

Trusting: Strategic Discernment and Selective Vulnerability

By Dr. Michael Obsatz – May 2023

In our lives, there are people we can trust, and people we can't trust. It is sometimes very challenging to discern who fits into each category.

Erik Erickson, a psychologist, wrote that trust vs. mistrust is the first developmental stage of emotional growth. When we are born, we have to rely upon our parents and families because those are the designated caregivers. Some parents are trustworthy, and others are not.

Children viscerally know if they are loved unconditionally or not. Growing up with trustworthy parents, who are loving, compassionate, and nurturing is wonderful. Not every child gets to have this.

Erikson claims that one can master trust vs. mistrust. I believe it is a lifelong process. We are continually put into situations where our trust is tested. Can we trust all of our teachers? Our politicians? Our news media? Can we trust our friends, our neighbors, our relatives? Maybe some. Maybe not others.

This process of deciding how vulnerable to be, how protective of ourselves we want to be -- is complicated, and often imperfect. We make guesses all the time. Van Sant has written a wonderful book about trust called: "Trust: Trusting God, Self, Others, and Life."

I believe that trusting is a good thing, but it also is too simplistic to suggest that people run around being vulnerable and open all the time. There are people who would hurt us, manipulate us, and shame us. There are people who may use our vulnerability against us.

So -- being strategic and discerning and being selective are very important in becoming more vulnerable. Wholeness is not total vulnerability all the time. It involves selective vulnerability when it is safe to live that way.

We choose the time and the places where we open up. We choose people with whom we share our deepest desires and secrets. Those people need to have done their own emotional work and be in a place of love, acceptance, and gratitude. If we are not careful with our true selves, we might experience betrayal and emotional trauma.