THE GIFTS OF Imperfection

Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are

YOUR GUIDE TO A WHOLEHEARTED LIFE

Brené Brown, Ph.D., L.M.S.W.

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Editor's note

The names, details, and circumstances may have been changed to protect the privacy of those mentioned in this publication.

This publication is not intended as a substitute for the advice of health care professionals.

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To Steve, Ellen, and Charlie.

I love you with my whole heart.

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preface

Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do.

Once you see a pattern, you can't *un*-see it. Trust me, I've tried. But when the same truth keeps repeating itself, it's hard to pretend that it's just a coincidence. For example, no matter how hard I try to convince myself that I can function on six hours of sleep, anything less than eight hours leaves me impatient, anxious, and foraging for carbohydrates. It's a pattern. I also have a terrible procrastination pattern: I always put off writing by reorganizing my entire house and spending way too much time and money buying office supplies and organizing systems. Every single time.

One reason it's impossible to un-see trends is that our minds are engineered to seek out patterns and to assign meaning to them. Humans are a meaning-making species. And, for better or worse, my mind is actually fine-tuned to do this. I spent years training for it, and now it's how I make my living.

As a researcher, I observe human behavior so I can identify and name the subtle connections, relationships, and patterns that help us make meaning of our thoughts, behaviors, and feelings.

I love what I do. Pattern hunting is wonderful work and, in fact, throughout my career, my attempts at un-seeing were strictly reserved for my personal life and those humbling vulnerabilities that I loved to deny. That all changed in November 2006, when the research that fills these pages smacked me upside the head. For the first time in my career, I was desperate to un-see my own research.

Up until that point, I had dedicated my career to studying difficult emotions like shame, fear, and vulnerability. I had written academic

pieces on shame, developed a shame-resilience curriculum for mental health and addictions professionals, and written a book about shame resilience called *I Thought It Was Just Me*.[1]

In the process of collecting thousands of stories from diverse men and women who lived all over the country—ranging in age from eighteen to eighty-seven—I saw new patterns that I wanted to know more about. Yes, we all struggle with shame and the fear of not being enough. And, yes, many of us are afraid to let our true selves be seen and known. But in this huge mound of data there was also story after story of men and women who were living these amazing and inspiring lives.

I heard stories about the power of embracing imperfection and vulnerability. I learned about the inextricable connection between joy and gratitude, and how things that I take for granted, like rest and play, are as vital to our health as nutrition and exercise. These research participants trusted themselves, and they talked about authenticity and love and belonging in a way that was completely new to me.

I wanted to look at these stories as a whole, so I grabbed a file and a Sharpie and wrote the first word that came to my mind on the tab: *Wholehearted*. I wasn't sure what it meant yet, but I knew that these stories were about people living and loving with their whole hearts.

I had a lot of questions about Wholeheartedness. What did these folks value? How did they create all of this resilience in their lives? What were their main concerns and how did they resolve or address them? Can anyone create a Wholehearted life? What does it take to cultivate what we need? What gets in the way?

As I started analyzing the stories and looking for re-occurring themes, I realized that the patterns generally fell into one of two columns; for simplicity sake, I first labeled these *Do* and *Don't*. The *Do* column was brimming with words like worthiness, rest, play, trust, faith, intuition, hope, authenticity, love, belonging, joy, gratitude, and creativity. The *Don't* column was dripping with words like perfection, numbing, certainty, exhaustion, self-sufficiency, being cool, fitting in, judgment, and scarcity.

I gasped the first time I stepped back from the poster paper and took

it all in. It was the worst kind of sticker shock. I remember mumbling, "No. No. No. How can this be?"

Even though I wrote the lists, I was shocked to read them. When I code data, I go into deep researcher mode. My only focus is on accurately capturing what I heard in the stories. I don't think about how I would say something, only how the research participants said it. I don't think about what an experience would mean to me, only what it meant to the person who told me about it.

I sat in the red chair at my breakfast room table and stared at these two lists for a very long time. My eyes wandered up and down and across. I remember at one point I was actually sitting there with tears in my eyes and with my hand across my mouth, like someone had just delivered bad news.

And, in fact, it was bad news. I thought I'd find that Wholehearted people were just like me and doing all of the same things I was doing: working hard, following the rules, doing it until I got it right, always trying to know myself better, raising my kids exactly by the books . . .

After studying tough topics like shame for a decade, I truly believed that I deserved confirmation that I was "living right."

But here's the tough lesson that I learned that day (and every day since):

> *How much we know and understand ourselves is critically important, but there is something that is even more essential to living a Wholehearted life: loving ourselves.*

Knowledge is important, but only if we're being kind and gentle with ourselves as we work to discover who we are. Wholeheartedness is as much about embracing our tenderness and vulnerability as it is about developing knowledge and claiming power.

And perhaps the most painful lesson of that day hit me so hard that it took my breath away: It was clear from the data that we cannot give our children what we don't have. Where we are on our journey of living and loving with our whole hearts is a much stronger indicator of parenting success than anything we can learn from how-to books.

This journey is equal parts heart work and head work, and as I sat there on that dreary November day, it was clear to me that I was lacking in my own heart work.

I finally stood up, grabbed my marker off the table, drew a line under the *Don't* list, and then wrote the word *me* under the line. My struggles seemed to be perfectly characterized by the sum total of the list.

I folded my arms tightly across my chest, sunk deep down into my chair, and thought, *This is just great. I'm living straight down the shit list.*

I walked around the house for about twenty minutes trying to un-see and undo everything that had just unfolded, but I couldn't make the words go away. I couldn't go back, so I did the next best thing: I folded all of the poster sheets into neat squares and tucked then into a Rubbermaid tub that fit nicely under my bed, next to my Christmas wrap. I wouldn't open that tub again until March of 2008.

Next, I got myself a really good therapist and began a year of serious soul work that would forever change my life. Diana, my therapist, and I still laugh about my first visit. Diana, who is a therapist to many therapists, started with the requisite, "So what's going on?" I pulled out the *Do* list and matter-of-factly said, "I need more of the things on this list. Some specific tips and tools would be helpful. Nothing deep. No childhood crap or anything."

It was a long year. I lovingly refer to it on my blog as the 2007 ~~Breakdown~~ Spiritual Awakening. It felt like a textbook breakdown to me, but Diana called it a spiritual awakening. I think we were both right. In fact, I'm starting to question if you can have one without the other.

Of course, it's not a coincidence that this unraveling happened in November 2006. The stars were perfectly aligned for a breakdown: I was raw from being newly sugar and flour free, I was days away from my birthday (always a contemplative time for me), I was burned out from work, and I was right on the cusp of my *midlife unraveling*.

People may call what happens at midlife "a crisis," but it's not. It's an unraveling—a time when you feel a desperate pull to live the life you want to live, not the one you're "supposed" to live. The unraveling is a

time when you are challenged by the universe to let go of who you think you are supposed to be and to embrace who you are.

Midlife is certainly one of the great unraveling journeys, but there are others that happen to us over the course of our lives:

- marriage
- divorce
- becoming a parent
- recovery
- moving
- an empty nest
- retiring
- experiencing loss or trauma
- working in a soul-sucking job

The universe is not short on wake-up calls. We're just quick to hit the snooze button.

As it turned out, the work I had to do was messy and deep. I slogged through it until one day, exhausted and with mud still wet and dripping off of my traveling shoes, I realized, "Oh, my God. I feel different. I feel joyful and real. I'm still afraid, but I also feel really brave. Something has changed—I can feel it in my bones."

I was healthier, more joyful, and more grateful than I had ever felt. I felt calmer and grounded, and significantly less anxious. I had rekindled my creative life, reconnected with my family and friends in a new way, and most important, felt truly comfortable in my own skin for the first time in my life.

I learned how to worry more about how I felt and less about "what people might think." I was setting new boundaries and began to let go of my need to please, perform, and perfect. I started saying *no* rather than *sure* (and being resentful and pissed off later). I began to say "Oh, hell yes!" rather than "Sounds fun, but I have lots of work to do" or "I'll do that when I'm _____ (thinner, less busy, better prepared)."

As I worked through my own Wholehearted journey with Diana, I

read close to forty books, including every spiritual awakening memoir I could get my hands on. They were incredibly helpful guides, but I still craved a guidebook that could offer inspiration, resources, and basically serve as a soul traveler's companion of sorts.

One day, as I stared at the tall pile of books precariously stacked on my nightstand, it hit me! *I want to tell this story in a memoir.* I'll tell the story of how a cynical, smart-ass academic became every bit of the stereotype that she spent her entire adult life ridiculing. I'll fess up about how I became the middle-aged, recovering, health-conscious, creative, touchy-feely spirituality-seeker who spends days contemplating things like grace, love, gratitude, creativity, authenticity, and is happier than I imagined possible. I'll call it *Wholehearted*.

I also remember thinking, *Before I write the memoir, I need to use this research to write a guidebook on Wholehearted living!* By mid-2008, I had filled three huge tubs with notebooks, journals, and mounds of data. I had also done countless hours of new research. I had everything I needed, including a passionate desire to write the book that you're holding in your hands.

On that fateful November day when the list appeared and I sunk into the realization that I wasn't living and loving with my whole heart, I wasn't totally convinced. Seeing the list wasn't enough to fully believe in it. I had to dig very deep and make the *conscious choice* to believe . . . to believe in myself and the possibility of living a different life. A lot of questioning, countless tears, and a huge collection of joyful moments later, believing has helped me see.

I now see how owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do.

I now see that cultivating a Wholehearted life is not like trying to reach a destination. It's like walking toward a star in the sky. We never really arrive, but we certainly know that we're heading in the right direction.

I now see how gifts like courage, compassion, and connection only work when they are exercised. Every day.

I now see how the work of *cultivating* and *letting go* that shows up in

the ten guideposts is not "to-do list" material. It's not something we accomplish or acquire and then check off our list. It's life work. It's soul work.

For me, believing was seeing. I believed first, and only then I was able to see how we can truly change ourselves, our families, and our communities. We just have to find the courage to live and love with our whole hearts. It's an honor to make this journey with you!

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INTRODUCTION

Wholehearted Living

Wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness. It means cultivating the courage, compassion, and connection to wake up in the morning and think, *No matter what gets done and how much is left undone, I am enough.* It's going to bed at night thinking, *Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn't change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging.*

The Journey

Wholehearted living is not a onetime choice. It is a process. In fact, I believe it's the journey of a lifetime. My goal is to bring awareness and clarity to the constellation of choices that lead to Wholeheartedness and to share what I've learned from many, many people who have dedicated themselves to living and loving with their whole hearts.

Before embarking on any journey, including this one, it's important to talk about what we need to bring along. What does it take to live and love from a place of worthiness? How do we embrace imperfection? How do we cultivate what we need and let go of the things that are holding us back? The answers to all of these questions are courage, compassion, and connection—the tools we need to work our way through our journey.

If you're thinking, *Great. I just need to be a superhero to fight perfectionism,* I understand. Courage, compassion, and connection seem like big, lofty ideals. But in reality, they are daily practices that, when

exercised enough, become these incredible gifts in our lives. And the good news is that our vulnerabilities are what force us to call upon these amazing tools. Because we're human and so beautifully imperfect, we get to practice using our tools on a daily basis. In this way, courage, compassion, and connection become gifts—the gifts of imperfection.

Here's what you'll find in the pages that follow. In the first chapter, I explain what I've learned about courage, compassion, and connection and how they are truly the tools for developing worthiness.

Once we get some clarity about the tools that we're going to use on this journey, in the next chapter we move to the heart of the matter: love, belonging, and worthiness. I answer some of the most difficult questions of my career: What is love? Can we love someone and betray them? Why does our constant need to fit in sabotage real belonging? Can we love the people in our lives, like our partners and children, more than we love ourselves? How do we define worthiness, and why do we so often end up hustling for it rather than believing in it?

We encounter obstacles on every journey we make; the Wholehearted journey is no exception. In the next chapter, we'll explore what I've found to be the greatest barriers to living and loving with our whole hearts and how we can develop effective strategies to move through the barriers and to cultivate resilience.

From there, we'll explore the ten guideposts for the Wholehearted journey, daily practices that provide direction for our journey. There's one chapter for each guidepost, and each chapter is illustrated with stories, definitions, quotes, and ideas for making deliberate and inspired choices about the way we live and love.

Defining Moments

This book is full of big-concept words such as *love, belonging,* and *authenticity*. I think it's critically important to define the gauzy words that are tossed around every day but rarely explained. And I think good definitions should be accessible and actionable. I've tried to define these words in a way that will help us unpack the term and explore the pieces. When we dig down past the feel-good words and excavate the daily

activities and experiences that put the *heart* in Wholehearted living, we can see how people define the concepts that drive their actions, beliefs, and emotions.

For example, when the research participants talked about a concept such as *love,* I was careful to define it as they experienced it. Sometimes that required developing new definitions (like I actually did with *love* and many other words). Other times, when I started looking around in the existing literature, I found definitions that captured the spirit of the participants' experiences. A good example of this is *play.* Play is an essential component to Wholehearted living, and when I researched the topic, I discovered the amazing work of Dr. Stuart Brown.[1] So, rather than creating a new definition, I reference his work because it accurately reflects what I learned in the research.

I realize that definitions spark controversy and disagreement, but I'm okay with that. I'd rather we debate the meaning of words that are important to us than not discuss them at all. We need common language to help us create awareness and understanding, which is essential to Wholehearted living.

Digging Deep

In early 2008, when my blog was still pretty new, I wrote a post about breaking my "dig-deep" button. You know the dig-deep button, right? It's the button that you rely on when you're too bone-tired to get up one more time in the middle of the night or to do one more load of throw-up-diarrhea laundry or to catch one more plane or to return one more call or to please/perform/perfect the way you normally do even when you just want to flip someone off and hide under the covers.

The dig-deep button is a secret level of pushing through when we're exhausted and overwhelmed, and when there's too much to do and too little time for self-care.

In my blog post, I explained how I had decided not to fix my dig-deep button. I made a promise to myself that when I felt emotionally, physically, and spiritually done, I'd try slowing down rather than relying on my old standbys: pushing through, soldiering on, and sucking it up.

It worked for a while, but I missed my button. I missed having something to turn to when I was depleted and down. I needed a tool to help me dig my way out. So, I turned back to my research to see if I could find a way to dig that was more consistent with Wholehearted living. Maybe there was something better than just sucking it up.

Here's what I found: Men and women who live Wholeheartedly do indeed DIG Deep. They just do it in a different way. When they're exhausted and overwhelmed, they get

Deliberate in their thoughts and behaviors through prayer, meditation, or simply setting their intentions;

Inspired to make new and different choices;

Going. They take action.

Since I made that discovery, I've been DIGging Deep the new way, and it's been pretty amazing. One example happened just recently when I was lost in an Internet fog. Rather than working, I was just lulling myself into a haze by mindlessly playing on Facebook and piddling on the computer. It was neither relaxing nor productive—it was just a giant time and energy suck.

I tried the new DIG Deep—get deliberate, inspired, and going. I told myself, "If you need to refuel and losing yourself online is fun and relaxing, then do it. If not, do something deliberately relaxing. Find something inspiring to do rather than something soul-sucking. Then, last but not least, get up and do it!" I closed my laptop, said a little prayer to remind myself to be self-compassionate, and watched a movie that had been sitting in a Netflix envelope on my desk for over a month. It was exactly what I needed.

It wasn't the old Dig Deep—the pushing through. I didn't force myself to start working or to do something productive. Rather, I prayerfully, intentionally, and thoughtfully did something restorative.

Each guidepost has a DIG Deep section to help us start thinking about how we get deliberate and inspired about our choices, and how we take action. I share my personal DIG Deep strategies with you and

I encourage you to come up with your own. These new strategies have been so much more effective than the old "pushing through."

What I Hope to Contribute

This book is full of powerful topics such as self-compassion, acceptance, and gratitude. I'm not the first to talk about these subjects, and I'm certainly not the smartest researcher or the most talented writer. I am, however, the first to explain how these topics work individually and together to cultivate Wholehearted living. And, maybe more important, I'm certainly the first person to come at these topics from the perspective of someone who has spent years studying shame and fear.

I can't tell you how many times I wanted to give up my research on shame. It's extremely difficult to dedicate your career to studying topics that make people squeamish. On several occasions I've literally thrown my hands up and said, "I quit. It's too hard. There are so many cool things to study. I want out of this!" I didn't choose to study shame and fear; the research chose me.

Now I know why. It was what I needed—professionally and personally—to prepare for this work on Wholeheartedness. We can talk about courage and love and compassion until we sound like a greeting card store, but unless we're willing to have an honest conversation about what gets in the way of putting these into practice in our daily lives, we will never change. Never, ever.

Courage sounds great, but we need to talk about how it requires us to let go of what other people think, and for most of us, that's scary. Compassion is something we all want, but are we willing to look at why boundary-setting and saying *no* is a critical component of compassion? Are we willing to say *no,* even if we're disappointing someone? Belonging is an essential component of Wholehearted living, but first we have to cultivate self-acceptance—why is this such a struggle?

Before I start writing, I always ask myself, "Why is this book worth writing? What's the contribution that I'm hoping to make?" Ironically, I think the most valuable contribution that I can make to the ongoing discussions about love, belonging, and worthiness stems from my

experiences as a shame researcher.

Coming at this work with a full understanding of how the shame tapes and gremlins keep us feeling afraid and small allows me to do more than present great ideas; this perspective helps me share real strategies for changing our lives. If we want to know why we're all so afraid to let our true selves be seen and known, we have to understand the power of shame and fear. If we can't stand up to the *never good enough* and *who do you think you are?* we can't move forward.

I only wish that during those desperate and defeated moments of my past, when I was knee-deep in shame research, I could have known what I know now. If I could go back and whisper in my ear, I'd tell myself the same thing that I'll tell you as we begin this journey:

> *Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.*

Courage, Compassion, and Connection: The Gifts of Imperfection

Practicing courage, compassion, and connection in our daily lives is how we cultivate worthiness. The key word is *practice*. Mary Daly, a theologian, writes, "Courage is like—it's a habitus, a habit, a virtue: You get it by courageous acts. It's like you learn to swim by swimming. You learn courage by couraging." The same is true for compassion and connection. We invite compassion into our lives when we act compassionately toward ourselves and others, and we feel connected in our lives when we reach out and connect.

Before I define these concepts and talk about how they work, I want to show you how they work together in real life—as practices. This is a personal story about the courage to reach out, the compassion that comes from saying, "I've been there," and the connections that fuel our worthiness.

The Gun-for-Hire Shame Storm

Not too long ago, the principal of a large public elementary school and the president of the school's parent-teacher organization (PTO) invited me to speak to a group of parents about the relationship between resilience and boundaries. I was in the process of collecting data about Wholehearted parenting and schools at the time, so I was excited about the opportunity. I had no idea what I was getting myself into.

The second I walked into the school auditorium, I felt this really strange vibe from the parents in the audience. They almost seemed agitated.

I asked the principal about it, and she just shrugged her shoulders and walked away. The PTO president didn't have much to say about it either. I chalked it up to my nerves and tried to let it go.

I was sitting in the front row when the principal introduced me. This is always a very awkward experience for me. Someone is running through a list of my accomplishments while I'm secretly trying to stave off vomiting and talking myself out of running. Well, this introduction was beyond anything I had ever experienced.

The principal was saying things like, "You might not like what you're going to hear tonight, but we need to listen for the sake of our children. Dr. Brown is here to transform our school and our lives! She's going to set us straight whether we like it or not!"

She was talking in this loud, aggressive voice that made her seem downright pissed off. I felt like I was being introduced for WWE WrestleMania. All we needed were the Jock Jams and a few strobe lights.

In hindsight, I should have walked up to the podium and said, "I'm feeling very uncomfortable. I'm excited to be here, but I'm certainly not here to set anyone straight. I also don't want you to think that I'm trying to transform your school in an hour. What's going on?"

But I didn't. I just started talking in my vulnerable I'm-a-researcher-but-I'm-also-a-struggling-parent way. Well, the die had been cast. These parents were not receptive. Instead, I felt row after row of people glaring at me.

One man, who was sitting right up front, had his arms folded across his chest and his teeth clenched so tightly that the veins in his neck were popping out. Every three or four minutes he'd shift in his seat, roll his eyes, and sigh louder than I've ever heard anyone sigh. It was so loud that I'm barely comfortable calling it a sigh. It was more like a *humph!* It was so bad that the people next to him were visibly mortified by his behavior. They were still inexplicably unhappy with me, but he was making the entire evening unbearable for all of us.

As an experienced teacher and group leader, I know how to handle these situations and am normally comfortable doing so. When someone is being disruptive, you really only have two choices: ignore him or take

a break so that you can privately confront him about his inappropriate behavior. I was so knocked off my game by this weird experience that I did the very worst thing possible: I tried to impress him.

I started talking louder and getting really animated. I quoted scary research statistics that would freak out any parent. I served up my authenticity for a big ole helping of *You better listen to me or your kids are going to drop out of third grade and take up hitchhiking, drugs, and running with scissors.*

Nothing. Nada.

I didn't get a head nod or a slight grin or anything. I just managed to freak out the other 250 already-pissy parents. It was a disaster. Trying to co-opt or win over someone like that guy is always a mistake, because it means trading in your authenticity for approval. You stop believing in your worthiness and start hustling for it. And, oh man, was I hustling.

The second the talk ended, I grabbed my stuff and ran-walked to my car. As I was pulling out of the parking lot, my face was growing hotter. I felt small and my heart was racing. I tried to push back the instant replay of me acting crazy, but I couldn't stop thinking about it. The shame storm was brewing.

When the shame winds are whipping all around me, it's almost impossible to hold on to any perspective or to recall anything good about myself. I went right into the bad self-talk of *God, I'm such an idiot. Why did I do that?*

The greatest gift of having done this work (the research and the personal work) is that I can recognize shame when it's happening. First, I know my physical symptoms of shame—the dry mouth, time slowing down, tunnel vision, hot face, racing heart. I know that playing the painful slow-motion reel over and over in my head is a warning sign.

I also know that the very best thing to do when this is happening feels totally counterintuitive: Practice courage and reach out! We have to own our story and share it with someone who has earned the right to hear it, someone whom we can count on to respond with compassion. We need courage, compassion, and connection. ASAP.

Shame hates it when we reach out and tell our story. It hates having

words wrapped around it—it can't survive being shared. Shame loves secrecy. The most dangerous thing to do after a shaming experience is hide or bury our story. When we bury our story, the shame metastasizes. I remember saying out loud: "I need to talk to someone RIGHT NOW. Be brave, Brené!"

But here's the tricky part about compassion and connecting: We can't call just anyone. It's not that simple. I have a lot of good friends, but there are only a handful of people whom I can count on to practice compassion when I'm in the dark shame place.

If we share our shame story with the wrong person, they can easily become one more piece of flying debris in an already dangerous storm. We want solid connection in a situation like this—something akin to a sturdy tree firmly planted in the ground. We definitely want to avoid the following:

1. The friend who hears the story and actually feels shame for you. She gasps and confirms how horrified you should be. Then there is awkward silence. Then you have to make *her* feel better.
2. The friend who responds with sympathy (I feel so sorry for you) rather than empathy (I get it, I feel with you, and I've been there). If you want to see a shame cyclone turn deadly, throw one of these at it: "Oh, you poor thing." Or, the incredibly passive-aggressive southern version of sympathy: "Bless your heart."
3. The friend who needs you to be the pillar of worthiness and authenticity. She can't help because she's too disappointed in your imperfections. You've let her down.
4. The friend who is so uncomfortable with vulnerability that she scolds you: "How did you let this happen? What were you thinking?" Or she looks for someone to blame: "Who was that guy? We'll kick his ass."
5. The friend who is all about making it better and, out of her own discomfort, refuses to acknowledge that you can actually be crazy and make terrible choices: "You're exaggerating. It wasn't that bad. You rock. You're perfect. Everyone loves you."

6. The friend who confuses "connection" with the opportunity to one-up you: "That's nothing. Listen to what happened to me one time!"

Of course, we're all capable of being "these friends"—especially if someone tells us a story that gets right up in our own shame grill. We're human, imperfect, and vulnerable. It's hard to practice compassion when we're struggling with our authenticity or when our own worthiness is off balance.

When we're looking for compassion, we need someone who is deeply rooted, able to bend, and, most of all, we need someone who embraces us for our strengths and struggles. We need to honor our struggle by sharing it with someone who has *earned* the right to hear it. When we're looking for compassion, it's about connecting with the *right person* at the *right time* about the *right issue.*

I called my sister. It's only been since the 2007 ~~Breakdown~~ Spiritual Awakening that I've called one of my sisters or my brother for shame-cyclone support. I'm four years older than my brother and eight years older than my sisters (they're twins). Before 2007, I was pretty vested in being the older, perfect (aka uptight, better than, and judgmental) sister.

Ashley was amazing. She listened and responded with total compassion. She had the courage to tap into her own struggles with worthiness so that she could genuinely connect to what I was experiencing. She said wonderfully honest and empathic things like, "Oh, man. That's so hard. I've done that dance. I hate that feeling!" That may not be what someone else would need to hear, but for me it was the best.

Ashley wasn't uprooted and thrown into the storm created by my experience. She also wasn't so rigid that she snapped with judgment and blame. She didn't try to fix me or make me feel better; she just listened and had the courage to share some of her own vulnerabilities with me.

I felt totally exposed and completely loved and accepted at the same time (which is the definition of compassion for me). Trust me when I tell you that shame and fear can't tolerate that kind of powerful connection surging between people. That's exactly why courage, compassion, and connection are the tools we need for the Wholehearted journey. To top

it off, my willingness to let someone I care about see me as imperfect led to a strengthening of our relationship that continues today—that's why I can call courage, compassion, and connection the gifts of imperfection. When we're willing to be imperfect and real, these gifts just keep giving.

Just a quick follow-up to the story: About a week after the wrestling match/parenting talk, I found out that the school was experiencing a hovering problem—parents were in the classrooms all day and interfering with instruction and class management. Without telling me, the principal and PTO president had required the parents to attend my lecture. They told the parents that I was coming to tell them why they needed to stop hovering. In other words, I was set up as a helicopter-parent mercenary. Not good. I may not be a fan of hovering in the classroom, but I'm also not a parenting gun-for-hire. The irony is that I had no idea that was an issue, so I never even mentioned the topic.

With this story in mind, let's take a closer look at each of the concepts of Wholeheartedness and how they work together.

Courage

Courage is a huge theme in my life. It seems that either I'm praying for some, feeling grateful for having found a little bit, appreciating it in other people, or studying it. I don't think that makes me unique. Everyone wants to be brave.

After interviewing people about the truths of their lives—their strengths and struggles—I realized that courage is one of the most important qualities that Wholehearted people have in common. And not just any kind of courage; I found that Wholeheartedness requires *ordinary courage.* Here's what I mean . . .

The root of the word *courage* is *cor*—the Latin word for *heart.* In one of its earliest forms, the word *courage* had a very different definition than it does today. Courage originally meant "To speak one's mind by telling all one's heart." Over time, this definition has changed, and, today, courage is more synonymous with being heroic. Heroics is important and we certainly need heroes, but I think we've lost touch with the idea that speaking honestly and openly about who we are, about what we're

feeling, and about our experiences (good and bad) is the definition of courage. Heroics is often about putting our life on the line. Ordinary courage is about putting our *vulnerability* on the line. In today's world, that's pretty extraordinary.[1]

When we pay attention, we see courage every day. We see it when people reach out for help, like I did with Ashley. I see it in my classroom when a student raises her hand and says, "I'm completely lost. I have no idea what you're talking about." Do you know how incredibly brave it is to say "I don't know" when you're pretty sure everyone around you gets it? Of course, in my twelve-plus years of teaching, I know that if one person can find the courage to say, "You've lost me," there are probably at least ten more students who feel the exact same way. They may not take the risk, but they certainly benefit from that one person's courage.

I saw courage in my daughter, Ellen, when she called me from a slumber party at 10:30 p.m. and said, "Mom, can you come get me?" When I picked her up, she got in the car and said, "I'm sorry. I just wasn't brave enough. I got homesick. It was so hard. Everyone was asleep, and I had to walk to Libby's mom's bedroom and wake her up."

I pulled into our driveway, got out of the car, and walked around to the backseat where Ellen was sitting. I scooted her over and sat next to her. I said, "Ellen, I think asking for what you need is one of the bravest things that you'll ever do. I suffered through a couple of really miserable sleepovers and slumber parties because I was too afraid to ask to go home. I'm proud of you."

The next morning during breakfast, Ellen said, "I thought about what you said. Can I be brave again and ask for something else?" I smiled. "I have another slumber party next weekend. Would you be willing to pick me up at bedtime? I'm just not ready." That's courage. The kind we could all use more of.

I also see courage in myself when I'm willing to risk being vulnerable and disappointed. For many years, if I really wanted something to happen—an invitation to speak at a special conference, a promotion, a radio interview—I pretended that it didn't matter that much. If a friend or colleague would ask, "Are you excited about that television interview?"

I'd shrug it off and say, "I'm not sure. It's not that big of a deal." Of course, in reality, I was praying that it would happen.

It's only been in the last few years that I've learned that playing down the exciting stuff doesn't take the pain away when it doesn't happen. It does, however, minimize the joy when it does happen. It also creates a lot of isolation. Once you've diminished the importance of something, your friends are not likely to call and say, "I'm sorry that didn't work out. I know you were excited about it."

Now when someone asks me about a potential opportunity that I'm excited about, I'm more likely to practice courage and say, "I'm so excited about the possibility. I'm trying to stay realistic, but I really hope it happens." When things haven't panned out, it's been comforting to be able to call a supportive friend and say, "Remember that event I told you about? It's not going to happen, and I'm so bummed."

I recently saw another example of ordinary courage at my son Charlie's preschool. Parents were invited to attend a holiday music presentation put on by the kids. You know the scene—twenty-five children singing with fifty-plus parents, grandparents, and siblings in the audience wielding thirty-nine video cameras. The parents were holding up cameras in the air and randomly snapping pictures while they scrambled to make sure that their kids knew they were there and on time.

In addition to all the commotion in the audience, one three-year-old girl, who was new to the class, cried her way through the entire performance because she couldn't see her mom from the makeshift stage. As it turns out, her mother was stuck in traffic and missed the performance. By the time her mother arrived, I was kneeling by the classroom door telling Charlie good-bye. From my low vantage point, I watched the girl's mother burst through the door and immediately start scanning the room to find her daughter. Just as I was getting ready to stand up and point her toward the back of the classroom where a teacher was holding her daughter, another mother walked by us, looked straight at this stressed mom, shook her head, and rolled her eyes.

I stood up, took a deep breath, and tried to reason with the part of me that wanted to chase after the better-than-you eye-rolling mom and

kick her perfectly punctual ass. Just then two more moms walked up to this now tearful mother and smiled. One of the mothers put her hand on top of the woman's shoulder and said, "We've all been there. I missed the last one. I wasn't just late. I completely forgot." I watched as the woman's face softened, and she wiped away a tear. The second woman looked at her and said, "My son was the only one who wasn't wearing pajamas on PJ Day—he still tells me it was the most rotten day ever. It will be okay. We're all in the same boat."

By the time this mother made it to the back of the room where the teacher was still comforting her daughter, she looked calm. Something that I'm sure came in handy when her daughter lunged for her from about six feet away. The moms who stopped and shared their stories of imperfection and vulnerability were practicing courage. They took the time to stop and say, "Here's my story. You're not alone." They didn't have to stop and share; they could have easily joined the perfect-parent parade and marched right by her.

As these stories illustrate, courage has a ripple effect. Every time we choose courage, we make everyone around us a little better and the world a little braver. And our world could stand to be a little kinder and braver.

Compassion

To prepare for writing my book on shame, I read everything I could find on compassion. I ultimately found a powerful fit between the stories I heard in the interviews and the work of American Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön. In her book *The Places That Scare You,* Chödrön writes, "When we practice generating compassion, we can expect to experience the fear of our pain. Compassion practice is daring. It involves learning to relax and allow ourselves to move gently toward what scares us."[2]

What I love about Chödrön's definition is her honesty about the vulnerability of practicing compassion. If we take a closer look at the origin of the word *compassion,* much like we did with *courage,* we see why compassion is not typically our first response to suffering. The word *compassion* is derived from the Latin words *pati* and *cum,* meaning

"to suffer with." I don't believe that compassion is our default response. I think our first response to pain—ours or someone else's—is to self-protect. We protect ourselves by looking for someone or something to blame. Or sometimes we shield ourselves by turning to judgment or by immediately going into fix-it mode.

Chödrön addresses our tendency to self-protect by teaching that we must be honest and forgiving about when and how we shut down: "In cultivating compassion we draw from the wholeness of our experience—our suffering, our empathy, as well as our cruelty and terror. It has to be this way. Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity." [3]

In my story, Ashley was willing to be in my darkness with me. She wasn't there as my helper or to fix me; she was just with me—as an equal—holding my hand as I waded through my feelings.

Boundaries and Compassion

One of the greatest (and least discussed) barriers to compassion practice is the fear of setting boundaries and holding people accountable. I know it sounds strange, but I believe that understanding the connection between boundaries, accountability, acceptance, and compassion has made me a kinder person. Before the breakdown, I was sweeter—judgmental, resentful, and angry on the inside—but sweeter on the outside. Today, I think I'm genuinely more compassionate, less judgmental and resentful, and way more serious about boundaries. I have no idea what this combination looks like on the outside, but it feels pretty powerful on the inside.

Before this research, I knew a lot about each one of these concepts, but I didn't understand how they fit together. During the interviews, it blew my mind when I realized that many of the truly committed compassion practitioners were also the most boundary-conscious people in the study. Compassionate people are boundaried people. I was stunned.

Here's what I learned: The heart of compassion is really acceptance.

The better we are at accepting ourselves and others, the more compassionate we become. Well, it's difficult to accept people when they are hurting us or taking advantage of us or walking all over us. This research has taught me that if we really want to practice compassion, we have to start by setting boundaries and holding people accountable for their behavior.

We live in a blame culture—we want to know whose fault it is and how they're going to pay. In our personal, social, and political worlds, we do a lot of screaming and finger-pointing, but we rarely hold people accountable. How could we? We're so exhausted from ranting and raving that we don't have the energy to develop meaningful consequences and enforce them. From Washington, DC, and Wall Street to our own schools and homes, I think this rage-blame-too-tired-and-busy-to-follow-through mind-set is why we're so heavy on self-righteous anger and so low on compassion.

Wouldn't it be better if we could be kinder, but firmer? How would our lives be different if there were less anger and more accountability? What would our work and home lives look like if we blamed less but had more respect for boundaries?

I was recently brought in to talk with a group of corporate leaders who were trying to manage a difficult reorganization in their company. One of the project managers told me that, after listening to me talk about the dangers of using shame as a management tool, he was worried that he shamed his team members. He told me that when he gets really frustrated, he singles people out and criticizes their work in team meetings.

He explained, "I'm so frustrated. I have two employees who just don't listen. I explain every single detail of the project, I check to make sure they understand, and they *still* do it their way. I'm out of options. I feel backed into a corner and angry, so I take them down in front of their colleagues."

When I asked him how he was holding these two employees accountable for not following the project protocol, he replied, "What do you mean by accountable?"

I explained, "After you check with them to make sure they understand

your expectations and the objectives, how do you explain the consequences of not following the plan or not meeting the objectives?"

He said, "I don't talk about the consequences. They know they're supposed to follow the protocol."

I gave him an example, "Okay. What would happen if you told them that you were going to write them up or give them an official warning the next time they violated protocol and that if it continues, they're going to lose their jobs?"

He shook his head and said, "Oh, no. That's pretty serious. I'd have to get the human resources people involved. That becomes a big hassle."

Setting boundaries and holding people accountable is a lot more work than shaming and blaming. But it's also much more effective. Shaming and blaming without accountability is toxic to couples, families, organizations, and communities. First, when we shame and blame, it moves the focus from the original behavior in question to our own behavior. By the time this boss is finished shaming and humiliating his employees in front of their colleagues, the only behavior in question is his.

Additionally, if we don't follow through with appropriate consequences, people learn to dismiss our requests—even if they sound like threats or ultimatums. If we ask our kids to keep their clothes off the floor and they know that the only consequence of not doing it is a few minutes of yelling, it's fair for them to believe that it's really not that important to us.

It's hard for us to understand that we can be compassionate and accepting while we hold people accountable for their behaviors. We can, and, in fact, it's the best way to do it. We can confront someone about their behavior, or fire someone, or fail a student, or discipline a child without berating them or putting them down. The key is to separate people from their behaviors—to address what they're doing, not who they are (I'll talk more about this in the next chapter). It's also important that we can lean into the discomfort that comes with straddling compassion and boundaries. We have to stay away from convincing ourselves that we hate someone or that they deserve to feel bad so that we can feel better about holding them accountable. That's where we get into trouble. When

we talk ourselves into disliking someone so we're more comfortable holding them accountable, we're priming ourselves for the shame and blame game.

When we fail to set boundaries and hold people accountable, we feel used and mistreated. This is why we sometimes attack who they are, which is far more hurtful than addressing a behavior or a choice. For our own sake, we need to understand that it's dangerous to our relationships and our well-being to get mired in shame and blame, or to be full of self-righteous anger. It's also impossible to practice compassion from a place of resentment. If we're going to practice acceptance and compassion, we need boundaries and accountability.

Connection

I define *connection* as *the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.*

Ashley and I felt deeply connected after our experience. I know I was seen, heard, and valued. Even though it was scary, I was able to reach out for support and help. And we both felt strengthened and fulfilled. In fact, a couple of weeks later, Ashley said, "I can't tell you how glad I am that you called me that day. It helped me so much to know that I'm not the only one who does stuff like that. I also love knowing that I can help you and that you trust me." Connection begets connection.

As a matter of fact, we are wired for connection. It's in our biology. From the time we are born, we need connection to thrive emotionally, physically, spiritually, and intellectually. A decade ago, the idea that we're "wired for connection" might have been perceived as touchy-feely or New Age. Today, we know that the need for connection is more than a feeling or a hunch. It's hard science. Neuroscience, to be exact.

In his book *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships,* Daniel Goleman explores how the latest findings in biology and neuroscience confirm that we are hardwired for connection and that our relationships shape our biology as well as our experiences. Goleman

writes, "Even our most routine encounters act as regulators in the brain, priming our emotions, some desirable, others not. The more strongly connected we are with someone emotionally, the greater the mutual force."[4] It's amazing—yet perhaps not surprising—that the connectedness we experience in our relationships impacts the way our brain develops and performs.

Our innate need for connection makes the consequences of disconnection that much more real and dangerous. Sometimes we only *think* we're connected. Technology, for instance, has become a kind of imposter for connection, making us believe we're connected when we're really not—at least not in the ways we need to be. In our technology-crazed world, we've confused being communicative with feeling connected. Just because we're plugged in, doesn't mean we feel seen and heard. In fact, hyper-communication can mean we spend more time on Facebook than we do face-to-face with the people we care about. I can't tell you how many times I've walked into a restaurant and seen two parents on their cell phones while their kids are busy texting or playing video games. What's the point of even sitting together?

As we think about the definition of connection and how easy it is to mistake technology for connecting, we also need to consider letting go of the myth of self-sufficiency. One of the greatest barriers to connection is the cultural importance we place on "going it alone." Somehow we've come to equate success with not needing anyone. Many of us are willing to extend a helping hand, but we're very reluctant to reach out for help when we need it ourselves. It's as if we've divided the world into "those who offer help" and "those who need help." The truth is that we are both.

I've learned so much about giving and receiving from the men and women who are engaged in Wholehearted living but nothing more important than this:

> *Until we can receive with an open heart, we are never really giving with an open heart. When we attach judgment to receiving help, we knowingly or unknowingly attach judgment to giving help.*

For years, I placed value on being the helper in my family. I could help with a crisis or lend money or dispense advice. I was always happy to help others, but I would have never called my siblings to ask them for help, especially for support during a shame storm. At the time, I would have vehemently denied attaching judgment to my generous giving. But now, I understand how I derived self-worth from never needing help and always offering it.

During the breakdown, I needed help. I needed support and hand-holding and advice. Thank God! Turning to my younger brother and sisters completely shifted our family dynamics. I gained permission to fall apart and be imperfect, and they could share their strength and incredible wisdom with me. If connection is the energy that surges between people, we have to remember that those surges must travel in both directions.

The Wholehearted journey is not the path of least resistance. It's a path of consciousness and choice. And, to be honest, it's a little counter-culture. The willingness to tell our stories, feel the pain of others, and stay genuinely connected in this disconnected world is not something we can do halfheartedly.

To practice courage, compassion, and connection is to look at life and the people around us, and say, "I'm all in."

about the author

Dr. Brené Brown is a researcher, writer, and professor. She is a member of the research faculty at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, where she has spent the past ten years studying a concept that she calls Wholeheartedness, posing the questions: *How do we engage in our lives from a place of authenticity and worthiness? How do we cultivate the courage, compassion, and connection that we need to embrace our imperfections and to recognize that we are enough—that we are worthy of love, belonging, and joy?*

Brené spent the first seven years of her decade-long research journey studying how the universal experiences of shame and fear affect us and how practicing resilience in our everyday lives can change the way we live, love, parent, and work.

In 2008, she was named Behavioral Health Scholar-in-Residence at the Council on Alcohol and Drugs in Houston. Brené's work has been featured on PBS and the Oprah and Friends Radio Network, and her articles have appeared in *Self* magazine, *Elle* magazine, and many national newspapers. She is also a frequent guest on radio shows across the United States. Most recently, *Houston Women Magazine* named her one of "The 50 Most Influential Women of 2009."

In addition to this book, Brené is the author of *I Thought It Was Just Me (but it isn't): Telling the Truth About Perfectionism, Inadequacy, and Power* (Gotham, 2007) and *Wholehearted: Spiritual Adventures in Falling Apart, Growing Up, and Finding Joy* (Hazelden, forthcoming). She is also the author of *Connections,* a psychoeducational shame-resilience curriculum that is being facilitated across the nation by mental health and addictions professionals.

Brené lives in Houston with her husband, Steve, and their two young children, Ellen and Charlie.

You can learn more about Brené and her research by visiting www.brenebrown.com or by visiting her blog at www.ordinarycourage.com. For a *Gifts of Imperfection* reading guide and a list of book recommendations, please visit her Web site.

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In *The Gifts of Imperfection,* Brené Brown, a leading expert on shame, authenticity, and belonging, shares ten guideposts on the power of Wholehearted living—a way of engaging with the world from a place of worthiness.

Photo by Andrea Scher

Brené Brown, Ph.D., L.M.S.W., is a writer and research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. A dynamic speaker, she frequently presents on the topic of shame resilience at conferences and public events. Visit her popular blog (www.ordinarycourage.com) to learn more.

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