

Braving the Wilderness

The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone



Chapter 1: Everywhere and Nowhere.

"You are only free when you realize you belong no place - you belong every place - no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great." (Brown, 5).

Author Brene Brown begins by recounting how she always lived in fear. In fear of someone being pissed off at what she was saying. Her writing was always guarded in fear of the throwback from whatever her message was. It took many years and a lot of hard work to finally fire the



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naysayers and quit writing to please them. She surrounded herself with 'brave innovators and disrupters whose courage feels contagious' in their place (Brown, 3).

She listens to the positive messages and courageous stories of many people but a few of her favourites are Oprah, J.K. Rowling, and Shonda Rhimes. The ultimate innovator, in Brown's opinion, is Maya Angelou. Brown quotes Angelou many times and bases this entire book on this:



"You are only free when you realize you belong no place - you belong every place - no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great." (Brown, 5).

The rest of chapter one recounts stories from Brown's childhood where she experienced a series of moves to a wide variety of different schools where she always felt like the outcast for race, religion, or sometimes just because of the spelling of her name. Not feeling she truly belonged in any of these schools nor with her parents who were unable to assist her with finding belonging because of their own personal difficulties led to Brown becoming an expert on how to appear like she fit in and to spew bullshit to do it. Not truly belonging was Brown's greatest shame as a child and part of her adult life as well.

A lack of belonging has the power to break a person's heart, a person's spirit, and a person's sense of self-worth. When those three things break, there are only three outcomes: first, living in constant pain and seeking relief through numbing the pain and/or inflicting it on others; second, living in denial of that pain and your denial is then passed on to children and those around you; or, third, finding the courage to own the pain and develop a level of empathy and compassion for yourself that allows you to see the hurt in others in a unique way.

Brown lived in shame because her parent's continually fought and weren't like the parents of the perfect families you see on TV. She was always afraid that the other kids would find out that she

THREE OUTCOMES OF A BROKEN HEART, A BROKEN SPIRIT, OR A BROKEN SELF-WORTH.

- ◆ **Living in constant pain and seeking relief through numbing or inflicting it on others.**
- ◆ **Living in denial of that pain and passing it on.**
- ◆ **Finding the courage to own the pain and develop a level of empathy and compassion for yourself.**



wasn't from the perfect family and, with no other perspective offered, she simply increased her ability to fit in (drinking, bullshitting, drugs, etc.) and did whatever it took to feel like she belonged. She felt like a chameleon and became a very lonely stranger to even herself.

It took meeting the person who would become her husband before she allowed anyone to see the real her. With him, she found belonging. She has spent most of her adult life grieving the girl who never fit in and longing to figure out who she is meant to be. She is on a decades long search for true belonging. She wrestled with being an outsider and it wasn't until she changed her response to not fitting in that the journey truly began.

Instead of suffering in silence and in shame, she began to talk about her fears and her hurt. She began to question what was important to her and why. She began to do things that she wanted to such as a qualitative dissertation when she was told she couldn't and focusing her research on shame when she was told she shouldn't.

In 2013, she was invited to meet Oprah. This was a long term dream for her and one that, rather than being present for, she was afraid would go wrong so she was standing back and studying it instead. She was acting polite and friendly but was not truly present in the moment. Right before meeting Oprah, Brown was asked by her daughter about a permission slip which led to the idea of writing herself permission slips. She wrote herself the first of countless permission slips. Permission to enjoy the experience.

These slips gave her permission from herself to do things such as 'to stop being so serious' or 'to have fun today'. This was an intention setting method that forced her to start enjoying her life. It was setting the intention of allowing herself to belong to herself. Oprah and Dr. Maya Angelou told her she was doing great work and that she couldn't stop. Angelou said Brown could not be moved and quoted from her own poem

'Like a tree planted by the river, I shall not be moved' (Brown, 24).

Brown shall not be moved. She stays true to herself and to what she wants to do.

The chapter continues with personal stories of how she has pursued her authenticity by ensuring she stays true to herself and not giving in to bullshit. For Brown that means keeping faith in her lectures as well as wearing the clothes she feels comfortable in despite the expectation of dress clothes. Brown, despite her success, still did not feel like she had found belonging yet.

A conversation with her husband made her realize that "you will always belong anywhere you show up as yourself and talk about your work in a real way" (Brown, 26). This sentence was the moment that Brown feels that she truly understood, at a fundamental level, what Angelou meant in saying you were only free when you belonged nowhere. It was the moment she saw the story of how she saw herself shift from an image of a lonely girl on the outside. She belonged only to herself and how she viewed herself dictated how she belonged when interacting with others.

It was this shift that led her down the 'research rabbit hole' and was the catalyst for four years of research that developed Brown's Theory of True Belonging.

CHAPTER TWO

The words 'true belonging' feel like they belong together in Brown's mind.

We all crave to find true belonging. In 2010, Brown published a definition of belonging: "Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Because this yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which are not hollow substitutes for belonging, but often barriers to it. Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance"

This definition remains true and research supports this statement, but Brown feels it is incomplete because it is something that can only be achieved with others. True belonging is something that belongs only to the individual. The individual who chooses to 'brave the wilderness of uncertainty, vulnerability, and criticism' from others and belong only to themselves.

Brown used a grounded theory approach to understand the main concern of people who are trying to achieve belonging. The answer she found was complex. People 'want to be a part of something – to experience real connection with others – but not at the cost of their authenticity, freedom, or power' (Brown, 33).

Brown feels that a large part of the struggle for people who are seeking true belonging is spiritual. She defines spirituality as 'recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded

in love and compassion' (Brown, 34).

Spirituality is not a religious struggle but an effort to stay connected with one another. As she researched this further, she developed four main principles for true belonging:

1. People are hard to hate close-up. Move in.
2. Speak truth to bullshit. Be civil.
3. Hold hands. With strangers.
4. Strong back. Soft front. Wild heart.

This means we will often stand alone in the wilderness of what we believe in. Wilderness metaphors contain notions of solitude, vulnerability, as well as emotional, spiritual, and physical quests. Standing up for what you alone believe in will often leave you alone in the wilderness. True belonging means becoming the wilderness and is not a passive thing.

True belonging will require us to learn how to be present with people without sacrificing who we are. And that means we need to trust others and to trust ourselves. Trust is 'choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person's actions. Brown discovered seven elements of trust in her research and uses the acronym BRAVING as a checklist to remind her that trusting herself and others is a vulnerable and courageous process:

Boundaries - setting boundaries around what is ok and what is not. Being able to say no.

Reliability - do what you say you'll do. Stay aware of limitations and don't overpromise.

Accountability - Own your mistakes, apologize, and make amends.

Vault - don't share experiences or information that isn't yours to share.

Integrity - choose courage over comfort. Choose right over fun, fast, or easy. Practice this.

Nonjudgment - no judgment when asking or asked for what someone needs

Generosity - extend the most generous interpretation possible to intentions, words and actions of others.

Self-trust is the most important element in our search for true belonging. If we can't trust ourselves, who could we ever trust? Using the seven elements above, we can continually prove to ourselves that we are worthy of trust or that we need to re-adjust how we reacted to a situation.

The quest for true belonging is about creating a path with every step we take rather than following a readymade path. Brown states that the quest for true belonging begins with this definition:

"True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are; it requires you to *be* who you are."

This journey will create a paradox. We will need to be with others but also be with ourselves because true belonging is being a part

of something as well as being alone. As Angelou said 'the price is high. The reward is great.' (Brown, 41).

Chapter 3: High Lonesome. A Spiritual Crisis.

High lonesome is a sound that is found in bluegrass music. It is a sound that encompasses both misery and redemption with pain and freedom.

Brown says it is a sound that belongs in another time and makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up when you hear it. She feels art has the power to render sorrow beautiful and that our modern world feels high lonesome and heartbroken.

The solution is to unite in our similarities and to spread joy with our connectedness. Instead, we are sorting ourselves into smaller and smaller factions. Brown feels this indicates that the world is in a 'collective spiritual crisis' (Brown, 45).

Spirituality isn't religious. Brown defines it as 'recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other be a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion'.

Currently, the world is not recognizing nor celebrating our connections. We sort ourselves into racial, geographic, political, spiritual, and like-minded groups that encourage extreme thinking and consume only facts that support our position. This sorting leads to making assumptions about other people and to grow bitter in our loneliness. Loneliness is what we experience when we feel disconnected. Being alone or in solitude is a powerful and healing thing. Loneliness is the

feeling you feel when you feel disconnected with what is happening around you. You can feel this even, and sometimes the hardest, when you are surrounded by a group of people. And when we feel lonely, we feel isolated and disconnected. We move into protective survival mode.

What we feel becomes more intense and more real. We exaggerate how intense everything is and live in fear. To combat this, we must search for connectivity. We must find the things that make us similar and focus on those rather than the differences.

We must talk about the issues that make us the most vulnerable and that are the most awkward. The three biggest are race, gender, and class. If we continually avoid these topics, the differences will grow, and the loneliness will be replaced with blatant hate and fear-based reactions.

Through understanding and a willingness to choose courage and address the areas we feel vulnerable, we can find true belonging. We need to learn to feel the hurt rather than spread the hurt. Instead of refusing to help one another, we need to show up and be present for one another.

Chapter 4: People are Hard to hate closeup. Move in.

According to Brown, if we take a wide angle look at our world as it is increasingly defined by politics, social media and the twenty-four hour news, we see a lot of hatred (Brown, 63). There is war, there is politician's using the law to protect themselves, there is violence, there are lies, and there is an ever-increasing amount of it. By zooming in on our own life, there is a significant change. There is the love of our

family. We can see the hopes and struggles of every person as they overcome their personal pain and trauma to become better people. These are the people we can relate to as they go through their everyday lives of carpools, school, work, etc. We understand these people and their life story.

It is easy to hate a group of people. It is hard to hate the individual based on a belief they may hold. Brown provides examples of her own life through stories to emphasize this point. It is easy to hate democrats or republicans. Can you hate the best friend who sat through your husband's heart attack with you and helped shoulder your pain as you went through a loss – even if she is a democrat or republican? Her political belief did not make her stay at the hospital with you or pick up the kids or bring over supper. Her beliefs did not define her. Her actions did.

It is hard to let go of the hate and to see the love. It is hard to seek understanding even when you want to hate and keep the rage because that is easier than forgiving. It is easy to suppress the emotions and focus on the day-to-day activities. It is not easy to realize that your hatred is not sustainable and will lead to long term health issues if you choose to stay in that mental state.

Courage is forged in hate. Pain that is denied or is ignored becomes fear or hate. It manifests in resentment and in bitterness. Committing to courage is committing to eventually encountering some real face-to-face conflict. And facing it when you feel vulnerable. It will take courage to stand alone against the groupthink of hatred and to take a stand. Not to make others see your side of it but to maintain your boundaries of integrity and vulnerability. To do what you feel is right.

It is hard to stay kind-hearted when you feel people are taking advantage of you or

threatening your lifestyle. It is important to draw boundaries that maintain not only your physical safety but also your *emotional safety*.

Emotional safety is not choosing to not listen to opinions that you don't agree with. It is choosing to not listen to 'dissenting opinion that utilizes dehumanizing language and behaviour'(Brown, 71). Dehumanizing is turning a person into something less than that is deserving of your hate and violence. It is what allows a person to exclude people from equal moral treatment.

It will take courage to create emotional safety because we must insist it is given to all people. Even people we would prefer to hate ourselves. We must never tolerate dehumanization. We must fight against that type of behaviour at all costs by ensuring it is given to all people equally. Challenge ourselves to live by higher standards and to offer that high standard to all people. This is what transforms us from 'just fitting in' to 'true belonging'.

Challenging people on their beliefs will involve conflict. It is important to be open-minded and listen with a desire to hear the other person's perspective. One of the most uncomfortable things to say in conflict is 'tell me more' (Brown, 83).

Brown concludes this chapter by interviewing Viola Davis. Viola says one of the most beautiful things of the whole book in this interview. It is simply

“every story matters”.

When a person takes the time to be present in the moment and truly takes the time to listen, it is hard to find hatred in those stories.

Chapter 5: Speak truth to Bullshit. Be civil.

Brown finds that bullshit is a good way to get swamped down with the trivial details. Bullshit is different than lying in three ways. First, lying is defying the truth. Bullshitting is dismissing the truth. Second, bullshit is used when you don't understand an issue yet feel the need to weigh in with opinions. And third, because it is hard to get the actual truth, it is easier to just rely on what we think is the truth and thus begin to believe the bullshit.

Brown believes that one way of sorting us is using the

‘you are either with us or against us’

line that almost all politicians, movie heroes, and villains use (Brown, 93). It helps people force the undecided into sides. Alternatives almost always exist which makes this statement factually untrue. Ultimately, it is oversimplified bullshit. The only true option is to refuse the terms of the argument.

A truly one or the other option forces people to respond out of fear. Adding in a lack of knowledge and a good dose of bullshit provides the perfect setting for bullshit and incivility. Civility is easy to use when combatting lying. When combatting bullshit, the truth isn't the starting point. There are two ways Brown combats bullshit.

One, be generous when speaking with a bullshitter. It is possible the bullshitter doesn't know better rather than just being malicious. Often, people will feel shame on not having an informed opinion and so resort to bullshit to get

through the conversation. Generosity, empathy, and curiosity helps to combat. Asking questions such as ‘where did you read this’ can go a long way in questioning what we are hearing and to introduce fact. The second tactic to combat bullshit is civility. Civility is treating the other person or people in the conversation with respect and dignity even if they are not acting the same way.

Brown shares several stories where she was either the giver of bullshit or the receiver of bullshit. All the experiences were tough learning experiences for her. Each story reveals a way in which she learned how to move past the bullshit in a better way.

Speaking truth to bullshit and practicing civility starts with knowing ourselves, knowing behaviours and issues, that push into our own bullshit and get in the way of our civility. Using the BRAVING acronym, Brown suggests we set Boundaries for discussions, focus on the Reliability of the information, hold ourselves Accountable for bullshitting less, maintain confidentiality by using the Vault, insist on maintaining our own Integrity with Nonjudgement, and Generosity.

Chapter 6: Hold hands. With strangers.

The key to solving our spiritual crisis is to develop a human connection. This connection exists and cannot be broken. However, our belief that there is something bigger than us that is filled with love and compassion is constantly tested and broken.

Brown believes our belief in this connection is one of the greatest renewable resources because no matter how many times it is broke, it always renews itself.

People love the idea of humankind. But they also are annoyed by individual people and look for blanket solutions. We expect everyone else to change to suit our individual preference. Brown relates this to a floor covered in glass. If we could just cover the entire floor in leather, we would be protected from the glass.

Choosing to brave the wilderness is realizing how ridiculous a floor of leather is and choosing instead to make individual choices to protect yourself from the glass. Cover your own feet in leather. You adjust. You don’t expect the world to adjust to you.

Human connection can be found in anything. And, while each of us will never belong in precisely one place,

**each of us DOES belong as a small part
of many things.**

Brown uses personal examples of the Harry Potter movies where she belonged to those people that enjoyed it with her; when the Challenger shuttle exploded, she belonged with the people who were grieving it and driving on the freeway with her; or when she is cheering for her favourite sports team. That is where she finds her belonging.

This inextricable connection that makes us each a part of everything we are present for is unbreakable. There is healing in the power of a group that isn’t fighting but rather doing what is the best for everyone. Instead of focusing on the fear and the pain, choose love.

Choose joy over sorrow.

We must be careful in making sure we are choosing to find the connection that is true. Idle gossip, while fun at the time, can be simply the spreading of bullshit and talking about others so you fit in. It can feel like a connection, but it is a counterfeit connection. Braving the wilderness is about true

belonging. Not short-term ones based on light-hearted bullshit.

Social media is a powerful way to find connection if you use it to be warmed and nourished. It can easily consume you with bullshit though. It all depends on your intentions, expectations, and reality checking skills (Brown, 140). Brown's research proves that face-to-face connection is the most important. Social media can help that by finding the people to connect with.

Brown quotes Susan Pinker's research to prove that there are legitimate life or death reasons for in-person interactions. Results such as a bolstered immune system and positive hormones help us live longer. It is suggested that isolating yourself is as dangerous to your health as obesity, smoking, or hypertension.

It is not enough to be in the room when interacting with people. You must truly 'lean-in' to the experience and participate wholeheartedly. This is about being present in the moment and enjoying both the pain and the joy. It takes courage to experience joy. Joy is the most vulnerable emotion. To experience pure joy, you must let go of all your anxiety and worries and simply be in the moment.

Pain is a vulnerable emotion. It is far easier to deny your pain and cause it in others. It takes courage for a person to face the pain and the grief. It hurts. And you don't like being hurt so you pretend you can handle it.

Courage is facing your pain.

Courage is being vulnerable. No vulnerability; no courage. It takes chancing pain to be brave. Courage is letting other people in and not always walking alone.

Chapter 7: Strong back. Soft Front. Wild Heart.

It is important to be strong when braving the wilderness. To have a strong back but give love and compassion as well is a Buddhist concept. And, to do that we must give ourselves

permission to inhale.

When asserting ourselves and giving to others, we're exhaling. But we must also inhale and care for ourselves. Courage is the strong back while vulnerability is the soft front.

Brown feels we need more though. Once we've found the courage and the vulnerability to shed the expectations of others and are comfortable by exploring the wilderness, we are still going to find difficult situations. We will spend our entire lives strengthening our backs. Some will focus on softening their front. What other people think is a strong deterrent against strengthening our backs. Returning to the BRAVING acronym will assist us:

Boundaries: Learn to set, hold and respect boundaries. The challenge is letting go of being liked and the fear of disappointing people.

Reliability: Learn how to say what we mean and mean what we say. The challenge is not overcommitting and over promising to please others or prove ourselves.

Accountability: Learn how to step up, be accountable, take responsibility, and issue meaningful apologies when we're wrong. The challenge is letting go of blame and staying out of shame.

Vault: Learn how to keep confidences, to recognize what's ours to share and what's not. The challenge is stop using gossip, common enemy intimacy, and oversharing as a way to hotwire connection.

Integrity: Learn how to practice our values even when it's uncomfortable and hard. The challenge is choosing courage to over comfort in those moments.

Nonjudgement: Learn how to give and receive help. The challenge is letting go of "helper and fixer" as our identity and of our self-worth.

Generosity: Learn how to set boundaries that allow us to be generous in our assumptions about others. The challenge is being honest and clear with others about what's okay and not okay."

Brown recounts examples of a strong back with a soft front and then emphasizes two points. One, we must maintain our strong back continually. And two, it is hard to keep the soft front when there's so much hurt. So, Brown's visceral response to this is "strong back, armoured front" (Brown, 153). But many of us armour up too quickly and never learn how to live without their armour.

It MUST be strong back with vulnerable soft front but with a wild heart.

A wild heart is what leads us to be tough and tender. It is what leads us to live our lives in a paradox. Pain and suffering countered with love and tenderness. How can we enjoy cupcakes at a birthday party when others are starving? Because cupcakes are joy. And joy matters. With joy, we feed our souls and inhale. It is what gives us the strength to exhale while braving our wilderness.

Joy is practicing gratitude. Appreciating the small things and truly being gratitude for everything in your life – even the pain. And it is choosing to only let in the things you feel you can handle. Setting boundaries to protect your joy.

A wild heart knows the pain in the world but does not diminish its own pain. A wild heart uses gratitude to lean into joy.

Brown concludes the book with this: "There will be times when standing alone feels too hard, too scary, and we'll doubt our ability to make our way through the uncertainty. Someone, somewhere, will say "Don't do it. You don't have what it takes to survive the wilderness". This is when you reach deep into your wild heart and remind yourself,

"I am the wilderness."

(Brown, 163).

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Brene Brown is a research professor for the University of Houston. She lives in Texas with her husband and two children.

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