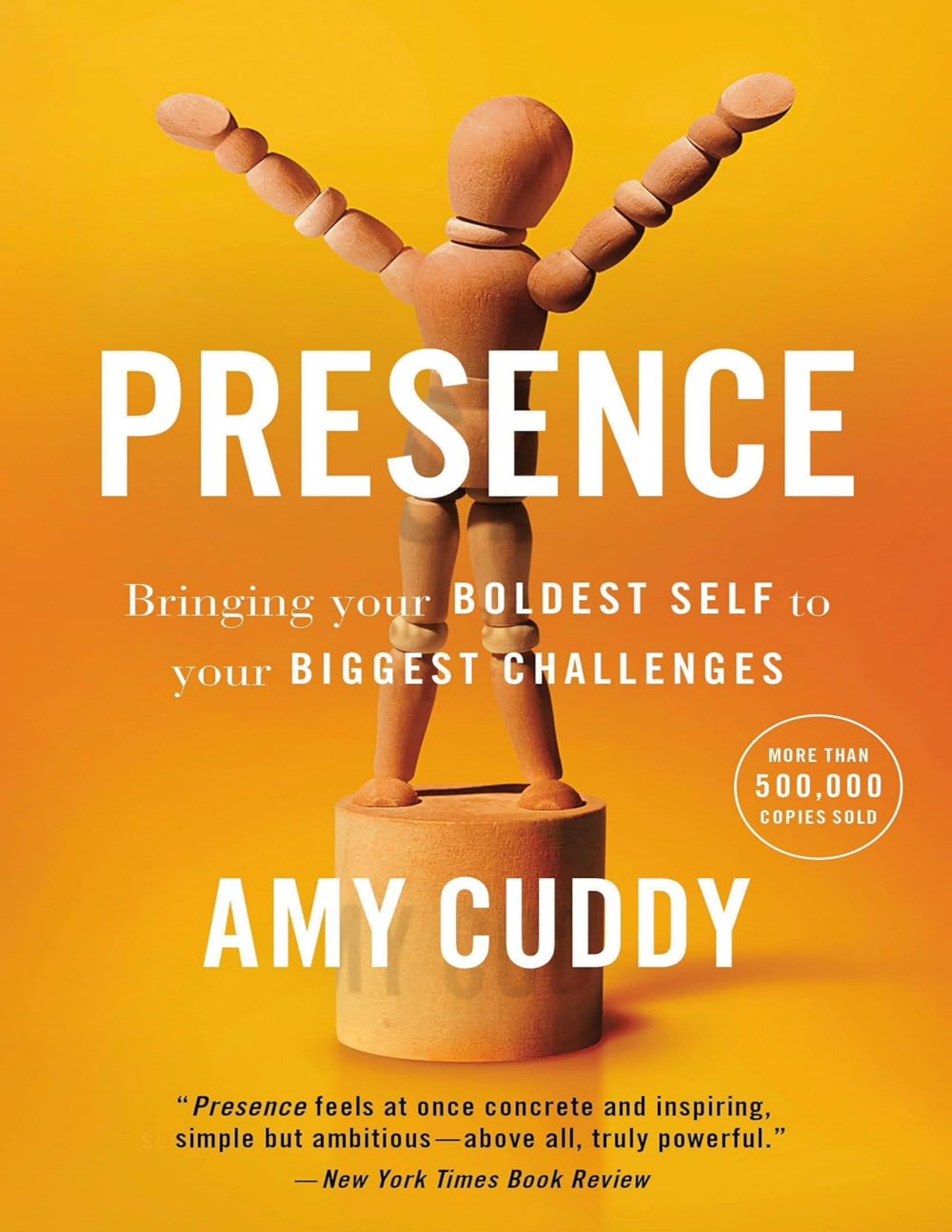
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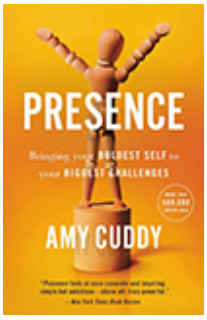

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For Jonah and Paul,

the loves of my life…

Thank you for patiently reminding me, again and again,

to "just stand up on the surfboard"

And you live life with your arms reached out,
Eye to eye when speaking.
Enter rooms with great joy shouts,
Happy to be meeting.…
Bright as yellow,
Warm as yellow.

—Karen Peris (the innocence mission)

Introduction

I'M SITTING AT THE counter in my favorite Boston bookstore-café, laptop open, writing. Ten minutes ago I ordered coffee and a muffin. The server—a young, dark-haired woman with a broad smile and glasses—paused and quietly said, "I just want to tell you how much your TED talk meant to me—how much it inspired me. A couple years ago my professor posted it for a class I was taking. Now I'm applying to medical school, and I want you to know that I stood in the bathroom like Wonder Woman before I took my MCAT, and it really helped. So even though you don't know me, you helped me figure out what I really wanted to do with my life—go to medical school—and then you helped me do what I needed to do to get there. Thank you."

Tears in my eyes, I asked, "What's your name?"

"Fetaine," she said. Then we chatted for the next ten minutes about Fetaine's challenges in the past and newfound excitement about her future.

Everyone who approaches me is unique and memorable, but this kind of interaction happens far more frequently than I'd ever have anticipated: a stranger warmly greets me, shares a personal story about how they successfully coped with a particular challenge, and then simply thanks me for my small part in it. They're women and men, old and young, timid and gregarious, struggling and wealthy. But something binds them: all have felt powerless in the face of great pressure and anxiety, and all discovered a remarkably simple way to liberate themselves from that feeling of powerlessness, at least for that moment.

For most authors, the book comes first, then the responses. For me, it was the other way around. First, I conducted a series of experiments that gave rise to a talk I delivered at the TEDGlobal conference in 2012. In that talk, I discussed some intriguing findings, from my own and others' research, about how our bodies can influence our brains and behavior. (This

is where I described that Wonder-Woman-in-the-bathroom thing Fetaine mentioned, which I will explain by and by, that can quickly increase our confidence and decrease our anxiety in challenging situations.) I also shared my own struggles with impostor syndrome and how I learned to trick myself to feel—and actually to become—more confident. I referred to this phenomenon as "fake it till you become it." (By the way, in the talk, that part about my own struggles was almost entirely unplanned and unscripted, because I didn't think I had the audacity to disclose something so personal to the hundreds of people in that audience. Little did I know.…) I didn't know whether these topics would resonate with people. They surely spoke to me. Immediately after the twenty-one-minute video of the talk was posted on the Internet, I began hearing from people who had seen it.

Of course, watching my talk didn't magically give Fetaine the knowledge she needed to do well on the MCAT. She didn't miraculously acquire a detailed understanding of the characteristics of smooth-strain versus rough-strain bacteria or how the work-energy theorem relates to changes in kinetic energy. But it may have released her from the fear that could have prevented her from expressing the things she knew. Powerlessness engulfs us—and all that we believe, know, and feel. It enshrouds who we are, making us invisible. It even alienates us from ourselves.

The opposite of powerlessness must be power, right? In a sense that's true, but it's not quite that simple. The research I've been doing for years now joins a large body of inquiry into a quality I call *presence*. Presence stems from believing in and trusting yourself—your real, honest feelings, values, and abilities. That's important, because if you don't trust yourself, how can others trust you? Whether we are talking in front of two people or five thousand, interviewing for a job, negotiating for a raise, or pitching a business idea to potential investors, speaking up for ourselves or speaking up for someone else, we all face daunting moments that must be met with poise if we want to feel good about ourselves and make progress in our lives. Presence gives us the power to rise to these moments.

The path that brought me to that talk and this breakthrough was roundabout, to say the least. But it's clear where it started.

What I most remember were the cartoonish sketches and sweet notes on the whiteboard, left by my friends. I'm a sophomore in college. I wake up in a hospital room. I look around—cards everywhere, and flowers. I'm exhausted. But I'm also anxious and agitated. I can barely keep my eyes open. I've never felt like this. I don't understand, but I don't have the energy to try to make sense of it. I fall asleep.

Repeat—many times.

My last clear memory before waking up in that hospital was of traveling from Missoula, Montana, to Boulder, Colorado, with two of my good friends and housemates. We'd gone up to Missoula to help organize a conference with University of Montana students and to visit with friends. We left Missoula in the early evening, around six, on a Sunday. We were trying to get back to Boulder for morning classes. In retrospect, especially as a parent, I now see how incredibly stupid this was, given that the drive time between Missoula and Boulder is thirteen to fourteen hours. But we were nineteen.

We had what we thought was a good plan: we would each drive a third of the trip; one passenger would stay up to help the driver stay awake and alert while the other passenger would sleep in the back of the Jeep Cherokee, seats down, in a sleeping bag. I drove my shift; I think I went first. Then I was the active passenger, keeping an eye on the driver. And it's a really tender memory. So peaceful. I loved these people I was with. I loved the openness of the West. I loved the wilderness. No headlights to count on the highway. Just us. Then came my turn to sleep in the backseat.

As I learned later, here's what happened next. My friend was driving the worst shift. It was the time of night when you feel as though you might be the only person in the entire world who is awake. Not only was it the middle of the night, it was the middle of the night in the middle of Wyoming. Very dark, very open, very lonesome. Very little to keep you awake. At around four in the morning, my friend veered off the road. When she hit the rumble strip on the shoulder, she overcorrected in the opposite direction. The car rolled several times, eventually landing on its roof. My friends in the front seat were wearing their seatbelts. I, who had been sleeping in back with the seats down, was ejected from the car and thrown into the night. The right-front side of my head slammed into the highway. The rest of me remained in the sleeping bag.

I sustained a traumatic brain injury. More specifically, I suffered a diffuse axonal injury (DAI). In a DAI, the brain is subjected to "shearing forces," usually from severe rotational acceleration, which is quite common in car accidents. Imagine what happens during a high-speed car crash: with the sudden and extreme change in velocity upon impact, your body abruptly stops but your brain continues to move and sometimes even rotate within the skull, which it is not meant to do, and even bangs back and forth against your skull, which it is also not meant to do. The force of my head slamming into the highway, which fractured my skull, probably didn't help matters.

The brain is meant to exist in a safe space, protected by the skull and cushioned by several thin membranes, called meninges, and cerebrospinal fluid. The skull is the brain's friend, but the two are never intended to touch. The shearing forces of a severe head injury tear and stretch neurons and their fibers, called axons, throughout the brain. Like electrical wires, axons are insulated by a protective coating, or buffer, called the myelin sheath. Even if an axon isn't severed, damage to the myelin sheath can significantly slow the speed at which information travels from neuron to neuron.

In a DAI, the injury occurs throughout the brain, unlike a focal brain injury, such as a gunshot wound, where damage strikes a very specific location. Everything the brain does depends on neurons communicating; when neurons throughout the brain are damaged, their communication is inevitably damaged as well. So when you have a DAI, no doctor is going to tell you, "Well, the damage is to your motor area, so you're going to have trouble with movement." Or "It's your speech area; you're going to have difficulty producing and processing speech." They won't know *if* you'll recover, *how well* you'll recover, or *which brain functions* will be affected: Will your memory be impaired? Your emotions? Your spatial reasoning? Your small-motor skills? Given how little we understand about DAIs, the likelihood that a doctor can offer an accurate prognosis is dismal.

After a DAI, you are a different person. In many ways. How you think, how you feel, how you express yourself, respond, interact—all of these dimensions are affected. On top of that, your ability to understand yourself has probably taken a hit, so you're not really in a position to know exactly *how* you've changed. And no one—NO ONE—can tell you what to expect.

Now let me give you an explanation of what happened to my brain as I understood it *then:* (Insert the sound of chirping crickets here.)

Okay, so there I was in the hospital. Naturally, I had been withdrawn from college, and my doctors expressed serious doubts about whether I would ever be cognitively fit to return. Given the severity of my injury and statistics on people with similar injuries, they said: *Don't expect to finish college. You're going to be fine—"high functioning"—but you should consider finding something else to do*. I learned that my IQ had dropped thirty points—two standard deviations. I knew this not because a doctor had explained it to me. I knew because the IQ was part of a two-day battery of neuropsychology tests they'd given me, and I'd received a long report that included that result. The doctors didn't think it was important to explain this to me. Or did they think I wasn't smart enough to understand? I don't want to give the IQ more credit than it deserves; I'm not making any claims about its ability to predict life outcomes. But at the time it was something that I believed quantified my intelligence. So, as I understood it, according to the doctors, I was no longer smart, and I felt this acutely.

I received occupational therapy, cognitive therapy, speech therapy, physical therapy, psychological counseling. About six months after the accident, when I was home for the summer, a couple of my closest friends, who'd noticeably pulled away from me, told me, "You're just not the same anymore." How could two of the people who seemed to understand me the best tell me I was no longer myself? How was I different? They couldn't see me; I couldn't even see myself.

A head injury makes you feel confused, anxious, and frustrated. When your doctors tell you they don't know what you should expect, and your friends tell you that you're different, it certainly amplifies all that confusion, anxiety, and frustration.

I spent the next year in a fog—anxious, disoriented, making bad decisions, not sure what I would do next. After that, I went back to school. But it was too soon. I couldn't think. I couldn't adequately process spoken information. It was like listening to someone speaking half in a language I knew and half in a language I didn't know, which only made me more frustrated and anxious. I had to drop out because I was failing my classes.

Although I'd broken several bones and gained a few ugly scars in the accident, I looked physically whole. And because traumatic brain injuries are often invisible to others, people said things like, "Wow, you're so lucky! You could have broken your neck!" "Lucky?" I thought. Then I'd feel guilty and ashamed for being frustrated by their well-intentioned comments.

Our way of thinking, our intellect, our affect, our personality—these aren't things we expect will ever change. We take them for granted. We fear having an accident that will make us paralyzed, change our ability to move around, or cause us to lose our hearing or sight. But we don't think about having an accident that will cause us to lose ourselves.

For many years after the head injury, I was trying to pass as my former self… although I didn't really know who that former self was. I felt like an impostor, an impostor in my own body. I had to relearn how to learn. I kept trying to start school again because I couldn't accept people telling me that I couldn't do it.

I had to study circles around others. Slowly, eventually, and to my unspeakable relief, my mental clarity began to return. I finished college four years after my pre-accident classmates.

One of the reasons I persisted was that I'd found something I liked to study: psychology. After college, I managed to enter a profession that required a fully functioning brain. As Anatole France wrote, "All changes… have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter another." Along the way, not surprisingly, I became a person for whom all these questions of presence and power, of confidence and doubt, took on a great deal of significance.

My injury led me to study the science of presence, but it was my TED talk that made me realize just how universal the yearning for it is. Because here's the thing: *most* people are dealing with stressful challenges every day. People in every corner of the world and in all walks of life are trying to work up the nerve to speak in class, to interview for a job, to audition for a role, to confront a daily hardship, to stand up for what they believe in, or to just find peace being who they are. This is true of people who are homeless and people who are by traditional standards wildly successful. Fortune 500 executives, winning trial lawyers, gifted artists and performers, victims of bullying and prejudice and sexual assault, political refugees, people dealing with mental illness or who have suffered grave injuries—all of them face these challenges. And so do all the people working to help those people—the parents, spouses, children, counselors, doctors, colleagues, and friends of those who are struggling.

All these people—the vast majority of whom are *not* scientists—have forced me to look at my own research in a new way: they simultaneously take me away from the science and bring me closer to it. Hearing their stories, I became obliged to think about how social science findings actually play out in the real world. I started to care about doing research that changes lives in a positive way. But I also started coming up with basic questions that may never have occurred to me if I'd stayed inside the lab and steeped myself in the literature.

In the beginning I was overwhelmed by the response to the TED talk and by the sense that I might have made a big mistake in sharing my research and my personal story. I had no expectation that so many strangers would watch it and no idea how incredibly vulnerable and exposed I'd feel. It's what happens to anyone whom the Internet scoops up and then blasts all over the world all at once. Some people will recognize you in public. And that requires adjustment—whether it's a stranger asking me to stand with them like Wonder Woman for a selfie or hearing someone yell from a pedicab (as happened in Austin), "Hey! It's TED Girl!"

But mostly I feel *incredibly* lucky—lucky to have had a chance to share this research and my story with so many people, and even luckier to have so many of those people share their stories with me. I love academia, but I find much inspiration outside the lab and the classroom. One of the great things about being at Harvard Business School is that I am encouraged to cross that researcher-practitioner divide, so I had already started talking to people in organizations about how research is applied, what's working, where the kinks are, and things like that. But I didn't anticipate how this enormous world of thoughtful strangers would open up to me after the TED talk was posted.

I love these people and I feel eternally connected and loyal to them. I want to honor them, to honor their willingness to try—to keep getting back in the saddle or to help other people keep trying—and their willingness to sit down and write about their struggles in an e-mail to me, a stranger. Or to tell me about it in an airport, or a bookstore-café. Now I see how a talk can work like a song—how people personalize it, connect with it, feel validated knowing that someone else has felt as they feel. As Dave Grohl once said, "That's one of the great things about music: you can sing a song to 85,000 people and they'll sing it back for 85,000 different reasons." I was speaking at a youth homeless shelter and asked the residents to tell me about the

situations they found most challenging. One teenager said, “Showing up at the doorstep of this shelter.” At another shelter, a woman said, “Calling to ask for services or help or support. I know I’m going to wait a long time, and that the person on the other end will be annoyed and judgmental.” To this, another woman at the shelter responded, “I used to work in a call center, and I was going to say, ‘Taking calls from people who you know are going to be frustrated and angry, who’ve been waiting a long time while I’m trying to manage a hundred other incoming calls.’”

Thousands of people have written to tell me about a range of challenges—a range that blows my mind, contexts I’d never have considered as places where this research might apply. Here’s a snapshot taken from e-mail subject lines, most of which begin with something like “How your talk helped…”: Alzheimer’s families, firefighters, a fellow brain injury survivor, closing the biggest deal of my life, negotiating for a house, a college interview, adults with disabilities, a WWII vet who’d “lost [his] pride,” recovering from trauma, racing in the world sailing championships, kids who are bullied, self-confidence in the service industry, fifth-grade students who are afraid of mathematics, my son with autism, a professional opera singer in a tough audition, proposing a new idea to my boss, finding my voice when I had to speak up. And that’s just a small sample.

All the responses I’ve gotten to the TED talk are gifts that helped me better understand how and why this research resonates. In short: the stories helped me understand how to write this book and motivated me to do it. They are from all around the world, from people in all walks of life, and I will be sharing many of them in these pages. Maybe among these stories you will find echoes of your own.

1

What Is Presence?

We convince by our presence.

—WALT WHITMAN

WE KNOW IT WHEN we feel it, and we know it when we see it, but presence is hard to define. On the other hand, most of us are quite good at describing the lack of it. Here's my story—one of many.

Hoping to become a professor (as all good doctoral students do), I marched into the academic job market in the fall of 2004. If a doctoral student in social psychology is lucky, her faculty adviser will "debut" her at a certain smallish annual conference that's attended by the best social psychologists in the world. It's a collective coming-out party for competitive fifth-year PhD students and marks their ascension to the status of people-maybe-to-be-taken-seriously. This stage also triggers a student's most potent form of "feeling like a fraud." The student, dressed in her best guess at academic finery, gets an opportunity to mingle with senior faculty, many from top research universities that might be hiring in the coming year. The senior faculty, dressed in whatever they wear every day, get a chance to scout new talent—but mostly they're there to catch up with each other.

In a sense, students train for this moment for the entire four or five years leading up to it. They arrive prepared. Ready to pithily summarize their research program and goals in around ninety seconds—briefly enough to hold the audience's attention without accidentally signaling disrespect by taking too much of their time. They have armed themselves with what is colloquially known—inside and outside academia—as the elevator pitch.

My anxiety about this conference defied all reasonable dimensions.

At an unremarkable midsize conference hotel in an unremarkable midsize city, the meeting commenced. Heading up to the opening dinner, I stepped from the lobby into an elevator with three people—all well-established figures in my field, people I'd idolized for years. It was as if I were the rhythm guitarist from a mediocre college-town indie rock band, carrying in my hand a CD that we had recorded in the basement of the drummer's mom's house, walking into an elevator with Jimmy Page, Carlos Santana, and Eric Clapton. I was the only one who actually needed the giant name tag.

With no introduction, one of the rock stars, from a prestigious research university where I'd have been thrilled to land a job, casually said: "Fine. We're in an elevator. Let's hear your pitch."

My face went hot; my mouth went dry. Hyperaware that not one but *three* luminary scholars were confined with me in that tiny space, I began my pitch—or, rather, words started tumbling out of my mouth. I knew by the end of the first sentence that I'd started all wrong. I heard myself saying things like "So… oh, wait, before I explain that part…" I could barely follow my own story. And as the awareness of my imminent failure closed in, the ability to think about anything other than my crushing anxiety fled. Certain that I was killing my chances at not one but three schools—oh, and also at the schools where their closest collaborators worked—I acquiesced to the panic. I qualified everything. I kept trying to restart. There was no chance in hell that I'd get through it in the time it took to ride to the twentieth floor,[1] where the dinner was being held. My eyes darted from idol to idol to idol, seeking some glimmer of understanding, some microexpression of support, approval, empathy. Something. Anything. *Please*.

The doors finally opened. Two of the passengers swiftly escaped, heads down. The third—the one who'd goaded me to give my pitch—stepped across the threshold onto firm ground, paused, turned to me, and said, "That was the worst elevator pitch I have ever heard." (And… was that a hint of a smirk on his face?)

The doors closed. I fell against the back of my elevator cell, crumpling into a fetal ball, descending with it, down, down, down—straight back to the lobby. Despite the unequivocal censure, I felt a dim but fleeting sensation of relief.

But then: Oh. My. God. What had I done? How had I failed to say a single clever thing about a topic I'd been studying for more than four years? How is that even *possible?*

Outside the elevator, my practiced pitch started coming back to me, pressing through a smoggy haze and resuming a recognizable shape. There it was. I had the urge to run back to the elevator, chase the professors down, and ask for a do-over.

Instead, I spent the following three days of the conference backward-projecting myself into that moment, replaying the many ways it should have gone, agonizing over the scorn, or maybe even amusement, my three elevator mates must have felt. I was mercilessly anatomizing the memory, jabbing and cutting into every possible cross section, and never once forgetting that I had not just failed to represent myself, I'd also failed to represent my adviser, who'd spent many years training me and had spent a bit of reputational capital by taking me to that conference. Looping, looping, looping, my ninety-second failure ran on repeat in my brain, haunting me. I spent those three days at the conference but was not actually present for a single one of them.

I recounted my ordeal to my good friend Elizabeth, who said, "Oh, the spirit of the stairs!"

"The what of the what?"

So she told me this story, as she remembered it from her undergraduate philosophy class.

Eighteenth-century French philosopher and writer Denis Diderot was at a dinner party, engaged in debate over a topic that he knew well. But perhaps he wasn't himself on that evening—a bit self-conscious, distracted, worried about looking foolish. When challenged on some point, Diderot found himself at a loss for words, incapable of cobbling together a clever response. Soon after, he left the party.

Once outside, on his way down the staircase, Diderot continued to replay that humiliating moment in his mind, searching in vain for the perfect retort. Just as he reached the bottom of the stairs, he found it. Should he turn around, walk back up the stairs, and return to the party to deliver his witty comeback? Of course not. It was too late. The moment—and, with it, the opportunity—had passed. Regret washed over him. If only he'd had the presence of mind to find those words when he needed them.

Reflecting on this experience in 1773, Diderot wrote, "A sensitive man, such as myself, overwhelmed by the argument leveled against him, becomes confused and can only think clearly again [when he reaches] the bottom of the stairs."[2]

And so he coined the phrase *l'esprit d'escalier*—the spirit of the stairs, or staircase wit. In Yiddish it's *trepverter*. Germans call it *treppenwitz*. It's been called elevator wit, which has a sentimental resonance for me. My personal favorite is afterwit. But the idea is the same—it's the incisive remark you come up with too late. It's the hindered comeback. The orphaned retort. And it carries with it a sense of regret, disappointment, humiliation. We all want a do-over. But we'll never get one.

Apparently everyone has had moments like my conference-elevator nightmare, even eighteenth-century French philosophers.

Rajeev, one of the first strangers to write to me after my TED talk was posted, described it like this: "In so many situations in life, I don't walk away feeling like I have given my all and put everything on the table, so to speak. And it always eats at me later, when I analyze it over and over again in my head, and [it] ultimately leads to feelings of weakness and failure."

Most of us have our own personal version of this experience. After interviewing for a job, auditioning for a role, going on a date, pitching an idea, speaking up in a meeting or in class, arguing with someone at a dinner party.

But how did we get there? We probably were worrying what others would think of us, but believing we already knew what they thought; feeling powerless, and also consenting to that feeling; clinging to the outcome and attributing far too much importance to it instead of focusing on the process. These worries coalesce into a toxic cocktail of self-defeat. That's how we got there.

Before we even show up at the doorstep of an opportunity, we are teeming with dread and anxiety, borrowing trouble from a future that hasn't yet unfolded.[3] When we walk into a high-pressure situation in that frame of mind, we're condemned to leave it feeling bad.

If only I'd remembered to say this…. If only I'd done it that way…. If only I'd shown them who I really am. We can't be fully engaged in an interaction when we're busy second-guessing ourselves and attending to the hamster wheel in our heads—the jumbled, frenetic, self-doubting analysis of what we *think* is happening in the room. The excruciating self-awareness

that we are, most definitely, in a high-pressure situation. And we're screwing it up. Exactly when we most need to be present, we are least likely to be.

As Alan Watts wrote in *The Wisdom of Insecurity,* "To understand music, you must listen to it. But so long as you are thinking, 'I am listening to this music,' you are not listening."[4] When you are in a job interview, thinking, "I am in a job interview," you can't understand or engage fully with the interviewer or present the self you'd like to present—your truest, sharpest, boldest, most relaxed self.

Watts described the anxiety-laced anticipation of these future moments as the pursuit of "a constantly retreating phantom, and the faster you chase it, the faster it runs ahead."[5] These moments become apparitions. And we endow them with the power to haunt us—before, during, and after.

Next time you're faced with one of these tense moments, imagine approaching it with confidence and excitement instead of doubt and dread. Imagine feeling energized and at ease while you're there, liberated from your fears about how others might be judging you. And imagine leaving it without regret, satisfied that you did your best, regardless of the measurable outcome. No phantom to be chased; no spirit under the stairs.

Tina, a New Orleans native, wrote to tell me how being a high-school dropout had impeded her—not only by limiting her access to stable, well-paying work but also by undermining her feeling that she deserved to have those things. She worked many jobs, many hours a day, for many years, and at thirty-four, she graduated from college. She then slowly taught herself, through small, incremental changes, to treat "even the most difficult interactions as opportunities for me to reveal what I'm capable of and to express my worthiness."

Imagine that. That sounds like presence.

The Elements of Presence

Several years ago, during a lab meeting in my department, I had an aha moment that acutely piqued my interest in cracking open the psychology of presence.

On that day, a visiting student, Lakshmi Balachandra, was soliciting feedback about some new data. She'd been investigating the way entrepreneurs make pitches to potential investors and the way investors respond. After meticulously analyzing videos of 185 venture capital presentations—looking at both verbal and nonverbal behavior—Lakshmi ended up with results that surprised her: the strongest predictor of who got the money was not the person's credentials or the content of the pitch. The strongest predictors of who got the money were these traits: *confidence, comfort level, and passionate enthusiasm*. Those who succeeded did not spend their precious moments in the spotlight worrying about how they were doing or what others thought of them. No spirit under the stairs awaited them, because they knew they were doing their best. In other words, those who succeeded were fully present, and their presence was palpable. It came through mostly in nonverbal ways—vocal qualities, gestures, facial expressions, and so on.[6]

The findings puzzled quite a few people in the room. Are huge investment decisions really being made based solely on impressions of the person making the pitch? Is it just about charisma?

I was having a starkly different reaction as I listened to Lakshmi at the lab meeting: I suspected that these qualities—confidence, comfort, passion, and enthusiasm—were signaling something more powerful than words about the entrepreneur's investment worthiness. They were signaling how much that person truly believed in the value and integrity of her idea and her ability to bring it to fruition, which may in turn have signaled something about the quality of the proposition itself.

Sometimes we easily project poised, enthusiastic confidence. As Lakshmi's study and other research suggests, this counts for a lot. It predicts which entrepreneurs get funding from investors. It predicts job interviewers' evaluations of applicants, whether the applicants will get

called back, and final hiring decisions.[7] Are we right to value this trait so highly? Is it just a superficial preference? The success of these hiring and investment decisions suggests that it isn't. In fact, self-assured enthusiasm is an impressively useful indicator of success. In studies of entrepreneurs, this quality predicts drive, willingness to work hard, initiative, persistence in the face of obstacles, enhanced mental activity, creativity, and the ability to identify good opportunities and novel ideas.[8]

It doesn't stop there. Entrepreneurs' grounded enthusiasm is contagious, stimulating a high level of commitment, confidence, passion, and performance in the people who work for and with them. On the other hand, entrepreneurs and job candidates who don't convey these qualities are usually judged to be less confident and believable, less effective communicators, and, ultimately, poorer performers.[9]

There's another reason we tend to put our faith in people who project passion, confidence, and enthusiasm: these traits can't easily be faked. When we're feeling brave and confident, our vocal pitch and amplitude are significantly more varied, allowing us to sound expressive and relaxed. When we fearfully hold back—activating the sympathetic nervous system's fight-or-flight response—our vocal cords and diaphragms constrict, strangling our genuine enthusiasm.[10] If you've ever had to sing through stage fright, you'll know this feeling: the muscles that produce sound seize, causing your voice to come out thin and tight—nothing like what you are imagining in your head.

When we try to fake confidence or enthusiasm, other people can tell that something is off, even if they can't precisely articulate what that thing is. In fact, when job applicants try too hard to make a good impression through nonverbal tactics such as forced smiles, it can backfire—interviewers dismiss them as phony and manipulative.[11]

A disclaimer: my field, social psychology, has amassed a great deal of evidence that humans persistently make biased decisions based on minimal, misleading, and misunderstood first impressions. We've clearly demonstrated that first impressions are often flimsy and dangerous, and I'm not challenging that. In fact, much of my own research has focused on identifying and understanding these destructive biases.[12] What I'm saying here is that first impressions based on the qualities of enthusiasm, passion, and confidence *might* actually be quite sound—precisely because they're so