

Ch 5: The Rumble

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When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it.¹ It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else. —Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*

THE RECKONING IS how we walk into our story; the rumble is where we own it. The goal of the rumble is to get honest about the stories we're making up about our struggles, to revisit, challenge, and reality-check these narratives as we dig into topics such as boundaries, shame, blame, resentment, heartbreak, generosity, and forgiveness. Rumbling with these topics and moving from our first responses to a deeper understanding of our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors gives birth to key learnings about who we are and how we engage with others. The rumble is where wholeheartedness is cultivated and change begins.

CONSPIRACIES AND CONFABULATIONS

The rumble begins with turning up our curiosity level and becoming aware of the story we're telling ourselves about our hurt, anger, frustration, or pain. The minute we find ourselves facedown on the arena floor, our minds go to work trying to make sense of what's happening. This story is driven by emotion and the immediate need to self-protect, which means it's most likely not accurate, well thought out, or even civil. In fact, if your very first story is any of these things, either you're an outlier or you're not being fully honest.

Remember the Thompson quote "Civilization ends at the waterline"? The rumble starts when we have the willingness, ability, and courage to cross the waterline—to wade into that first, uncivilized story we're making up. This is the beginning of Act 2.

Why is capturing this uncensored story necessary? Because embedded in this unedited narrative are the answers to three critically important questions—questions that cultivate wholeheartedness and bring deeper courage, compassion, and connection to our lives:

1. What more do I need to learn and understand about the situation?
2. What more do I need to learn and understand about the other people in the story?
3. What more do I need to learn and understand about myself?

In the absence of data, we will always make up stories. It's how we are wired. In fact, the need to make up a story, especially when we are hurt, is part of our most primitive survival wiring. Meaning making is in our biology, and our default is often to come up with a story that makes sense, feels familiar, and offers us insight into how best to self-protect. What we're trying to do in the rumble—choosing to feel uncertain and vulnerable as we rumble with the truth—is a conscious choice. A brave, conscious choice.

Robert Burton, a neurologist and novelist, explains that our brains reward us with dopamine when we recognize and complete patterns. Stories are patterns. The brain recognizes the

familiar beginning-middle-end structure of a story and rewards us for clearing up the ambiguity. Unfortunately, we don't need to be accurate, just certain.

You know that wonderful sensation we experience when we connect the dots or something finally makes sense for the first time? The "aha moment," as Oprah calls it? Burton uses that as an example of how we might experience our brain's pattern-recognition reward. The tricky part is that the promise of that sensation can seduce us into shutting down the uncertainty and vulnerability that are often necessary for getting to the truth.

Burton writes, "Because we are compelled to make stories, we are often compelled to take incomplete stories and run with them." He goes on to say that even with a half story in our minds, "we earn a dopamine 'reward' every time it helps us understand something in our world—even if that explanation is incomplete or wrong." For example, in the Lake Travis story, I started with a half story defined by these limited data points:

Steve and I are swimming together for the first time in decades.
I'm being unusually vulnerable and trying to connect with Steve.
He's not responding positively to my bid for connection.
The very first story I tell myself is that he's a jerk who tricked me into believing he's kind and loving over the past twenty-five years when the real truth is that he's blowing me off because I don't look great in a Speedo and my freestyle sucks.

Why is this my first story? Because "I'm not enough" is one of my go-to narratives when I'm hurt. It's the equivalent of my comfy jeans. When I am in doubt, the "never enough" explanation is often the first thing I grab. The blame story is another favorite of mine. If something goes wrong, feels bad, or leaves me feeling too exposed or vulnerable, I want to know whose fault it is. I can make up one of these meaning-making stories in a heartbeat.

What do we call a story that's based on limited real data and imagined data and blended into a coherent, emotionally satisfying version of reality? A conspiracy theory. Drawing on extensive research and history, English professor and science writer Jonathan Gottschall examines the human need for story in his book *The Storytelling Animal*. He explains that there's growing evidence that "ordinary, mentally healthy people are strikingly prone to confabulate in everyday situations." Social workers always use the term confabulate when talking about how dementia or a brain injury sometimes causes people to replace missing information with something false that they believe to be true. The further I got into this research, the more I agreed with Gottschall's assessment about confabulation being an everyday human issue, not just the result of specific medical conditions.

In one of my favorite studies described in *The Storytelling Animal*, a team of psychologists asked shoppers to choose a pair of socks among seven pairs and then to give their reasons for choosing that particular pair. Every shopper explained their choice based on subtle differences in color, texture, and stitching. No shopper said, "I don't know why this is my choice," or "I have no idea why I picked that one." All of them had a story that explained their decision. But here's the kicker: All of the socks were identical. Gottschall explains that all of the shoppers told stories that made their decisions seem rational. But they really weren't. He writes, "The stories were confabulations—lies, honestly told."

Many confabulations are less the result of health or memory issues and more about the interplay of emotion, behavior, and thought. Had Steve and I not resolved our problem in the lake that day, it's very likely that I would have told my sisters (whom I love, respect, and am honest with) that we had a terrible fight because Steve thought I looked like crap in my new Speedo. It would have been a confabulation. And regardless of how honestly I was conveying this untruth, it could have hurt Steve, our relationship, and me. And perhaps even my relationship with my sisters. I can just see one or both of them saying, "That doesn't sound like Steve. Are you sure?" My response probably would have been "That's perfect. Be on his side. All of you suck!" Productive, right?

We all conspire and confabulate, and sometimes the consequences appear to be negligible. But I would argue that they're not. I would argue that conspiring can become a destructive pattern over time, and sometimes a single confabulation can damage our sense of self-worth and our relationships.

The most dangerous stories we make up are the narratives that diminish our inherent worthiness. We must reclaim the truth about our lovability, divinity, and creativity.

Lovability: Many of my research participants who had gone through a painful breakup or divorce, been betrayed by a partner, or experienced a distant or uncaring relationship with a parent or family member spoke about responding to their pain with a story about being unlovable—a narrative questioning if they were worthy of being loved. This may be the most dangerous conspiracy theory of all. If there's one thing I've learned over the past thirteen years, it's this: Just because someone isn't willing or able to love us, it doesn't mean that we are unlovable.

Divinity: Research participants who shared stories of shame around religion had less in common than most people guess. No specific denomination has emerged as more shaming in my work; however, there is a strong pattern worth noting. Over half of the participants who talked about experiencing shame in their faith histories also found resilience and healing through spirituality. The majority of them changed their churches or their beliefs, but spirituality and faith remain important parts of their lives. They believed that the sources of shame arose from the earthly, man-made, human-interpreted rules or regulations and the social/community expectations of religion rather than their personal relationships with God or the divine. Our faith narratives must be protected, and we must remember that no person is ordained to judge our divinity or to write the story of our spiritual worthiness.

Creativity and ability: In *Daring Greatly*, I write, "One reason that I'm confident that shame exists in schools is simply because 85 percent of the men and women we interviewed for the shame research could recall a school incident from their childhood that was so shaming that it changed how they thought of themselves as learners. What makes this even more haunting is that approximately half of those recollections were what I refer to as creativity scars. The research participants could point to a specific incident where they were told or shown that they weren't good writers, artists, musicians, dancers, or something creative. This helps explain why the gremlins are so powerful when it comes to creativity and innovation." Like our lovability and divinity, we must care for and nurture the stories we tell ourselves about our creativity and ability. Just because we didn't measure up to some standard of achievement doesn't mean that we don't possess gifts and talents that only we

can bring to the world. Just because someone failed to see the value in what we can create or achieve doesn't change its worth or ours.

Gottschall argues that conspiratorial thinking “is not limited to the stupid, the ignorant, or the crazy. It is a reflex of the storytelling mind’s compulsive need for meaningful experience.” He goes on to make the compelling point that ultimately, conspiracy theories are used to explain why bad things happen. He writes, “To the conspiratorial mind, shit never just happens,” and the complexities of human life are reduced to produce theories that are “always consoling in their simplicity.”

His conclusion about conspiracy thinking on the societal level reflects some of the exact same problems at the personal and relational levels. Gottschall writes that for conspiracy theorists, “bad things do not happen because of a wildly complex swirl of abstract historical and social variables. They happen because bad men live to stalk our happiness. And you can fight, and possibly even defeat, bad men. If you can read the hidden story.”

In my research I’ve found that the same can be said for the conspiracies we make up to explain that fight with our partner or the disapproving look from our boss or our child’s behavior at school. We make up hidden stories that tell us who is against us and who is with us. Whom we can trust and who is not to be trusted. Conspiracy thinking is all about fear-based self-protection and our intolerance for uncertainty. When we depend on self-protecting narratives often enough, they become our default stories. And we must not forget that storytelling is a powerful integration tool. We start weaving these hidden, false stories into our lives and they eventually distort who we are and how we relate to others.

When unconscious storytelling becomes our default, we often keep tripping over the same issue, staying down when we fall, and having different versions of the same problem in our relationships—we’ve got the story on repeat. Burton explains that our brains like predictable storytelling. He writes, “In effect, well-oiled patterns of observation encourage our brains to compose a story that we expect to hear.”

The men and women who have cultivated rising strong practices in their lives became aware of the traps in these first stories, whereas the participants who continued to struggle the most appeared to have gotten stuck in those stories. The good news is that people aren’t born with an exceptional understanding of the stories they make up, nor does it just dawn on them one day. They practiced. Sometimes for years. They set out with the intention to become aware and they tried until it worked. They captured their conspiracies and confabulations.

Capturing the Conspiracies and Confabulations

To capture these first stories and to learn from them, we need to engage our second integration tool—creativity. The most effective way to foster awareness is by writing down our stories. Nothing fancy. The goal here is to write what Anne Lamott would call your “shitty first draft”—or your SFD, as I like to call it (this can stand for “stormy first draft” if you are looking for a G-rated term to teach the rising strong process to kids). Lamott’s advice from her exceptional book *Bird by Bird* is exactly what we need:

The only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts. The first draft is the child's draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later. You just let this childlike part of you channel whatever voices and visions come through and onto the page. If one of the characters wants to say, "Well, so what, Mr. Poopy Pants?," you let her. No one is going to see it. If the kid wants to get into really sentimental, weepy, emotional territory, you let him. Just get it all down on paper because there may be something great in those six crazy pages that you would never have gotten to by more rational, grown-up means.

I can promise that you will meet the romping, tantrum-throwing five-year-old Brené in almost all of my first stories, like you did in the Lake Travis story. Our rational, grown-up selves are good liars. The five-year-old tyrants within us are the ones who can tell it like it is. What you write doesn't have to be a sweeping narrative. It can be a bulleted list on a Post-it note or a simple paragraph in a journal. Just get it down. And because our goal is wholeheartedness, we need to consider our whole selves when we write our SFDs. The core (sometimes the entirety) of my SFD is normally these six sentences with maybe a few notes.

The story I'm making up:

My emotions:

My body:

My thinking:

My beliefs:

My actions:

Storytelling is also a creative endeavor, so if you have a friend or someone you trust who has the skills and patience to listen, you can talk through your SFD, but writing is always more powerful. James Pennebaker, a researcher at the University of Texas at Austin and author of *Writing to Heal*, has done some of the most important and fascinating research I've seen on the power of expressive writing in the healing process. In an interview posted on the University of Texas's website, Pennebaker explains, "Emotional upheavals touch every part of our lives. You don't just lose a job, you don't just get divorced. These things affect all aspects of who we are—our financial situation, our relationships with others, our views of ourselves, our issues of life and death. Writing helps us focus and organize the experience." Pennebaker believes that because our minds are designed to try to understand things that happen to us, translating messy, difficult experiences into language essentially makes them "graspable."

What's important to note about Pennebaker's research is the fact that he advocates limited writing, or short spurts. He's found that writing about emotional upheavals for just fifteen to twenty minutes a day on four consecutive days can decrease anxiety, rumination, and depressive symptoms and boost our immune systems.

The participants in my research did not reference a specific approach, but more than 70 percent of them did some form of short writing. Many of them worked through their emotions in letters that they knew they would never send but needed to write. One participant told me that both she and her husband wrote short letters to their nineteen-year-old son every night for one week after finding out that he had dropped out of college

and was using the money they were sending him to host parties for his friends. She said, “There would have been nothing but yelling and screaming without those letters. By the time we sat down with him, we were calm and ready to hold him responsible for his decisions.”

I share my own story of letter writing as an SFD in Chapter Ten, “You Got to Dance with Them That Brung You.” As you’ll see, working through blinding shame on paper is far less painful than working it out on a person. Pennebaker’s research, combined with what I’ve learned in my own work, has convinced me that even brief engagements with writing can yield significant results.

When it comes to our SFDs, it’s important that we don’t filter the experience, polish our words, or worry about how our story makes us look (which is why writing is often safer than having a conversation). We can’t get to our brave new ending if we start from an inauthentic place. So give yourself permission to wade through the sometimes-murky waters of whatever you’re thinking and feeling. You can be mad, self-righteous, blaming, confused. Just don’t edit and don’t try to “get it right.” Ninety percent of my SFDs start with “I’m feeling angry. I’m physically feeling like screaming or punching someone or crying.”

Again, you can speak this process rather than write it, but there are some risks with that. Getting clear on the story that we’re making up in the midst of pain is not about venting or lashing out. Your SFD is not permission to be hurtful. If you’re standing across from someone and saying, “I’m making up that you’re a self-centered egomaniac and everyone who works for you thinks you’re an asshole”—you’re on the wrong track. This process is about capturing the story you’re telling yourself about your fall. This should feel vulnerable and personal. Your intention should be to embrace curiosity, awareness, and growth.

Steve and I sometimes go straight to storytelling—like we did in the lake story. But don’t forget that in the lake story, I had a long swim back to sort out my confabulations and conspiracies. If we go straight to storytelling with each other or with the kids, we’re very careful and respectful about how we use this tool. This first draft is a tool of inquiry and intention—not a weapon.

I normally have to walk or swim or do something that gives me the time and space I need to get clear on my SFD before I share it. About 50 percent of the research participants talked about doing something physical as a means for thinking through more complex SFDs, where they’re feeling strong emotion. One participant walked down and then back up five flights of stairs at his office. My leadership team also uses “the story I’m making up” on a regular basis. What I’ve noticed is that most of us have already done the romping and raging before we sit down and have the discussion. On occasion we also use it unrehearsed, but that came with practice. For example, we were recently in a brainstorming session about new ventures when I noticed that one of our team members was becoming increasingly quiet. When I asked if everything was okay, she said, “I keep asking tough questions about these ideas and I’m starting to make up that I’m being perceived as not excited or not a team player.” This gave me the opportunity to redefine our objective for the session and assure the team that I expected a point of view from everyone and appreciated honesty and tough questions above all else.

Think about how much more productive that is than having someone leave the meeting angry, resentful, and confused, or having people leave questioning their contributions. As the leader of this team, I really appreciate and respect this kind of honesty. It gives me an invaluable opportunity to communicate honestly with the people I trust the most.

The SFD has changed the way we communicate. Just think about how many times you've walked away from a conflict with someone at work or read an email that pissed you off and then made up an entire story about what's happening. Of all the emails I get from leaders who are implementing my work with their teams, the vast majority talk about how getting clear on these first stories has changed the way they lead and live.

In 2014, The Daring Way launched a three-year collaboration with Team Red, White, and Blue (Team RWB) to bring what we're learning about daring and rising strong to veterans. Team RWB's mission is to enrich the lives of America's veterans by connecting them to their communities through physical and social activity. I had the opportunity to meet leaders from Team RWB during visits to West Point, the campus of the U.S. Military Academy in New York's Hudson Valley. What they taught me and what I learned through my interviews with them made invaluable contributions to the research I'm sharing with you.

Blayne Smith, a West Point graduate and former Special Forces officer, is the executive director of Team RWB. He shared this with me about his experience of rumbling with "the story we make up."

The ability to say "the story that I'm making up" is extremely helpful in a couple of ways. First, it creates the opportunity for some inner dialogue. It gives me a chance to pause and evaluate what I'm thinking and feeling before I even bring it up with another person. In some cases, that is all I need to do. At times when I need to communicate a frustration or issue, "the story that I'm making up" gives me permission to speak honestly and candidly without the fear of generating a defensive response. It is also very disarming and almost always results in a productive conversation, rather than a heated back-and-forth.

As the first paid employee of a start-up nonprofit, I've always been extremely frugal with spending. Though we have grown and now enjoy financial stability, I still maintain my old habits with the company credit card. When traveling, I rarely pay for a coffee or meal with company funds. On a recent trip to Washington, D.C., one of my teammates said he had to ask me a favor. He said, "I need you to use your company card when paying for meals on the road." When I inquired why, he responded, "Because the story that I'm making up is that whenever I use my company card to pay for a meal, you're judging me." I was floored. I hadn't even considered that. He told me that our team needed to feel comfortable when appropriately spending company dollars and that my resistance to spending made that difficult. That wasn't a major strategy issue or hotly debated company decision, but that kind of communication and honesty is a big part of what makes Team RWB a great place to work.

In addition to the cautions about not polishing your SFD, watch out for the need to be certain. Uncertainty is tricky. It moves good storytelling along—the fun of a whodunit is the

mystery—but it can shut down difficult stories we are trying to capture. When it comes to the process of owning our hard stories, uncertainty can be so uncomfortable that we either walk away or race to the ending. So if you come across a part of your story that you don't understand or that makes you feel uncertain or anxious, just jot down a question mark or write yourself a note: What the heck happened here? Total confusion. Who knows? The important thing is not to skip it. Stay in the story until you touch every part of it.

You'll know you're being honest if you're worried that someone might see your SFD and think you're a total jerk or a nut job. Concerns like this are a good sign that you're on the right track. Don't hold back. There is no rising strong without a true accounting of the stories we make up.

RUMBLING WITH

It's time to rumble. Time to unleash our curiosity. Time to poke, prod, and explore the ins and outs of our story. The first questions we ask in the rumble are sometimes the simplest:

1. What more do I need to learn and understand about the situation?
What do I know objectively?
What assumptions am I making?
2. What more do I need to learn and understand about the other people in the story?
What additional information do I need?
What questions or clarifications might help?

Now we get to the more difficult questions—the ones that take courage and practice to answer.

3. What more do I need to learn and understand about myself?
What's underneath my response?
What am I really feeling?
What part did I play?

How we rumble with our story and approach these questions depends on who we are and what we've experienced. As Yoda told Luke, what's in the cave depends on who walks into the cave. That said, some rumble topics worth investigating did consistently emerge in my interviews— issues uncovered by the participants' curiosity as they rumbled with the question of what they were feeling. Here's a list:

RUMBLING TOPICS

Grief, vulnerability, failure, forgiveness, blame and accountability, disappointment, expectations, and resentment, fear, nostalgia, stereotypes and labels, boundaries, perfectionism, identity, trust, love, belonging, and heartbreak, regret, need and connection, criticism, generosity, shame, integrity

As you read through the chapters, you'll find that some of these topics are areas that I've researched and know well (e.g., shame, guilt, and blame), while other topics, like forgiveness

and nostalgia, are subjects that put me squarely in the seat of the student. When the topics are outside my area of study, I'll introduce you to men and women who know these fields and we'll explore their work together.

THE DELTA

delta | 'del-t | noun the fourth letter in the Greek alphabet—is a mathematical symbol for difference. A capital delta is a triangle.

The difference—the delta—between what we make up about our experiences and the truth we discover through the process of rumbling is where the meaning and wisdom of this experience live. The delta holds our key learnings—we just have to be willing to walk into our stories and rumble.

Even though the words difference and delta can mean the same thing, I like to use the word delta for two reasons, one professional and the other personal. The triangle symbol takes us back to that three-legged stool of emotion, thought, and behavior. A true rumble affects the way we feel, think, and act—our whole selves.

The personal reason is closer to my heart. The song “Delta,” on Crosby, Stills & Nash’s album *Daylight Again*, is one of the songs that I’ve turned to during the peaks and valleys of the past thirty years. I sat on the floor in my apartment in San Antonio and listened to it when I found out that Ronnie, my mother’s only sibling, had been shot and killed in a random act of violence. I listened to it after my parents called my dorm room to tell me they were getting a divorce. I played it on the way to my wedding; in my parked car before walking into my dissertation defense; on the way to my first meeting with my therapist, Diana; and in the hospital when I gave birth to both of my children. The lyrics make me feel less alone—they let me see I’m not the only one navigating the “fast running rivers of choice and chance.”

Thoughts

Like scattered leaves
Slowed in mid-fall
Into the streams Of fast running rivers
Of choice and chance
And time stops here on the delta
While they dance, while they dance. I love the child
Who steers this riverboat,
But lately he’s crazy
For the deep ...

I do love the child in me who steers my riverboat, but sometimes she is so unafraid of the dark, swift, deep water that I find myself in over my head during the rumbling part of this process. I’m so much better at being angry than I am at being hurt or disappointed or scared. This is why the rumble is so important—many of us have go-to emotions that mask what we’re really feeling. Deltas are where rivers meet the sea. They’re marshy, full of sediment, and forever changing. They are also rich and fertile areas of growth. This is where we need to do our work—our key learnings emerge from the delta.

In the lake story, I had to rumble with shame, blame, connection, love, trust, and generosity. The delta between the story I made up and the truth gave birth to a key learning that to this day is invaluable in our relationship: Steve and I love and trust each other, but when shame and fear visit, everything can unravel in a heartbeat if we're not willing to be vulnerable in the exact moment when we most want to self-protect. Other key learnings from the delta:

- I was reminded that shame is a liar and a story-stealer. I have to trust myself and the people I care about more than the gremlins, even if that means risking being hurt.
- I learned that one of the most vulnerable parts of loving someone is trusting that they love you back, and I need to be generous in my assumptions.
- When I played the story to the end on the swim back, I saw for the first time that many of our cold wars and arguments are predicated on bad information and that often I turn to blame when I'm scared.

As we start to integrate what we learn from the rising strong process into our lives, we get better at rumbling. In some cases, I can go from "facedown" to the delta to key learnings in five minutes. Other times, it takes me months. But if you're like me, there will always be times when we experience a completely new way of falling down, and that delta will be gaping once again, requiring more learning.

Having the courage to reckon with our emotions and to rumble with our stories is the path to writing our brave new ending and the path that leads to wholeheartedness. It's also the beginning. Understanding our fall and rise, owning our story, taking responsibility for our emotions—this is where the revolution starts. I've devoted the final chapter to the revolution. In the meantime, the following chapters are stories that will let us examine the rising strong process in action. Each of the chapters includes additional research on the rumbling topics.