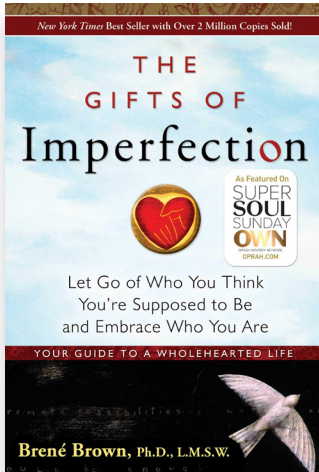


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# The Gifts of Imperfection

## THE SUMMARY

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### **Introduction: Wholehearted Living**

Wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness. It means 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.*

Wholehearted living is not a onetime choice. It is a process. In fact, I believe it's the journey of a lifetime. Before embarking on any journey, including this one, it's important to talk about what we need to bring along. What does it take to live and love from a place of worthiness? How do we embrace imperfection? How do we cultivate what we need and let go of the things that are holding us back? The answers to all of these questions are courage, compassion, and connection which are all the tools we need to work our way through our journey.

Courage, compassion, and connection seem like big, lofty ideals, but in reality, they are daily practices that when exercised enough become these incredible gifts in our lives. The good news is that our vulnerabilities are what force us to call upon these amazing tools and just because we're human and so beautifully imperfect, we get to practice using our tools on a daily basis. In this way, courage, compassion, and connection become the gifts of imperfection.

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## **Courage, Compassion, and Connection: The Gift of Imperfection**

Practicing courage, compassion, and connection in our daily lives is how we cultivate worthiness. The key word is practice. Mary Daly, a theologian, writes, “Courage is a habitués, a habit, a virtue which you get by courageous acts. It’s like you learn to swim by swimming. You learn courage by couraging.” The same is true for compassion and connection. We invite compassion into our lives when we act compassionately towards ourselves and others, and we feel connected in our lives when we reach out and connect.

The root of the word courage is cor—the Latin word for heart. In one of its earliest forms, the word courage had a very different definition than it does today. Courage originally meant: “To speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart.” Over time, this definition has changed, and, today, courage is more synonymous with being heroic. Heroics is important and we certainly need heroes, but I think we’ve lost touch with the idea that speaking honestly and openly about who we are, about what we’re feeling, and about our experiences (good and bad) is the definition of courage. Heroics is often about putting our life on the line. Ordinary courage is about putting our vulnerability on the line. In today’s world, that’s pretty extraordinary.

The word compassion is derived from the Latin words pati and cum, meaning “to suffer with.” I don’t believe that compassion is our default response. I think our first response to pain, ours or someone else’s, is to self-protect. We protect ourselves by looking for someone or something to blame. Sometimes we shield ourselves by turning to judgment or by immediately going into fix-it mode.

The heart of compassion is really acceptance. The better we are at accepting ourselves and others, the more compassionate we become. It’s difficult to accept people when they are hurting us or taking advantage of us or walking all over us. This research has taught me that if we really want to practice compassion, we have to start by setting boundaries and holding people accountable for their behavior.

We live in a blame culture. We want to know whose fault it is and how they’re going to pay. In our personal, social, and political worlds, we do a lot of screaming and finger-pointing, but we rarely hold people accountable. How could we when we’re so exhausted from ranting and raving. Setting boundaries and holding people accountable is a lot more work than shaming and blaming, but it’s also much more effective. Shaming and blaming without accountability is toxic to couples, families, organizations, and communities. When we shame and blame, it moves the focus from the original behavior in question to our own behavior. By the time this boss is finished shaming and humiliating his employees in front of their colleagues, the only behavior in question is his.

I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship. Our innate need for connection makes the consequences of disconnection that much more real and dangerous. Sometimes we only think we’ve connected. Technology, for instance,

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has become a kind of imposter for connection, making us believe we're connected when we're really not or at least not in the ways we need to be. In our technology-crazed world, we've confused being communicative with feeling connected. Just because we're plugged in doesn't mean we feel seen and heard.

As we think about the definition of connection and how easy it is to mistake technology for connecting, we also need to consider letting go of the myth of self-sufficiency. One of the greatest barriers to connection is the cultural importance we place on "going it alone." Somehow, we've come to equate success with not needing anyone. Many of us are willing to extend a helping hand, but we're very reluctant to reach out for help when we need it ourselves. It's as if we've divided the world into "those who offer help" and "those who need help." The truth is that we are both.

The Wholehearted journey is not the path of least resistance. It's a path of consciousness and choice. To be honest, it's a little counter-cultural. The willingness to tell our stories, feel the pain of others, and stay genuinely connected in this disconnected world is something we cannot do halfheartedly. To practice courage, compassion, and connection is to look at life and the people around us, and say, "I'm all in."

## **Exploring the Power of Love, Belonging, and Being Enough**

When we can let go of what other people think and own our story, we gain access to our worthiness which may be defined as the feeling that we are enough just as we are and that we are worthy of love and belonging. When we spend a lifetime trying to distance ourselves from the parts of our lives that don't fit with who we think we're supposed to be, we stand outside of our story and hustle for our worthiness by constantly performing, perfecting, pleasing, and proving. Our sense of worthiness lives inside of our story.

Most of us use the terms fitting in and belonging interchangeably, and like many of you, I'm really good at fitting in. We know exactly how to hustle for approval and acceptance. We know what to wear, what to talk about, how to make people happy, what not to mention. In other words, we know how to chameleon our way through the day.

One of the biggest surprises in this research was learning that fitting in and belonging are not the same thing, and, in fact, fitting in gets in the way of belonging. Fitting in is about assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, doesn't require us to change who we are; it requires us to be who we are.

A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all women, men, and children. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don't function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick. There are certainly other causes of illness, numbing, and hurt, but the absence of love and belonging will always lead to suffering.

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We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness, and affection. Love is not something we give or get; it is something that we nurture and grow, a connection that can only be cultivated between two people when it exists within each one of them. We can only love others as much as we love ourselves.

Shame, blame, disrespect, betrayal, and the withholding of affection damage the roots from which love grows. Love can only survive these injuries if they are acknowledged, healed, and rare. Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. This yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which are not only hollow substitutes for belonging, but often barriers to it. Being imperfect selves in the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.

It's so much easier to say, "I'll be whoever or whatever you need me to be, as long as I feel like I'm part of this." From gangs to gossiping, we'll do what it takes to fit in if we believe it will meet our need for belonging. But it doesn't. We can only belong when we offer our most authentic selves and when we're embraced for who we are. If we want to take part in this revolution, we have to understand the anatomy of love and belonging; we need to understand when and why we hustle for worthiness rather than claim it; and we have to understand the things that get in the way. We encounter obstacles on every journey we make. The Wholehearted journey is no different.

## The Things That Get in the Way

If we want to live and love with our whole hearts, and if we want to engage with the world from a place of worthiness, we have to talk about the things that get in the way, especially shame, fear, and vulnerability.

Shame is that warm feeling that washes over us, making us feel small, flawed, and never good enough. If we want to develop shame resilience, which is the ability to recognize shame and move through it, while maintaining our worthiness and authenticity, then we have to talk about why shame happens. Shame is basically the fear of being unlovable and that's the total opposite of owning our story and feeling worthy. In fact, the definition of shame that I developed from my research is this: *Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.*

People often want to believe that shame is reserved for the folks who have survived terrible traumas, but this is not true. Shame is something we all experience. While it feels as if shame hides in our darkest corners, it actually tends to lurk in all of the familiar places, including appearance and body image, family, parenting, money and work, health, addiction, sex, aging, and religion. To feel shame is to be human. The stories of our struggles are difficult for everyone to own, and if we've worked hard to make sure everything looks "just right" on the outside, the stakes are high when it comes to truth-telling. This is why shame loves perfectionists. It's so easy to keep us quiet.

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In addition to the fear of disappointing people or pushing them away with our stories, we're also afraid that if we tell our stories, the weight of a single experience will collapse upon us. There is a real fear that we can be buried or defined by an experience that, in reality, is only a sliver of who we are. Shame needs three things to grow out of control in our lives: secrecy, silence, and judgment. When something shaming happens and we keep it locked up, it festers and grows. It consumes us. We need to share our experience. Shame happens between people, and it heals between people. If we can find someone who has earned the right to hear our story, we need to tell it. Shame loses power when it is spoken. In this way, we need to cultivate our story to let go of shame, and we need to develop shame resilience in order to cultivate our story.

After a decade of research, I found that men and women with high levels of shame resilience share these four elements:

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

In order to deal with shame, some of us move away by withdrawing, hiding, silencing ourselves, and keeping secrets. Some of us move toward by seeking to appease and please. Finally, some of us move against by trying to gain power over others, by being aggressive, and by using shame to fight shame (like sending really mean e-mails).

Most of us use all of these at different times with different folks and for different reasons. Yet all of these strategies move us away from our story. Shame is about fear, blame, and disconnection. Story is about worthiness and embracing the imperfections that bring us courage, compassion, and connection. If we want to live fully, without the constant fear of not being enough, we have to own our story. We also have to respond to shame in a way that doesn't exacerbate our shame. One way to do that is to recognize when we're in shame so we can react with intention.

If you want to kick-start your shame resilience and story-claiming, start with these questions. Figuring out the answers can change your life:

1. Who do you become when you're backed into that shame corner?
2. How do you protect yourself?

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3. Who do you call to work through the mean-nasties or the cry-n-hides or the people-pleasing?

4. What's the most courageous thing you could do for yourself when you feel small and hurt?

We don't need love, belonging and story-catching from everyone in our lives, but we need it from at least one person. If we have that one person or that small group of confidants, the best way to acknowledge these connections is to acknowledge our worthiness. If we're working toward relationships based in love, belonging, and story, we have to start in the same place: I am worthy.

## Guidepost #1: Cultivating Authenticity

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. 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.
- 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 is 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. 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. 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.

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. 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 to the people we love.

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## Guidepost #2: Cultivating Self-Compassion

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. 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 as your self-worth is on the line.

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 but 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) is the reality of the human experience. Perfectionism actually increases the odds that we'll experience these painful emotions and often leads to self-blame, as in "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 which include courage, compassion, and connection. Perfectionism exists along a continuum. We all have some perfectionist 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.

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."

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*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."

Perfectionism never happens in a vacuum. It touches everyone around us. We pass it down to our children, we infect our work place 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.

## **Guidepost #3: Cultivating a Resilient Spirit**

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.

According to the people I interviewed, the very foundation of the "protective factors," or 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, I define spirituality as recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion. Practicing spirituality brings a sense of perspective, meaning, and purpose to our lives.

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.



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I was shocked to discover that hope is not an emotion but rather a way of thinking or a cognitive process. Emotions lay a supporting role, but hope is really a thought process made up of a trilogy of goals, pathways, and agency. In very simple terms, hope is a combination of setting goals, having the tenacity and perseverance to pursue them, and believing in our own abilities.

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.

Practicing critical awareness is about reality-checking messages and expectations that drive the "never good enough" gremlins. Practicing critical awareness is actually one of the four elements of shame resilience. Shame works like a zoom on a camera. When we are feeling shame, camera is zoomed in tight and all we see is our flawed selves, alone and struggling. We think to ourselves, am I the only one with a muffin-top? Am I the only one with a family who is messy, loud, and out of control? 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 feeling like 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.

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 the 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 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.

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.

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

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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 and then I don't experience joy and so on.

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

## **Guidepost #4: Cultivating Gratitude and Joy**

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.

When it comes to gratitude, the word that jumped out at me throughout this research process is practice. So, what does a gratitude practice look like? The folks I interviewed talked about keeping gratitude journals, doing daily gratitude meditations 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 in that it's not alive.

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.

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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.

Twinkle lights are the perfect metaphor for joy. Joy is not a constant. It comes to us in moments, though 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.

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.

## **Guidepost #5: Cultivating Intuition and Trusting Faith**

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. 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. 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. The definition I crafted from the research is 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.

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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.

Based on the research interviews, I define faith as 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.

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.

## **Guidepost #6: Cultivating Creativity**

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 to cultivate self-acceptance, belonging, and authenticity. It's to 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.

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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. Without comparison, concepts like ahead or behind, or best or worst lose their meaning.

## **Guidepost #7: Cultivating Play and Rest**

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. Dr. Stuart 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. 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.

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."

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. 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. 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 very dangerously tired.

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.

## **Guidepost #8: Cultivating Calm and Stillness**

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.

# The Gifts of Imperfection

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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. 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.

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.

The concept of stillness is less complicated than the concept of calm but, for me at least, way more difficult to put into practice. Stillness is not about focusing on nothingness; it is about creating a clearing. It is 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.

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.

## **Guidepost #9: Cultivating Meaningful Work**

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.

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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've found a way to 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. 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."

## **Guidepost #10: Cultivating Laughter, Song, and Dance**

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." 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: that we are not alone.

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 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.

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.

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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.

## Final Thoughts

I think of this book 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. I revel in feeling brave, afraid and very, very alive.