dare to lead

BRAVE WORK.
TOUGH CONVERSATIONS.
WHOLE HEARTS.

Brené Brown

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The ~~Four~~ Six Myths of Vulnerability

In *Daring Greatly,* I wrote about four myths surrounding vulnerability, but since I've brought the courage-building work into organizations and have been doing it with leaders, the data have spoken, and there are clearly *six* misguided myths that persist across wide variables including gender, age, race, country, ability, and culture.

Myth #1: Vulnerability is weakness.

It used to take me a long time to dispel the myths that surround vulnerability, especially the myth that vulnerability is weakness. But in 2014, standing across from several hundred military special forces soldiers on a base in the Midwest, I decided to stop evangelizing, and I nailed my argument with a single question.

I looked at these brave soldiers and said, "Vulnerability is the emotion that we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. Can you give me a single example of courage that you've witnessed in another soldier or experienced in your own life that did not require experiencing vulnerability?"

Complete silence. Crickets.

Finally, a young man spoke up. He said, "No, ma'am. Three tours. I can't think of a single act of courage that doesn't require managing massive vulnerability."

I've asked that question now a couple of hundred times in meeting rooms across the globe. I've asked fighter pilots and software engineers, teachers and accountants, CIA agents and CEOs, clergy and professional athletes, artists and activists, and not one person has been able to give me an example of courage without vulnerability. The weakness myth simply crumbles under the weight of the data and people's lived experiences of courage.

Myth #2: I don't do vulnerability.

Our daily lives are defined by experiences of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. There is no opting out, but there are two options: You can do vulnerability, or it can do you. Choosing to own our vulnerability and *do it* consciously means learning how to rumble with this emotion and understand how it drives our thinking and behavior so we can stay aligned with our values and live in our integrity. Pretending that we *don't do vulnerability* means letting fear drive our thinking and behavior without our input or even awareness, which almost always leads to acting out or shutting down.

If you don't believe the data, ask someone from your square squad this question: *How do I act when I'm feeling vulnerable?* If you're rumbling with vulnerability from a place of awareness, you won't hear anything you don't know and that you aren't actively addressing. If you subscribe to the idea of terminal uniqueness (everyone in the world *but you*), you will probably be on the receiving end of some tough feedback.

And as much as we'd like to believe that wisdom and experience can replace the need to "do" vulnerability, they don't. If anything, wisdom and experience validate the importance of rumbling with vulnerability. I love this quote by Madeleine L'Engle: "When we were children, we used to think that when we

were grown-up we would no longer be vulnerable. But to grow up is to accept vulnerability."

Myth #3: I can go it alone.

The third myth surrounding vulnerability is "I can go it alone." One line of defense that I encounter is "I don't need to be vulnerable because I don't need anyone." I'm with you. Some days I wish it were true. The problem, however, is that *needing no one* pushes against everything we know about human neurobiology. We are hardwired for connection. From our mirror neurons to language, we are a social species. In the absence of authentic connection, we suffer. And by *authentic* I mean the kind of connection that doesn't require hustling for acceptance and changing who we are to fit in.

I dug deep into the work of the neuroscience researcher John Cacioppo when I was writing *Braving the Wilderness*. He dedicated his career to understanding loneliness, belonging, and connection, and he makes the argument that we don't derive strength from our rugged individualism, but rather from our collective ability to plan, communicate, and work together. Our neural, hormonal, and genetic makeup support interdependence over independence. He explained, "To grow to adulthood as a social species, including humans, is not to become autonomous and solitary, it's to become the one on whom others can depend. Whether we know it or not, our brain and biology have been shaped to favor this outcome." No matter how much we love Whitesnake—and, as many of you know, I do—we really weren't born to walk alone.

Myth #4: You can engineer the uncertainty and discomfort out of vulnerability.

I love working with tech companies and engineers. There is almost always a moment when someone suggests that we should

make vulnerability easier by engineering the uncertainty and emotion right out of it. I've had people recommend everything from a texting app for hard conversations to an algorithm to predict when it's safe to be vulnerable with someone.

As I mentioned in the introduction, what sometimes underpins this urge is how we think about vulnerability and the way we use the word. Many people walk into work every day with one clear task: Engineer the vulnerability and uncertainty out of systems and/or mitigate risk. This is true of everyone from lawyers, who often equate vulnerability with loopholes and liabilities, to engineers and other people who work in operations, security, and technology, who think of vulnerabilities as potential systems failures, to combat soldiers and surgeons, who may literally equate vulnerabilities with death.

When I start talking about engaging with vulnerability and even embracing it, there can be real resistance until I clarify that I'm talking about relational vulnerability, not systemic vulnerability. Several years ago, I was working with a group of rocket scientists (actual ones). During a break an engineer walked up to me and said, "I don't do vulnerability. I can't. And that's a good thing. If I get all vulnerable, shit might fall from the sky. Literally."

I smiled and said, "Tell me about the toughest part of your job. Is it keeping shit from falling from the sky?"

He said, "No. We've created sophisticated systems that control for human error. It's hard work, but not the part I hate the most."

Wait for it.

He thought for a minute and said, "It's leading the team and all the people stuff. I've got a guy who is just not a good fit. His deliverables have been off for a year. I've tried everything. I got really tough this last time, but he almost started crying, so I

wrapped up the meeting. It just didn't feel right. But now it's like I'm going to get in trouble because I'm not even turning in his performance sheets."

I said, "Yeah. That sounds hard. How does it feel?"

His response: "Got it. I'll sit down now."

Those fields in which systemic vulnerability is equated with failure (or worse) are often the ones in which I see people struggling the most for daring leadership skills and, interestingly, the ones in which people, once they understand, are willing to really dig deep and rumble hard. Can you imagine how hard it can be to wrap your brain around the critical role vulnerability plays in leadership when you're rewarded for eliminating vulnerability every day?

Another example of this comes from Canary Wharf—London's financial district—where I spent an afternoon with some very proper bankers who wondered what I was doing there and weren't afraid to ask me directly. They explained that banking is completely compliance driven and there's no place for vulnerability. Neither the frustrated bankers nor the wonderful and forward-thinking learning and development team who invited me expected my answer.

I was honest: "Tomorrow is my last day in London, and I really want to visit James Smith & Sons"—the famous umbrella shop that's been around since the early 1800s—"so let's try to figure out why I'm here, and if we can't, I'm out."

They seemed a little miffed but interested in the deal. So I asked one question: "What's the biggest issue you're facing here and in your industry?"

There was a pause filled with some back-and-forth between people before the self-elected spokesperson shouted out "Ethical decision making."

Bloody hell. I'm not going anywhere.

I took a deep breath and asked, "Has anyone here ever stood up to a team or group of people and said, 'This is outside our values' or 'This is not in line with our ethics'?"

Most people in the room raised a hand.

"And how does that feel?"

The room got quiet. I answered for them. "There's probably not a single act at work that requires more vulnerability than holding people responsible for ethics and values, especially when you're alone in it or there's a lot of money, power, or influence at stake. People will put you down, question your intentions, hate you, and sometimes try to discredit you in the process of protecting themselves. So if you don't 'do' vulnerability, and/or you have a culture that thinks vulnerability is weakness, then it's no wonder that ethical decision making is a problem."

There was nothing but the sound of people getting out pens and journals to take notes and settling into their seats until a woman in the front said, "Sorry about the umbrella shop. You'll have to come back. London is lovely in the spring."

Regardless of how we approach systemic vulnerability, once we try to strip uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure from the relational experience, we bankrupt courage by definition. Again, we know that courage is four skill sets with vulnerability at the center. So the bad news is that there's no app for it, and regardless of what you do and where you work, you're called to be brave in vulnerability even if your job is engineering the vulnerability out of systems.

The good news is that if we can successfully develop the four courage-building skills, starting with how to rumble with vulnerability, we will have the capacity for something deeply human, invaluable to leadership, and unattainable by machines.

Myth #5: Trust comes before vulnerability.

We sometimes do an exercise with groups where we give people sentence stems and they fill out the answers on a Post-it note. An example:

I grew up believing that vulnerability is:

_____.

If the group is big enough to ensure that comments will be anonymous, we stick them up for everyone to read. It's incredibly powerful because, without fail, people are stunned by how similar the answers are. We too often believe that we're the only ones wrestling with some of these issues.

I'll never forget a sticky note that someone shared a couple of years ago. It said, "I grew up believing that vulnerability is: *The first step to betrayal.*"

I was with a group of community leaders and activists, and we spent an hour talking about how so many of us were taught that vulnerability is for suckers. While some of us were raised hearing that explicit message loud and clear, and others learned it through quiet observation, the message was the same: If you're stupid enough to let someone know where you're tender or what you care about the most, it's just a matter of time before someone uses that to hurt you.

These conversations always bring up the chicken-egg debate about trust and vulnerability.

How do I know if I can trust someone enough to be vulnerable?

Can I build trust without ever risking vulnerability?

The research is clear, but not a huge relief for those of us who would prefer a scoring system or failproof trust test. Or that app we just talked about.

We need to trust to be vulnerable, and we need to be vulnerable in order to build trust.

The research participants described trust as a slow-building, iterative, and layered process that happens over time. Both trust-building and rumbling with vulnerability involve risk. That's what makes courage hard and rare. In our work we use the metaphor of **the marble jar.** I first wrote about this in *Daring Greatly,* but I'll tell the story again here.

When my daughter, Ellen, was in third grade, she came home from school one day, closed the door behind her, looked at me, and then literally slid down the front door, buried her face in her hands, and started sobbing.

My response, of course, was, "Oh, my God, Ellen, are you okay? What happened?"

"Something really embarrassing happened at school today, and I shared it with my friends and they promised not to tell anyone, but by the time we got back to class, everyone in my whole class knew."

I could feel the slow rising of my internal Mama Bear. Ellen told me that it had been so bad that Ms. Baucum, her third-grade teacher, took half of the marbles out of the marble jar. In her classroom, there is a big jar for marbles—when the class collectively makes good decisions, they get to put marbles into the jar; when the class collectively makes bad decisions, marbles come out. Ms. Baucum took marbles out because everyone was laughing, apparently at Ellen. I told my daughter how sorry I was, and then she looked at me and said: "I will never trust anyone again in my life."

My heart was breaking with hers. My first thought was, *Damn straight—you trust your mama and that's it. And when you go to college I'm going to get a little apartment right next to the dorm and you can come and talk to me.* An appealing idea at the time. But instead, I put my fears and anger aside and started trying to figure out how to talk to her about trust and connection. As I was searching for the right way to translate my own experiences of trust, and what I was learning about trust from the research, I thought, *Ah, the marble jar. Perfect.*

I told Ellen, "We trust the people who have earned marbles over time in our life. Whenever someone supports you, or is kind to you, or sticks up for you, or honors what you share with them as private, you put marbles in the jar. When people are mean, or disrespectful, or share your secrets, marbles come out. We look for the people who, over time, put marbles in, and in, and in, until you look up one day and they're holding a full jar. Those are the folks you can tell your secrets to. Those are the folks you trust with information that's important to you."

And then I asked her if she had a friend with a full marble jar. "Yes, I've got marble jar friends. Hanna and Lorna are my marble jar friends." And I asked her to tell me how they earn marbles. I was really curious, and I expected her to recount dramatic stories of the girls doing heroic things for her. Instead, she said something that shocked me even more. "Well, I was at the soccer game last weekend, and Hanna looked up and told me that she saw Oma and Opa." Oma and Opa are my mom and stepdad.

I pushed Ellen for more details. "Then what?"

"No, that's it. I gave her a marble."

"Why?"

"Well, not everyone has eight grandparents." My parents are divorced and remarried, and Steve's parents are divorced and re-

married. "I think it's really cool that Hanna remembers all of their names."

She continued, "Well, Lorna is also my marble jar friend because she will do the half-butt sit with me."

My very understandable response: "Lord have mercy, what is that?"

"If I come in too late to the cafeteria and all the tables are full, she'll scoot over and just take half the seat and give me the other half of the seat so I can sit at the friend table." I had to agree with her that a half-butt sit was really great, and certainly deserving of a marble. Perking up, she asked me if I have marble jar friends and how they earn their marbles.

"Well, I think it might be different for grown-ups." But then I thought back to the soccer game that Ellen was referring to. When my parents arrived, my friend Eileen had walked up and said, "Hey, David and Deanne, it's great to see you." And I remember feeling how much it meant to me that Eileen had remembered their names.

I tell you this story because I had always assumed that trust is earned in big moments and through really grand gestures, not the more simple things like a friend remembering small details in your life. Later that night, I called the doctoral students on my team, and we spent five days going through all the research around trust. We started looking into trust-earning behaviors, which enforced what Ellen had taught me after school that day. It turns out that trust is in fact earned in the smallest of moments. It is earned not through heroic deeds, or even highly visible actions, but through paying attention, listening, and gestures of genuine care and connection.

My job as a grounded theory researcher is to figure out what the data say and then jump into the literature to see how my findings fit or don't fit with what other researchers are reporting. Ei-

ther way, the theory that emerges doesn't change, but if there's a conflict—which happens often—the researcher has to acknowledge it. Most quantitative researchers go the other way, looking first at what existing research says and then trying to confirm whether it is true. In my approach, I develop theories based on lived experiences, not existing theories. Only after I capture the participants' experiences do I try to place my theories in the existing research. Grounded theory researchers do it in that order so that our conclusions about the data aren't skewed by existing theories that may or may not reflect real experiences by diverse populations.

The first place I turned to see what was in the existing literature was John Gottman's research, which is based on forty years of studying intimate relationships. For those who are unfamiliar with Gottman's work on marriages, he was able to predict an outcome of divorce with 90 percent accuracy based on responses to a series of questions. His team screened for what he called the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling, and contempt, with contempt being the most damning in a romantic partnership.

In an article on one of my go-to websites, the University of California, Berkeley's "Greater Good" (greatergood.berkeley.edu), Gottman describes trust-building with our partners in a manner totally consistent with what I found in my research. Gottman writes,

> What I've found through research is that trust is built in very small moments, which I call "sliding door" moments, after the movie *Sliding Doors*. In any interaction, there is a possibility of connecting with your partner or turning away from your partner.
>
> Let me give you an example of that from my own relationship. One night, I really wanted to finish a mystery

novel. I thought I knew who the killer was, but I was anxious to find out. At one point in the night, I put the novel on my bedside and walked into the bathroom.

As I passed the mirror, I saw my wife's face in the reflection, and she looked sad, brushing her hair. There was a sliding door moment.

I had a choice. I could sneak out of the bathroom and think, I don't want to deal with her sadness tonight; I want to read my novel. But instead, because I'm a sensitive researcher of relationships, I decided to go into the bathroom. I took the brush from her hand and asked, "What's the matter, baby?" And she told me why she was sad.

Now, at that moment, I was building trust; I was there for her. I was connecting with her rather than choosing to think only about what I wanted. These are the moments, we've discovered, that build trust.

One such moment is not that important, but if you're always choosing to turn away, then trust erodes in a relationship—very gradually, very slowly.

Trust is the stacking and layering of small moments and reciprocal vulnerability over time. Trust and vulnerability grow together, and to betray one is to destroy both.

Myth #6: Vulnerability is disclosure.

Apparently there is a misconception in some circles that I am a proponent of leaders disclosing personal experiences and openly sharing emotions in all cases. I think that notion stems from people having only a peripheral understanding of the key themes of my TEDxHouston talk on vulnerability and the book *Daring Greatly,* combined with the fact that 80 percent of the work I do today is about vulnerability and leadership. It's a bad case of the

2+2=57 craziness that we see in the world today. We all know people (and we've all been the people) who add up a couple of things that we *think* we understand and come to a clear, somewhat interesting, and totally false conclusion. Let's dispel that myth right off the bat with two seemingly conflicting statements:

1. I am not a proponent of oversharing, indiscriminate disclosure as a leadership tool, or vulnerability for vulnerability's sake.
2. There is no daring leadership without vulnerability.

Both of these are true statements.

I know there's a problem when people ask me, "How much should leaders share with their colleagues or employees?" Some of the most daring leaders I know have incredible vulnerability rumbling skills and yet disclose very little. I've also worked with leaders who share way more than they should and demonstrate little to no rumbling skills.

During a time of difficult change and uncertainty, daring leaders might sit with their teams and say,

> These changes are coming in hard and fast, and I know there's a lot of anxiety—I'm feeling it too, and it's hard to work through. It's hard not to take it home, it's hard not to worry, and it's easy to want to look for someone to blame. I will share everything I can about the changes with you, as soon as I can.
>
> I want to spend the next forty-five minutes rumbling on how we're all managing the changes. Specifically, *What does support from me look like? What questions can I try to answer? Are there any stories you want to check out with me? And any other questions you have?*

> I'm asking everyone to stay connected and lean into each other during this churn so we can really rumble with what's going on. In the midst of all of this we still need to produce work that makes us proud. Let's each write down one thing we need from this group in order to feel okay sharing and asking questions, and one thing that will get in the way.

This is a great example of rumbling with vulnerability. The leader is naming some of the unsaid emotions and creating what we call a **safe container** by asking the team what they need to feel open and safe in the conversation. This is one of the easiest practices to implement, and the return on the time investment is huge in terms of trust-building and improving the quality of feedback and conversation; yet I rarely see team, project, or group leaders take that time.

Google's five-year study on highly productive teams, Project Aristotle, found that psychological safety—team members feeling safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other—was "far and away the most important of the five dynamics that set successful teams apart." Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson coined the phrase *psychological safety*. In her book *Teaming*, she writes,

> Simply put, psychological safety makes it possible to give tough feedback and have difficult conversations without the need to tiptoe around the truth. In psychologically safe environments, people believe that if they make a mistake others will not penalize or think less of them for it. They also believe that others will not resent or humiliate them when they ask for help or information. This belief comes about when people both trust and respect each other, and

> it produces a sense of confidence that the group won't embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up. Thus psychological safety is a taken-for-granted belief about how others will respond when you ask a question, seek feedback, admit a mistake, or propose a possibly wacky idea. Most people feel a need to "manage" interpersonal risk to retain a good image, especially at work, and especially in the presence of those who formally evaluate them. This need is both instrumental (promotions and rewards may depend on impressions held by bosses and others) and socio-emotional (we simply prefer approval over disapproval).
>
> Psychological safety does not imply a cozy situation in which people are necessarily close friends. Nor does it suggest an absence of pressure or problems.

In our container-building work, the team would review all of the items that they wrote down, then work together to consolidate and match items to come up with some ground rules.

Items that frequently show up as things that get in the way of psychological safety in teams and groups include judgment, unsolicited advice giving, interrupting, and sharing outside the team meeting. The behaviors that people need from their team or group almost always include listening, staying curious, being honest, and keeping confidence. Dare to lead by investing twenty minutes in creating psychological safety when you need to rumble. Make your intention of creating safety explicit and get your team's help on how to do it effectively.

What I also love about this example is how the leader is being honest about the struggle, staying calm while naming the anxiety and how it might be showing up, and giving people the opportunity to ask questions and reality-check the rumor mill. What I really appreciate about this approach is one of my favorite rumble

tools: **"What does support from me look like?"** Not only does it offer the opportunity for clarity and set up the team for success, asking people for specific examples of what supportive behaviors look like—and what they do *not* look like—it also holds them accountable for asking for what they need.

When you put this question into practice, expect to see people struggling to come up with examples of supportive behaviors. We're much more accustomed to not asking for exactly what we need and then being resentful or disappointed that we didn't get it. Also, most of us can tell you what support does *not* look like more easily than we can come up with what it does look like. Over time, this practice is a huge grounded-confidence builder (we'll talk about that concept later).

In this rumble example, the leader is not oversharing or disclosing inappropriately as a mechanism for hotwiring connection or trust with other people. There's also no fake vulnerability. Fake vulnerability can look like a leader telling us that we can ask questions but not taking the time to create the psychological safety to do it, or not offering a pause in the conversation for anyone else to speak at all.

This leader is also not shirking the responsibility of attending to the team's fears and feelings by oversharing and sympathy seeking with statements like "I'm really falling apart too. I don't know what to do either. I'm not the enemy here." Basically, *Feel sorry for me and don't hold me accountable for leading through this hard time because I'm scared too.* Blech.

Not only is fake vulnerability ineffective—but it breeds distrust. There's no faster way to piss off people than to try to manipulate them with vulnerability. Vulnerability is not a personal marketing tool. It's not an oversharing strategy. Rumbling with vulnerability is about leaning into rather than walking away from

the situations that make us feel uncertain, at risk, or emotionally exposed.

We should always be clear about our intention, understand the limits of vulnerability in the context of roles and relationships, and set boundaries. **Boundaries** is a slippery word, but I love how my friend Kelly Rae Roberts makes it simple and powerful. She's an artist, and several years ago she wrote a blog post about how people can and can't use her copyrighted work. The post had two lists: what's okay and what's not okay. It was crystal clear and completely captured what had emerged from the data we collected on effective boundary setting. Today, we teach that **setting boundaries is making clear what's okay and what's not okay, and why.**

Vulnerability minus boundaries is not vulnerability. It's confession, manipulation, desperation, or shock and awe, but it's not vulnerability.

As an example of what vulnerability is not, I sometimes tell the story of a young CEO who was six months into his first round of investment funding. He came up to me after a talk and said, "I get it! I'm in. I'm drinking the Kool-Aid! *I'm gonna get really vulnerable with my people.*"

My first thought was *Oh, man. Here we go.* First, when people talk about "drinking the Kool-Aid," I get skeptical. It's a pretty terrible reference, and if you have to turn off your critical thinking and chug the groupthink juice to be down with an idea or get on board with a plan, I'm already concerned. Second, if you run up to me excited about becoming more vulnerable, you must not really understand the concept. If, on the other hand, you come up to me and say, "Okay. I think I get it and I'm going to try to embrace the suck of vulnerability," I'm pretty sure you understand what's involved.

The conversation started with multiple flags. Not enough for a parade, but close.

I gave him a nervous smile and said **"Say more."** *Another favorite rumble tool.* Asking someone to "say more" often leads to profoundly deeper and more productive rumbling. Context and details matter. Peel the onion. Stephen Covey's sage advice still stands: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."

The excited CEO explained, "I'm just going to tell the investors and my team the truth: I'm completely in over my head, we're bleeding money, and I have no idea what I'm doing."

He paused and looked at me. "What do you think?"

I took his hand and led him to the side of the room, and we sat down. I looked at him and repeated what I had said in the talk, but what he apparently missed: "What do I think? I think you won't secure any more funding and you're going to scare the shit out of some people. Vulnerability without boundaries is not vulnerability. It might be fear or anxiety. We have to think about why we're sharing and, equally important, with whom. *What are their roles? What is our role? Is this sharing productive and appropriate?*"

Before I go any further when I'm telling the story to a group, I always ask the audience this question: *We probably all agree that standing in front of your employees and investors with this confession is not smart. But here's a question for you: If everyone here had a full year's salary invested in this guy's company, how many of you would be hoping he was sitting down across from* someone *saying, "I'm completely in over my head, we're bleeding money, and I have no idea what I'm doing?"*

If there are a thousand people in the room, two or three might nervously raise their hand as they become increasingly aware of being in a tiny minority. The only exception was a room of fifty venture capitalists. They all raised their hand.

I break the tension by raising my hand and explaining my

thinking: "If I've got money invested in his company, I pray that he's sitting down with a mentor or an advisor or a board member and being really honest about what's happening. Why? Because we all know the alternative. He keeps pretending and hustling and grinding on the same ineffective changes until everything is gone."

Now, if I were the guy, I wouldn't stand up in front of all of my investors or my team of friends and colleagues who left great jobs to come work with me to turn my vision into a reality and spill my guts like that—that's not good judgment. When I asked him why he'd share that with them rather than an advisor or mentor who might be able to help without becoming personally panicked, he revealed what I call the **stealth intention** and the **stealth expectation.**

The stealth intention is a self-protection need that lurks beneath the surface and often drives behavior outside our values. Closely related is the stealth expectation—a desire or expectation that exists outside our awareness and typically includes a dangerous combination of fear and magical thinking. Stealth expectations almost always lead to disappointment, resentment, and more fear.

He said, "I'm not sure. I guess I want them to know I'm trying. I want them to know that I'm doing the best I can and I'm a good guy, but I'm failing. If I tell them the truth and get really vulnerable, they won't blame me or hate me. They'll understand."

Stealth intention: I can protect myself from rejection, shame, judgment, and people turning away from me and thinking I'm a bad person.

Stealth expectation: They won't turn away from me and think I'm a bad person.

Trust me when I tell you that stealth intentions and expectations are things I have to wrestle with often in myself, sometimes on a daily basis. I've wanted to shout the same type of thing to my

team for the same reasons, but I've had enough practice to know that vulnerability is not a sympathy-seeking tool. As a leader, he needs to stay honest with his team and investors, *and* this vulnerable conversation needs to happen with someone who can help him lead through it. Sharing just to share without understanding your role, recognizing your professional boundaries, and getting clear on your intentions and expectations (especially those flying under the radar) is just purging or venting or gossip or a million other things that are often propelled by hidden needs.

More than occasionally, I find that the people who misrepresent my work on vulnerability and conflate it with disclosure or emotional purging either don't understand it, or they have so much personal resistance to the notion of being vulnerable that they stretch the concept until it appears ridiculous and easy to discount. In either case, if you come across an explanation of vulnerability that doesn't include setting boundaries or being clear on intentions, proceed with caution. Vulnerability for vulnerability's sake is not effective, useful, or smart.

TO FEEL IS TO BE VULNERABLE

For those of us who were raised with a healthy (or unhealthy) dose of "suck it up and get 'er done," rumbling with vulnerability is a challenge. The myths I outlined above work together to lead us to believe that vulnerability is the gooey center of the hard emotions that we work full time to avoid feeling, much less discussing (even when our avoidance causes us and the people around us pain)—emotions like fear, shame, grief, disappointment, and sadness. But vulnerability isn't just the center of hard emotions, it's the core of all emotions. **To feel is to be vulnerable. Believing that vulnerability is weakness is believing that feeling is weakness.** And, like it or not, we are emotional beings.

What most of us fail to understand, and what took me a de-

cade of research to learn, is that vulnerability is the cradle of the emotions and experiences that we crave. Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, and joy.

We know that vulnerability is the cornerstone of courage-building, but we often fail to realize that without vulnerability there is no creativity or innovation. Why? Because there is nothing more uncertain than the creative process, and there is absolutely no innovation without failure. Show me a culture in which vulnerability is framed as weakness and I'll show you a culture struggling to come up with fresh ideas and new perspectives. I love what Amy Poehler had to say in her web series *Smart Girls: Ask Amy*:

> It's very hard to have ideas. It's very hard to put yourself out there, it's very hard to be vulnerable, but those people who do that are the dreamers, the thinkers, and the creators. They are the magic people of the world.

Adaptability to change, hard conversations, feedback, problem solving, ethical decision making, recognition, resilience, and all of the other skills that underpin daring leadership are born of vulnerability. To foreclose on vulnerability and our emotional life out of fear that the costs will be too high is to walk away from the very thing that gives purpose and meaning to living. As the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio reminds us, "We are not necessarily thinking machines. We are feeling machines that think."

In the next section we'll break down one of my own leadership stories to better understand how fear and feelings left unattended can cause major problems, and we'll explore more rumbling language, skills, tools, and practices.