

Blind Spots

Tim taught me vulnerability. He didn't *want* to hit that girl. She was in his blind spot. He didn't see her. Yes, he was driving after having had some alcohol. Ok, he was technically drinking and driving. But he was doing alright. He just didn't see her. And he is very, very sorry.

He sits in the front row. His posture is quite good and his face is smiling, intent, ostensibly calm, actually scared to death. The classroom is at the local prison, part of a prototype program that was being trialed in the North Carolina, New Jersey, and Michigan prisons. The prototype was called the VERA Pathways Project. It is run by the VERA Institute for Justice in conjunction with the state prison systems. VERA was a privately funded organization known for advocacy in justice issues in the U.S. They had obtained funding from five leading philanthropies: the Ford Foundation, the Sunshine Lady Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The project involved classes for selected incarcerated individuals due to be released within the next year. VERA Pathways made a commitment to help them get into a college, and to provide living expenses for two years, as long as they passed the entrance exams. I was a teacher in two of the four NC prisons. Tim was my student for three days a week, five hours a day.

"I can't stop seeing her face!", Tim told me.

We were talking after class. Tim requested this special conversation, even though I was instructed to keep the incarcerated students to a fairly strict regimen of leaving class

within five minutes of its end and returning to the main building. They were not to loiter in the classroom or the "yard" - the outdoor space between the classroom and the main building. I was making an exception, on a judgement call that this was important. So, I continued the conversation. Tim seemed genuinely distressed. He appeared to be authentically asking for help, and I felt that he would probably use our talk constructively. I was slightly torn, though. Already in my first few weeks here at the prison, I had been approached by other students for what felt like attempts to get something from me - special favors like contacting someone on the outside or good grades in return for some bargain. So, you can understand my caution. But Tim looked sincere; I didn't sense any hidden agenda.

Tim continued, "I go to sleep, or sometimes even just close my eyes and I see her. Do you have any advice? I mean, it's really hard."

He was tearing up. Tim was tall and thin. There were freckles on his kind and handsome face. His hair was brown. Tim was around 20 to 25 years old. His eyes revealed intelligence. Of course his dress was exactly like that of the other prisoners, a green shirt and pants and a white undershirt. He wore sneakers - something that can differ from one inmate to another. I replied to his plea for help, "I don't know what you should do, Tim. Do you have to get away from this? I mean, is there any way to keep seeing her and accept that this has happened, so that it doesn't hurt so much?" I am not a counselor. I'm a teacher. Yes, I've been around the block and I've worked with emotionally disturbed teenagers. Some of them later went to prison, and some came from 'juvi' - juvenile detention, or prison for minors. But I didn't know what to think, here. This was delicate ground. I respected the gravity of the situation.

"Well, maybe I can learn to look at her - to look at it - you know, the accident. You see, I was driving, and she was in my blind spot. By the time I saw her it was too late. It's just that I feel so bad for her. Then there's the parents - she was so young!"

"Wow. This must be hard", I said. "I don't know how you feel and I don't know what to say. Man, this must hurt."

"You don't know," Tim allowed.

"Yeah."

"Maybe I can learn somehow to move on. There must be a way, right?"

"Yes!" We both looked around the room, probably because we both sensed the need for time – so that maybe inspiration would come. The room was a former truck garage. It was large, about 50 by 50 feet. There was a regular door at one end and a truck-size garage door right next to the white board the prison had just installed for me. A brand new teacher's desk was at the front with a 45 inch flat screen tv and a dvd player. There were about 20 student desks. The ceiling was high, maybe 12 or 14 feet. It was clean and did not smell like a garage, so they must have scrubbed it pretty well when it was converted into a classroom. Finally I answered, "There must be something you can do. I mean, it's like you're a sitting duck. You open yourself to this painful thing you've done, admit you've done it, and then let it hurt you. Over and over!"

"I know," was all he could say.

"It seems you're motivation is to respect her and her family."

"Yeah."

"Well, instead of passively letting the pain of what you have done get to you in a destructive way, what if you look for a way to make a proactive move of your own. Is there something you could do that would not diminish your respect for her, yet would allow you to get on with your life?"

"If there is, I'll do it. I want to end the nightmares."

"This constant punishment feels like something you're asking for. It's like you want to learn a lesson - pay a price - make some tribute to honor the incredible sacrifice that she and her family have made."

"Maybe ..."

"Well look. Haven't you become vulnerable from this? You know, vulnerable in a strong way. Haven't you become more sensitive to other people? I mean, were you this open and available to friends and relatives before the accident?"

"No. I was a good guy - you know, I didn't go around dissing my friends, or anything. But I didn't listen to my parents. They kept telling me not to party too much. Not to drink and drive. I wouldn't listen."

"And now? Look at you. You are opening yourself, ready to be hurt or helped. In this very conversation you are modeling strength and vulnerability. It's contagious. Tim, you are changing *me* right now, by your powerful sincerity. You're not just listening, you're causing me to get vulnerable, just by this conversation." Tim noticeably recoils. A good recoil.

"I guess so," he admits.

"Man, I know so! I don't know what you should do, but I sure know this. You are my hero of *vulnerability*, right now, right here!"

Let's pause here. To fully grasp what is going on in this, you have to understand that in addition to the work on math and reading, this program included a component on life skills. So, Tim and I have had many classes where we had been talking about how to move from prison to outside life. We had our own language regarding the issue of vulnerability. You see, prison can do a real number on you. It can rip you apart. On the one hand, it makes you feel really bad about the things you have done wrong, and on the other hand, it makes you hyper-vigilant to keep your defenses up against the other prisoners and the prison officials. In other words, it messes with your mind, big time. How can you stay sane while everything around you says, **BE VULNERABLE ABOUT YOUR CRIME**, and simultaneously, **DON'T BE VULNERABLE TO YOUR SURROUNDINGS**? It's a crime ... what we do to criminals. So, Tim and I had been talking about vulnerability up the gazoo (as we say in prison). I had been telling them that vulnerability is essential to their survival on the outside. It is one of the main ways to enter back into relationship with other people. I told them that if they are not vulnerable to being hurt, they can't let anyone in to be loved, trusted, or helped. But many of the students have been resisting this advice. So now you can see why I am telling Tim that he is my hero.

"I mean it, Tim. You are already paying homage to the girl you hit in the accident! Your extreme vulnerability is a testament to the respect you bring to this girl and her family."

"What do you mean. I, I ... can't help seeing her. Is that what you're calling vulnerable?"

"Well, yeah. You think you have no choice. But, I believe that the constructive part of what you say you can't help IS

actually done by your choice. You could be pathological and have no remorse. But no. You chose to feel terrible! You chose misery."

"You know I didn't."

"I know. I'm partly kidding. But seriously, do you really think you have no part in this vulnerable state of despair you find yourself in?"

Tim is very sad and quite desperate. But he isn't stupid. He hears me.

"I hear you. But how can I stop the terror? I don't think I can take it anymore."

"Can you forgive yourself Tim? There's a difference between being vulnerable and beating yourself up."

"Maybe."

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Blind spots. What is a blind spot? Your car has a blind spot. A large truck pulls up next to your car. The truck is close enough to touch - close enough to crush you. You cannot see it in the side mirror or the rear view mirror. This is what happens with blind spots. Something big enough to kill you is right there, but you don't see it. So, are blind spots good or bad? I see it this way. It's up to you. If you know there's a blind spot in your car, you can practice watching out for it. You can accept the vulnerability of your position, and so, you just *turn enough*. Maybe life is like that. Maybe you have to allow yourself to be vulnerable enough to *turn enough*. But blind spots aren't just physical. Sometimes they're psychological. For instance, you meet someone, someone refreshingly different from anyone you've ever met before. He or she constantly responds to familiar situations in ways you've never encountered. You're constantly surprised. This person could either be the biggest pain in the neck or perhaps your mate for life. Perhaps both. My point is that it would be up to you. If you can *turn enough* to use your new someone's unanticipated reactions to learn from, you may just grow. You may turn out to be a new person, yourself.

Hey. What's so much fun in an amusement park? What's so amusing. Take the roller coaster. It throws you around so that you're out of control. Many rides do that. And how about the part where you don't see a curve or a drop coming. When you get off the roller coaster, do you calmly say, "My my, that was somewhat unanticipated." Or do you say, "Holy crap, I didn't see that coming!" Didn't three quarters of the people on the ride scream? You see, the amusement park uses blind spots to shake you out of your normal life - to surprise, scare, or toss you into an

out-of-control spin. They twist and turn you into vulnerable positions. It's amusing the way a joke is. Is a joke a joke if you can guess what's coming every time? Is it funny if I say, "What did the yogi say to the sandwich vendor?", and the answer is, "I'll have ham and cheese." No. It's funny (if you haven't heard this one) if he says, "Make me one with everything." Part of what is funny is that you *do not* see what's coming. What I'm trying to say is that life continually presents us with blind spots. So we continually have opportunities to become more vulnerable. You see blind spots are like intuitions. Both catch you off guard and present an opportunity for you to leap into the present where you have to live in the moment and let go of past behaviors and suspend old beliefs. A turn toward some new direction is suddenly possible. You are vulnerable and open to accept new insights. So use them. They are our chance to turn. Use them willingly to become vulnerable enough to turn your inner disposition so that you can actually consider a new and fresh version of yourself. Use them to lose control of the life that you probably want to change anyway, and move into your next phase of development. Turn enough to become more vulnerable.

She was in Tim's blind spot. And he was very sorry. What he could not see, had the power to put him away - for years. And it did. And now he's vulnerable. Extremely so. But of the many students I met in the prison, Tim looked most as if he was going to make it. Around 40% of the formerly incarcerated individuals that are being released nowadays do not make it on the outside. They return to prison. I think part of the reason for this is that they don't have enough vulnerability. They haven't been shown how to use those blind spots to reveal their vulnerabilities - then willingly accept them so that they can turn enough to start becoming a new self. I think that the prison system in the U.S. has it all wrong. Well, maybe not all wrong, maybe partly wrong - the part where the prisoners are treated poorly. Treating them like dirt makes them treat each other and the prison officials in like manner. It makes them hardened criminals, even if they were

just, kind of, regular people when they went into prison. It makes them guard their vulnerability for fear of being ripped apart. And that loss of vulnerability, I think, very often leads to recidivism. The prisoners don't lose control and turn bad - they hunker down, get tightened, and hold on. I think that the guy who was formerly incarcerated, who re-enters society with a loss of vulnerability, looks to all of us like a guy who is guilty. Either he looks as if he has a chip on his shoulder or he looks as if he is going to do something wrong. It isn't necessarily any of that. He is just hardened. He has lost his softness. We ripped it from him. Tim knows. But Tim has an advantage. He feels so bad - he is in such pain - that he has remained vulnerable. She was in his blind spot. And what Tim could not see may have saved his life.

So, the next time you run into Tim, or one of his friends, don't just look at his guilty disguise. Try to really see him. Don't leave him in your blind spot.