



# IDENTIFY

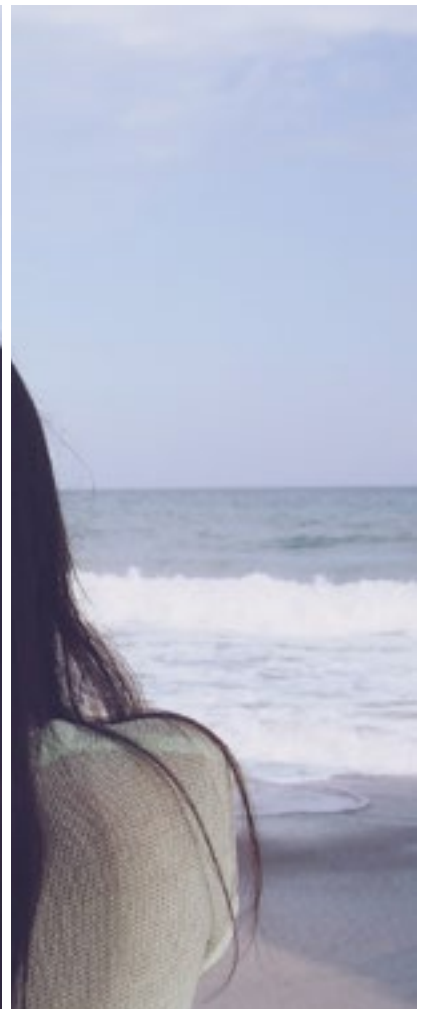
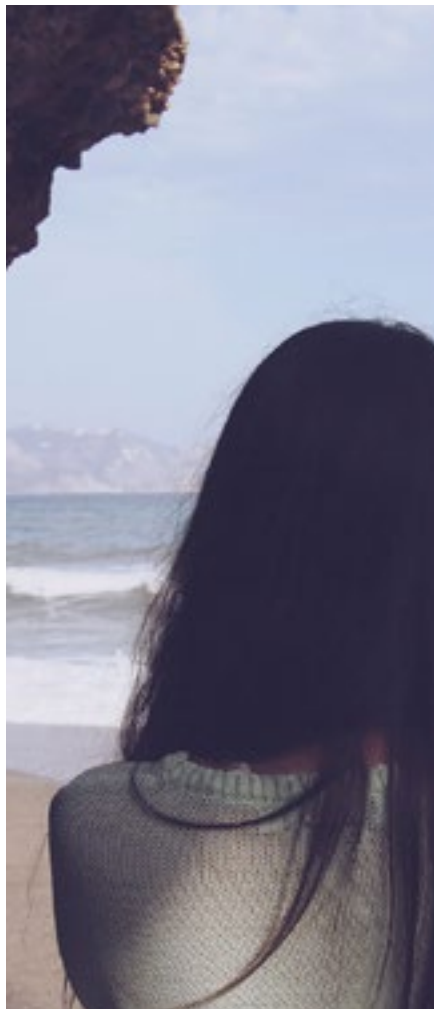
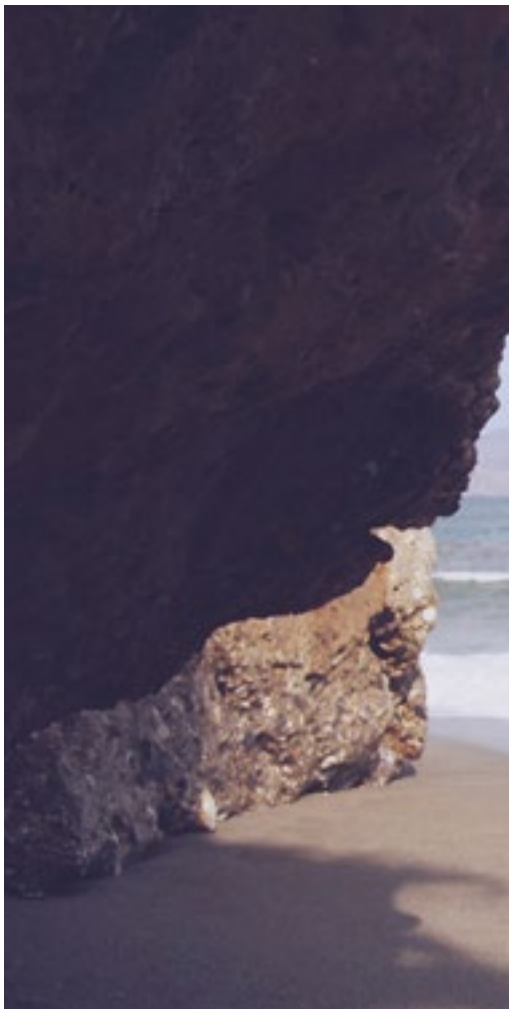
*the Monsters in Your Closet*

## MODULE 3

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We already looked at some of the judgments that keep us from diving into our truth. Now, let's explore the power of delving into our darkness, which is the terrain of our fear, shame, rage, intense and uncomfortable emotions, and most closely guarded secrets.



Although we may want more than anything to bury our most painful stories, they are actually powerful agents for our healing. In fact, the secrets we choose to keep are the fertile ground for our most healing and expansive stories.

Granted, the fullest version of who we are isn't necessarily the one we're eager to broadcast to the rest of the world. After all, it can be scary to fully reveal one's repressed urges, anger, fear, selfishness, addictions, or anything else we might view as embarrassing defects.

Some of us don't merely have monsters under the bed and skeletons in the closet—we have entire houses full of them. Sometimes, after years of neglect and pretending they don't exist, many of us are prompted to tentatively move toward them—perhaps in the hope that they will magically evaporate into thin air if we turn on the light and fling the doors open.

But our darkness isn't some kind of mythical creature that doesn't actually exist. It's absolutely real. And when we move toward it with the desire to understand it more deeply, we come to realize that not only is it real—it's also an integral component of every single human being. We can deny the hell out of it, or project it onto things and beings outside ourselves...but at the end of the day, it is here to stay.

**Being a truth teller is about getting real about all parts of ourselves. There is no better way to get real than to take a journey through your own darkness.**

Darkness connects us to the reservoir of pain and suffering that is part of the human condition. It enables us to build our muscle of empathy and to choose complexity over easy snap judgments.

Although we usually tend to consider our darkness home to the least desirable aspects of ourselves, it is actually full of beauty, mystery, and intrigue. It harbors important aspects of our being that we may have even rejected or unconsciously kept buried. Once we learn to skillfully access these parts, they can be extremely powerful allies.

**When we reclaim our brilliance from the shame that has held it captive, we can experience our true genius.**


The desire to chase the darkness away and steer clear of the cellar door that leads to the underworld is perfectly understandable. Life is painful enough—why would anyone want to willingly go exploring in scary places?

It all comes back to awareness. Greater awareness gives you an amazing amount of power. When you come face to face with the things about yourself that you believe are unbearable (e.g., you have a secret tendency to lie, cheat, or steal; you're hiding a sexual fantasy that you think is sick and twisted; you are embarrassed about the fact that you get so angry with your kids; your finances are a trainwreck), you become more capable of deciding what to do with those parts. It's only in hiding them or not admitting they are present that you allow them to have power over you.

## Our darkness is part of who we are.

When you fully own the qualities you'd prefer never to admit to yourself or others, with as much awareness as you can muster and as little shame as possible, you become freer. Not only do you learn to forgive and honor yourself, you also become more accepting of an uncomfortable truth about human nature.

Just as we carry light and goodness, we carry darkness and collective pain. When we don't allow our darkness to be an integral aspect of our story, and when we don't treat it with compassion and curiosity, we deprive ourselves of wholeness and keep ourselves from the healing elixir of truth.



*"Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness.  
It took me years to understand this too, was a gift."*

*Mary Oliver*

# THE COST OF SHAME

There are so many cultural narratives around shame that keep us from experiencing wholeness and healing. Social-science researcher and author Dr. Brené Brown writes about shame as a layered experience of competing expectations that define who, what, and how we should be. These may arise from narrow societal roles and agreements—and for most women, they are not usually of our own making.

**Shame often arises from the feeling that we aren't living up to ideals around gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, weight, profession, or any other aspect of our identity.**

Shame is like a universal solution in which every single one of us is stewing, but as clear and present as it might be, it is at the root of every secret we've ever shoved under the rug. Shame and secret-keeping tend to create a toxic proliferation of stories based in delusion and lies. We might be so busy trying to make ourselves look good that we don't even realize we are creating more darkness and confusion! Often, we fall prey to the belief that going into hiding will keep us safe from judgment, and in the process, many of us sacrifice the love and acceptance of the one person who should matter the most: our very own self.

A secret is always a defensive response to shame, but it's also a way of regaining control in a place where we've lost it. For example, people who experienced abuse and subsequently repressed their memories of the events are doing their best to survive—and if surviving means avoiding the truth, so be it.

Many of us view this as a perfectly viable tool because it keeps us safe, but shame eventually eats away at our souls and prevents us from making decisions that are rooted in authenticity, joy, power, and most importantly, truth.

Most of us have secrets that we've preferred to keep silent about. At the same time, these secrets have the ability to snake into our lives and stories, and to define us. For close to 30 years, I kept one of the biggest secrets of my life, even from myself: At the age of five, I was sexually abused by my father. It was so devastating that I buried the memory until my early 30s.

**No matter how long we choose to keep a secret, we cannot bury the truth forever.**

Saving face and hiding an experience you're ashamed of can help you feel safe and look good to other people, but by doing this, you end up losing more of who you are. You become disconnected from your truth. In fact, what usually ends up happening is that when you hide the “yucky” parts, you also end up obscuring the parts of you that were always meant to shine brightly.

You can't disconnect your “good” from your “bad.” This only adds to more fragmentation rather than the wholeness and acceptance that enable us to butterfly open into our most powerful selves. The places where you hold secrets are the dark rooms you need to enter. These are the places where you must flip on the light switch and reclaim the truth.

*Your wholeness is absolutely about the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.*

1. What are some of my earliest experiences of shame, and how are they still affecting me?

2. How does shame feel in my body (e.g., hot, cold, tight, paralyzing, constricting, etc.)? How does it manifest in my life (e.g., an eating disorder, obsessive-compulsive tendencies, persistent anger, etc.)?

3. When I think about claiming my most personal stories and sharing them with others, what are some fears that arise? Why do I hold back?

4. Where are the places I still hold shame?

# Peeling Back *the masks*

The words “be yourself” might constitute the most frustrating and trite advice in the world. After all, what exactly does it mean to be yourself? Given the sheer number of roles we may find ourselves assuming in a lifetime, who we are is composed of many different masks we choose to put on, depending on the situation and the person we are interacting with.

There is nothing inherently wrong with a mask. A mask is just another version of the story we tell ourselves. However, the masks we find ourselves turning to again and again can be constricting, even suffocating.

Our masks are often cut from the cloth of our idealized images: the projections and stories that keep us from accepting reality exactly as it is. These might be fairy tales about Prince Charming and “happily ever after,” or ideas about “family values” and what it means to be a “good woman,” or even airbrushed images of fit, happy women meditating in a field of wildflowers.

But this is all the stuff of fantasy. And fantasy is kind of like an inflatable balloon. The more filled up with air that balloon gets, the higher the chance that it’ll pop. Some people build entire castles out of these fantasies, only to eventually get hit by a gigantic wave of hot air.

**Although our fantasies are artificial and fabricated from our conditioning, we come to see them as being a “natural” part of who we are. We can become so trapped in our fantasies of perfection that they turn into a second skin.**

Masks start out as useful tools that help us function more efficiently in the world, similar to a uniform that we put on in order to solidify our sense of identity. The problem is, some of us put them on and subsequently forget that we did. They become part of our performance and end up running our lives instead of serving us from moment to moment. Instead of using the masks to our advantage, we find ourselves being used by them. In fact, they can often end up sabotaging our lives.



*“Fear, to a great extent, is born  
of a story we tell ourselves.”*

*Cheryl Strayed*

You can get a pretty strong idea of the masks you are wearing by paying attention to what you tend to avoid or deny, and what that method of avoidance looks like. For example, someone reeling from a broken heart might do anything from retreating to an ashram on a remote mountaintop to burying her sorrows in a string of meaningless short-term relationships.

It's true that going to extremes in response to something dramatic in our lives can sometimes be a healthy coping mechanism. But it's important to become aware of when we use our masks and why we choose to. After all, when our reaction solidifies into a habit and turns into a mask, it becomes increasingly difficult to remove.

Choosing to wear our mask 24/7 does not ultimately support wholeness and truth-telling—because the mask isn't real, to begin with.

**A mask is simply a reaction we had that somehow got frozen into a role that we identify with.**

Just as our masks give us an enormous amount of information about what we are in denial about, they tell us a lot about where we've been previously hurt and how we subsequently reacted. For example, a "nice" woman who rarely ever gets angry might have put on her mask after years of coming under fire from a rage-a-holic parent.

But when we run from our disappointment and grief by putting on a mask, it becomes more and more difficult to get in touch with our authentic selves and those parts of us that are crying out to be seen.

All of us wear masks, and certainly, some are far more beneficial than others. However, peeling them off, even if only a little, and getting curious about them enables us to claim our truth. When we learn to separate ourselves from the masks, we see that we are so much bigger than the roles we have consciously or unconsciously chosen.

A person's hands are shown holding a bouquet of small yellow flowers. The person is wearing a ring on their left hand. The background is a soft, out-of-focus outdoor setting.

*"Having fun with the masks you wear frees you from  
the prison of a solid identity."*

*Kelly McNelis*

All of us wear masks that hide our truth from the world. For five minutes, write down a list of all the “masks” you’ve put on over the years and that you use to hide the full extent of your truth (e.g., nurturing mother, dutiful daughter, star pupil). Use the masks you have identified to answer the questions below your list.

1. Which masks feel limiting? Why?

2. Which masks feel expansive? Why?

3. What purpose do my masks serve? Why do I continue to put them on?



# *Feminine Wisdom*

## Honor Your Shadows

When we allow ourselves distance from the experiences that trigger intense shame within us, we can gain perspective to see them for what they are. Perhaps, in inspecting them more closely, they aren't monsters at all, but parts of us that were calling out for compassionate acknowledgement.

Using the assignments from the past modules, connect with a specific "monster" of shame that wants to come out into the light. This might be a painful memory of abuse that you internalized to mean something negative about you, or a quality that you intensely dislike about yourself. Even if you feel that you've already healed the wound, surrender to this process and see what wisdom or lessons are revealed this time around.

Take this story or quality and turn it into a "character" (similar to what you did with the spirit of your genius in last week's module). There is no need to sugar-coat this character or to make it more palatable to the senses. For instance, perhaps you are ashamed of what you perceive to be your innate stinginess; the character you create might be a haggard old woman with stringy hair, diseased-looking skin, hollow eyes, and clothes that hang off her body. Do not shy away from the "ugliness" of the character you are creating.

If you are a visual person, you may choose to draw this character. Give her a name. Take a few minutes to simply connect with your breath and the essence of this character. Then, "ask" your monster of shame the following questions:

- a) When did you first appear in my life?
- b) What are you here to teach me now?
- c) What are some tangible ways I can integrate your wisdom into my life?
- d) Is there anything you need from me today?

Allow yourself to answer the questions in your character's voice. (For instance, perhaps your inner stingy woman is gruff, to the point, and somewhat crass in the way she expresses herself.) Even if it feels unfamiliar or uncomfortable, allow your imagination and your intuition to guide you. (For extra credit, try writing in your non-dominant hand, which is believed to connect you with your intuitive faculties.)



## Exploring our shame and darkness is cathartic and essential to finding our truth.

Although this action ultimately leads to greater joy and freedom, and helps shift our perspective into more expansive stories, it can feel heavy and painful. Be gentle with yourself, as this module's Homeplay and exercises are likely to bring up intense emotions. Also, give yourself plenty of time and space, and to enlist the help of a trusted friend or advisor, if need be.

Whenever you need to, share your experiences in the Facebook group and open yourself up to the support of your fellow truthtellers. Although our experiences are distinct, we have all felt pain and sorrow at one point or another. So please know that we are all here for you!



# HOMEPLAY 1

**Write down a list of all the secrets that you wouldn't want to share with anybody,** as well as the lies you might have told others and yourself in order to hide anything that you still hold shame around. For each secret, consider how claiming it would actually free you from shame.

**Write about it as much as you would like (the more, the better).**



# HOMEPLAY 2

**Take the story you identified in the final assignment of the Module 2 Homeplay. This is the story you will continue to work on and refine throughout this course.** Allow yourself to remember the painful aspects of this story and, for about 15 to 30 minutes, to write about it (or record yourself speaking about it) in great detail.

Deeply examine the story you selected. What were the harsh lessons? As you write about it, include the details of what happened, describe all your feelings (at the time and in the present), and bring to light any residual difficult emotions you might still harbor about the experience. The purpose isn't to make yourself feel miserable. It is to consider the idea that without darkness, there would be no light.