

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

By Brené Brown

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The #1 *New York Times* bestseller. 1 million copies sold!

From thought leader Dr. Brené Brown, a transformative new vision for the way we lead, love, work, parent, and educate that teaches us the power of vulnerability.

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; . . . who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at worst, if he fails, at least fails while ***daring greatly.****"*—Theodore Roosevelt

Every day we experience the uncertainty, risks, and emotional exposure that define what it means to be vulnerable or to dare greatly. Based on twelve years of pioneering research, Dr. Brené Brown dispels the cultural myth that vulnerability is weakness and argues that it is, in truth, our most accurate measure of courage.

Brown explains how vulnerability is both the core of difficult emotions like fear, grief, and disappointment, *and* the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, empathy, innovation, and creativity. She writes: "When we shut ourselves off from vulnerability, we distance ourselves from the experiences that bring purpose and meaning to our lives."

Daring Greatly is not about winning or losing. It's about courage. In a world where "never enough" dominates and feeling afraid has become second nature, vulnerability is subversive. Uncomfortable. It's even a little dangerous at times. And, without question, putting ourselves out there means there's a far greater risk of getting criticized or feeling hurt. But when we step back and examine our lives, we will find that nothing is as uncomfortable, dangerous, and hurtful as standing on the outside of our lives looking in and wondering what it would be like if we had the courage to step into the arena—whether it's a new relationship,

an important meeting, the creative process, or a difficult family conversation. *Daring Greatly* is a practice and a powerful new vision for letting ourselves be seen.

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Editorial Review

Review
“The brilliantly insightful Brené Brown draws upon extensive research and personal experience to explore the paradoxes of courage: we become strong by embracing vulnerability, we dare more greatly when we acknowledge our fear. I can’t stop thinking about this book.”
—Gretchen Rubin, author of *The Happiness Project*

"A wonderful book: urgent, essential and fun to read. I couldn't put it down, and it continues to resonate with me."

—Seth Godin, author of *Linchpin*

"In *Daring Greatly*, Brené Brown refers to herself as both a mapmaker and a traveler. In my book, that makes her a guide. And I believe the world needs more guides like her who are showing us a wiser way to our inner world. If you'd like to set your course on being more courageous and connected, engaged and resilient, leave the GPS at home. *Daring Greatly* is all the navigation you'll need."
—Maria Shriver

"*Daring Greatly* is an important book -- a timely warning about the danger of pursuing certainty and control above all. Brené Brown offers all of us a valuable guide to the real reward of vulnerability: Greater courage."
—Daniel Pink

"What I find remarkable about this book is the unique combination of solid research and kitchen table story-telling. Brené becomes such a real person in the book that you can actually hear her voice asking, *"Have you dared greatly today?"* The invitation in this book is clear: We must be larger than anxiety, fear, and shame if we want to speak, act, and show up. The world needs this book and Brené’s unique blend of warmth, humor and ass-kicking makes her the perfect person to inspire us to dare greatly."
—Harriet Lerner, Ph.D.

"One of the tragic ironies of modern life is that so many people feel isolated from each other by the very feelings they have in common: including a fear of failure and a sense of not being enough. Brené Brown shines a bright light into these dark recesses of human emotion and reveals how these feelings can gnaw at fulfillment in education, at work and in the home. She shows too how they can be transformed to help us live more wholehearted lives of courage, engagement and purpose. Brené Brown writes as she speaks, with wisdom, wit, candor and a deep sense of humanity. If you're a student, teacher, parent, employer, employee or just alive and wanting to live more fully, you should read this book. I double dare you."
—Sir Ken Robinson

"In an age of constant pressure to conform and pretend, *Daring Greatly* offers a compelling alternative: transform your life by being who you really are. Embrace the courage to be vulnerable. Dare to read this book!"
—Chris Guillebeau, author of *The $100 Startup*

"Here's the essence of this book: Vulnerability is courage in you but inadequacy in me. Brené's book, weaving together research and Texan anecdote, shows you some paths forward. And don't for a moment think this is just for women. Men carry the burden of Being Strong And Never Weak, and we pay a heavy price for it. *Daring Greatly* can help us all."
—Michael Bungay Stanier, author of *Do More Great Work*

"I deeply trust Brené Brown--her research, her intelligence, her integrity, and her personhood. So when she definitively lands on the one most important value we can cultivate for professional success, relationship health, parental joy, and courageous, passionate living...well, I sit up and take notice . . . even when that one most critical value turns out to be the risky act of being vulnerable. She dared greatly to write this book, and you will benefit greatly to read it and to put its razor-sharp wisdom into action in your own life and work."
—Elizabeth Lesser, Cofounder, Omega Institute, author of *Broken Open*

"A straightforward approach to revamping one's life from an expert on vulnerability."
—*Kirkus*

"Will draw readers in and have them considering what steps they would dare to take if shame and fear were not present."
--Publishers Weekly

"Offers good insights into how people don personal armor to shield themselves from vulnerability. "
--The Wall Street Journal

"Brene's down-to-earth approach to vulnerability resonates with me." --Katie Couric

About the Author
Brené Brown, PhD, LMSW, is a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. She is the author of the #1 *New York Times* bestsellers *Rising Strong* and *The Gifts of Imperfection,* and *I Thought It Was Just Me (but it isn't)*. She is the founder and CEO of The Daring Way, an organization that brings her work on vulnerability, courage, shame, and worthiness to organizations, schools, communities, and families. Her 2010 TEDx Houston talk, "The Power of Vulnerability," is one of the top five most-viewed TED talks in the world. Brown lives in Houston, Texas, with her husband and two children

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Praise for *Daring Greatly*

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Brené Brown, Ph.D., LMSW, is a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. She has spent the past decade studying vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame. Her 2010 TEDxHouston talk, on the power of vulnerability, is one of the most watched talks on TED.com. Brené is the author of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *The Gifts of Imperfection* (2010), *I Thought It Was Just Me* (2007), and *Rising Strong* (2015). Brené is also the founder and CEO of The Daring Way—a teaching and certification program for helping professionals who want to facilitate her work on vulnerability, courage, shame, and worthiness. Brené lives in Houston with her husband, Steve, and their two children.

ALSO BY BRENÉ BROWN

The Gifts of Imperfection

I Thought It Was Just Me (but it isn't)

Rising Strong

WHAT IT

MEANS TO

DARE

GREATLY

THE phrase *Daring Greatly* is from Theodore Roosevelt's speech "Citizenship in a Republic." The speech, sometimes referred to as "The Man in the Arena," was delivered at the Sorbonne in Paris, France, on April 23, 1910. This is the passage that made the speech famous:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.

The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again,

because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause;

who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.…"

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:

- Cultivating Authenticity: Letting Go of What People Think
- Cultivating Self-Compassion: Letting Go of Perfectionism
- Cultivating a Resilient Spirit: Letting Go of Numbing and Powerlessness
- Cultivating Gratitude and Joy: Letting Go of Scarcity and Fear of the Dark
- Cultivating Intuition and Trusting Faith: Letting Go of the Need for Certainty
- Cultivating Creativity: Letting Go of Comparison

- Cultivating Play and Rest: Letting Go of Exhaustion as a Status Symbol and Productivity as Self-Worth
- Cultivating Calm and Stillness: Letting Go of Anxiety as a Lifestyle
- Cultivating Meaningful Work: Letting Go of Self-Doubt and "Supposed To"
- 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:

- 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.
- 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.
- A strong belief in our worthiness doesn't just happen—it's cultivated when we understand the guideposts as choices and daily practices.
- The main concern of Wholehearted men and women is living a life defined by courage, compassion, and connection.
- 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 invited 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 feeling when you wake up and everything feels fine until the memory of laying yourself open washes over you and you want to hide under the covers? *What did I do? Five hundred people officially think I'm crazy and it totally sucks. I forgot to mention two important things. Did I actually have a slide with the word* breakdown *on it to reinforce the story that I shouldn't have told in the first place? I must leave town.*

But there was nowhere to run. Six months after the talk, I received an e-mail from the curators of TEDxHouston congratulating me because my talk was going to be featured on the main TED website. I knew that was a good thing, a coveted honor even, but I was terrified. First, I was just settling into the idea of "only" five hundred people thinking I'm crazy. Second, in a culture full of critics and cynics, I had always felt safer in my career flying right under the radar. Looking back, I'm not sure how I would have responded to that e-mail had I known that having a video go viral on vulnerability and the importance of letting ourselves be seen would leave me feeling so uncomfortably (and ironically) vulnerable and exposed.

Today that talk is one of the most viewed on TED.com, with more than five million hits and translation available in thirty-eight languages. I've never watched it. I'm glad I did it, but it still makes me feel really uncomfortable.

The way I see it, 2010 was the year of the TEDxHouston talk, and 2011 was the year of *walking the talk*—literally. I crisscrossed the country speaking to groups ranging from Fortune 500 companies, leadership coaches, and the military, to lawyers, parenting groups, and school districts. In 2012, I was invited to give another talk at the main TED conference in Long Beach, California. For me the 2012 talk was my opportunity to share the work that has literally been the foundation and springboard for all of my research—I talked about shame and how we have to understand it and work through it if we really want to dare greatly.

The experience of sharing my research led me to write this book. After discussions with my publisher about the possibility of a business book and/or a parenting book, plus a book for teachers, I realized that there only needed to be one book because no matter where I went or with whom I was speaking, the core issues were the same: fear, disengagement, and yearning for more courage.

My corporate talks almost always focus on inspired leadership or creativity and innovation. The most significant problems that everyone from C-level executives to the frontline folks talk to me about stem from disengagement, the lack of feedback, the fear of staying relevant amid rapid change, and the need for clarity of purpose. If we want to reignite innovation and passion, we have to rehumanize work. When shame becomes a management style, engagement dies. When failure is not an option we can forget about learning, creativity, and innovation.

When it comes to parenting, the practice of framing mothers and fathers as good or bad is both rampant and corrosive—it turns parenting into a shame minefield. The real questions for parents should be: “Are you engaged? Are you paying attention?” If so, plan to make lots of mistakes and bad decisions. Imperfect parenting moments turn into gifts as our children watch us try to figure out what went wrong and how we can do better next time. The mandate is not to be perfect and raise happy children. Perfection doesn’t exist, and I’ve found that what makes children happy doesn’t always prepare them to be courageous, engaged adults. The same is true for schools. I haven’t encountered a single problem that isn’t attributed to some combination of parental, teacher, administrative, and/or student disengagement and the clash of competing stakeholders vying to define one purpose.

I have found that the most difficult and most rewarding challenge of my work is how to be both a mapmaker and a traveler. My maps, or theories, on shame resilience, Wholeheartedness, and vulnerability have not been drawn from the experiences of my own travels, but from the data I’ve collected over the past dozen years—the experiences of thousands of men and women who are forging paths in the direction that I, and many others, want to take our lives.

Over the years I’ve learned that a surefooted and confident mapmaker does not a swift traveler make. I stumble and fall, and I constantly find myself needing to change course. And even though I’m trying to follow a map that I’ve drawn, there are many times when frustration and self-doubt take over, and I wad up that map and shove it into the junk drawer in my kitchen. It’s not an easy journey from excruciating to exquisite, but for me it’s been worth every step.

What we all share in common—what I’ve spent the past several years talking to leaders, parents, and educators about—is the truth that forms the very core of this book: *What we know matters, but who we are matters more*. Being rather than knowing requires showing up and letting ourselves be seen. It requires us to dare greatly, to be vulnerable. The first step of that journey is understanding where we are, what we’re up against, and where we need to go. I think we can best do that by examining our pervasive “Never Enough” culture.

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 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. *Facebook 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 everyone and is always putting other people down.*

And while laypeople are using narcissism as a catchall diagnosis for everything from arrogance to rude behavior, researchers and helping professionals are testing the concept's elasticity in every way imaginable. Recently a group of researchers 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 special? 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 empathy to be compassionate, connected people?

If you're like me, you're probably wincing a bit and thinking, *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 making 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 penetrated the social consciousness enough that most people correctly 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.

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 solutions. 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:

- What are the messages and expectations that define our culture and how does culture influence our behaviors?
- How are our struggles and behaviors related to protecting ourselves?
- 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…"

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:

- **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?
- **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?
- **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.

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.

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 affect 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.

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