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DARE TO LEAD

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

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CHAPTER 4
THE VULNERABILITY ARMORY

As children we found ways to protect ourselves from vulnerability, from being hurt, diminished, and disappointed. We put on armor; we used our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors as weapons; and we learned how to make ourselves scarce, even to disappear. Now as adults we realize that to live with courage, purpose, and connection—to be the person whom we long to be—we must again be vulnerable. We must take off the armor, put down the weapons, show up, and let ourselves be seen.

THE word *persona* is the Greek term for "stage mask." In my work masks and armor are perfect metaphors for how we protect ourselves from the discomfort of vulnerability. Masks make us feel safer even when they become suffocating. Armor makes us feel stronger even when we grow weary from dragging the extra weight around. The irony is that when we're standing across from someone who is hidden or shielded by masks and armor, we feel frustrated and disconnected. That's the paradox here: *Vulnerability is the last thing I want you to see in me, but the first thing I look for in you.*

If I were directing a play about the vulnerability armory, the setting would be a middle school cafeteria and the characters would be our eleven-, twelve-, and thirteen-year-old selves. I pick this age because armor can be hard to see on adults. Once we've worn it long enough, it molds to our shape and is ultimately undetectable—it's like a second skin. Masks are the same way. I've interviewed hundreds of participants who have conveyed the same fear: "I can't take the mask off now—no one knows what I really look like. Not my partner, not my kids, not my friends. They've never met the real me. I'm not even sure who I am under here."

Preteens or tweens, though, are much different. Upper elementary school and middle school was where most of us started to try on new and different forms of protection. At this tender age, the armor is still awkward and ill fitting. Kids are clumsy in their efforts to hide fear and self-doubt, which makes it easier for observers to see exactly what armor they are using and why. And depending on the level of shame and fear, most kids have yet to be convinced that the heaviness of the armor or the suffocating nature of a mask is worth the effort. They put on and take off personas and protection without hesitation, sometimes in the same sentence: "I don't care what those people think. They're so stupid. The dance is stupid. Can you call their moms and find out what they're wearing? I hope I get to dance."

The after-school specials of my youth seemed to be dedicated to exploring just these ideas. They brought us the mean boy who really just wanted to be included and the know-it-all girl who was showing off at school to hide her misery over her parents' recent divorce. Our protection mechanisms may be more sophisticated now that we're adults, but most of us learned about armor during these raw and impressionable years, and most of us can be brought back to that place in a heartbeat.

From my personal experiences, I can tell you that the most difficult thing about parenting a daughter in middle school is coming face-to-face with the awkward, sweaty-palmed seventh-grader who lives inside me. My instinct back then was to duck and run, and I often feel that impulse creeping up on me when Ellen is in a struggle. I swear there are times when she's describing a situation at school that I can actually smell my middle school cafeteria.

Whether we're fourteen or fifty-four, our armor and our

masks are as individualized and unique as the personal vulnerability, discomfort, and pain we're trying to minimize. That's why I was surprised to discover that we all share a small array of common protection mechanisms. Our armor may be custom-made, but certain parts of it are interchangeable. By prying open the doors of the armory, we can expose to daylight the more universal bits and pieces and also rummage through the closets that house less universal, but often dangerous, items of vulnerability protection.

If you're like me, it's tempting to take this information and create your own after-school special. As these shared mechanisms started to emerge from the data, my first instinct was to label behavior and cast the people around me as stereotypes: "She so wears this mask, and my neighbor totally uses this armor." It's human nature to want to categorize and oversimplify, but I think this misses the point. None of us uses just one of these shared defenses. Most of us will be able to relate to almost all of them, depending on the different circumstances we navigate. My hope is that a peek inside the armory will help us to look inside ourselves. How do we protect ourselves? When and how did we start using these defense mechanisms? What would it take to make us put the armor away?

THE "ENOUGH" MANDATE

For me the most powerful part of this research was discovering the strategies that seem to empower people to take off the masks and armor that I'm about to describe. I assumed that I'd find unique strategies for each protection mechanism, similar to what emerged in the ten guideposts I write about in *The Gifts of Imperfection*. But that wasn't the case here.

In the first chapter, I talked about "enough" as the oppo-

site of scarcity, and the properties of scarcity as shame, comparison, and disengagement. Well, it appears that believing that we're "enough" is the way out of the armor—it gives us permission to take off the mask. With that sense of "enough" comes an embrace of worthiness, boundaries, and engagement. This lay at the core of every strategy illuminated by the research participants for freeing themselves from their armor:

- I am enough (worthiness versus shame).
- I've had enough (boundaries versus one-uping and comparison).
- Showing up, taking risks, and letting myself be seen is enough (engagement versus disengagement).

As you read through this chapter, I think it's helpful for you to know that every single person I interviewed spoke about struggling with vulnerability. It's not as if there are lucky people among us who can openly embrace vulnerability without reservation, hesitation, or fear. When it comes to uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure, what I heard over and over were descriptions of people trying on some kind of armor before finally letting it go:

- "My first instinct is to _____, but that never worked, so now I _____, and that's changed my life."
- "I spent years _____ until one day I tried _____, and it made my marriage stronger."

Last year I gave a talk on vulnerability to 350 SWAT team officers, parole officers, and jailers. (Yes, it was as intimidating as it sounds.) A SWAT officer walked up to me after the talk and said, "The only reason we listened to you is because you're just as bad at being open as we are. If you didn't wrestle with being vulnerable, we wouldn't trust you one bit."

Not only did I believe him, but I totally agreed. I trust the strategies that I'm writing about here for two reasons. First, the research participants who shared them with me had wrestled with the same gremlins, discomfort, and self-doubt that we all face. Second, I've practiced these strategies in my own life and know for a fact that they aren't just game changers—they're lifesavers.

The three forms of shielding that I am about to introduce are what I refer to as the "common vulnerability arsenal" because I have found that we all incorporate them into our personal armor in some way. These include **foreboding joy**, or the paradoxical dread that clamps down on momentary joyfulness; **perfectionism**, or believing that doing everything perfectly means you'll never feel shame; and **numbing**, the embrace of whatever deadens the pain of discomfort and pain. Each shield is followed by "Daring Greatly" strategies, all variants on "being enough" that have proved to be effective at disarming the three common forms of shielding.

THE COMMON VULNERABILITY SHIELDS

THE SHIELD: FOREBODING JOY

Given that I study emotions like shame, fear, and vulnerability, I hardly expected to one day be telling you that exploring the construct of joy turned my professional and personal life upside down. But it's true. In fact, having spent several years studying what it means to feel joyful, I'd argue that joy is prob-

ably the most difficult emotion to really feel. Why? Because when we lose the ability or willingness to be vulnerable, joy becomes something we approach with deep foreboding. This shift from our younger self's greeting of joy with unalloyed delight happens slowly and outside of our awareness. We don't seem to even know that it's happening or why. We just know that we crave more joy in our lives, that we are joy starved.

In a culture of deep scarcity—of never feeling safe, certain, and sure enough—joy can feel like a setup. We wake up in the morning and think, *Work is going well. Everyone in the family is healthy. No major crises are happening. The house is still standing. I'm working out and feeling good. Oh, shit. This is bad. This is really bad. Disaster must be lurking right around the corner.*

Or we get promoted, and our first thought is *Too good to be true. What's the catch?* We find out we're pregnant, and we think, *Our daughter is healthy and happy, so something really bad is going to happen with this baby. I just know it.* We're taking our first family vacation, but rather than being excited, we're making plans for the plane to go down or the ship to sink.

We're always waiting for the other shoe to drop. That expression originated in the early 1900s, when new immigrants and people flooding to the cities were crammed into tenement housing where you could literally hear your upstairs neighbor taking off his shoes at night. Once you heard the first shoe hit the floor you *waited for the other shoe to drop.* Even though the world today is much safer in many ways than it was in the early part of that century, and our life expectancy is far greater than that of the folks who were listening for a second shoe to hit the floor, the stakes feel so much higher to us. Most of us today think of the other shoe as something terrifying: a terrorist attack, a natural disaster, an *E. coli* outbreak in our local grocery store, a school shooting.

When I started asking participants about the experiences that left them feeling the most vulnerable, I didn't expect joy to be one of the answers. I expected fear and shame, but not the joyful moments of their lives. I was shocked to hear people say they were at their most vulnerable when:

- Standing over my children while they're sleeping
- Acknowledging how much I love my husband/wife
- Knowing how good I've got it
- Loving my job
- Spending time with my parents
- Watching my parents with my children
- Thinking about my relationship with my boyfriend
- Getting engaged
- Going into remission
- Having a baby
- Getting promoted
- Being happy
- Falling in love

Not only was I shocked to hear these answers, I knew I was in trouble.

Before my 2007 ~~breakdown~~ spiritual awakening, forebod-

ing joy was one of my own unconscious pieces of armor. When I first made the connection between vulnerability and joy reported by participants, I could barely breathe. I had considered my constant disaster planning as my little secret. I was convinced that I was the only one who stood over my children while they slept and, in the split second that I became engulfed with love and adoration, pictured something really terrible happening to them. I was sure that no one but me pictured car wrecks and rehearsed the horrific phone conversations with the police that all of us dread.

One of the first stories I heard was from a woman in her late forties. "I used to take every good thing and imagine the worst possible disaster," she told me. "I would literally picture the worst-case scenario and try to control all of the outcomes. When my daughter got into the college of her dreams, I just knew something bad would happen if she moved too far away. I spent the entire summer before she left trying to convince her to go to a local school. It crushed her confidence and took the fun out of our last summer. It was a painful lesson. Now I cross my fingers, stay grateful, pray, and try like hell to push the bad images out of my head. Unfortunately, I've passed that way of thinking down to my daughter. She's increasingly afraid to try new things, especially when her life is going well. She says she doesn't want to 'tempt fate.'"

A man in his early sixties told me, "I used to think the best way to go through life was to expect the worst. That way, if it happened, you were prepared, and if it didn't happen, you were pleasantly surprised. Then I was in a car accident and my wife was killed. Needless to say, expecting the worst didn't prepare me at all. And worse, I still grieve for all of those wonderful moments we shared and that I didn't fully enjoy. My commitment to her is to fully enjoy every moment

now. I just wish she was here, now that I know how to do that."

These stories illustrate how the concept of foreboding joy as a method of minimizing vulnerability is best understood as a continuum that runs from "rehearsing tragedy" to what I call "perpetual disappointment." Some of us, like the woman in the first story, scramble to the bleakest worst-case scenario when joy rears its vulnerable head, while others never even see joy, preferring to stay in an unmoving state of perpetual disappointment. What the perpetual-disappointment folks described is this: "It's easier to live disappointed than it is to feel disappointed. It feels more vulnerable to dip in and out of disappointment than to just set up camp there. You sacrifice joy, but you suffer less pain."

Both of these ends of the continuum tell the same story: Softening into the joyful moments of our lives requires vulnerability. If, like me, you've ever stood over your children and thought to yourself, *I love you so much I can barely breathe*, and in that exact moment have been flooded with images of something terrible happening to your child, know that you're not crazy nor are you alone. About eighty percent of the parents I've interviewed acknowledged having that experience. The same percentage holds true for the thousands of parents I've spoken to and worked with over the years. Why? What are we doing and why on earth are we doing it?

Once we make the connection between vulnerability and joy, the answer is pretty straightforward: We're trying to beat vulnerability to the punch. We don't want to be blindsided by hurt. We don't want to be caught off-guard, so we literally practice being devastated or never move from self-elected disappointment.

For those of us who rehearse tragedy, there's a reason

those images flood into our mind the second we're overwhelmed with joy. When we spend our lives (knowingly or unknowingly) pushing away vulnerability, we can't hold space open for the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure of joy. For many of us, there's even a physiological response—a "coming out of our skin" feeling. We're desperate for more joy, but at the same time we can't tolerate the vulnerability.

And our culture assists in this doom-filled rehearsal: Most of us have a stockpile of terrible images that we can pull from at the instant we're grappling with vulnerability. I often ask audience members to raise their hands if they've seen a graphically violent image in the past week. About twenty percent of the audience normally raises their hands. Then I reframe the question: "Raise your hand if you've watched the news; *CSI*, *NCIS*, *Law & Order*, *Bones*, or any other crime show on TV." At that point about eighty to ninety percent of the audience hands go up. We have the images we need to activate foreboding joy right at our neurological fingertips.

We're visual people. We trust, consume, and mentally store what we see. I remember recently being in the car with Steve and the kids as we headed to San Antonio for a long weekend. Charlie was performing his new kindergarten knock-knock joke routine for us, and we were all cracking up—even his older sister. I started welling up with joy, and in the split second that vulnerability, joy's constant companion, hit me, I shuddered, recalling an image from the news that showed an overturned SUV on I-10 and two empty car seats lying on the ground next to the truck. My laughter turned to panic, and I remember blurting out, "Slow down, Steve." He looked at me with a puzzled expression and said, "We're stopped."

DARING GREATLY: PRACTICING GRATITUDE

Even those of us who have learned to "lean into" joy and embrace our experiences are not immune to the uncomfortable quake of vulnerability that often accompanies joyful moments. We've just learned how to use it as a reminder rather than a warning shot. What was the most surprising (and life changing) difference for me was the nature of that reminder: For those welcoming the experience, the shudder of vulnerability that accompanies joy is an invitation to practice gratitude, to acknowledge how truly grateful we are for the person, the beauty, the connection, or simply the moment before us.

Gratitude, therefore, emerged from the data as the antidote to foreboding joy. In fact, every participant who spoke about the ability to stay open to joy also talked about the importance of practicing gratitude. This pattern of association was so thoroughly prevalent in the data that I made a commitment as a researcher not to talk about joy without talking about gratitude.

It wasn't just the relationship between joy and gratitude that took me by surprise. I was also startled by the fact that research participants consistently described both joyfulness and gratitude as spiritual practices that were bound to a belief in human connectedness and a power greater than us. Their stories and descriptions expanded on this, pointing to a clear distinction between happiness and joy. Participants described happiness as an emotion that's connected to circumstances, and they described joy as a spiritual way of engaging with the world that's connected to practicing gratitude. While I was initially taken aback by the relationship between joy and vulnerability, it now makes perfect sense to me, and I can see why gratitude would be the antidote to foreboding joy.

Scarcity and fear drive foreboding joy. We're afraid that the feeling of joy won't last, or that there won't be enough, or that the transition to disappointment (or whatever is in store for us next) will be too difficult. We've learned that giving in to joy is, at best, setting ourselves up for disappointment and, at worst, inviting disaster. And we struggle with the worthiness issue. Do we deserve our joy, given our inadequacies and imperfections? What about the starving children and the war-ravaged world? Who are we to be joyful?

If the opposite of scarcity is enough, then practicing gratitude is how we acknowledge that there's enough and that we're enough. I use the word practicing because the research participants spoke of tangible gratitude practices, more than merely having an attitude of gratitude or feeling grateful. In fact, they gave specific examples of gratitude practices that included everything from keeping gratitude journals and gratitude jars to implementing family gratitude rituals.

Actually, I learned the most about gratitude practices and the relationship between scarcity and joy that plays out in vulnerability from the men and women who had experienced some of the most profound losses or survived the greatest traumas. These included parents whose children had died, family members with terminally ill loved ones, and genocide and trauma survivors. One of the questions I'm most often asked is "Don't you get really depressed talking to people about vulnerability and hearing about people's darkest struggles?" My answer is *no, never.* That's because I've learned more about worthiness, resilience, and joy from those people who courageously shared their struggles with me than from any other part of my work.

And nothing has been a greater gift to me than the three

lessons I learned about joy and light from people who have spent time in sorrow and darkness:

1. **Joy comes to us in moments—ordinary moments. We risk missing out on joy when we get too busy chasing down the extraordinary.** Scarcity culture may keep us afraid of living small, ordinary lives, but when you talk to people who have survived great losses, it is clear that joy is not a constant. Without exception, all the participants who spoke to me about their losses, and what they missed the most, spoke about ordinary moments. "If I could come downstairs and see my husband sitting at the table and cursing at the newspaper . . ." "If I could hear my son giggling in the backyard . . ." "My mom sent me the craziest texts—she never knew how to work her phone. I'd give anything to get one of those texts right now."
2. **Be grateful for what you have.** When I asked people who had survived tragedy how we can cultivate and show more compassion for people who are suffering, the answer was always the same: Don't shrink away from the joy of your child because I've lost mine. Don't take what you have for granted—celebrate it. Don't apologize for what you have. Be grateful for it and share your gratitude with others. Are your parents healthy? Be thrilled. Let them know how much they mean to you. *When you honor what you have, you're honoring what I've lost.*

3. **Don't squander joy.** We can't prepare for tragedy and loss. When we turn every opportunity to feel joy into a test drive for despair, we actually diminish our resilience. Yes, softening into joy is uncomfortable. Yes, it's scary. Yes, it's vulnerable. *But every time we allow ourselves to lean into joy and give in to those moments, we build resilience and we cultivate hope.* The joy becomes part of who we are, and when bad things happen—and they do happen—we are stronger.

It took me a couple of years to understand and integrate this information, and to start to cultivate a gratitude practice. Ellen, on the other hand, seemed to intuitively understand the importance of acknowledging and owning joy. When she was in the first grade, we played hooky one afternoon and spent the day at the park. At one point we were on a paddleboat, feeding ducks stale bread that we had brought from home, when I realized that she had stopped pedaling and was sitting perfectly still in her seat. Her hands were wrapped around the bread sack, her head was tilted back, and her eyes were closed. The sun was shining on her uplifted face and she had a quiet smile on her face. I was so struck by her beauty and her vulnerability that I could barely catch my breath.

I watched for a full minute, but when she didn't move, I got a little nervous. "Ellie? Is everything okay, sweetie?"

Her smile widened and she opened her eyes. She looked at me and said, "I'm fine, Mama. I was just making a picture memory."

I had never heard of a picture memory, but I liked the sound of it. "What's that mean?"

"Oh, a picture memory is a picture I take in my mind when I'm really, really happy. I close my eyes and take a picture, so when I'm feeling sad or scared or lonely, I can look at my picture memories."

I'm not as eloquent or poised as my then six-year-old daughter, but I've been practicing. For me, expressing gratitude is still bumpier than it is graceful or fluid. I still get overwhelmed with vulnerability in the midst of joyful experiences. But now I've learned to literally say aloud, "I'm feeling vulnerable and I'm so grateful for _____."

Okay, this can be fairly awkward in the middle of a conversation, but it's much better than the alternative—catastrophizing and controlling. Just recently, Steve told me that he was thinking about taking the kids to his family's farmhouse in Pennsylvania while I was out of town for work. I immediately thought it was a great idea, until I started boarding the crazy train of *Oh, my God, I can't let them fly without me; what if something happens?* Rather than picking a fight, being critical, or making up something to quash the idea without revealing my unreasonable fears (e.g., "That's a terrible idea. Airfare is really high right now," or, "That's selfish. I want to go too."), I just said, "Vulnerability. Vulnerability. I'm grateful for . . . for . . . the kids getting to spend alone time with you and explore the country outside."

Steve smiled. He's well aware of my practice, and he knew I meant it. Before I put this research on countering foreboding joy into practice, I never knew how to get past that immediate vulnerability shudder. I didn't have the information to get from what I feared, to how I actually felt, and to what I really craved: gratitude-fueled joy.

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

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

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

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

"taking the edge off," and that means considering the glasses of wine we drink while we're cooking dinner, eating dinner, and cleaning up after dinner, our sixty-hour workweeks, the sugar, the fantasy football, the prescription pills, and the four shots of espresso that we drink in order to clear the fog from the wine and Advil PM. I'm talking about you and me and the stuff we do every day.

When I looked at the data, my primary question was "What are we numbing and why?" Americans today are more debt-ridden, obese, medicated, and addicted than we ever have been. For the first time in history, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has announced that automobile accidents are now the second leading cause of accidental death in the United States. The leading cause? Drug overdoses. In fact, more people die from prescription drug overdoses than from heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine drug use combined. Even more alarming is the estimate that less than 5 percent of those who died from prescription drug overdoses obtained their drugs from the folks we normally think of as street-corner drug dealers. The dealers today are more likely to be parents, relatives, friends, and physicians. Clearly there's a problem. We're desperate to feel less or more of something—to make something go away or to have more of something else.

Having spent years working closely with addiction researchers and clinicians, I had guessed that the primary driver of numbing would be our struggles with worthiness and shame: We numb the pain that comes from feeling inadequate and "less than." But that was only part of the puzzle. Anxiety and disconnection also emerged as drivers of numbing in addition to shame. As I'll explain, the most powerful need for numbing seems to come from combinations of all three—shame, anxiety, and disconnection.

The anxiety described by the research participants appeared to be fueled by uncertainty, overwhelming and competing demands on our time, and (one of the big surprises) social discomfort. Disconnection was tougher to nail down. I thought about using the term *depression* rather than *disconnection*, but as I recoded the data, that's not what I heard. I instead heard a range of experiences that encompassed depression but also included loneliness, isolation, disengagement, and emptiness.

Again, what was really powerful for me, personally and professionally, was seeing the strong pattern of shame threading through the experiences of anxiety and/or disconnection. The most accurate answers to the question about what drives numbing sound more like the answers to "What's your sign?" *Anxiety with shame rising. Disconnection with shame rising. Anxiety and disconnection with shame rising.*

Shame enters for those of us who experience anxiety because not only are we feeling fearful, out of control, and incapable of managing our increasingly demanding lives, but eventually our anxiety is compounded and made unbearable by our belief that if we were just smarter, stronger, or better, we'd be able to handle everything. Numbing here becomes a way to take the edge off of both instability and inadequacy.

With disconnection it's a similar story. We may have a couple of hundred friends on Facebook, plus a slew of colleagues, real-life friends, and neighbors, but we feel alone and unseen. Because we are hardwired for connection, disconnection always creates pain. Feeling disconnected can be a normal part of life and relationships, but when coupled with the shame of believing that we're disconnected because we're not worthy of connection, it creates a pain that we want to numb.

One stop beyond disconnection is isolation, which pre-

sents real danger. Jean Baker Miller and Irene Stiver, relational-cultural theorists from the Stone Center at Wellesley College, have eloquently captured the extremity of isolation. They write, "We believe that the most terrifying and destructive feeling that a person can experience is psychological isolation. This is not the same as being alone. It is a feeling that one is locked out of the possibility of human connection and of being powerless to change the situation. In the extreme, psychological isolation can lead to a sense of hopelessness and desperation. People will do almost anything to escape this combination of condemned isolation and powerlessness."

The part of this definition that is critical to understanding shame is the sentence "People will do almost anything to escape this combination of condemned isolation and powerlessness." Shame often leads to desperation. And reactions to this desperate need to escape from isolation and fear can run the gamut from numbing to addiction, depression, self-injury, eating disorders, bullying, violence, and suicide.

As I thought back on my own numbing history, understanding how shame magnifies anxiety and disconnection provided me with answers to questions that I've had for years. I didn't start drinking to drown my sorrows: I just needed something to do with my hands. In fact, I'm convinced that if smart phones and the bejeweled Chihuahuas that today's celebrities sport as accessories had been in fashion when I was in my late teens, I never would have started smoking and drinking. I drank and smoked to minimize my feelings of vulnerability and to look busy when all of the other girls at my table had been asked to dance. I literally needed something to do, something to help me look busy.

Twenty-five years ago it felt as if my only choice was nurs-

ing a beer, stirring an amaretto sour, or fiddling with a cigarette. I was alone at the table with no one and nothing to keep me company except for my vices. For me, vulnerability led to anxiety, which led to shame, which led to disconnection, which led to Bud Light. For many of us, the literal chemical anesthetizing of emotions is just a pleasant, albeit dangerous, side effect of behaviors that are more about fitting in, finding connection, and managing anxiety.

I quit drinking and smoking sixteen years ago. In *The Gifts of Imperfection*, I write:

> I wasn't raised with the skills and emotional practice needed to "lean into discomfort," so over time I basically became a take-the-edge-off-aholic. But they don't have meetings for that. And after some brief experimenting, I learned that describing your addiction that way in a traditional twelve-step meeting doesn't always go over very well with the purists.
>
> For me, it wasn't just the dance halls, cold beer, and Marlboro Lights of my youth that got out of hand—it was banana bread, chips and queso, e-mail, work, staying busy, incessant worrying, planning, perfectionism, and anything else that could dull those agonizing and anxiety-fueled feelings of vulnerability.

Let's look at the Daring Greatly strategies for numbing.

DARING GREATLY: SETTING BOUNDARIES, FINDING TRUE COMFORT, AND CULTIVATING SPIRIT

When I interviewed the research participants, whom I'd describe as living a Wholehearted life, about numbing, they consistently talked about three things:

1. Learning how to actually feel their feelings.
2. Staying mindful about numbing behaviors (they struggled too).
3. Learning how to lean into the discomfort of hard emotions.

This all made perfect sense to me, but I wanted to know exactly how you lean into anxiety and disconnection. So I started interviewing people about this question specifically. As I expected, there was more to it. These folks had elevated "enough" to whole new levels. Yes, they practiced mindfulness and leaning, but they also set serious boundaries in their lives.

As I asked more pointed questions about the choices and behaviors Wholehearted men and women made to reduce anxiety, they explained that reducing anxiety meant paying attention to how much they could do and how much was too much, and learning how to say, "Enough." They got very clear on what was important to them and when they could let something go.

In Sir Ken Robinson's wonderful 2010 TED talk on the learning revolution, he starts to explain to the audience that he divides the world into two groups, then he stops himself and with great humor says, "Jeremy Bentham, the great utilitarian philosopher, once spiked this argument. He said, 'There are two types of people in the world, those who divide people into two types, and those who do not.'"

Robinson paused and smiled. "Well, I do." I loved that because as a researcher, I do too. But before I talk about the two groups I identified, I want to say that this division is not exactly as neat and tidy as two discrete groups, and at the same time it almost is. Let's take a look.

When it comes to anxiety, we all struggle. Yes, there are different types of anxiety and certainly different intensities. Some anxiety is hardwired and best addressed with a combination of medication and therapy, and some of it is environmental—we're overextended and overstressed. What was interesting to me was how the participants could be divided into two camps: Group A defined the challenge of anxiety as *finding ways to manage and soothe the anxiety*, while Group B clearly defined the problem as *changing the behaviors that led to anxiety*. Participants from both groups often used today's dominating technology as an example of an anxiety-producing source during the interviews, so let's look at how these two groups thought differently about the daily onslaught of e-mail, voicemail, and text messages.

Group A: "I make a pot of coffee after I tuck in my kids so I can take care of all the e-mails between ten P.M. and midnight. If there are too many, I wake up at four A.M. and start over again. I don't like getting to work with any unanswered e-mail in my in-box. I'm exhausted, but they're answered."

Group B: "I've simply stopped sending unnecessary e-mails and asked my friends and colleagues to do the same. I've also started setting the expectation that it might take me a few days to respond. If it's important, call me. Don't text or e-mail. Call. Better yet, stop by my office."

Group A: "I use red lights, grocery lines, and elevator rides to stay on top of my calls. I even sleep with my phone in case someone calls or I remember something in the middle of the night. One time I called my assistant at four A.M. because I remembered that we needed to add something to a motion that we were preparing. I was surprised that she answered, but then she reminded me that I had told her to keep her phone on her nightstand. I'll rest and let off steam when we're done. Work hard. Play hard. That's my motto. And it doesn't take much to play hard when you haven't slept in a while."

Group B: "My boss, my friends, and my family know that I don't take calls before nine A.M. or after nine P.M. If the phone rings after or before those times, it's either a wrong number or an emergency—a real emergency, not a work issue."

The participants who struggled the most with numbing, Group A, explained that reducing anxiety meant finding ways to numb it, not changing the thinking, behaviors, or emotions that created anxiety. I hated every minute of this part of the research. I've always looked for better ways to manage my exhaustion and anxiety. I wanted help "living like this," not suggestions on how to "stop living like this." My struggle mirrored the struggle that I heard from the folks who talked the most about numbing. The smaller group, Group B—the participants who addressed anxiety at the root by aligning their lives with their values and setting boundaries—fell on the Wholehearted continuum.

When we asked that group about the process of setting boundaries and limits to lower the anxiety in their lives, they didn't hesitate to connect worthiness with boundaries. We

have to believe we are enough in order to say, "Enough!" For women, setting boundaries is difficult because the shame gremlins are quick to weigh in: "Careful saying no. You'll really disappoint these folks. Don't let them down. Be a good girl. Make everyone happy." For men, the gremlins whisper, "Man up. A real guy could take this on and then some. Is the little mamma's boy just too tired?"

We know that *daring greatly* means engaging with our vulnerability, which can't happen when shame has the upper hand, and the same is true for dealing with anxiety-fueled disconnection. The two most powerful forms of connection are love and belonging—they are both irreducible needs of men, women, and children. As I conducted my interviews, I realized that only one thing separated the men and women who felt a deep sense of love and belonging from the people who seemed to be struggling for it. That one thing was the belief in their worthiness. It's as simple and complicated as this: If we want to fully experience love and belonging, we must believe that we are worthy of love and belonging. But before we talk more about numbing and disconnection, I want to share two more definitions with you. I shared my definition of love on page 105, here are the definitions of connection and belonging that emerged from the data.

Connection: Connection is the energy that is created between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment.

Belonging: Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Because this yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which are not only hollow substitutes for belonging, but often barriers to it. Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world,

our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.

These definitions are crucial to understanding how we become disconnected in our lives and how to change. Living a connected life ultimately is about setting boundaries, spending less time and energy hustling and winning over people who don't matter, and seeing the value of working on cultivating connection with family and close friends.

Before I undertook this research, my question was "What's the quickest way to make these feelings go away?" Today my question is "What are these feelings and where did they come from?" Invariably, the answers are that I'm not feeling connected enough to Steve or the kids, and that this comes from (take your pick) not sleeping enough, not playing enough, working too much, or trying to run from vulnerability. What has changed for me is that I know now that I can address these answers.

THE CARE AND FEEDING OF OUR SPIRITS

One final question remains, and I hear it a lot. People often ask, "Where is the line between pleasure or comfort and numbing?" In response, author and personal growth teacher Jennifer Louden has named our numbing devices "shadow comforts." When we're anxious, disconnected, vulnerable, alone, and feeling helpless, the booze and food and work and endless hours online feel like comfort, but in reality they're only casting their long shadows over our lives.

In her book *The Life Organizer*, Louden writes, "Shadow comforts can take any form. It's not what you do; it's *why* you do it that makes the difference. You can eat a piece of chocolate as a holy wafer of sweetness—a real comfort—or you can cram an entire chocolate bar into your mouth without even tasting

it in a frantic attempt to soothe yourself—a shadow comfort. You can chat on message boards for half an hour and be energized by community and ready to go back to work, or you can chat on message boards because you're avoiding talking to your partner about how angry he or she made you last night."

I found that what emerged from the data was exactly what Louden points out: "It's not what you do; it's why you do it that makes the difference." The invitation is to think about the intention behind our choices and, if helpful, to discuss these issues with family, close friends, or a helping professional. There aren't any checklists or norms to help you identify shadow comforts or other destructive numbing behavior. This requires self-examination and reflection. Additionally, I would recommend listening with great care if the people you love say that they are concerned about you engaging in these types of behaviors. But ultimately these are questions that transcend what we know and how we feel—they're about our spirit. *Are my choices comforting and nourishing my spirit, or are they temporary reprieves from vulnerability and difficult emotions ultimately diminishing my spirit? Are my choices leading to my Wholeheartedness, or do they leave me feeling empty and searching?*

For me, sitting down to a wonderful meal is nourishment and pleasure. Eating while I'm standing, be it in front of the refrigerator or inside the pantry, is always a red flag. Sitting down to watch one of my favorite shows on television is pleasure. Flipping through channels for an hour is numbing.

As we think about nourishing or diminishing our spirit, we have to consider how our numbing behaviors affect the people around us—even strangers. A couple of years ago, I wrote an op-ed about cell phones and disconnection for the *Houston Chronicle* after witnessing how our crazy-busy, anxiety-fueled lifestyles affect other people. Food for thought:

Last week, while I was trying to enjoy my manicure, I watched in horror as the two women across from me talked on their phones the entire time they were getting their nails done. They employed head nods, eyebrow raises, and finger-pointing to instruct the manicurists on things like nail length and polish choices.

I really couldn't believe it.

I've had my nails done by the same two women for ten years. I know their names (their real Vietnamese names), their children's names, and many of their stories. They know my name, my children's names, and many of my stories. When I finally made a comment about the women on their cell phones, they both quickly averted their eyes. Finally, in a whisper, the manicurist said, "They don't know. Most of them don't think of us as people."

On the way home, I stopped at Barnes & Noble to pick up a magazine. The woman ahead of me in line bought two books, applied for a new "reader card," and asked to get one book gift-wrapped without getting off of her cell phone. She plowed through the entire exchange without making eye contact or directly speaking to the young woman working at the counter. She never acknowledged the presence of the human being across from her.

After leaving Barnes & Noble, I went to a drive-through fast food restaurant to get a Diet Dr Pepper. Right as I pulled up to the window, my cell phone rang. I wasn't quite sure, but I thought it might be Charlie's school calling, so I answered it. It wasn't the school—it was someone calling to

confirm an appointment. I got off the phone as quickly as I could.

In the short time it took me to say, "Yes, I'll be at my appointment," the woman in the window and I had finished our soda-for-money transaction. I apologized to her the second I got off of the phone. I said, "I'm so sorry. The phone rang right when I was pulling up and I thought it was my son's school."

I must have surprised her because she got huge tears in her eyes and said, "Thank you. Thank you so much. You have no idea how humiliating it is sometimes. They don't even see us."

I don't know how it feels for her, but I do know how it feels to be an invisible member of the service industry. It can suck. I worked my way through undergrad and some of graduate school by waiting tables and bartending. I worked in a very nice restaurant that was close to campus and a hot spot for wealthy college kids and their parents (parents who were visiting for the weekend and treating their kids and their kids' friends to dinner). I was in my late twenties and praying to finish my bachelor's degree before I hit thirty.

When the customers were kind and respectful, it was OK, but one "waiter as object" moment could tear me apart. Unfortunately, I now see those moments happening all of the time.

I see adults who don't even look at their waiters when they speak to them. I see parents who let their young children talk down to store clerks. I see people rage and scream at receptionists, then treat the bosses/doctors/bankers with the utmost respect.

And I see the insidious nature of race, class, and privilege playing out in one of the most historically damaging ways possible—the server/served relationship.

Everyone wants to know why customer service has gone to hell in a handbasket. I want to know why customer behavior has gone to hell in a handbasket.

When we treat people as objects, we dehumanize them. We do something really terrible to their souls and to our own. Martin Buber, an Austrian-born philosopher, wrote about the differences between an I-it relationship and an I-you relationship. An I-it relationship is basically what we create when we are in transactions with people whom we treat like objects—people who are simply there to serve us or complete a task. I-you relationships are characterized by human connection and empathy.

Buber wrote, "When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them."

After spending a decade studying belonging, authenticity, and shame, I can say for certain that we are hardwired for connection—emotionally, physically, and spiritually. I'm not suggesting that we engage in a deep, meaningful relationship with the man who works at the cleaners or the woman who works at the drive-through, but I am suggesting that we stop dehumanizing people and start looking them in the eye when we speak to them. If we don't have the energy or time to do that, we should stay at home.

Spirituality emerged as a fundamental guidepost in Wholeheartedness. Not religiosity but the deeply held belief that we are inextricably connected to one another by a force greater than ourselves—a force grounded in love and compassion. For some of us that's God, for others it's nature, art, or even human soulfulness. I believe that owning our worthiness is the act of acknowledging that we are sacred. Perhaps embracing vulnerability and overcoming numbing is ultimately about the care and feeding of our spirits.

THE LESS FREQUENTED SHELVES IN THE ARMORY

So far, we've cracked open the armory doors to throw some light on the common arsenal that pretty much everyone uses to keep themselves safe from vulnerability. Foreboding joy, perfectionism, and numbing have emerged as the three most universal methods of protection—what we call major categories of defense. In this last part of the chapter, I want to briefly explore the less frequented shelves in the armory where a few more masks and pieces that form important subcategories of shielding are kept. Most of us are likely to identify with one or more of these protection mechanisms, or, at the very least, we will see slivers of ourselves reflected back from their polished surfaces in a way that cultivates some understanding.

THE SHIELD: VIKING OR VICTIM

I recognized this piece of armor when a significant group of research participants indicated they had very little use for the concept of vulnerability. Their responses to the idea that vulnerability might have value ranged from dismissive and defensive to hostile. What emerged from these interviews and interactions was a lens on the world that essentially saw peo-

ple divided into two groups (ahem, like me and Sir Ken Robinson) that I call *Vikings* or *Victims*.

Unlike some participants who had intellectual or theoretical issues with the value of vulnerability, these folks shared the belief that everyone without exception belongs to one of two mutually exclusive groups: Either you're a Victim in life—a sucker or a loser who's always being taken advantage of and can't hold your own—or you're a Viking—someone who sees the threat of being victimized as a constant, so you stay in control, you dominate, you exert power over things, and you never show vulnerability.

As I coded the data from these interviews, I kept thinking about the chapter in my dissertation on the French philosopher Jacques Derrida and binary opposition (the pairing of related terms that are opposite). While the respondents didn't all use the same examples, a strong pattern of paired opposites emerged in the language they used to describe their worldview: winner or loser, survive or die, kill or be killed, strong or weak, leaders or followers, success or failure, crush or be crushed. And in case those aren't clear enough examples, there's the life motto of a high-achieving, take-no-prisoners lawyer, "The world is divided into assholes and suckers. It's that simple."

The source of their Viking-or-Victim worldview was not completely clear, but most attributed it to the values they had been taught growing up, the experience of surviving hardships, or their professional training. The majority of the participants who fell into the group holding this view were men, but there were also women. It makes sense that this is a somewhat gendered issue as many men, even men who don't rely on this armor, talked about the win-lose-zero-sum-power dynamic being taught and modeled as they grew up. And, don't

forget, winning, dominance, and power over women were part of the list of masculine norms that we discussed in Chapter 3.

In addition to socialization and life experiences, many of these folks held jobs or worked in cultures that reinforced the Viking-or-Victim mentality: We heard this from servicemen and -women, veterans, corrections and law-enforcement officers, and people working in high-performance, supercompetitive cultures like law, technology, and finance. What I don't know is if these folks sought careers that leveraged their existing Viking-or-Victim belief system, or if their work experiences shaped this win-or-lose take on life. My guess would be that a larger percentage of folks belong to the former group, but I don't have the data to do more than speculate. It's something we're researching now.

One issue that made these interviews some of the most difficult was the honesty with which people spoke about the struggles in their personal lives—dealing with high-risk behaviors, divorces, disconnection, loneliness, addiction, anger, exhaustion. But rather than seeing these behaviors and negative outcomes as consequences of their Viking-or-Victim worldview, they perceived them as evidence of the harsh win-or-lose nature of life.

When I look at the statistics in more vulnerability-intolerant Viking-or-Victim professions, I see a dangerous pattern developing. And no place is this more evident than in the military. The statistics on post-traumatic-stress-related suicides, violence, addiction, and risk-taking all point to this haunting truth: *For soldiers serving in Afghanistan and Iraq, coming home is more lethal than being in combat.* From the invasion of Afghanistan to the summer of 2009, the US military lost 761 soldiers in combat in that country. Compare that to the 817 who took their own lives over the same period. And

this number doesn't account for deaths related to violence, high-risk behaviors, and addiction.

Craig Bryan, a University of Texas psychologist and suicide expert who recently left the air force, told *Time* magazine that the military finds itself in a catch-22: "We train our warriors to use controlled violence and aggression, to suppress strong emotional reactions in the face of adversity, to tolerate physical and emotional pain, and to overcome the fear of injury and death. These qualities are also associated with increased risk for suicide." Bryan then explained that the military can't decrease the intensity of that conditioning "without negatively affecting the fighting capability of our military." And he gave chilling expression to the inherent danger of looking at the world through the Viking-or-Victim lens for those in the military when he noted, "Service members are, simply put, more capable of killing themselves by sheer consequence of their professional training." The situation may be at its most extreme in the military, but if you look at the mental and physical health statistics of police officers, you'll find the same thing.

The same holds true in organizations—when we lead, teach, or preach from a gospel of Viking or Victim, win or lose, we crush faith, innovation, creativity, and adaptability to change. Take away the guns, in fact, and we find outcomes similar to those for soldiers and police in corporate America. Lawyers—an example of a profession largely trained in win or lose, succeed or fail—have outcomes that aren't much better. The American Bar Association reports that suicides among lawyers are close to four times greater than the rate of the general population. An *American Bar Association Journal* article reported that experts on lawyer depression and substance abuse attributed the higher suicide rate to lawyers'

perfectionism and on their need to be aggressive and emotionally detached. And this mentality can trickle down into our home lives as well. When we teach or model to our children that vulnerability is dangerous and should be pushed away, we lead them directly into danger and disconnection.

The Viking or Victim armor doesn't just perpetuate behaviors such as dominance, control, and power over folks who see themselves as Vikings, it can also perpetuate a sense of ongoing victimhood for people who constantly struggle with the idea that they're being targeted or unfairly treated. With this lens, there are only two possible positions that people can occupy—power over or powerless. In the interviews I heard many participants sound resigned to Victim simply because they didn't want to become the only alternative in their opinion—Vikings. Reducing our life options to such limited and extreme roles leaves very little hope for transformation and meaningful change. I think that's why there's often a sense of desperation and feeling "boxed in" around this perspective.

DARING GREATLY: REDEFINING SUCCESS, REINTEGRATING VULNERABILITY, AND SEEKING SUPPORT

To examine how the research participants moved from Viking or Victim to engaging in vulnerability, there was a clear distinction between those who operated from this belief system because it's what they learned or it's a value they hold, and those who rely on this life lens as a result of trauma. Ultimately the question that best challenges the logic behind Viking or Victim for both groups is this: How are you defining success?

It turns out that in this win-or-lose, succeed-or-fail paradigm, Vikings are not victorious by any metric that most of us would label "success." Survival or winning may be success

in the midst of competition, combat, or trauma, but when the immediacy of that threat is removed, merely surviving is not living. As I mentioned earlier, love and belonging are irreducible needs of men, women, and children, and love and belonging are impossible to experience without vulnerability. Living without connection—without knowing love and belonging—is not victory. Fear and scarcity fuel the Viking-or-Victim approach and part of reintegrating vulnerability means examining shame triggers; what's fueling the win-or-lose fear? The men and women who made the shift from this paradigm to Wholeheartedness all talked about cultivating trust and connection in relationships as a prerequisite for trying on a less-combative way of engaging with the world.

As far as connection and the military is concerned, I'm not advocating for a kinder, gentler fighting force—I understand the realities faced by nations and the soldiers who protect them. What I *am* advocating is a kinder, gentler public, one willing to embrace, support, and reach out to the men and women we pay to be invulnerable on our behalf. *Are we willing to reach out and connect?*

A great example of how connection can heal and transform is the work being done by Team Red, White and Blue (TeamRWB.org). According to their mission statement, they believe the most effective way to impact a veteran's life is through a meaningful relationship with someone in their community. Their program pairs wounded veterans with local volunteers. Together, they share meals, attend the veteran's medical appointments, go to local sporting events, and engage in other social activities. This interaction allows veterans to grow in their community, meet supportive people, and find new passions in life.

My interest in this work not only stemmed from my re-

search, but also from an extraordinary experience I had working with a group of veterans and military family members on a shame resilience project in one of my classes at the University of Houston. It changed my life. It made me realize how much we, the public, can do for veterans, and why our politics and beliefs about war shouldn't stop us from reaching out to them with vulnerability, compassion, and connection. I will always be grateful for that experience and for what I've learned interviewing veterans about their experiences. For many of us who grieve over the wounds of war, we're missing an opportunity for healing that's right in front of us. Team RWB's motto, *It's Our Turn!*, is a call to action for all of us who want to do something to support vets. I'm working with them now and I invite everyone to find a way to reach out. *Dare greatly and take actions that communicate to veterans or military families that they are not alone. Actions that communicate, "Your struggle is my struggle. Your trauma is my trauma. Your healing is my healing."*

TRAUMA AND DARING GREATLY

We all struggle to understand why some people who have survived trauma—be it combat, domestic violence, sexual or physical abuse, or the quieter but equally devastating covert traumas of oppression, neglect, isolation, or living in extreme fear or stress—exhibit tremendous resilience and lead full, Wholehearted lives, while others become defined by their trauma. They may become perpetrators themselves of the violence they suffered, they struggle with addiction, or they're unable to escape the feeling that they are victims in situations where they're not.

After studying shame for six years, I knew that part of the answer was shame resilience—the people with the most resil-

ience intentionally cultivated the four elements that we discussed in the earlier chapters. The other part of the answer felt elusive to me until I started my new research interviewing people about Wholeheartedness and vulnerability. Then it made perfect sense. If we're forced into seeing the world through the Viking-or-Victim lens as a survival mechanism, then it can feel impossible or even deadly to let go of that worldview. How can we expect someone to give up a way of seeing and understanding the world that has physically, cognitively, or emotionally kept them alive? None of us is ever able to part with our survival strategies without significant support and the cultivation of replacement strategies. Putting down the Viking-or-Victim shield often requires help from a professional—someone who understands trauma. Groups are also very helpful.

The research participants who survived trauma and are living Wholehearted lives spoke passionately about the need to:

- Acknowledge the problem;
- Seek professional help and/or support;
- Work through the accompanying shame and secrecy;
- And approach the reintegration of vulnerability as a daily practice rather than a checklist item.

And while the importance of spirituality saturated all of the interviews with the Wholehearted, it emerged as especially important with the participants who consider themselves not only trauma survivors, but also "thrivers."

THE SHIELD: LETTING IT ALL HANG OUT

I see two forms of oversharing in our culture. The first is what I call *floodlighting*, and the other is *the smash and grab*.

As we discussed in the chapter on vulnerability myths, oversharing is not vulnerability. In fact, it often results in disconnection, distrust, and disengagement.

THE SHIELD: FLOODLIGHTING

To understand floodlighting, we have to see that the intentions behind this kind of sharing are multifaceted and often include some combination of soothing one's pain, testing the loyalty and tolerance in a relationship, and/or hot-wiring a new connection ("We've only known each other for a couple of weeks, but I'm going to share this and we'll be BFFs now"). Unfortunately for all of us who've done this (and I include myself in this group), the response is normally the opposite of what we're looking for: People recoil and shut down, compounding our shame and disconnection. You can't use vulnerability to discharge your own discomfort, or as a tolerance barometer in a relationship ("I'll share this and see if you stick around"), or to fast-forward a relationship—it just won't cooperate.

Ordinarily, when we reach out and share ourselves—our fears, hopes, struggles, and joy—we create small sparks of connection. Our shared vulnerability creates light in normally dark places. My metaphor for this is twinkle lights (I keep them in my house year-round as a reminder).

There's something magical about the idea of twinkle lights shining in dark and difficult places. The lights are small, and a single light is not very special, but an entire strand of sparkling lights is sheer beauty. It's the connectivity

that makes them beautiful. When it comes to vulnerability, connectivity means sharing our stories with people who have *earned the right to hear them*—people with whom we've cultivated relationships that can bear the weight of our story. Is there trust? Is there mutual empathy? Is there reciprocal sharing? Can we ask for what we need? These are the crucial connection questions.

When we share vulnerability, especially shame stories, with someone with whom there is no connectivity, their emotional (and sometimes physical) response is often to wince, as if we have shone a floodlight in their eyes. Instead of a strand of delicate lights, our shared vulnerability is blinding, harsh, and unbearable. If we are on the receiving end, our hands fly up and cover our faces, we squeeze our entire faces (not just our eyes) shut, and we look away. When it's over, we feel depleted, confused, and sometimes even manipulated. Not exactly the empathic response that those telling the story were hoping for. Even for those of us who study empathy and teach empathy skills, it's rare that we're able to stay attuned when someone's oversharing has stretched us past our connectivity with them.

DARING GREATLY: CLARIFYING INTENTIONS, SETTING BOUNDARIES, AND CULTIVATING CONNECTION

Much of the beauty of light owes its existence to the dark. The most powerful moments of our lives happen when we string together the small flickers of light created by courage, compassion, and connection and see them shine in the darkness of our struggles. That darkness is lost when we use vulnerability to floodlight our listener, and the response is disconnection. We then use this disconnection as verification that we'll never find comfort, that we're not worthy, that the

relationship is no good, or, in the case of oversharing to hot-wire a connection, that we'll never have the intimacy that we crave. We think; "*Vulnerability is a crock. It's not worth it and I'm not worth it.*" What we don't see is that *using* vulnerability is not the same thing as *being* vulnerable; it's the opposite—it's armor.

Sometimes we're not even aware that we're oversharing as armor. We can purge our vulnerability or our shame stories out of total desperation to be heard. We blurt out something that is causing us immense pain because we can't bear the thought of holding it in for one more second. Our intentions may not be purging or blurting to armor ourselves or push others away, but that's the exact outcome of our behaviors. Whether we're on the purging end or the receiving end of this experience, self-compassion is critical. We have to give ourselves a break when we share too much too soon, and we have to practice self-kindness when we feel like we weren't able to hold space for someone who hit us with the floodlight. Judgment exacerbates disconnection.

Hearing this, sometimes people ask me how I decide what to share and how to share it when it comes to my own work. I share a lot of myself in my work, after all, and I certainly haven't cultivated trusting relationships with all of you or all of the people in the audiences where I speak. It's an important question, and the answer is that I don't tell stories or share vulnerabilities with the public until I've worked through them with the people I love. I have my own boundaries around what I share and what I don't share and I stay mindful of my intentions.

First, I only share stories or experiences that I've worked through and feel that I can share from solid ground. I don't share what I define as "intimate" stories, nor do I share stories

that are fresh wounds. I did that once or twice early in my career and it was pretty terrible. There's nothing like staring into an audience of a thousand people who are all giving you the floodlight look.

Second, I follow the rule that I learned in my graduate social work training. Sharing yourself to teach or move a process forward can be healthy and effective, but disclosing information as a way to work through your personal stuff is inappropriate and unethical. Last, I only share when I have no unmet needs that I'm trying to fill. I firmly believe that being vulnerable with a larger audience is only a good idea if the healing is tied to the sharing, not to the expectations I might have for the response I get.

When I asked other people who share their stories through blogs, books, and public speaking about this, it turns out that they are very similar in their approaches and intentions. I don't want the fear of floodlighting to stop anyone from sharing their struggles with the world, but being mindful about what, why, and how we share is important when the context is a larger public. We're all grateful for people who write and speak in ways that help us remember that we're not alone.

If you recognize yourself in this shield, this checklist might help:

Why am I sharing this?

What outcome am I hoping for?

What emotions am I experiencing?

Do my intentions align with my values?

Is there an outcome, response, or lack of a response that will hurt my feelings?

Is this sharing in the service of connection?

Am I genuinely asking the people in my life for what I need?

THE SHIELD: THE SMASH AND GRAB

If floodlighting is about mis*using* vulnerability, the second form of oversharing is all about using vulnerability as a manipulation tool. A smash-and-grab job is where a burglar smashes in a door or a store window and grabs what s/he can; it's sloppy, unplanned, and desperate. The smash and grab used as vulnerability armor is about smashing through people's social boundaries with intimate information, then grabbing whatever attention and energy you can get your hands on. We see this most often in celebrity culture, where sensationalism thrives.

Unfortunately, teachers and school administrators have told me that they see this same smash-and-grab behavior in students as young as middle school kids. Unlike floodlighting, which at least comes from a place of needing confirmation of our worthiness, this purported disclosure of vulnerability feels less real. I haven't interviewed enough people who engage in this behavior to fully understand the motivation, but what's emerged so far is attention seeking. Of course, worthiness issues can and do underpin attention seeking, but in our social media world, it's increasingly difficult to determine what's a real attempt to connect and what's performance. The only thing I do know is that it's *not* vulnerability.

DARING GREATLY: QUESTIONING INTENTIONS

This self-exposure instead feels one-directional, and for those who engage in it an audience appears to be more desirable than intimate connection. If we find ourselves engaging in a smash and grab, I think the reality-check questions are the same as the ones in the section on floodlighting. I think it's also important to ask, "What need is driving this behavior?" and "Am I trying to reach, hurt, or connect with someone specifically, and is this the right way to do it?"

THE SHIELD: SERPENTINING

I'm not someone who typically enjoys slapstick humor or screwball comedies. I much prefer a good romantic comedy or one of those painfully slow, character-driven Miramax movies. That makes the movie clip that I'm using as the metaphor for this particular vulnerability protection mechanism seem odd. But honestly, every time I watch this movie, I laugh so hard that my face hurts. Just thinking about it makes me start laughing.

The movie is the 1979 comedy *The In-Laws*, starring Peter Falk and Alan Arkin. On the eve of their children's wedding, dentist Sheldon Kornpett (played by Alan Arkin) meets Vince Ricardo (played by Peter Falk). Sheldon is the bride's father, and Vince is the groom's. Arkin's character is an anxious, regimented, straitlaced dentist. Falk's character is a CIA operative who appears to have gone rogue and who thinks nothing of car chases and shootouts. As you've probably guessed, the lovable but reckless agent drags the unsuspecting dentist into his far-flung misadventures.

The movie is really corny, but Peter Falk is brilliant as the outrageous agent and Alan Arkin is the perfect uptight straight

man. My very favorite scene is when Falk tells a terrified Arkin to avoid a flurry of bullets by running in a zigzag pattern. They're totally exposed on an airport runway while being shot at by multiple snipers, and his best advice is "Serpentine, Shel! Serpentine!" At one point, the dentist miraculously makes it to shelter, but then remembers that he didn't serpentine, so he runs back into the line of fire so he can zigzag his way back to cover. I'm totally into this, so I put the two-minute clip on my website. Scroll down to the bottom of the page and you'll see it (http://www.brenebrown.com/videos).

I don't know why it cracks me up, but I laugh out loud every time I see it. Maybe it's the visual of a wild-eyed Peter Falk running back and forth, yelling, "Serpentine!" Maybe it's because I remember watching it with my dad and brother and falling out. To this day if things are getting tense in a family conversation, one of us will nonchalantly say, "Serpentine," and we'll all laugh.

Serpentining is the perfect metaphor for how we spend enormous energy trying to dodge vulnerability when it would take far less effort to face it straight on. The image also conveys how fruitless it is to think of zigzagging in the face of something as expansive and all-consuming as vulnerability.

"Serpentining" means trying to control a situation, backing out of it, pretending it's not happening, or maybe even pretending that you don't care. We use it to dodge conflict, discomfort, possible confrontation, the potential for shame or hurt, and/or criticism (self- or other-inflicted). Serpentining can lead to hiding out, pretending, avoidance, procrastination, rationalizing, blaming, and lying.

I have a tendency to want to serpentine when I feel vulnerable. If I have to make a difficult call, I'll try to script both sides of it, I'll convince myself that I should wait, I'll draft an

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

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 construc-

tive (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

not egomaniacs who took pleasure in cutting down other people; in fact, they were consistently harder on themselves than they were on other people. So their mean-spiritedness wasn't only directed outward, even if they admitted that they often used it to lessen their own self-doubt.

The first sentence of the "daring greatly" quote from Theodore Roosevelt says a lot: "It's not the critic who counts." And for the men and women I interviewed who defined themselves as that critic, the "not counting" was definitely felt. They often struggled with feeling dismissed and invisible in their own lives. Criticizing was a way to be heard. When I asked how they moved from hurtful criticism to constructive criticism and from cynicism to contribution, they described a process that mirrored shame resilience: understanding what triggered their attack, what it means about their own sense of self-worth, talking to people they trust about it, and asking for what they need. Many of these folks had to dig deep about the cool issue. How did being perceived as cool become a driving value and what was the cost of pretending that things didn't matter?

The fear of being vulnerable can unleash cruelty, criticism, and cynicism in all of us. Making sure we take responsibility for what we say is one way that we can check our intentions. Dare greatly and put your name on your posted comments online. If you don't feel comfortable owning it, then don't say it. And if you're reading this and you have control over online sites that allow comments, then you should dare greatly and make users sign in and use real names, and hold the community responsible for creating a respectful environment.

In addition to walking the tightrope, practicing shame resilience, and cultivating a safety-net community that sup-

ports me when I'm feeling attacked or hurt, I've implemented two additional strategies. The first is simple: I only accept and pay attention to feedback from people who are also in the arena. If you're occasionally getting your butt kicked as you respond, and if you're also figuring out how to stay open to feedback without getting pummeled by insults, I'm more likely to pay attention to your thoughts about my work. If, on the other hand, you're not helping, contributing, or wrestling with your own gremlins, I'm not at all interested in your commentary.

The second strategy is also simple. I carry a small sheet of paper in my wallet that has written on it the names of people whose opinions of me matter. To be on that list, you have to love me for my strengths and struggles. You have to know that I'm trying to be Wholehearted, but I still cuss too much, flip people off under the steering wheel, and have both Lawrence Welk and Metallica on my iPod. You have to know and respect that I'm totally uncool. There's a great quote from the movie *Almost Famous* that says, "The only true currency in this bankrupt world is what you share with someone else when you're uncool."

To be on my list, you have to be what I call a "stretch-mark friend"—our connection has been stretched and pulled so much that it's become part of who we are, a second skin, and there are a few scars to prove it. We're totally uncool with each other. I don't think anyone has more than one or two people who qualify for that list. The important thing is not to discount the stretch-mark friends to gain the approval of the strangers who are being mean and nasty or are too cool. Nothing serves as a better reminder of that than the immortal words of my friend Scott Stratten, author of *UnMarketing*: "Don't try to win over the haters; you're not the jackass whisperer."