I waited. A long wait. Not a word, a cough, a glance in my direction. Nothing. "Maybe," I thought, "I wasn't clear." I reiterated my case. A little more definite this time. A bit more assertive. I left no doubt as to what I wanted. And still, not a word. Nothing! Just an occasional exhalation of smoke. It was as if I wasn't even in the car. I blew up. I told him where to get off and exactly what he could do with his cigar.

Ironically, most of my scenes that day were with Lee and I blasted through every one. At one point during the day the director pulled me aside and said, "I don't know what you're doing, Gary, but keep it up. Your scenes are great."

The last scene of the day: Lee and me. Waiting for the set up, I'm pacing. Lee's sitting in his director's chair smoking another damned cigar. As I paced I happened to glance his way and thought I caught a hint of a glint in his eyes. I stopped, turned to him, and he broke out into this incredible smile. It hit me like a ton of bricks. "You son-of-a..," I said. "You did that on purpose!" He laughed, stood and gave me a bone-crushing bear hug. From that moment until the day he died we were fast friends. And to this day I thank him for being the kind of person who would go that far out on a limb for another human being. God bless you, Lee.

Lee's contribution to me allowed me to pay it forward, in spades. One of my first observations was that being vulnerable was ever so much freer than trying to be invulnerable. By freer I mean unencumbered; at ease with who I was, peaceful, authentic.., definitely a much more delightful place to be. I also found that when I'm vulnerable it allows people around me to experience vulnerability. I don't do it with an agenda, I just do it because it works. For me and others. One more illustration and I'll sign off.

Columbia Studios was doing a prison movie in New York and sent their top casting agent to L.A. My agent couldn't get me on the audition list. But, I happened to be dating the young lady who had been assigned to be this casting agent's secretary. As a favor to her he agreed, albeit reluctantly, to see me.., at noon, the next day.

I was early. He was an hour late. He returned from lunch and even though I was sitting right next to his door he never looked at me as he entered his office. My friend, the

secretary, gave me an “I’m sorry” look. But it was okay. I was there on a pass anyway. Fifteen minutes later he buzzes her and she motions me to go in. I did. He was at his desk. Still not looking up, he pointed to a sofa. I sat. Another five minutes pass and still no recognition. But I’m fine., “in the zone,” you might say. I watched him for a long time and saw clearly that the man was riddled with angst and stress (my read). So I said, “This has got to be a pain in the ass for you.” That, or maybe the tone of my voice, got his attention.

“What?”

“I said that this has to be a pain in the ass for you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well,” I elaborated, “you’re out here from New York to cast a movie. Unfamiliar territory. Newspapers say there are a few production problems. You’re pressed for time, and to top it off your secretary asks if you might find time to audition a friend of hers. It’s got to be a pain in the ass.”

Before my eyes he morphed into an entirely different person. Had the expression on his face spoken it would have said, “Thank you. Thank you for hearing me.”

“Look,” I said. “I appreciate the opportunity. So let me read for you. I’ll give you my best shot and if you can use me, great. If not, well, at least I got to meet you.” We talked for an hour: about the business, families, guy stuff. He was wide open and so was I. I didn’t get the part. Not that one. But I auditioned for him on four separate occasions and he cast me twice. He became a friend I would have missed had I been practicing “invulnerability.”

Now I practice “vulnerable” at every opportunity. Always successfully? No. But I’ll tell you, even an unsuccessful “vulnerable” is much better than a successful “invulnerable.” If I had a Jewish grandmother, right about now she’d say, “Try it. You’ll like it.”