

# CHAPTER 2

## DEBUNKING THE VULNERABILITY MYTHS

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

## **MYTH #1: “VULNERABILITY IS WEAKNESS.”**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Here's the crux of the struggle:

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

*Vulnerability is courage in you and inadequacy in me.  
I'm drawn to your vulnerability but repelled by mine.*

As I walked on the stage, I focused my thoughts on Steve, who was sitting in the audience, my sisters back in Texas, and some friends who were watching live from TEDActive—an offsite location. I also drew courage from something that I learned at TED—a very unexpected lesson on failure. The vast majority of folks whom Steve and I met during the three days leading up to my talk spoke openly about failing. It wasn't unusual for someone to tell you about the two or three ventures or inventions that had failed as they explained their work or talked about their passions. I was blown away and inspired.

I took a deep breath and recited my vulnerability prayer as I waited for my turn: *Give me the courage to show up and let myself be seen.* Then, seconds before I was introduced, I thought about a paperweight on my desk that reads, "What would you attempt to do if you knew you could not fail?" I pushed that question out of my head to make room for a new question. As I walked up to the stage, I literally whispered aloud, "What's worth doing even if I fail?"

I honestly don't remember much of what I said, but when it was over I was back knee-deep in the vulnerability hang-over AGAIN! Was the risk worth it? Absolutely. I am passionate about my work and I believe in what I've learned from my research participants. I believe honest conversations about vulnerability and shame can change the world. Both of the talks are flawed and imperfect, but I walked into the arena and gave it my best shot. The willingness to show up changes us. It makes us a little braver each time. And, I'm not sure how one measures the success or failure of a talk, but the minute I was done I knew that even if it flopped or drew criticism, it had been totally worth doing.

In the song “Hallelujah,” Leonard Cohen writes, “Love is not a victory march, it’s a cold and it’s a broken hallelujah.” Love is a form of vulnerability and if you replace the word *love* with *vulnerability* in that line, it’s just as true. From calling a friend who’s experienced a terrible tragedy to starting your own business, from feeling terrified to experiencing liberation, vulnerability is life’s great dare. It’s life asking, “Are you all in? Can you value your own vulnerability as much as you value it in others?” Answering yes to these questions is not weakness: It’s courage beyond measure. It’s daring greatly. And often the result of daring greatly isn’t a victory march as much as it is a quiet sense of freedom mixed with a little battle fatigue.

## MYTH #2: “I DON’T DO VULNERABILITY”

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. To be alive is to be vulnerable.

—Madelaine I’Engle

The definition and examples that you just read make busting the second vulnerability myth a lot easier. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard people say, “Interesting topic, but I don’t do vulnerability.” It’s often buttressed by a gender or professional explanation: “I’m an engineer—we hate vulnerability.” “I’m a lawyer—we eat vulnerability for breakfast.” “Guys don’t do vulnerability.” Trust me, I get it. I’m not a guy or an engineer or a lawyer, but I’ve spoken these exact words a hundred times. Unfortunately, there is no “get out of vulnerability free” card. We can’t opt out of the uncertainty, risk,

and emotional exposure that's woven through our daily experiences. Life is vulnerable.

Look back at the list of examples. These are the challenges of being alive, of being in a relationship, of being connected. Even if we choose to stay out of relationships and opt for disconnection as a form of protection, we're still alive and that means vulnerability happens. When we operate from the belief that we "don't do vulnerability" it's extremely helpful to ask ourselves the following questions. If we truly don't know the answers, we can bravely ask someone with whom we are close—they'll probably have an answer (even if we don't want to hear it):

1. "What do I do when I feel emotionally exposed?"
2. "How do I behave when I'm feeling very uncomfortable and uncertain?"
3. "How willing am I to take emotional risks?"

Before I started doing this work, my honest answers would have been:

1. Scared, angry, judgmental, controlling, perfecting, manufacturing certainty.
2. Scared, angry, judgmental, controlling, perfecting, manufacturing certainty.
3. At work, very unwilling if criticism, judgment, blame, or shame was possible. Taking emotional risks with the people I love was always mired in fear of something bad happening—a total joy killer that we'll explore in the "Armory" chapter.

This questioning process helps because, as you can see from my answers, regardless of our willingness to do vulnerability, *it does us*. When we pretend that we can avoid vulnerability we engage in behaviors that are often inconsistent with who we want to be. Experiencing vulnerability isn't a choice—the only choice we have is how we're going to respond when we are confronted with uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. As a huge fan of the band Rush, this seems like the perfect place to throw in a quote from their song "Freewill": "If you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice."

In Chapter 4 we'll take a closer look at the conscious and unconscious behaviors we use to protect ourselves when we believe we're "not doing vulnerability."

### MYTH #3: VULNERABILITY IS LETTING IT ALL HANG OUT

One line of questioning that I often get is about our "let it all hang out" culture. *Can't there be too much vulnerability? Isn't there such a thing as oversharing?* These questions are inevitably followed by examples from celebrity culture. *What about when Movie Star X tweeted about her husband's suicide attempt? Or what about reality TV stars who share the intimate details of their lives and their children's lives with the world?*

Vulnerability is based on mutuality and requires boundaries and trust. It's not oversharing, it's not purging, it's not indiscriminate disclosure, and it's not celebrity-style social media information dumps. Vulnerability is about sharing our feelings and our experiences with people who have earned the right to hear them. Being vulnerable and open is mutual and an integral part of the trust-building process.

We can't always have guarantees in place before we risk sharing; however, we don't bare our souls the first time we

meet someone. We don't lead with "Hi, my name is Brené, and here's my darkest struggle." That's not vulnerability. That may be desperation or woundedness or even attention-seeking, but it's not vulnerability. Why? Because sharing appropriately, with boundaries, means sharing with people with whom we've developed relationships that can bear the weight of our story. The result of this mutually respectful vulnerability is increased connection, trust, and engagement.

Vulnerability without boundaries leads to disconnection, distrust, and disengagement. In fact, as we'll explore in Chapter 4, "letting it all hang out" or boundaryless disclosure is one way we protect ourselves from real vulnerability. And the TMI (too much information) issue is not even a case of "too much vulnerability"—vulnerability is bankrupt on its own terms when people move from *being* vulnerable to *using* vulnerability to deal with unmet needs, get attention, or engage in the shock-and-awe behaviors that are so commonplace in today's culture.

To more effectively dispel the myth that vulnerability is a secret-sharing-free-for-all, let's examine the issue of trust.

When I talk to groups about the importance of being vulnerable, there's always a flood of questions about the need for trust:

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

"I'll only be vulnerable with someone if I'm sure they won't turn on me."

"How can you tell who's got your back?"

"How do we build trust with people?"

The good news is that the answers to these questions emerged from the data. The bad news is that it's a chicken-or-the-egg issue: We need to feel trust to be vulnerable and we need to be vulnerable in order to trust.

There is no trust test, no scoring system, no green light that tells us that it's safe to let ourselves be seen. The research participants described trust as a slow-building, layered process that happens over time. In our family, we refer to trust as "the Marble Jar."

In the middle of third grade, Ellen had her first experience with betrayal. In many elementary school settings, third grade is a big move. Students are no longer clustered with the K-2 crowd; they're now navigating the Grade 3-5 group. During recess, she had confided in a friend from her class about a funny, slightly embarrassing thing that had happened to her earlier in the day. By lunchtime, all of the girls in her peer group knew her secret and were giving her a hard time. It was an important lesson, but also a painful one, because up to that point she had never considered the possibility that someone would do that.

When she came home, she burst into tears and told me that she was never going to tell anyone anything again. Her feelings were so hurt. Listening, I felt my heart aching for her. To make matters worse, Ellen told me that the girls were still laughing at her when they returned to the classroom, so much so that her teacher separated them and took some marbles out of the marble jar.

Ellen's teacher had a large, clear glass vase that she and the kids referred to as "the marble jar." She kept a bag of colored marbles next to the jar, and whenever the class was collectively making good choices, she would throw some marbles into the jar. Whenever the class was acting out,



breaking rules, or not listening, the teacher would take marbles out of the jar. If and when the marbles made it to the top of the jar, the students would be rewarded with a celebration party.

As much as I wanted to pull Ellen close and whisper, "Not sharing with those girls is a great idea! That way they'll never hurt us you again," 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 to think about her friendships as marble jars. 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. When I asked her if it made sense, she nodded her head with excitement and said, "I've got marble jar friends! I've got marble jar friends!"

When I asked her to tell me about it, she described four friends whom she could always count on, who knew some of her secrets and would never tell, and who told her some of their secrets too. She said, "These are the friends who ask me to sit with them, even if they've been asked to sit at the popular kids' table."

It was such a great moment for both of us. When I asked her how her marble jar friends became marble jar friends, she thought about it for a minute and replied, "I'm not sure. How did your marble jar friends get their marbles?" After thinking about it for a while, we both started blurting out our answers. Some of hers were:

They keep our secrets.

They tell us their secrets.

They remember my birthday!

They know who Oma and Opa are.

They always make sure I'm included in fun things.

They know when I'm sad and ask me why.

When I miss school because I'm sick, they ask their moms to call to check on me.

And mine? Exactly the same (except for me, Oma and Opa are Deanne and David, my mom and stepdad). When my mom comes to Ellen or Charlie's events, it's a great feeling to hear one of my friends say, "Hey, Deanne! Good to see you." I always think, *She remembered my mom's name. She cares. She's paying attention.*

Trust is built one marble at a time.

The chicken-or-the-egg dilemma comes into play when we think about the investment and leap that people in relationships have to make before the building process ever begins. The teacher didn't say, "I'm not buying a jar and marbles until I know that the class can collectively make good choices." The jar was there on the first day of school. In fact, by the end of the first day, she had already filled the bottom with a layer of marbles. The kids didn't say, "We're not going to make good choices because we don't believe you'll put marbles in the jar." They worked hard and enthusiastically engaged with the marble jar idea based on their teacher's word.

One of my favorite scholars in the field of relationships is

John Gottman. He's considered the country's foremost couples researcher because of the power and accessibility of his pioneering work on how we connect and build relationships. His book *The Science of Trust: Emotional Attunement for Couples* is an insightful and wise book on the anatomy of trust and trust building. In an article on the University of California-Berkeley's "Greater Good" website ([www.greatergood.berkeley.edu](http://www.greatergood.berkeley.edu)), Gottman describes trust building with our partners in a manner totally consistent with what I found in my research and what Ellen and I call the marble jar:

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 hair 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.

When we think about betrayal in terms of the marble jar metaphor, most of us think of someone we trust doing something so terrible that it forces us to grab the jar and dump out every single marble. What’s the worst betrayal of trust you can think of? He sleeps with my best friend. She lies about where the money went. He/she chooses someone over me. Someone uses my vulnerability against me (an act of emotional treason that causes most of us to slam the entire jar to the ground rather than just dumping the marbles). All terrible betrayals, definitely, but there is a particular sort of betrayal that is more insidious and equally corrosive to trust.

In fact, this betrayal usually happens long before the other ones. I’m talking about the betrayal of disengagement. Of not caring. Of letting the connection go. Of not being willing to devote time and effort to the relationship. The word *betrayal* evokes experiences of cheating, lying, breaking a confidence, failing to defend us to someone else who’s gossiping about us, and not choosing us over other people. These behaviors are certainly betrayals, but they’re not the only form of betrayal. If I had to choose the form of betrayal that

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### MYTH #4: WE CAN GO IT ALONE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



it never dawned on me that adults could love each other like that; that I could be loved for my vulnerabilities, not despite them.

All of the love and support I received—especially from Steve and Diana, my therapist—allowed me to slowly begin to take more risks, to show up at work and at home in new ways. I took more chances and tried new things, like storytelling. I learned how to set new boundaries and say no, even when I was terrified that I was going to piss off a friend or squander a professional opportunity that I'd regret. *So far, I haven't regretted a single no.*

Going back to Roosevelt's "Man in the Arena" speech, I also learned that the people who love me, the people I really depend on, were never the critics who were pointing at me while I stumbled. They weren't in the bleachers at all. They were with me in the arena. Fighting for me and with me.

Nothing has transformed my life more than realizing that it's a waste of time to evaluate my worthiness by weighing the reaction of the people in the stands. The people who love me and will be there regardless of the outcome are within arm's reach. This realization changed everything. That's the wife and mother and friend that I now strive to be. I want our home to be a place where we can be our bravest selves and our most fearful selves. Where we practice difficult conversations and share our shaming moments from school and work. I want to look at Steve and my kids and say, "I'm with you. In the arena. And when we fail, we'll fail together, while daring greatly." We simply can't learn to be more vulnerable and courageous on our own. Sometimes our first and greatest dare is asking for support.