

When I was sitting where you are now, one year ago today, not only was I overwhelmed and exhausted, I was terrified. I was afraid for the uncertainty I was entering into, and for the daunting task of taking on the work of a JV—you all are so brave and I hope you recognize that. For me, sitting there and being sent off to be a force of resistance in a broken and fearful world was, all at once, the bravest and most frightening thing I had done so far in my life. Just like you are now, I was risking the comfort and safety of the space I inhabited and the relationships I formed before getting on a plane to Portland, Ore. My sense of peace and certitude for who I was and what I thought my life would be was hesitantly put on the line and told it was going to be “ruined”. The risk of saying “yes” to a year living with strangers, doing work I’ve never done, and being among vulnerable and oppressed communities really did scare me.

But I didn’t want the discomfort of my own fear to stand in the way of the thing I desperately wanted from a year of service—a revolution in myself and in the world. I had no sense of how to arrive at that revolution, only that I had reluctantly but strategically placed myself in the line of struggle, on a path of challenge and adversity. I left Orientation last year head down, fists clenched, unknowingly unprepared to witness vulnerability and suffering in the lives I would encounter and most unsuspectingly, vulnerability in myself.

As I entered my first year of service, I quickly became aware that many of us are never taught how to hold vulnerability, or sit with it, or communicate it, only how to discharge, dump it, or pretend that it’s not happening. So often, folks perceive vulnerability as weakness, which can make it hard for us to make space for and encounter it. But the most valuable lesson I learned from my first year as a JV was that the world needs people who are willing to take risks,

endure failure, and experience vulnerability—people willing to feel their own hurt instead of hiding from it, off-loading it onto other people, or ignoring it altogether. I discovered that in order for positive change to occur both personally and universally, we need people willing to own their stories of struggle, live their values, and keep showing up despite any promises of comfort or happiness. What grants life its beauty and magic is not the absence of fear, heartbreak, or failure, but the grace with which we navigate our suffering and rise as more wholehearted individuals and communities.

Parker Palmer, the Quaker elder and activist, wisely recognized that “violence is what happens when we don’t know what to do with our suffering.” This violence can be seen in war torn countries, power hungry politicians, and abusive relationships—in the actions that protect pride and assign blame. And when we look at these examples, we see fear as the underlying emotion humming below the surface. Within a system that denies basic human rights, of course fear tends to be the commanding emotion of the day. The fear I’ve witnessed in our fractured world this past year, has revealed to me that one of the most precious gifts is the courage acquired through endeavor, courage that comes from refusing to let fear dictate one’s actions. Acknowledging our own fear as a human community requires us to recognize what makes us vulnerable, and then make decisions for the betterment of those most harmed by our imperfect system. This bold process of manifesting bravery and regaining our footing in the midst of struggle is where, as a society, our courage is tested and our values forged.

As Jesuit Volunteers, let us recognize that the most fulfilling human projects succeeded inseparable from vulnerability that the world’s greatest successes lie awkwardly close to its

greatest struggles. Think of the revolutions throughout history that inspire us: the end of apartheid, the Civil Rights Movement, the women's movement, non-violent civil disobedience in India. None of these enormous feats were won, or will be won, without struggle and brokenness. In our generation, we get so caught up in making our success look effortless, of using productivity as a status symbol, of striving for absolute perfection. But as JVs we need to correct the belief that fulfillment must come easily or not at all. A belief that can lead us to withdraw prematurely from challenges that might have been overcome if only we had been prepared for the ferocity required by fulfillment. Today, in the gap between who we are at the present and who we wish one day to be, must come trial, adversity, vulnerability, and suffering. But the bravery of owning these stories of brokenness and challenge in our communities is essential to solving the problems in the world that feel unrelenting and irredeemable. Success and joy must be reached not by avoiding our vulnerability, but by recognizing its role as an inevitable step on the way to anything good.

Identifying this paradox—of darkness and light, of beauty and brokenness—served me not only in my civic life as a JV but also me personally and spiritually. Towards the end of my JV year, I was facing my own personal crisis, a time where I felt face down in life's arena. While maneuvering through a family member's illness, a break up, community tension, and some really tough goodbyes, I recognized this same pattern of power and frailty, birth and death, pain and hope. I was facing that fundamental choice of how to confront suffering—either with aggressive aversion or with generative openness to possibility.

Of course, my default reaction was to protect my heart, to shield it from pain, to make excuses. But eventually, I realized that in the same way our society can cause destruction when it isn't able to address its own suffering, so too do individuals self-destruct when they can't own their stories of struggle. In individuals this violence manifests as substance abuse, overwork to the point of burnout, isolation, and painful silence. This allergy to vulnerability permeates our spirit and can make us so brittle that we easily fall apart under the stress of failure and disappointment.

But when I held space for my suffering, when I leaned into my own vulnerability, I deeply felt the osmotic relationship of suffering and joy—how diminishing one, diminished the other, how when I numb the dark, I also numb the light. I now understand that feeling alive is found in pleasure and pain, confusion and wisdom, available in each moment of my weird, unfathomable, everyday life. Now, I can see what I could not in other moments when I was face-down—how the job denied helped me find work I needed to do, how the “road closed” sign directed me to terrain I needed to travel, how the failed relationship led me to even more love and belonging, how the losses that felt irredeemable forced me to discern meanings I needed to know. Those times of hurt and brokenness were the moments that made me, the moments that shaped who I am.

Each one of us in this room has had these moments to some degree in our lives. Maybe we've been fractured by the choices we've made; Maybe we've been shattered by things we would have never chosen. But our brokenness is the source of our common humanity, the basis for our shared search for meaning. This past year, I learned that our mutual vulnerability

nurtures and sustains our capacity for connection and compassion; that suffering can be transformed into the compost of growth and new life. We must awaken to the fact that not in spite of our suffering, but because of it, we can become bigger, braver, more compassionate people with the ability to hold others in their own moments of suffering—that's what being a JV is about. Only through such active self-compassion to our own darkness can we begin to offer authentic light to anybody else, to become a force of radiance in the world. We, as a JVC Northwest community, are broken people with broken hearts, we come here with an array of struggle and strength, but we can allow our hearts to be broken open, rather than broken apart.

This is the revolution I sought one year ago on this day: the idea that wounds held in a broken-open heart can initiate the transformation we urgently need in our world and in our selves. As a JV, you cannot effectively fight abusive power, poverty, inequality, illness, oppression, or injustice and not be broken by it. But you have a choice: you can embrace your vulnerability, and the compassion that remains our best hope for revolution, or you can deny your own humanity.

Revolution might sound a little dramatic, but choosing to own our stories of struggle and face our vulnerability is an absolute act of resistance and the ultimate form of solidarity. Choosing to live and love with our whole hearts without any guarantees is a radical act of defiance. You're going to confuse, piss off, and terrify lots of people—including yourself. And just like I did, when I was sitting in the seats you are in now, you may wonder how you can feel so brave and so frightened at the same time. But just like I did, I hope you feel brave, afraid, and very, very alive.

So go, be brave, and start a revolution. The world needs your brokenness, your humanness, and your inextinguishable light. Thank you.