

and remember what it felt like to drift along in my tube, feeling the warm sun on my skin as I watched dragonflies skip along the water and kicked away perch nibbling at my toes.

THE BIG DOOR PRIZE

Lake Travis was magic for me—the kind of magic you want to share with your own kids. So, when Steve and I were planning our 2012 summer vacation, we decided to rent a house about half an hour from Aunt Lorenia and Uncle Joe's. We were excited because it was the first time we had blocked out such a long stretch for a vacation—we'd be gone for two whole weeks. Lawless one-week vacations are fine, but our family functions better with a few limits in place. So we decided for this vacation that we'd monitor technology with the kids, keep reasonable bedtimes, cook and eat relatively healthy meals, and work out as often as possible. Our siblings and parents were coming to spend time with us over the course of the vacation, so we put everyone on notice about the "healthy vacation" plans. Flurries of emails detailing meal planning and grocery lists ensued.

The rental house was tucked away along a deepwater cove on the lake and had a long stretch of stairs leading down to an old dock with a corrugated tin roof. Steve and I committed to swimming across the cove every day of our vacation. It was about five hundred yards each way. The day before we left, I went out and bought a new Speedo and replaced my goggles. It had been a long time since Steve and I had swum together. Twenty-five years, to be exact. We met when we both were life-

guarding and coaching swimming. While I still swim every week, it's more of a "toning" endeavor for me. Steve, on the other hand, was a competitive swimmer in high school, played club water polo in college, and is still a serious swimmer. I gauge the differences in our current abilities this way: He still does flip turns. I touch and go these days.

Early one morning, before any of our tribe was up, Steve and I headed down to the dock. My sisters and their families were visiting, so we felt comfortable leaving the kids up at the house. We dove in and started our trek across the cove. About halfway across, we both stopped to perform the basic open-water swimming check for boats. As we treaded water and looked for lake traffic, our eyes met. I was overwhelmed by gratitude for the surrounding beauty and the gift of finding myself swimming in my magic lake with the guy I met in the water some twenty-five years ago. Feeling the intense vulnerability that always accompanies deep joy for me, I let my sentiments roam free, tenderly telling Steve, "I'm so glad we decided to do this together. It's beautiful out here." Steve is so much better at putting himself out there that I prepared myself for an equally gushing response. Instead he flashed a noncommittal half smile and replied, "Yeah. Water's good." Then he started swimming again.

We were only about fifteen feet apart. *Didn't he hear me?* I thought. *Maybe he just heard something other than what I said. Maybe my unexpected touchy-feely-ness took him off guard, and he was so overwhelmed with love that he was rendered speechless?* Whatever the case, it was weird and I didn't like it. My emotional reaction was embarrassment, with shame rising.

I reached the rocky shore on the other side a few minutes

after Steve, who'd paused to catch his breath but was already preparing to swim back. We were only a few feet from each other. I took a deep breath and weighed the option of going in *again*. One poetic bid for connection was already outside of my comfort zone—but reaching out again felt really scary and possibly stupid. But I knew Steve would do it. He'd try twenty times, but then he's braver than I am. In his song "Hallelujah," Leonard Cohen writes:

Maybe there's a God above

But all I've ever learned from love

Was how to shoot at someone who outdrew you.

That's how I was raised: Hurt them before they hurt you or, at the very least, as soon as they do. If you go in once and you get hurt, consider yourself schooled. If you go in twice and get hurt, consider yourself a sucker. Love is by far my scariest arena.

I couldn't reconcile the fear I felt, standing there in the lake muck, with the fact that I had just written a book about vulnerability and daring. So I told myself, *Put your heart where your mouth is*. I flashed a smile in hopes of softening him up and doubled down on my bid for connection: "This is so great. I love that we're doing this. I feel so close to you."

He seemed to be looking through me rather than at me when he replied, "Yep. Good swim." Then he took off again. *This is total horseshit*, I thought. *What's going on? I don't know if I'm supposed to feel humiliated or hostile*. I wanted to cry and I wanted to scream. Instead, fueled by anxiety, I took a deep breath and started swimming back across the cove.

I beat Steve back to the dock by a few strokes. I was physically and emotionally exhausted. I was even a little light-headed. Once Steve reached the dock, he went straight to the rickety metal ladder and started pulling himself out of the water.

"Can you get back in the water?" I said to him. It's all I could manage. He stopped climbing and turned his head toward me with both hands still on the ladder. "Get back in the water, please." He lowered himself into the lake.

"What's up?" he asked as we faced each other and treaded water next to the dock.

What's up? I thought. *He wants to know what's up? I have no idea what's up.* All I knew was that I had already scripted the rest of the morning on the swim back, and without an intervention we were headed toward a terrible day. We'd done this fight a thousand times.

We'd climb up onto the dock, dry off, and head to the house. We'd throw our towels over the porch rail, walk into the kitchen, and Steve would say, "What's for breakfast, babe?"

I'd look at him and fire off a sarcastic, "I don't know, *baabe*. Let me ask the breakfast fairy." Then I'd raise my eyes to the ceiling and put my hands on my hips. "Oh, breakfast fairy! What's for breakfast?" And after a sufficiently long dramatic pause, I'd launch into this oldie but goodie: "Gee, Steve. I forgot how vacation works. I forgot that I'm in charge of breakfast. And lunch. And dinner. And laundry. And packing. And goggles. And sunscreen. And bug spray. And groceries. And . . ." Somewhere in the litany, Steve would scrunch up his face and insert a genuinely confused, "Did something happen? Did I miss something?" Then, somewhere between four and twenty-four hours of cold-war maneuvering would unfold.

We could do this argument with our eyes closed. But this was Lake Travis and this was our special vacation. I wanted something different. I looked at him and, rather than launching into blaming, I tried a new approach. "I've been trying to connect with you and you keep blowing me off. I don't get it."

He just stared at me. The water was about thirty feet deep at the dock, and we were treading water the entire time.

So I had to think quick. This was all new to me. In the course of what felt like an hour but was probably thirty seconds, I went back and forth in my head. *Be kind*. No, get him! *Be kind*. No, self-protect; take him down.

Opting for kind and trusting, I relied completely on a technique I had learned from my research, a phrase that emerged in numerous variations over and over again. I said, "I feel like you're blowing me off, and *the story that I'm making up* is either that you looked over at me while I was swimming and thought, *Man, she's getting old. She can't even swim freestyle anymore.* Or you saw me and thought, *She sure as hell doesn't rock a Speedo like she did twenty-five years ago.*"

Steve seemed agitated. He doesn't lash out when he's frustrated, he takes deep breaths, purses his lips, and nods his head. This probably serves him well in his job as a pediatrician, but I know his tells—he was agitated. He turned his back to me, then turned back around before saying, "Shit. You're being vulnerable, right?"

This answer took no time. "Yes. I am. But I'm right on the edge of rage. So what you say matters. A lot." The phrase "the story that I'm making up" may have emerged from the research as an important tool, but this was my first time using it and I felt literally and emotionally out of my depth.

Steve turned away again and back again. And after what seemed like another eternity, he finally said, "I don't want to do this with you. I really don't."

My immediate reaction was panic. *What's going on? What does that mean—I don't want to do this with you? Holy crap. Does that mean he doesn't want to swim with me? Or talk to me?* Then it flashed into my head that maybe the *this* he meant was being married. Time slowed down, and I went into slow-motion, frame-by-frame panic, only to be ripped back to reality when he said, "No. I really don't want to have this conversation with you right now."

I was out of tools and patience. "Too bad. We're having this conversation. Right now. See? I'm talking. Then you're talking. We're having this conversation."

After a few seconds of weird silence and turning away from me in the water, Steve finally faced me and said, "Look, I don't mind hanging out with the kids. I really don't."

What? I was so confused. "What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

Steve explained that he didn't mind taking the kids across the cove on the blow-up rafts. He actually enjoyed pulling them across so they could find "secret treasure," and he loved giving me time to hang out with my sisters.

Completely freaked out at this point, I raised my voice and said, "What are you talking about? What are you saying?"

Steve took a deep breath and, in a voice that was equal parts agitation and resignation, said, "I don't know what you were saying to me today. I have no idea. I was fighting off a total panic attack during that entire swim. I was just trying to stay focused by counting my strokes."

There was silence.

He continued, "Last night I had a dream that I had all five of the kids on the raft, and we were halfway across the cove when a speedboat came hauling toward us. I waved my hands in the air, and they didn't even slow down. I finally grabbed all five of the kids and went as deep as I could go. But, hell, Brené, Ellen and Lorna can swim, but Gabi, Amaya, and Charlie are little, and it's sixty feet deep. I grabbed them off the raft and pulled them as deep as I could go. I held them down there and waited for the boat to pass over us. I knew if we surfaced, we'd be killed. So I waited. But at one point I looked over at Charlie and I could tell he was out of breath. I knew he would drown if we stayed down one more minute. I don't know what you were saying. I was just counting my strokes and trying to get back to the dock."

My heart hurt and my eyes filled with tears. It made sense. We'd arrived at the house on a weekday, when the lake is pretty quiet. Today was Friday, traffic on the lake would double during the weekend, and drunk boaters would be a given. When you grow up around "water people," you hear a lot of stories about boating and skiing accidents caused by drinking, and, tragically, you often know people deeply affected by these events.

"I'm so glad you told me, Steve."

He rolled his eyes. "Bullshit."

Oh my God. Make this conversation stop. Now what? I couldn't believe it. "What are you saying? Of course I'm glad you told me."

Steve shook his head and said, "Look. Don't quote your research to me. Please. Don't tell me what you think you're sup-

posed to say. I know what you want. You want the tough guy. You want the guy who can rescue the kids in the path of a speeding boat by throwing them to the shore and swimming so fast that he's there to catch them before they land. The guy who then looks over at you across the cove and shouts, 'Don't worry, babel I got this!'

He was hurting. I was hurting. We were both tired and at the absolute edge of our vulnerability. We owed each other the truth. I wouldn't quote my research at him, but I've been doing that research long enough to know that as much as we'd love to blame distant or cruel fathers, bullying buddies, and overbearing coaches for the lion's share of shame that men feel, women can be the most fearful about letting men off the white horse and the most likely to be critical of their vulnerability.

I often say, "Show me a woman who can hold space for a man in real fear and vulnerability, and I'll show you a woman who's learned to embrace her own vulnerability and who doesn't derive her power or status from that man. Show me a man who can sit with a woman in real fear and vulnerability and just hear her struggle without trying to fix it or give advice, and I'll show you a man who's comfortable with his own vulnerability and doesn't derive his power from being Oz, the all-knowing and all-powerful."

I reached out and grabbed Steve's hand. "You know what? Ten years ago this story would have scared me. I'm not sure I could have handled it. I might have said the right thing, but a couple of days later, if something triggered it, I might have brought it up in a crappy way, like, 'Are you sure you're feeling up to taking the kids tubing?' I would have screwed up. I would have hurt you and betrayed your trust. I'm sure I have in the

past, and I'm truly sorry. Five years ago I would have been better. I would have understood and been respectful, but probably still fearful. Today? Today I'm so grateful for you and our relationship, I don't want anything or anyone but you. I'm learning how to be afraid. You're the best man I know. Plus, we're all we have. We're the big door prize."

Steve smiled. I was speaking in code, but he knew what I meant. "The big door prize" is a line from one of our favorite songs—"In Spite of Ourselves" by John Prine and Iris DeMent. It's one of our favorite date songs, and the chorus always reminds me of Steve:

In spite of ourselves

We'll end up a-sittin' on a rainbow.

Against all odds,

Honey, we're the big door prize.

We're gonna spite our noses

Right off of our faces.

There won't be nothin' but big old hearts

Dancin' in our eyes.

We climbed up on the dock, dried off, and started up the stairs. Steve snapped me on the butt with his wet towel and smiled. "Just so you know: You still rock a Speedo."

That morning was a turning point in our relationship. There we were, both of us completely engulfed in our shame stories. I was stuck in appearance and body-image fear—the most common shame trigger for women. He was afraid I would think he was weak—the most common shame trigger for men. Both of us were scared to embrace our own vulnerabilities,

even knowing full well that vulnerability is the only path out of the shame storm and back to each other. Somehow we managed to find the courage to trust ourselves and each other, avoiding both the hot sting of words we would never be able to take back and the withheld affection of a cold war. That morning revolutionized how we thought about our marriage. It wasn't a subtle evolution: It forever shifted our relationship. And that was a good thing.

For me, this became a story of great possibility, of what *could be* if our best selves showed up when we were angry or frustrated or hurt. Our fights didn't normally go so well—this was transformative. In fact, it was such a powerful story that I asked Steve what he thought about my using it as an example of the power of vulnerability when I speak in public. He said, “Of course. It really is a pretty amazing story.”

We were able to resurrect some of these skills we learned at the lake in later arguments, but for some reason unknown to me at the time, those subsequent showdowns were never as good or as productive as the one that day. I was convinced that it was the magic of Lake Travis or the majesty of nature itself that made us more gentle and loving with each other. I would eventually learn that there was much more to the story.

YOU CAN'T SKIP DAY TWO

Fast-forward two years, and I find myself on a stage sharing the Lake Travis story with a standing-room-only crowd at Pixar Animation Studios.

1. Early in the swim, I started off by telling myself a version of the story that allowed me to be the victim (and the hero) and that ended with Steve getting paid back when he least expected it.

2. I kept thinking to myself with each stroke, *I'm so pissed, I'm so pissed*. But after a few minutes, I fessed up. I had learned several years before that when I'm planning payback or rehearsing a conversation where I'm being super mean or trying to make someone feel bad, I'm normally not mad, I'm hurt, feeling uncomfortably vulnerable, or feeling shame. I was all three during that swim back. I was hurt that he had pushed me away and feeling shame over why.

3. I then started wrestling with the payback story. I hate that ending of Steve getting his, but it's the one I do best when I'm hurt. The only way I could possibly change the ending was to tell a different story, one where Steve's intentions were not bad. I bombarded myself with questions while I was swimming: *Could I be that generous? Do I have a part in this? Can I trust him? Do I trust myself? What's the most generous assumption that I can make about his response while still acknowledging my own feelings and needs?*

4. The question that was the hardest to answer that day involves the most vulnerable decision I have to make when I'm afraid or angry: What are the consequences of putting down the weapons and taking off the armor? *What if he was hurting me on purpose? What if he's really an insensitive person? If I give him the benefit of the doubt and I'm wrong, I'll be doubly shamed for being rejected and naïve.* Of course, this was the point in the swim when I started worrying about bodies in the water and krakens—the giant squids feared by generations of sailors. I ac-

tually remember thinking that morning about that scene in the second *Pirates of the Caribbean* film when Davy Jones yells, "Release the kraken!" It's no wonder I was light-headed by the time I got back.

5. I remember wishing I could talk to my sisters about this before I screwed it up.

Before I could write and punctuate number six in the growing list in my journal, a second big jolt hit me. Oh my God! Those weren't random questions that I had been trying to answer that morning. These questions were concepts emerging from my ongoing research on overcoming adversity. For a year, I had been telling this story as an example of vulnerability and shame resilience; little did I know that what lay beneath the story—in that murky water—was also the story of rising strong.

When I was writing *Daring Greatly*, I decided not to include what I was learning about overcoming adversity. Not only was it too much to include in a book that was already introducing huge concepts like vulnerability and scarcity, I also didn't fully understand it yet. I knew the elements of shame resilience and the role that vulnerability plays in being brave, but as far as the actual process of rising strong went, I was only clear on the basics. I had yet to sort out the process and label the pieces.

Looking back on how my research played out under the water that summer, I was caught off guard by the applicability of what I was learning about rising strong to smaller everyday situations—like the incident at the lake. I thought I was working on a process for addressing life's major struggles. Like everyone, I know failure and I know heartbreak—I've survived the kind of professional failures and personal heartbreaks that rearrange

REGRET IS A TOUGH

but fair teacher.

TO LIVE WITHOUT REGRET
IS TO BELIEVE YOU HAVE

NOTHING TO LEARN.

*no amends to make, and
NO OPPORTUNITY to be*

BRAVER WITH YOUR LIFE.

Nine
COMPOSTING FAILURE
RUMBLING WITH FEAR, SHAME,
PERFECTIONISM, BLAME, ACCOUNTABILITY,
TRUST, FAILURE, AND REGRET

Andrew is known around his office as a listener, a thinker, an expert in strategy, and the keeper of culture. He's the guy who doesn't say much, but when he does, everyone listens. His point of view is sought by colleagues throughout the successful advertising agency where he's worked for twelve years, especially when it comes to estimating costs and putting together bids for pitches. One colleague said, "Andrew is the reason it all works. His word is gold and everyone trusts him."

Andrew was part of a small group of senior leaders that I met with to discuss early versions of the rising strong process. After we met, Andrew, like Claudia, reached out to me to share what he described as a painful failure at work. I'm grateful that he allowed me to interview him and his two colleagues about his experience. I recognized so much of myself in his story, and I think you might, too.

In most advertising agencies, teams respond to proposals from potential clients by creating pitches that include their creative concepts and the estimated cost of executing them. This is notoriously stressful work, with fierce competition among ad agencies for clients and frequent tension between a company's creative and business teams. The creatives strive to wow the clients, while the business team has to make sure the project nets a profit. One of Andrew's primary responsibilities is overseeing the financial estimates and approving the final budget that accompanies every bid—basically, telling the prospective client, "We can do it for this much money."

Because Andrew has always framed the tension between art and money as necessary and valuable to the process, he is highly respected and liked by both sides of the organization. A colleague from the creative side said, "If Andrew tells me that we need to bring down expenses to make it work, I know he's thought about it, and I know he understands what he's asking me to do. I do it." One of Andrew's direct reports said, "I'm learning from him and I trust him 100 percent. He's one of the most thorough people I know. And he's a straight shooter."

The trust and influence that Andrew has earned over the years have also positioned him as the unofficial watchdog of the company culture. He accepted that there would naturally be tension between colleagues from time to time, but he had little tolerance for gossip, favoritism, and back-channel negotiations. Even in heated arguments, which there were plenty of, he was always up-front, respectful, and appreciative. This set the tone for the entire agency.

When I asked Andrew how he got so good at his job, he said, "There's certainly a skill set when it comes to interpreting

the creative piece and the management piece in terms of time and materials, but the real key is knowing yourself. You have to know where the quicksand is—everyone has their own sinkholes." When I asked Andrew for examples of "sinkholes," he gave me what he thought were the five most common ones:

1. Emotional blinders—I'm so emotionally invested in working with this client that I'm blind to the fact that our bid is too low for the scope of the work.
2. The loss leader—I'm convinced that a big discount on this project, even if we lose money, will lead to future work that will be more profitable and eventually offset this loss.
3. Uncharted territory—I'm going after business in a category I have no experience in. *I don't know what I don't know.*
4. Win at any cost—I'm addicted to the thrill of the win. Another variation: My self-worth is tied to how much business I bring in.
5. Defensive pricing—I have to protect my turf with an existing client by making it difficult for a competitor to match my price, even if we take a loss.

As I wrote these down, I couldn't help but notice their application to everyday life. I told Andrew that I'd never in my life put together a bid, but I'd spent plenty of time in similar sinkholes, like getting sucked in emotionally, living in the future, thinking in the short term, wanting to win, and being defensive. We laughed for a bit before Andrew got more serious and said, "But sometimes the greatest threat is keeping your head down and staying so focused on dodging the sinkholes that you lose sight of where you're going and why." This is his story.

Everyone at Andrew's agency was ecstatic when they were asked to pitch a huge ad campaign for a well-known and influential brand. The proposal was especially exciting because the brand's needs intersected very well with the agency's strengths. The creative team was grateful for the big-budget opportunity to showcase their work and hoped to add the high-profile company to their individual portfolios. The business team saw the tremendous revenue potential in this new strategic partnership. Within hours, the atmosphere in the office was electric. People were calling home to let their families know they'd be spending long hours in the office over the next two weeks. This pitch would require all hands on deck.

Andrew wasn't quite as excited as the rest of the team. Everyone was already stretched thin. They had just the right number of projects in various places on the design and production timeline. Adding another—especially one of this size—could tip the balance. He also had mixed feelings about the client, who had a reputation in the industry for treating partners poorly. One of his good friends, a colleague who worked in a related field, had once described the client as a bully. Andrew was mulling over these concerns when Manuel, a senior member of the creative team, showed up in his office.

"We've got this," Manuel said. "People are psyched about the project, and we can do it." His enthusiasm was contagious, and Andrew didn't want his doubts to squelch the team's passion, so he jumped in. "I know. *We can do this.*" Andrew was generally measured in his responses, but he also liked a challenge and wasn't immune to the growing energy.

For the next couple of weeks, Andrew worked long hours

with the team to develop their pitch for the first round of selection. Managing internal relationships and building team cohesion during that period felt like a full-time job. When people are stretched, their coping skills start to fray. A mere twenty-four hours after Andrew spoke the words *We can do this*, the account manager and the creative director stood in front of him, having it out with each other.

Despite the fatigue and tough group dynamics, the entire agency came together to celebrate when they found out they had made it to the second round of the selection process. The win felt like a balm for the frazzled, emotionally and physically exhausted team.

But Andrew was still worried about the burden the heavy workload was placing on everyone, and he continued to have some nagging concerns about the client's reputation. Still, he was invested now, so he pushed down his uneasiness and joined in the celebration.

The second round of the process required Andrew and the pitch team to fly to the Midwest for a face-to-face meeting with the company's branding team. In Andrew's words, "This is where things went south.

"For almost an hour, I watched our team put heart and soul into explaining our ideas and concepts," he said. "Meanwhile, the entire branding team sat there typing away on their laptops, rarely, if ever, looking up. We're used to some degree of inattention during these meetings, but it was obvious that these side conversations weren't even related to our pitch." Two people on the branding team then asked questions that had been addressed in the presentation, confirming that they

had been too busy emailing or doing whatever it was on their laptops to even pay attention. After a third member of the branding team made an inappropriate and disrespectful comment to the presenter, Andrew told me, "I did nothing."

He looked at me. "Within minutes of that meeting ending, I thought to myself, *I am a screwup. I am a failure. I let them down and they will no longer trust me.* It was absolutely a facedown moment for me. My team had worked sixty-plus hours a week for two months only to be completely dismissed by a group of people I had known, in advance, had the capacity and propensity to do that. Why hadn't I done something to prevent this? How would they ever trust me again?"

Nobody talked much on the car ride to the airport or on the plane ride home. The team members were deflated and angry, and absolutely exhausted. The long hours had taken a toll on their health and their relationships both inside and outside of work. Andrew said, "The only thought in my head during the entire trip back was, *I'm a screwup. I didn't protect my people. I didn't do my job. I'm a screwup. I failed. I've lost their trust.* The tape was on a constant loop in my head.

"When I woke up the next morning, my first thought was, *I'm a failure and a screwup. My second thought was, I need to get out of this. I need to make this work. I need an easy fix. Who else is to blame? Who else was responsible for this mess?* Then it hit me. *I'm hustling. Not only that, I'm underneath a rock. I need to get out from underneath this rock first. I can't make any good decisions from under here.* I thought of your work and realized, *Shit, I know this rock is shame.* I called a friend who is also familiar with your work and told him the story. I told him that I couldn't get past the voice saying *I'm a screwup.* I couldn't get

past how much I had let everyone down, including myself. I couldn't get past losing their trust."

Andrew told me that making that call to his friend was incredibly difficult, but the rising strong talk was still fresh in his mind, and he realized he was in it. He added wryly, "I was willing to give it a shot—desperate times call for desperate measures." His friend's reply was, "I get it. And I think you might have screwed up. But you make a hundred judgment calls every day. Do you think you're going to make the right call every time? Does making a bad call make you a failure?"

He went on to ask Andrew what he would say to someone who worked for him if she had made a similar mistake. Andrew replied automatically, "That's different. Making mistakes is a part of the process."

After hearing himself say that, Andrew sighed. "No mistakes allowed," he said to his friend. "This is my perfectionism talking, isn't it?"

"Maybe so," his friend replied. "That's probably why you called me. This is my stuff, too."

Andrew described the feeling that came over him during that conversation as relief. "It was so helpful to recognize that rock as shame and to make the choice to get out from underneath it. It doesn't mean that what's ahead is going to be easy, but it does mean that I can stop hustling. I can start making decisions that are in line with my values. At this point in my career, I need to know how to own my mistakes and set things right."

When Andrew got to work that day, he was greeted by a team that was still emotionally spent, but also completely unfused. Despite their reading of the pitch meeting as a disaster,

it turned out that they, along with one other agency, had made it to the final round. No one knew how to react. That's when Andrew called a meeting to decide their next move.

"I have to tell you," he said, "when we decided to take on this project, I was so focused on proving that we can do this that I forgot to ask the most important question: Should we do it? We were stretched to the max before we started, and I knew this client was potentially a bad fit for us. It was my job to step back and ask questions, and I didn't. I screwed up. I made a mistake, and I apologize. I hope I can regain your trust."

The room was quiet until Manuel finally responded, "Thank you for saying that. I do trust you. What happens next?"

Andrew told them that given the time everyone had put in, and the money and resources invested by the agency, they needed to decide as a team if they should continue or not. His vote, he said, was to walk away. Manuel seconded Andrew's vote and looked toward Cynthia, the account manager. The tension between Manuel and Cynthia was no secret, and everyone in the room knew that Cynthia could probably tell you, to the penny, what the aggressive pitching process had cost the agency over the past two months. Cynthia leaned forward in her chair and said, "I saw the way they treated Manuel yesterday. I vote *hell no*." The rest of the team agreed, and the vote was unanimous.

In addition to the financial consequences, Andrew knew that fallout was likely in the advertising community. It's highly unusual to get that far in a pitch process and pull out. But this was a risk that he, the team, and the agency's owners were willing to take. During the call to the client explaining

their decision, Andrew did not blame the decision on the poor behavior of the company's branding team, but instead took responsibility for not accurately assessing the fit and timing. Several months later, he received a call from a leader in the company's branding division asking about his team's experience. Andrew had the sense that the brand was trying to understand its growing reputation as a difficult partner. This time he told her more directly what he thought about the culture clash and the behaviors he found to be unprofessional.

Andrew and his colleagues told me that something changed the day they decided not to pursue the pitch. Andrew attributed it to Manuel and Cynthia coming together to protect the team. His colleagues agreed about the power of that moment, but they also said that Andrew's willingness to own his mistake and apologize shifted something in the spirit of the place. The one thing they could say emphatically was that the levels of trust, respect, and pride within the team skyrocketed after that experience. Andrew said, "We worked together. We fell together. We climbed up together. That changes people."

THE RECKONING

Andrew's facedown-in-the-arena moment was very clear to him. It came with the pain and guilt he felt over not intervening as he watched his talented team being treated with disrespect while they were presenting work that was important to them. His curiosity was less about *What is this feeling?* and more about *What am I going to do now?*

THE RUMBLE

Andrew laughed when he told me that he thinks he has the shortest SFD in history—a single three-word sentence: *I'm a screwup*. When I asked him what the rumble had been like to let him get from *I'm a screwup* to *I screwed up*, he said, “I had to take on shame, blame, fear, perfectionism, accountability, trust, and failure, for sure. I can give other people a break, but I'm hard on myself. Self-trust was a big part of it for me.”

Rumbling with Shame and Perfectionism

The difference between shame and guilt lies in the way we talk to ourselves. Shame is a focus on self, while guilt is a focus on behavior. This is not just semantics. There's a huge difference between *I screwed up* (guilt) and *I am a screwup* (shame). The former is acceptance of our imperfect humanity. The latter is basically an indictment of our very existence.

It's always helpful to remember that when perfectionism is driving, shame is riding shotgun. Perfectionism is not healthy striving. It is not asking, *How can I be my best self?* Instead, it's asking, *What will people think?* When looking at our own stories, we can benefit from wondering: *Did something happen in this story that left me feeling like my cover was blown, revealing that I'm really not what I want people to think I am? Did my pretend/please/perfect/perform/prove house of cards come tumbling down?* For those of us who struggle with perfectionism, it's not difficult to find ourselves in a situation similar to Andrew's, one where we look back and think, *I got sucked into proving I could, rather than stepping back and asking if I should—or if I really even wanted to.*

Another one of shame's sidekicks is comparison. I have a picture over my desk of the pool where I swim that reminds me to keep comparison in check. Under the picture I wrote, “Stay in your own lane. Comparison kills creativity and joy.” For me, swimming is the trifecta of health—meditation, therapy, and exercise—but only when I stay in my own lane, focused on my breathing and my stroke. Problems begin when I happen to sync up with the swimmer next to me and we push off the wall at the same time, because I always start comparing and competing. A couple of months ago, I did it to the point where I almost reinjured my rotator cuff. Believe me, comparison sucks the creativity and joy right out of life.

If our story includes shame, perfectionism, or comparison and we're left feeling isolated or “less than,” we need to employ two completely counterintuitive strategies. We need to:

1. Talk to ourselves in the same way we'd talk to someone we love.
 - Yes, you made a mistake. You're human.*
 - You don't have to do it like anyone else does.*
 - Fixing it and making amends will help. Self-loathing will not.*
2. Reach out to someone we trust—a person who has earned the right to hear our story and who has the capacity to respond with empathy.

The second strategy is especially effective because shame can't survive being spoken. It thrives on secrecy, silence, and judgment. If we can share our experience of shame with someone who responds with empathy, shame can't survive. We

share our stories—even our SFDs—to get clear on what we're feeling and what triggered those feelings, allowing us to build a deeper, more meaningful connection with both ourselves and our trusted friends.

Andrew reached out to a friend, shared his struggle, got an empathic response, and was encouraged to give himself the same grace he so willingly offered others. There are a million ways this story could have gone bad, and only one way to turn it around: Address the shame.

Rumbling with Blame and Accountability

In research terms, we think about blame as a form of anger used to discharge discomfort or pain. The shame-blame combo is so common because we're desperate to get out from underneath the pain of shame, and we see blame as a quick fix. If, for example, I suddenly realize that I missed an important conference call earlier, sometimes in a split second I'm discharging that frustration by yelling at my child or my student or my employee. I always say, "When we're in shame, we're not fit for human consumption. And we're especially dangerous around people over whom we have some power."

It doesn't have to be something big—blame works to discharge mild discomfort, too. You're late for work and you can't find that shirt you want to wear, so you yell at your partner for hanging the dry cleaning in the wrong place in the closet. It doesn't have to make sense either. It just has to give us some sense of relief and control. In fact, for most of us who rely on blaming and finding fault, the need for control is so strong that we'd rather have something be *our* fault than succumb to the

bumper-sticker wisdom of "shit happens." If stuff just happens, how do I control that? Fault-finding fools us into believing that someone is always to blame, hence, controlling the outcome is possible. But blame is as corrosive as it is unproductive.

I always know that I need to rumble with blame when there's a kid-self in my SFD waving her arms wildly and saying with righteous fury, "It's all their fault!" Or if I'm looking for the person, unfairness, or annoyance that tripped me up and landed me facedown. In Andrew's case, one of the first thoughts that came to mind when he was hustling under the rock was, *Who's to blame?* I imagine most of us have had the experience of trying to blame and hustle our way out of the pain of *I'm a screwup*.

The difference between accountability and blame is very similar to the difference between guilt and shame. Guilt gets a bad rap, but the emotional discomfort of guilt can be a powerful and healthy motivator for change. Of course, feeling guilty about something over which we have no control or something that isn't our responsibility is not helpful, and more times than not, what we think is guilt is really shame and the fear of not being enough.

Like guilt, accountability is often motivated by wanting to live in alignment with our values. Accountability is holding ourselves or someone else responsible for specific actions and their specific consequences. Blame, on the other hand, is simply a quick, broad-brush way to off-load anger, fear, shame, or discomfort. We think we'll feel better after pointing a finger at someone or something, but nothing changes. Instead, blame kills relationships and organizational cultures. It's toxic. It's also a go-to reaction for many of us.

Accountability is a prerequisite for strong relationships and

cultures. It requires authenticity, action, and the courage to apologize and make amends. Rumbling with accountability is a hard and time-consuming process. It also requires vulnerability. We have to own our feelings and reconcile our behaviors and choices with our values. Andrew demonstrated both vulnerability and courage when he stood in front of his team and said, "I screwed up, and I'm sorry."

Rumbling with Trust

Trust—in ourselves and in others—is often the first casualty in a fall, and stories of shattered trust can render us speechless with hurt or send us into a defensive silence. Maybe someone betrayed us or let us down, or our own judgment led us astray. *How could I have been so stupid and naive? Did I miss the warning signs?* If I've learned anything in my research, it's that trust can't be hot-wired, whether it's between two friends or within a work team; it's grown in a process that takes place over the course of a relationship.

Several of the Daring Way facilitators referred me to Charles Feltman's *The Thin Book of Trust*. While the book focuses on building trust at work, I found Feltman's definitions of *trust* and *distrust* to fit powerfully with my own findings. Feltman describes *trust* as "choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person's actions," and he describes *distrust* as deciding that "what is important to me is not safe with this person in this situation (or any situation)."

When rumbling with our stories about losing trust, we need to be able to identify exactly where the breach lies and to speak to it. As Feltman writes, "It isn't surprising people seldom talk

directly about distrust. If it requires you to use words like 'sneaky, mean, or liar' to tell someone you don't trust him or her, you're probably going to think twice about it." The ability to point to specific behaviors rather than just using the word *trust* can also help us rumble with our stories of falling. The more specific we can be, the more likely it is that we can create change.

In my research, seven elements of trust emerged as useful in both trusting others and trusting ourselves. I came up with an acronym—BRAVING—for the elements. It also serves as a checklist when I'm rumbling with trust issues with the people in my life. As Feltman so wisely suggests, breaking down the attributes of trust into specific behaviors allows us to more clearly identify and address breaches of trust. I love the BRAVING checklist because it reminds me that trusting myself or other people is a vulnerable and courageous process.

Boundaries—You respect my boundaries, and when you're not clear about what's okay and not okay, you ask. You're willing to say no.

Reliability—You do what you say you'll do. At work, this means staying aware of your competencies and limitations so you don't overpromise and are able to deliver on commitments and balance competing priorities.

Accountability—You own your mistakes, apologize, and make amends.

Vault—You don't share information or experiences that are not yours to share. I need to know that my confidences are kept, and that you're not sharing

with me any information about other people that should be confidential.

Integrity—You choose courage over comfort. You choose what is right over what is fun, fast, or easy. And you choose to practice your values rather than simply professing them.

Nonjudgment—I can ask for what I need, and you can ask for what you need. We can talk about how we feel without judgment.

Generosity—You extend the most generous interpretation possible to the intentions, words, and actions of others.

Self-trust is often a casualty of failure. In many of the interviews about professional and personal failure, the research participant would say, “I don’t know if I can trust myself again” or “I’ve lost faith in my own judgment.” If you reread this checklist and change the pronouns, you’ll see that BRAVING also works as a powerful tool for assessing our level of self-trust.

B—Did I respect my own boundaries? Was I clear about what’s okay and what’s not okay?

R—Was I reliable? Did I do what I said I was going to do?

A—Did I hold myself accountable?

V—Did I respect the vault and share appropriately?

I—Did I act from my integrity?

N—Did I ask for what I needed? Was I nonjudgmental about needing help?

G—Was I generous toward myself?

If you hold up Andrew’s choices and behaviors against any one of these elements of trust, you’ll see that mistakes don’t bankrupt trust in the way that violations of personal accountability, integrity, or values can. Trust and mistakes can coexist, and often do, as long as we make amends, stay aligned with our values, and confront shame and blame head-on.

Running with Failure

Part of the tape that was playing on a loop in Andrew’s head was, *I am a failure*. *Failure* is a slippery word because we use it to describe a wide range of experiences—from risky efforts that didn’t pan out or ideas that were never launched to painful, life-altering losses. Whatever the experience, failure feels like a lost opportunity, like something that can’t be redone or undone. Regardless of the context or magnitude, failure brings with it the sense that we’ve lost some of our personal power.

Many of us have a negative, almost stomach-clenching reaction to the word *power*. I think this is because we automatically conflate *power* and *power over*. But the type of power I’m talking about is more in line with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s definition of it: the ability to achieve our purpose and to effect change.

Experiencing failure often leads to feeling powerless simply because we didn’t achieve our purpose and/or effect the change we wanted to see. The connection between failure and powerlessness is important, because all of my years of research lead me to argue that we are most dangerous to ourselves and to the people around us when we feel powerless. Powerlessness leads to fear and desperation. Look behind an act of violence, from

bullying to terrorism, and you will often find a frantic attempt to escape powerlessness.

The feelings of powerlessness that often accompany failure start with those all-too-familiar “could have” or “should have” self-inventories. And our fear grows in tandem with the strength of our belief that an opening has been forever closed. Pervasive feelings of powerlessness eventually lead to despair. My favorite definition of despair comes from author and pastor Rob Bell: Despair is a spiritual condition. It’s the belief that tomorrow will be just like today. My heart stopped when I heard him say this. *Man. I know what it feels like to be under that rock and to believe, with all of my heart, that there’s no way out and that I’ll be in that exact same spot tomorrow.* For me, that feeling is absolutely a spiritual crisis.

In my work, I’ve found that moving out of powerlessness, and even despair, requires hope. Hope is not an emotion. It’s a cognitive process—a thought process made up of what researcher C. R. Snyder called the trilogy of “goals, pathways, and agency.” Hope happens when we can set goals, have the tenacity and perseverance to pursue those goals, and believe in our own abilities to act. Snyder also found that hope is learned. When boundaries, consistency, and support are in place, children learn it from their parents. But even if we didn’t get it as kids, we can still learn hope as adults. It’s just tougher when we’re older because we have to resist and unlearn old habits, like the tendency to give up when things get tough.

Hope is a function of struggle. If we’re never allowed to fall or face adversity as children, we are denied the opportunity to develop the tenacity and sense of agency we need to be hopeful. One of the greatest gifts my parents gave me was hope.

When I fell, failed, or screwed up, they did not run to the rescue. They supported me, but they always expected me to figure it out. They placed high value on grit and moxie, and this has served me well—especially in my career as a writer.

I wrote my first book in 2002. The title was *Hairy Toes and Sexy Rice: Women, Shame, and the Media*. The title was based on two stories from my own life, set twenty-five years apart. The “hairy toes” part was the story of my first experience with shame and body image. When I was eight years old, I found a little peach fuzz on my big toe and spent months quietly scouring the pages of *Seventeen* and *Young Miss* magazines, trying to figure out if I was normal. Nothing. Any close-ups of a model’s feet showed toes that were totally bald. Convinced that I was the only girl in the world with hair on her toes, I did the only two things I could think of: I bought more of the things I saw in the magazine ads, like Noxzema and Bonne Bell lip gloss, and I hid my toes. This is how my love affair with clogs started.

“Sexy rice” referred to a television commercial popular between 1999 and 2000. Once, after a long day of teaching, I was looking forward to a little alone time before Steve and my then one-year-old daughter got home. Once the bra-off, hair-up, TV-on ritual was complete, I sank into the couch and was contemplating what to fix for dinner when something on the television caught my eye. A beautiful woman in a silk teddy and a gorgeous, beefy guy were panting, groping each other, and sliding down the front of a Sub-Zero refrigerator. Every couple of seconds, the lovers would pause to take turns spoon-feeding each other. *Damn, I think that’s rice*, I thought. Finally, in the very last shot, the camera panned to a bowl of rice and a famil-

lar logo appeared on the screen. I rolled my eyes and thought, *That was so stupid.*

Next I started thinking, *Do they think people actually do that? I bet guys would love that—to come home and have dinner spoon-fed to them as they have sex against the fridge.* Then, as the advertising gods intended, I started feeling a little sad about my own mundane dinner plans . . . and the sweats I was wearing . . . and the sandwiches we would probably eat . . . and the half conversations we would have while we played with Ellen . . . and the baby weight that I couldn't lose . . . and the inevitability of falling asleep during the news.

So, I used these experiences to title my first book, about the research I was conducting on women and shame. I spent six months trying to find an agent, at the end of which all I had to show for my efforts was a huge file of impersonal rejection letters. My last hope was a writers' conference in Austin where, for the price of a ticket, I could have a ten-minute audience with a real live editor from New York City. I was scared, excited, and hopeful. My ten-minute meeting was with an editor from a house known for publishing serious nonfiction. I immediately liked the look of him. He had disheveled hair, he was wearing chunky weird glasses, and he seemed a bit tortured. In my mind, those things made him legit. "What do you have for me?" he asked as I sat down.

Surprisingly, I wasn't nervous at all as I started to deliver the lines I had rehearsed for days. He propped his chin on his fist and frowned as I told him about my book. "Do you have anything with you?" he asked. I pulled out a proposal complete with a cover letter addressed to him. He grabbed some pages and began reading. After a few minutes, he told me he

thought I had something important and valuable here, but he hated the title. Then he said, "There's nothing funny about shame. Don't lighten up the subject. Nietzsche said, 'What do you consider the most humane? To spare someone shame. What is the seal of liberation? To no longer be ashamed in front of oneself.' Be serious. You have the credentials."

I started to tell him that I disagreed, that being serious about shame and recognizing the importance of humor and laughter to healing aren't mutually exclusive, but then my time ran out. He quickly gave me the name and number of an agent. As I walked out of the room, his parting words were, "I really hate the humor. I hate the title. No funny stories. Remember Nietzsche!" The door closed behind me.

I was under the rock. Rather than trying to crawl out, I took his advice, changed the title to *Women and Shame*, and got rid of some of my funny stories. I couldn't bear to strip all the laughter out of the book, but looking back, I know now I took out way more than I should have and I wasn't being true to myself. His agent friend turned down my proposal, and over the next year I sent forty more query letters to agents and publishers. All I got in return were form letters that said some version of "As titillating as a book about shame written by an academic sounds, we're not interested." So I borrowed money from my parents, and in 2004 I self-published *Women and Shame*. Self-publishing was relatively new back then, and it was expensive and clunky. I had to store the books myself, and Steve and I did most of the shipping with the help of my friend Charles. I even sold books out of my trunk at events.

One day a faculty colleague stopped me in the elevator and

said, "I read your book. It's really powerful. I'm going to order it and add it to my syllabus. Who is your publisher?"

I stalled for a minute, then said, "I published it myself."

He stepped out of the elevator and, as he held the door open with his hand, turned back to me and said, "I really can't add a vanity-published book to my syllabus."

I couldn't breathe. The weight of that rock literally took my breath away. I immediately pictured myself hawking my book on the corner, wearing one of those coin-changer belts. I was so full of shame that at one very low point, when a woman pulled out her checkbook and asked to whom she should write her check, I actually said, "Make it out to the publisher" as I held up the book and pretended to read the name of the publisher off the spine, as if it wasn't me.

Six months later, though, the book caught on with mental health professionals and began selling like hotcakes. I even convinced a large distributor to help me get it into a few Barnes & Noble stores. Then, on one very magical evening, I met one of my great heroes, the psychologist and author Harriet Lerner. One thing led to the next, and within three months I had an agent and a book deal for *Women and Shame*. I couldn't believe it!

The reworked book was titled *I Thought It Was Just Me*, and it came out in February 2007. Steve and I were psyched, and our parents were ready to hold down the fort and help with the kids while I traveled to media outlets and did the book tour. I maxed out one of our credit cards buying new clothes. I practiced my *Today* show interview every morning in the mirror. It was GO TIME.

Go, go, go.

Now.

It's go time!

Nothing. The phone rang once on publication day. It was the bank informing us that we had overlooked a student loan payment and owed a late fee. I was devastated. The phone didn't ring the next day, or the next. And there I sat, with my closet full of new outfits and a Post-it note I'd named Katie Couric stuck on my bathroom mirror.

In a moment of desperation, I scrambled to put together a book reading in Chicago, where I was already doing a lecture for mental health professionals. It was the coldest February day on record. Five people came to the reading. One woman was drunk, and two of them were there because they thought I was a mystery writer.

Six months after the book came out, I got a call from the publisher asking if I wanted to buy copies at a great low price. At first I was excited. But then I learned that they were offering me the opportunity to buy hundreds of books. "This isn't a good thing, Brené," the publisher said. "Your book is being remaindered. The sales are too low to keep it in our warehouse. That's valuable real estate, and if we're not moving books, they have to go."

"I don't understand," I replied. "What does *remaindered* even mean?" I sat on the floor in my kitchen and listened to him explain the process of moving books from the warehouses to the bargain bins. Any leftover books are sent to the pulping machines.

I'm being composted, I thought. It was a devastating failure for me. Five years of work gone in six months. I felt it all—the powerlessness and the despair and the shame. After I spent

three weeks in shame-fueled blaming of others and berating myself for everything I should and could have done, Steve helped me out from under that rock. As I would learn, the hardest part of coming out from hiding is facing the painful work of rumbling with the real story. And the real story was that I had set myself up for failure.

I swore that if I ever had the opportunity to publish a book again, I'd do it differently. I wasn't going to get dressed up in my new outfit and wait for someone to knock on my door and ask me about my work. I'd put on my shit-kickers and start knocking on doors myself.

I've published four books now, and I still feel scared and exposed and vulnerable as I prepare to share a new idea with the world. I still flinch a little when I turn to my community and say, "I'm trying this, and I would love your support!" But I try to remind myself that, on the flip side, I love it when someone is genuinely excited about his or her work. I've also learned in all of my rumbles that if you don't put value on your work, no one is going to do that for you.

I've rumbled with failure and shame enough over the past decade to know this: You can do everything right. You can cheer yourself on, have all the support you can find in place, and be 100 percent ready to go, and still fail. It happens to writers, artists, entrepreneurs, health professionals, teachers—you name it. But if you can look back during your rumble and see that you didn't hold back—that you were *all in*—you will feel very different than someone who didn't fully show up. You may have to deal with the failure, but you won't have to wrestle with the same level of shame that we experience when our efforts were halfhearted.

And, in addition to assessing the level of our effort, our experience of failure is also shaped by how well we lived out our values: *Were we all in and were we true to ourselves?* When you're rumbling with failure and it's clear that the choices you made along the way were not in alignment with your values, you have to grapple not only with the fallout of failing but also with the feeling that you betrayed yourself. Andrew had to reconcile his decision to push down his concerns and uneasiness about the new project and his choice to stay quiet during the meeting with what he believed in his heart. I had to rumble with the consequence of silencing my instincts on the best ways to approach the topic of shame and to successfully get a book out into the world.

I knew the most effective way for me (maybe not for everyone, but certainly for me) to talk about shame was to use everyday stories—even a few funny or absurd ones, like sexy rice—to illustrate how we fall prey to ridiculous and unattainable messages about perfection. But I took that Nietzsche advice and ran it through my *not good enough* processor until it morphed into, *Grow up. Be serious and stop clowning around.* I also knew how to sell books—coin-changer belt and all. Sadly, at the time a new academic, I ran the “vanity publishing” comment through the same gremlin processor and redefined a *proper and sophisticated author* as one who distanced herself from the unsavory ordeal of promoting and selling the book.

When I look back at these two experiences today, I know that both were potential facedown-in-the-arena moments—ones that if they happened today, I hope would lead me to acknowledge my self-doubt and shame.

I'm grateful for the advice from the editor, but it doesn't mean I need to accept it unquestioningly.

Damn! That vanity-publishing comment was hurtful and probably meant to be shaming, but his view of my efforts doesn't need to dictate how I see myself. But I didn't have the information or experience that I have today, so rather than getting curious about the hurt I was feeling, I silenced my pain by codifying the expert advice. Choosing to place greater value on what the experts thought than on what I was feeling or what I knew about my own work made the composting conversation (which was ultimately my facedown moment) far more painful.

In both instances, I walked away from the two values that guide my life—my faith and my commitment to be brave. My faith calls me to practice love over fear, and in this experience I let fear trample all over self-love. I made every decision with the mindset *What will people think?* rather than *I am enough*. That is as unholly as it gets for me. Courage calls for me to show up and be seen, and in this instance, I literally hid at home and waited for someone else to show up and do the work, including the publisher and the book-buying public. Of all the things I regret from this experience, the biggest one is betraying my own values and being so unkind to myself. But, as you'll see in the next section, I'm a student of regret, and she's a tough but fair teacher whose lessons on empathy and compassion are critical pieces of wholehearted living.

Rumbling with Regret

If there is one thing failure has taught me, it is the value of regret. Regret is one of the most powerful emotional reminders

that change and growth are necessary. In fact, I've come to believe that regret is a kind of package deal: A function of empathy, it's a call to courage and a path toward wisdom. Like all emotions, regret can be used constructively or destructively, but the wholesome dismissal of regret is wrongheaded and dangerous. "No regrets" doesn't mean living with courage, it means living without reflection. To live without regret is to believe you have nothing to learn, no amends to make, and no opportunity to be braver with your life.

A friend of mine who knew I was studying regret in my data sent me a picture of a tough-looking kid who had NO RAGRETS tattooed across his chest. I later found out that the image was from the film *We're the Millers*. It's such a perfect metaphor for what I've learned: If you have no regrets, or you intentionally set out to live without regrets, I think you're missing the very value of regret.

One of the truest things I've ever heard about regret came from George Saunders's 2013 commencement address at Syracuse University. He talked about how when he was a child, a young girl was teased at his school and, although he didn't tease her and even defended her a little, he still thought about it. He said, "So here's something I know to be true, although it's a little corny, and I don't quite know what to do with it.

"What I regret most in my life are failures of kindness.

"Those moments when another human being was there, in front of me, suffering, and I responded . . . sensibly. Reservedly. Mildly."

During a research focus group at West Point, I asked a group of officers, many of whom had lost troop members during

combat, about the word *regret* and how it fit into their combat experiences. One officer said, “I wouldn’t say *regret*. It’s different. I have profound grief about the losses. I made all of the calls to the parents myself. I would trade places with any of my soldiers in a minute if I could. But I can’t. And I’ve been over it one thousand times. I believe I was doing the best I could with the intelligence we had. Do I wish there was a different outcome? Every minute of the day.”

Wondering if maybe he subscribed to the “no regrets” school of thought, I asked if he had any regrets at all. He responded with a story remarkably similar to the one Saunders included in his speech. “Yes. When I was in high school, there was a girl who was different. She had special needs and every now and then she would eat lunch in the cafeteria with us. She had a crush on me and my friends gave me a hard time about it. When she asked to sit with me once, I told her she couldn’t. I deeply regret that. I could have done something different at that moment, and I didn’t. I deeply regret it.”

I believe that what we regret most are our failures of courage, whether it’s the courage to be kinder, to show up, to say how we feel, to set boundaries, to be good to ourselves. For that reason, regret can be the birthplace of empathy. When I think of the times when I wasn’t being kind or generous—when I chose being liked over defending someone or something that deserved defending—I feel deep regret, but I’ve also learned something: Regret is what taught me that living outside of my values is not tenable for me. Regrets about not taking chances have made me braver. Regrets about shaming or blaming people I care about have made me more thought-

ful. Sometimes the most uncomfortable learning is the most powerful.

THE REVOLUTION

In the introduction, I wrote, “People who wade into discomfort and vulnerability and tell the truth about their stories are the real badasses.” I think this is why I appreciate Andrew’s story so much. In my book, he’s a total badass. Here’s a person who didn’t have to own anything—a leader who could have shifted the blame to his own team or to the brand’s disrespectful team. But instead, he had the courage to feel pain, to recognize that he was feeling shame, to reach out and be vulnerable with a friend, to own his part, and to stand in front of his team and be accountable.

The delta between *I am a screwup* and *I screwed up* may look small, but in fact it’s huge. Many of us will spend our entire lives trying to slog through the shame swampland to get to a place where we can give ourselves permission to both be imperfect and to believe we are enough.

While composting may be a terrible fate for a book, it’s a powerful metaphor for failure. Having the courage to own our mistakes, screwups, and failures and to embed the key learnings from these rumbles in our lives, our families, and our organizations yields the exact same results as adding nutrient-rich humus to soil: It brings growth and new vitality. In her book *The Rise*, Sarah Lewis writes, “The word *failure* is imperfect. Once we begin to transform it, it ceases to be that any

longer. The term is always slipping off the edges of our vision, not simply because it's hard to see without wincing, but because once we are ready to talk about it, we often call the event something else—a learning experience, a trial, a reinvention—no longer the static concept of failure.” Failure can become nourishment if we are willing to get curious, show up vulnerable and human, and put rising strong into practice.

THE RUMBLE

To get to the delta and the key learnings, I had to rumble with shame, identity, criticism, and nostalgia. One reason for this is the complexity of shame resilience. In my earlier books, I talk about the four elements of shame resilience that had emerged in my research. Men and women with high levels of shame resilience:

1. Understand shame and recognize what messages and expectations trigger shame for them.
2. Practice critical awareness by reality-checking the messages and expectations that tell us that being imperfect means being inadequate.
3. Reach out and share their stories with people they trust.
4. Speak shame—they use the word *shame*, they talk about how they're feeling, and they ask for what they need.

In the process of reality-checking the messages that fuel shame, we often have to dig into identity, labels, and stereotypes. We also have to explore whether the expectations are rooted, as they often are, in nostalgia or the perilous practice of comparing a current struggle with an edited version of “the way things used to be.”

Rumbling with Identity

I dearly love the state of Texas, but I consider that a harmless perversion on my part, and discuss it only with consenting adults.

—Molly Ivins

A THEORY ON WHOLEHEARTED LIVING

1. Love and belonging are irreducible needs of all men, women, and children. We're hardwired for connection—it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. The absence of love, belonging, and connection always leads to suffering.

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 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, engagement, and a clear sense of purpose.

5. The wholehearted identity vulnerability as the catalyst for courage, engagement, and a clear sense of purpose. 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.

THE GIFTS OF IMPERFECTION— SUMMARY OF KEY LEARNINGS

TEN GUIDEPOSTS FOR WHOLEHEARTED LIVING

1. Cultivating authenticity: letting go of what people think
2. Cultivating self-compassion: letting go of perfectionism
3. Cultivating a resilient spirit: letting go of numbing and powerlessness
4. Cultivating gratitude and joy: letting go of scarcity and fear of the dark
5. Cultivating intuition and trusting faith: letting go of the need for certainty
6. Cultivating creativity: letting go of comparison
7. Cultivating play and rest: letting go of exhaustion as a status symbol and productivity as self-worth
8. Cultivating calm and stillness: letting go of anxiety as a lifestyle
9. Cultivating meaningful work: letting go of self-doubt and “supposed to”
10. Cultivating laughter, song, and dance: letting go of being cool and “always in control”

DEBUNKING THE VULNERABILITY MYTHS

Key Learning: I define vulnerability as exposure, uncertainty, and emotional risk.

Yes, feeling vulnerable is at the core of difficult emotions like fear, grief, and disappointment, but it's also the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, empathy, innovation, and creativity. When we shut ourselves off from vulnerability, we distance ourselves from the experiences that bring purpose and meaning to our lives.

Myth #1: Vulnerability is weakness.

Myth #2: "I don't do vulnerability."

Myth #3: We can go it alone.

Myth #4: Trust comes before vulnerability.

UNDERSTANDING AND COMBATING SHAME

Key Learning: Shame derives its power from being unspeakable. That's why it loves perfectionists—we're so easy to keep quiet. If we cultivate enough awareness about shame to name it and speak to it, we've basically cut it off at the knees. Just the way exposure to light was deadly for the Gremmlins, language and story bring light to shame and destroy it.

DARING GREATLY— SUMMARY OF KEY LEARNINGS

SCARCITY: LOOKING INSIDE OUR CULTURE OF "NEVER ENOUGH"

Key Learning: We're living in a culture of scarcity; a culture of "never enough."

The opposite of "never enough" isn't abundance or "more than you could ever imagine." The opposite of scarcity is enough, or what I call *wholeheartedness*. There are ten guideposts to wholeheartedness, but at its core are vulnerability and worthiness: facing uncertainty, exposure, and emotional risk, and knowing that you are enough.

After doing this work for the past twelve years and watching scarcity ride roughshod over our families, organizations, and communities, I'd say the one thing we all have in common is that we're sick of feeling afraid. We want to dare greatly. We're tired of the national conversation centering on "What should we fear?" and "Who should we blame?" We all want to be brave.

THE ARMORY

Key Learning: 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 people we long to be—we must again be vulnerable. The courage to be vulnerable means taking off the armor we use to protect ourselves, putting down the weapons that we use to keep people at a distance, showing up, and letting ourselves be seen.

MIND THE GAP: CULTIVATING CHANGE AND CLOSING THE DISENGAGEMENT DIVIDE

Key Learning: To reignite creativity, innovation, and learning, we must rehumanize education and work; we need **DISRUPTIVE ENGAGEMENT**.

Rehumanizing work and education requires courageous leadership. Honest conversations about vulnerability and shame are disruptive. The reason that we're not having these conversations in our organizations is that they shine light in the dark corners. Once there is language, awareness, and understanding, turning back is almost impossible and carries with it severe consequences. We all want to dare greatly. If you give us a glimpse into that possibility, we'll hold on to it as our vision. It can't be taken away.

WHOLEHEARTED PARENTING: DARING TO BE THE ADULTS WE WANT OUR CHILDREN TO BE

Key Learning: Who we are and how we engage with the world are much stronger predictors of how our children will do than what we know about parenting. In terms of teaching our children to dare greatly in the “never enough” culture, the question isn't so much “Are you parenting the right way?” as it is “Are you the adult that you want your child to grow up to be?” Our stories of worthiness—of being enough—begin in our first families. The narrative certainly doesn't end there, but what we learn about ourselves and how we learn to engage with the world as children set a course that either will require us to spend a significant part of our lives fighting to reclaim our self-worth or will give us hope, courage, and resilience for our journey.