



# INTRODUCTION: MY ADVENTURES IN THE ARENA

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

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

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

“What does it feel like?”

“Like I’m coming out of my skin. Like I need to fix whatever’s happening and make it better.”

“And if you can’t?”

Then I feel like punching someone in the face.”

“And do you?”

“No. Of course not.”

“So what do you do?”

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

“When do you feel the most vulnerable?”

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

“I see.”

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

“Yes, I believe they can.”

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

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

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

“No.”

“Well, shit. That’s just awesome.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This definition is based on these fundamental ideals:

1. Love and belonging are irreducible needs of all men, women, and children. We're hard-wired for connection—it's what gives purpose

and meaning to our lives. The absence of love, belonging, and connection always leads to suffering.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



ing when you wake up and everything feels fine until the memory of laying yourself open washes over you and you want to hide under the covers? *What did I do? Five hundred people officially think I'm crazy and it totally sucks. I forgot to mention two important things. Did I actually have a slide with the word breakdown on it to reinforce the story that I shouldn't have told in the first place? I must leave town.*

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

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

The way I see it, 2010 was the year of the TEDxHouston talk, and 2011 was the year of *walking the talk*—literally. I crisscrossed the country speaking to groups ranging from Fortune 500 companies, leadership coaches, and the military, to lawyers, parenting groups, and school districts. In 2012, I was invited to give another talk at the main TED conference in Long Beach, California. For me the 2012 talk was my opportunity to share the work that has literally been the foun-

ation and springboard for all of my research—I talked about shame and how we have to understand it and work through it if we really want to dare greatly.

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

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

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

isn't attributed to some combination of parental, teacher, administrative, and/or student disengagement and the clash of competing stakeholders vying to define one purpose.

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

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

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

