

**CURIOSITY**  
*is a*  
**SHIT-STARTER.**  
**BUT THAT'S OKAY.**

*Sometimes we have to*

**RUMBLE**  
**WITH A STORY**

*to find the truth.*

*Four*  
**THE RECKONING**

The big question is whether you are going to be able to say a hearty yes to your adventure.

—Joseph Campbell

**Y**ou may not have signed up for a hero's journey, but the second you fell down, got your butt kicked, suffered a disappointment, screwed up, or felt your heart break, it started. It doesn't matter whether we are ready for an emotional adventure—hurt happens. And it happens to every single one of us. Without exception. The only decision we get to make is what role we'll play in our own lives: Do we want to write the story or do we want to hand that power over to someone else? Choosing to write our own story means getting uncomfortable; it's choosing courage over comfort.

One of the truisms of wholehearted living is *You either walk into your story and own your truth, or you live outside of your story, hustling for your worthiness.* Walking into a story about falling

down can feel like being swallowed whole by emotion. Our bodies often respond before our conscious minds, and they are hardwired to protect—to run or fight. Even with small, everyday conflicts and disappointments, physical and emotional intolerance for discomfort is the primary reason we linger on the outskirts of our stories, never truly facing them or integrating them into our lives. We disengage to self-protect.

In navigation, the term *reckoning*, as in *dead reckoning*, is the process of calculating where you are. To do that, you have to know where you've been and what factors influenced how you got to where you now are (speed, course, wind, etc.). Without reckoning, you can't chart a future course. In the rising strong process, we can't chart a brave new course until we recognize exactly where we are, get curious about how we got there, and decide where we want to go. Ours is an emotional reckoning.

There is a clear pattern among the women and men who demonstrate the ability to rise strong from hurt or adversity—they reckon with emotion. The word *rekenen* comes from the Middle English *rekenen*, meaning to narrate or make an account. The rising strong reckoning has two deceptively simple parts: (1) engaging with our feelings, and (2) getting curious about the story behind the feelings—what emotions we're experiencing and how they are connected to our thoughts and behaviors.

First, rising strong requires us to recognize that we're experiencing a “facedown in the arena” moment—an emotional reaction. Remember, these moments can be small and we're susceptible to them anytime we're trying to show up and be seen. A button is pushed, a sense of disappointment or anger

washes over us, our hearts race—something tells us that all is not well. We're hooked. The good news is that in our reckoning we don't have to pinpoint the emotion accurately—we just need to recognize that we're feeling something. There will be time to sort out exactly what we're feeling later.

I don't know what's happening, but I just want to hide.

I just know I want to punch a wall.

I want Oreos. Lots of them.

I feel \_\_\_\_\_ (disappointed, regretful, pissed, hurt, angry, heartbroken, confused, scared, worried, etc.).

I am \_\_\_\_\_ (in a lot of pain, feeling really vulnerable, in a shame storm, embarrassed, overwhelmed, in a world of hurt).

Steve ignored my bid for connection and now I'm feeling something between anger and fear.

My stomach is in knots.

This sounds pretty easy, but you'd be surprised how many of us never recognize our emotions or feelings—we off-load instead. Rather than saying *I failed and it feels so crappy*, we move to *I am a failure*. We act out and shut down rather than reaching out.

The goal here is simply to recognize that emotions and feelings are in play. Some of us might be alerted to emotion by our bodies' responses. Others know that something emotional is happening because our thoughts start racing or we have the event on slow-motion replay. And others may recognize emotion is at hand only once their behavior sends up a flare, like

yelling at their kids or firing off a shitty email to a colleague. For me, it all depends on the emotion. When I feel shame, sometimes my body's response is the first clue that I'm being hijacked by emotion. I can get tunnel vision and my heart races. My less-than-awesome blaming behavior is normally a sign that I'm resentful, and when I start rehearsing meaningful "gotcha" conversations, I'm normally feeling vulnerable or afraid.

Recognizing emotion means developing awareness about how our thinking, feeling (including our physiology), and behavior are connected. While some researchers and clinicians argue that you can change your life by just changing your thoughts, actions, or feelings, I have seen no evidence in my research that real transformation happens until we address all three as equally important parts of a whole, parts that are inextricably connected to one another, like a three-legged stool.

Second, rising strong requires getting curious about our experience. This means having the willingness to open a line of inquiry into what's going on and why. Again, the good news is that you don't need to answer those questions right off the bat. You just need to want to learn more:

Why am I being so hard on everyone around me today?

What's setting me off?

How did I get to the point that I want to punch this wall?

I want to dig in to why I'm so overwhelmed.

I can't stop thinking about that conversation at work.

Why not?

I'm having such a strong emotional reaction—what's going on?

I know Oreos aren't going to work. What's really happening?

What's going on with my stomach?

For example, your face turns red and heat radiates across your chest when you learn that your boss gave the lead for a new project to your colleague. Rising strong requires you to recognize that you're experiencing emotion and to get curious about why: *I'm so pissed about her giving the lead to Todd. I need to figure this out before I lose it with everyone on our team.* Or maybe your father is once again critical of your parenting during a holiday get-together. You basically check out. You're quiet and almost hiding the rest of the night. When you get home you realize that you're full of emotion. You turn to your partner and say, *"I'm so tired of feeling like crap around my father. I expect it to get better, but he never lets up. Why do I keep walking into this?"*

The reckoning sounds pretty straightforward, but like I said earlier, that's deceptive and, frankly, it's not the default for most of us. Don't forget that our bodies respond to emotion first, and they often direct us to shut down or disengage. In that first scenario, it's so much easier to steamroll right over emotion: *My boss is an asshole. Todd's such a brownnoser. Who cares? This job sucks and this company is a joke.* There's been no recognition of emotion. No curiosity.

In the second scenario, there are a number of options that are easier than engaging. We could buy into our father's criticism and stay completely withdrawn, we might start planning

how we're going to impress him the next time, we could discharge our emotion by yelling at our partner for no reason, we could drink another beer or three—whatever it takes to drown the criticism, we could easily rage and blame the kids for making us look bad, we could spend the entire ride home vowing to never see our dad again—the list goes on.

*The opposite of recognizing that we're feeling something is denying our emotions. The opposite of being curious is disengaging. When we deny our stories and disengage from tough emotions, they don't go away; instead, they own us, they define us. Our job is not to deny the story, but to defy the ending—to rise strong, recognize our story, and rumble with the truth until we get to a place where we think, Yes. This is what happened. This is my truth. And I will choose how this story ends.*

In the following sections I want to explore the two parts of the reckoning: recognizing emotion and getting curious. Specifically, I want to look at what gets in the way of both of these efforts and how we can develop new practices that give us both the tools and the courage to engage.

## RECKONING WITH EMOTION

What gets in the way of reckoning with emotion is exactly what gets in the way of engaging in other courageous behaviors: fear. We don't like how difficult emotions feel and we're worried about what people might think. We don't know what to do with the discomfort and vulnerability. Emotion can feel terrible, even physically overwhelming. We can feel exposed, at risk, and uncertain in the midst of emotion. Our

instinct is to run from pain. In fact, most of us were never taught how to hold discomfort, sit with it, or communicate it, only how to discharge or dump it, or to pretend that it's not happening. If you combine that with the instinctual avoidance of pain, it's easy to understand why off-loading becomes a habit. Both nature and nurture lead us to off-load emotion and discomfort, often onto other people. The irony is that at the exact same time that we are creating distance between ourselves and the people around us by off-loading onto others, we are craving deeper emotional connection and richer emotional lives.

Miriam Greenspan, a psychotherapist and the author of *Healing Through the Dark Emotions*, was interviewed by Jungian therapist Barbara Platek in *The Sun Magazine*. The article has been required reading in my classes since it first appeared in 2008. Greenspan explains why she believes our culture is “emotion phobic” and that we fear and devalue emotion. She cautions:

But despite our fear, there is something in us that wants to feel all these emotional energies, because they are the juice of life. When we suppress and diminish our emotions, we feel deprived. So we watch horror movies or so-called reality shows like *Fear Factor*. We seek out emotional intensity vicariously, because when we are emotionally numb, we need a great deal of stimulation to feel something, anything. So emotional pornography provides the stimulation, but it's only ersatz emotion—it doesn't teach us anything about ourselves or the world.

I don't think we can learn much about ourselves, our relationships, or the world without recognizing and getting curious about emotion. Fortunately, unlike navigating using dead reckoning, we don't need to immediately be precise in order to find our way. We just need to bring our feelings to light. We just need to be honest and curious. *I'm having an emotional reaction to what's happened and I want to understand* is enough for the reckoning. But it's still difficult in our culture. Let's take a closer look at curiosity.

### GETTING CURIOUS

Choosing to be curious is choosing to be vulnerable because it requires us to surrender to uncertainty. It wasn't always a choice; we were born curious. But over time, we learn that curiosity, like vulnerability, can lead to hurt. As a result, we turn to self-protecting—choosing certainty over curiosity, armor over vulnerability, and knowing over learning. But shutting down comes with a price—a price we rarely consider when we're focused on finding our way out of pain.

Einstein said, "The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existence." Curiosity's reason for existing is not simply to be a tool used in acquiring knowledge; it reminds us that we're alive. Researchers are finding evidence that curiosity is correlated with creativity, intelligence, improved learning and memory, and problem solving.

There is a profound relationship—a love affair, really—between curiosity and wholeheartedness. How do we come to those *aha* moments if we're not willing to explore and ask

questions? New information won't transform our thinking, much less our lives, if it simply lands at our feet. For experiences and information to be integrated into our lives as true awareness, they have to be received with open hands, inquisitive minds, and wandering hearts.

A critical piece of my wholehearted journey has been moving from judgment to curiosity about my own path. Poet and writer William Plomer wrote, "Creativity is the power to connect the seemingly unconnected." Connecting the dots of our lives, especially the ones we'd rather erase or skip over, requires equal parts self-love and curiosity: *How do all of these experiences come together to make up who I am?*

Curiosity led me to adopt and live by the belief that "nothing is wasted"—a belief that shapes how I see the world and my life. I can now look back at my often rough-and-tumble past and understand how dropping out of school, hitchhiking across Europe, bartending and waiting tables, working as a union steward, and taking customer service calls in Spanish on the night shift at AT&T taught me as much about empathy as my career as a social worker, teacher, and researcher. I used to look back at those far-flung dots as mistakes and wasted time, but allowing myself to be curious about who I am and how everything fits together changed that. As difficult and dark as some of those times were, they all connect to form the real me, the integrated and whole me.

Curiosity is an act of vulnerability and courage. In this stage of the rising strong process—the reckoning—we need to get curious. We need to be brave enough to *want to know more*.

I say *brave* because getting curious about emotion is not always an easy choice. I have to take a deep breath and think

through questions like, *What's at stake if I open myself up to investigate these feelings and realize I'm more hurt than I thought?* Or, *What if she's really not to blame and I was wrong? It's going to suck if it turns out that I'm the one who needs to make amends.*

But again, the upside of curiosity outweighs discomfort. A study published in the October 22, 2014, issue of the journal *Neuron* suggests that the brain's chemistry changes when we become curious, helping us better learn and retain information. But curiosity is uncomfortable because it involves uncertainty and vulnerability.

Curiosity is a shit-starter. But that's okay. Sometimes we have to rumble with a story to find the truth.

In his book *Curious: The Desire to Know and Why Your Future Depends on It*, Ian Leslie writes, "Curiosity is unruly. It doesn't like rules, or, at least, it assumes that all rules are provisional, subject to the laceration of a smart question nobody has yet thought to ask. It disdains the approved pathways, preferring diversions, unplanned excursions, impulsive left turns. In short, curiosity is deviant."

This is exactly why curiosity is so vital to this process: The diverse and sometimes erratic course of rising strong is also unruly. Embracing the vulnerability it takes to rise up from a fall and grow stronger makes us a little dangerous. People who don't stay down after they fall or are tripped are often trouble-makers. Hard to control. Which is the best kind of dangerous possible. They are the artists, innovators, and change-makers.

The most common barrier to getting curious about emotion is having a dry well. In his groundbreaking 1994 article "The Psychology of Curiosity," George Loewenstein introduced his information gap perspective on curiosity. Loewen-

stein, a professor of economics and psychology at Carnegie Mellon University, proposed that curiosity is the feeling of deprivation we experience when we identify and focus on a gap in our knowledge.

What's important about this perspective is that it means we have to have some level of knowledge or awareness before we can get curious. We aren't curious about something we are unaware of or know nothing about. Loewenstein explains that simply encouraging people to ask questions doesn't go very far toward stimulating curiosity. He writes, "To induce curiosity about a particular topic, it may be necessary to 'prime the pump'"—to use intriguing information to get folks interested so they become more curious.

The good news is that a growing number of researchers believe that curiosity and knowledge-building grow together—the more we know, the more we want to know. The bad news is that many of us are raised believing that emotions aren't worthy of our attention. In other words, we don't know enough and/or we aren't sufficiently aware of the power of our emotions and how they're connected to our thoughts and behaviors, so we fail to get curious.

There are still no definitive research answers about how we develop curiosity, but what I can tell you for certain is this: The participants in my study who taught me the most about getting curious learned to investigate their emotions in one of three ways:

1. Their parents or another important adult in their lives (often a teacher, coach, or counselor) explicitly taught them about emotion and the importance of exploring feelings.

2. Their parents or another important adult in their lives (often a teacher, coach, or counselor) modeled curiosity about emotion.
3. They worked with a helping professional who taught them about the power of inquiry.

In other words, their pumps were primed with enough knowledge about emotion to serve as a foundation for getting curious.

There are numerous, complex reasons why the well is dry—why there's so little open discussion and engagement around emotion. The research made it clear that a lot of how much or little we value emotion comes from what we were taught or saw as we were growing up. That value usually results from a combination of several of the seven ideas listed below.

1. Being emotional is a sign of vulnerability, and vulnerability is weakness.
2. Don't ask. Don't tell. You can feel emotion all you want, but there's nothing to be gained by sharing it with others.
3. We don't have access to emotional language or a full emotional vocabulary, so we stay quiet about or make fun of it.
4. Discussing emotion is frivolous, self-indulgent, and a waste of time. It's not for people like us.
5. We're so numb to feeling that there's nothing to discuss.
6. Uncertainty is too uncomfortable.
7. Engaging and asking questions invites trouble. I'll learn something I don't want to or shouldn't know.

When I was a child, the smallest glimpse into a new world could unleash a torrent of curiosity within me. If I came across a word I didn't know in a book, I'd look it up. If a television show referenced an island in the Pacific, I'd run for our *Encyclopedia Britannica*, praying the entire way that there would be color photos. I wanted to know more about everything. Except emotion.

I grew up with a dry emotional well. I didn't want to know more because I didn't know there was more to learn—we didn't discuss feelings. We didn't do vulnerability. If we happened to get so overwhelmed by emotion that tears or a look of fear physically breached our tough veneer, we were promptly and not-too-subtly reminded that emotions don't fix problems—they make them worse. Doing, not feeling, fixes problems.

My emotional education started in my late teens, when I watched my mother break every taboo in our family and go to therapy. Our family was like many others I knew—quietly imploding. It was the early 1980s and we lived in a suburb of Houston. My high school, along with several others, was featured in the national news for the number of suicides. My siblings and I were all lost. We were wild and for the most part unseen. And, like many Houstonians navigating the oil bust in the early 1980s, my parents were just trying to keep the lights on and postpone the inevitable loss of everything.

Regardless of how dark and hard things got, there was never any discussion of how we were doing or how we were feeling until my mom went to therapy. The more curious she became about her own life and feelings, and our lives and feelings, the worse things got. There seemed to be no stop to the endless excavating of hurt and resentment and grief. I wasn't sure if it

was worth it. But my mother, who was living on Merit cigarettes, Tab soda, and her survival instincts, saw her emotional reckoning as a life-or-death situation. We were left wondering if the implosion was happening because we had never recognized or questioned our pain, or if everything was falling apart precisely because we were breaking the rules and getting too curious about our feelings. The latter was what we had been taught and told growing up.

But, against the odds, my mom was rising strong after a long, slow fall that started when I was around twelve. Over the next few years, she modeled and taught us what she was learning in therapy, and that small spark started an inextinguishable transformation in our family. It also led to several years of tremendous pain and discomfort and burned down a lot of what we knew—including my parents' marriage. While their divorcing was the right thing to do, it was nonetheless heart-breaking for all of us.

But as poet Mizuta Masahide wrote, "Barn's burnt down / now / I can see the moon." Eventually, the burning not only revealed new light, but turned over new soil, and, with new seeds, it brought love and renewal. If you had told me during those fiery, dark days that eventually everything would be okay as long as everyone kept talking about their feelings and setting boundaries, and that one day, all four of my divorced and remarried parents and in-laws would be in the hospital room cheering as I gave birth to my children, I would have called you a liar. What's been rebuilt is far from perfect, and there are still heartaches and family struggles—fights, bruised relationships, hurt feelings, and the occasional throw-down—but the pretending and the silence are gone. They just don't work anymore.

This experience and how it played out over the years ignited within me a spark of curiosity about emotions that has continued to grow. That spark led to my career, and it's probably why I ultimately found my own therapist (who, frustratingly and awesomely, encouraged my growing emotional curiosity). I think the willingness to engage with emotion is why I'm still married to the man I love and why I feel proud about the way we're parenting our children. The pump was primed—I learned enough about emotion to get and stay curious. And, if you question the ability of a single spark to start a revolution, think about this: Had my mom denied her emotions and disengaged from her hurt, I seriously doubt this book would exist. It often takes just a single brave person to change the trajectory of a family, or of any system, for that matter.

### OFF-LOADING HURT: BARRIERS TO RECKONING WITH EMOTION

Hurt doesn't go away simply because we don't acknowledge it. In fact, left unchecked, it festers, grows, and leads to behaviors that are completely out of line with whom we want to be, and thinking that can sabotage our relationships and careers. What follows are five of the most common strategies for off-loading hurt that we think we have banished by refusing to admit it's there.

**Chandeliering.** My daughter, Ellen, and one of her closest friends, Lorna, play field hockey on two different teams. On a day when the field hockey planets were clearly out of align-



ment, both girls hurt a hand at their respective practices. Ellen came home with a black-and-blue finger that was swollen to double its size. I'm relatively calm during these situations, but that's a perk of being married to a pediatrician. After Steve pulled and pushed and felt around on Ellen's finger for a few minutes, he buddy taped it to her next finger and announced that we'd see how it was in the morning.

Not two hours later, my friend Suzanne was standing in our dining room with her daughter Lorna, who was telling us how her hand had been hit by someone's stick while Steve got ready to perform the same exam he had given Ellen. Lorna is tough and was trying her best to convince us that she was fine. You could tell she was willing her finger to be well. But the second Steve just grazed her hand, she practically jumped out of her skin. Steve looked at Suzanne and said, "It's exquisitely tender. She needs to be seen and x-rayed."

The next day I asked Steve if *exquisitely tender* is an official medical term. I had heard him use it before, and it struck me as funny—like *marvelously sore* or *fantastically achy*. He explained that it's used to describe the kind of pain that someone can't hide even if they're trying their best to be stoic. Then he said, "We also call it *chandelier pain*—like it hurts so much to the touch that people jump as high as the chandelier."

One of the outcomes of attempting to ignore emotional pain is chandeliering. We think we've packed the hurt so far down that it can't possibly resurface, yet all of a sudden, a seemingly innocuous comment sends us into a rage or sparks a crying fit. Or maybe a small mistake at work triggers a huge shame attack. Perhaps a colleague's constructive feedback hits that exquisitely tender place and we jump out of our skin.

Chandeliering is especially common and dangerous in "power-over" situations—environments where, because of power differentials, people with a higher position or status are less likely to be held accountable for flipping out or overreacting. These are places where our powerlessness and hurt get worked out. We maintain our prized stoicism in front of the people we want to impress or influence, but the second we're around people over whom we have emotional, financial, or physical power, we explode. And because it's not a side of us seen by many of the higher-ups, our version of the story is framed as truth. We see power-over chandeliering in families, churches, schools, communities, and offices. And when you mix in issues like gender, class, race, sexual orientation, and age—the combination can be lethal.

Road rage and sports are often considered socially acceptable venues for chandeliering pain. Don't get me wrong—I'm an enthusiastic sports fan, and I have a terrible habit of flipping off people under the steering wheel (so other drivers and the children in my backseat can't see). But I'm not going to lose myself in a vein-popping fury because the Longhorns are having a bad season or because you cut me off in the parking lot. I grew up around a lot of chandeliering, and I've also worked with people who pushed down emotion, then exploded. I know firsthand that uncontrolled eruptions of emotion sabotage the safety that most of us are trying to create, whether in our families or our organizations. If it happens often enough, chandeliering leads to eggshell environments—fear-based settings where everyone is on edge.

We can't pack down hurt, nor can we off-load it to someone else while maintaining our authenticity and integrity.

Most of us have been on the receiving end of one of these outbursts. Even if we have the insight to know that our boss, friend, colleague, or partner blew up at us because something tender was triggered and it's not actually about us, it still shatters trust and respect. Living, growing up, working, or worshipping on eggshells creates huge cracks in our sense of safety and self-worth. Over time, it can be experienced as trauma.

**Bouncing hurt.** Our ego is the part of us that cares about our status and what people think, about always being *better than* and always being right. I think of my ego as my inner hustler. It's always telling me to compare, prove, please, perfect, outperform, and compete. Our inner hustlers have very little tolerance for discomfort or self-reflection. The ego doesn't own stories or want to write new endings; it denies emotion and hates curiosity. Instead, the ego uses stories as armor and alibis. The ego has a shame-based fear of being ordinary (which is how I define narcissism). The ego says, "Feelings are for losers and weaklings." Avoiding truth and vulnerability are critical parts of the hustle.

Like all good hustlers, our egos employ crews of ruffians in case we don't comply with their demands. Anger, blame, and avoidance are the ego's bouncers. When we get too close to recognizing an experience as an emotional one, these three spring into action. It's much easier to say, "I don't give a damn," than it is to say, "I'm hurt." The ego likes blaming, finding fault, making excuses, inflicting payback, and lashing out, all of which are ultimate forms of self-protection. The ego is also a fan of avoidance—assuring the offender that we're fine, pretending that it doesn't matter, that we're impervious.

We adopt a pose of indifference or stoicism, or we deflect with humor and cynicism. *Whatever. Who cares?*

When the bouncers are successful—when anger, blame, and avoidance push away real hurt, disappointment, or pain—our egos are free to scam all they want. Often the first hustle is putting down and shaming others for their lack of "emotional control." Like all hustlers, the ego is a slick, conniving, and dangerous liar.

**Numbing hurt.** Numbing has been a constant in my research since the beginning. Picture emotions as having very sharp points, like thorns. When they prick us, they cause discomfort or even pain. After a while, the mere anticipation of these feelings can trigger a sense of intolerable vulnerability: We know it's coming. For many of us, the first response is not to lean in to the discomfort and feel our way through, but to make it go away. We do that by numbing the pain with whatever provides the quickest relief. We can take the edge off emotional pain with a whole bunch of stuff, including alcohol, drugs, food, sex, relationships, money, work, caretaking, gambling, affairs, religion, chaos, shopping, planning, perfectionism, constant change, and the Internet.

And just so we don't miss it in this long list of all the ways we can numb ourselves, there's always staying busy: living so hard and fast that the truths of our lives can't catch up with us. We fill every ounce of white space with something so there's no room or time for emotion to make itself known.

But no matter what we use, we can't selectively numb emotions—when we numb the dark, we also numb the light. When "taking the edge off" with a couple of glasses of red wine becomes a routine, our experiences of joy and love and trust

will become duller, too. With less positive emotion in our lives, we are drawn to numbing. It's a vicious cycle, and the viciousness is as likely to be unleashed at a fancy wine-tasting party as it is with a 40 wrapped in a brown paper bag.

If we numb compulsively and chronically—it's addiction. And, as I pointed out in the TEDx talk, this is an issue. We are still the most in-debt, obese, medicated, and addicted adults in human history. Looking back over the past fourteen years of research, I've come to believe that addiction, like violence, poverty, and inequality, is one of the greatest societal challenges we face today. There is not a single person reading this right now who is not affected by addiction. You may not be the one who is or was addicted, but I guarantee that someone you love, work with, or is important in your life is struggling. It's a pandemic that's destroying families.

**Stockpiling hurt.** There's a quiet, insidious alternative to chandeliering, bouncing, or numbing hurt—we can stockpile it. We're not erupting with misplaced emotions or using blame to deflect our true feelings or numbing the pain. Stockpiling starts like chandeliering, with us firmly packing down the pain, but here, we just continue to amass hurt until the wisest parts of us, our bodies, decide that enough is enough. The body's message is always clear: Shut down the stockpiling or I'll shut you down. The body wins every time.

In hundreds of interviews, people have recounted how they just "kept everything inside" until they couldn't sleep or eat or they became so anxious they couldn't focus at work or grew too depressed to do anything but stay in bed. Depression and anxiety are two of the body's first reactions to stockpiles of hurt. Of course, there are organic and biochemical reasons we

experience clinical depression and debilitating anxiety—causes over which we have no control—but unrecognized pain and unprocessed hurt can also lead there.

In his book *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk, a professor of psychiatry at Boston University, explores how trauma literally reshapes the brain and the body, and how interventions that enable adults to reclaim their lives must address the relationship between our emotional well-being and our bodies. There is so much wisdom in our bodies. We just need to learn how to listen and trust what we're hearing.

**Hurt and the fear of high centering.** If you've ever found yourself high centered in your car, you know exactly how scary and helpless it feels. Just a couple of weeks ago, I was driving with Ellen across a parking lot in San Antonio, looking for a bookstore that I had visited at least twenty times. It was ten o'clock on a Sunday morning, so the parking lot was almost empty. I became a little disoriented because the store that I knew so well was gone, as was the store next to it. My first thought was that I had pulled into the wrong shopping center, so I started looking around to orient myself. In that split second, I drove over a tall, two-foot-wide, cobblestone median strip. The sound of cement scraping against the metal undercarriage of my car was horrendous. One of the cobblestone bricks dislodged and stood straight up, pushing into the plate under my car. My front and back tires were straddling the median. I couldn't move forward and I couldn't back up. I was high centered.

One reason we deny our feelings is our fear of high centering emotionally. If I recognize my hurt or fear or anger, I'll get stuck. Once I engage even a little, I won't be able to move backward

and pretend that it doesn't matter, but moving forward might open a floodgate of emotion that I can't control. I'll be stuck. Helpless. Recognizing emotion leads to feeling it. What if I recognize the emotion and it dislodges something and I can't maintain control? I don't want to cry at work or on the battlefield or when I'm with my parents. Getting high centered is the worst because we feel a total loss of control. We feel powerless.

On that day in San Antonio, I got out of my car and began pacing. Finally, a kind man pulled up and walked over. After lying on the ground and assessing the situation, he said, "You're going to need help. We can do it, we just need to think about it." After a few minutes of brainstorming, we had a plan. Ellen put the car in reverse and the man and I lifted the front end of my car just enough for the brick to fall, freeing the car. In the scheme of high centering, my car experience was easier than some of my emotional experiences of it have been.

Scraping the underbelly of our emotions when we're in a tough situation is bad enough. Getting stuck there is the definition of vulnerability and helplessness. But denying emotion is not avoiding the high curbs, it's never taking your car out of the garage. It's safe in there, but you'll never go anywhere.

### *Off-Loading Versus Integrating*

You may not control all the events that happen to you,  
but you can decide not to be reduced by them.

—Maya Angelou

The opposite of off-loading is integrating. The methods outlined above represent different ways that we fail to integrate

into our lives the hurt that arises in our stories of struggle. Pre-tending not to be hurt is choosing to become imprisoned by the dark emotion we have experienced—recognizing and feeling our way through the emotion is choosing freedom. It's seductive to think that not talking about our pain is the safest way to keep it from defining us, but ultimately the avoidance takes over our lives. The idea that "we're only as sick as our secrets" is more than an adage; there's growing empirical evidence that not owning and integrating our stories affects not just our emotional health but also our physical well-being.

### THE UMBRIDGE

In relational terms, pervasive off-loading behaviors can be very unsettling to be around. They don't feel authentic. In addition to explosive tempers and contagious fear, one of the most difficult patterns to experience is what I call *The Umbridge*. It's present when light and dark are not integrated at all. There's almost something foreboding about overly sweet and accommodating ways. All that niceness feels inauthentic and a little like a ticking bomb. I named this after J. K. Rowling's character Dolores Umbridge in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Umbridge wears cutesy pink suits and pillbox hats, adorns her pink office with bows and trinkets decorated with kittens, and is a fan of torturing children who misbehave. Rowling writes about her, "I have noticed more than once in life that a taste for the ineffably twee can go hand-in-hand with a distinctly uncharitable outlook on the world." She adds, "A love of all things saccharine often seems present where there is a lack of real warmth or charity." I've noticed the same thing. Too much twee emotional expression—too many claims like, "Every-

thing is awesome,” or “I just never really feel angry or upset,” or “If you’re just positive, you can turn that frown upside down”—often masks real pain and hurt. These behaviors are as much red flags as brooding and anger are.

Children have great radar for the emotion that lives right under the sugarcoated surface. Charlie, my fourth-grader, will sometimes say, “Be careful. I think she’s a Unikitty.” He’s referring to the cat from *The LEGO Movie* that was all sunshine and rainbows until she snapped and turned into Super Angry Kitty. Integration is key. Being all light is as dangerous as being all dark, simply because denial of emotion is what feeds the dark.

### *Strategies for Reckoning with Emotion*

So how do we reckon with emotion rather than off-load it? What I’ve learned from the research and tried to put into practice in my own life sounds way simpler than it is: Give yourself permission to feel emotion, get curious about it, pay attention to it, and practice. This work takes practice. Awkward, uncomfortable practice.

#### PERMISSION SLIPS

I wrote my first permission slip on a Post-it note the morning I met Oprah Winfrey for the first time and taped an episode of *Super Soul Sunday*. It said, “Permission to be excited, have fun, and be goofy.” Now my jeans pockets are often stuffed with permission slips. My team and I often start difficult team meetings by writing permission slips and sharing them before we dig into our work. We’re not going to recognize emotion if we don’t feel like we have permission to feel emotion.

If you grew up in a family where emotion was not just permitted but encouraged, you may have an easier time giving yourself permission to feel it and recognize it. You may even think, *I don’t need to do this—I’m good with emotion*. I still think it’s an important step because writing down permission becomes a powerful intention to stay aware.

If you were raised in an environment where emotion was minimized, seen as weakness, invalidated, shut down, perceived as wasteful (e.g., *crying won’t help*), or even punished, then giving yourself permission to feel, recognize, and explore may be a bigger challenge. You might be the first person in your life to grant yourself the permission you need to experience emotion. If you’re worried that giving permission to experience and engage with emotion will turn you into something you’re not or someone you don’t want to become—it won’t. It will, however, give you the opportunity to be your most authentic self. We are wired to be emotional beings. When that part of us is shut down, we’re not whole.

#### PAYING ATTENTION

Every reckoning starts with giving yourself permission to engage with emotion. The next step is paying attention—taking a deep breath and becoming mindful of what we’re feeling. I’ve been a breath holder all of my life, so the power of breathing was foreign to me and still feels a little woo-woo. I not only hold my breath when I’m nervous, anxious, working out, or mad, but also have a visceral reaction to people saying, “Take a breath, Brené,” or “Just breathe.” It basically makes me want to knock ‘em upside the head. While holding my breath.

But over the past couple of years, breathing has become the

cornerstone of my “calm practice,” which I call my don’t-lose-it approach to living. Interestingly, the research participants who taught me the most about breathing occupy what we would traditionally think of as opposite sides of the professional continuum: yoga teachers, meditation leaders, and mindfulness practitioners on one side and soldiers, firefighters, first responders, and elite athletes on the other. Regardless of the teacher, though, the methods are virtually the same.

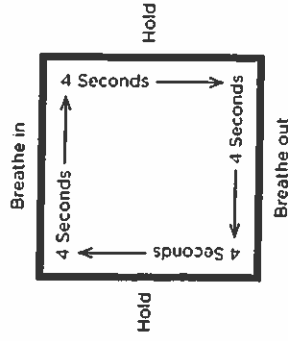
Mark Miller describes himself as a poet-warrior, a casual hero, and a student of science. He is also a Green Beret who has spent years in combat, and his descriptions of the tactical breathing techniques used by the military were incredibly helpful to me. I even taught them to my kids. In fact, in my interviews with veterans, active-duty soldiers, and first responders, they were quick to tell me that they rely on these techniques to calm and center themselves in their personal lives as much as they do in crisis situations—one firefighter told me that he most recently used it while negotiating homework with his teenage son. Here’s Mark Miller’s explanation of tactical breathing.

#### Tactical Breathing

1. Inhale deeply through your nose, expanding your stomach, for a count of four—one, two, three, four.
2. Hold in that breath for a count of four—one, two, three, four.
3. Slowly exhale all the air through your mouth, contracting your stomach, for a count of four—one, two, three, four.
4. Hold the empty breath for a count of four—one, two, three, four.

The breathing method many therapists and mindfulness practitioners teach is square or box breathing. They use it for increasing mindfulness and decreasing anxiety and stress. Take a look at how similar it is to tactical breathing.

#### Square or Box Breathing



Breathing is central to practicing mindfulness. The definition of *mindfulness* that resonates most with what I’ve heard research participants describe is from the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley—one of my favorite online stomping grounds ([greatergood.berkeley.edu](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu)):

Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment. Mindfulness also involves acceptance, meaning that we pay attention to our thoughts and feelings without judging them—without believing, for instance, that there’s a “right” or “wrong” way to think or feel in a given moment. When we practice mindfulness, our thoughts tune in to what we’re sensing in the present moment rather than rehashing the past or imagining the future.

In the Lake Travis story, what happened on the way back that was critical to the outcome was my breathing. I count strokes when I swim and normally breathe every fourth stroke. There is something about rhythmic breathing that focuses my mind and my thoughts.

When it comes to my everyday life on dry land, I struggle with being mindful. My mind is normally three miles ahead of my body, worrying about what comes next or jumping a curb three streets behind me, looking for the person who didn't give me the friendly driver's wave when I let them pull in in front of me. Living this way makes driving to the grocery store exhausting. If I'm really worked up, I can pull into the parking lot of the store and literally have no memory of how I got there.

At first, the idea of "being in the moment" scared me. I imagined that I would spend my life thinking, *Right now, the wind is blowing and I see a butterfly. Now the butterfly is gone, but the wind is still blowing. A mosquito bit me despite the blowing wind. Oh my God—make it stop! I can't do a play-by-play of every moment. I've got things to think about—work to get done.* I basically was afraid mindfulness would disrupt my flow—what the scholar Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes as that sacred intersection of deep enjoyment and disciplined concentration.

Then one day I noticed something in the middle of a walk. I had already found that I do my best thinking while I'm walking alone. That is when I sort and organize my thoughts. Even if I took a walk with a friend earlier, I still carve out time to walk alone. If I get stuck and it's rainy and thirty degrees outside, I walk. Well, I actually walk and talk. My neighbors constantly make fun of me because I talk to myself and swing my arms around while I'm walking our streets. I can't help it—it's my process.

But on that day I was suddenly struck by how aware I was of every single thing around me. I was completely in my work zone—my brain was on fire—but I was also keenly aware of the smell of cut grass and the color of the snapdragons my neighbor was planting. I liked the way the new socks I'd stolen from my daughter's drawer felt inside my running shoes, and I was savoring the slightly cooler weather that all Houstonians await with great anticipation. That's when I realized that mindfulness and flow are never in competition with each other. They aren't the same thing, but they share the same foundation: making the choice to pay attention.

A couple of weeks later, I returned from a productive work walk to find my son, Charlie, holding his finger and fighting back tears. He had gotten a splinter from a fence post in our backyard and needed help. Before my realization about flow and mindfulness, I would have been anxious about not being able to sit down and immediately capture all of the ideas from my walk. But on this day, I decided to simply stay present and shift my mindfulness to Charlie. While it took me a few minutes to find the tweezers and my glasses, I didn't race around the house in a panic. I got the splinter out and sat with Charlie until he was ready to go back outside.

When finally I sat down at the computer, my thoughts were all there waiting for me. My ideas and inspirations weren't something external that I tricked into following me home from the walk: They were a part of me. I was present to them and they, in turn, stayed present to me.

Newton's third law of motion states that "for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." I believe this law also applies to our emotional lives. For every emotion we feel, there

is a response. When we feel angry, we can mindlessly lash out or shut down, or our reaction can be intentional and we can breathe, get grounded, and bring awareness to what we're really feeling and how we respond. When we're scared, we can default to the instinctual fight, flight, or freeze mode, or we can breathe and respond thoughtfully. Breath and mindfulness give us the awareness and space we need to make choices that are aligned with our values.

## IN YOU MUST GO

Maybe by now you're thinking, *I don't want to do this. It seems like a lot of work. It feels too hard.* I get it. I'm with you. Just coming back to ourselves, however stunned, after falling down already demands so much of us—that should be enough. It's not. Walking into our story is the reckoning. It can feel dangerous, but “in you must go.”

There's a pivotal scene in *The Empire Strikes Back* when Yoda is training Luke to be a Jedi warrior, teaching him how to honorably use the Force and how the dark side of the Force—anger, fear, and aggression—can consume him if he doesn't learn how to find calm and inner peace. In this scene, Luke and Yoda are standing in the dark swamp where they've been training when a strange look comes over Luke. He points toward a dark cave at the base of a giant tree and, looking at Yoda, he says, “There's something not right here. . . . I feel cold. Death.”

Yoda explains to Luke that the cave is dangerous and strong with the dark side of the Force. Luke looks confused and afraid, but Yoda's response is simply, “In you must go.”

When Luke asks what's in the cave, Yoda explains, “Only what you take with you.”

As Luke straps on his weapons, Yoda hauntingly advises, “Your weapons, you will not need them.”

The cave is dark and thick with vines. Steam eerily rises off the ground while a large snake winds its way over a branch and a prehistoric-looking lizard perches on a limb. As Luke slowly makes his way through the cave, he is confronted by his enemy, Darth Vader. They both draw their light sabers and Luke quickly cuts off Vader's helmeted head. The head rolls to the ground and the face guard blows off the helmet, revealing Vader's face. Only, it isn't Darth Vader's face; it's Luke's face. Luke is staring at his own head on the ground.

Walking into our stories of hurt is like walking into that cave in Yoda's swamp. It can feel dangerous and foreboding, and what we must ultimately confront is ourself. The most difficult part of our stories is often what we bring to them—what we make up about who we are and how we are perceived by others. Yes, maybe we lost our job or screwed up a project, but what makes that story so painful is what we tell ourselves about our own self-worth and value.

Owning our stories means reckoning with our feelings and rumbling with our dark emotions—our fear, anger, aggression, shame, and blame. This isn't easy, but the alternative—denying our stories and disengaging from emotion—means choosing to live our entire lives in the dark.

When we decide to own our stories and live our truth, we bring our light to the darkness.

On to the rumble.