DARING GREATLY

How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead

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The first time I read this quote, I thought, *This is vulnerability. Everything I've learned from over a decade of research on vulnerability has taught me this exact lesson. Vulnerability is not knowing victory or defeat, it's understanding the necessity of both; it's engaging. It's being all in.*

Vulnerability is not weakness, and the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional. Our only choice is a question of engagement. Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose; the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection.

When we spend our lives waiting until we're perfect or bulletproof before we walk into the arena, we ultimately sacrifice relationships and opportunities that may not be recoverable, we squander our precious time, and we turn our backs on our gifts, those unique contributions that only we can make.

Perfect and *bulletproof* are seductive, but they don't exist in the human experience. We must walk into the arena, whatever it may be—a new relationship, an important meeting, our creative process, or a difficult family conversation—with courage and the willingness to engage. Rather than sitting on the sidelines and hurling judgment and advice, **we must dare to show up and let ourselves be seen**. This is vulnerability. This is *daring greatly.*

Join me as we explore the answers to these questions:

- What drives our fear of being vulnerable?
- How are we protecting ourselves from vulnerability?

- What price are we paying when we shut down and disengage?
- How do we own and engage with vulnerability so we can start transforming the way we live, love, parent, and lead?

INTRODUCTION: MY ADVENTURES IN THE ARENA

I looked right at her and said, "I frickin' hate vulnerability." I figured she's a therapist—I'm sure she's had tougher cases. Plus, the sooner she knows what she's dealing with, the faster we can get this whole therapy thing wrapped up. "I hate uncertainty. I hate not knowing. I can't stand opening myself to getting hurt or being disappointed. It's excruciating. Vulnerability is complicated. *And* it's excruciating. Do you know what I mean?"

Diana nods. "Yes, I know vulnerability. I know it well. It's an exquisite emotion." Then she looks up and kind of smiles, as if she's picturing something really beautiful. I'm sure I look confused because I can't imagine what she's picturing. I'm suddenly concerned for her well-being and my own.

"I said it was *excruciating*, not *exquisite*," I point out. "And let me say this for the record, if my research didn't link being vulnerable with living a Wholehearted life, I wouldn't be here. I hate how it makes me feel."

"What does it feel like?"

"Like I'm coming out of my skin. Like I need to fix whatever's happening and make it better."

"And if you can't?"

"Then I feel like punching someone in the face."

"And do you?"

"No. Of course not."

"So what do you do?"

"Clean the house. Eat peanut butter. Blame people. Make everything around me perfect. Control whatever I can—whatever's not nailed down."

"When do you feel the most vulnerable?"

"When I'm in fear." I look up as Diana responds with that annoying pause and head-nodding done by therapists to draw us out. "When I'm anxious and unsure about how things are going to go, or if I'm having a difficult conversation, or if I'm trying something new or doing something that makes me uncomfortable or opens me up to criticism or judgment." Another annoying pause as the empathic nodding continues. "When I think about how much I love my kids and Steve, and how my life would be over if something happened to them. When I see the people I care about struggling, and I can't fix it or make it better. All I can do is be with them."

"I see."

"I feel it when I'm scared that things are too good. Or too scary. I'd really like for it to be exquisite, but right now it's just excruciating. Can people change that?"

"Yes, I believe they can."

"Can you give me some homework or something? Should I review the data?"

"No data and no homework. No assignments or gold stars in here. Less thinking. More feeling."

"Can I get to exquisite without having to feel really vulnerable in the process?"

"No."

"Well, shit. That's just awesome."

If you don't know anything about me from my other books, my blog, or the TED videos that have gone viral online, let me catch you up. If, on the other hand, you're already a little queasy from the mention of a therapist, skip this chapter entirely and go straight to the appendix about my research process. I have spent my entire life trying to outrun and outsmart vulnerability. I'm a fifth-generation Texan with a family motto of "lock and load," so I come by my aversion to uncertainty and emotional exposure honestly (and genetically). By middle school, which is the time when most of us begin to wrestle with vulnerability, I began to develop and hone my vulnerability-avoidance skills.

Over time I tried everything from "the good girl" with my "perform-perfect-please" routine, to clove-smoking poet, angry activist, corporate climber, and out-of-control party girl. At first glance these may seem like reasonable, if not predictable, developmental stages, but they were more than that for me. All of my stages were different suits of armor that kept me from becoming too engaged and too vulnerable. Each strategy was built on the same premise: *Keep everyone at a safe distance and always have an exit strategy.*

Along with my fear of vulnerability, I also inherited a huge heart and ready empathy. So, in my late twenties, I left a management position at AT&T, got a job waiting tables and bartending, and went back to school to become a social worker. When I met with my boss at AT&T to resign, I'll never forget her response: "Let me guess. You're leaving to become a social worker or an MTV VJ on *Headbanger's Ball*?"

Like many of the folks drawn to social work, I liked the idea of fixing people and systems. By the time I was done with my bachelor's degree (BSW) and was finishing my master's degree (MSW), though, I had realized that social work wasn't

about fixing. It was and is all about contextualizing and "leaning in." Social work is all about leaning into the discomfort of ambiguity and uncertainty, and holding open an empathic space so people can find their own way. In a word—*messy*.

As I struggled to figure out how I could ever make a career in social work actually work, I was riveted by a statement from one of my research professors: "If you can't measure it, it doesn't exist." He explained that unlike our other classes in the program, research was all about prediction and control. I was smitten. You mean that rather than leaning and holding, I could spend my career predicting and controlling? I had found my calling.

The surest thing I took away from my BSW, MSW, and Ph.D. in social work is this: Connection is why we're here. We are hardwired to connect with others, it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives, and without it there is suffering. I wanted to develop research that explained the anatomy of connection.

Studying connection was a simple idea, but before I knew it, I had been hijacked by my research participants who, when asked to talk about their most important relationships and experiences of connection, kept telling me about heartbreak, betrayal, and shame—the fear of not being worthy of real connection. We humans have a tendency to define things by what they are not. This is especially true of our emotional experiences.

By accident, then, I became a shame and empathy researcher, spending six years developing a theory that explains what shame is, how it works, and how we cultivate resilience in the face of believing that we're not enough—that we're not worthy of love and belonging. In 2006 I realized that in addition to understanding shame, I had to understand the flip

side: "What do the people who are the most resilient to shame, who believe in their worthiness—I call these people the Wholehearted—have in common?"

I hoped like hell that the answer to this question would be: "They are shame researchers. To be Wholehearted, you have to know a lot about shame." But I was wrong. Understanding shame is only one variable that contributes to Wholeheartedness, a way of engaging with the world from a place of worthiness. In *The Gifts of Imperfection*, I defined ten "guideposts" for Wholehearted living that point to what the Wholehearted work to cultivate and what they work to let go of:

1. Cultivating Authenticity: Letting Go of What People Think
2. Cultivating Self-Compassion: Letting Go of Perfectionism
3. Cultivating a Resilient Spirit: Letting Go of Numbing and Powerlessness
4. Cultivating Gratitude and Joy: Letting Go of Scarcity and Fear of the Dark
5. Cultivating Intuition and Trusting Faith: Letting Go of the Need for Certainty
6. Cultivating Creativity: Letting Go of Comparison
7. Cultivating Play and Rest: Letting Go of Exhaustion as a Status Symbol and Productivity as Self-Worth
8. Cultivating Calm and Stillness: Letting Go of Anxiety as a Lifestyle
9. Cultivating Meaningful Work: Letting Go of Self-Doubt and "Supposed To"

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10. Cultivating Laughter, Song, and Dance: Letting Go of Being Cool and "Always in Control"

As I analyzed the data, I realized that I was about two for ten in my own life when in comes to Wholehearted living. That was personally devastating. This happened a few weeks before my forty-first birthday and sparked my midlife unraveling. As it turns out, getting an intellectual handle on these issues isn't the same as living and loving with your whole heart.

I have written in great detail in *The Gifts of Imperfection* about what it means to be Wholehearted and about the ~~breakdown~~ spiritual awakening that ensued from this realization. But what I want to do here is to share the definition of Wholehearted living and share the five most important themes that emerged from the data and which led me to the breakthroughs I share in this book. It will give you an idea of what's ahead:

Wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness. It means cultivating the courage, compassion, and connection to wake up in the morning and think, *No matter what gets done and how much is left undone, I am enough.* It's going to bed at night thinking, *Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn't change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging.*

This definition is based on these fundamental ideals:

1. Love and belonging are irreducible needs of all men, women, and children. We're hardwired for connection—it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. The absence of love, belonging, and connection always leads to suffering.
2. If you roughly divide the men and women I've interviewed into two groups—those who feel a deep sense of love and belonging, and those who struggle for it—there's only one variable that separates the groups: Those who feel lovable, who love, and who experience belonging simply believe they are *worthy* of love and belonging. They don't have better or easier lives, they don't have fewer struggles with addiction or depression, and they haven't survived fewer traumas or bankruptcies or divorces, but in the midst of all of these struggles, they have developed practices that enable them to hold on to the belief that they are worthy of love, belonging, and even joy.
3. A strong belief in our worthiness doesn't just happen—it's cultivated when we understand the guideposts as choices and daily practices.
4. The main concern of Wholehearted men and women is living a life defined by courage, compassion, and connection.
5. The Wholehearted identify vulnerability as the catalyst for courage, compassion, and connection. In fact, the willingness to be vulnerable emerged as the single clearest value shared by all of the women and men whom I would describe as Wholehearted. They attribute everything—from their professional success to

their marriages to their proudest parenting
moments—to their ability to be vulnerable.

I had written about vulnerability in my earlier books; in fact, there's even a chapter on it in my dissertation. From the very beginning of my investigations, embracing vulnerability emerged as an important category. I also understood the relationships between vulnerability and the other emotions that I've studied. But in those previous books, I assumed that the relationships between vulnerability and different constructs like shame, belonging, and worthiness were coincidence. Only after twelve years of dropping deeper and deeper into this work did I finally understand the role it plays in our lives. Vulnerability is the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experiences.

This new information created a major dilemma for me personally: On the one hand, how can you talk about the importance of vulnerability in an honest and meaningful way without being vulnerable? On the other hand, how can you be vulnerable without sacrificing your legitimacy as a researcher? To be honest, I think emotional accessibility is a shame trigger for researchers and academics. Very early in our training, we are taught that a cool distance and inaccessibility contribute to prestige, and that if you're too relatable, your credentials come into question. While being called pedantic is an insult in most settings, in the ivory tower we're taught to wear the pedantic label like a suit of armor.

How could I risk being really vulnerable and tell stories about my own messy journey through this research without looking like a total flake? What about my professional armor?

My moment to "dare greatly," as Theodore Roosevelt once urged citizens to do, came in June 2010 when I was in-

vited to speak at TEDxHouston. TEDxHouston is one of many independently organized events modeled after TED—a nonprofit addressing the worlds of Technology, Entertainment, and Design that is devoted to "Ideas Worth Spreading." TED and TEDx organizers bring together "the world's most fascinating thinkers and doers" and challenge them to give the talk of their life in eighteen minutes or less.

The TEDxHouston curators were unlike any event organizers I've known. Bringing in a shame-and-vulnerability researcher makes most organizers a little nervous and compels a few to get somewhat prescriptive about the content of the talk. When I asked the TEDx people what they wanted me to talk about, they responded, "We love your work. Talk about whatever makes you feel awesome—do your thing. We're grateful to share the day with you." Actually, I'm not sure how they made the decision to let me do my thing, because before that talk I wasn't aware of having *a thing.*

I loved the freedom of that invitation and I hated it. I was back straddling the tension between leaning into the discomfort and finding refuge in my old friends, prediction and control. I decided to go for it. *Truthfully, I had no idea what I was getting into.*

My decision to dare greatly didn't stem from self-confidence as much as it did from faith in my research. I know I'm a good researcher, and I trusted that the conclusions I had drawn from the data were valid and reliable. Vulnerability would take me where I wanted or maybe needed to go. I also convinced myself that it wasn't really a big deal: *It's Houston, a hometown crowd. Worst-case scenario, five hundred people plus a few watching the live streaming will think I'm a nut.*

The morning after the talk, I woke up with one of the worst vulnerability hangovers of my life. You know that feel-

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CHAPTER 1

SCARCITY: LOOKING INSIDE OUR CULTURE OF "NEVER ENOUGH"

After doing this work for the past twelve years and watching scarcity ride roughshod over our families, organizations, and communities, I'd say the one thing we have in common is that we're sick of feeling afraid. We want to dare greatly. We're tired of the national conversation centering on "What should we fear?" and "Who should we blame?" We all want to be brave.

YOU can't swing a cat without hitting a narcissist."

Granted, it wasn't my most eloquent moment onstage. It also wasn't my intention to offend anyone, but when I'm really fired up or frustrated, I tend to revert back to the language instilled in me by the generations of Texans who came before me. I swing cats, things get stuck in my craw, and I'm frequently "fixin' to come undone." These regressions normally happen at home or when I'm with family and friends, but occasionally, when I'm feeling ornery, they slip out onstage.

I've heard and used the swinging-cat expression my entire life, and it didn't dawn on me that more than a few of the thousand members of the audience were picturing me knocking over self-important folks with an actual feline. In my defense, while responding to numerous e-mails sent by audience members who thought animal cruelty was inconsistent with my message of vulnerability and connection, I did learn that the expression has nothing to do with animals. It's actually a British Navy reference to the difficulty of using a cat-o'-nine-tails in the tight quarters of a ship. I know. Not so great either.

In this particular instance, the cat-swinging was

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triggered when a woman from the audience shouted out, "The kids today think they're so special. What's turning so many people into narcissists?" My less-than-stellar response verged on smart-alecky: "Yeah. You can't swing a cat without hitting a narcissist." But it stemmed from a frustration that I still feel when I hear the term *narcissism* thrown around. *Face-book is so narcissistic. Why do people think what they're doing is so important? The kids today are all narcissists. It's always me, me, me. My boss is such a narcissist. She thinks she's better than every-one and is always putting other people down.*

And while laypeople are using narcissism as a catchall di-agnosis for everything from arrogance to rude behavior, re-searchers and helping professionals are testing the concept's elasticity in every way imaginable. Recently a group of re-searchers conducted a computer analysis of three decades of hit songs. The researchers reported a statistically significant trend toward narcissism and hostility in popular music. In line with their hypothesis, they found a decrease in usages such as *we* and *us* and an increase in *I* and *me.*

The researchers also reported a decline in words related to social connection and positive emotions, and an increase in words related to anger and antisocial behavior, such as *hate* or *kill.* Two of the researchers from that study, Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell, authors of the book *The Narcissism Epidemic,* argue that the incidence of narcissistic personality disorder has more than doubled in the United States in the last ten years.

Relying on yet another fine saying from my grandmother, it feels like the world is going to hell in a handbasket.

Or is it? Are we surrounded by narcissists? Have we turned into a culture of self-absorbed, grandiose people who are only interested in power, success, beauty, and being spe-

cial? Are we so entitled that we actually believe that we're superior even when we're not really contributing or achieving anything of value? Is it true that we lack the necessary empa-thy to be compassionate, connected people?

If you're like me, you're probably wincing a bit and think-ing, *Yes. This is exactly the problem. Not with me, of course. But in general . . . this sounds about right!*

It feels good to have an explanation, especially one that conveniently makes us feel better about ourselves and places the blame on *those people.* In fact, whenever I hear people mak-ing the narcissism argument, it's normally served with a side of contempt, anger, and judgment. I'll be honest, I even felt those emotions when I was writing that paragraph.

Our first inclination is to cure "the narcissists" by cutting them down to size. It doesn't matter if I'm talking to teachers, parents, CEOs, or my neighbors, the response is the same: *These egomaniacs need to know that they're not special, they're not that great, they're not entitled to jack, and they need to get over themselves. No one cares.* (This is the G-rated version.)

Here's where it gets tricky. And frustrating. And maybe even a little heartbreaking. The topic of narcissism has pen-etrated the social consciousness enough that most people cor-rectly associate it with a pattern of behaviors that include grandiosity, a pervasive need for admiration, and a lack of empathy. What almost no one understands is how every level of severity in this diagnosis is underpinned by shame. Which means we don't "fix it" by cutting people down to size and reminding folks of their inadequacies and smallness. Shame is more likely to be the cause of these behaviors, not the cure.

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LOOKING AT NARCISSISM THROUGH THE LENS OF VULNERABILITY

Diagnosing and labeling people whose struggles are more environmental or learned than genetic or organic is often far more detrimental to healing and change than it is helpful. And when we have an epidemic on our hands, unless we're talking about something physically contagious, the cause is much more likely to be environmental than a hardwiring issue. Labeling the problem in a way that makes it about who people are rather than the choices they're making lets all of us off the hook: *Too bad. That's who I am.* I'm a huge believer in holding people accountable for their behaviors, so I'm not talking about "blaming the system" here. I'm talking about understanding the root cause so we can address the problems.

It's often helpful to recognize patterns of behaviors and to understand what those patterns may indicate, but that's far different from becoming defined by a diagnosis, which is something I believe, and that the research shows, often exacerbates shame and prevents people from seeking help.

We need to understand these trends and influences, but I find it far more helpful, and even transformative in many instances, to look at the patterns of behaviors through the lens of vulnerability. For example, when I look at narcissism through the vulnerability lens, I **see the shame-based fear of being ordinary**. I see the fear of never feeling extraordinary enough to be noticed, to be lovable, to belong, or to cultivate a sense of purpose. Sometimes the simple act of humanizing problems sheds an important light on them, a light that often goes out the minute a stigmatizing label is applied.

This new definition of narcissism offers clarity and it illuminates both the source of the problem and possible solu-

tions. I can see exactly how and why more people are wrestling with how to believe they are enough. I see the cultural messaging everywhere that says that an ordinary life is a meaningless life. And I see how kids that grow up on a steady diet of reality television, celebrity culture, and unsupervised social media can absorb this messaging and develop a completely skewed sense of the world. *I am only as good as the number of "likes" I get on Facebook or Instagram.*

Because we are all vulnerable to the messaging that drives these behaviors, this new lens takes away the us-versus-those-damn-narcissists element. I know the yearning to believe that what I'm doing matters and how easy it is to confuse that with the drive to be extraordinary. I know how seductive it is to use the celebrity culture yardstick to measure the smallness of our lives. And I also understand how grandiosity, entitlement, and admiration-seeking feel like just the right balm to soothe the ache of being too ordinary and inadequate. Yes, these thoughts and behaviors ultimately cause more pain and lead to more disconnection, but when we're hurting and when love and belonging are hanging in the balance, we reach for what we think will offer us the most protection.

There are certainly instances when a diagnosis might be necessary if we are to find the right treatment, but I can't think of one example where we don't benefit by also examining the struggle through the lens of vulnerability. Something can always be learned when we consider these questions:

1. What are the messages and expectations that define our culture and how does culture influence our behaviors?
2. How are our struggles and behaviors related to protecting ourselves?

3. How are our behaviors, thoughts, and emotions related to vulnerability and the need for a strong sense of worthiness?

If we go back to the earlier question of whether or not we're surrounded by people with narcissistic personality disorder, my answer is no. There is a powerful cultural influence at play right now, and I think the fear of being ordinary is a part of it, but I also think it goes deeper than that. To find the source, we have to pan out past the name-calling and labeling.

We've had the vulnerability lens zoomed in here on a few specific behaviors, but if we pull out as wide as we can, the view changes. We don't lose sight of the problems we've been discussing, but we see them as part of a larger landscape. This allows us to accurately identify the greatest cultural influence of our time—the environment that not only explains what everyone is calling a narcissism epidemic, but also provides a panoramic view of the thoughts, behaviors, and emotions that are slowly changing who we are and how we live, love, work, lead, parent, govern, teach, and connect with one another. This environment I'm talking about is our culture of scarcity.

SCARCITY: THE NEVER-ENOUGH PROBLEM

A critical aspect of my work is finding language that accurately represents the data *and* deeply resonates with participants. I know I'm off when people look as if they're pretending to get it, or if they respond to my terms and definitions with "huh" or "sounds interesting." Given the topics I study, I know that I'm onto something when folks look away, quickly cover their faces with their hands, or respond with "ouch," "shut up," or "get out of my head." The last is normally how

people respond when they hear or see the phrase: *Never __________ enough.* It only takes a few seconds before people fill in the blanks with their own tapes:

- Never good enough
- Never perfect enough
- Never thin enough
- Never powerful enough
- Never successful enough
- Never smart enough
- Never certain enough
- Never safe enough
- Never extraordinary enough

We get scarcity because we live it.

One of my very favorite writers on scarcity is global activist and fund-raiser Lynne Twist. In her book *The Soul of Money*, she refers to scarcity as "the great lie." She writes:

> For me, and for many of us, our first waking thought of the day is "I didn't get enough sleep." The next one is "I don't have enough time." Whether true or not, that thought of *not enough* occurs to us automatically before we even think to question or examine it. We spend most of the hours and the days of our lives hearing, explaining, complaining, or worrying about what we don't have enough

> of: . . . Before we even sit up in bed, before our feet touch the floor, we're already inadequate, already behind, already losing, already lacking something. And by the time we go to bed at night, our minds are racing with a litany of what we didn't get, or didn't get done, that day. We go to sleep burdened by those thoughts and wake up to that reverie of lack. . . . This internal condition of scarcity, this mind-set of scarcity, lives at the very heart of our jealousies, our greed, our prejudice, and our arguments with life. . . . (43–45).

Scarcity is the "never enough" problem. The word *scarce* is from the Old Norman French *scars*, meaning "restricted in quantity" (c. 1300). Scarcity thrives in a culture where everyone is hyperaware of lack. Everything from safety and love to money and resources feels restricted or lacking. We spend inordinate amounts of time calculating how much we have, want, and don't have, and how much everyone else has, needs, and wants.

What makes this constant assessing and comparing so self-defeating is that we are often comparing our lives, our marriages, our families, and our communities to unattainable, media-driven visions of perfection, or we're holding up our reality against our own fictional account of how great someone else has it. Nostalgia is also a dangerous form of comparison. Think about how often we compare ourselves and our lives to a memory that nostalgia has so completely edited that it never really existed: "Remember when . . . ? Those were the days . . ."

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THE SOURCE OF SCARCITY

Scarcity doesn't take hold in a culture overnight. But the feeling of scarcity does thrive in shame-prone cultures that are deeply steeped in comparison and fractured by disengagement. (By a shame-prone culture, I don't mean that we're ashamed of our collective identity, but that there are enough of us struggling with the issue of worthiness that it's shaping the culture.)

Over the past decade, I've witnessed major shifts in the zeitgeist of our country. I've seen it in the data, and honestly, I've seen it in the faces of the people I meet, interview, and talk to. The world has never been an easy place, but the past decade has been traumatic for so many people that it's made changes in our culture. From 9/11, multiple wars, and the recession, to catastrophic natural disasters and the increase in random violence and school shootings, we've survived and are surviving events that have torn at our sense of safety with such force that we've experienced them as trauma even if we weren't directly involved. And when it comes to the staggering numbers of those now unemployed and underemployed, I think every single one of us has been directly affected or is close to someone who has been directly affected.

Worrying about scarcity is our culture's version of post-traumatic stress. It happens when we've been through too much, and rather than coming together to heal (which requires vulnerability), we're angry and scared and at each other's throats. It's not just the larger culture that's suffering: I found the same dynamics playing out in family culture, work culture, school culture, and community culture. And they all share the same formula of shame, comparison, and disengagement. Scarcity bubbles up from these conditions and

perpetuates them until a critical mass of people start making different choices and reshaping the smaller cultures they belong to.

One way to think about the three components of scarcity and how they influence culture is to reflect upon the following questions. As you're reading the questions, it's helpful to keep in mind any culture or social system that you're a part of, whether your classroom, your family, your community, or maybe your work team:

1. **Shame:** Is fear of ridicule and belittling used to manage people and/or to keep people in line? Is self-worth tied to achievement, productivity, or compliance? Are blaming and finger-pointing norms? Are put-downs and name-calling rampant? What about favoritism? Is perfectionism an issue?
2. **Comparison:** Healthy competition can be beneficial, but is there constant overt or covert comparing and ranking? Has creativity been suffocated? Are people held to one narrow standard rather than acknowledged for their unique gifts and contributions? Is there an ideal way of being or one form of talent that is used as measurement of everyone else's worth?
3. **Disengagement:** Are people afraid to take risks or try new things? Is it easier to stay quiet than to share stories, experiences, and ideas? Does it feel as if no one is really paying attention or listening? Is everyone struggling to be seen and heard?

When I look at these questions and think about our larger culture, the media, and the social-economic-political landscape, my answers are YES, YES, and YES!

When I think about my family in the context of these questions, I know that these are the exact issues that my husband, Steve, and I work to overcome every single day. I use the word *overcome* because to grow a relationship or raise a family or create an organizational culture or run a school or nurture a faith community, all in a way that is fundamentally opposite to the cultural norms driven by scarcity, it takes awareness, commitment, and work . . . every single day. The larger culture is always applying pressure, and unless we're willing to push back and fight for what we believe in, the default becomes a state of scarcity. We're called to "dare greatly" every time we make choices that challenge the social climate of scarcity.

The counterapproach to living in scarcity is not about abundance. In fact, I think abundance and scarcity are two sides of the same coin. The opposite of "never enough" isn't abundance or "more than you could ever imagine." The opposite of scarcity is enough, or what I call *Wholeheartedness.* As I explained in the Introduction, there are many tenets of Wholeheartedness, but at its very core is vulnerability and worthiness: facing uncertainty, exposure, and emotional risks, and knowing that I am enough.

If you go back to the three sets of questions about scarcity that I just posed and ask yourself if you'd be willing to be vulnerable or to dare greatly in any setting defined by these values, the answer for most of us is a resounding no. If you ask yourself if these are conditions conducive to cultivating worthiness, the answer is again no. *The greatest casualties of a scarcity culture are our willingness to own our vulnerabilities and our ability to engage with the world from a place of worthiness.*

After doing this work for the past twelve years and watching scarcity ride roughshod over our families, organizations, and communities, I'd say the one thing we have in common is that we're sick of feeling afraid. We all want to be brave. We want to dare greatly. We're tired of the national conversation centering on "What should we fear?" and "Who should we blame?"

In the next chapter we'll talk about the vulnerability myths that fuel scarcity and how courage starts with showing up and letting ourselves be seen.

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CHAPTER 2
DEBUNKING THE VULNERABILITY MYTHS

Yes, we are totally exposed when we are vulnerable. Yes, we are in the torture chamber that we call uncertainty. And, yes, we're taking a huge emotional risk when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable. But there's no equation where taking risks, braving uncertainty, and opening ourselves up to emotional exposure equals weakness.

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MYTH #1: "VULNERABILITY IS WEAKNESS."

The perception that vulnerability is weakness is the most widely accepted myth about vulnerability *and* the most dangerous. When we spend our lives pushing away and protecting ourselves from feeling vulnerable or from being perceived as too emotional, we feel contempt when others are less capable or willing to mask feelings, suck it up, and soldier on. We've come to the point where, rather than respecting and appreciating the courage and daring behind vulnerability, we let our fear and discomfort become judgment and criticism.

Vulnerability isn't good or bad: It's not what we call a dark emotion, nor is it always a light, positive experience. Vulnerability is the core of all emotions and feelings. To feel is to be vulnerable. To believe vulnerability is weakness is to believe that feeling is weakness. To foreclose on our emotional life out of a fear that the costs will be too high is to walk away from the very thing that gives purpose and meaning to living.

Our rejection of vulnerability often stems from our associating it with dark emotions like fear, shame, grief, sadness, and disappointment—emotions that we don't want to discuss, even when they profoundly af-

fect the way we live, love, work, and even lead. What most of us fail to understand and what took me a decade of research to learn is that vulnerability is also the cradle of the emotions and experiences that we crave. Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.

I know this is hard to believe, especially when we've spent our lives thinking that vulnerability and weakness are synonymous, but it's true. **I define vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.** With that definition in mind, let's think about love. Waking up every day and loving someone who may or may not love us back, whose safety we can't ensure, who may stay in our lives or may leave without a moment's notice, who may be loyal to the day they die or betray us tomorrow—that's vulnerability. Love is uncertain. It's incredibly risky. And loving someone leaves us emotionally exposed. Yes, it's scary and yes, we're open to being hurt, but can you imagine your life without loving or being loved?

To put our art, our writing, our photography, our ideas out into the world with no assurance of acceptance or appreciation—that's also vulnerability. To let ourselves sink into the joyful moments of our lives even though we know that they are fleeting, even though the world tells us not to be too happy lest we invite disaster—that's an intense form of vulnerability.

The profound danger is that, as noted above, we start to think of *feeling* as weakness. With the exception of anger (which is a secondary emotion, one that only serves as a socially acceptable mask for many of the more difficult underlying emotions we feel), we're losing our tolerance for emotion and hence for vulnerability.

It starts to make sense that we dismiss vulnerability as weakness only when we realize that we've confused *feeling* with *failing* and *emotions* with *liabilities*. If we want to reclaim the essential emotional part of our lives and reignite our passion and purpose, we have to learn how to own and engage with our vulnerability and how to feel the emotions that come with it. For some of us, it's new learning, and for others it's relearning. Either way, the research taught me that the best place to start is with defining, recognizing, and understanding vulnerability.

What really brings the definition of vulnerability up close and personal are the examples people shared when I asked them to finish this sentence stem: "Vulnerability is ____________." Here are some of the replies:

- Sharing an unpopular opinion
- Standing up for myself
- Asking for help
- Saying no
- Starting my own business
- Helping my thirty-seven-year-old wife with Stage 4 breast cancer make decisions about her will
- Initiating sex with my wife
- Initiating sex with my husband
- Hearing how much my son wants to make first chair in the orchestra and encouraging him while knowing that it's probably not going to happen

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- Calling a friend whose child just died
- Signing up my mom for hospice care
- The first date after my divorce
- Saying, "I love you," first and not knowing if I'm going to be loved back
- Writing something I wrote or a piece of art that I made
- Getting promoted and not knowing if I'm going to succeed
- Getting fired
- Falling in love
- Trying something new
- Bringing my new boyfriend home
- Getting pregnant after three miscarriages
- Waiting for the biopsy to come back
- Reaching out to my son who is going through a difficult divorce
- Exercising in public, especially when I don't know what I'm doing and I'm out of shape
- Admitting I'm afraid
- Stepping up to the plate again after a series of strikeouts
- Telling my CEO that we won't make payroll next month

- Laying off employees
- Presenting my product to the world and getting no response
- Standing up for myself and for friends when someone else is critical or gossiping
- Being accountable
- Asking for forgiveness
- Having faith

Do these sound like weaknesses? Does showing up to be with someone in deep struggle sound like a weakness? Is accepting accountability weak? Is stepping up to the plate after striking out a sign of weakness? NO. *Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage.* Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they're never weakness.

Yes, we are totally exposed when we are vulnerable. Yes, we are in the torture chamber that we call uncertainty. And, yes, we're taking a huge emotional risk when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable. But there's no equation where taking risks, braving uncertainty, and opening ourselves up to emotional exposure equals weakness.

When we asked the question "How does vulnerability feel?" the answers were equally as powerful:

- It's taking off the mask and hoping the real me isn't too disappointing.
- Not sucking it in anymore.
- It's where courage and fear meet.

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- You are halfway across a tightrope, and moving forward and going back are both just as scary.
- Sweaty palms and a racing heart.
- Scary and exciting; terrifying and hopeful.
- Taking off a straitjacket.
- Going out on a limb—a very, very high limb.
- Taking the first step toward what you fear the most.
- Being all in.
- It feels so awkward and scary, but it makes me human and alive.
- A lump in my throat and a knot in my chest.
- The terrifying point on a roller coaster when you're about to tip over the edge and take the plunge.
- Freedom and liberation.
- It feels like fear, every single time.
- Panic, anxiety, fear, and hysteria, followed by freedom, pride, and amazement—then a little more panic.
- Baring your belly in the face of the enemy.
- Infinitely terrifying and achingly necessary.
- I know it's happening when I feel the need to strike first before I'm struck.

- It feels like free-falling.
- Like the time between hearing a gunshot and waiting to see if you're hit.
- Letting go of control.

And the answer that appeared over and over in all of our efforts to better understand vulnerability? *Naked.*

- Vulnerability is like being naked onstage and hoping for applause rather than laughter.
- It's being naked when everyone else is fully clothed.
- It feels like the naked dream: You're in the airport and you're stark naked.

When discussing vulnerability, it is helpful to look at the definition and etymology of the word *vulnerable*. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the word *vulnerability* is derived from the Latin word *vulnerare*, meaning "to wound." The definition includes "capable of being wounded" and "open to attack or damage." Merriam-Webster defines *weakness* as the inability to withstand attack or wounding. Just from a linguistic perspective, it's clear that these are very different concepts, and in fact, one could argue that weakness often stems from a lack of vulnerability—when we don't acknowledge how and where we're tender, we're more at risk of being hurt.

Psychology and social psychology have produced very persuasive evidence on the importance of acknowledging vulnerabilities. From the field of health psychology, studies show

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that perceived vulnerability, meaning the ability to acknowledge our risks and exposure, greatly increases our chances of adhering to some kind of positive health regimen. In order to get patients to comply with prevention routines, they must work on perceived vulnerability. And what makes this really interesting is that the critical issue is not about our actual level of vulnerability, but the level at which we *acknowledge* our vulnerabilities around a certain illness or threat.

From the field of social psychology, influence-and-persuasion researchers, who examine how people are affected by advertising and marketing, conducted a series of studies on vulnerability. They found that the participants who thought they were not susceptible or vulnerable to deceptive advertising were, in fact, the most vulnerable. The researchers' explanation for this phenomenon says it all: **"Far from being an effective shield, the illusion of invulnerability undermines the very response that would have supplied genuine protection."**

One of the most anxiety-provoking experiences of my career was speaking at the TED Conference in Long Beach that I referenced in the Introduction. In addition to all of the normal fears associated with giving a filmed, eighteen-minute talk in front of an intensely successful and high-expectation audience, I was the closing speaker for the entire event. For three days I sat and watched some of the most amazing and provocative talks that I've ever seen.

After each talk I slumped a little lower in my chair with the realization that in order for my talk "to work" I'd have to give up trying to do it like everyone else and I'd have to connect with the audience. I desperately wanted to see a talk that I could copy or use as a template, but the talks that resonated the most

strongly with me didn't follow a format, they were just genuine. This meant that I'd have to be me. I'd have to be vulnerable and open. I'd need to walk away from my script and look people in the eye. I'd have to be naked. And, oh, my God . . . I hate naked. I have recurring nightmares about naked.

When I finally walked onto the stage the first thing I did was make eye contact with several people in the audience. I asked the stage managers to bring up the houselights so I could see people. I needed to feel connected. Simply seeing people as people rather than "the audience" reminded me that the challenges that scare me—like being naked—scare everyone else. I think that's why empathy can be conveyed without speaking a word—it just takes looking into someone's eyes and seeing yourself reflected back in an engaged way.

During my talk I asked the audience two questions that reveal so much about the many paradoxes that define vulnerability. First I asked, "How many of you struggle to be vulnerable because you think of vulnerability as weakness?" Hands shot up across the room. Then I asked, "When you watched people on this stage being vulnerable, how many of you thought it was courageous?" Again, hands shot up across the room.

We love seeing raw truth and openness in other people, but we're afraid to let them see it in us. We're afraid that our truth isn't enough—that what we have to offer isn't enough without the bells and whistles, without editing, and impressing. I was afraid to walk on that stage and show the audience my kitchen-table self—these people were too important, too successful, too famous. My kitchen-table self is too messy, too imperfect, too unpredictable.

Here's the crux of the struggle:

I want to experience your vulnerability but I don't want to be vulnerable.

emerged most frequently from my research and that was the
most dangerous in terms of corroding the trust connection, I
would say disengagement.

When the people we love or with whom we have a deep
connection stop caring, stop paying attention, stop investing,
and stop fighting for the relationship, trust begins to slip
away and hurt starts seeping in. Disengagement triggers
shame and our greatest fears—the fears of being abandoned,
unworthy, and unlovable. What can make this covert betrayal
so much more dangerous than something like a lie or an af-
fair is that we can't point to the source of our pain—there's no
event, no obvious evidence of brokenness. It can feel crazy-
making.

We may tell a disengaged partner, "You don't seem to
care anymore," but without "evidence" of this, the response is
"I'm home from work every night by six P.M. I tuck in the
kids. I'm taking the boys to Little League. What do you want
from me?" Or at work, we think, *Why am I not getting feed-
back? Tell me you love it! Tell me it sucks! Just tell me something so
I know you remember that I work here!*

With children, actions speak louder than words. When
we stop requesting invitations into their lives by asking about
their day, asking them to tell us about their favorite songs,
wondering how their friends are doing, then children feel
pain and fear (and not relief, despite how our teenagers may
act). Because they can't articulate how they feel about our dis-
engagement when we stop making an effort with them, they
show us by acting out, thinking, *This will get their attention.*

Like trust, most experiences of betrayal happen slowly,
one marble at a time. In fact, the overt or "big" betrayals that
I mentioned before are more likely to happen after a period of
disengagement and slowly eroding trust. What I've learned

about trust professionally and what I've lived personally boils
down to this:

Trust is a product of vulnerability that grows over time
and requires work, attention, and full engagement. Trust isn't
a grand gesture—it's a growing marble collection.

MYTH #4: WE CAN GO IT ALONE

Going it alone is a value we hold in high esteem in our culture,
ironically even when it comes to cultivating connection. I get
the appeal; I have that rugged individualism in my DNA. In
fact, one of my very favorite break-up-kick-ass-no-one-can-
hurt-me songs is Whitesnake's "Here I Go Again." If you're a
person of a certain age, I'd put money down that you've rolled
down the window and defiantly sung: "And here I go again on
my own. . . . Like a drifter I was born to walk alone. . . ." If
Whitesnake isn't your cup of tea, there are bootstrapping an-
thems in every imaginable genre. In reality, walking alone
can feel miserable and depressing, but we admire the strength
it conveys, and *going it alone* is revered in our culture.

Well, as much as I love the idea of walking alone down a
lonely street of dreams, the vulnerability journey is *not* the
kind of journey we can make alone. We need support. We
need folks who will let us try on new ways of being without
judging us. We need a hand to pull us up off the ground when
we get kicked down in the arena (and if we live a courageous
life, that will happen). Across the course of my research, par-
ticipants were very clear about their need for support, en-
couragement, and sometimes professional help as they
reengaged with vulnerability and their emotional lives. Most
of us are good at giving help, but when it comes to vulnerabil-
ity, we need to ask for help too.

In *The Gifts of Imperfection*, I write, "Until we can receive

with an open heart, we are never really giving with an open heart. When we attach judgment to receiving help, we knowingly or unknowingly attach judgment to giving help." We all need help. I know I couldn't have done it without reinforcements that included my husband Steve, a great therapist, a stack of books a mile high, and friends and family members who were on a similar journey. Vulnerability begets vulnerability; courage is contagious.

There's actually some very persuasive leadership research that supports the idea that asking for support is critical, and that vulnerability and courage are contagious. In a 2011 *Harvard Business Review* article, Peter Fuda and Richard Badham use a series of metaphors to explore how leaders spark and sustain change. One of the metaphors is the snowball. The snowball starts rolling when a leader is willing to be vulnerable with his or her subordinates. Their research shows that this act of vulnerability is predictably perceived as courageous by team members and inspires others to follow suit.

Supporting the metaphor of the snowball is the story of Clynton, the managing director of a large German corporation who realized that his directive leadership style was preventing senior managers from taking initiative. The researchers explain, "He could have worked in private to change his behavior—but instead he stood up at an annual meeting of his top sixty managers, acknowledged his failings, and outlined both his personal and organizational roles. He admitted that he didn't have all of the answers and asked his team for help leading the company." Having studied the transformation that followed this event, the researchers report that Clynton's effectiveness surged, his team flourished, there were increases in initiative and innovation, and his organization went on to outperform much larger competitors.

Similar to the story above, my greatest personal and professional transformations happened when I started asking hard questions about how my fear of being vulnerable was holding me back and when I found the courage to share my struggles and ask for help. After running from vulnerability, I found that learning how to lean into the discomfort of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure was a painful process.

I did believe that I could opt out of feeling vulnerable, so when it happened—when the phone rang with unimaginable news; or when I was scared; or when I loved so fiercely that rather than feeling gratitude and joy I could only prepare for loss—I controlled things. I managed situations and micromanaged the people around me. I performed until there was no energy left to feel. I made what was uncertain certain, no matter what the cost. I stayed so busy that the truth of my hurting and my fear could never catch up. I looked brave on the outside and felt scared on the inside.

Slowly I learned that this shield was too heavy to lug around, and that the only thing it really did was keep me from knowing myself and letting myself be known. The shield required that I stay small and quiet behind it so as not to draw attention to my imperfections and vulnerabilities. It was exhausting.

I remember a very tender moment from that year, when Steve and I were lying on the floor watching Ellen do a series of crazy, arm-flinging, and knee-slapping dances and tumbles. I looked at Steve and said, "Isn't it funny how I just love her that much more for being so vulnerable and uninhibited and goofy. I could never do that. Can you imagine knowing that you're loved like that?" Steve looked at me and said, "I love you exactly like that." Honestly, as someone who rarely risked vulnerability and always steered clear of silly or goofy,

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worthiness and connection." Strap yourself in, and let's get our heads and hearts around this experience called shame, so we can get about the business of truly living.

WHAT IS SHAME AND WHY IS IT SO HARD TO TALK ABOUT IT?

(If you're pretty sure that shame doesn't apply to you, keep reading; I'll clear that up in the next couple of pages.)

I start every talk, article, and chapter on shame with the Shame 1-2-3s, or the first three things that you need to know about shame, so you'll keep listening:

1. We all have it. Shame is universal and one of the most primitive human emotions that we experience. The only people who don't experience shame lack the capacity for empathy and human connection. Here's your choice: Fess up to experiencing shame or admit that you're a sociopath. *Quick note: This is the only time that shame seems like a good option.*
2. We're all afraid to talk about shame.
3. The less we talk about shame, the more control it has over our lives.

There are a couple of very helpful ways to think about shame. First, shame is the fear of disconnection. We are psychologically, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually hardwired for connection, love, and belonging. Connection, along with love and belonging (two expressions of connection), is why we are here, and it is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. Shame is the fear of disconnection—it's the fear that something we've done or failed to do, an ideal that we've not lived up to, or a goal that we've not accomplished makes us

unworthy of connection. *I'm not worthy or good enough for love, belonging, or connection.* I'm unlovable. I don't belong. Here's the definition of shame that emerged from my research:

Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.

People often want to believe that shame is reserved for people who have survived an unspeakable trauma, but this is not true. Shame is something we all experience. And while it feels as if shame hides in our darkest corners, it actually tends to lurk in all of the familiar places. Twelve "shame categories" have emerged from my research:

- Appearance and body image
- Money and work
- Motherhood/fatherhood
- Family
- Parenting
- Mental and physical health
- Addiction
- Sex
- Aging
- Religion
- Surviving trauma
- Being stereotyped or labeled

Here are some of the responses we received when we asked people for an example of shame:

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- Shame is getting laid off and having to tell my pregnant wife.
- Shame is having someone ask me, "When are you due?" when I'm not pregnant.
- Shame is hiding the fact that I'm in recovery.
- Shame is raging at my kids.
- Shame is bankruptcy.
- Shame is my boss calling me an idiot in front of the client.
- Shame is not making partner.
- Shame is my husband leaving me for my next-door neighbor.
- Shame is my wife asking me for a divorce and telling me that she wants children, but not with me.
- Shame is my DUI.
- Shame is infertility.
- Shame is telling my fiancé that my dad lives in France when in fact he's in prison.
- Shame is Internet porn.
- Shame is flunking out of school. Twice.
- Shame is hearing my parents fight through the walls and wondering if I'm the only one who feels this afraid.

Shame is real pain. The importance of social acceptance and connection is reinforced by our brain chemistry, and the pain that results from social rejection and disconnection is real pain. In a 2011 study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health and by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, researchers found that, as far as the brain is concerned, physical pain and intense experiences of social rejection hurt in the same way. So when I define shame as an intensely "painful" experience, I'm not kidding. Neuroscience advances confirm what we've known all along: Emotions can hurt and cause pain. And just as we often struggle to define physical pain, describing emotional pain is difficult. Shame is particularly hard because it hates having words wrapped around it. It hates being spoken.

UNTANGLING SHAME, GUILT, HUMILIATION, AND EMBARRASSMENT

In fact, as we work to understand shame, one of the simpler reasons that shame is so difficult to talk about is vocabulary. We often use the terms *embarrassment*, *guilt*, *humiliation*, and *shame* interchangeably. It might seem overly picky to stress the importance of using the appropriate term to describe an experience or emotion; however, it is much more than semantics.

How we experience these different emotions comes down to self-talk. How do we talk to ourselves about what's happening? The best place to start examining self-talk and untangling these four distinct emotions is with shame and guilt. The majority of shame researchers and clinicians agree that the difference between shame and guilt is best understood as the difference between "I am bad" and "I did something bad."

Guilt = I did something bad.

Shame = I am bad.

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For example, let's say that you forgot that you made plans to meet a friend at noon for lunch. At 12:15 P.M., your friend calls from the restaurant to make sure you're okay. If your self-talk is "I'm such an idiot. I'm a terrible friend and a total loser"—that's shame. If, on the other hand, your self-talk is "I can't believe I *did* that. What a crappy thing *to do*"—that's guilt.

Here's what's interesting—especially for those who automatically think, *You should feel like a terrible friend!* or *A little shame will help you keep your act together next time.* When we feel shame, we are most likely to protect ourselves by blaming something or someone, rationalizing our lapse, offering a disingenuous apology, or hiding out. Rather than apologizing, we blame our friend and rationalize forgetting: "I told you I was really busy. This wasn't a good day for me." Or we apologize halfheartedly and think to ourselves, *Whatever. If she knew how busy I am, she'd be apologizing.* Or we see who is calling and don't answer the phone at all, and then when we finally can't stop dodging our friend, we lie: "Didn't you get my e-mail? I canceled in the morning. You should check your spam folder."

When we apologize for something we've done, make amends, or change a behavior that doesn't align with our values, guilt—not shame—is most often the driving force. We feel guilty when we hold up something we've done or failed to do against our values and find they don't match up. It's an uncomfortable feeling, but one that's helpful. The psychological discomfort, something similar to cognitive dissonance, is what motivates meaningful change. Guilt is just as powerful as shame, but its influence is positive, while shame's is destructive. In fact, in my research I found that shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we can change and do better.

We live in a world where most people still subscribe to

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the belief that shame is a good tool for keeping people in line. Not only is this wrong, but it's dangerous. Shame is highly correlated with addiction, violence, aggression, depression, eating disorders, and bullying. Researchers don't find shame correlated with positive outcomes at all—there are no data to support that shame is a helpful compass for good behavior. In fact, shame is much more likely to be the cause of destructive and hurtful behaviors than it is to be the solution.

Again, it is human nature to want to feel worthy of love and belonging. When we experience shame, we feel disconnected and desperate for worthiness. When we're hurting, either full of shame or even just feeling the fear of shame, we are more likely to engage in self-destructive behaviors and to attack or shame others. In the chapters on parenting, leadership, and education, we'll explore how shame erodes our courage and fuels disengagement, and what we can do to cultivate cultures of worthiness, vulnerability, and shame resilience.

Humiliation is another word that we often confuse with *shame.* Donald Klein captures the difference between shame and humiliation when he writes, "People believe they deserve their shame; they do not believe they deserve their humiliation." If John is in a meeting with his colleagues and his boss, and his boss calls him a loser because of his inability to close a sale, John will probably experience that as either shame or humiliation.

If John's self-talk is "God, I am a loser. I'm a failure"—that's shame. If his self-talk is "Man, my boss is so out of control. This is ridiculous. I don't deserve this"—that's humiliation. Humiliation feels terrible and makes for a miserable work or home environment—and if it's ongoing, it can certainly become shame if we start to buy into the messaging. It is, however, still better than shame. Rather than internal-

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izing the "loser" comment, John's saying to himself, "This isn't about me." When we do that, it's less likely that we'll shut down, act out, or fight back. We stay aligned with our values while trying to solve the problem.

Embarrassment is the least serious of the four emotions. It's normally fleeting and it can eventually be funny. The hallmark of embarrassment is that when we do something embarrassing, we don't feel alone. We know other folks have done the same thing and, like a blush, it will pass rather than define us.

Getting familiar with the language is an important start to understanding shame. It is part of the first element of what I call shame resilience.

I GET IT. SHAME IS BAD. SO WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT IT?

The answer is shame *resilience.* Note that shame *resistance* is not possible. As long as we care about connection, the fear of disconnection will always be a powerful force in our lives, and the pain caused by shame will always be real. But here's the great news. In all my studies, I've found that men and women with high levels of shame resilience have four things in common—I call them the elements of shame resilience. Learning to put these elements into action is what I call "Gremlin Ninja Warrior training."

We'll go through each of the four elements, but first I want to explain what I mean by shame resilience. I mean the ability to practice authenticity when we experience shame, to move through the experience without sacrificing our values, and to come out on the other side of the shame experience with more courage, compassion, and connection than we had going into it. Shame resilience is about moving from shame to empathy—the real antidote to shame.

If we can share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can't survive. Self-compassion is also critically important, but because shame is a social concept—it happens between people—it also heals best between people. A social wound needs a social balm, and empathy is that balm. Self-compassion is key because when we're able to be gentle with ourselves in the midst of shame, we're more likely to reach out, connect, and experience empathy.

To get to empathy, we have to first know what we're dealing with. Here are the four elements of shame resilience—the steps don't always happen in this order, but they always ultimately lead us to empathy and healing:

1. **Recognizing Shame and Understanding Its Triggers.** Shame is biology and biography. Can you physically recognize when you're in the grips of shame, feel your way through it, and figure out what messages and expectations triggered it?
2. **Practicing Critical Awareness.** Can you reality-check the messages and expectations that are driving your shame? Are they realistic? Attainable? Are they what you want to be or what you think others need/want from you?
3. **Reaching Out.** Are you owning and sharing your story? We can't experience empathy if we're not connecting.
4. **Speaking Shame.** Are you talking about how you feel and asking for what you need when you feel shame?

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Shame resilience is a strategy for protecting connection—our connection with ourselves and our connections with the people we care about. But resilience requires cognition, or thinking, and that's where shame has a huge advantage. When shame descends, we almost always are hijacked by the limbic system. In other words, the prefrontal cortex, where we do all of our thinking and analyzing and strategizing, gives way to that primitive fight-or-flight part of our brain.

In his book *Incognito*, neuroscientist David Eagleman describes the brain as a "team of rivals." He writes, "There is an ongoing conversation among the different factions in your brain, each competing to control the single output channel of your behavior." He lays out the dominant two-party system of reason and emotion: "The rational system is the one that cares about analysis of things in the outside world, while the emotional system monitors the internal state and worries whether things are good or bad." Eagleman makes the case that because both parties are battling to control one output—behavior—emotions can tip the balance of decision making. I would say that's definitely true when the emotion is shame.

Our fight or flight strategies are effective for survival, not for reasoning or connection. And the pain of shame is enough to trigger that survival part of our brain that runs, hides, or comes out swinging. In fact, when I asked the research participants how they normally responded to shame before they started working on shame resilience, I heard many comments like these:

- "When I feel shame, I'm like a crazy person. I do stuff and say stuff I would normally never do or say."

- "Sometimes I just wish I could make other people feel as bad as I do. I just want to lash out and scream at everyone."
- "I get desperate when I feel shame. Like I have nowhere to turn—no one to talk to."
- "When I feel ashamed, I check out mentally and emotionally. Even with my family."
- "Shame makes you feel estranged from the world. I hide."
- "One time I stopped to get gas and my credit card was declined. The guy gave me a really hard time. As I pulled out of the station, my three-year-old son started crying. I just started screaming, 'Shut up . . . shut up . . . shut up!' I was so ashamed about my card. I went nuts. Then I was ashamed that I yelled at my son."

When it comes to understanding how we defend ourselves against shame, I turn to the wonderful research from the Stone Center at Wellesley. Dr. Linda Hartling, a former relational-cultural theorist at the Stone Center and now the director of Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies, uses the late Karen Horney's work on "moving toward, moving against, and moving away" to outline the strategies of disconnection we use to deal with shame.

According to Dr. Hartling, in order to deal with shame, some of us *move away* by withdrawing, hiding, silencing ourselves, and keeping secrets. Some of us *move toward* by seeking to appease and please. And some of us *move against* by trying to gain power over others, by being aggressive, and by

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THE SHIELD: PERFECTIONISM

One of my favorite features on my blog is my *Inspiration Interviews* series. It's special to me because I only interview people whom I find truly inspirational—people who engage with the world in a way that inspires me to be more creative and a little bit braver with my own work. I've always asked interviewees the same group of questions, and after the Wholehearted research emerged, I started asking questions about vulnerability and perfectionism. As a recovering perfectionist and an aspiring good-enough-ist, I'm always finding myself skimming down the list to read the answer to this question first: *Is perfectionism an issue for you? If so, what's one of your strategies for managing it?*

I ask this question because, in all of my data collecting, I've never heard one person attribute their joy, success, or Wholeheartedness to being perfect. In fact, what I've heard over and over throughout the years is one clear message: "The most valuable and important things in my life came to me when I cultivated the courage to be vulnerable, imperfect, and self-compassionate." Perfectionism is not the path that leads us to our gifts and to our sense of purpose; it's the hazardous detour.

I'm going to share a few of my favorite answers from the interviews with you, but first I want to tell you about the definition of *perfectionism* that bubbled up from the data. Here's what I learned:

Like vulnerability, perfectionism has accumulated around it a considerable mythology. I think it's helpful to start by looking at what perfectionism *isn't:*

- Perfectionism is not the same thing as striving for excellence. Perfectionism is not about healthy achievement and growth. Perfectionism is a defensive move. It's the belief that if we do things perfectly and look perfect, we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgment, and shame. Perfectionism is a twenty-ton shield that we lug around, thinking it will protect us, when in fact it's the thing that's really preventing us from being seen.

- Perfectionism is not self-improvement. Perfectionism is, at its core, about trying to earn approval. Most perfectionists grew up being praised for achievement and performance (grades, manners, rule following, people pleasing, appearance, sports). Somewhere along the way, they adopted this dangerous and debilitating belief system: "I am what I accomplish and how well I accomplish it. Please. Perform. Perfect." Healthy striving is self- focused: How can I improve? Perfectionism is other-focused: What will they think? Perfectionism is a hustle.

- Perfectionism is not the key to success. In fact, research shows that perfectionism hampers achievement. Perfectionism is correlated with depression, anxiety, addiction, and life paralysis or missed opportunities. The fear of failing, making mistakes, not meeting people's expectations, and being criticized keeps us outside of the arena where healthy competition and striving unfolds.

- Last, perfectionism is not a way to avoid shame. Perfectionism is a form of shame. Where we struggle with perfectionism, we struggle with shame.

After using the data to bushwhack my way through the myths, I then developed the following definition of *perfectionism:*

- Perfectionism is a self-destructive and addictive belief system that fuels this primary thought: *If I look perfect and do everything perfectly, I can avoid or minimize the painful feelings of shame, judgment, and blame.*
- Perfectionism is self-destructive simply because perfection doesn't exist. It's an unattainable goal. Perfectionism is more about perception than internal motivation, and there is no way to control perception, no matter how much time and energy we spend trying.
- Perfectionism is addictive, because when we invariably do experience shame, judgment, and blame, we often believe it's because we weren't perfect enough. Rather than questioning the faulty logic of perfectionism, we become even more entrenched in our quest to look and do everything just right.
- Perfectionism actually sets us up to feel shame, judgment, and blame, which then leads to even more shame and self-blame: "It's my fault. I'm feeling this way because I'm not good enough."

DARING GREATLY: APPRECIATING THE BEAUTY OF CRACKS

Just as our experiences of foreboding joy can be located on a continuum, I found that most of us fall somewhere on a perfectionism continuum. In other words, when it comes to hiding our flaws, managing perception, and wanting to win over folks, we're all hustling a little. For some folks, perfectionism may only emerge when they're feeling particularly vulnerable. For others, perfectionism is compulsive, chronic, and debilitating—it looks and feels like an addiction.

Regardless of where we are on this continuum, if we want freedom from perfectionism, we have to make the long journey from "What will people think?" to "I am enough." That journey begins with shame resilience, self-compassion, and owning our stories. To claim the truths about who we are, where we come from, what we believe, and the very imperfect nature of our lives, we have to be willing to give ourselves a break and appreciate the beauty of our cracks or imperfections. To be kinder and gentler with ourselves and each other. To talk to ourselves the same way we'd talk to someone we care about.

Dr. Kristin Neff, a researcher and professor at the University of Texas at Austin, runs the Self-Compassion Research Lab, where she studies how we develop and practice self-compassion. According to Neff, self-compassion has three elements: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. In her new book, *Self-Compassion: Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind*, she defines each of these elements:

- Self-kindness: Being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel

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inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or flagellating ourselves with self-criticism.

- Common humanity: Common humanity recognizes that suffering and feelings of personal inadequacy are part of the shared human experience—something we all go through rather than something that happens to "me" alone.
- Mindfulness: Taking a balanced approach to negative emotions so that feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated. We cannot ignore our pain and feel compassion for it at the same time. Mindfulness requires that we not "overidentify" with thoughts and feelings, so that we are caught up and swept away by negativity.

I love how her definition of mindfulness reminds us that being mindful also means not overidentifying with or exaggerating our feelings. For me, it's so easy to get stuck in regret or shame or self-criticism when I make a mistake. But self-compassion requires an observant and accurate perspective when feeling shame or pain. Neff has a great website where you can take a self-compassion inventory and learn more about her research. The Web address is www.self-compassion.org.

In addition to practicing self-compassion (and trust me, like gratitude and everything else worthwhile, it's a practice), we must also remember that our worthiness, that core belief that we are enough, comes only when we live inside our story. We either own our stories (even the messy ones), or we stand outside of them—denying our vulnerabilities and imperfections, orphaning the parts of us that don't fit in with who/

what we think we're supposed to be, and hustling for other people's approval of our worthiness. Perfectionism is exhausting because hustling is exhausting. It's a never-ending performance.

I want to go back now to the *Inspiration Interviews* series from my blog and share some of the responses with you. In these responses I see the beauty of being real—of embracing the cracks—and I'm inspired by the self-compassion. I think they'll inspire you too. The first is from Gretchen Rubin, the best-selling writer whose book *The Happiness Project* is the account of the year she spent test-driving studies and theories about how to be happier. Her new book, *Happier at Home*, focuses on the factors that matter at home, such as possessions, marriage, time, parenthood, neighborhood. Here's how she answered the question about managing perfectionism:

> I remind myself, "Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good." (Cribbed from Voltaire.) A twenty-minute walk that I do is better than the four-mile run that I don't do. The imperfect book that gets published is better than the perfect book that never leaves my computer. The dinner party of take-out Chinese food is better than the elegant dinner that I never host.

Andrea Scher is a photographer, writer, and life coach living in Berkeley, California. Through her e-courses "Superhero Photo" and "Mondo Beyondo" and her award-winning blog *Superhero Journal*, Andrea inspires others to live authentic, colorful, and creative lives. You can often find her sitting on the kitchen floor, holding her new baby, and asking her

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four-year-old son to leap so she can take a superhero portrait. She writes here about perfectionism (I love her mantras!):

> I was a competitive gymnast as a kid, got perfect attendance every year in school, was terrified of getting anything worse than an A minus, and had an eating disorder in high school.
>
> Oh, and I think I was the homecoming queen.
>
> Yep. I think I have some issues with perfectionism!
>
> But I have been working on it. As a kid, I equated being perfect with being loved . . . and I think I still confuse the two. I often find myself doing what Brené calls "the hustle for worthiness." That dance we do so that people don't see how incredibly flawed and human we are. Sometimes I have my self-worth wrapped up in what I do and how good I look doing it, but mostly I am learning to let go. Parenthood has taught me a lot about that. It's messy and humbling, and I am learning to show my mess.
>
> To manage my perfectionism I give myself tons of permission to do things that are good enough. I do things quickly (having two small children will teach you how to do most tasks at lightning speed), and if it's good enough, it gets my stamp of approval. I have a few mantras that help:
>
> Quick and dirty wins the race.
>
> Perfection is the enemy of done.
>
> Good enough is really effin' good.

Nicholas Wilton is the artist behind the beautiful illustrations on my earlier book covers and my website. In addition to showings in gallery exhibitions and inclusion in private collections, he is the founder of the Artplane Method, a system of fundamental painting and intuition principles that help enable the creative process.

I absolutely love what he writes about perfectionism and art. It completely aligns with the research finding that perfectionism crushes creativity—which is why one of the most effective ways to start recovering from perfectionism is to start creating. Here's what Nick has to say:

> I always felt that someone, a long time ago, organized the affairs of the world into areas that made sense—categories of stuff that is perfectible, things that fit neatly in perfect bundles. The world of business, for example, is this way—line items, spreadsheets, things that add up, that can be perfected. The legal system—not always perfect, but nonetheless a mind-numbing effort to actually write down all kinds of laws and instructions that cover all aspects of being human, a kind of umbrella code of conduct we should all follow.
>
> Perfection is crucial in building an aircraft, a bridge, or a high-speed train. The code and mathematics residing just below the surface of the Internet is also this way. Things are either perfectly right or they will not work. So

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much of the world we work and live in is based upon being correct, being perfect.

But after this someone got through organizing everything just perfectly, he (or probably a she) was left with a bunch of stuff that didn't fit anywhere—things in a shoe box that had to go somewhere.

So in desperation this person threw up her arms and said, "OK! Fine. All the rest of this stuff that isn't perfectible, that doesn't seem to fit anywhere else, will just have to be piled into this last, rather large, tattered box that we can sort of push behind the couch. Maybe later we can come back and figure where it all is supposed to fit in. Let's label the box ART."

The problem was thankfully never fixed, and in time the box overflowed as more and more art piled up. I think the dilemma exists because art, among all the other tidy categories, most closely resembles what it is like to be human. To be alive. It is our nature to be imperfect. To have uncategorized feelings and emotions. To make or do things that don't sometimes necessarily make sense.

Art is all just perfectly imperfect.

Once the word *Art* enters the description of what you're up to, it is almost like getting a hall pass from perfection. It thankfully releases us from any expectation of perfection.

In relation to my own work not being perfect, I just always point to the tattered box behind the couch and mention the word *Art*,

and people seem to understand and let you off the hook about being perfect and go back to their business.

There's a quote that I share every time I talk about vulnerability and perfectionism. My fixation with these words from Leonard Cohen's song "Anthem" comes from how much comfort and hope they give me as I put "enough" into practice: "There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

THE SHIELD: NUMBING

If you're wondering if this section is about addiction and you're thinking, *This isn't about me*, please read on. This is about all of us. First, one of the most universal numbing strategies is what I call *crazy-busy*. I often say that when they start having twelve-step meetings for busy-aholics, they'll need to rent out football stadiums. We are a culture of people who've bought into the idea that if we stay busy enough, the truth of our lives won't catch up with us.

Second, statistics dictate that there are very few people who haven't been affected by addiction. I believe we all numb our feelings. We may not do it compulsively and chronically, which is addiction, but that doesn't mean that we don't numb our sense of vulnerability. And numbing vulnerability is especially debilitating because it doesn't just deaden the pain of our difficult experiences; numbing vulnerability also dulls our experiences of love, joy, belonging, creativity, and empathy. We can't selectively numb emotion. Numb the dark and you numb the light.

If you're also wondering if numbing refers to doing illegal drugs or having a few glasses of wine after work—the answer is yes. I'm going to argue that we need to examine the idea of

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e-mail while telling myself that it's better in writing, and I'll think of a million other things to do. I'll emotionally run back and forth until I'm exhausted.

DARING GREATLY: BEING PRESENT, PAYING ATTENTION, MOVING FORWARD

When I catch myself trying to zigzag my way out of vulnerability, it always helps to have Peter Falk's voice in my head shouting, "Serpentine, Shel!" It makes me laugh, which forces me to breathe. Breathing and humor are great ways to reality-check our behaviors and to start engaging with vulnerability.

Serpentining is draining, and running back and forth to avoid something is not a good way to live. As I was trying to come up with occasions when serpentining might be useful, I thought about the advice that I once received from an old guy who lived in a Louisiana swamp. My parents took my brother and me to fish in the channels running through some swampland owned by the company my dad worked for in New Orleans. The man who let us onto the property said, "If a gator comes atcha, run a zigzag pattern—they're quick but they ain't good at making turns."

Well, a gator did lunge out of the water and ate the end off my mom's fishing pole, but we never were chased. And, as it turns out, the whole thing is a myth anyway. According to the experts at the San Diego Zoo, we can easily outrun an alligator, zigzagging or not. They max out at a speed of around ten or eleven miles per hour, and more importantly, they can't run very far. They depend on surprise attacks, not chasing down their prey. In that sense they're very much like the gremlins that live in the shame swamplands and keep us from being vulnerable. So, we don't need to serpentine; we just need to be present, pay attention, and move forward.

THE SHIELD: CYNICISM, CRITICISM, COOL, AND CRUELTY

If you decide to walk into the arena and *dare greatly*, you're going to get kicked around. It doesn't matter if your arena is politics or the PTO, or if your great dare is an article for your school newsletter, a promotion, or selling a piece of pottery on Etsy—you're going to be on the receiving end of some cynicism and criticism before it's over. There may even be some plain ol' mean-spiritedness. Why? Because cynicism, criticism, cruelty, and cool are even better than armor—they can be fashioned into weapons that not only keep vulnerability at a distance but also can inflict injury on the people who are being vulnerable and making us uncomfortable.

If we are the kind of people who "don't do vulnerability," there's nothing that makes us feel more threatened and more incited to attack and shame people than to see someone daring greatly. Someone else's daring provides an uncomfortable mirror that reflects back our own fears about showing up, creating, and letting ourselves be seen. That's why we come out swinging. When we see cruelty, vulnerability is likely to be the driver.

When I say criticism, I don't mean productive feedback, debate, and disagreement over the value or importance of a contribution. I'm talking about put-downs, personal attacks, and unsubstantiated claims about our motivations and intentions.

When I talk about cynicism, I don't mean healthy skepticism and questioning. I'm talking about the reflexive cynicism that leads to mindless responses like "That's so stupid," or "What a loser idea." Cool is one of the most rampant forms of cynicism. *Whatever. Totally Lame. So uncool. Who gives a shit?* Among some folks it's almost as if enthusiasm and engagement have become a sign of gullibility. Being too excited

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or invested makes you *lame.* A word that we've banned in our house along with *loser* and *stupid.*

In the introduction to the chapter I talked about adolescence as the starting line for the race to the armory. Cynicism and cool are currency of the realm in middle and high school. Every single student in my daughter's middle school wears a hoodie every single day (even when it's 95 degrees outside). Not only do these jackets shield vulnerability by being the ultimate in cool accessories, but I'm pretty sure the kids think of them as invisibility cloaks. They literally disappear inside them. They're a way to hide. When the hoods are up and the hands are hidden in the pocket, they scream disengagement. *Too cool to care.*

As adults, we can also protect ourselves from vulnerability with cool. We worry about being perceived as laughing too loud, buying in, caring too much, being too eager. We don't wear hoodies as often, but we can use our titles, education, background, and positions as handles on the shields of criticism, cynicism, cool, and cruelty: *I can talk to you this way or blow you off because of who I am or what I do for a living.* And, make no mistake, when it comes to this shield, handles are also fashioned out of nonconformity and rejection of traditional status markers: *I dismiss you because you've sold out and you spend your life in a cubicle* or *I'm more relevant and interesting because I rejected the trappings of higher education, traditional employment, etc.*

DARING GREATLY: TIGHTROPE WALKING, PRACTICING SHAME RESILIENCE, AND REALITY CHECKING

Over the course of one year, I interviewed artists, writers, innovators, business leaders, clergy, and community leaders about these issues, and how they stayed open to the constructive (albeit difficult-to-hear) criticism while filtering out the mean-spirited attacks. Basically I wanted to know how they maintained the courage to keep on walking into the arena. I'll confess that I was motivated by my own struggle to learn how to keep daring.

When we stop caring about what people think, we lose our capacity for connection. When we become defined by what people think, we lose our willingness to be vulnerable. If we dismiss all the criticism, we lose out on important feedback, but if we subject ourselves to the hatefulness, our spirits get crushed. It's a tightrope, shame resilience is the balance bar, and the safety net below is the one or two people in our lives who can help us reality-check the criticism and cynicism.

I'm very visual, so I have a picture of a person on a tightrope hanging over my desk to remind me that working to stay open and at the same time to keep boundaries in place is worth the energy and risk. I actually used a Sharpie to write this across the balance bar: "Worthiness is my birthright." It's both a reminder to practice shame resilience and a touchstone of my spiritual beliefs. And in case I'm feeling more ornery than usual, I have a little Post-it Note under my tightrope picture that reads, "Cruelty is cheap, easy, and chickenshit." That's also a touchstone of my spiritual beliefs.

The research participants who had used criticism and cynicism in the past as a way to protect themselves from vulnerability had some very powerful wisdom to share about their transition to Wholeheartedness. Many of them said that they grew up with parents who modeled that behavior and that they weren't aware of how fully they had mimicked it until they started investigating their own fear of being vulnerable, trying new things, and engaging. These folks were

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CHAPTER 5
MIND THE GAP: CULTIVATING CHANGE AND CLOSING THE DISENGAGEMENT DIVIDE

Minding the gap is a daring strategy. We have to pay attention to the space between where we're actually standing and where we want to be. More importantly, we have to practice the values that we're holding out as important in our culture. Minding the gap requires both an embrace of our own vulnerability and cultivation of shame resilience—we're going to be called upon to show up as leaders and parents and educators in new and uncomfortable ways. We don't have to be perfect, just engaged and committed to aligning values with action.

MIND the Gap" first appeared in 1969 on the London Underground as a warning to train passengers to be careful while stepping over the gap between the train door and the station platform. It has since become the name of a band and a movie, and the phrase has been captured on everything from T-shirts to doormats. In our house we have a small, framed "Mind the Gap" postcard that reminds us to pay attention to the space between where we're standing and where we want to go. Let me explain.

STRATEGY VERSUS CULTURE

In the business world, there's an ongoing debate about the relationship between strategy and culture, and the relative importance of each. Just to define the terms, I think of *strategy* as "the game plan," or the detailed answer to the question "What do we want to achieve and how are we going to get there?" We all—families, religious groups, project teams, teachers from the kindergarten cluster—have game plans. And we all think about the goals we want to accomplish and the steps we need to take to be successful.

Culture, on the other hand, is less about what we want to achieve and more about who we are. Out of the

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many complex definitions of culture, including those that weighed down my undergrad sociology textbooks, the one that resonates the most with me is the simplest. As organizational development pioneers Terrence Deal and Allan Kennedy explained it: "Culture is the way we do things around here." I like this definition because it rings true for discussions about all cultures—from the larger culture of scarcity that I write about in the first chapter, to a specific organizational culture, to the culture that defines my family.

Some form of the debate about what's more important, strategy or culture, bubbles up in every conversation I have with leaders. One camp subscribes to the famous quote often attributed to thought leader Peter Drucker: "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." Other folks believe that pitting one against the other creates a false dichotomy and that we need both. Interestingly, I've yet to find a strong argument that strategy is more important than culture. I think everyone agrees *in theory* that "who we are" is at least as important as "what we want to achieve."

While some complain that the debate is old, and too chicken-or-the-egg to be helpful, I think it's a critically relevant discussion for organizations. Maybe more importantly, I think examining these issues can transform families, schools, and communities.

"The way we do things around here," or culture, is complex. In my experience, I can tell a lot about the culture and values of a group, family, or organization by asking these ten questions:

1. What behaviors are rewarded? Punished?
2. Where and how are people actually spending their resources (time, money, attention)?

3. What rules and expectations are followed, enforced, and ignored?
4. Do people feel safe and supported talking about how they feel and asking for what they need?
5. What are the sacred cows? Who is most likely to tip them? Who stands the cows back up?
6. What stories are legend and what values do they convey?
7. What happens when someone fails, disappoints, or makes a mistake?
8. How is vulnerability (uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure) perceived?
9. How prevalent are shame and blame and how are they showing up?
10. What's the collective tolerance for discomfort? Is the discomfort of learning, trying new things, and giving and receiving feedback normalized, or is there a high premium put on comfort (and how does that look)?

In each of the following sections I'll talk about how these play out in our lives and what specifically I look for, but first I want to talk about where this line of questioning leads us.

As someone who studies culture as a whole, I think the power of these questions is their ability to shed light on the darkest areas of our lives: disconnection, disengagement, and our struggle for worthiness. Not only do these questions help us understand the culture, they surface the discrepancies between "what we say" and "what we do," or between the values we espouse and the values we practice. My dear friend Charles Kiley uses the term "aspirational values" to describe the elusive list of values that reside in our best intentions, on the wall

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CHAPTER 6

DISRUPTIVE ENGAGEMENT: DARING TO REHUMANIZE EDUCATION AND WORK

To reignite creativity, innovation, and learning, leaders must rehumanize education and work. This means understanding how scarcity is affecting the way we lead and work, learning how to engage with vulnerability, and recognizing and combating shame. Make no mistake: honest conversations about vulnerability and shame are disruptive. The reason that we're not having these conversations in our organizations is that they shine light in dark corners. Once there is language, awareness, and understanding, turning back is almost impossible and carries with it severe consequences. We all want to dare greatly. If you give us a glimpse into that possibility, we'll hold on to it as our vision.

It can't be taken away.

Before we start this chapter, I want to clarify what I mean by "leader." I've come to believe that a leader is anyone who holds her- or himself accountable for finding potential in people and processes. The term leader has nothing to do with position, status, or number of direct reports. I wrote this chapter for all of us—parents, teachers, community volunteers, and CEOs—anyone who is willing to dare greatly and lead.

THE CHALLENGE OF LEADING IN A CULTURE OF "NEVER ENOUGH"

In 2010 I had the opportunity to spend a long weekend with fifty CEOs from Silicon Valley. One of the other speakers at the retreat was Kevin Surace, the then CEO of Serious Materials, and *Inc.* magazine's 2009 Entrepreneur of the Year. I knew Kevin was going to speak about disruptive innovation so in my first conversation with him, before either one of us had spoken to the group and before he knew about my work, I asked him this question: What's the most significant barrier to creativity and innovation?

Kevin thought about it for a minute and said, "I don't know if it has a name, but honestly, it's the fear of

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introducing an idea and being ridiculed, laughed at, and belittled. If you're willing to subject yourself to that experience, and if you survive it, then it becomes the fear of failure and the fear of being wrong. People believe they're only as good as their ideas and that their ideas can't seem too 'out there' and they can't 'not know' everything. The problem is that innovative ideas often sound crazy and failure and learning are part of revolution. Evolution and incremental change is important and we need it, but we're desperate for real revolution and that requires a different type of courage and creativity."

Before that conversation I had never specifically asked the leaders I'd interviewed about innovation, but everything Kevin was saying fit with my data on work and education. I smiled and responded, "It's true, isn't it? Most people and most organizations can't stand the uncertainty and the risk of real innovation. Learning and creating are inherently vulnerable. There's never enough certainty. People want guarantees."

He simply said, "Yes. Again, I'm not sure if there's a name for the problem, but something related to fear keeps people from going for it. They focus on what they already do well and they don't put themselves out there." There was a slight pause in our conversation before he looked at me and said, "So, I understand you're a researcher. What exactly do you do?"

I chuckled. "I study that *something related to fear*—I'm a shame-and-vulnerability researcher."

When I got back to my hotel room I grabbed my research journal and made notes about my conversation with Kevin. As I thought about that *something related to fear*, I remembered another set of notes that I had written in that same journal. I flipped back until I found the field notes that I had taken after

talking to a group of middle school students about their classroom experiences. When I asked them to describe the key to learning, one girl gave the following reply while the others passionately nodded their heads and said, "Yes! That's it!" and "Exactly."

"There are times when you can ask questions or challenge ideas, but if you've got a teacher that doesn't like that or the kids in the class make fun of people who do that, it's bad. I think most of us learn that it's best to just keep your head down, your mouth shut, and your grades high."

As I reread this passage in my notes and thought about my conversation with Kevin, I was overwhelmed. As a teacher I felt heartbreak—we can't learn when our heads are down and our mouths are shut. As a mother of a middle school student and a kindergartener, I found it infuriating. As a researcher, it was the moment when I started to realize how often the struggles of our education system and the challenges we face in our workplaces mirror each other.

I first envisioned this as two separate discussions—one for educators and one for leaders. But as I looked back on the data, I realized that teachers and school administrators are leaders. C-level executives, managers, and supervisors are teachers. No corporation or school can thrive in the absence of creativity, innovation, and learning, and the greatest threat to all three of these is disengagement.

Given what I've learned from the research, and what I've observed over the past couple of years as I've worked with leaders from schools and companies of all sizes and types, I believe we have to completely reexamine the idea of engagement. **I call it disruptive engagement for this reason.** To reignite creativity, innovation, and learning, leaders must rehumanize education and work. This means understanding

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how scarcity is affecting the way we lead and work, learning how to engage with vulnerability, and recognizing and combating shame.

Sir Ken Robinson speaks to the power of making this shift in his appeal to leaders to replace the outdated idea that human organizations should work like machines with a metaphor that captures the realities of humanity. In his book *Out of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative*, Robinson writes, "However seductive the machine metaphor may be for industrial production, human organizations are not actually mechanisms and people are not components in them. People have values and feelings, perceptions, opinions, motivations, and biographies, whereas cogs and sprockets do not. An organization is not the physical facilities within which it operates; it is the networks of people in it."

Make no mistake: Rehumanizing work and education requires courageous leadership. Honest conversations about vulnerability and shame are disruptive. The reason that we're not having these conversations in our organizations is that they shine light in the dark corners. Once there is language, awareness, and understanding, turning back is almost impossible and carries with it severe consequences. We all want to Dare Greatly. If you give us a glimpse into that possibility, we'll hold on to it as our vision. It can't be taken away.

RECOGNIZING AND COMBATING SHAME

Shame breeds fear. It crushes our tolerance for vulnerability, thereby killing engagement, innovation, creativity, productivity, and trust. And worst of all, if we don't know what we're looking for, shame can ravage our organizations before we see one outward sign of a problem. Shame works like termites in a house. It's hidden in the dark behind the walls and con-

stantly eating away at our infrastructure, until one day the stairs suddenly crumble. Only then do we realize that it's only a matter of time before the walls come tumbling down.

In the same way that a casual walk around our house won't reveal a termite problem, a stroll through an office or a school won't necessarily reveal a shame problem. Or at least we hope it's not that obvious. If it is—if we see a manager berating an employee or a teacher shaming a student—the problem is already acute and more than likely has been happening for a long time. In most cases, though, we have to know what we're looking for when we assess an organization for signs that shame may be an issue.

SIGNS THAT SHAME HAS PERMEATED THE CULTURE

Blaming, gossiping, favoritism, name-calling, and harassment are all behavior cues that shame has permeated a culture. A more obvious sign is when shame becomes an outright management tool. Is there evidence of people in leadership roles bullying others, criticizing subordinates in front of colleagues, delivering public reprimands, or setting up reward systems that intentionally belittle, shame, or humiliate people?

I've never been to a shame-free school or organization. I'm not saying it doesn't exist, but I doubt it. In fact, once I've explained how shame works, I normally have one or two teachers approach me and explain that they use shame on a daily basis. Most ask how to change that practice, but a few proudly say, "It works." The best-case scenario is that it's a limited or contained problem, rather than a cultural norm. One reason that I'm confident that shame exists in schools is simply because 85 percent of the men and women we interviewed for the shame research could recall a school incident from their childhood that was so shaming, it changed how

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they thought of themselves as learners. What makes this even
more haunting is that approximately half of those recollec-
tions were what I refer to as creativity scars. The research
participants could point to a specific incident where they were
told or shown that they weren't good writers, artists, musi-
cians, dancers, or something creative. I still see this happen-
ing in schools all of the time. Art is graded on narrow
standards and kids as young as kindergarten are told they
have creative gifts. This helps explain why the gremlins are
so powerful when it comes to creativity and innovation.

Corporations have their own struggles. The Workplace
Bullying Institute (WBI) defines bullying as "Repeated mis-
treatment: sabotage by others that prevented work from get-
ting done, verbal abuse, threatening conduct, intimidation,
and humiliation." A 2010 poll conducted by Zogby Interna-
tional for WBI reported that an estimated 54 million Ameri-
can workers (37 percent of the US workforce) have been
bullied at work. Furthermore, another WBI report revealed
that 52.5 percent of the time, bullied workers reported that
employers basically did nothing to stop the bullying.

When we see shame being used as a management tool
(again, that means bullying, criticism in front of colleagues,
public reprimands, or reward systems that intentionally be-
little people), we need to take direct action because it means
that we've got an infestation on our hands. And we need to
remember that this doesn't just happen overnight. Equally
important to keep in mind is that shame is like the other "sh"
word. Like shit, shame rolls downhill. If employees are con-
stantly having to navigate shame, you can bet that they're
passing it on to their customers, students, and families.

So, if it's happening and it can be isolated to a specific
unit, work team, or person, it has to be addressed immedi-

ately *and without shame.* We learn shame in our families of origin, and many people grow up believing that it's an effective and efficient way to manage people, run a classroom, and parent. For that reason, shaming someone who's using shame is not helpful. But doing nothing is equally dangerous, not only for the people who are targets of the shaming but also for the entire organization.

Several years ago a man came up to me after an event and said, "Interview me! Please! I'm a financial advisor and you wouldn't believe what happens in my office." When I met Don for the interview, he told me that in his organization you choose your office each quarter based on your quarterly results: The person with the best results chooses first and sends the person in the desired office packing.

He shook his head, and his voice cracked a bit when he said, "Given that I've had the best numbers for the past six quarters, you'd think I'd like that. But I don't. I absolutely hate it. It's a miserable environment." He then told me how after the previous quarterly results were in, his boss walked into his office, closed the door, and told him that he had to move offices.

"At first I thought my numbers had dropped. Then he told me that he didn't care if I had the best numbers or if I liked my office; the point was to terrorize the other guys. He said, 'Busting their balls in public builds character. It's motivating.'"

Before the end of our interview, he told me he was job hunting. "I'm good at my job and even enjoy it, but I didn't sign up to terrorize people. I never knew why it felt so shitty, but after hearing you talk, now I do. It's shame. It's worse than high school. I'll find a better place to work, and you can be damn sure that I'm taking my clients with me."

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The Daring Greatly Leadership Manifesto

To the CEOs and teachers. To the principals and the managers. To the politicians, community leaders, and decision-makers:

We want to show up, we want to learn, and we want to inspire.

We are hardwired for connection, curiosity, and engagement.

We crave purpose, and we have a deep desire to create and contribute.

We want to take risks, embrace our vulnerabilities, and be courageous.

When learning and working are dehumanized—when you no longer see us and no longer encourage our daring, or when you only see what we produce or how we perform—we disengage and turn away from the very things that the world needs from us: our talent, our ideas, and our passion.

What we ask is that you engage with us, show up beside us, and learn from us.

Feedback is a function of respect; when you don't have honest conversations with us about our strengths and our opportunities for growth, we question our contributions and your commitment.

Above all else, we ask that you show up, let yourself be seen, and be courageous. Dare Greatly with us.

You can find a printed copy of this manifesto on my website (www.brenebrown.com).

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