

## **Embracing Imperfection Curriculum**

### **Topic 1**

- Introduction to group and review of group protocol
- Review of topics to be covered in the group which include: Authenticity, Self-Compassion, Resiliency, Gratitude, Intuition, Creativity, Play and Rest, Calm and Stillness, Meaningful Work, Laughter, Forgiveness
- Engage the group in establishing group rules, and review standards of confidentiality
- Explain the role of checking in and the question, “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 2**

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #1: “Cultivating Authenticity: Letting go of what people think”
- Reflection Worksheet: “Authenticity”
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 3**

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #2: “Cultivating Self-Compassion”
- Reflection Worksheet: Just for today.... (Self-compassionate statements.)
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 4**

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic: Self-Compassion Scale by Dr. Kristen Neff.
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 5**

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”

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- Topic and Reading: Noting/Labeling Emotions
- Exercise: “How would you treat a friend?”
- Exercise: Self-Compassion Break (part 2)
- Reflection Worksheet: Self-Compassion Journal
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 6**

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #3: “Cultivating a Resilient Spirit” part 1
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 7**

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #3: “Cultivating a Resilient Spirit” part 2
- Reflection Worksheet: Resilient Spirit
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 8**

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #4: “Cultivating Gratitude and Joy”
- Reflection Worksheet: Gratitude and Joy
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 9**

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #5: “Cultivating Intuition and Trusting Faith”
- Reflection Worksheet: Intuition and Trusting Faith
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 10**

## *Embracing Imperfection*

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #6: “Cultivating Creativity”
- Reflection Practice: Creativity practices: Drawing, painting, beadwork, lanyards, mandalas, abstracts, collage, journaling
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 11**

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #7: “Cultivating Play and Rest”
- Reflection Practice: Wii, games, socialization, music
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 12**

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #8: “Cultivating Calm and Stillness”
- Reflection Practice: 10 minutes silent meditation, 10 minutes listening to tones/instrumentals
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 13**

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #9: “Cultivating Meaningful Work”
- Reflection Worksheet: Meaningful Work
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 14**

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #9: Cultivating Laughter, Song, and Dance
- Reflection Practice: Dare to Be Goofy!!!

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- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 15**

- Check-in: "Is there anything you've struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?"
- Topic and Reading: Final Thoughts
- Reflection Worksheet: Final Thoughts
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 16**

- Check-in: "Is there anything you've struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?"
- Reflection Worksheet
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 17**

- Check-in: "Is there anything you've struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?"
- Reflection Worksheet
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 18**

- Check-in: "Is there anything you've struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?"
- Reflection Worksheet
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 19**

- Check-in: "Is there anything you've struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?"
- Reflection Worksheet
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 20**

## *Embracing Imperfection*

- Check-in: "Is there anything you've struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?"
- Termination of group.
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

### **Topic 1**

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**Putnam Family and Community Services  
PROSper  
GROUP PROTOCOL**

**DATE:** May 7, 2012

**TITLE:** Embracing Imperfection

**COMPONENT:** Community Rehab & Support (CRS)

**SERVICE:** Wellness Self-Management (WSM)

**POPULATION:** Any member of PROS

**FREQUENCY:** 1x/week

**DURATION:** 50 minutes

**DESCRIPTION:** This is an education and discussion-based group focusing on clients' barriers to self-acceptance. Three sub-themes will be woven throughout the group, all cornerstones of a sense of worthiness, the feeling that "I am enough."

Those subthemes are: Courage (to be imperfect), Compassion (kindness to self and others) and Connection.

**MODE OF WORK:**

A. **Purpose:** To enhance client self-worth via addressing:

- Authenticity
- Self-Compassion
- Resiliency
- Gratitude
- Intuition
- Creativity
- Play and Rest
- Calm and Stillness
- Meaningful Work
- Laughter
- Forgiveness

B. **Group Framework:** Group will read and discuss excerpts from the books, The Gifts of Imperfection by Brene Brown, PhD, Self-Compassion by Kristin Neff PhD and The Forgiveness Workbook by Eileen Barker .

**Expected Outcome:** Members will let go of who they think they should be and embrace more fully who they are, in order to be able to move forward in recovery and realization of life goals.

## Topic 2

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #1: “Cultivating Authenticity: Letting go of what people think”
- Reflection Worksheet: “Authenticity”
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.





# Cultivating Authenticity

LETTING GO OF WHAT PEOPLE THINK

*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.*

*Mindfully practicing authenticity during our most soul-searching struggles is how we invite grace, joy, and gratitude into our lives.*

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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."

**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?*



## Embracing Imperfection

### **Authenticity**

What does the courage to be imperfect look like in your life?

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What boundaries do you need to set in your life?

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Where can you practice saying “NO” more?

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Where can you practice saying “YES” more?

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### Topic 3

- Check-in: "Is there anything you've struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?"
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #2: "Cultivating Self-Compassion"
- Reflection Worksheet: Just for today.... (Self-compassionate statements.)
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.





# Cultivating Self-Compassion

LETTING GO OF PERFECTIONISM

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

~ ANNA QUINDLEN ~

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.<sup>2</sup> *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<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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](http://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.<sup>6</sup> 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?*



## Embracing Imperfection

### Self-Compassion Break

Just for today I will... give myself the compassion that I need.

Just for today I will... accept myself as I am.

Just for today I will... learn to accept myself as I am.

Just for today I will... forgive myself.

Just for today I will... be strong.

Just for today I will... be patient.

Just for today I will \_\_\_\_\_.

Just for today I will \_\_\_\_\_.

Just for today I will \_\_\_\_\_.

Just for today I will \_\_\_\_\_.

Just for today I will \_\_\_\_\_.

Just for today I will \_\_\_\_\_.

Just for today I will \_\_\_\_\_.

Just for today I will \_\_\_\_\_.

Just for today I will \_\_\_\_\_.

#### **Topic 4**

- Check-in: "Is there anything you've struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?"
- Topic: Self-Compassion Scale by Dr. Kristen Neff.
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

To all interested, please feel free to use the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) for research or any other use. Masters and dissertation students also have my permission to use and publish the Self-Compassion Scale in their theses. The SCS is appropriate for ages 14 and up (as long as individuals have at least an 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading level). If you aren't that interested in using the subscales, you might also want to consider using the Short SCS (12 items), which has a near perfect correlation with the long scale.

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Reference:

Neff, K. D. (2003). Development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity*, 2, 223-250.

Coding Key:

Self-Kindness Items: 5, 12, 19, 23, 26  
Self-Judgment Items: 1, 8, 11, 16, 21  
Common Humanity Items: 3, 7, 10, 15  
Isolation Items: 4, 13, 18, 25  
Mindfulness Items: 9, 14, 17, 22  
Over-identified Items: 2, 6, 20, 24

Subscale scores are computed by calculating the mean of subscale item responses. To compute a total self-compassion score, reverse score the negative subscale items - self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification (i.e., 1 = 5, 2 = 4, 3 = 3, 4 = 2, 5 = 1) - then compute a total mean.

(This method of calculating the total score is slightly different than that used in the article referenced above, in which each subscale was added together. However, I find it is easier to interpret the scores if the total mean is used.)

## HOW I TYPICALLY ACT TOWARDS MYSELF IN DIFFICULT TIMES

Please read each statement carefully before answering. To the left of each item, indicate how often you behave in the stated manner, using the following scale:

**Almost  
never**  
**1**

**2**

**3**

**4**

**Almost  
always**  
**5**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. When I'm feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. When things are going badly for me, I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. When I think about my inadequacies, it tends to make me feel more separate and cut off from the rest of the world.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. I try to be loving towards myself when I'm feeling emotional pain.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. When I fail at something important to me I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. When I'm down and out, I remind myself that there are lots of other people in the world feeling like I am.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. When times are really difficult, I tend to be tough on myself.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. When something upsets me I try to keep my emotions in balance.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. When I feel inadequate in some way, I try to remind myself that feelings of inadequacy are shared by most people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. I'm intolerant and impatient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. When I'm going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. When I'm feeling down, I tend to feel like most other people are probably happier than I am.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. When something painful happens I try to take a balanced view of the situation.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. I try to see my failings as part of the human condition.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. When I see aspects of myself that I don't like, I get down on myself.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. When I fail at something important to me I try to keep things in perspective.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. When I'm really struggling, I tend to feel like other people must be having an easier time of it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. I'm kind to myself when I'm experiencing suffering.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. When something upsets me I get carried away with my feelings.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. I can be a bit cold-hearted towards myself when I'm experiencing suffering.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. When I'm feeling down I try to approach my feelings with curiosity and openness.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 23. I'm tolerant of my own flaws and inadequacies.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 24. When something painful happens I tend to blow the incident out of proportion.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 25. When I fail at something that's important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26. I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.

### Topic 5

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Noting/Labeling Emotions
- Exercise: “How would you treat a friend?”
- Exercise: Self-Compassion Break (part 2)
- Reflection Worksheet: Self-Compassion Journal
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

**Noting/Labeling Emotions/Thoughts** (From, The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion, Christopher Germer, pgs 69-74)

In meditation noting=turning inward toward an inner experience with awareness="Oh yes" or "ah-ha" or by "labeling it" with a word.

In meditation you can also turn away from a difficult inner experience, returning to an "anchor" (such as the breath). This is sometimes a good idea so as not to get too overwhelmed.

Focusing on one object to the exclusion of others brings calmness to the mind, at least for the time being. It's worth learning to "note/label", since we all eventually have to deal with our difficult emotions, such as fear. Noting helps us to do it safely: "That's fear. Yes, but it's only fear."

In actual meditation practice, noting alternates with anchoring, switching back and forth every few seconds. Don't stray from the body (your breath or any other bodily anchor) for very long. The more we allow our attention to dwell on an emotion or thought rather than an anchor, the more we'll learn about it, but we risk losing calmness and stability of mind. Noting plus anchoring helps you maintain even, balanced attention while you explore difficult emotions/thoughts.

Try to adopt a gentle, accepting tone with your labels. If you are yelling at your emotion/thought, you probably have an underlying agenda of making the emotion go away, which runs counter to everything we're doing. Soft, gentle labeling helps the mind escape the tendency to wish away unpleasant experiences. Also don't work too hard at this or your attention is likely to wrap around and hold onto an uncomfortable emotion/thought, rather than release it. Go slow and easy.

Labeling emotions/thoughts is a powerful way to manage them and to behave skillfully in relationships. It helps us to stay calm so we can make rational decisions. For example, if we cannot say "I feel ashamed", we're more likely to get angry and act in ways that only make our situation more painful. Brain research has shown that finding words for feelings DE-activates the part of the brain (the amygdala) that initiates a stress response.

It's important to remember that emotions are not inherently positive or negative. Rather, they become negative, and ultimately destructive, the more we struggle to make them go away. The formula for suffering ( $\text{Pain} \times \text{Resistance} = \text{Suffering}$ ) can be restated as: **Difficult Emotions  $\times$  Resistance = Destructive Emotions**. With a consistent mindfulness/meditation practice, so-called negative emotions—anger, fear, hatred—are not so painful because they get less under your skin. Instead, you begin to greet them (and ourselves) with mindfulness and compassion.

## **Exercise 1**

### **How would you treat a friend?**

**Please take out a sheet of paper and answer the following questions:**

1. First, think about times when a close friend feels really bad about him or herself or is really struggling in some way. How would you respond to your friend in this situation (especially when you're at your best)? Please write down what you typically do, what you say, and note the tone in which you typically talk to your friends.
2. Now think about times when you feel bad about yourself or are struggling. How do you typically respond to *yourself* in these situations? Please write down what you typically do, what you say, and note the tone in which you talk to yourself.
3. Did you notice a difference? If so, ask yourself why. What factors or fears come into play that lead you to treat yourself and others so differently?
4. Please write down how you think things might change if you responded to yourself in the same way you typically respond to a close friend when you're suffering.

**Why not try treating yourself like a good friend and see what happens?**



## Exercise 2 Self-Compassion Break

Think of a situation in your life that is difficult, that is causing you stress.  
Call the situation to mind, and see if you can actually feel the stress and emotional discomfort in your body.

Now, say to yourself:

### 1. *This is a moment of suffering*

That's mindfulness. Other options include:

- *This hurts.*
- *Ouch.*
- *This is stress.*

### 2. *Suffering in a part of life*

That's common humanity. Other options include:

- *Other people feel this way.*
- *I'm not alone.*
- *We all struggle in our lives.*

Now, put your hands over your heart, feel the warmth of your hands and the gentle touch of your hands on your chest.

Or adopt the soothing touch you discovered felt right for you.

Say to yourself:

### 3. *May I be kind to myself*

You can also ask yourself, "*What do I need to hear right now to express kindness to myself?*" Is there a phrase that speaks to you in your particular situation, such as:

- *May I give myself the compassion that I need*
- *May I accept myself as I am*
- *May I learn to accept myself as I am*
- *May I forgive myself.*
- *May I be strong.*
- *May I be patient*

This practice can be used any time of day or night, and will help you remember to evoke the three aspects of self-compassion when you need it most.

## Exercise 6

### Self-compassion journal

Try keeping a daily self-compassion journal for one week (or longer if you like.)

Journaling is an effective way to express emotions, and has been found to enhance both mental and physical well-being. At some point during the evening when you have a few quiet moments, review the day's events. In your journal, write down anything that you felt bad about, anything you judged yourself for, or any difficult experience that caused you pain. (For instance, perhaps you got angry at a waitress at lunch because she took forever to bring the check. You made a rude comment and stormed off without leaving a tip. Afterwards, you felt ashamed and embarrassed.) For each event, use mindfulness, a sense of common humanity, and kindness to process the event in a more self-compassionate way.

*Mindfulness.* This will mainly involve bring awareness to the painful emotions that arose due to your self-judgment or difficult circumstances. Write about how you felt: sad, ashamed, frightened, stressed, and so on. As you write, try to be accepting and non-judgmental of your experience, not belittling it nor making it overly dramatic. (For example, "I was frustrated because she was being so slow. I got angry, over-reacted, and felt foolish afterwards.")

*Common Humanity.* Write down the ways in which your experience was connected to the larger human experience. This might include acknowledging that being human means being imperfect, and that all people have these sorts of painful experiences. ("Everyone over-reacts sometimes, it's only human.") You might also want to think about the various causes and conditions underlying the painful event. ("My frustration was exacerbated by the fact that I was

late for my doctor's appointment across town and there was a lot of traffic that day. If the circumstances had been different my reaction probably would have been different.")

*Self-Kindness.* Write yourself some kind, understanding, words of comfort. Let yourself know that you care about yourself, adopting a gentle, reassuring tone. (It's okay. You messed up but it wasn't the end of the world. I understand how frustrated you were and you just lost it. Maybe you can try being extra patient and generous to any wait-staff this week...")

Practicing the three components of self-compassion with this writing exercise will help organize your thoughts and emotions, while helping to encode them in your memory. If you keep a journal regularly, your self-compassion practice will become even stronger and translate more easily into daily life.

### Topic 6

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #3: “Cultivating a Resilient Spirit” part 1
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.



## Cultivating a Resilient Spirit

LETTING GO OF NUMBING AND POWERLESSNESS

*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.BONESIGCHARTS.COM](http://WWW.BONESIGCHARTS.COM)

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:

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.<sup>2</sup>

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 intricately 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:

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> In very simple terms, hope happens when

- 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

### Topic 7

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #3: “Cultivating a Resilient Spirit” part 2
- Reflection Worksheet: Resilient Spirit
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

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.”<sup>3</sup> 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*,<sup>4</sup> and Katz’s DVD is titled *Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity*.)

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 of 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, comfortable 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

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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.<sup>8</sup>

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 incredible 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 Absinent 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 Exercised today?

I = What have I done for myself today?

O = What have I done for Others today?

U = Am I holding on to Unexpressed emotions today?

Y = Yeah! 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

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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?*



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## Embracing Imperfection

### Resilient Spirit

How do you numb or take the edge off?

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What are the specific behaviors you engage in to numb vulnerability?

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Do you allow yourself to embrace and soften into happiness, or are you waiting for the “other shoe to drop” (in other words, have something bad happen to you).

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What are the most vulnerable positive emotions for you?

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What struggles are you most likely to numb?

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### Topic 8

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #4: “Cultivating Gratitude and Joy”
- Reflection Worksheet: Gratitude and Joy
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.



# Cultivating Gratitude and Joy

LETTING GO OF SCARCITY AND FEAR OF THE DARK

Earlier I mentioned how surprised I was to see certain concepts from my research emerge in pairs or groups. These “collections of concepts” have created major paradigm shifts for me in terms of the way I think about my life and the choices I make every day.

A good example of this is the way that love and belonging go together. Now I understand that in order to feel a true sense of belonging, I need to bring the real me to the table and that I can only do that if I’m practicing self-love. For years I thought it was the other way around: I’ll do whatever it takes to fit in, I’ll feel accepted, and that will make me like myself better. *(Just typing those words and thinking about how many years I spent living that way makes me weary. No wonder I was tired for so long!)*

In many ways, this research has not only taught me new ways to think about how I want to live and love, it’s taught me about the relationship between my experiences and choices. One of the most profound changes in my life happened when I got my head around the relationship between gratitude and joy. I always thought that joyful people were grateful people. I mean, why wouldn’t they be? They have all of that goodness to be grateful for. But after spending countless hours collecting stories about joy and gratitude, three powerful patterns emerged:

- Without exception, every person I interviewed who described living a joyful life or who described themselves as joyful, actively

practiced gratitude and attributed their joyfulness to their gratitude practice.

- Both joy and gratitude were described as spiritual practices that were bound to a belief in human interconnectedness and a power greater than us.
- People were quick to point out the differences between happiness and joy as the difference between a human emotion that's connected to circumstances and a spiritual way of engaging with the world that's connected to practicing gratitude.

### Gratitude

When it comes to gratitude, the word that jumped out at me throughout this research process is *practice*. I don't necessarily think another researcher would have been so taken aback, but as someone who thought that knowledge was more important than practice, I found these words to be a call to action. In fact, it's safe to say that reluctantly recognizing the importance of practice sparked my 2007 *Breakdown Spiritual Awakening*.

For years, I subscribed to the notion of an "attitude of gratitude." I've since learned that an attitude is an orientation or a way of thinking and that "having an attitude" doesn't always translate to a behavior.

For example, it would be reasonable to say that I have a yoga attitude. The ideals and beliefs that guide my life are very in line with the ideas and beliefs that I associate with yoga. I value mindfulness, breathing, and the body-mind-spirit connection. I even have yoga outfits. But, let me assure you, my yoga attitude and outfits don't mean jack if you put me on a yoga mat and ask me to stand on my head or strike a pose. As I'm sitting here writing this, I've never practiced yoga. I plan to change that between now and the time you're holding this book in your hand, but to date, I've never put the attitude into action. So where it really matters—on the mat—my yoga attitude doesn't count for much.

So, what does a gratitude practice look like? The folks I interviewed talked about keeping gratitude journals, doing daily gratitude medita-

tions or prayers, creating gratitude art, and even stopping during their stressful, busy days to actually say these words out loud: "I am grateful for . . ." When the Wholehearted talk about *Gratitude*, there are a whole bunch of verbs involved.

It seems that gratitude without practice may be a little like faith without works—it's not alive.

### What Is Joy?

*Joy seems to me a step beyond happiness. Happiness is a sort of atmosphere you can live in sometimes when you're lucky.*

*Joy is a light that fills you with hope and faith and love.*

~ ADELA ROGERS ST. JOHNS

The research has taught me that happiness and joy are different experiences. In the interviews, people would often say something like, "Being grateful and joyful doesn't mean that I'm happy all of the time." On many occasions I would delve deeper into those types of statements by asking, "What does it look like when you're joyful and grateful, but not happy?" The answers were all similar: Happiness is tied to circumstance and joyfulness is tied to spirit and gratitude.

I also learned that neither joy nor happiness is constant; no one feels happy all of the time or joyful all of the time. Both experiences come and go. Happiness is attached to external situations and events and seems to ebb and flow as those circumstances come and go. Joy seems to be constantly tethered to our hearts by spirit and gratitude. But our actual experiences of joy—these intense feelings of deep spiritual connection and pleasure—seize us in a very vulnerable way.

After these differences emerged from my data, I looked around to find what other researchers had written about joy and happiness. Interestingly, the explanation that seemed to best describe my findings was from a theologian.

Arne Robertson, a Methodist pastor, writer, and executive director of the Massachusetts Bible Society, explains how the Greek origins of the words *happiness* and *joy* hold important meaning for us today. She

explains that the Greek word for happiness is *Makarios*, which was used to describe the freedom of the rich from normal cares and worries, or to describe a person who received some form of good fortune, such as money or health. Robertson compares this to the Greek word for joy which is *chairō*. Chairō was described by the ancient Greeks as the “culmination of being” and the “good mood of the soul.” Robertson writes, “Chairō is something, the ancient Greeks tell us, that is found only in God and comes with virtue and wisdom. It isn’t a beginner’s virtue; it comes as the culmination. They say its opposite is not sadness, but fear.”<sup>1</sup>

We need both happiness and joy. I think it’s important to create and recognize the experiences that make us happy. In fact, I’m a big fan of Gretchen Rubin’s book *The Happiness Project* and Tal Ben-Shahar’s research and book *Happier*. But in addition to creating happiness in our lives, I’ve learned that we need to cultivate the spiritual practices that lead to joyfulness, especially gratitude. In my own life, I’d like to experience more happiness, but I want to *live* from a place of gratitude and joy. To do this, I think we have to take a hard look at the things that get in the way of gratitude and joy, and to some degree, even happiness.

### Scarcity and Fear of the Dark

The very first time I tried to write about what gets in the way of gratitude and joy, I was in sitting on the couch in my living room with my laptop next to me and my research memo journal in my hands. I was tired and rather than writing, I spent an hour staring at the twinkle lights hanging over the entryway into my dining room. I’m a huge fan of those little clear, sparkly lights. I think they make the world look prettier, so I keep them in my house year-round.

As I sat there flipping through the stories and gazing at the twinkle lights, I took out a pen and wrote this down:

*Twinkle lights are the perfect metaphor for joy. Joy is not a constant. It comes to us in moments—often ordinary moments. Sometimes we miss out on the bursts of joy because we’re too busy chasing down extraordinary moments. Other times we’re so*

*afraid of the dark that we don’t dare let ourselves enjoy the light.*

*A joyful life is not a floodlight of joy. That would eventually become unbearable.*

*I believe a joyful life is made up of joyful moments gracefully strung together by trust, gratitude, inspiration, and faith.*

For those of you who follow my blog, you’ll recognize this as the mantra for my gratitude posts on Fridays that I call TGIF. I turned this quote into a small badge, and part of my gratitude practice is a weekly post about what I’m *Trusting*, what I’m *Grateful* for, what *Inspires* me, and how I’m practicing my *Faith*. It’s incredibly powerful to read everyone’s comments.

Joy and gratitude can be very vulnerable and intense experiences. We are an anxious people and many of us have very little tolerance for vulnerability. Our anxiety and fear can manifest as scarcity. We think to ourselves:

- *I’m not going to allow myself to feel this joy because I know it won’t last.*
- *Acknowledging how grateful I am is an invitation for disaster.*
- *I’d rather not be joyful than have to wait for the other shoe to drop.*

### Fear of the Dark

I’ve always been prone to worry and anxiety, but after I became a mother, negotiating joy, gratitude, and scarcity felt like a full-time job. For years, my fear of something terrible happening to my children actually prevented me from fully embracing joy and gratitude. Every time I came too close to softening into sheer joyfulness about my children and how much I love them, I’d picture something terrible happening; I’d picture losing everything in a flash.

At first I thought I was crazy. Was I the only person in the world who did this? As my therapist and I started working on it, I realized that “my too good to be true” was totally related to fear, scarcity, and vulnerability.

Knowing that those are pretty universal emotions, I gathered up the courage to talk about my experiences with a group of five hundred parents who had come to one of my parenting lectures. I gave an example of standing over my daughter watching her sleep, feeling totally engulfed in gratitude, then being ripped out of that joy and gratitude by images of something bad happening to her.

You could have heard a pin drop. I thought, *Oh, God. I'm crazy and now they're all sitting there like, "She's a nut. How do we get out of here?"* Then all of the sudden I heard the sound of a woman toward the back starting to cry. Not sniffle cry, but sob cry. That sound was followed by someone from the front shouting out, "Oh my God! Why do we do that? What does it mean?" The auditorium erupted in some kind of crazy parent revival. As I had suspected, I was not alone.

Most of us have experienced being on the edge of joy only to be overcome by vulnerability and thrown into fear. Until we can tolerate vulnerability and transform it into gratitude, intense feelings of love will often bring up the fear of loss. If I had to sum up what I've learned about fear and joy, this is what I would say:

*The dark does not destroy the light; it defines it. It's our fear of the dark that casts our joy into the shadows.*

### Scarcity

These are anxious and fearful times, both of which breed scarcity. We're afraid to lose what we love the most, and we hate that there are no guarantees. We think not being grateful and not feeling joy will make it hurt less. We think if we can beat vulnerability to the punch by imaging loss, we'll suffer less. We're wrong. There is one guarantee: If we're not practicing gratitude and allowing ourselves to know joy, we are missing out on the two things that will actually sustain us during the inevitable hard times.

What I'm describing above is scarcity of safety and uncertainty. But there are other kinds of scarcity. My friend Lynne Twist has written an incredible book called *The Soul of Money*. In this book, Lynne addresses the myth of scarcity. She writes,

For me, and for many of us, our first waking thought of the day is "I didn't get enough sleep." The next one is "I don't have enough time." Whether true or not, that thought of *not enough* occurs to us automatically before we even think to question or examine it. We spend most of the hours and the days of our lives hearing, explaining, complaining, or worrying about what we don't have enough of. . . . We don't have enough exercise. We don't have enough work. We don't have enough profits. We don't have enough power. We don't have enough wilderness. We don't have enough weekends. Of course, we don't have enough money—ever.

We're not thin enough, we're not smart enough, we're not pretty enough or fit enough or educated or successful enough, or rich enough—ever. Before we even sit up in bed, before our feet touch the floor, we're already inadequate, already behind, already losing, already lacking something. And by the time we go to bed at night, our minds race with a litany of what we didn't get, or didn't get done, that day. We go to sleep burdened by those thoughts and wake up to the reverie of lack. . . . What begins as a simple expression of the hurried life, or even the challenged life, grows into the great justification for an unfulfilled life.<sup>2</sup>

As I read this passage, it makes total sense to me why we're a nation hungry for more joy. Because we're starving from a lack of gratitude. Lynne says that addressing scarcity doesn't mean searching for abundance but rather choosing a mind-set of sufficiency:

We each have the choice in any setting to step back and let go of the mind-set of scarcity. Once we let go of scarcity, we discover the surprising truth of sufficiency. By sufficiency, I don't mean a quantity of anything. Sufficiency isn't two steps up from poverty or one step short of abundance. It isn't a measure of barely enough or more than enough. Sufficiency isn't an amount at all. It is an experience, a context we generate, a declaration, a knowing that there is enough, and that we are enough.

Sufficiency resides inside of each of us, and we can call it forward.



It is a consciousness, an attention, an intentional choosing of the way we think about our circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

Scarcity is also great fuel for the gremlins. In my earlier shame research and in this more recent research, I realized how many of us have bought into the idea that something has to be extraordinary if it's going to bring us joy. In *I Thought It Was Just Me*, I write, "We seem to measure the value of people's contributions (and sometimes their entire lives) by their level of public recognition. In other words, worth is measured by fame and fortune. Our culture is quick to dismiss quiet, ordinary, hardworking men and women. In many instances, we equate *ordinary* with *boring* or, even more dangerous, *ordinary* has become synonymous with *meaningless*."<sup>4</sup>

I think I learned the most about the value of ordinary from interviewing men and women who have experienced tremendous loss such as the loss of a child, violence, genocide, and trauma. The memories that they held most sacred were the ordinary, everyday moments. It was clear that their most precious memories were forged from a collection of ordinary moments, and their hope for others is that they would stop long enough to be grateful for those moments and the joy they bring. Author and spiritual leader Marianne Williamson says, "Joy is what happens to us when we allow ourselves to recognize how good things really are."

### DIG Deep

**Get Deliberate:** When I'm flooded with fear and scarcity, I try to call forward joy and sufficiency by acknowledging the fear, then transforming it into gratitude. I say this out loud: "I'm feeling vulnerable. That's okay. I'm so grateful for \_\_\_\_." Doing this has absolutely increased my capacity for joy.

**Get Inspired:** I'm so inspired by the daily doses of joy that happen in those ordinary moments, like walking my kids home from school, jumping on the trampoline, and sharing family meals. Acknowledging that these moments are really what life is about has changed my outlook on work, family, and success.

**Get Going:** From taking turns being thankful during grace to more creative projects like creating a jar to keep gratitude notes in, we're making Wholeheartedness a family affair.

*How do you DIG Deep?*

**Gratitude and Joy**

How do you practice, or how would you like to practice gratitude?

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What is something you can do every day to acknowledge what you are grateful for?

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How can you incorporate a gratitude practice into your family or social life?

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How is gratitude tied to joy for you?

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### Topic 9

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #5: “Cultivating Intuition and Trusting Faith”
- Reflection Worksheet: Intuition and Trusting Faith
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.



# Cultivating Intuition and Trusting Faith

LETTING GO OF THE NEED FOR CERTAINTY

Everything about this research process has pushed me in ways that I never imagined. This is especially true when it comes to topics like faith, intuition, and spirituality. When the importance of intuition and faith first emerged as key patterns in Wholehearted living, I winced a little bit. Once again, I felt like my good friends—logic and reason—were under attack. I remember telling Steve, “Now it’s intuition and faith! Can you believe it?”

He replied, “I’m surprised that you’re surprised. You work off of faith and your gut all of the time.”

He took me off guard with his comment.

I sat down next to him and said, “Yeah, I know I’m a gut and faith kinda girl, but I guess I’m not very intuitive. Read this definition from the dictionary: ‘Intuition is direct perception of truth or fact, independent of any reasoning process.’”

Steve chuckled, “So, maybe the definition doesn’t match what you’re learning from the data. You’ll write a new one. It won’t be the first time.”

I spent a year focusing on intuition and faith. I interviewed and collected stories so that I could get my head and heart around what it means to cultivate intuition and trust faith. I was surprised by what I learned.

## Intuition

Intuition is not independent of any reasoning process. In fact, psychologists believe that intuition is a rapid-fire, unconscious associating process.

like a mental puzzle.<sup>2</sup> The brain makes an observation, scans its files, and matches the observation with existing memories, knowledge, and experiences. Once it puts together a series of matches, we get a “gut” on what we’ve observed.

Sometimes our intuition or our gut tells us what we need to know; other times it actually steers us toward fact-finding and reasoning. As it turns out, intuition may be the quiet voice within, but that voice is not limited to one message. Sometimes our intuition whispers, “Follow your instincts.” Other times it shouts, “You need to check this out; we don’t have enough information!”

In my research, I found that what silences our intuitive voice is our need for certainty. Most of us are not very good at not knowing. We like sure things and guarantees so much that we don’t pay attention to the outcomes of our brain’s matching process.

For example, rather than respecting a strong internal instinct, we become fearful and look for assurances from others.

- “What do you think?”
- “Should I do it?”
- “Do you think it’s a good idea, or do you think I’ll regret it?”
- “What would you do?”

A typical response to these survey questions is, “I’m not sure what you should do. What does your gut say?”

And there it is. *What does your gut say?*

We shake our head and say, “I’m not sure” when the real answer is, “I have no idea what my gut says; we haven’t spoken in years.”

When we start polling people, it’s often because we don’t trust our own knowing. It feels too shaky and too uncertain. We want assurances and folks with whom we can share the blame if things don’t pan out. I know all about this. I’m a professional pollster—it’s hard for me to go it alone sometimes. When I’m making a difficult decision and feel disconnected from my intuition, I have a tendency to survey everyone

around me. Ironically, since doing this research, surveying has become a red flag for me—it tells me that I’m feeling vulnerable about making a decision.

As I mentioned earlier, if we learn to trust our intuition, it can even tell us that we don’t have a good instinct on something and that we need more data. Another example of how our need for certainty sabotages our intuition is when we ignore our gut’s warning to slow down, gather more information, or reality-check our expectations:

- “I’m just going to do it. I don’t care anymore.”
- “I’m tired of thinking about it. It’s too stressful.”
- “I’d rather just do it than wait another second.”
- “I can’t stand not knowing.”

When we charge headlong into big decisions, it may be because we don’t want to know the answers that will emerge from doing due diligence. We know that fact-finding might lead us away from what we think we want.

I always tell myself, “If I’m afraid to run the numbers or put pencil to paper, I shouldn’t do it.” When we just want to get the decision-making over with, it’s a good idea to ask ourselves whether we simply can’t stand the vulnerability of being still long enough to think it through and make a mindful decision.

So, as you can see, intuition isn’t always about accessing the answers from within. Sometimes when we’ve tapped into our inner wisdom, it tells us that we don’t know enough to make a decision without more investigation. Here’s the definition I crafted from the research:

*Intuition is not a single way of knowing—it’s our ability to hold space for uncertainty and our willingness to trust the many ways we’ve developed knowledge and insight, including instinct, experience, faith, and reason.*

## Faith

I've come to realize that faith and reason are not natural enemies. It's our human need for certainty and our need to "be right" that have pitted faith and reason against each other in an almost reckless way. We force ourselves to choose and defend one way of knowing the world at the expense of the other.

I understand that faith and reason can clash and create uncomfortable tensions—those tensions play out in my life, and I can feel them in my bones. But this work has forced me to see that it's our fear of the unknown and our fear of being wrong that create most of our conflict and anxiety. We need both faith and reason to make meaning in an uncertain world.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard the terms *having faith* and *my faith* in my interviews with men and women who are living the Wholehearted journey. At first I thought that faith meant "there's a reason for everything." I personally struggled with that because I'm not comfortable with using God or faith or spirituality to explain tragedy. It actually feels like substituting certainty for faith when people say, "There's a reason for everything."

But I quickly learned from the interviews that faith meant something else to these people. Here's how I define *faith* based on the research interviews:

*Faith is a place of mystery, where we find the courage to believe in what we cannot see and the strength to let go of our fear of uncertainty.*

I also learned that it's not always the scientists who struggle with faith and the religious who fully embrace uncertainty. Many forms of fundamentalism and extremism are about choosing certainty over faith.

I love this from theologian Richard Rohr: "My scientist friends have come up with things like 'principles of uncertainty' and dark holes. They're willing to live inside imagined hypotheses and theories. But many religious folks insist on *answers* that are *always* true. We love closure, resolution and clarity, while thinking that we are people of

'faith'! How strange that the very word 'faith' has come to mean its exact opposite."<sup>3</sup>

Faith is essential when we decide to live and love with our whole hearts in a world where most of us want assurances before we risk being vulnerable and getting hurt. To say, "I'm going to engage Wholeheartedly in my life" requires believing without seeing.

## DIG DEEP

**Get Deliberate:** Letting go of certainty is one of my greatest challenges. I even have a physical response to "not knowing"—it's anxiety and fear and vulnerability combined. That's when I have to get very quiet and still. With my kids and my busy life, that can mean hiding in the garage or driving around the block. Whatever it takes, I have to find a way to be still so I can hear what I'm saying.

**Get Inspired:** The process of reclaiming my spiritual and faith life was not an easy one (hence the 2007 ~~Breakdown~~ Spiritual Awakening). There's a quote that literally cracked open my heart. It's from a book by Anne Lamott: "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty."<sup>4</sup> Her books about faith and grace inspire me.<sup>5</sup> I'm inspired by and thankful for *When the Heart Waits* by Sue Monk Kidd<sup>6</sup> and Pema Chödrön's *Comfortable with Uncertainty*<sup>7</sup>; they saved me. And last, I absolutely love this quote from Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*: "... intuition is really a sudden immersion of the soul into the universal current of life, where the histories of all people are connected, and we are able to know everything, because it's all written there."<sup>8</sup>

**Get Going:** When I'm really scared or unsure, I need something right away to calm my cravings for certainty. For me, the Serenity Prayer does the trick. *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.* Amen!

*How do you DIG Deep?*

**Intuition and Trusting Faith**

When was a time in the past when you trusted your “gut” feeling about something?

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How has uncertainty silenced your intuitive voice? How has uncertainty sabotaged your intuition?

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How do you define Faith?

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### Topic 10

- Check-in: "Is there anything you've struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?"
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #6: "Cultivating Creativity"
- Reflection Practice: Creativity practices: Drawing, painting, beadwork, lanyards, mandalas, abstracts, collage, journaling
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.





## Cultivating Creativity

LETTING GO OF COMPARISON

Some of my best childhood memories involve creativity, and almost all of them are from the years that we lived in New Orleans, in a funky, pink stucco duplex a couple of blocks from Tulane University. I remember my mom and me spending hours painting wooden key chains shaped like turtles and snails, and making crafts out of sequins and felt with my friends.

I can vividly see my mom and her friends in their bell-bottoms coming home from the market in the French Quarter and making stuffed mirlitons and other delicious dishes. I was so fascinated with helping her in the kitchen that one Sunday afternoon she and my dad let me cook alone. They said I could make anything I wanted with any ingredient that I wanted. I made oatmeal-raisin cookies. With crawfish boil spices instead of cinnamon. The entire house stank for days.

My mom also loved to sew. She made matching shift dresses that she and I wore (along with my doll, who also had her own tiny matching dress). It's so strange to me that all of these memories that involve creating are so real and textured to me—I can almost feel them and smell them. They also hold so much tender meaning.

Sadly, my memories of creating end around age eight or nine. In fact, I don't have a single creativity memory after about fifth grade. That was the same time that we moved from our tiny house in the Garden District to a big house in a sprawling Houston suburb. Everything seemed to

change. In New Orleans, every wall in our house was covered with art done by my mom or a relative or us kids, and homemade curtains hung over every window. The art and curtains may have been out of necessity, but I remember it being beautiful.

In Houston, I remember walking into some of my new neighbors' houses and thinking that their living rooms looked like the lobby of a fancy hotel—I vividly remember thinking at the time, *like a Howard Johnson or a Holiday Inn*. There were long heavy drapes, big sofas with matching chairs, and shiny glass tables. There were plastic plants with hanging vines strategically sitting on top of armchairs, and dried flowers in baskets decorating the tops of tables. Strangely, everyone's lobby kinda looked the same.

While the houses were all the same and fancy, the school was a different story. In New Orleans, I went to a Catholic school and everyone looked the same, prayed the same, and, for the most part, acted the same. In Houston I started public school, which meant no more uniforms. In this new school, cute clothes counted. And not homemade cute clothes, but clothes from "the mall."

In New Orleans, my dad worked during the day and was a law student at Loyola at night. There was always an informal and fun feel to our lives there. Once we got to Houston, he dressed up every morning and commuted to an oil and gas corporation along with every other father in our neighborhood. Things changed, and in many ways that move felt like a fundamental shift for our family. My parents were launched on the accomplishments-and-acquisitions track, and creativity gave way to that stifling combination of fitting in and being better than, also known as comparison.

Comparison is all about conformity and competition. At first it seems like conforming and competing are mutually exclusive, but they're not. When we compare, we want to see who or what is best out of a specific collection of "alike things." We may compare things like how we parent with parents who have totally different values or traditions than us, but the comparisons that get us really riled up are the ones we make with the folks living next door, or on our child's soccer team,

or at our school. We don't compare our houses to the mansions across town; we compare our yard to the yards on our block. When we compare, we want to be the best or have the best of our group.

The comparison mandate becomes this crushing paradox of "fit in and stand out!" It's not cultivate self-acceptance, belonging, and authenticity; it's be just like everyone else, but better.

It's easy to see how difficult it is to make time for the important things such as creativity, gratitude, joy, and authenticity when we're spending enormous amounts of energy conforming and competing. Now I understand why my dear friend Laura Williams always says, "Comparison is the thief of happiness." I can't tell you how many times I'm feeling so good about myself and my life and my family, and then in a split second it's gone because I consciously or unconsciously start comparing myself to other people.

As far as my own story, the older I got, the less value I put on creativity and the less time I spent creating. When people asked me about crafting or art or creating, I relied on the standard, "I'm not the creative type." On the inside I was really thinking, *Who has time for painting and scrapbooking and photography when the real work of achieving and accomplishing needs to be done?*

By the time I was forty and working on this research, my lack of interest in creativity had turned into disdain. I'm not sure if I would categorize my feelings about creativity as negative stereotypes, shame triggers, or some combination of the two, but it came to the point where I thought of creating for the sake of creating as self-indulgent at best and flaky at worst.

Of course I know, professionally, that the more entrenched and reactive we are about an issue, the more we need to investigate our responses. As I look back with new eyes, I think tapping into how much I missed that part of my life would have been too confusing or painful.

I never thought I'd come across something fierce enough to shake me loose from my entrenched beliefs about creativity. Then this research came along . . .

Let me sum up what I've learned about creativity from the world of Wholehearted living and loving:

1. "I'm not very creative" doesn't work. There's no such thing as creative people and non-creative people. There are only people who use their creativity and people who don't. Unused creativity doesn't just disappear. It lives within us until it's expressed, neglected to death, or suffocated by resentment and fear.
2. The only unique contribution that we will ever make in this world will be born of our creativity.
3. If we want to make meaning, we need to make art. Cook, write, draw, doodle, paint, scrapbook, take pictures, collage, knit, rebuild an engine, sculpt, dance, decorate, act, sing—it doesn't matter. As long as we're creating, we're cultivating meaning.

Literally one month after I worked through the data on creativity, I signed up for a gourd-painting class. I'm not even kidding. I went with my mom and Ellen, and it was one of the best days of my life.

For the first time in decades, I started creating. And I haven't stopped. I even took up photography. It might sound cliché, but the world doesn't even look the same to me anymore. I see beauty and potential everywhere—in my front yard, at a junk store, in an old magazine—everywhere.

It's been a very emotional transition for me and for my family. Both of my kids love art, and we do family projects together all the time. Steve and I are Mac addicts, and we love to make movies together. Last month, Ellen told us that she either wants to be a chef or a "life artist" like my friend Ali Edwards, who inspires both of us. At this point, Charlie loves to paint and would like to own a booger store (which is both creative and entrepreneurial).

I also realized that much of what I do in my work is creative work. Writer William Plomer described creativity as "the power to connect the seemingly unconnected." My work is all about making connections, so part of my transformation was owning and celebrating my existing creativity.

Letting go of comparison is not a to-do list item. For most of us, it's something that requires constant awareness. It's so easy to take our eyes off our path to check out what others are doing and if they're ahead or behind us. Creativity, which is the expression of our originality, helps us stay mindful that what we bring to the world is completely original and cannot be compared. And, without comparison, concepts like *ahead* or *behind* or *best* or *worst* lose their meaning.

### DIG Deep

**Get Deliberate:** If creativity is seen as a luxury or something we do when we have spare time, it will never be cultivated. I carve out time every week to take and process photographs, make movies, and do art projects with the kids. When I make creating a priority, everything in my life works better.

**Get Inspired:** Nothing inspires me more than my friendship with the Lovebombers, a group of artists, writers, and photographers whom I met online and spend a long weekend with every year. I think it's so important to find and be a part of a community of like-spirited people who share your beliefs about creativity.

**Get Going:** Take a class. Risk feeling vulnerable and new and imperfect and take a class. There are wonderful online classes if you need more flexibility. Try something that scares you or something you've dreamt about trying. You never know where you'll find your creative inspiration.

*How do you DIG Deep?*



### Topic 11

- Check-in: "Is there anything you've struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?"
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #7: "Cultivating Play and Rest"
- Reflection Practice: Wii, games, socialization, music
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.



## Cultivating Play and Rest

LETTING GO OF EXHAUSTION AS A STATUS SYMBOL  
AND PRODUCTIVITY AS SELF-WORTH

At times, when I was interviewing people for my research, I felt like an alien—like a visitor trying to figure out the customs and habits of people living lives that looked incredibly different from mine. There were many awkward moments when I struggled to understand what *they*, the *Wholehearted*, were doing and why. Sometimes the concepts were so foreign to me that I didn't have the language to name them. This was one of those times.

I remember telling one of my colleagues, "These Wholehearted people fool around a lot." She laughed and asked, "Fool around? How?"

I shrugged, "I don't know. They have fun and . . . I don't know what you call it. They hang out and do fun things."

She looked confused. "Like what kind of fun things? Hobbies? Crafts? Sports?"

"Yes," I replied. "Kinda like that but not so organized. I'm going to have to dig around some more."

Now I look back on that conversation and think, *How did I not know what I was seeing?* Was I so personally removed from this concept that I couldn't recognize it?

It's *play*! A critically important component of Wholehearted living is play!

I came to this realization by watching my children and recognizing

the same playful behaviors in them that were described by the men and women I interviewed. These folks play.

Researching the concept of play got off to a rocky start. I learned this very quickly: Do *not* Google "Adult play." I was closing pornography pop-ups so fast it was like playing *Whac-A-Mole*.

Once I recovered from that search disaster, I was lucky enough to find the work of Dr. Stuart Brown. Dr. Brown is a psychiatrist, clinical researcher, and founder of the National Institute for Play. He is also the author of a wonderful book titled, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing on his own research, as well as the latest advances in biology, psychology, and neurology, Brown explains that play shapes our brain, helps us foster empathy, helps us navigate complex social groups, and is at the core of creativity and innovation.

If you're wondering why play and rest are paired together in this guidepost, it's because after reading the research on play, I now understand that play is as essential to our health and functioning as rest.

So, if you're like me, you want to know, "What exactly is play?" Brown proposes seven properties of play; the first of which is that play is apparently purposeless. Basically this means that we play for the sake of play. We do it because it's fun and we want to.

Well, this is where my work as a shame researcher comes in. In today's culture—where our self-worth is tied to our net worth, and we base our worthiness on our level of productivity—spending time doing purposeless activities is rare. In fact, for many of us it sounds like an anxiety attack waiting to happen.

We've got so much to do and so little time that the idea of spending time doing anything unrelated to the to-do list actually creates stress. We convince ourselves that playing is a waste of precious time. We even convince ourselves that sleep is a terrible use of our time.

We've got to *get 'er done!* It doesn't matter if our job is running a multimillion-dollar company, raising a family, creating art, or finishing school, we've got to keep our noses to the grindstone and work! There's no time to play around!

But Brown argues that play is not an option. In fact he writes, "The opposite of play is not work—the opposite of play is depression." He explains, "Respecting our biologically programmed need for play can transform work. It can bring back excitement and newness to our job. Play helps us deal with difficulties, provides a sense of expansiveness, promotes mastery of our craft, and is an essential part of the creative process. Most important, true play that comes from our own inner needs and desires is the only path to finding lasting joy and satisfaction in our work. In the long run, work does not work without play."<sup>2</sup>

What's shocking is the similarity between the biological need for play and our body's need for rest, a topic that also emerged as a major theme in *Wholehearted* living. It seems that living and loving with our whole hearts requires us to respect our bodies' need for renewal. When I first researched the ideas of rest, sleep, and *sleep debt*—the term for not getting enough—I couldn't believe some of the consequences of not getting proper rest.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, insufficient sleep is associated with a number of chronic diseases and conditions, such as diabetes, heart disease, obesity, and depression.<sup>3</sup> We're also learning that drowsy driving can be as dangerous—and as preventable—as driving while intoxicated. Yet, somehow many of us still believe that exhaustion is a status symbol of hard work and that sleep is a luxury. The result is that we are so very tired. Dangerously tired.

The same gremlins that tell us we're too busy to play and waste time fooling around are the ones that whisper:

- "One more hour of work! You can catch up on your sleep this weekend."
- "Napping is for slackers."
- "Push through. You can handle it."

But the truth is, we can't handle it. We are a nation of exhausted and overstressed adults raising overscheduled children. We use our spare time to desperately search for joy and meaning in our lives. We think

accomplishments and acquisitions will bring joy and meaning, but that pursuit could be the very thing that's keeping us so tired and afraid to slow down.

If we want to live a Wholehearted life, we have to become intentional about cultivating sleep and play, and about letting go of exhaustion as a status symbol and productivity as self-worth.

Making the choice to rest and play is, at best, counterculture. The decision to let go of exhaustion and productivity as badges of honor made total sense to Steve and me, but putting Wholeheartedness into practice has been a struggle for our entire family.

Steve and I sat down in 2008 and made a practical list of the things that make our family work. We basically answered the question, "When things are going really well in our family, what does it look like?" The answers included sleep, working out, healthy food, cooking, time off, weekends away, going to church, being present with the kids, a sense of control over our money, meaningful work that doesn't consume us, time to piddle, time with family and close friends, and time to just hang out. These were (and are) our "ingredients for joy and meaning."

Then we looked at the dream list that we started making a couple of years ago (and keep adding to). Everything on this list was an accomplishment or an acquisition—a house with more bedrooms, a trip here, personal salary goals, professional endeavors, and so forth. Everything required that we make more money and spend more money.

When we compared our dream list to our "joy and meaning" list, we realized that by merely letting go of the list of things we want to accomplish and acquire, we would be actually living our dream—not striving to make it happen in the future, but living it right now. The things we were working toward did nothing in terms of making our life fuller.

Embracing our "joy and meaning" list has not been easy. There are days when it makes perfect sense, and then there are days when I get sucked into believing how much better everything would feel if we just had a really great guest room or a better kitchen, or if I got to speak here or write an article for that popular magazine.

Even E has had to make some changes. Last year, we told her

that we were going to limit her extracurricular activities and that she would have to make choices between multiple sports and Girl Scouts and after-school activities. At first there was some resistance. She pointed out that she did fewer things than most of her friends. This was true. She has many friends who are in two or three sports every semester and take music lessons and language lessons and art classes. These kids wake up at 6 a.m. and go to bed at 10 p.m.

We explained that the "cutting down" was part of a larger family plan. I had decided to go part-time at the university, and her dad was going to a four-day workweek. She looked at us as if she were bracing for bad news. She asked, "Is anything wrong?"

We explained that we wanted more downtime. More time to hang out and take it easy. After we swore that we weren't sick, she got excited and asked, "Are we making time for more TV?"

I explained, "No. Just more family play time. Your dad and I love our work, but it can be very demanding. I travel and have writing deadlines; your dad has to be on call. You also work hard at your schoolwork. We want to make sure that we schedule in downtime for all of us."

While this experience may sound great, it was terrifying for me as a parent. What if I'm wrong? What if busy and exhausted is what it takes? What if she doesn't get to go to the college of her choice because she doesn't play the violin and speak Mandarin and French and she doesn't play six sports?

What if we're normal and quiet and happy? Does that count?

I guess the answer to this is only yes if it counts to us. If what matters to us is what we're concerned about, then play and rest is important. If what matters to us is what other people think or say or value, then it's back to exhaustion and producing for self-worth.

Today, I choose play and rest.

## DIG DEEP

**Get Deliberate:** One of the best things that we've ever done in our family is making the "ingredients for joy and meaning" list. I encourage you to sit down and make a list of the specific conditions that are in

place when everything feels good in your life. Then check that list against your to-do list and your to-accomplish list. It might surprise you.

**Get Inspired:** I'm continually inspired by Stuart Brown's work on play and Daniel Pink's book *A Whole New Mind*.<sup>4</sup> If you want to learn more about the importance of play and rest, read these books.

**Get Going:** Say *no* today. Buck the system. Take something off your list and add "take a nap."

*How do you DIG Deep?*



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## Topic 12

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #8: “Cultivating Calm and Stillness”
- Reflection Practice: 10 minutes silent mediation, 10 minutes listening to tones/instrumentals
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

## GUIDEPOST #8



# Cultivating Calm and Stillness

LETTING GO OF ANXIETY AS A LIFESTYLE

After this research first emerged, remember that I made a beeline for my therapist's office. I knew my life was out of balance, and I wanted more of what I was learning about in my study. I also wanted to figure out why I was having dizzy spells whenever I got really anxious and stressed out. I would actually get lightheaded, and the room would start to spin. A couple of times, I literally fell over.

The dizziness was new; the anxiety was not. Before I started learning about Wholehearted living, I had always been able to manage the competing priorities, the family demands, and the unrelenting pressure of academic life. In many ways, anxiety was a constant in my life.

But as I started developing an awareness about Wholehearted living, it's as if my body said, "I'm going to help you embrace this new way of living by making it very difficult for you to ignore anxiety." If I became too anxiety ridden, I'd literally have to sit down or risk falling.

I remember telling Diana, my therapist, "I can't function this way any longer. I really can't."

She replied, "I know. I see that. What do you think you need?"

I thought about it for a second and said, "I need a way to stay on my feet when I'm really anxious."

She just sat there nodding her head and waiting, like therapists do. Waiting and waiting and waiting.

Finally, it dawned on me. "Oh. I get it. I can't function *this way*. I

. Then check that list list. It might surprise

Brown's work on play you want to learn more books.

something off your list

can't function in this much anxiety anymore. I don't need to figure out a way to keep going with this level of anxiety—I need to figure out how to be less anxious.”

That silence thing can be effective. It's a pain in the ass, but nonetheless effective.

I used my research to formulate a plan to lessen my anxiety. The men and women I interviewed weren't anxiety-free or even anxiety-averse; they were anxiety-aware. They were committed to a way of living where anxiety was a reality but not a lifestyle. They did this by cultivating calm and stillness in their lives and making these practices the norm.

Calm and stillness may sound like the same things, but I learned that they are different and that we need both.

### Calm

I define *calm* as *creating perspective and mindfulness while managing emotional reactivity*. When I think about calm people, I think about people who can bring perspective to complicated situations and feel their feelings without reacting to heightened emotions like fear and anger.

When I was pregnant with Ellen, someone gave me a small book called *Baby Love: A Tradition of Calm Parenting* by Maud Bryt.<sup>1</sup> Bryt's mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother were midwives in Holland and the book draws on their wisdom. I can still see myself sitting in my brand-new glider with one hand resting on my very pregnant belly and the other hand holding that book. I remember thinking, *This is my goal. I want to be a calm parent*.

Surprisingly, I am a pretty calm parent. Not because it comes naturally to me, but because I practice. A lot. I also have an incredible role model in my husband, Steve. By watching him, I've learned about the value of bringing perspective and quiet to difficult situations.

I try to be slow to respond and quick to think *Do we even have all the information we need to make a decision or form a response?* I also stay very mindful about the effect that calm has on an anxious person or situation. A panicked response produces more panic and more fear. As psychologist and writer Harriet Lerner says, “Anxiety is extremely

contagious, but so is calm.”<sup>2</sup> The question becomes, *Do we want to infect people with more anxiety, or heal ourselves and the people around us with calm?*

If we choose to heal with calm, we have to commit to practicing calm. Small things matter. For example, before we respond we can count to ten or give ourselves permission to say, “I'm not sure. I need to think about this some more.” It's also extremely effective to identify the emotions that are the most likely to spark your reactivity and then practice non-reactive responses.

A couple of years ago there was this powerful public service announcement that showed a couple screaming at each other and slamming the door in each other's faces. They were shouting things like, “I hate you!” and “Mind your own business!” and “I don't want to talk to you.” As you watched it, you had no idea what or why they kept saying these things, slamming the door, and then starting over. After about twenty seconds of the slamming and yelling, the couple held hands and walked away from screen. One of them says to the other, “I think we're ready.” The commercial then cut to the announcer, who said something like, “Talk to your kids about drugs. It's not easy, but it could save their lives.”

The commercial is a great example of practicing calm. Unless we had calm modeled by our parents and grew up practicing it, it's unlikely that it will be our default response to anxious or emotionally volatile situations.

For me, breathing is the best place to start. Just taking a breath before I respond slows me down and immediately starts spreading calm. Sometimes I actually think to myself, *I'm dying to freak out here! Do I have enough information to freak out? Will freaking out help?* The answer is always *no*.

### Stillness

The concept of stillness is less complicated than the concept of calm but, for me at least, way more difficult to put into practice.

I wish I could tell you how much I resisted even hearing people

describe stillness as an integral part of their Wholehearted journey. From meditation and prayer to regular periods of quiet reflection and alone time, men and women spoke about the necessity of quieting their bodies and minds as a way to feel less anxious and overwhelmed.

I'm sure my resistance to this idea comes from the fact that just thinking about meditating makes me anxious. When I try to meditate, I feel like a total poser. I spend the entire time thinking about how I need to stop thinking. *Okay, I'm not thinking about anything. I'm not thinking about anything. Milk, diapers, laundry detergent . . . stop! Okay, not thinking. Not thinking. Oh, man. Is this over yet?*

I don't want to admit it, but the truth is that stillness used to be very anxiety provoking for me. In my mind, being still was narrowly defined as sitting cross-legged on the floor and focusing on that elusive nothingness. As I collected and analyzed more stories, I realized that my initial thinking was wrong. Here's the definition of *stillness* that emerged from the data:

*Stillness is not about focusing on nothingness; it's about creating a clearing. It's opening up an emotionally clutter-free space and allowing ourselves to feel and think and dream and question.*

Once we can let go of our assumptions about what stillness is supposed to look like and find a way to create a clearing that works for us, we stand a better chance of opening ourselves up and confronting the next barrier to stillness: fear. And it can be big, big fear.

If we stop long enough to create a quiet emotional clearing, the truth of our lives will invariably catch up with us. We convince ourselves that if we stay busy enough and keep moving, reality won't be able to keep up. So we stay in front of the truth about how tired and scared and confused and overwhelmed we sometimes feel. Of course, the irony is that the thing that's wearing us down is trying to stay out in front of feeling worn down. This is the self-perpetuating quality of anxiety. It feeds on itself. I often say that when they start having Twelve Step meetings for busy-aholics, they'll need to rent out football stadiums.

In addition to fear, another barrier that gets in the way of both

stillness and calm is how we're raised to think about these practices. From very early in our lives, we get confusing messages about the value of calm and stillness. Parents and teachers scream, "Calm down!" and "Sit still!" rather than actually modeling the behaviors they want to see. So instead of becoming practices that we want to cultivate, calm gives way to perpetuating anxiety, and the idea of stillness makes us feel jumpy.

In our increasingly complicated and anxious world, we need more time to do less and be less. When we first start cultivating calm and stillness in our lives, it can be difficult, especially when we realize how stress and anxiety define so much of our daily lives. But as our practices become stronger, anxiety loses its hold and we gain clarity about what we're doing, where we're going, and what holds true meaning for us.

### DIG DEEP

**Get Deliberate:** My anxiety detox included more calm and more stillness, but it also included more exercise and less caffeine. I know so many people who take something at night to help them sleep and drink caffeine all day to stay awake. Calm and stillness are potent medicine for general sleeplessness and a lack of energy. Increasing my daily intake of calm and stillness along with walking and swimming and cutting caffeine has done wonders for my life.

**Get Inspired:** I remain inspired and transformed by something I learned from Harriet Lerner's book *The Dance of Connection*.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Lerner explains that we all have patterned ways of managing anxiety. Some of us respond to anxiety by overfunctioning and others by underfunctioning. Overfunctioners tend to move quickly to advise, rescue, take over, micromanage, and get in other people's business rather than look inward. Underfunctioners tend to get less competent under stress. They invite others to take over and often become the focus of family gossip, worry, or concern. They can get labeled as the "irresponsible one" or the "the problem child" or the "fragile one." Dr. Lerner explains that seeing these behaviors as patterned responses to anxiety, rather than truths about who we are, can help us understand that we can change.

Overfunctioners, like me, can become more willing to embrace our vulnerabilities in the face of anxiety, and underfunctioners can work to amplify their strengths and competencies.

**Get Going:** Experiment with different forms of still and quiet. We all need to find something that works for us. To be honest, I'm never more open and emotionally clutter-free than when I'm walking alone outside. It's not technically still, but it's an emotional opening for me.

### *How do you DIG Deep?*



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### Topic 13

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #9: “Cultivating Meaningful Work”
- Reflection Worksheet: Meaningful Work
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.



# Cultivating Meaningful Work

LETTING GO OF SELF-DOUBT AND "SUPPOSED TO"

In the chapter on creativity, I wrote that a significant part of my work involves making connections. In fact, the heart of my work is finding and naming the subtle and often unspoken connections between how we think, feel, and act. Sometimes the connections are easy to spot and fall right into place. Other times they are elusive, and trying to put things together feels messy and tangled. This guidepost started out as one of those messy and tangled experiences, but with time, I learned about some striking connections.

Early in this research, it was clear to me that living a Wholehearted life included engaging in what many people I interviewed called *meaningful work*. Others spoke of having a calling. And some simply described feeling a tremendous sense of accomplishment and purpose from their work. It all seemed pretty straightforward, except for this pesky list of words that emerged as being important and somehow *connected* to the quest for meaningful work:

- gifts and talents
- spirituality
- making a living
- commitment
- supposed to's
- self-doubt

I say pesky because it took me a long time to figure out how they all worked together. The exhausted part of me wanted to forget about these “extra” words, much like what Steve does when he puts together furniture from IKEA and there are twelve unused screws when he’s done. I wanted to stand back, give it a little shake, and say, “Good enough! These must be extras.”

But I couldn’t. So I took apart the idea of meaningful work, interviewed more participants, found the connections, and rebuilt the guidepost. This is what emerged:

- *We all have gifts and talents.* When we cultivate those gifts and share them with the world, we create a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives.
- *Squandering our gifts brings distress to our lives.* As it turns out, it’s not merely benign or “too bad” if we don’t use the gifts that we’ve been given; we pay for it with our emotional and physical well-being. When we don’t use our talents to cultivate meaningful work, we struggle. We feel disconnected and weighed down by feelings of emptiness, frustration, resentment, shame, disappointment, fear, and even grief.
- Most of us who are searching for spiritual connection spend too much time looking up at the sky and wondering why God lives so far away. God lives within us, not above us. *Sharing our gifts and talents with the world is the most powerful source of connection with God.*
- *Using our gifts and talents to create meaningful work takes a tremendous amount of commitment,* because in many cases the meaningful work is not what pays the bills. Some folks have managed to align everything—they use their gifts and talents to do work that feeds their souls and their families; however, most people piece it together.
- No one can define what’s meaningful for us. Culture doesn’t get to dictate if it’s working outside the home, raising children, lawyering,

teaching, or painting. *Like our gifts and talents, meaning is unique to each one of us.*

### Self-Doubt and “Supposed To”

The gauntlet of gremlins can get in the way of cultivating meaningful work. They start by taunting us about our gifts and talents:

- “Maybe everyone has special gifts . . . *except for you.* Maybe that’s why you haven’t found them yet.”
- “Yes, you do that well, but that’s not really a gift. It’s not big enough or important enough to be a real talent.”

Self-doubt undermines the process of finding our gifts and sharing them with the world. Moreover, if developing and sharing our gifts is how we honor spirit and connect with God, self-doubt is letting our fear undermine our faith.

The gremlins get lots of mileage out of “supposed to”—the battle cry of fitting in, perfectionism, people-pleasing, and proving ourselves:

- “You’re supposed to care about making money, not meaning.”
- “You’re supposed to grow up and be a \_\_\_\_\_. Everyone’s counting on it.”
- “You’re supposed to hate your work; that’s the definition of work.”
- “If you’re brave, you’re supposed to quit your job and follow your bliss. Don’t worry about money!”
- “You’re supposed to choose: Work you love or work that supports the people you love.”

To overcome self-doubt and “supposed to,” we have to start owning the messages. What makes us afraid? What’s on our “supposed to” list? Who says? Why?

Gremlins are like toddlers. If you ignore them, they get louder. It’s usually best to just acknowledge the messages. Write them down. I know it seems counterintuitive, but writing them down and owning the gremlins’ messages doesn’t give the messages more power; it gives us more



power. It gives us the opportunity to say, "I get it. I see that I'm afraid of this, but I'm going to do it anyway."

### Nice to Meet You. What Do You Do?

In addition to the gremlins, another thing that gets in the way of meaningful work is the struggle to define who we are and what we do in an honest way. In a world that values the primacy of work, the most common question that we ask and get asked is, "What do you do?" I used to wince every time someone asked me this question. I felt like my choices were to reduce myself to an easily digestible sound bite or to confuse the hell out of people.

Now my answer to "What do you do?" is, "How much time do you have?"

Most of us have complicated answers to this question. For example, I'm a mom, partner, researcher, writer, storyteller, sister, friend, daughter, and teacher. All of these things make up who I am, so I never know how to answer that question. And, to be honest with you, I'm tired of choosing to make it easier on the person who asked.

In 2009, I met Marci Alboher, an author/speaker/coach. If you're wondering what's up with the slashes, I think they're very appropriate as Marci is the author of *One Person/Multiple Careers: A New Model for Work/Life Success*.<sup>1</sup>

Alboher interviewed hundreds of people pursuing multiple careers simultaneously and discovered how slash careers—researcher/storyteller, artist/real estate agent—integrate and fully express the multiple passions, talents, and interests that a single career cannot accommodate. Marci's book is full of stories about people who have created meaningful work by refusing to be defined by a single career. Examples include a longshoreman/documentary filmmaker, a management consultant/cartoonist, a lawyer/chef, a rabbi/stand-up comic, a surgeon/playwright, an investment manager/rapper, and a therapist/violin maker.

I wanted to share the idea of the slash effect with you because in the blogging, art, and writing world, I meet so many people who are afraid to claim their work. For example, I recently met a woman at a social

media conference who is an accountant/jeweler. I was excited to meet her, because I had bought a beautiful pair of earrings from her online. When I asked her how long she had been a jeweler, she blushed and said, "I wish. I'm a CPA. I'm not a real jeweler."

I thought to myself, *I'm wearing your earrings right now, not your abacus*. When I pointed to my ears and said, "Of course you're a jeweler maker!" she just smiled and replied, "I don't make very much money doing that. I just do it because I love it." As ludicrous as that sounded to me, I get it. I hate calling myself a writer because it doesn't feel legitimate to me. I'm not writer *enough*. Overcoming self-doubt is all about believing we're enough and letting go of what the world says we're supposed to be and supposed to call ourselves.

Every semester I share this quote by theologian Howard Thurman with my graduate students. It's always been one of my favorites, but now that I've studied the importance of meaningful work, it's taken on new significance: "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

### DIG DEEP

**Get Deliberate:** It can take some time to figure out how to get deliberate about doing meaningful work. I finally got very specific and wrote down my own criteria for "meaningful." Right now, just for me, I want my work to be inspiring, contemplative, and creative. I'm using these as a filter to make decisions about what I do/what I commit to/how I spend my time.

**Get Inspired:** I highly recommend Marci Alboher's *One Person/Multiple Careers*. It includes lots of practical strategies for living the slash. Malcom Gladwell is also a constant source of inspiration for me. In his book *Outliers*, Gladwell proposes that there are three criteria for meaningful work—complexity, autonomy, and a relationship between effort and reward—and that these can often be found in creative work.<sup>2</sup> These criteria absolutely fit with what cultivating meaningful work means in the context of the Wholehearted journey. Last, I think

everyone should read Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*—I try to read it at least once a year. It's a powerful way of seeing the connections between our gifts, our spirituality, and our work (slashed or not) and how they come together to create meaning in our lives.

**Get Going:** Make a list of the work that inspires you. Don't be practical. Don't think about making a living; think about doing something you love. There's nothing that says you have to quit your day job to cultivate meaningful work. There's also nothing that says your day job isn't meaningful work—maybe you've just never thought of it that way. What's your ideal slash? What do you want to be when you grow up? What brings meaning to you?

*How do you DIG Deep?*



Cultiv  
LETTIN

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*Embracing Imperfection*

**Meaningful Work**

What are your gifts and talents?

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How have you used your gifts/talents in the world? How have they affected you? How have your gifts/talents affected others?

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What's on your "supposed to" list?

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What does *Meaningful Work* mean to you?

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### Topic 14

- Check-in: "Is there anything you've struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?"
- Topic and Reading: Guidepost #9: Cultivating Laughter, Song, and Dance
- Reflection Practice: Dare to Be Goofy!!!
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.



## Cultivating Laughter, Song, and Dance

LETTING GO OF BEING COOL AND "ALWAYS IN CONTROL"

...try to read it at  
connections between  
or not) and how they  
you. Don't be practi-  
doing something you  
uit your day job to  
at says your day job  
hought of it that way.  
when you grow up?

*Dance like no one is watching. Sing like no one is listening. Love like you've never been hurt and live like it's heaven on Earth.*

~ MARK TWAIN

Throughout human history, we've relied on laughter, song, and dance to express ourselves, to communicate our stories and emotions, to celebrate and mourn, and to nurture community. While most people would tell you that a life without laughter, music, and dance would be unbearable, it's easy to take these experiences for granted.

Laughter, song, and dance are so woven into the fabric of our everyday life that we can forget how much we value the people who can make us laugh, the songs that inspire us to roll down the car window and sing at the top of our lungs, and the total freedom we feel when we "dance like no one is watching."

In her book *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*, social critic Barbara Ehrenreich draws on history and anthropology to document the importance of engaging in what she refers to as "collective ecstasy." Ehrenreich concludes that we are "innately social beings, impelled almost instinctively to share our joy." I absolutely believe she is right. I also love the idea of collective ecstasy—especially now, when we seem to be stuck in a state of collective fear and anxiety.

As I sifted through my data, I asked myself two questions:

1. Why are laughter, song, and dance so important to us?
2. Is there some transformational element that they have in common?

These were complicated questions to answer because, yes, we yearn to laugh and sing and dance when we feel joy, but we also turn to these forms of expression when we feel lonely, sad, excited, in love, heartbroken, afraid, ashamed, confident, certain, doubtful, brave, grief, and ecstasy (just to name a few). I'm convinced that there's a song, a dance, and a path to laughter for every human emotion.

After a couple of years of analyzing my data, here's what I learned: *Laughter, song, and dance create emotional and spiritual connection; they remind us of the one thing that truly matters when we are searching for comfort, celebration, inspiration, or healing. We are not alone.*

Ironically, I learned the most about laughter during the eight years that I was studying shame. Shame resilience requires laughter. In *I Thought It Was Just Me*, I refer to the kind of laughter that helps us heal as *knowing laughter*. Laughter is a spiritual form of communing, without words we can say to one another, "I'm with you. I get it."

True laughter is not the use of humor as self-deprecation or deflection; it's not the kind of painful laughter we sometimes hide behind. Knowing laughter embodies the relief and connection we experience when we realize the power of sharing our stories—we're not laughing at each other but *with* each other.

One of my favorite definitions of laughter comes from writer Anne Lamott, whom I once heard say, "Laughter is a bubbly, effervescent form of holiness." Amen!

### Song

From the eight-track tapes my parents played in our station wagon to my stack of vinyl records from the 1970s to my mix-tapes from the '80s and

'90s to the iTunes playlists on my new computer, my life has a soundtrack. And the songs from that soundtrack can stir memories and provoke emotion in me like nothing else.

I realize that not everyone shares the same passion for music, but the one thing that is universal about song is its ability to move us emotionally—sometimes in ways we don't even think about. For example, I was recently watching the director's cut of a movie. It showed a very dramatic scene from the film with music and then without music. I couldn't believe the difference.

The first time I watched the film, I didn't even notice that music was playing. I was just on the edge of my seat waiting and hoping that things would turn out the way I wanted them to. When I watched it without music, the scene was flat. There wasn't the same level of anticipation. Without music it felt factual, not emotional.

Whether it's a hymn at church, the national anthem, a college fight song, a song on the radio, or the carefully scored soundtrack to a movie, music reaches out and offers us connection—something we really can't live without.

### Dancing

I measure the spiritual health of our family by how much dancing is happening in our kitchen. Seriously. Charlie's favorite dance song is "Kung Fu Fighting" and Ellen likes Vanilla Ice's "Ice Ice Baby"! We're music and dance lovers, not snobs. We're not above kicking it old-school with "The Twist" or "The Macarena." We don't have a big kitchen so when the four of us are in there, sock-footed and sliding around, it looks more like a mosh pit than a sock hop. It's messy, but it's always fun.

It didn't take me long to learn that dance is a tough issue for many people. Laughing hysterically can make us feel a little out of control, and singing out loud can make some of us feel self-conscious. But for many of us, there is no form of self-expression that makes us feel more vulnerable than dancing. It's literally full-body vulnerability. The only other full-body vulnerability that I can think of is being naked, and I don't have to tell you how vulnerable that makes most of us feel.

For many people, risking that kind of public vulnerability is too difficult, so they dance at home or only in front of people they care about. For others, the vulnerability is so crushing that they don't dance at all. One woman told me, "Sometimes if I'm watching TV and people are dancing or there's a good song playing, I tap my feet without even noticing it. When I finally catch myself, I feel embarrassed. I have no rhythm."

There's no question that some people are more musically inclined or coordinated than others, but I'm starting to believe that dance is in our DNA. Not super-hip and cool dancing, or line dancing, or *Dancing with the Stars* dancing—but a strong pull toward rhythm and movement. You can see this desire to move in children. *Until* we teach our children that they need to be concerned with how they look and with what other people think, they dance. They even dance naked. Not always gracefully or with the beat, but always with joy and pleasure.

Writer Mary Jo Putney says, "What one loves in childhood stays in the heart forever." If this is true, and I believe it is, then dance stays in our heart, even when our head becomes overly concerned with what people might think.

### Being Cool and "Always in Control"

*The only true currency in this bankrupt world is what you share with someone else when you're uncool.*

~ A QUOTE FROM THE FILM *ALMOST FAMOUS*, 2000

A good belly laugh, singing at the top of your lungs, and dancing like no one is looking are unquestionably good for the soul. But as I mentioned, they are also exercises in vulnerability. There are many shame triggers around the vulnerability of laughing, song, and dance. The list includes the fear of being perceived as awkward, goofy, silly, spastic, uncool, out of control, immature, stupid, and foolish. For most of us, this is a pretty scary list. The gremlins are constantly there to make sure that self-expression takes a backseat to self-protection and self-consciousness.

- "What will people think?"
- "Everyone is watching—calm down!"
- "You look ridiculous! Get a hold of yourself!"

Women spoke about the dangers of being perceived as "getting too loud" or "out of hand." I can't tell you how many women told me about the painful experience of throwing caution to the wind, only to be patronizingly told, "Whoa . . . settle down."

Men were quick to point out the dangers of being perceived as "out of control." One man told me, "Women say we should let loose and have fun. How attractive will they think we are if we get out on the dance floor and look like assholes in front of other guys—or worse—your girlfriend's friends. It's easier to just hang back and act like you're not interested in dancing. Even if you really want to."

There are many ways in which men and women hustle for worthiness around these issues, but the two that keep us the most quiet and still are hustling to be perceived as "cool" and "in control." Wanting to be perceived as cool isn't about wanting to be "The Fonz"—it's about minimizing vulnerability in order to reduce the risk of being ridiculed or made fun of.

We hustle for our worthiness by slipping on the emotional and behavioral straitjacket of cool and posturing as the tragically hip and the terminally "better than." Being "in control" isn't always about the desire to manipulate situations, but often it's about the need to manage perception. We want to be able to control what other people think about us so that we can feel good enough.

I grew up in a family where being cool and fitting in were highly valued. As an adult, I have to constantly work at allowing myself to be vulnerable and authentic around some of these issues. I could laugh and sing and dance as an adult, as long as I stayed clear of silly, goofy, and awkward. For years, these were major shame triggers for me.

During my 2007 ~~Breakdown~~ *Spiritual Awakening*, I learned how much I've missed while pretending to be cool. I realized that one of the

reasons I'm afraid to try new things (like yoga or the hip-hop exercise class at my gym) is my fear of being perceived as goofy and awkward.

I've spent a lot of time and energy working on this. It's a slow process. I'm still only supersilly and goofy around people I trust, but I think that's okay. I'm also working hard not to pass this down to my kids. It's easy to do when we're not mindful of the gremlins and shame triggers. Here's proof:

Last year, I had to run to Nordstrom to pick up some make-up. I was in one of those "nothing fits and I feel like Jabba the Hutt" moods, so I put on my baggiest sweats, pulled my dirty hair back with a headband, and told Ellen, "We're just running in and running out."

On the way to the mall, Ellen reminded me that the shoes her grandmother had bought her were in the back of the car and asked if we could exchange them for a bigger size while we were at the store. After I bought my makeup, we went upstairs to the kid's shoe department. As soon as we cleared the top of the escalator, I saw a trio of gorgeous women standing in the shoe department. They were tossing their long (clean) hair over their narrow, square shoulders as they perched on their high-heeled, pointed-toe boots, and watched their equally beautiful daughters try on sneakers.

As I tried to avoid crumpling and comparing by focusing on the display shoes, I saw a strange blur of jerky movement out of the corner of my eye. It was Ellen. A pop song was playing in the neighboring children's department, and Ellen, my totally confident eight-year-old, was dancing. Or, to be more specific, she was doing the robot.

At the very moment that Ellen looked up and saw me watching her, I saw the magnificent moms and their matching daughters staring right at Ellen. The mothers looked embarrassed for her, and the daughters, who were a couple of years older than Ellen, were visibly on the edge of doing or saying something mean-spirited. Ellen froze. Still bent over with her arms in rigid formation, she looked up at me with eyes that said, "What do I do, Mom?"

My default response in this scenario is to shoot a diminishing look at Ellen that says, "Geez, man. Don't be so uncool!" Basically, my

immediate reaction would be to save myself by betraying Ellen. Thank God I didn't. Some combination of being immersed in this work, having a mother instinct that was louder than my fear, and pure grace told me, "Choose Ellen! Be on her side!"

I glanced up at the other mothers and then looked at Ellen. I reached down into my courage, as far as I go, smiled, and said, "You need to add the scarecrow to your moves." I let my wrist and hand dangle from my extended arm and pretended to bat my forearm around. Ellen smiled. We stood in the middle of the shoe department and practiced our moves until the song was over. I'm not sure how the onlookers responded to our shoe department Soul Train. I didn't take my eyes off Ellen.

*Betrayal* is an important word with this guidepost. When we value being cool and in control over granting ourselves the freedom to unleash the passionate, goofy, heartfelt, and soulful expressions of who we are, we betray ourselves. When we consistently betray ourselves, we can expect to do the same to the people we love.

When we don't give ourselves permission to be free, we rarely tolerate that freedom in others. We put them down, make fun of them, ridicule their behaviors, and sometimes shame them. We can do this intentionally or unconsciously. Either way the message is, "Geez, man. Don't be so uncool."

The Hopi Indians have a saying, "To watch us dance is to hear our hearts speak." I know how much courage it takes to let people hear our hearts speak, but life is way too precious to spend it pretending like we're super-cool and totally in control when we could be laughing, singing, and dancing.

### DIG DEEP

**Get Deliberate:** If we believe that laughter, song, and dance are essential to our soul-care, how do we make sure that we hold space for them in our lives? One thing that we've started doing is turning on music in the kitchen while we do a family cleanup after supper. We dance and sing, which in turn, always leads to a good laugh.



**Get Inspired:** I love making “themed playlists”—groups of songs that I want to listen to when I’m feeling a certain way. I have everything from a playlist called “God on the iPod,” to a “Run like you mean it” list. My favorite is my “Authentic Me” list—the songs that make me feel most like myself.

**Get Going:** Dare to be goofy. Dance every day for five minutes. Make a CD of songs to sing along with in the car. Watch that dumb YouTube video that makes you laugh every time!

*How do you DIG Deep?*



### **Topic 15**

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Topic and Reading: Final Thoughts
- Reflection Worksheet: Final Thoughts
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.



## Final Thoughts

I think most of us have developed fairly sensitive bullshit meters when it comes to reading “self-help” books. I think this is a good thing. There are too many books that make promises they can’t keep or make change sound so much easier than it is. The truth is that meaningful change is a process. It can be uncomfortable and is often risky, especially when we’re talking about embracing our imperfections, cultivating authenticity, and looking the world in the eye and saying, “I am enough.”

However afraid we are of change, the question that we must ultimately answer is this: *What’s the greater risk? Letting go of what people think or letting go of how I feel, what I believe, and who I am?*

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

It makes sense to me that the gifts of imperfection are courage, compassion, and connection, because when I think back to my life before this work, I remember often feeling fearful, judgmental, and alone—the opposite of the gifts. I wondered, *What if I can’t keep all of these balls in the air? Why isn’t everyone else working harder and living up to my expectations? What will people think if I fail or give up? When can I stop proving myself to everyone?*

For me, the risk of losing myself felt far more dangerous than the risk of letting people see the real me. It's been close to four years since that day in 2006, when my own research turned my life upside down. It's been the best four years of my life, and I wouldn't change a thing. The ~~Breakdown~~ Spiritual Awakening was tough, but I'm hardheaded. I guess the universe needed a way to get my attention.

Despite where this book will be shelved in your local bookstore, I'm not at all sure that this work is about self-help. I think of it as an invitation to join a Wholehearted revolution. A small, quiet, grassroots movement that starts with each of us saying, "My story matters because I matter." A movement where we can take to the streets with our messy, imperfect, wild, stretch-marked, wonderful, heartbreaking, grace-filled, and joyful lives. A movement fueled by the freedom that comes when we stop pretending that everything is okay when it isn't. A call that rises up from our bellies when we find the courage to celebrate those intensely joyful moments even though we've convinced ourselves that savoring happiness is inviting disaster.

*Revolution* might sound a little dramatic, but in this world, choosing authenticity and worthiness is an absolute act of resistance. Choosing to live and love with our whole hearts is an act of defiance. You're going to confuse, piss off, and terrify lots of people—including yourself. One minute you'll pray that the transformation stops, and the next minute you'll pray that it never ends. You'll also wonder how you can feel so brave and so afraid at the same time. At least that's how I feel most of the time . . . brave, afraid, and very, very alive.



## *Embracing Imperfection*

### **Final Thoughts**

What have you learned about yourself and your gift of imperfection?

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What was the biggest take-away from this group for you? What was the biggest challenge?

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Any other final thoughts you would like to share:

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*When you're done with this worksheet, shout or say "Woohoo!" Dare to be goofy!*

### Topic 16

- Check-in: "Is there anything you've struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?"
- Reflection Worksheet
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

*Embracing Imperfection*

**Reflection Worksheet**

What boundaries/limits do you need to set in your life right now?

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How have you used your gifts/talents recently? For yourself? For others?

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How have you practiced “leaning into discomfort” in your life at present?

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Joy.

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I am grateful for:

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### Topic 17

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Reflection Worksheet
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.



*Embracing Imperfection*

**Reflection Worksheet**

What boundaries/limits do you need to set in your life right now?

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How have you used your gifts/talents recently? For yourself? For others?

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How have you practiced “leaning into discomfort” in your life at present?

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### Topic 18

- Check-in: “Is there anything you’ve struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?”
- Reflection Worksheet
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

*Embracing Imperfection*

**Reflection Worksheet**

What boundaries/limits do you need to set in your life right now?

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How have you used your gifts/talents recently? For yourself? For others?

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How have you practiced “leaning into discomfort” in your life at present?

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Joy.

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### Topic 19

- Check-in: "Is there anything you've struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?"
- Reflection Worksheet
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

*Embracing Imperfection*

**Reflection Worksheet**

What boundaries/limits do you need to set in your life right now?

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How have you used your gifts/talents recently? For yourself? For others?

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How have you practiced “leaning into discomfort” in your life at present?

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Joy.

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### Topic 20

- Check-in: "Is there anything you've struggled with embracing or accepting into yourself over the past week?"
- Termination of group.
- Closing: Go around the room and ask for one feeling word to describe their experience of this group today.

*Embracing Imperfection*

**Reflection Worksheet**

What boundaries/limits do you need to set in your life right now?

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How have you used your gifts/talents recently? For yourself? For others?

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How have you practiced “leaning into discomfort” in your life at present?

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Joy.

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# THE HOLE

## WORKSHEET

1. What is your 'deep hole'? (A problem behavior specific to you.)

Possible answers are: drinking, drugs, violence, unhealthy relationships, self-harm.

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2. Tell about your chapter #1 – your first fall. Explain how you found a way out.

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3. What is the difference between chapter #1 and #2? What does "I pretend I don't see it" mean and how did you pretend you didn't see your 'hole'?

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4. In chapter #3, why do we fall in? What do we recognize that helps us get out immediately? Tell time you admitted it was your fault and how it helped.

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5. What big difference occurs in chapter #4? Tell a time you 'walked around it.'

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6. What does it mean to 'walk down another street'? Describe your new activities and/or lifestyle. What will you be thinking and doing? What kind of relationships will you seek?

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# THE HOLE

## AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN FIVE SHORT CHAPTERS by Portia Nelson

5/7/15  
Curriculum

Taking Action  
"Walk"  
Prevents us  
from being  
"stuck"

Topic -  
Openmindedness  
Taking risks,  
changing our  
thoughts and  
behaviors

I

I walk down the street  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I fall in  
I am lost ..... I am helpless  
It isn't my fault.  
It takes forever to find a way out.

II

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I pretend I don't see it.  
I fall in again.  
I can't believe I am in the same place,  
but it isn't my fault.  
It still takes a long time to get out.

III

I walk down the same street  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I see it is there.  
I still fall in..... it's a habit.  
My eyes are open. I know where I am.  
It is my fault.  
I get out immediately.

IV

I walk down the same street  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I walk around it.

V

I walk down another street.