

URL: <https://stvp.stanford.edu/videos/jane-chen-embrace-global-doing-the-inner-work-entire-talk/>

Jane Chen is the co-founder of Embrace Global, which created a low-cost infant warmer that has helped more than one million babies in low-resource settings. Her new book, *Like a Wave We Break: a Memoir of Falling Apart and Finding Myself*, tells the story of her globe-spanning journey to break free of the narratives that once defined her and confront the long-buried truths of a traumatic past. In this conversation with Adjunct Lecturer Emily Ma, Chen encourages entrepreneurs to focus on journeys instead of outcomes, sharing her experiences with burnout and healing to illustrate the importance of self-compassion and finding the worthiness within.



Transcript

(bright music) - Super excited today to have Jane Marie Chen back in our classroom with us.. Jane is a friend and a classmate from the Stanford Graduate School of Business, and she's the co-founder of Embrace, which is a little tiny startup that actually got funding from BASES, which is the Business Association for Stanford Entrepreneurial Students, to get going to build an infant incubator that has saved over a million babies.. She is so incredibly well recognized across so many different forums, the World Economic Forum, Forbes, you know, 30, and she just wrote a book called *Like a Wave We Break*.. And I'm so thrilled she's here to share that with you today.. Alright, well, Jane, welcome to the Entrepreneurial Thought Leader Series.. What a pleasure to have you back.. - And I want to point out, Rahul Panicker is here, my co-founder.. - Oh, goodness! - Yeah.. (audience applauding) - So we were part of the original Stanford class in 2007, and we moved to India together.. And he's been on this whole crazy journey..

- Well, that means you were pitching to BASES- - We were pitching to BASES together.. Yep.. - Well, let's start with that.. And then we'll come back to this incredible journey you've been on.. What was it like to be at Stanford with this, you know, like, this concept, early concept.. And this was part of a design for extreme affordability.. - Yeah.. - And you pitched at the BASES competition, and you got a little bit of seed funding, you and Rahul.. What would you say to, if you could go back in time to, I think it was 2008, like, if you could tell yourselves something, what would you tell yourselves? - In that moment, you mean, like, as we were starting Embrace? Oh gosh, I think what I just covered in my presentation, that the journey is more important than the destination.. I remember my high school chemistry teacher said that to me, and I absolutely think that's true..

It's not about the outcome in the end, it's everything that you learn, and the growth that you experience and the people that you meet and the connections that you make.. All of that is far more important than the outcome.. And I think there are many moments along the years where I lost sight of that.. But Rahul used to say this to me all the time.. He would say, "Don't take yourself so seriously.. The universe will go on without you." (both laughing) - Everything does take a life of its own.. - It does.. - You imbue it with purpose, and then it becomes alive and takes on a life of its own.. Before we move on, any sort of, if people in the audience are looking to maybe pitch to BASES, any tips on how you succeeded? - Any tips, Rahul? I'm thinking.. - [Rahul] I think what worked was authenticity..

- [Emily] Yes.. Authenticity.. Alright.. Write that down.. If you're pitching to BASES, I think you landed \$35,000.. - We landed \$35,000.. And I'll tell you guys the way this started, We actually first won an elevator pitch competition at Stanford that gave us our first \$2,000.. So we got really excited, and as a team, we started applying to all these different business plan competitions around the country for that.. The whole year, it was my last year at the GSB, we did that.. We lost every competition, but we didn't let it stop us..

We kept going.. The week before graduation, I didn't have a job, we had no funding.. But finally on the same day, we landed the BASES competition.. We also won the Echoing Green Fellowship for social entrepreneurs.. And that gave us our first little bit of money to run with it.. And so I think if you have an idea you believe in, just be persistent and don't take no for an answer.. Keep moving forward with it.. - And be authentic.. - And be authentic And be authentic.. And bring your prototype to whatever pitch you're doing, 'cause I forgot mine, and Rahul had to scramble one together very quickly..

- [Emily] Pretty incredible.. - [Rahul] Fake it till you make it hadn't made it yet.. - [Emily] Fake it till you make it.. And what was it? - [Rahul] So being authentic flies in the face of fake it till you make it.. - Okay, being authentic flies in the face of fake it until you make it.. What a treat with us.. Isn't that crazy and awesome? Okay, so I know that it was a journey for you also to become the CEO.. You really had to see yourself in that role.. I think a lot of our students in the classroom here are potentially looking to step into a role of being CEO.. Any reflections? I know you've had some incredible lessons already..

You know, it's really being part of the journey, not necessarily the outcomes, you know? And I know you also learned how to surf as part of rounding out your life.. Maybe some reflections on, you know, if you could step back into being a CEO again, like, what would you do? How would you do it differently? How would you approach it? - Sure, well, I think I was just so nervous being a first-time CEO, for many reasons.. But being at Stanford, I had total imposter syndrome.. I was like convinced that I was the admissions mistake.. And so when we had this idea and we divided roles, and I decided, you know, we decided that I would be the CEO, I felt like, gosh, who am I to be the CEO? And there were very kind of few female CEOs, in particular, at that time.. And so my vision of a CEO was someone who was like so composed and buttoned up and had it all together all the time.. And that's really what I strove for.. And then I remember, and I told this story in the book, but my first year in India, it was so overwhelming, you know, just the issue we were working on was so emotionally challenging, and we faced so many setbacks along the way.. But I remember in a team meeting, I started crying, and afterwards I was mortified.. Mortified, and it was all men reporting to me at that time..

But afterwards, my head of operations approached me, and I'll never forget this, he said, "Jane, thank you so much for being vulnerable, because when you're vulnerable, it gives us all permission to be vulnerable as well." And he wanted to tell me how exhausted everyone was and how they were afraid to admit that, because I held such airtight composure.. - [Emily] You have a chapter called Airtight Composure.. - Yes, and so that really woke me up to the fact that leadership is really about authenticity.. Going back to Rahul said, it's about authenticity, which requires vulnerability, which requires that we feel all of our feelings.. And so I teach a leadership class now, and I teach this concept of feeling your feelings.. And there's some students in the class who are like, "Well, why, what's the importance of that?" You know, feelings are for home and work is a different thing, but actually, there is so much wisdom to our emotions.. So how do we tune into that and let that guide us in our decision-making? - Hmm.. A hundred percent.. And I loved what you said about, as a leader, as a CEO, by giving yourself the permission to share how you feel.. Maybe it's not all the time, but, you know, really thoughtfully at the right moments, being choiceful about it, you're giving permission to everyone else to feel..

And to do anything great, we're gonna run into walls.. So we know that, right? You know, if we're gonna achieve the moonshot of, you know, saving a million babies, we're gonna run into countless obstacles along the way.. And so, you know, we are emotional beings and we have to process those feelings as individuals, as a team.. And I had a second, a coach who used to say, "If you don't process all that stuff, it's just gonna leak out the sides, like a lot of FUs." So you gotta process that stuff with yourself and with your team, and give permission to your team to go through those emotions.. So let's go there.. I want to tie, you know, the intensity that you brought as a CEO to your journey of healing.. And I thought what was deeply interesting to me was the fact that resilience is not surface level.. So as entrepreneurs in this room, we talk a lot about what does it mean to be resilient? You had to actually go pretty deep into the work.. You worked with some amazing people along the way, including the author of "The Body Keeps Score." Maybe we could take a little time sort of exploring how do you begin that journey? How do you approach it? And I think one of the important lessons for us here is the earlier we can start that journey, the more well equipped we are, not just at the surface level but at the very deep level.. - Yeah, I think that's absolutely right..

And I think this comes back to your earlier question of what I would've done differently.. I think through most of that first 10 years at Embrace, my mantra was Embrace first, me second.. So take of the company first, get the company to where it needs to go, and then I can focus on myself.. And at the end of that 10-year period, I was so burned out, so burned out.. I mean, I had a mental and physical breakdown.. I could not work anymore for a year.. And up until that point I thought I was invincible.. You know, if I was tired, I kept going.. I did not listen to the clues that I needed to take a break desperately.. And to me, that felt like failing..

And so when the company shut down 10 years in, I was really brought to my knees.. And I had to take that break.. I had no choice, right? And so I threw myself into healing.. But I had a very type A approach to it.. I had my spreadsheets, I had like all

the different modalities I wanted to try.. If something didn't work, I would pivot to the next thing.. And I just tried it all.. But I think there were a couple things I learned in the process.. One, reading "The Body Keeps the Score" by Bessel van der Kolk was really life-changing for me.. And it taught me about the science of trauma, right? Trauma is not something that happens in your past that you just keep in the past..

And that's what I had thought for most of my life.. Trauma actually rewires your brain and your nervous system.. And so it's the way you bring the past into the present, and it affects every part of your life.. And it is also so prevalent, and it's something many of us don't want to talk about.. But 70% of Americans have been through at least one major traumatic event.. And so instead of burying it, how do we actually address it? And that starts with acknowledging and feeling.. So the first thing I say for people who want to kind of go down this path and go on a healing journey is to take that moment to pause, right? We live in the society that's about doing, doing, doing, doing, doing or escaping.. We feel something painful and we immediately try to escape that.. And so what does it mean to pause and sit with that? And I think that happens through the power of community.. And I'm so grateful for the friends, the teachers, the healers I've worked with that created a safe enough space for me to go back and revisit some really painful emotions, right? So the first step is as simple as pausing..

And then the second thing I will mention is one of the things that really changed the game for me was a practice called Internal Family System or Parts Work.. And this is based on this premise that all of us, and I talked about this a little bit in the talk I gave, but this is all, we all have a multitude of parts.. So you, Emily, may have the control freak or the perfectionist, the overachiever, the inner critic.. But you also have parts that carry painful emotions like shame or rejection, abandonment, right? And so this practice is about really developing that compassion for ourselves such that we relate to these parts of ourselves differently, right? We thank them for the role they have played in our lives, and we learn to, you know, truly love those parts of ourselves that are experiencing pain.. So this is, I'll show a QR code later, but I've developed a free exercise for people who want to try this that's based on this framework.. And it's been one of the most helpful things for me.. - This is so good.. I will share a little bit behind the scenes.. I do talk to the different parts of myself, and they all play a role.. Anchor plays a really important role..

It's protecting us.. Same thing.. Anxiety plays a role, you know, Anxiety Emily has a really important role in helping me through obstacles along the way.. They sort of are able to help me see, you know, all the scenarios that could happen, right? And so even the negative emotions that we have are really critical, and it's acknowledging their role in our lives and not pushing them away and sort of helping them through.. I want to touch upon one more topic that's associated with this, which is achievement dysmorphia.. You talked a little bit about that in your book, and I think, you know, you talked about, you brought up the imposter syndrome being here at Stanford students.. And I want to play with this idea a little bit, because I think it impacts a lot of us, right? We're like, "Oh, we got an A, moving on." Or "Oh, I just like raised \$10 million, moving on to the next round." So how did she go about sort of really acknowledging your achievements as they truly are? - Yeah, I think it took a long time for that to happen, that my had such a skewed self-perception because I had this kind of feeling of unworthiness.. And I see this with so many high achievers, that because of some wounding or some inner sense of unworthiness, we go out and we try to prove more and be more and do more.. But the goalpost keeps moving.. I'm curious here, whoever who here has ever felt like you weren't enough? Raise your hand..

Okay, so like 90% of us, if not 100% of us, right? And this is probably some of the highest achievers.. - Totally.. - Right.. But we continue to feel that way.. And this is what I learned in my journey, is that it doesn't matter what you do externally until you find that sense of worthiness within.. Nothing out there is going to give it to you.. And this is what I know true resilience is now, right? Because when we have that inner sense of worthiness that is unshakeable, that is what gives us the courage to go out and take risks and fail and know we're still gonna be okay.. We brush ourselves off and we keep going.. - That's right.. - Yeah..

So my definition of resilience has completely changed over the years.. - That's incredible.. Incredible.. Well, I do want to leave some room for questions.. So I'm gonna ask one last closing question.. Normally in this class we ask, "Well, what would you have told yourself when you were 20?" But I think, you know, you have this beautiful chapter in your book that I encourage everyone to read about connecting with your 7-year-old self.. I'm actually curious what, I don't know how old you'll be in 2045, but if you could talk to the Jane of 2045, 20 years from now, what would she say to you? - Well, I think, I did a meditation retreat like four or five months ago before my book launched.. And as I was sitting there, there's that spirit rock in Marin, I had the most beautiful visual, and it was this vision of me riding an endless wave and being so in flow with the ocean and my elements, and just, you know, being in a state of joy.. And what I realized in that moment was that it's not about what I do, it's how I want to do it.. - Yes..

- Right? So it's not about this next chapter, like the exact mechanism of what I'm gonna do or how I'm gonna do it.. It's the way I want to do it, which is from a place of flow and joy and ease, as opposed to, you know, the constant pushing and striving and grasping that was happening.. And again, I loved the work we were doing.. It was so meaningful to me, but it was also incredibly challenging.. And I don't think I found many moments of ease in those first 10 years.. So that's what I would say to myself, to remember that feeling of being in flow.. And I'll tell you guys one more story.. Something I've really learned is the power of, it's great to set goals.. And then there's some something really powerful about surrendering and letting go.. And so giving something your all, and then realizing it's not all in your control..

So leading up to my book launch, I only had one copy of the book, and a month before my launch, I threw it in the ocean.. And it was kind of this beautiful act of surrendering and letting it go and realizing that, you know, I'm gonna let the wave take this message to where it needs to go.. - [Emily] I love that so much.. That infinite wave.. I hope you surf it.. - Thank you.. - Well, with that, we're gonna enter Q&A.. But before we do that, we're going to start with having a few folks queue up.. - [Portia] Thank you so much for coming up here today.. You did an amazing job sharing your deeply personal and relatable stories..

It's definitely difficult to go through that kind of trauma.. And I really love how you use principles-based decision-making in a lot of your like thoughts and decisions.. And so I kind of wanted to ask, what are some things you do in the immediate present when emotions or uncertainty begin to kind of blur your judgment? - That's a great question.. I think this comes back to like taking that moment to pause, have a meditation practice and finding that time, 10 minutes a day, five minutes, whatever it is to sit with and allow, allow those emotions to be there rather than, you know, trying to resist or push them away.. So that's really important.. And then getting in my body, that's a daily practice for me.. So I moved to Honolulu last year so I could surf every day, and that is my self-care.. But I do practices throughout the day that kind of help me stay grounded and be in my body.. And then just the practice of like listening to those cues, listening to when you want to do something, when you don't want to do something.. A really useful practice I've learned is something called a whole body yes..

So as you're making decisions, when are your head, your heart, and your gut, when is your head, your heart, and your gut all aligned? So if you think about like something you really wanted to do, like seeing a friend or going to a movie, taking a trip, what did that feel like in your body? Anything that doesn't feel like that, you have to question, do I really want to do this? And the more I've been able to tune into that, the better I've been able to make decisions that are aligned with who I am.. And that plays a big part in my overall wellness.. - Awesome.. Thank you so much.. - Yeah, thank you.. - Thank you, Portia.. - [Carlos] Hi, I'm Carlos.. I'm a data science freshman.. Especially in Silicon Valley and at Stanford, I think tech entrepreneurship is really big right now.. What do you think the role is for social entrepreneurship and nonprofit work, especially in such like a tech-saturated field here? - Yeah, I think we were facing that back, you know, 20 years ago as well, but I think there is a huge role for it..

And especially now with what's happening in the world, I think there is an even bigger role for it.. So if that is something that you are excited to pursue, you know, I think, by all means, you follow your heart.. And that's what I encourage the most to people, that the decisions I have been the most proud of are not necessarily the ones that have made sense intellectually, but the ones where I've really followed my heart to do something.. So I think there is a special need for social entrepreneurs in today's environment.. - [Carlos] Thank you.. - [David] My name's David.. I am a sophomore.. And I'm undecided as of now, but I'm deciding between data science and MSNE.. But my question was obviously through Embrace and that journey you were able to come to terms with your past and help move forward through that, but I was wondering if there were any other unforeseen benefits that came from Embrace that maybe were very unexpected or maybe not even necessarily connected? - Connected to- - To Embrace, but just some sort of benefit that came from that journey that was unexpected.. - Oh my gosh, so many..

I feel like Embrace was where I really discovered who I was in so many ways, right? And part of it was what Rahul said, "Fake it till you make it," putting myself there and just going for it and learning, wow, I can do this.. I can be a leader.. I can run this organization.. It was really, helped me build up a lot of confidence to know that I could do this thing that could really touch people, right? And so that was such a beautiful thing.. And I think one of actually was just talking about this on Guy Kawasaki's podcast today, but we were talking about kind of some of the things that happened that I didn't expect.. And so it wasn't just about saving babies, but the number of students who approached us over the years saying, "Thanks to your example and thanks to us watching you do this, we were willing to do something courageous or something that helped others.. We were willing to start our own social enterprise." Like, that has been an unexpected result of this.. And I think in some ways that's even more powerful than the lives Embrace has saved.. - Awesome.. Thank you..

- Thank you.. - [Chia] Thank you so much for opening up your story.. I'm Chia from Japan.. And in Japan we have a hierarchy of like test scores.. And it's really hard to get out from this mental of being perfect and being afraid to fail.. How were you able to change from that mindset? - That's such a great question.. I think actually being at the design school and learning design thinking was a big part of that, because in design thinking, it's not about failing, it's about experimentation, right? And every time you fail, you get to learn something and try again and try again.. And so that was one of the first experiences that I had, where I really kind of reframed failure into learning instead opportunities for growth.. But I think definitely in Asian cultures there is that sense of fear failure, and you know, you need to do everything exactly right.. And frankly, it prevents people from taking risks..

So now when I think about doing something scary, I think about it in two ways.. One, what am I gonna learn from this regardless of whether I succeed or fail? And two, coming back to this idea of resilience, like, putting out this book is the scariest thing I've ever done.. And I don't think I would have the courage to do that did I not have an innate sense of worthiness, such that regardless of how it's received in the world, I'm gonna be okay.. And that is really what allows me to take risks.. - [Chia] And how did you cultivate that innate worthiness? - You'll have to read my book (laughs).. - [Kendall] Hi, I am Kendall Johnson, I'm a senior.. I really appreciated your talk and the focus on the importance of the work that you do with yourself.. I think that's a topic that's often overlooked.. My question for you is I think there are people that come into Stanford

knowing that they want to be leaders, and then there are also people that learn through experience or that learn through doing the work on themselves that they're meant to be leaders.. So I'm wondering what your advice would be to that second group of people..

- Interesting.. Advice.. from what perspective? - [Kendall] From your perspective of your experience on your work, like with the work with yourself.. - Oh, okay.. Yeah.. I think whether, you know, you want to do something or not or what that path is for you, I think doing that inner work is so critical, right? And I think especially for those who like don't know exactly where they're headed, as you come to know yourself more, you'll have a better idea of A, like, what that is and how to navigate that, right? And so that's kind of looking at our patterns, our shadows, the things that trigger us, the thing that bring us joy.. I certainly did not have that level of self-awareness, I think, when we first started Embrace, certainly as a Stanford student.. And so developing that kind of deep sense of self-awareness will help guide you.. And then it's less about, coming back to what I said earlier, it's less about that exact destination, but more how do you want to live your life? How do you want to live out your values, right? And that will bring you to where you need to go.. - [Kendall] Thank you..

- [Nathan] Hi, my name is Nathan.. I'm a first-year master student studying design at Stanford.. I actually deeply related to your story of burnout and how these things kind of manifest.. I spent the past four years running operations for a startup here in the Valley, and now I'm using Stanford as my Indonesia.. I am curious, having now on the other side of this healing journey, what kind of the big takeaways, in terms of your interpersonal healing you're now applying to your interpersonal successes? - Hmm.. Yeah, that's such a great question.. I think that the way I approach my work is so different.. The way I also approach relationships, whether they're personal or professional.. There's more of a awareness and compassion towards others, right? I don't know if I was a compassionate leader back in the day, Rahul, but I'm noticing now with the folks that I work with, just kind of checking in more, being more in tune, right? I think the more we're able to have compassion for ourselves, the more we could extend that to others.. A term that I hear a lot these days is this concept of psychological safety, right? And this is this famous Google study looking at what is the number one most important determinant of the highest functioning teams..

And it's psychological safety, The ability for someone to come to work and be their full selves, to take risks and fail, knowing that that's okay.. Is that how you would characterize it, Emily? - A hundred percent.. I think we'll miss out a lot if we don't give people psychological safety to speak up.. Because oftentimes it's when we surface many different perspectives, that you suss out the challenges that you might have not seen as a singular person.. So I love what you said about that.. - So that's so important.. And yet, as leaders, how do we create that for our teams if we don't have that within ourselves? - That's right.. - Right? And that is why that inner work is so imperative.. And I look at some of the leadership in Silicon Valley now, or even in our country, and I see a lot of people operating from a place of woundedness, right? And when that happens, we tend to act from a place of fear, control, ego, as opposed to a place of love and compassion and shared purpose, right? So I think it's not only for ourselves and the people around us, but to our society as a whole that we do this work.. - Thank you so much..

- Yeah, thank you.. - We'll take one, maybe two more questions.. We'll see how we go.. - [Patricia] Hi, my name's Patricia.. I'm a master's student in electrical engineering.. And this previous question somewhat encroached on mine.. But a lot of the past speakers have stressed the importance of surrounding yourself with the right people.. And so I wanted to ask you how you decide who you want to surround yourself with, and maybe even, you know, back then, it seems like you and your co-founder had a good relationship thus far.. - We've had our moments.. we've had our moments (laughs)..

- [Patricia] How you made those decisions, or, you know, how did you make those decisions, both back then and how you look at it now? - Yeah, well, I'll tell you how our team came together at the D school, which is very interesting.. It was all done through body language.. So the day that teams were chosen, there's no speaking, people just kind of walked around each other, and through body language, these teams came together.. And I wasn't even in class that day.. I just got thrown into this amazing teams.. It was like pure serendipity.. But to your question of like now what's important for me, I would say the number one most important thing for the people I work with and close friends is their dedication to personal growth.. And I'm really only interested in surrounding myself with people who are committed to that path.. Because then we get to learn together and grow together, and those are my most fruitful and deepest relationships.. - [Patricia] That's really insightful..

Thank you.. - Yeah.. - Let's do one more.. - [Arnov] Hi, I'm Arnov.. I'm a freshman here from the Bay Area studying MSNE.. So you talked a lot about like your self-worth reinvention journey in Indonesia, which kind of happened like later on in your career after company took off.. So as someone who's younger, who like is obviously interested in traveling and knows the importance of this, is doing a journey like that something that I should be thinking about right now or something I should worry about later on in my career? - Oh, I advocate it now and then again in 10 years and again in 10, you know, as often as you can.. But I think so long as there's kind of that interest to do that introspection, that will guide everything.. I wish I had the foresight and the wisdom to do that when I was younger.. So I highly recommend you do that..

And again, feel free to visit all the things that I did.. I put it on a resource page so everyone else could access it.. - Thank you.. - Yeah.. - Okay, thank you, Jane, again for coming back.. - Thank you for having me.. - And we will see you in class next Wednesday.. It will be Steve Cousins, who is the director of the Stanford Robotics Center.. Thank you again.. (light music)..