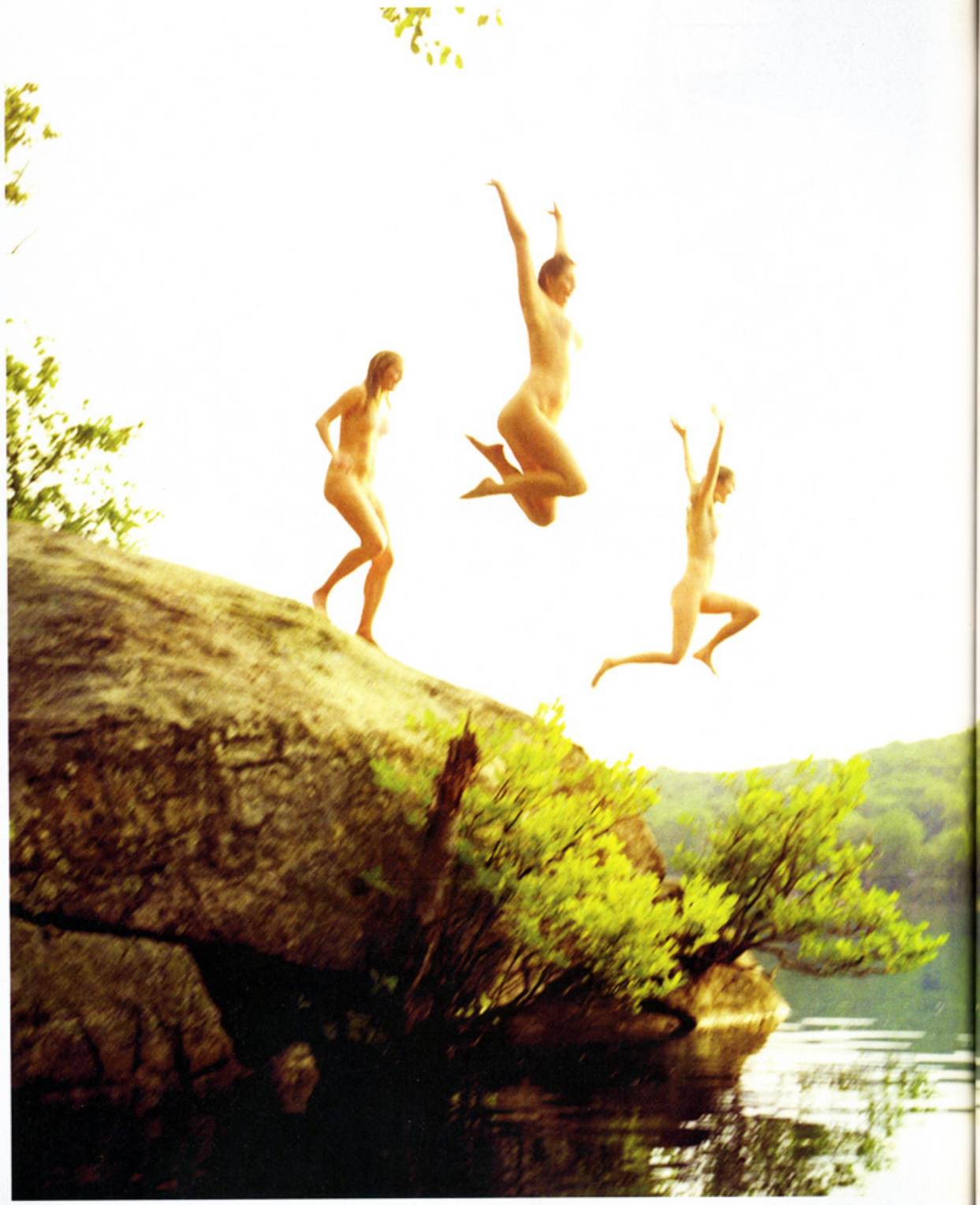

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN DOLAN

(make this your year of...)

living fearlessly

DON'T LET ANYTHING STOP YOU FROM TAKING THE PLUNGE.

BY JENNIFER GOODMAN LINN

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN a "seize the day" type of person, but everything I really know about fearless living began on December 21, 2004. Although New York City was buzzing with pre-holiday preparations, I was on the Upper East Side of Manhattan at a radiology office, emerging from a CAT scan machine where I'd been wedged uncomfortably. The radiologist looked like he could use a vacation; he was unshaven and had large, puffy bags under his eyes. His tone was compassionate but had an all-in-a-day's-work edge as he said, "Are you aware that you have a tumor roughly the size of a football in your abdomen?" No, I wasn't aware—I was the opposite of aware. *Tumor? Who has a tumor?* I thought. The doctor couldn't possibly be talking to me.

This would be the first of many out-of-body moments to come. Ten days later, while most people were toasting New Year's Eve with champagne and dancing, I was shuffling around Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center on an IV drip after a grueling five-hour abdominal surgery.

The diagnosis was MFH sarcoma, a rare cancer of the connective tissue, which affects only about 1,500 people a year in the U.S. The doctors said my odds of beating it were 50-50, and we had no clear blueprint for how to proceed. There was little available information about the disease, and treatment consisted of some antiquated chemotherapy cocktails. We'd all be working without a net.

But this story isn't about my disease. It's about how I've chosen to live my life in spite of the disease.

If I told you fearlessness was my go-to response after the diagnosis, I'd be lying. During the first few weeks, I wasn't exactly saying, "Cancer? Bring it on!" I felt it all: terror, shock, uncertainty, helplessness. I was 33 years old, I had just gotten married, I had a career I loved, and there was so much more I wanted to do. My mind raced through a montage of those dramatic cancer moments in movies like *Beaches* and *Terms of Endearment*. I actually found myself asking the clichéd questions: "Why me?" "How long do I have?"

And then, in a moment of clarity that I still don't completely understand, I realized that fear would eat me up if I let it—and I couldn't afford to let it. Cancer hadn't taken away all my options. I still had a choice about how I was going to live my life from day to day. I could give up, or I could fight like hell. That's when I made a vow to myself: to live fearlessly.

PROFILES IN COURAGE
FROM LEFT: Jennifer taking a moment before performing a baton-twirling routine in the third grade; sky-diving with the Golden Knights; and speaking at a Cycle for Survival event in New York City, 2010.

This wasn't the first time I'd looked fear in the face. Let's flash back here to my third-grade talent show: I was doing a baton routine set to Donna Summer's "Last Dance," and the most challenging part was the "step-out," where I needed to throw the baton high, do a 360-degree turn, and then catch it. I had never done this move successfully, though I had practiced it a thousand times. But I got on stage wearing a blue leotard with fringe across my backside and flung that baton as if I couldn't imagine doing anything else besides catching it. It made a slow-motion arc over my upturned head, and then—on the 1,001st time—I caught it. (I was so stunned I forgot the next few seconds of the routine.)

I would feel that same exhilaration in my late twenties, when I found myself jumping out of a United States Army airplane, not something I usually did as a management consultant. My team had just finished a project for the Army, and when a client there asked how he could thank us, a testosterone-fueled teammate suggested they let us make a run with the Golden Knights, the Army's acclaimed paratroopers. Two days later, I was in a plane in full gear, ascending over Fort Bragg, North Carolina, strapped onto a Golden Knight. My internal dialogue was zinging between *How cool!* and *What the f@#%?*

I should mention that I'm terrified of heights. If jumping out of a plane is rational behavior, then why were seat belts invented? Or walls? All those years growing up, authority figures had cautioned me to stay away from the edge. How could I now jump out of a plane? Honestly, because I was up there with a bunch of competitive guys and was too chicken to say no.

But as the plane climbed higher, my internal pressure gauge shifted. I realized I was expending a lot of energy trying to remove myself mentally from a situation to which I was clearly committed. Since there was no turning back, I moved toward acceptance. I admitted to myself I was scared: My palms were sweaty, my heart was racing, and I wanted to throw up. I had never been so uncertain of anything in my life. Somehow, when I acknowledged my fear, the situation became more manageable—it was less about the emotion and more about being where I was at that moment.

I didn't jump out of the plane. I somersaulted out at 15,000 feet and loved every minute of it. This experience gave me a rare glimpse of what I believed I was capable of becoming.

When I got my cancer diagnosis, I needed a way to consistently channel the third-grader reaching out confidently for that falling baton, the woman gleefully suspended in mid-air. I needed a guidebook for fearlessness.

I started by looking up *fearlessness* in the dictionary, and I didn't like what I read: Fearlessness is a state of "no fear." I don't believe it's possible to live without fear. Everyone has some fear in their lives. I actually think the people who are truly fearless are those who "fear less," because they're willing to confront their fears and embrace them. I turned instead to the lives of leaders I've always admired: Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Rudy Giuliani in the wake of the World Trade Center attacks. They were beloved because of their vulnerabilities. Once they looked fear in the face, they realized they could handle it and thrive, and they made other scared people feel that way too.

I went on a fact-finding mission, tracking down articles and books about fear—its psychology, its physical symptoms, even the link between fear and spirituality. I was inspired by people like Wayne Dyer—who wrote, "When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at will change"—and kayaker Chris Joosse, who draws analogies between navigating white-water rapids and navigating life. Kayakers have a phrase they use when they're about to capsize: "Roll with it." That means having the confidence to embrace the waves and not falter, which is what puts your life at risk.

Joosse also writes that often the most difficult part of fear is anticipation. Paralyzed by it, we hesitate to push further, so we don't exercise our "fear muscles" and thus never develop the resilience that comes from repeated exposure to risks.

Early in my diagnosis, I spent a lot of time anticipating—thinking about the effects of chemotherapy or what might happen if a particular treatment didn't work. My doctor gently told me, "Year by year all is unclear, but day by day we find our way." I hear those words at least once a day and find my way back to the present. Fear is about what might happen, not what is happening right now. It takes us to a place of panic, not power. The only thing you have to master is the thing right in front of you, this very second. Instead of thinking, *I'm having major stomach surgery,* I broke everything into baby steps: *Today my job is to get the pre-surgical test. Tomorrow my job is to stop taking fluids.* And so the overwhelming turned into something manageable.

photographs courtesy of Jennifer Gresham Linn

When it comes to making big changes, I can't say cancer would be the first method I'd recommend. But when I began to embrace fearlessness, it paid back in every aspect of my life. Shortly after my diagnosis, I was still working in corporate America, where so many of the day-to-day concerns are about office politics or what other people might think. When you're dealt a hand of cancer, you start to wonder why you've been wasting so much time on the small stuff. I had work to do, and I started to focus on the ideas rather than the ifs. (What if the client doesn't like it? What if my colleagues don't support me?) Cancer didn't lower the bar for what I expected from myself, but raised it. And when I stopped being afraid of being authentic at work, I was more productive and sensed that I was getting more respect. I got promotions and raises that I might have been too fearful to ask for before. When my fears dissolved, my life began to happen.

MFH sarcoma is what I call an "orphan cancer," a rare type that hasn't been the subject of much research. No one knew better than I did how desperately these orphan cancers needed attention. I had sort of developed a taste for making things happen, and one night in 2006, I sat down to figure out how I could raise $10,000 for research. I knew I wanted to include cycling in some way, because spinning had been my therapy through treatment, a way to tackle the road ahead. I came up with Cycle for Survival, an indoor fundraiser that would benefit research trials for rare cancers like mine. Needless to say, I'd never done anything like this before. As with my disease, there was no real blueprint for success, but I decided I'd just forge ahead and do my best to figure it all out along the way.

We started in 2007 with 50 teams in New York; now it's an 850-team event in multiple cities around the world. We've raised more than $5 million and initiated more than 13 medical trials. Ironically, I'd never thought of myself as a gifted saleswoman, but over the past five years, I've asked probably thousands of people to donate, participate, or volunteer, and virtually everyone has said yes. When you're passionate about something, people want to follow you—something I'm not sure I completely understood before, even though I'd spent more than 15 years in the business of persuasion.

Every life is the result of a million little choices. Living fearlessly—fearing less—is no easy task. But it's possible. And it can make all things possible. There's a quote from Ivy Baker Priest, a former U.S. Treasury secretary, that I love: "The world is round and the place which may seem like the end may also be only the beginning." Day by day we find our way. We begin again. And it's never too late to start.

JENNIFER GOODMAN LINN *is a motivational speaker and marketing consultant. To learn more, visit youfearless.com or cycleforsurvival.org*

creating a **no-fear zone**

BY ROBIN FISHER ROFFER

In small doses, fear can be a great motivator. It can help us discover what we're capable of and how far we can go. However, an overload of fear can be paralyzing. As the head of a brand-marketing agency, I've helped hundreds of clients reinvent themselves and have witnessed firsthand how fear prevents people from reaching their potential and enjoying their lives. Whether you fear change, true love, imperfection, pursuing your passion—to live in fear is essentially not to live. How to fight it: Find a place I call the No-Fear Zone. When we face our fears, we begin to see our true nature and life's purpose. Knowing what we can do in challenging moments helps us find the courage to move forward, no matter how scary things get.

1 ASK YOURSELF: WHAT AM I REALLY AFRAID OF?

To move past your fear, you first must identify it. I have a client who had a powerful spiritual message to share but was afraid of public speaking. When I asked her to pinpoint the root of her fear, she said she worried people would think she was boasting by putting herself in the spotlight. So rather than having her write a motivational speech, which could be seen as a sales pitch, I asked her instead to compose an uplifting sermon. That simple assignment reframed her purpose and removed the fear. When anxiety surfaces, try to describe the source of your distress. It could be something concrete, such as looming layoffs or relationship trouble. Or maybe it's less tangible—say, failure, rejection, or the future and what it holds. Either way, the conscious act of naming your fear is the first step to making it manageable.

2 PUT IT IN PERSPECTIVE

What would happen if your fear came true? To get a grip on the potential fallout—and see how it might not be a big deal after all—walk yourself through this "fear tree" of questions. First, describe the fear or problem. Ask, What's the worst possible outcome? Could it be reversed? Would you lose income? Would your family survive? Would it cause you or someone else bodily harm? Could you ask for help? Would it be possible to repair or control the damage? What can you do today to protect yourself? When you think it through like that, you'll see that even if your worst fears come true, it won't be the end of the world.

3 DO WHAT'S IN YOUR POWER TO DO

The fact is, we can't control the future or other people's behavior. But by focusing on what we *can* control—our own actions—we can help dispel our fear. I tell my clients to take concrete steps to address whatever they're afraid of, and then let go of the outcome. One client feared going home to visit her family, believing that inevitably there would be some kind of drama. I suggested she devise a getaway plan just in case things got challenging. By renting a car, she'd have an escape and wouldn't feel trapped and fearful. I also asked her to write down everything she needed to accept about her family and the things she could change. She realized the only change she could make was from within and she couldn't judge or place blame; she had to love herself and love her family for who they are. Now when she goes home, her anxiety is lessened and she can actually focus on trying to enjoy her family.

4 KNOW WHEN TO ASK FOR HELP

Most fears cannot be conquered alone. One of my most successful clients was getting burned out and bored running her thriving company all by herself. She worried that if something didn't change, her company would tank. After nine years of doing it on her own, she asked her sister to become her business partner. Working with her sister gave her a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Turning her sole proprietorship into a family business renewed her passion and proved she could achieve a longtime goal of growing her company. By asking her sister for help, she found an ally in fearlessness. Allowing others—family, friends, coaches, mentors—to help you navigate life is like having an anchor in rough seas.

5 PRACTICE YOUR ABCs: ACTION + BELIEF + COURAGE

The fearless among us overcome doubts by practicing what I call their ABCs: *A* stands for purposeful action, or just taking the plunge and doing what you've been afraid to do. You can always rehearse first: For example, before initiating a difficult work conversation, try role-playing with a friend. *B* is for having belief in your own abilities. Fear loses its power when confronted with a positive mind-set. Use positivity to act "as if" everything is all right, and soon it will be. *C* stands for the courage that comes from remembering that if you've succeeded before, you can do so again. And chances are, you *have* succeeded before. A client of mine had a fear of never being good enough at her job as a mediator. When I asked what her track record of cases was, she said she had a 98 percent success rate. I wrote "98 percent" on a whiteboard and told her what that meant: She was an "A" student. Because she always focused on the other 2 percent, she never saw herself in that way. But from this exercise, she realized her fear of being a failure was intellectually unfounded. By focusing on her winning record, my client now espouses well-earned confidence. Try it yourself: Make a mental list of all the right moves you've made in the past. Acknowledging your own success will give you the courage for your next fearless act.

ROBIN FISHER ROFFER is a reinvention specialist and the author of *Make a Name for Yourself: 8 Steps Every Woman Needs to Create a Personal Brand Strategy for Success* and *The Fearless Fish Out of Water: How to Succeed When You're the Only One Like You.* She's also the CEO of Big Fish Marketing, Inc. *(bigfishmarketing.com)*

6 BE YOUR AUTHENTIC SELF

One of the most common fears is the fear of simply being ourselves, especially when we end up in unfamiliar or uncomfortable situations—when we're "fish out of water." Thus, many of us tend to shy away from the attention that may come from being different. As a result, we try to hide who we truly are. We don't want to stand out, so we may find ourselves doing everything possible to stamp out our individuality in favor of conformity. We then wind up projecting an image we assume, and hope, will please others. That's one road you can choose to travel when you're feeling out of place. The other is to celebrate who you are without apology.

Let's face it, no one wants to be rejected. And yet, think about the people you truly admire in this world. Without a doubt, they conduct their lives with authenticity and conviction, and to realize your full potential, you'll need to do the same. Case in point: One of my clients rose to the top of a major corporation in large part due to her commitment to authenticity. As a Cuban-American, and a minority in her workplace, she worked her way up from customer-service rep to head of the company's global-diversity program. She achieved this by getting a business degree, championing women, and expressing herself with standout personal style—wearing colorful clothing rather than standard-issue dark suits. She succeeded not in spite of her differences but *because* of them.

Becoming comfortable in your own skin isn't easy. It takes practice. It takes tuning in to your inner voice and honoring it, asking yourself, What if I just go for it? What if I just say what's on my mind? And it takes trusting your intuition. With practice, authenticity will become your norm.

Let this be the year you find your passion and step into your personal power. If you follow these six steps, you will be well on your way to unearthing the real you and reaching your next peak—fearlessly.

your brain on fear

Is fear sabotaging your potential? A Harvard researcher says you can blame a primitive nerve center deep in your brain.

Q&A WITH SRINIVASAN S. PILLAY, M.D.

IF YOU WORRY a lot, don't be too hard on yourself: The human brain is virtually wired for fear. Historically, that's served the species well, protecting us from marauding saber-toothed cats and other primitive mortal dangers. Yet even as humans have evolved, a run-for-the-hills instinct remains on alert within us, even when we're unaware of it. And while an occasional well-justified pang of terror may be a boon to our survival, an unending state of unconscious worry is, of course, a hazard to our quality of life. As Harvard psychotherapist and brain imaging specialist Srinivasan S. Pillay, M.D., suggests, when the primitive part of our brain runs amok, fear trumps other critical functions. Pillay says the good news (you knew there was some, right?) is that the brain, for all of its preprogrammed, hardwired habits, is also malleable and very much capable of change—and ultimately overcoming fear.

HOW EXACTLY DOES OUR PRIMITIVE BRAIN KEEP US IN A STATE OF FEAR?

It starts in the amygdala, an almond-shaped mass of nerve cells deep in our brains. The amygdala is a small but vital inheritance from our ancestors. It's been called the "guard dog" of the human brain, activating whenever danger looms. The amygdala plays a key role in regulating all of our emotions, but to ensure our survival, it's wired to process fear first. The problem is that the amygdala can start buzzing even when we're experiencing fear unconsciously. If something frightening is happening around you, the brain will pick it up. The amygdala is so sensitive that images of fearful faces can activate it even in those who are cortically blind.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE REST OF OUR BRAINS WHEN THE AMYGDALA STARTS WHIRRING?

When we're anxious, shock waves from the amygdala start blasting through the brain's frontal cortex, the area responsible for planning and assessing a decision in terms of risk and reward. When the prefrontal cortex is affected, we have a shorter attention span and we're more easily distracted. A lot of people think they have ADD, when in fact they don't: It's not a problem of attention but of the anxiety center. If the amygdala continues to fire, it may cut off impulses to the thinking part of the brain, making it difficult to focus on simple tasks. Fear captures attention and makes us look for potential threats. We tend to see things more negatively, because that's what the fearful brain was designed to do. Fear and stress turn the conscious brain off, and what we have left to help us figure out solutions is the unconscious brain, which works quickly but not always accurately. When we're under stress, we tell ourselves not to do things, and then we'll wind up doing exactly the things we told ourselves not to do. You've seen this at work if you've ever concentrated hard on not spilling red wine on a white couch.

IF THIS IS UNCONSCIOUS, HOW CAN WE DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT?

We have to retrain the amygdala, forming new connections through new associations. That's why visualization can help us reach our goals. When you imagine something happening, that activates the action center. Stress and fear deactivate the parts of the brain that are needed to mount an image, so we have to give the brain information to figure out a course of action for what we want. Imagined action and actual movement activate the same parts of the brain, so it's important to picture your intended outcome from behind your own eyes, not to observe yourself as an onlooker. If you want to run a marathon, look down and see yourself in black shorts. See the road ahead. You want to give yourself the feeling of being in the race. Tell yourself a goal may be difficult but possible. When you think a goal is possible, that gives the brain permission to reach it. Take Roger Bannister, who ran the first four-minute mile. Everyone thought it was a barrier that couldn't be broken. But since then several people have done it. You're more likely to reach for what you want if you tell your brain that it's possible. Beyond visualization, meditation can stabilize the amygdala, particularly loving-kindness meditation, which involves cultivating compassion toward self and others through silent or spoken mantras. The amygdala isn't just a fear processor, it's an emotion processor, and loving-kindness is a positive emotion that can displace fear. Also, meditation can increase oxytocin, which increases trust, which decreases amygdala activation. It's all about training your brain.

SRINIVASAN S. PILLAY, M.D., is an assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and author of *Life Unlocked: 7 Revolutionary Lessons to Overcome Fear.* He is also a certified master coach and CEO of NeuroBusiness Group, a brain science–based executive-coaching firm.