Connection is why we're here. We are hardwired to connect with others, it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives, and without it there is suffering. I wanted to develop research that explained the anatomy of connection.

Vulnerability is the core, the heart, the center of meaningful human experiences.

When shame becomes a management style, engagement dies. When failure is not an option we can forget about learning, creativity, and innovation.

What we know matters, but who we are matters more.

Being rather than knowing requires showing up and letting ourselves be seen.

The topic of narcissism has penetrated the social consciousness enough that most people correctly associate it with a pattern of behaviors that include grandiosity, a pervasive need for admiration, and a lack of empathy. What almost no one understands is how every level of severity in this diagnosis is underpinned by shame.

When I look at narcissism through the vulnerability lens, I see the shame-based fear of being ordinary.

I know the yearning to believe that what I'm doing matters and how easy it is to confuse that with the drive to be extraordinary.

I also understand how grandiosity, entitlement, and admiration-seeking feel like just the right balm to soothe the ache of being too ordinary and inadequate.

Scarcity: The never-enough problem

I know that I'm onto something when folks look away, quickly cover their faces with their hands, or respond with "ouch," "shut up," or "get out of my head." The last is normally how people respond when they hear or see the phrase: Never _____ enough. It only takes a few seconds before people fill in the blanks with their own tapes. Never good enough, never perfect enough, never thin enough, never powerful enough, never successful enough, never smart enough, never certain enough, never safe enough, never extraordinary enough.

The feeling of scarcity does thrive in shame-prone cultures that are deeply steeped in comparison and fractured by disengagement.

Shame: Is fear of ridicule and belittling used to manage people and/or to keep people in line? Is self-worth tied to achievement, productivity, or compliance? Are blaming and finger-pointing norms? Are put-downs and name-calling rampant? What about favoritism? Is perfectionism an issue? Comparison: Healthy competition can be beneficial, but is there constant overt or covert comparing and ranking? Has creativity been suffocated? Are people held to one narrow standard rather than acknowledged for their unique gifts and contributions? Is there an ideal way of being or one form of talent that is used as measurement of everyone else's worth? Disengagement: Are people afraid to take risks or try new things? Is it easier to stay quiet than to share stories, experiences, and ideas? Does it feel as if no one is really paying attention or listening? Is everyone struggling to be seen and heard?

The opposite of "never enough" isn't abundance or "more than you could ever imagine." The opposite of scarcity is enough, or what I call wholeheartedness.

There are many tenets of Wholeheartedness, but at its very core is vulnerability and worthiness: facing uncertainty, exposure, and emotional risks, and knowing that I am enough.

The greatest casualties of a scarcity culture are our willingness to own our vulnerabilities and our ability to engage with the world from a place of worthiness.

Debunking the vulnerability myths

Myth #1-"Vulnerability is weakness.

Vulnerability is also the cradle of the emotions and experiences that we crave.

I define vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.

We dismiss vulnerability as weakness only when we realize that we've confused feeling with failing and emotions with liabilities.

Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage. Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they're never weakness.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the word vulnerability is derived from the Latin word vulnerare, meaning "to wound."

 I took a deep breath and recited my vulnerability prayer as I waited for my turn: Give me the courage to show up and let myself be seen.

Vulnerability is life's great dare.

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

We can't opt out of the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure that's woven through our daily experiences. Life is vulnerable.

Experiencing vulnerability isn't a choice—the only choice we have is how we're going to respond when we are confronted with uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.

Myth #3: "Vulnerability is letting it all hang out."

Vulnerability is based on mutuality and requires boundaries and trust.

Vulnerability is about sharing our feelings and our experiences with people who have earned the right to hear them. Being vulnerable and open is mutual and an integral part of the trust-building process.

Vulnerability"—vulnerability is bankrupt on its own terms when people move from being vulnerable to using vulnerability to deal with unmet needs, get attention, or engage in the shock-and-awe behaviors that are so commonplace in today's culture.

Nothing has transformed my life more than realizing that it's a waste of time to evaluate my worthiness by weighing the reaction of the people in the stands.

Understanding and combating shame (Aka gremlin ninja warrior training

Only when we're brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.

We can't let ourselves be seen if we're terrified by what people might think.

In shame-prone cultures, where parents, leaders, and administrators consciously or unconsciously encourage people to connect their self-worth to what they produce, I see disengagement, blame, gossip, stagnation, favoritism, and a total dearth of creativity and innovation.

Every time someone holds back on a new idea, fails to give their manager much needed feedback, and is afraid to speak up in front of a client you can be sure shame played a part.

This notion that the leader needs to be "in charge" and to "know all the answers" is both dated and destructive.

Shame becomes fear. Fear leads to risk aversion. Risk aversion kills innovation.

Sometimes shame is the result of us playing the old recordings that were programmed when we were children or simply absorbed from the culture.

Sometimes when we dare to walk into the arena the greatest critic we face is ourselves.

This hurts. This is disappointing, maybe even devastating. But success and recognition and approval are not the values that drive me.

Shame is the fear of disconnection.

Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.

The majority of shame researchers and clinicians agree that the difference between shame and guilt is best understood as the difference between "I am bad" and "I did something bad." Guilt = I did something bad. Shame = I am bad.

I get it. Shame is bad. So what do we do about it? The answer is shame resilience. Note that shame resistance is not possible.

According to Dr. Hartling, in order to deal with shame, some of us move away by withdrawing, hiding silencing ourselves, and keeping secrets; some of us toward by seeking to appease and please. And some of us move against by trying to gain power over others by being aggressive, and by using shame to fight shame.

The most connected and compassionate people of those I've interviewed set and respect boundaries.

Shame thrives on secret keeping, and when it comes to secrets, there's some serious science behind the twelve-step program saying, "You're only as sick as your secrets."

Our worst fear is being criticized or ridiculed—either one of these is extremely shaming.

Basically, men live under the pressure of one unrelenting message: Do not be perceived as weak.

As scarcity has grabbed hold of our culture, it's not just "Don't be perceived as weak," but also "You better be great and all powerful."

I was not prepared to hear over and over from men how the women—the mothers, sisters, girlfriends, wives—in their lives are constantly criticizing them for not being open and vulnerable and intimate,

I don't want to oversimplify something as complex as the response to shame, but I have to say that when it comes to men, there seem to be two primary responses: pissed off or shut down.

I became very clear about how the world works and what it means to be a man: "I am not allowed to be afraid. "I am not allowed to show fear. "I am not allowed to be vulnerable. "Shame is being afraid, showing fear, or being vulnerable."

There is a quiet transformation happening that is moving us from "turning on each other" to "turning toward each other."

I sat down with a therapist who had spent more than twenty-five years working with men. He explained that from the time boys are eight to ten years old, they learn that initiating sex is their responsibility and that sexual rejection soon becomes the hallmark of masculine shame.

 "I guess the secret is that sex is terrifying for most men. That's why you see everything from porn to the violent, desperate attempts to exercise power and control. Rejection is deeply painful."

When we got married neither of us had any idea what a good partnership looked like, or what it took to make it work. If you asked us today what we believe is the key to our relationship, the answer would be vulnerability, love, humor, respect, shame-free fighting, and blame-free living.

Do you remember how I mentioned earlier in the chapter that researchers found that attributes such as nice, thin, and modest were qualities that our culture associates with femininity?

Well, when looking at the attributes associated with masculinity in the US, the same researchers identified the following: winning, emotional control, risk-taking, violence, dominance, playboy, self-reliance, primacy of work, power over women, disdain for homosexuality, and pursuit of status.

If women want to play by the rules, they need to be sweet, thin, and pretty, stay quiet, be perfect moms and wives, and not own their power.

With that sense of "enough" comes an embrace of worthiness, boundaries, and engagement.

This lay at the core of every strategy illuminated by the research participants for freeing themselves from their armor: I am enough (worthiness versus shame). I've had enough (boundaries versus one-uping and comparison). Showing up, taking risks, and letting myself be seen is enough (engagement versus disengagement).

Daring greatly: Practicing gratitude.

Gratitude, therefore, emerged from the data as the antidote to foreboding joy. In fact, every participant who spoke about the ability to stay open to joy also talked about the importance of practicing gratitude.

Scarcity and fear drive foreboding joy. We're afraid that the feeling of joy won't last, or that there won't be enough, or that the transition to disappointment (or whatever is in store for us next) will be too difficult.

Joy comes to us in moments—ordinary moments. We risk missing out on joy when we get too busy chasing down the extraordinary.

 Don't squander joy. We can't prepare for tragedy and loss. When we turn every opportunity to feel joy into a test drive for despair, we actually diminish our resilience.

The shield: Perfectionism

Perfectionism is not self-improvement. Perfectionism is, at its core, about trying to earn approval.

Perfectionism is not the key to success. In fact, research shows that perfectionism hampers achievement.

Perfectionism is a self-destructive and addictive belief system that fuels this primary thought: If I look perfect and do everything perfectly, I can avoid or minimize the painful feelings of shame, judgment, and blame.

Perfectionism is self-destructive simply because perfection doesn't exist. It's an unattainable goal.

Perfectionism is exhausting because hustling is exhausting. It's a never-ending performance.

"Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good." (Cribbed from Voltaire.)

Perfection is the enemy of done.

Perfectionism crushes creativity

One of the most universal numbing strategies is what I call crazy-busy.

When they start having twelve-step meetings for busy-aholics, they'll need to rent out football stadiums.

Reducing anxiety meant paying attention to how much they could do and how much was too much, and learning how to say, "Enough."

The participants who struggled the most with numbing, Group A, explained that reducing anxiety meant finding ways to numb it, not changing the thinking, behaviors, or emotions that created anxiety.

I wanted help "living like this," not suggestions on how to "stop living like this."

Living a connected life ultimately is about setting boundaries, spending less time and energy hustling and winning over people who don't matter, and seeing the value of working on cultivating connection with family and close friends.

Are my choices comforting and nourishing my spirit, or are they temporary reprieves from vulnerability and difficult emotions ultimately diminishing my spirit? Are my choices leading to my Wholeheartedness, or do they leave me feeling empty and searching?

Love and belonging are irreducible needs of men, women, and children, and love and belonging are impossible to experience without vulnerability.

None of us is ever able to part with our survival strategies without significant support and the cultivation of replacement strategies.

When we stop caring about what people think, we lose our willingness to be vulnerable.

If we dismiss all the criticism, we lose out on important feedback, but if we subject ourselves to the hatefulness, our spirits get crushed. It's a tightrope, shame resilience is the balance bar, and the safety net below is the one or two people in our lives who can help us reality-check the criticism and cynicism.

"The way we do things around here," or culture, is complex. In my experience, I can tell a lot about the culture and values of a group, family, or organization by asking these ten questions: What behaviors are rewarded? Punished?

Where and how are people actually spending their resources (time, money, attention)? What rules and expectations are followed, enforced, and ignored? Do people feel safe and supported talking about how they feel and asking for what they need? What are the sacred cows? Who is most likely to tip them? Who stands the cows back up? What stories are legend and what values do they convey? What happens when someone fails, disappoints, or makes a mistake? How is vulnerability (uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure) perceived? How prevalent are shame and blame and how are they showing up? What's the collective tolerance for discomfort? Is the discomfort of learning, trying new things, and giving and receiving feedback normalized, or is there a high premium put on comfort (and how does that look)?

We don't have to be perfect, just engaged and committed to aligning values with action.

Innovative ideas often sound crazy and failure and learning are part of revolution.

Most people and most organizations can't stand the uncertainty and the risk of real innovation. Learning and creating are inherently vulnerable. There's never enough certainty. People want guarantees."

"There are times when you can ask questions or challenge ideas, but if you've got a teacher that doesn't like that or the kids in the class make fun of people who do that, it's bad. I think most of us learn that it's best to just keep your head down, your mouth shut, and your grades high."

No corporation or school can thrive in the absence of creativity, innovation, and learning, and the greatest threat to all three of these is disengagement.

If employees are constantly having to navigate shame, you can bet that they're passing it on to their customers, students, and families.

Shame can only rise so far in any system before people disengage to protect themselves. When we're disengaged, we don't show up, we don't contribute, and we stop caring.

Here's the best way to think about the relationship between shame and blame: If blame is driving, shame is riding shotgun.

If blame is a pattern in your culture, then shame needs to be addressed as an issue.

Related to blame is the issue of cover-ups. Just like blame is a sign of shame-based organizations, cover-up cultures depend on shame to keep folks quiet.

When the culture of an organization mandates that it is more important to protect the reputation of a system and those in power than it is to protect the basic human dignity of individuals or communities, you can be certain that shame is systemic, money drives ethics, and accountability is dead.

We can't control the behavior of individuals; however, we can cultivate organizational cultures where behaviors are not tolerated and people are held accountable for protecting what matters most: human beings.

Today's organizations are so metric-focused in their evaluation of performance that giving, receiving, and soliciting valuable feedback ironically has become rare.

Without feedback there can be no transformative change. When we don't talk to the people we're leading about their strengths and their opportunities for growth, they begin to question their contributions and our commitment. Disengagement follows.

I believe that feedback thrives in cultures where the goal is not "getting comfortable with hard conversations" but normalizing discomfort.

The big challenge for leaders is getting our heads and hearts around the fact that we need to cultivate the courage to be uncomfortable and to teach the people around us how to accept discomfort as a part of growth.

So, how do we create a safe space for vulnerability and growth when we're not feeling open? Armored feedback doesn't facilitate lasting and meaningful change—I don't know a single person who can be open to accepting feedback or owning responsibility for something when they're being hammered. Our hardwiring takes over and we self-protect.

There's nothing more important than having the courage to say, 'I don't know,' and 'I messed up'—being honest and open is key to success in every part of our lives."

Getting people to engage and take ownership wasn't about "the telling" but about letting them come into the idea in a purpose-led way, and that her job was creating the space for others to perform.

If you're not uncomfortable in your work as a leader, it's almost certain you're not reaching your potential as a leader."

Who we are and how we engage with the world are much stronger predictors of how our children will do than what we know about parenting.

As parents, we help our children develop shame resilience and worthiness by staying very mindful about the prerequisites that we're knowingly or unknowingly handing down to them.

Perfectionism is not teaching them how to strive for excellence or be their best selves. Perfectionism is teaching them to value what other people think over what they think or how they feel.

It's teaching them to perform, please, and prove.

I don't want to criticize when my kids walk in the room, I want to light up!

Cultivating more guilt self-talk and less shame self-talk requires rethinking how we discipline and talk to our children.

I can say without hesitation that childhood experiences of shame change who we are, how we think about ourselves, and our sense of self-worth.

When we feel good about the choices we're making and when we're engaging with the world from a place of worthiness rather than scarcity, we feel no need to judge and attack.

But as I look back on my own life and what Daring Greatly has meant to me, I can honestly say that nothing is as uncomfortable, dangerous, and hurtful as believing that I'm standing on the outside of my life looking in and wondering what it would be like if I had the courage to show up and let myself be seen.

Traveler, there is no path. The path must be forged as you walk.