This is a work of nonfiction. Nonetheless, some of the names and personal characteristics of the individuals involved have been changed in order to disguise their identities. Any resulting resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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AND STORYTELLING AS METHODOLOGY

In the 1990s, when I began studying social work, the profession was in the midst of a polarizing debate about the nature of knowledge and truth. Is wisdom derived from experience more or less valuable than data produced by controlled research? What research should we allow into our professional journals and what should we reject? It was a heated debate that often created considerable friction between professors.

As doctoral students, we were often forced to take sides. Our research professors trained us to choose evidence over experience, reason over faith, science over art, and data over story. Ironically, at the exact same time, our non-research professors were teaching us that social work scholars should be wary of false dichotomies—those “either you’re this or you’re that” formulations. In fact, we learned that when faced with either-or dilemmas, the first question we should ask is, Who benefits by forcing people to choose?

If you applied the Who benefits? question to the debate in social work, the answer was clear: Traditional quantitative researchers benefited if the profession decided their work was the only path to truth. And tradition had the upper hand at my college, with little to no training in qualitative methods available and the only dissertation option quantitative. A single textbook covered qualitative research, and
the book jacket was light pink—it was often referred to as “the girls’?” research book.

This debate became personal to me when I fell in love with qualitative research—grounded theory research, to be specific. I responded by pursuing it anyway, finding a few faculty allies inside and outside my college. I chose as my methodologist Barney Glaser, from the University of California San Francisco Medical School, who, along with Anselm Strauss, is the founder of grounded theory.

I am still deeply affected by an editorial I read in the 1990s titled “Many Ways of Knowing.” It was written by Ann Hartman, the influential editor of one of our most prestigious journals at the time. In the editorial, Hartman wrote: This editor takes the position that there are many truths and there are many ways of knowing. Each discovery contributes to our knowledge, and each way of knowing deepens our understanding and adds another dimension to our view of the world….For example, large-scale studies of trends in marriage today furnish helpful information about a rapidly changing social institution. But getting inside one marriage, as in Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, richly displays the complexities of one marriage, leading us to new insights about the pain, the joys, the expectations, the disappointments, the intimacy, and the ultimate aloneness in relationships. Both the scientific and the artistic methods provide us with ways of knowing. And, in fact, as Clifford Geertz…has pointed out, innovative thinkers in many fields are blurring the genres, finding art in science and science in art and social theory in all human creation and activity.

I succumbed to fear and scarcity (the sense that my chosen research method wasn’t enough) for the first couple of years of my career as a tenure-track professor and researcher. I felt like an outsider as a qualitative researcher, so for safety I stood as close as I could to the “if you can’t measure it, it doesn’t exist” crowd. That served both my political needs and my profound dislike of uncertainty. But I never got that editorial out of my head or my heart. And today I proudly call myself a researcher-storyteller because I believe the most useful knowledge about human behavior is based on people’s lived experiences. I am incredibly grateful to Ann Hartman for having the guts to take this position, to Paul Raffoul, the professor who handed me a copy of that article, and to Susan Robbins, who bravely led my dissertation committee.

As you read through this book, you will see that I don’t believe faith and reason are natural enemies. I believe our human desire for certainty and our often-desperate need to “be right” have led to this false dichotomy. I don’t trust a theologian who dismisses the beauty of science or a scientist who doesn’t believe in the power of mystery.

Because of this belief, I now find knowledge and truth in a full range of sources. In this book, you’ll come across quotes from scholars and singer-songwriters. I’ll quote research and movies. I’ll share a letter from a mentor that helped me get a handle on what it means to get your heart broken and an editorial on nostalgia by a
sociologist. I won’t set up Crosby, Stills & Nash as academics, but I also won’t diminish the ability of artists to capture what is true about the human spirit.

I’m also not going to pretend that I am an expert on every topic that emerged as important in this book’s research. Instead, I will share the work of other researchers and experts whose work accurately captures what emerged in my data. I can’t wait to introduce you to some of these thinkers and artists who have dedicated their careers to exploring the inner workings of emotion, thought, and behavior.

I’ve come to believe that we all want to show up and be seen in our lives. This means we will all struggle and fall; we will know what it means to be both brave and brokenhearted.

I’m grateful that we’re making this journey together. As Rumi says, “We’re all just walking each other home.”

For more information on my methodology and current research, visit my website, brenebrown.com.

Thank you for joining me on this adventure.
The truth is that falling hurts. The dare is to keep being brave and feel your way back up.
Truth and Dare

AN INTRODUCTION

During an interview in 2013, a reporter told me that after reading The Gifts of Imperfection and Daring Greatly, he wanted to start working on his own issues related to vulnerability, courage, and authenticity. He laughed and said, “It sounds like it could be a long road. Can you give me the upside of doing this work?” I told him that with every ounce of my professional and personal being, I believe that vulnerability—the willingness to show up and be seen with no guarantee of outcome—is the only path to more love, belonging, and joy. He quickly followed up with, “And the downside?” This time I was the one laughing. “You’re going to stumble, fall, and get your ass kicked.”

There was a long pause before he said, “Is this where you tell me that you think daring is still worth it?” I responded with a passionate yes, followed by a confession: “Today it’s a solid yes because I’m not lying facedown after a hard fall. But even in the midst of struggle, I would still say that doing this work is not only worth it, it is the work of living a wholehearted life. But I promise that if you asked me about this in the midst of a fall, I’d be far less enthusiastic and way more pissed off. I’m not great at falling and feeling my way back.”

It’s been two years since that interview—two years of practicing being brave and putting myself out there—and vulnerability is still uncomfortable and falling still hurts. It always will. But I’m learning that the process of struggling and navigating hurt has as much to offer us as the process of being brave and showing up.

Over the past couple of years, I’ve had the privilege of spending time with some amazing people. They range from top entrepreneurs and leaders in Fortune 500 companies to couples who have maintained loving relationships for more than thirty years and parents working to change the education system. As they’ve shared their experiences and stories of being brave, falling, and getting back up, I kept asking myself: What do these people with strong relationships, parents with deep connections to their children, teachers nurturing creativity and learning, clergy walking with people through faith, and trusted leaders have in common? The answer was clear: They recognize the power of emotion and they’re not afraid to lean in to discomfort.

While vulnerability is the birthplace of many of the fulfilling experiences we long for—love, belonging, joy, creativity, and trust, to name a few—the process of regaining our emotional footing in the midst of struggle is where our courage is tested and our values are forged. Rising strong after a fall is how we cultivate wholeheartedness in our lives; it’s the process that teaches us the most about who we are.

In the past two years, my team and I have also received emails every week from people who write, “I dared greatly. I was brave. I got my butt kicked and now I’m down for the count. How do I get back up?” I knew when I was writing The Gifts and Daring Greatly that I would ultimately write a book about falling down.
I’ve collected that data all along, and what I’ve learned about surviving hurt has saved me again and again. It saved me and, in the process, it changed me.

Here’s how I see the progression of my work:

*The Gifts of Imperfection*—Be you.

*Daring Greatly*—Be all in.

*Rising Strong*—Fall. Get up. Try again.

The thread that runs through all three of these books is our yearning to live a wholehearted life. I define wholehearted living as 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 brave and worthy of love and belonging.*

Both *The Gifts* and *Daring Greatly* are “call to arms” books. They are about having the courage to show up and be seen even if it means risking failure, hurt, shame, and possibly even heartbreak. Why? Because hiding out, pretending, and armoring up against vulnerability are killing us: killing our spirits, our hopes, our potential, our creativity, our ability to lead, our love, our faith, and our joy. I think these books have resonated so strongly with people for two simple reasons: We’re sick of being afraid and we’re tired of hustling for our self-worth.

We want to be brave, and deep inside we know that being brave requires us to be vulnerable. The great news is that I think we’re making serious headway. Everywhere I go, I meet people who tell me how they’re leaning in to vulnerability and uncertainty—how it’s changing their relationships and their professional lives.

We get thousands of emails from people who talk about their experiences of practicing the Ten Guideposts from *The Gifts*—even the hard ones like cultivating creativity, play, and self-compassion. I’ve worked alongside CEOs, teachers, and parents who are mounting major efforts to bring about cultural change based on the idea of showing up and daring greatly. The experience has been more than I ever imagined sixteen years ago when my husband, Steve, asked me, “What’s the vision for your career?” and I answered, “I want to start a global conversation about vulnerability and shame.”

If we’re going to put ourselves out there and love with our whole hearts, we’re going to experience heartbreak. If we’re going to try new, innovative things, we’re going to fail. If we’re going to risk caring and engaging, we’re going to experience disappointment. It doesn’t matter if our hurt is caused by a painful breakup or we’re struggling with something smaller, like an offhand comment by a colleague or an argument with an in-law. If we can learn how to feel our way through these experiences and own our stories of struggle, we can write our own brave endings. When we own our stories, we avoid being trapped as characters in stories someone else is telling.

The epigraph for *Daring Greatly* is Theodore Roosevelt’s powerful quote from his 1910 “Man in the Arena” speech:
It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly;...who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.

It’s an inspiring quote that has truly become a touchstone for me. However, as someone who spends a lot of time in the arena, I’d like to focus on one particular piece of Roosevelt’s speech: “The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood”—STOP. (Imagine the sound of a needle scratching across a record.) Stop here. Before I hear anything else about triumph or achievement, this is where I want to slow down time so I can figure out exactly what happens next.

We’re facedown in the arena. Maybe the crowd has gone silent, the way it does at football games or my daughter’s field hockey matches when the players on the field take a knee because someone is hurt. Or maybe people have started booing and jeering. Or maybe you have tunnel vision and all you can hear is your parent screaming, “Get up! Shake it off!”

Our “facedown” moments can be big ones like getting fired or finding out about an affair, or they can be small ones like learning a child has lied about her report card or experiencing a disappointment at work. Arenas always conjure up grandeur, but an arena is any moment when or place where we have risked showing up and being seen. Risking being awkward and goofy at a new exercise class is an arena. Leading a team at work is an arena. A tough parenting moment puts us in the arena. Being in love is definitely an arena.

When I started thinking about this research, I went to the data and asked myself, What happens when we’re facedown? What’s going on in this moment? What do the women and men who have successfully staggered to their feet and found the courage to try again have in common? What is the process of rising strong?

I wasn’t positive that slowing down time to capture the process was possible, but I was inspired by Sherlock Holmes to give it a shot. In early 2014, I was drowning in data and my confidence was waning. I was also coming off a tough holiday, when I had spent most of my scheduled vacation time fighting off a respiratory virus that hit Houston like a hurricane. One night in February, I snuggled up on the couch with my daughter, Ellen, to watch the newest season of Masterpiece’s Sherlock with Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman. (I’m a huge fan.)

In Season 3, there’s an episode where Sherlock is shot. Don’t worry, I won’t say by whom or why, but, wow, I did not see it coming. The moment he’s shot, time stops. Rather than immediately falling, Sherlock goes into his “mind palace”—that crazy cognitive space where he retrieves memories from cerebral filing cabinets, plots car routes, and makes impossible connections between random facts. Over the next ten minutes or so, many of the cast of recurring characters appear in his
mind, each one working in his or her area of expertise and talking him through the best way to stay alive.

First, the London coroner who has a terrific crush on Sherlock shows up. She shakes her head at Sherlock, who seems completely taken aback by his inability to make sense of what’s happening, and comments, “It’s not like it is in the movies, is it, Sherlock?” Aided by a member of the forensics team at NewScotland Yard and Sherlock’s menacing brother, she explains the physics of how he should fall, how shock works, and what he can do to keep himself conscious. The three warn him when pain is coming and what he can expect. What probably takes three seconds in real time plays out for more than ten minutes on the screen. I thought the writing was genius, and it reenergized my efforts to keep at my own slow-motion project.

My goal for this book is to slow down the falling and rising processes: to bring into our awareness all the choices that unfurl in front of us during those moments of discomfort and hurt, and to explore the consequences of those choices. Much as in my other books, I’m using research and storytelling to unpack what I’ve learned. The only difference here is that I’m sharing many more of my personal stories. These narratives grant me not only a front-row seat to watch what’s playing out onstage, but also a backstage pass to access the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are taking place behind the scenes. In my stories, I have the details. It’s like watching the director’s cut of a movie or choosing the bonus feature on a DVD that allows you to listen to the director talk through decisions and thought processes. This is not to say that I can’t capture details from other people’s experiences—I do it all the time. I just can’t weave together history, context, emotion, behavior, and thinking with the same density.

During the final stages of developing the rising strong theory, I met with small groups of people familiar with my work to share my findings and gather feedback from their perspectives on the fit and relevance of the theory. Was I on the right track? Later, two of the participants in those meetings reached out to share their experiences of applying the rising strong process in their lives. I was moved by what they shared and asked if I could include it in this book. They both agreed, and I’m grateful. Their stories are powerful examples of rising.

On a cultural level, I think the absence of honest conversation about the hard work that takes us from lying facedown in the arena to rising strong has led to two dangerous outcomes: the propensity to gold-plate grit and a badassery deficit.

GOLD-PLATING GRIT

We’ve all fallen, and we have the skinned knees and bruised hearts to prove it. But scars are easier to talk about than they are to show, with all the remembered feelings laid bare. And rarely do we see wounds that are in the process of healing. I’m not sure if it’s because we feel too much shame to let anyone see a process as intimate as overcoming hurt, or if it’s because even when we muster the courage to share our still-incomplete healing, people reflexively look away.
We much prefer stories about falling and rising to be inspirational and sanitized. Our culture is rife with these tales. In a thirty-minute speech, there’s normally thirty seconds dedicated to “And I fought my way back,” or “And then I met someone new,” or, as in the case of my TEDx talk, simply “It was a street fight.”

We like recovery stories to move quickly through the dark so we can get to the sweeping redemptive ending. I worry that this lack of honest accounts of overcoming adversity has created a Gilded Age of Failure. The past couple of years have given rise to failure conferences, failure festivals, and even failure awards. Don’t get me wrong. I love and continue to champion the idea of understanding and accepting failure as part of any worthwhile endeavor. But embracing failure without acknowledging the real hurt and fear that it can cause, or the complex journey that underlies rising strong, is gold-plating grit. To strip failure of its real emotional consequences is to scrub the concepts of grit and resilience of the very qualities that make them both so important—toughness, doggedness, and perseverance.

Yes, there can be no innovation, learning, or creativity without failure. But failing is painful. It fuels the “shouldas and couldas,” which means judgment and shame are often lying in wait.

Yes, I agree with Tennyson, who wrote, “ ’Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.” But heartbreak knocks the wind out of you, and the feelings of loss and longing can make getting out of bed a monumental task. Learning to trust and lean in to love again can feel impossible.

Yes, if we care enough and dare enough, we will experience disappointment. But in those moments when disappointment is washing over us and we’re desperately trying to get our heads and hearts around what is or is not going to be, the death of our expectations can be painful beyond measure.

The work being done by Ashley Good is a great example of how we must embrace the difficult emotion of falling. Good is the founder and CEO of Fail Forward—a social enterprise with the mission to help organizations develop cultures that encourage the risk taking, creativity, and continuous adaptation required for innovation. She got started as a development worker in Ghana with Engineers Without Borders Canada (EWB) and was integral to the development of EWB’s failure reports and Admitting Failure?com, a kind of online failure report where anyone can submit stories of failure and learning.

These first reports were bold attempts to break the silence that surrounds failure in the nonprofit sector—a sector dependent on external funding. Frustrated by the learning opportunities missed because of that silence, EWB collected its failures and published them in a glossy annual report. The organization’s commitment to solving some of the world’s most difficult problems, like poverty, requires innovation and learning, so it put achieving its mission before looking good, and sparked a revolution.

In her keynote address at FailCon Oslo—an annual failure conference in Norway—Good asked the audience for words they associated with the term failure. The audience members shouted out the following: sadness, fear, making a fool of
myself, desperation, panic, shame, and heartbreak. Then she held up EWB’s failure report and explained that the thirty glossy pages included fourteen stories of failure, proving that EWB had failed at least fourteen times in the last year. She then asked the same audience what words they would use to describe the report and the people who submitted their stories. This time the words shouted out included: helping, generous, open, knowledgeable, brave, and courageous.

Good made the powerful point that there’s a vast difference between how we think about the term failure and how we think about the people and organizations brave enough to share their failures for the purpose of learning and growing. To pretend that we can get to helping, generous, and brave without navigating through tough emotions like desperation, shame, and panic is a profoundly dangerous and misguided assumption. Rather than gold-plating grit and trying to make failure look fashionable, we’d be better off learning how to recognize the beauty in truth and tenacity.

THE BADASSERY DEFICIT

I know, badassery is a strange term, but I couldn’t come up with another one that captures what I mean. When I see people stand fully in their truth, or when I see someone fall down, get back up, and say, “Damn. That really hurt, but this is important to me and I’m going in again”—my gut reaction is, “What a badass.”

There are too many people today who instead of feeling hurt are acting out their hurt; instead of acknowledging pain, they’re inflicting pain on others. Rather than risking feeling disappointed, they’re choosing to live disappointed. Emotional stoicism is not badassery. Blustery posturing is not badassery. Swagger is not badassery. Perfection is about the furthest thing in the world from badassery.

End of this sample Kindle book.
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