



Often people attempt to live their lives backwards: they try to have more things, or more money, in order to do more of what they want so that they will be happier. The way it actually works is the reverse. You must first be who you really are, then do what you really need to do, in order to have what you want.

— Margaret Young

Before I started doing my research, I always thought of people as being either authentic or inauthentic. Authenticity was simply a quality that you had or that you were lacking. I think that's the way most of us use the term: "She's a very authentic person." But as I started immersing myself in the research and doing my own personal work, I realized that, like many desirable ways of being, authenticity is not something we have or don't have. It's a practice—a conscious choice of how we want to live.

Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It's about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen.

There are people who consciously practice being authentic, there are people who don't, and there are the rest of us who are authentic on some days and not so authentic on other days. Trust me, even though I know plenty about authenticity and it's something I work toward, if I am full of self-doubt or shame, I can sell myself out and be anybody you need me to be.

The idea that we can choose authenticity makes most of us feel both hopeful and exhausted. We feel hopeful because being real is something we value. Most of us are drawn to warm, down-to-earth, honest people, and we aspire to be like that in our own lives. We feel exhausted because without even giving it too much thought, most of us know that choosing authenticity in a culture that dictates everything from how much we're supposed to weigh to what our houses are supposed to look like is a huge undertaking.

Given the magnitude of the task at hand—be authentic in a culture that wants you to "fit in" and "people-please"—I decided to use my research to develop a definition of authenticity that I could use as a touchstone. What is the anatomy of authenticity? What are the parts that come together to create an authentic self? Here's what I developed:

Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we're supposed to be and embracing who we are.

Choosing authenticity means

- *cultivating the courage to be imperfect, to set boundaries, and to allow ourselves to be vulnerable;*
- *exercising the compassion that comes from knowing that we are all made of strength and struggle; and*
- *nurturing the connection and sense of belonging that can only happen when we believe that we are enough.*

Authenticity demands Wholehearted living and loving—even when it's hard, even when we're wrestling with the shame and fear of not being good enough, and especially when the joy is so intense that we're afraid to let ourselves feel it.

You'll notice that many of the topics from the ten guideposts are woven throughout the definition. That theme will repeat itself throughout this book. All of the guideposts are interconnected and related to each other. My goal is to talk about them individually and collectively. I want us to explore how each of them works on its own and how they fit together. We'll spend the rest of the book unpacking terms like *perfection* so that we can understand why they're so important and what often gets in our way of living a Wholehearted life.

Choosing authenticity is not an easy choice. E. E. Cummings wrote, "To be nobody-but-yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody but yourself—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight—and never stop fighting." "Staying real" is one of the most courageous battles that we'll ever fight.

When we choose to be true to ourselves, the people around us will struggle to make sense of how and why we are changing. Partners and children might feel fearful and unsure about the changes they're seeing. Friends and family may worry about how our authenticity practice will affect them and our relationships with them. Some will find inspiration in our new commitment; others may perceive that we're changing too much—maybe even abandoning them or holding up an uncomfortable mirror.

It's not so much the *act of authenticity* that challenges the status quo—I think of it as the *audacity of authenticity*. Most of us have shame triggers around being perceived as self-indulgent or self-focused. We don't want our authenticity to be perceived as selfish or narcissistic. When I first started mindfully practicing authenticity and worthiness, I felt like every day was a walk through a gauntlet of gremlins. Their voices can be loud and unrelenting:

- • "What if I think I'm enough, but others don't?"
- "What if I let my imperfect self be seen and known, and nobody likes what they see?"
- "What if my friends/family/co-workers like the perfect me better ... you know, the one who takes care of everything and everyone?"

Sometimes, when we push the system, it pushes back. The pushback can be everything from eye rolls and whispers to relationship struggles and feelings of isolation. There can also be cruel and shaming responses to our authentic voices. In my research on authenticity and shame, I found that speaking out is a major shame trigger for women. Here's how the research participants described the struggle to be authentic:

- • Don't make people feel uncomfortable but be honest.
- Don't upset anyone or hurt anyone's feelings but say what's on your mind.
- Sound informed and educated but not like a know-it-all.
- Don't say anything unpopular or controversial but have the courage to disagree with the crowd.

I also found that men and women struggle when their opinions, feelings, and beliefs conflict with our culture's gender expectations. For example, research on the attributes that we associate with "being feminine" tells us that some of the most important qualities for women are thin, nice, and modest.¹ That means if women want to play it totally safe, we have to be willing to stay as small, quiet, and attractive as possible.

When looking at the attributes associated with masculinity, the researchers identified these as

important attributes for men: emotional control, primacy of work, control over women, and pursuit of status.² That means if men want to play it safe, they need to stop feeling, start earning, and give up on meaningful connection.

The thing is ... authenticity isn't always the safe option. Sometimes choosing being real over being liked is all about playing it unsafe. It means stepping out of our comfort zone. And trust me, as someone who has stepped out on many occasions, it's easy to get knocked around when you're wandering through new territory.

It's easy to attack and criticize someone while he or she is risk-taking—voicing an unpopular opinion or sharing a new creation with the world or trying something new that he or she hasn't quite mastered. Cruelty is cheap, easy, and rampant. It's also chicken-shit. Especially when you attack and criticize anonymously—like technology allows so many people to do these days.

As we struggle to be authentic and brave, it's important to remember that cruelty always hurts, even if the criticisms are untrue. When we go against the grain and put ourselves and our work out in the world, some people will feel threatened and they will go after what hurts the most—our appearance, our lovability, and even our parenting.

➔ The problem is that when we don't care at all what people think and we're immune to hurt, we're also ineffective at connecting. Courage is telling our story, not being immune to criticism. Staying vulnerable is a risk we have to take if we want to experience connection.

If you're like me, practicing authenticity can feel like a daunting choice—there's risk involved in putting your true self out in the world. But I believe there's even more risk in hiding yourself and your gifts from the world. Our unexpressed ideas, opinions, and contributions don't just go away. They are likely to fester and eat away at our worthiness. I think we should be born with a warning label similar to the ones that come on cigarette packages: *Caution: If you trade in your authenticity for safety, you may experience the following: anxiety, depression, eating disorders, addiction, rage, blame, resentment, and inexplicable grief.*

Sacrificing who we are for the sake of what other people think just isn't worth it. Yes, there can be authenticity growing pains for the people around us, but in the end, being true to ourselves is the best gift we can give the people we love. When I let go of trying to be everything to everyone, I had much more time, attention, love, and connection for the important people in my life. My authenticity practice can be hard on Steve and the kids—mostly because it requires time, energy, and attention. But the truth is that Steve, Ellen, and Charlie are engaged in the same struggle. We all are.

DIG Deep

Get Deliberate: Whenever I'm faced with a vulnerable situation, I get deliberate with my intentions by repeating this to myself: "Don't shrink. Don't puff up. Stand on your sacred ground." I think there's something deeply spiritual about standing your ground. Saying this little mantra helps me remember not to get small so other people are comfortable and not to throw up my armor as a way to protect myself.

Get Inspired: I'm inspired by everyone who shares their work and opinions with the world. Courage is contagious. My friend Katherine Center says, "You have to be brave with your life so that others can be brave with theirs."³

Get Going: I try to make authenticity my number one goal when I go into a situation where I'm

feeling vulnerable. If authenticity is my goal and I keep it real, I never regret it. I might get my feelings hurt, but I rarely feel shame. When acceptance or approval becomes my goal, and it doesn't work out, that can trigger shame for me: "I'm not good enough." If the goal is authenticity and they don't like me, I'm okay. If the goal is being liked and they don't like me, I'm in trouble. I get going by making authenticity the priority.

How do you DIG Deep?





The thing that is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up on being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself.

— ANNA QUINDLEN¹

One of the best parts of my work is receiving letters and e-mails from readers. In early 2009, I received my one thousandth e-mail from a reader of *I Thought It Was Just Me*. To celebrate, I decided to facilitate an eight-week read-along of the book on my blog. I called it the *Shame.Less Joy.Full* read-along.

Basically, the read-along was a Web-based book club. We covered one chapter per week, and I offered posts, podcasts, discussions, and creative arts exercises along the way. The read-along is now on my blog, and people still use it—reading through the book with a group or friend is so much more powerful.

Just before the read-along started, I received an e-mail that said, “I love the idea of a read-along. I don’t think I have shame issues, but if you ever do something on perfectionism, I’ll be the first in line.” Her sign-off was followed by a short little sentence that read: “PS—shame and perfectionism aren’t related, are they?”

I e-mailed her back and explained the relationship between shame and perfectionism: Where perfectionism exists, shame is always lurking. In fact, shame is the birthplace of perfectionism.

I loved her response: “You might want to talk about that before WE start the read-along. My friends and I know that we struggle with perfectionism, but we don’t claim shame.”

We don’t claim shame. You can’t believe how many times I’ve heard that! I know *shame* is a daunting word. The problem is that when we don’t claim shame, it claims us. And one of the ways it sneaks into our lives is through perfectionism.

As a recovering perfectionist and an aspiring good-enoughist, I’ve found it extremely helpful to bust some of the myths about perfectionism so that we can develop a definition that accurately captures what it is and what it does to our lives.

- *Perfectionism is not the same thing as striving to be your best.* Perfectionism is *not* about healthy achievement and growth. Perfectionism is the belief that if we live perfect, look perfect, and act perfect, we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgment, and shame. *It’s a shield.* Perfectionism is a twenty-ton shield that we lug around thinking it will protect us when, in fact, it’s the thing that’s really preventing us from taking flight.
- *Perfectionism is not self-improvement.* Perfectionism is, at its core, about trying to earn approval

and acceptance. Most perfectionists were raised being praised for achievement and performance (grades, manners, rule-following, people-pleasing, appearance, sports). Somewhere along the way, we adopt this dangerous and debilitating belief system: I am what I accomplish and how well I accomplish it. *Please. Perform. Perfect.* **Healthy striving is self-focused—How can I improve? Perfectionism is other-focused—What will they think?**

Understanding the difference between healthy striving and perfectionism is critical to laying down the shield and picking up your life. Research shows that perfectionism hampers success. In fact, it's often the path to depression, anxiety, addiction, and life-paralysis.² Life-paralysis refers to all of the opportunities we miss because we're too afraid to put anything out in the world that could be imperfect. It's also all of the dreams that we don't follow because of our deep fear of failing, making mistakes, and disappointing others. It's terrifying to risk when you're a perfectionist; your self-worth is on the line.

I put these three insights together to craft a definition of perfectionism (because you know how much I love to get words wrapped around my struggles!). It's long, but man has it helped me! It's also the "most requested" definition on my blog.

- ➔ **Perfectionism is a self-destructive and addictive belief system that fuels this primary thought:** If I look perfect, live perfectly, and do everything perfectly, I can avoid or minimize the painful feelings of shame, judgment, and blame.
- **Perfectionism is self-destructive simply because there is no such thing as perfect.** Perfection is an unattainable goal. Additionally, perfectionism is more about perception—we want to be perceived as
 - perfect. Again, this is unattainable—there is no way to control perception, regardless of how much time and energy we spend trying.
 - **Perfectionism is addictive** because when we invariably do experience shame, judgment, and blame, we often believe it's because we weren't perfect enough. So rather than questioning the faulty logic of perfectionism, we become even more entrenched in our quest to live, look, and do everything just right.
 - **Feeling shamed, judged, and blamed (and the fear of these feelings) are realities of the human experience.** Perfectionism actually increases the odds that we'll experience these painful emotions and often leads to self-blame: It's my fault. I'm feeling this way because "I'm not good enough."

To overcome perfectionism, we need to be able to acknowledge our vulnerabilities to the universal experiences of shame, judgment, and blame; develop shame resilience; and practice self-compassion. When we become more loving and compassionate with ourselves and we begin to practice shame resilience, we can embrace our imperfections. It is in the process of embracing our imperfections that we find our truest gifts: courage, compassion, and connection.

Based on my data, I don't think that some people are perfectionists and others are not. I think perfectionism exists along a continuum. **We all have some perfectionistic tendencies. For some, perfectionism may only emerge when they're feeling particularly vulnerable. For others, perfectionism can be compulsive, chronic, and debilitating, similar to addiction.**

I've started to work on my perfectionism, one messy piece at a time. In doing so, I finally understand (in my bones) the difference between perfectionism and healthy achieving. Exploring our fears and changing our self-talk are two critical steps in overcoming perfectionism.

Here's my example:

Like most women, I struggle with body image, self-confidence, and the always-complicated relationship between food and emotions. Here's the difference between perfectionism diets and healthy goals.

Perfectionism self-talk: "Ugh. Nothing fits. I'm fat and ugly. I'm ashamed of how I look. I need to be different than I am right now to be worthy of love and belonging."

Healthy-striving self-talk: "I want this for me. I want to feel better and be healthier. The scale doesn't dictate if I'm loved and accepted. If I believe that I'm worthy of love and respect now, I will invite courage, compassion, and connection into my life. I want to figure this out for me. I can do this."

For me, the results of this shift were life changing. Perfectionism didn't lead to results. It led to peanut butter.

I've also had to rely on the old "fake it 'til you make it" a few times. I think of it as practicing imperfection. For example, right after I started working on this definition, some friends dropped by our house. My then nine-year-old daughter, Ellen, shouted, "Mom! Don and Julie are at the door!" Our house was trashed, and I could tell by the sound of Ellen's voice that she was thinking, *Oh no! Mom's going to freak.*

I said, "Just a second," as I hurried to get dressed. She ran back to my room and said, "Do you want me to help pick up?"

I said, "No, I'm just getting dressed. I'm so glad they're here. What a nice surprise! Who cares about the house!" Then I put myself in a Serenity Prayer trance.

So, if we want to live and love with our whole hearts, how do we keep perfectionism from sabotaging our efforts? When I interviewed women and men who were engaging with the world from a place of authenticity and worthiness, I realized that they had a lot in common regarding perfectionism.

First, they spoke about their imperfections in a tender and honest way, and without shame and fear. Second, they were slow to judge themselves and others. They appeared to operate from a place of "We're all doing the best we can." Their courage, compassion, and connection seemed rooted in the way they treated themselves. I wasn't quite sure how to capture these attributes, but I assumed that they were separate qualities. That is until two years ago, when I found Dr. Kristin Neff's work on self-compassion. Let's explore the concept of self-compassion and why it's essential to practicing authenticity and embracing imperfection.

Self-Compassion

*A moment of self-compassion can change your entire day.
A string of such moments can change the course of your life.*

— CHRISTOPHER K. GERMER ³

Dr. Kristin Neff is a researcher and professor at the University of Texas at Austin. She runs the Self-Compassion Research Lab, where she studies how we develop and practice self-compassion. According to Neff, self-compassion has three elements: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.⁴ Here are abbreviated definitions for each of these:

- *Self-kindness*: Being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or flagellating ourselves with self-criticism.
- *Common humanity*: Common humanity recognizes that suffering and feelings of personal inadequacy are part of the shared human experience—something we all go through rather than something that happens to "me" alone.
- *Mindfulness*: Taking a balanced approach to negative emotions so that feelings are neither

suppressed nor exaggerated. We cannot ignore our pain and feel compassion for it at the same time. Mindfulness requires that we not “over-identify” with thoughts and feelings, so that we are caught up and swept away by negativity.

One of the many things that I love about Dr. Neff’s work is her definition of *mindfulness*. Many of us think that being mindful means not avoiding painful emotions. **Her definition reminds us that mindfulness also means not over-identifying with or exaggerating our feelings.** I think that’s key for those of us who struggle with perfectionism. I’ll give you the “perfect” example: I recently e-mailed an author to ask if I could quote her work in this book. I included the exact passage that I wanted to include so that she could make an informed choice. She generously said yes, but warned me against using the paragraph in the e-mail because I had misspelled her name.

I went into total perfection paralysis. “Oh my God! I’m writing to ask her if I can quote her and I misspell her name. She probably thinks I’m a total hack. Why was I so sloppy?” It wasn’t a shame attack—I didn’t get sucked under that far—but I also didn’t respond with self-compassion. I came close to being “swept away by negative reactivity.” Luckily, a draft of this chapter was on the table next to me. I looked down at it and smiled. *Be kind to yourself, Brené. This is not a big deal.*

Using this e-mail exchange as an example, you can see how my perfectionism and lack of self-compassion could easily lead to judgment. I think of myself as a sloppy hack because of one tiny mistake. By the same token, when I get an e-mail from someone and there are mistakes, I have a tendency to make sweeping judgments. It gets really dangerous if Ellen comes to me and says, “I just sent my teacher an e-mail, and I accidentally misspelled her name.” Do I say, “What? That’s unacceptable!” or do I say, “I’ve done the same thing—mistakes happen.”

Perfectionism never happens in a vacuum. It touches everyone around us. We pass it down to our children, we infect our workplace with impossible expectations, and it’s suffocating for our friends and families. Thankfully, compassion also spreads quickly. When we’re kind to ourselves, we create a reservoir of compassion that we can extend to others. Our children learn how to be self-compassionate by watching us, and the people around us feel free to be authentic and connected.

DIG Deep

Get Deliberate: One tool that’s helped me get deliberate about my self-compassion is Dr. Neff’s Self-Compassion Scale.⁵ It’s a short test that measures the elements of self-compassion (self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness) and the things that get in the way (self-judgment, isolation, and overidentification). The scale helped me to realize that I do really well in terms of common humanity and mindfulness, but self-kindness needs my constant attention. The Self-Compassion Scale and other wonderful information are available on Dr. Neff’s Web site: www.self-compassion.org.

Get Inspired: Most of us are trying to live an authentic life. Deep down, we want to take off our game face and be real and imperfect. There is a line from Leonard Cohen’s song “Anthem” that serves as a reminder to me when I get into that place where I’m trying to control everything and make it perfect.⁶ The line is, “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” So many of us run around spackling all of the cracks, trying to make everything look just right. This line helps me remember the beauty of the cracks (and the messy house and the imperfect manuscript and the too-tight jeans). It reminds me that our imperfections are not inadequacies; they are reminders that we’re all in this together. Imperfectly, but together.

Get Going: Sometimes it helps me to wake up in the morning and tell myself, “Today, I’m going to believe that showing up is enough.”

How do you DIG Deep?





She could never go back and make some of the details pretty. All she could do was move forward and make the whole beautiful.

— TERRI ST. CLOUD, WWW.BONESIGHARTS.COM¹

Resilience—the ability to overcome adversity—has been a growing topic of study since the early 1970s. In a world plagued by stress and struggle, everyone from psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers to clergy and criminal justice researchers want to know why and how some folks are better at bouncing back from hardship than others. We want to understand why some people can cope with stress and trauma in a way that allows them to move forward in their lives, and why other people appear more affected and stuck.

As I collected and analyzed my data, I recognized that many of the people I interviewed were describing stories of resilience. I heard stories about people cultivating Wholehearted lives despite adversity. I learned about people’s capacities to stay mindful and authentic under great stress and anxiety, and I heard people describe how they were able to transform trauma into Wholehearted thriving.

It wasn’t difficult to recognize these stories as tales of resilience because I was in graduate school during the heyday of resilience research. I knew these narratives were threaded with what we call *protective factors*—the things we do, have, and practice that give us the bounce.

What Makes Up Resilience?

If you look at the current research, here are five of the most common factors of resilient people:

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1. They are resourceful and have good problem-solving skills.
 2. They are more likely to seek help.
 3. They hold the belief that they can do something that will help them to manage their feelings and to cope.
 4. They have social support available to them.
 5. They are connected with others, such as family or friends.²

Of course, there are more factors, depending on the researchers, but these are the big ones.

At first, I hoped the patterns that I observed in my research would lead to a very straightforward conclusion—resilience is a core component of Wholeheartedness—just like the other guideposts. But there was something more to what I was hearing. The stories had more in common than just

resilience; all of these stories were about spirit.

According to the people I interviewed, the very foundation of the “protective factors”—the things that made them bouncy—was their spirituality. By spirituality, I’m not talking about religion or theology, but I am talking about a shared and deeply held belief. Based on the interviews, here’s how I define spirituality:

Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion. Practicing spirituality brings a sense of perspective, meaning, and purpose to our lives.

Without exception, **spirituality—the belief in connection, a power greater than self, and interconnections grounded in love and compassion—emerged as a component of resilience.** Most people spoke of God, but not everyone. Some were occasional churchgoers; others were not. Some worshipped at fishing holes; others in temples, mosques, or at home. Some struggled with the idea of religion; others were devout members of organized religions. The one thing that they all had in common was spirituality as the foundation of their resilience.

From this foundation of spirituality, three other significant patterns emerged as being essential to resilience:

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 1. Cultivating hope
 2. Practicing critical awareness
 3. Letting go of numbing and taking the edge off vulnerability, discomfort, and pain

Let’s take a look at each of these and how they’re connected to resilience and spirit.



Hope and Powerlessness

As a researcher, I can’t think of two words that are more misunderstood than the words *hope* and *power*. As soon as I realized that hope is an important piece of Wholehearted living, I started investigating and found the work of C. R. Snyder, a former researcher at the University of Kansas, Lawrence.³ Like most people, I always thought of hope as an emotion—like a warm feeling of optimism and possibility. I was wrong.

I was shocked to discover that hope is *not* an emotion; it’s a way of thinking or a cognitive process. Emotions play a supporting role, but hope is really a thought process made up of what Snyder calls a trilogy of goals, pathways, and agency.⁴ In very simple terms, hope happens when

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 - We have the ability to set realistic goals (*I know where I want to go*).
 - We are able to figure out how to achieve those goals, including the ability to stay flexible and develop alternative routes (*I know how to get there, I’m persistent, and I can tolerate disappointment and try again*).
 - We believe in ourselves (*I can do this!*).

So, hope is a combination of setting goals, having the tenacity and perseverance to pursue them, and believing in our own abilities.

And, if that’s not news enough, here’s something else: Hope is learned! Snyder suggests that we learn hopeful, goal-directed thinking in the context of other people. Children most often learn hope from their parents. Snyder says that to learn hopefulness, children need relationships that are characterized by boundaries, consistency, and support. I think it’s so empowering to know that I have the ability to teach my children how to hope. It’s not a crapshoot. It’s a conscious choice.

To add to Snyder's work on hope, I found in my research that men and women who self-report as hopeful put considerable value on persistence and hard work. The new cultural belief that everything should be *fun, fast, and easy* is inconsistent with hopeful thinking. It also sets us up for hopelessness. When we experience something that is difficult and requires significant time and effort, we are quick to think, *This is supposed to be easy; it's not worth the effort*, or, *This should be easier: it's only hard and slow because I'm not good at it*. Hopeful self-talk sounds more like, *This is tough, but I can do it*.

On the other hand, for those of us who have the tendency to believe that everything worthwhile should involve pain and suffering (like yours truly), I've also learned that *never fun, fast, and easy* is as detrimental to hope as *always fun, fast, and easy*. Given my abilities to chase down a goal and bulldog it until it surrenders from pure exhaustion, I resented learning this. Before this research I believed that unless blood, sweat, and tears were involved, it must not be that important. I was wrong. Again.

We develop a hopeful mind-set when we understand that some worthy endeavors will be difficult and time consuming and not enjoyable at all. Hope also requires us to understand that just because the process of reaching a goal happens to be *fun, fast, and easy* doesn't mean that it has less value than a difficult goal. If we want to cultivate hopefulness, we have to be willing to be flexible and demonstrate perseverance. Not every goal will look and feel the same. Tolerance for disappointment, determination, and a belief in self are the heart of hope.

As a college professor and researcher, I spend a significant amount of time with teachers and school administrators. Over the past two years I've become increasingly concerned that we're raising children who have little tolerance for disappointment and have a strong sense of entitlement, which is very different than agency. Entitlement is "I deserve this just because I want it" and agency is "I know I can do this." The combination of fear of disappointment, entitlement, and performance pressure is a recipe for hopelessness and self-doubt.

Hopelessness is dangerous because it leads to feelings of powerlessness. Like the word *hope*, we often think of power as negative. It's not. The best definition of *power* comes from Martin Luther King Jr. He described power as the ability to effect change. If we question our need for power, think about this: *How do you feel when you believe that you are powerless to change something in your life?*

Powerlessness is dangerous. For most of us, the inability to effect change is a desperate feeling. We need resilience and hope and a spirit that can carry us through the doubt and fear. We need to believe that we can effect change if we want to live and love with our whole hearts.

Practicing Critical Awareness

Practicing critical awareness is about reality-checking the messages and expectations that drive the "never good enough" gremlins. From the time we wake up to the time our head hits the pillow at night, we are bombarded with messages and expectations about every aspect of our lives. From magazine ads and TV commercials to movies and music, we're told exactly what we should look like, how much we should weigh, how often we should have sex, how we should parent, how we should decorate our houses, and which car we should drive. It's absolutely overwhelming, and, in my opinion, no one is immune. Trying to avoid media messages is like holding your breath to avoid air pollution—it's not going to happen.

It's in our biology to trust what we see with our eyes. This makes living in a carefully edited, overproduced, and Photoshopped world very dangerous. If we want to cultivate a resilient spirit and stop falling prey to comparing our ordinary lives with manufactured images, we need to know how to reality-check what we see. We need to be able to ask and answer these questions:

- ↳ 1. Is what I'm seeing real? Do these images convey real life or fantasy?
2. Do these images reflect healthy, Wholehearted living, or do they turn my life, my body, my family, and my relationships into objects and commodities?
3. Who benefits by my seeing these images and feeling bad about myself? *Hint: This is ALWAYS about money and/or control.*

In addition to being essential to resilience, practicing critical awareness is actually one of the four elements of shame resilience. Shame works like the zoom lens on a camera. When we are feeling shame, the camera is zoomed in tight and all we see is our flawed selves, alone and struggling. We think to ourselves, *I'm the only one with a muffin-top? Am I the only one with a family who is messy, loud, and out of control? Am I the only one not having sex 4.3 times per week (with a Calvin Klein model)? Something is wrong with me. I am alone.*

When we zoom out, we start to see a completely different picture. We see many people in the same struggle. Rather than thinking, *I'm the only one*, we start thinking, *I can't believe it! You too? I'm normal? I thought it was just me!* Once we start to see the big picture, we are better able to reality-check our shame triggers and the messages and expectations that we're never good enough.

In my experiences as a teacher and shame researcher, I have found incredible insight and wisdom in the work of Jean Kilbourne and Jackson Katz. Both Kilbourne and Katz explore the relationship of media images to actual problems in the society, such as violence, the sexual abuse of children, pornography and censorship, masculinity and loneliness, teenage pregnancy, addiction, and eating disorders. Kilbourne writes, "Advertising is an over \$200 billion a year industry. We are each exposed to over 3000 ads a day. Yet, remarkably, most of us believe we are not influenced by advertising. Ads sell a great deal more than products. They sell values, images, and concepts of success and worth, love and sexuality, popularity and normalcy. They tell us who we are and who we should be. Sometimes they sell addictions."⁵ I highly recommend Kilbourne's and Katz's DVDs—they've changed the way I see the world and myself. (Jean Kilbourne's latest DVD is *Killing Us Softly 4*,⁶ and Katz's DVD is titled *Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity*.⁷)

As I mentioned earlier, practicing spirituality brings perspective, meaning, and purpose to our lives. When we allow ourselves to become culturally conditioned to believe that we are not enough and that we don't make enough or have enough, it damages our soul. This is why I think practicing critical awareness and reality-checking is as much about spirituality as it is about critical thinking.

Numbing and Taking the Edge Off

I talked to many research participants who were struggling with worthiness. When we talked about how they dealt with difficult emotions (such as shame, grief, fear, despair, disappointment, and sadness), I heard over and over about the need to numb and take the edge off of feelings that cause vulnerability, discomfort, and pain. Participants described engaging in behaviors that numbed their feelings or helped them to avoid experiencing pain. Some of these participants were fully aware that their behaviors had a numbing effect, while others did not seem to make that connection. **When I interviewed the participants whom I'd describe as living a Wholehearted life about the same topic, they consistently talked about *trying to feel the feelings, staying mindful about numbing behaviors, and trying to lean into the discomfort of hard emotions.***

I knew this was a critically important finding in my research, so I spent several hundred interviews trying to better understand the consequences of numbing and how taking the edge off behaviors is related to addiction. Here's what I learned:

1. Most of us engage in behaviors (consciously or not) that help us to numb and take the edge off vulnerability, pain, and discomfort.
2. Addiction can be described as chronically and compulsively numbing and taking the edge off of feelings.
3. We cannot selectively numb emotions. When we numb the painful emotions, we also numb the positive emotions.

The most powerful emotions that we experience have very sharp points, like the tip of a thorn. When they prick us, they cause discomfort and even pain. Just the anticipation or fear of these feelings can trigger intolerable vulnerability in us. We know it's coming. For many of us, our first response to vulnerability and pain of these sharp points is not to lean into the discomfort and feel our way through but rather to make it go away. We do that by numbing and taking the edge off the pain with whatever provides the quickest relief. We can anesthetize with a whole bunch of stuff, including alcohol, drugs, food, sex, relationships, money, work, caretaking, gambling, staying busy, affairs, chaos, shopping, planning, perfectionism, constant change, and the Internet.

Before conducting this research I thought that numbing and taking the edge off was just about addiction, but I don't believe that anymore. Now I believe that everyone numbs and takes the edge off and that addiction is about engaging in these behaviors compulsively and chronically. The men and women in my study whom I would describe as fully engaged in Wholehearted living were not immune to numbing. The primary difference seemed to be that they were aware of the dangers of numbing and had developed the ability to feel their way through high-vulnerability experiences.

I definitely believe that genetics and neurobiology can play a critical role in addiction, but I also believe that there are countless people out there struggling with numbing and taking the edge off because the disease model of addiction doesn't fit their experiences as closely as a model that takes numbing processes into consideration. Not everyone's addiction is the same.

When I first started my research, I was very familiar with addiction. If you've read *I Thought It Was Just Me*, or if you follow my blog, you probably know that I've been sober for close to fifteen years. I've always been very up front about my experiences, but I haven't written about it in great detail because until I started working through this new research on Wholeheartedness, I didn't really understand it.

Now I get it.

My confusion stemmed from the fact that I never have felt completely in sync with the recovery community. Abstinence and the Twelve Steps are powerful and profoundly important principles in my life, but not everything about the recovery movement fits for me. For example, millions of people owe their lives to the power that comes from saying, "Hi, I'm (name), and I'm an alcoholic." That's never fit for me. Even though I'm grateful for my sobriety, and I'm convinced that it has radically changed my life, saying those words has always felt disempowering and strangely disingenuous for me.

I have often wondered if I felt out of place because I quit so many things at one time. My first sponsor couldn't figure out what meeting I needed and was perplexed by my "very high bottom" (I quit drinking because I wanted to learn more about true self, and my wild party-girl persona kept getting in the way). She looked at me one night and said, "You have the pupu platter of addictions—a little bit of everything. To be safe, it would be best if you just quit drinking, smoking, comfort-eating, and getting in your family's business."

I remember looking at her, throwing my fork on the table, and saying, "Well, that's just awesome. I guess I'll have some free time on my hands for all of the meetings." I never found my meeting. I quit

drinking and smoking the day after I finished my master's degree and made my way through enough meetings to work the Steps and get one year of sobriety under my belt.

Now I know why.

I've spent most of my life trying to outrun vulnerability and uncertainty. I wasn't raised with the skills and emotional practice needed to "lean into discomfort," so over time I basically became a take-the-edge-off-aholic. But they don't have meetings for that. And after some brief experimenting, I learned that describing your addiction that way in a meeting doesn't always go over very well with the purists.

For me, it wasn't just the dance halls, cold beer, and Marlboro Lights of my youth that got out of hand—it was banana bread, chips and queso, e-mail, work, staying busy, incessant worrying, planning, perfectionism, and anything else that could dull those agonizing and anxiety-fueled feelings of vulnerability.

I've had a couple of friends respond to my "I'm a take-the-edge-off-aholic" with concern about their own habits: "I drink a couple of glasses of wine every night—is that bad?" "I always shop when I'm stressed or depressed." "I come out of my skin if I'm not always going and staying busy."

Again, after years of research, I'm convinced that we all numb and take the edge off. The question is, does our _____ (eating, drinking, spending, gambling, saving the world, incessant gossiping, perfectionism, sixty-hour workweek) get in the way of our authenticity? Does it stop us from being emotionally honest and setting boundaries and feeling like we're enough? Does it keep us from staying out of judgment and from feeling connected? Are we using _____ to hide or escape from the reality of our lives?

Understanding my behaviors and feelings through a vulnerability lens rather than strictly through an addiction lens changed my entire life. It also strengthened my commitment to sobriety, abstinence, health, and spirituality. I can definitely say, "Hi. My name is Brené, and today I'd like to deal with vulnerability and uncertainty with an apple fritter, a beer and cigarette, and spending seven hours on Facebook." That feels uncomfortably honest.

When We Numb the Dark, We Numb the Light

In another very unexpected discovery, my research also taught me that there's no such thing as selective emotional numbing. There is a full spectrum of human emotions and when we numb the dark, we numb the light. While I was "taking the edge off" of the pain and vulnerability, I was also unintentionally dulling my experiences of good feelings, like joy. Looking back, I can't imagine any research finding that has changed what my daily life looks like more than this. Now I can lean into joy, even when it makes me feel tender and vulnerable. In fact, I expect tender and vulnerable.

Joy is as thorny and sharp as any of the dark emotions. To love someone fiercely, to believe in something with your whole heart, to celebrate a fleeting moment in time, to fully engage in a life that doesn't come with guarantees—these are risks that involve vulnerability and often pain. When we lose our tolerance for discomfort, we lose joy. In fact, addiction research shows us that an intensely positive experience is as likely to cause relapse as an intensely painful experience.⁸

We can't make a list of all of the "bad" emotions and say, "I'm going to numb these" and then make a list of the positive emotions and say, "I'm going to fully engage in these!" You can imagine the vicious cycle this creates: I don't experience much joy so I have no reservoir to draw from when hard things happen. They feel even more painful, so I numb. I numb so I don't experience joy. And so on.

More on joy is coming in the [next chapter](#). For now, as the sharp edges have started to come back

in my own life, I'm learning that recognizing and leaning into the discomfort of vulnerability teaches us how to live with joy, gratitude, and grace. I'm also learning that the uncomfortable and scary leaning requires both spirit and resilience.

The most difficult thing about what I'm proposing in this chapter is captured by a question that I get a lot (especially from my colleagues in the academic world): Is spirituality a necessary component for resilience? The answer is yes.

Feelings of hopelessness, fear, blame, pain, discomfort, vulnerability, and disconnection sabotage resilience. The only experience that seems broad and fierce enough to combat a list like that is the belief that we're all in this together and that something greater than us has the capacity to bring love and compassion into our lives.

Again, I didn't find that any one interpretation of spirituality has the corner on the resilience market. It's not about denominations or dogma. Practicing spirituality is what brings healing and creates resilience. For me, spirituality is about connecting with God, and I do that most often through nature, community, and music. We all have to define spirituality in a way that inspires us.

Whether we're overcoming adversity, surviving trauma, or dealing with stress and anxiety, having a sense of purpose, meaning, and perspective in our lives allows us to develop understanding and move forward. Without purpose, meaning, and perspective, it is easy to lose hope, numb our emotions, or become overwhelmed by our circumstances. We feel reduced, less capable, and lost in the face of struggle. The heart of spirituality is connection. When we believe in that inextricable connection, we don't feel alone.

DIG Deep

Get Deliberate: A good friend of mine heard this wonderful intention-setting reminder during a Twelve Step meeting. I love it! It's called the vowel check: AEIOUY.

A = Have I been **A**bstinent today? (However you define that—I find it a little more challenging when it comes to things like food, work, and the computer.)

E = Have I **E**xercised today?

I = What have I **I** done for myself today?

O = What have I done for **O**thers today?

U = Am I holding on to **U**nexpressed emotions today?

Y = **Y**eah! What is something good that's happened today?

Get Inspired: I'm inspired by this quote from writer and researcher Elisabeth Kübler-Ross: "People are like stained-glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within." I really do believe the light that I saw within the resilient people I interviewed was their spirit. I love the idea of being "lit from within."

Get Going: I love daily meditations and prayers. Sometimes the best way for me to get going is quiet prayer.

How do you DIG Deep?

