*You can't get to courage without rumbling with vulnerability.*

EMBRACE THE SUCK.

# *introduction*

## BRAVE LEADERS AND COURAGE CULTURES

**I have one deceptively simple and somewhat selfish goal for this book: I desperately want to share everything I've learned with you. I want to take my two decades of research and my experiences inside hundreds of organizations to give you a practical, *no-BS,* actionable book about what it takes to be a daring leader.**

I say "deceptively simple" because the data informing what's presented in this book are the culmination of:

- Interview data collected over the past twenty years
- New research including interviews with 150 global C-level (and sea-level) leaders on the future of leadership
- Program evaluation research from our Brave Leaders Inc. courage-building work
- Data collected during a three-year instrument development study on daring leadership

Coding and making sense of 400,000 pieces of data is already complex, and the more committed I am to translating the data

into actionable, research-based practices, the more painstakingly precise I need to be with the data and the more testing I need to do.

The selfish part of my goal stems from wanting to be a better leader myself. Over the past five years, I've transitioned from research professor to research professor *and* founder and CEO. The first hard and humbling lesson? Regardless of the complexity of the concepts, studying leadership is way easier than leading.

When I think about my personal experiences with leading over the past few years, the only endeavors that have required the same level of self-awareness and equally high-level "comms plans" are being married for twenty-four years and parenting. And that's saying something. I completely underestimated the pull on my emotional bandwidth, the sheer determination it takes to stay calm under pressure, and the weight of continuous problem solving and decision making. Oh, yeah—and the sleepless nights.

My other quasi-selfish goal is this: I want to live in a world with braver, bolder leaders, and I want to be able to pass that kind of world on to my children. **I define a leader as anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes, and who has the courage to develop that potential.** From corporations, nonprofits, and public sector organizations to governments, activist groups, schools, and faith communities, we desperately need more leaders who are committed to courageous, wholehearted leadership and who are self-aware enough to lead from their hearts, rather than unevolved leaders who lead from hurt and fear.

We've got a lot of ground to cover, and I told Steve that I wanted to write a book that would change how the reader thinks about leading, would result in at least one meaningful behavior



change, and could be read cover to cover on one flight. He laughed and asked, "Houston to Singapore?"

He knows that's the longest flight I've ever endured (Moscow was just halfway). I smiled and said, "No. New York to L.A. With a short delay."

## *Brave Leaders and Courage Cultures*

I've always been told, "Write what you need to read." What I need as a leader, and what every leader I've worked with over the past several years has asked for, is a practical playbook for putting the lessons from *Daring Greatly* and *Rising Strong* into action. There are even a few learnings from *Braving the Wilderness* that can help us create a culture of belonging at work. If you've read these books, expect some familiar lessons with new context, stories, tools, and examples related to our work lives. If you haven't read these books—no problem. I'll cover everything you need to know.

The language, tools, and skills described in these chapters require courage and serious practice. Yet they are straightforward and, I believe, accessible and actionable to everyone holding this book. The barriers and obstacles to daring leadership are real and sometimes fierce. But what I've learned from both the research and my own life is that as long as we name them, stay curious, and keep showing up, they don't have the power to stop us from being brave.

We've built a *Dare to Lead* hub on brenebrown.com where you can find resources including a free downloadable workbook for anyone who wants to put this book further into action as you read. I highly recommend it. As we learned from the research we did for *Rising Strong*: **We know that the way to**

**move information from your head to your heart is through your hands.**

There are also leadership book recommendations and role-play videos that you can watch as part of building your own courage skills. The videos won't take the place of putting this work into practice, but they will give you some idea of what it can look like, of where it gets hard, and of how to circle back when you inevitably make a mistake.

Additionally, you'll find a downloadable glossary of the language, tools, and skills that I'm discussing in the book. (Terms included in the glossary are bolded throughout the book.)

## WHAT STANDS IN THE WAY BECOMES THE WAY

We started our interviews with senior leaders with one question: *What, if anything, about the way people are leading today needs to change in order for leaders to be successful in a complex, rapidly changing environment where we're faced with seemingly intractable challenges and an insatiable demand for innovation?*

There was one answer across the interviews: **We need braver leaders and more courageous cultures.**

When we followed up to understand the specific "why" behind the call for braver leadership, the research took a critical turn. There wasn't just one answer. There were close to fifty answers, and many of them weren't intuitively connected to courage. Leaders talked about everything from critical thinking and the ability to synthesize and analyze information to building trust, rethinking educational systems, inspiring innovation, finding common political ground amid growing polarization, making tough decisions, and the importance of empathy and relationship-building in the context of machine learning and artificial intelligence.



We kept peeling the metaphorical onion by asking: *Can you break down the specific skills that you believe underpin brave leadership?*

I was surprised by how much the research participants struggled to answer this question. Just under half of the leaders we interviewed initially talked about courage as a personality trait, not a skill. They typically approached the question about specific skills with a "Well, you either have it or you don't" answer. We stayed curious and kept pushing for observable behaviors: *What does it look like if you have it?*

Just over 80 percent of the leaders, including those who believed that courage is behavioral, couldn't identify the specific skills; however, they could immediately and passionately talk about problematic behaviors and cultural norms that corrode trust and courage. Luckily, the idea of "starting where people are" is a tenet of both grounded theory research and social work, and it's exactly what I do. As much time as I spend trying to understand *the way,* I spend ten times as much researching *what gets in the way.*

For example, I didn't set out to study shame; I wanted to understand connection and empathy. But if you don't understand how shame can unravel connection in a split second, you don't really get connection. I didn't set out to study vulnerability; it just happens to be the big barrier to almost everything we want from our lives, especially courage. As Marcus Aurelius taught us, "What stands in the way becomes the way."

Here are the ten behaviors and cultural issues that leaders identified as getting in our way in organizations across the world:

1. We avoid tough conversations, including giving honest, productive feedback. Some leaders attributed this to a

lack of courage, others to a lack of skills, and, shockingly, more than half talked about a cultural norm of "nice and polite" that's leveraged as an excuse to avoid tough conversations. Whatever the reason, there was saturation across the data that the consequence is a lack of clarity, diminishing trust and engagement, and an increase in problematic behavior, including passive-aggressive behavior, talking behind people's backs, pervasive back-channel communication (or "the meeting after the meeting"), gossip, and the "dirty yes" (when I say yes to your face and then no behind your back).

2. Rather than spending a reasonable amount of time proactively acknowledging and addressing the fears and feelings that show up during change and upheaval, we spend an unreasonable amount of time managing problematic behaviors.
3. Diminishing trust caused by a lack of connection and empathy.
4. Not enough people are taking smart risks or creating and sharing bold ideas to meet changing demands and the insatiable need for innovation. When people are afraid of being put down or ridiculed for trying something and failing, or even for putting forward a radical new idea, the best you can expect is status quo and groupthink.
5. We get stuck and defined by setbacks, disappointments, and failures, so instead of spending resources on clean-up to ensure that consumers, stakeholders, or internal processes are made whole, we are spending too much time and energy reassuring team members who are questioning their contribution and value.



6. Too much shame and blame, not enough accountability and learning.
7. People are opting out of vital conversations about diversity and inclusivity because they fear looking wrong, saying something wrong, or being wrong. Choosing our own comfort over hard conversations is the epitome of privilege, and it corrodes trust and moves us away from meaningful and lasting change.
8. When something goes wrong, individuals and teams are rushing into ineffective or unsustainable solutions rather than staying with problem identification and solving. When we fix the wrong thing for the wrong reason, the same problems continue to surface. It's costly and demoralizing.
9. Organizational values are gauzy and assessed in terms of aspirations rather than actual behaviors that can be taught, measured, and evaluated.
10. Perfectionism and fear are keeping people from learning and growing.

I think most of us can look at this list and quickly recognize not only the challenges in our organizations, but our own internal struggles to show up and lead through discomfort. These may be work behaviors and organizational culture concerns, but what underlies all of them are deeply human issues.

After finding the roadblocks, our job was to identify the specific courage-building skill sets that people need to address these problems. We conducted more interviews, developed instruments, and tested them with MBA and EMBA students enrolled at the Jones Graduate School of Business at Rice University, the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, and the Wharton

School at the University of Pennsylvania. We worked until we found the answers. Then we tested it, improved it, and tested it again. Let's unpack what we learned.

## *The Heart of Daring Leadership*

**1. You can't get to courage without rumbling with vulnerability. Embrace the suck.**

At the heart of daring leadership is a deeply human truth that is rarely acknowledged, especially at work: Courage and fear are not mutually exclusive. Most of us feel brave and afraid at the exact same time. We feel vulnerable. Sometimes all day long. During those "in the arena" moments that Roosevelt described, when we're pulled between our fear and our call to courage, we need shared language, skills, tools, and daily practices that can support us through the rumble.

The word **rumble** has become more than just a weird *West Side Story* way to say, "Let's have a real conversation, even if it's tough." It's become a serious intention and a behavioral cue or reminder.

**A rumble is a discussion, conversation, or meeting defined by a commitment to lean into vulnerability, to stay curious and generous, to stick with the messy middle of problem identification and solving, to take a break and circle back when necessary, to be fearless in owning our parts, and, as psychologist Harriet Lerner teaches, to listen with the same passion with which we want to be heard.** More than anything else, when someone says, "Let's rumble," it cues me to show up with an open heart and mind so we can serve the work and each other, not our egos.

Our research led to a very clear, very hopeful finding: Courage is a collection of four skill sets that can be taught, observed, and measured. The four skill sets are:



**Rumbling with Vulnerability**
**Living into Our Values**
**Braving Trust**
**Learning to Rise**

The foundational skill of courage-building is the willingness and ability to rumble with vulnerability. Without this core skill, the other three skill sets are impossible to put into practice. Consider this carefully: Our ability to be daring leaders will never be greater than our capacity for vulnerability. Once we start to build vulnerability skills, we can start to develop the other skill sets. The goal of this book is to give you language and specifics on the tools, practices, and behaviors that are critical for building the muscle memory for living these concepts.

We've now tested this approach in more than fifty organizations and with approximately ten thousand individuals who are learning these skills on their own or in teams. From the Gates Foundation to Shell, from small family-owned businesses to Fortune 50 companies, to multiple branches of the U.S. military, we have found this process to have significant positive impact, not just on the way leaders show up with their teams, but also on how their teams perform.

**2. Self-awareness and self-love matter. Who we are is how we lead.**

So often we think of courage as an inherent trait; however, it is less about *who* people are, and more about *how* they behave and show up in difficult situations. Fear is the emotion at the center of that list of problematic behaviors and culture issues—it's precisely

what you'd expect to find as the underlying barrier to courage. However, all of the daring leaders we interviewed talked about experiencing many types of fear on a regular basis, which means that *feeling fear* is not the barrier.

The true underlying obstacle to brave leadership is *how we respond* to our fear. The real barrier to daring leadership is our armor—the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that we use to protect ourselves when we aren't willing and able to rumble with vulnerability. While we'll learn tools and build skills in the following chapters, we'll also assess what gets in the way of building courage, especially because we can expect our armor to show up and pose resistance to new ways of doing things and new ways of being. Practicing self-compassion and having patience with ourselves are essential in this process.

**3. Courage is contagious. To scale daring leadership and build courage in teams and organizations, we have to cultivate a culture in which brave work, tough conversations, and whole hearts are the expectation, and armor is not necessary or rewarded.**

If we want people to fully show up, to bring their whole selves including their unarmored, whole hearts—so that we can innovate, solve problems, and serve people—we have to be vigilant about creating a culture in which people feel safe, seen, heard, and respected.

**Daring leaders must care for and be connected to the people they lead.**

The data made clear that care and connection are irreducible requirements for wholehearted, productive relationships between leaders and team members. This means that if we do not have a sense of caring toward someone we lead and/or we don't feel connected to that person, we have two options: Develop the caring and connection or find a leader who's a better fit. There's no shame in this—we've all experienced the kind of disconnection that doesn't get better despite our strongest efforts. Understanding that commitment to care and connection is the minimum threshold, we need real courage to recognize when we can't fully serve the people we lead.



Given the reality of the world we live in today, that means leaders—you and I—must create and hold spaces that rise to a higher standard of behavior than what we experience in the news, on TV, and in the streets. And for many, the culture at work may even need to be better than what they experience in their own home. Sometimes leadership strategies make us better partners and parents.

As I often tell teachers—some of our most important leaders—we can't always ask our students to take off the armor at home, or even on their way to school, because their emotional and physical safety may require self-protection. But what we can do, and what we are ethically called to do, is create a space in our schools and classrooms where all students can walk in and, for that day or hour, take off the crushing weight of their armor, hang it on a rack, and open their heart to truly being seen.

We must be guardians of a space that allows students to breathe and be curious and explore the world and be who they are without suffocation. They deserve one place where they can rumble with vulnerability and their hearts can exhale. And what I know from the research is that we should never underestimate the benefit to a child of having a place to belong—even one—where they can take off their armor. It can and often does change the trajectory of their life.

If the culture in our school, organization, place of worship, or even family requires armor because of issues like racism, classism, sexism, or any manifestation of fear-based leadership, we can't expect wholehearted engagement. Likewise, when our organization rewards armoring behaviors like blaming, shaming, cynicism, perfectionism, and emotional stoicism, we can't expect innovative work. You can't fully grow and contribute behind armor. It takes a massive amount of energy just to carry it around—sometimes it takes *all* of our energy.

The most powerful part of this process for us was seeing a list of behaviors emerge that are not "hardwired." Everything above is teachable, observable, and measurable, whether you're fourteen or forty. For the research participants who were initially convinced that courage is determined by genetic destiny, the interview process alone proved to be a catalyst for change.

One leader told me, "I'm in my late fifties and it wasn't until today that I realized I was taught every single one of these behaviors growing up—by either my parents or my coaches. When I get down to the nitty-gritty, I can almost remember each lesson—how and when I learned it. We could and should be teaching this to everyone." This conversation was an important reminder to me that time can wear down our memories of tough lessons until what was once a difficult learning fades into "This is just who I am as a person."

The skill sets that make up courage are not new; they've been aspirational leadership skills for as long as there have been leaders. Yet we haven't made great progress in developing these skills in leaders, because we don't dig into the humanity of this work—it's too messy. It's much easier to talk about what we want and need than it is to talk about the fears, feelings, and **scarcity** (the belief that there's not enough) that get in the way of achieving all



of it. Basically, and perhaps ironically, we don't have the courage for real talk about courage. But it's time. And if you want to call these "soft skills" after you've tried putting them into practice—go for it. *I dare you.* Until then, find a home for your armor, and I'll see you in the arena.

# part one

## RUMBLING WITH VULNERABILITY

# Courage is contagious.

# section one

## THE MOMENT AND THE MYTHS

**The moment the universe put the Roosevelt quote in front of me, three lessons came into sharp focus. The first one is what I call "the physics of vulnerability." It's pretty simple: If we are brave enough often enough, we will fall. Daring is not saying "I'm willing to risk failure." Daring is saying "I know I will eventually fail, and I'm still *all in*." I've never met a brave person who hasn't known disappointment, failure, even heartbreak.**

Second, the Roosevelt quote captures everything I've learned about vulnerability. **The definition of vulnerability as the emotion that we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure** first emerged in my work two decades ago, and has been validated by every study I've done since, including this research on leadership. Vulnerability is not winning or

losing. It's having the courage to show up when you can't control the outcome.

We've asked thousands of people to describe vulnerability to us over the years, and these are a few of the answers that directly pierce the emotion: the first date after my divorce, talking about race with my team, trying to get pregnant after my second miscarriage, starting my own business, watching my child leave for college, apologizing to a colleague about how I spoke to him in a meeting, sending my son to orchestra practice knowing how badly he wants to make first chair and knowing there's a really good chance he will not make the orchestra at all, waiting for the doctor to call back, giving feedback, getting feedback, getting fired, firing someone.

Across all of our data there's not a shred of empirical evidence that vulnerability is weakness.

Are vulnerable experiences easy? No.

Can they make us feel anxious and uncertain? Yes.

Do they make us want to self-protect? Always.

Does showing up for these experiences with a whole heart and no armor require courage? Absolutely.

The third thing I learned has turned into a mandate by which I live: If you are not in the arena getting your ass kicked on occasion, I'm not interested in or open to your feedback. There are a million cheap seats in the world today filled with people who will never be brave with their lives but who will spend every ounce of energy they have hurling advice and judgment at those who dare greatly. Their only contributions are criticism, cynicism, and fearmongering. If you're criticizing from a place where you're not also putting yourself on the line, I'm not interested in what you have to say.

We have to avoid the cheap-seats feedback *and* stay armor-free. The research participants who do both of those well have one hack in common: Get clear on whose opinions of you matter.



We need to seek feedback from *those* people. And even if it's really hard to hear, we must bring it in and hold it until we learn from it. This is what the research taught me:

> Don't grab hurtful comments and pull them close to you by rereading them and ruminating on them. Don't play with them by rehearsing your badass comeback. And whatever you do, don't pull hatefulness close to your heart.
>
> Let what's unproductive and hurtful drop at the feet of your unarmored self. And no matter how much your self-doubt wants to scoop up the criticism and snuggle with the negativity so it can confirm its worst fears, or how eager the shame gremlins are to use the hurt to fortify your armor, take a deep breath and find the strength to leave what's mean-spirited on the ground. You don't even need to stomp it or kick it away. Cruelty is cheap, easy, and chickenshit. It doesn't deserve your energy or engagement. Just step over the comments and keep daring, always remembering that armor is too heavy a price to pay to engage with cheap-seat feedback.

Again, if we shield ourselves from all feedback, we stop growing. If we engage with all feedback, regardless of the quality and intention, it hurts too much, and we will ultimately armor up by pretending it doesn't hurt, or, worse yet, we'll disconnect from vulnerability and emotion so fully that we stop feeling hurt. When we get to the place that the armor is so thick that we no longer feel anything, we experience a real death. We've paid for self-protection by sealing off our heart from everyone, and from everything—not just hurt, but love.

No one captures the consequences of choosing that level of self-protection over love better than C. S. Lewis:

> To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.

To love is to be vulnerable.

## *Rumble Tool: The Square Squad*

When we define ourselves by what everyone thinks, it's hard to be brave. When we stop caring about what anyone thinks, we're too armored for authentic connection. So how do we get clear on whose opinions of us matter?

Here's the solution we shared in *Daring Greatly:* Get a one-inch by one-inch piece of paper and write down the names of the people whose opinions of you matter. It needs to be small because it forces you to edit. Fold it and put it in your wallet. Then take ten minutes to reach out to those people—your **square squad**—and share a little gratitude. You can keep it simple: *I'm getting clear on whose opinions matter to me. Thank you for being one of those people. I'm grateful that you care enough to be honest and real with me.*

If you need a rubric for choosing the people, here's the best I have: The people on your list should be the people who love you not *despite* your vulnerability and imperfections, but *because* of them.

The people on your list should *not* be "yes" people. This is not



the suck-up squad. They should be people who respect you enough to rumble with the vulnerability of saying "I think you were out of your integrity in that situation, and you need to clean it up and apologize. I'll be here to support you through that." Or "Yes, that was a huge setback, but you were brave and I'll dust you off and cheer you on when you go back into the arena."

## *The ~~Four~~ Six Myths of Vulnerability*

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

**Myth #1: Vulnerability is weakness.**

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

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

Complete silence. Crickets.

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

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

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

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

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

And as much as we'd like to believe that wisdom and experience can replace the need to "do" vulnerability, they don't. If anything, wisdom and experience validate the importance of rumbling with vulnerability. I love this quote by Madeleine L'Engle: "When we were children, we used to think that when we were grown-up we would no longer be vulnerable. But to grow up is to accept vulnerability."



**Myth #3: I can go it alone.**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Wait for it.*

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Bloody hell. I'm not going anywhere.*

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

Most people in the room raised a hand.

"And how does that feel?"

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

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

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

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



**Myth #5: Trust comes before vulnerability.**

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

I grew up believing that vulnerability is:

_____.

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

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

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

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

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

**Can I build trust without ever risking vulnerability?**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

"Why?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Myth #6: Vulnerability is disclosure.**

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



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

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

Both of these are true statements.

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

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

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

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

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

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

> Simply put, psychological safety makes it possible to give tough feedback and have difficult conversations without the need to tiptoe around the truth. In psychologically safe environments, people believe that if they make a mistake others will not penalize or think less of them for it. They also believe that others will not resent or humiliate them when they ask for help or information. This belief comes about when people both trust and respect each other, and it produces a sense of confidence that the group won't embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up. Thus psychological safety is a taken-for-granted belief about how others will respond when you ask a question, seek feedback, admit a mistake, or propose a possibly wacky idea. Most people feel a need to "manage" interpersonal risk to retain a good image, especially at work, and especially in the presence of those who formally evaluate them. This need is both instrumental (promotions and rewards may depend on impressions held by bosses and others) and socio-emotional (we simply prefer approval over disapproval).
>
> Psychological safety does not imply a cozy situation in which people are necessarily close friends. Nor does it suggest an absence of pressure or problems.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I break the tension by raising my hand and explaining my



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## TO FEEL IS TO BE VULNERABLE

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

What most of us fail to understand, and what took me a decade of research to learn, is that vulnerability is the cradle of the emotions and experiences that we crave. Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, and joy.



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

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

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

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