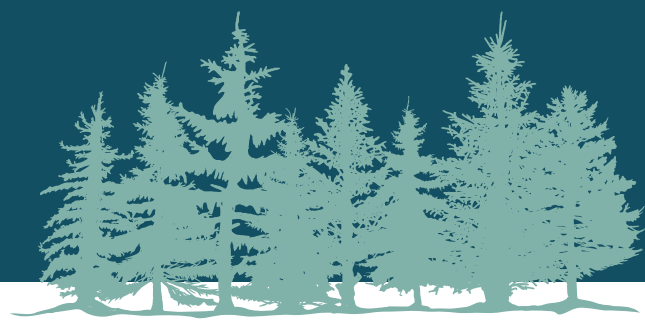




BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



BOOK DIGEST

EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE

Brene Brown starts the book by reflecting on her writing process, and how at first she wrestles with the knowledge that her research data will lead her to challenge long-held beliefs she might not be ready to question. This is why she always grounds herself into the work of brave innovators or disrupters--as she calls them--whose courage inspire her:

*“I do this so that when I need them, when I’m living in my fear,
they come to sit with me and cheer me on.”*

They also serve as a reminder to not go into denial or hiding.

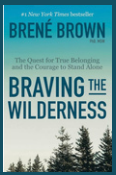
At first, she had tried the opposite tactic, relying heavily on what the naysayers and critics would say. It led her into a researcher’s worst case scenario: comfortable and safe findings that might nudge the current state of affairs, but without ever upsetting anyone because it was neatly folded into everybody’s preexisting beliefs. She remembered that great story tellers do not just describe new universes, they give us the stories that underline it; and great teachers such as bell Hooks embrace and celebrate the discomfort that comes in learning. She keeps a quote from Oprah on the wall of her study: “Do not think that you can be brave with your life and your work and never disappoint anyone. It doesn’t work that way”. And most often and for that book in particular, she relied on all that Maya Angelou allowed us to understand.

Indeed there was one quote from Dr Angelou that she just couldn’t wrap her head around:

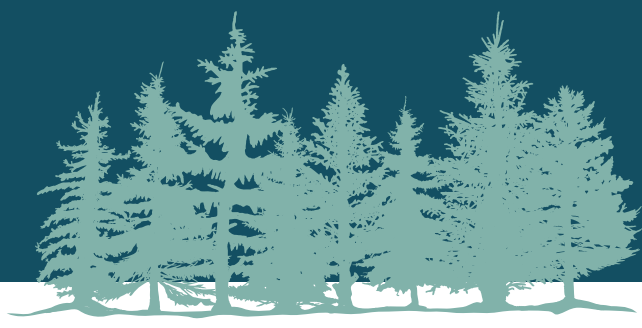
*“You are only free when you realize you belong no place—you belong every place—no place at all.
The price is high. The reward is great.”*

Brene Brown had struggled to belong for as long as she could remember and just couldn’t accept that it was an impossible quest to find a place, a person or a thing to belong to. It did not sound like freedom, it sounded like despair.

She couldn’t believe either that she could disagree with her hero on something so fundamental...



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Growing up in New Orleans in 1969 when the city was suffocated by racism, she found herself ostracized from the birthday parties organized by white families because her middle name was Cassandra and people therefore assumed she was black. She was welcomed by black families but was also the only white person in the room in a lot of cases, a fact she couldn't understand in kindergarten. She then changed schools and was at the time the only non-catholic student among her peers. So the only place she felt some sense of belonging was at home; but that all changed when her parents' marriage began to collapse. To make matters worse, in eighth grade, she failed the test to join her high school drill team and felt like she had disappointed her parents expectations who had both been very popular at her age. Indeed, none of them said anything when she came back with the disappointing news. She shares:

"The silence cut into me like a knife to the heart".

She made it mean that they were ashamed of her. She made it mean that she truly didn't belong anywhere.

"But let me tell you what it truly meant to me.

I don't know if this was true or if it was the story I told myself in that silence.

but that became the day I no longer belonged in my family—the most primal and important of all our social groups.

Had my parents consoled me or told me I was brave for trying—or better yet

and what I really wanted in that moment, had they taken my side and told me how terrible it was

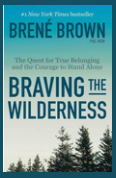
and how I deserved to be picked—this story wouldn't be the one that defined my life and shaped its trajectory.

But it did."

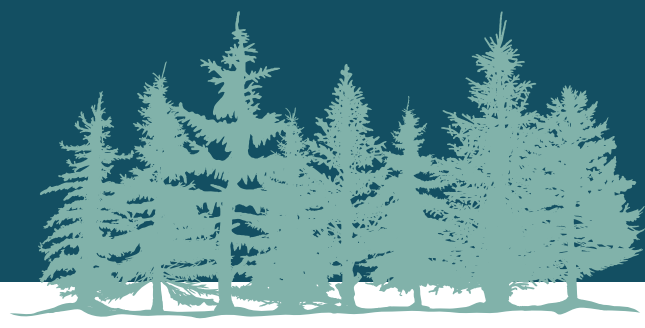
The author then highlights how much grief came up while relating these stories in writing. Grief for her younger self. Grief for her parents who did not have the skills to comfort their daughter or hold her pain and vulnerability.

"These are moments that, when left unspoken and unresolved,

send us into our adult lives searching desperately for belonging and settling for fitting in."



BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



BOOK DIGEST

EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE

Fortunately, her parents did not fall into the trap of thinking that parenting ends when children move out; they got to learn about courage, vulnerability and true belonging together.

She writes:

“Even in the context of suffering—poverty, violence, human rights violations—not belonging in our families is still one of the most dangerous hurts. That’s because it has the power to break our heart, our spirit, and our sense of self-worth.”

When those things break only three options are available to us:

- Living in constant pain and either numbing it or projecting it,
- Denying our pain and therefore passing it on,
- Finding the courage to own our pain and develop empathy and compassion for self and others, using the unique window on the suffering of the world we inherited from that experience.

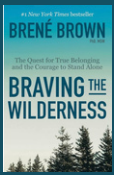
“Of course perspective is a function of experience.”

She reflects on how she had no way of understanding as a young person that she was not the only one whose parents were fighting; it was not a shame she was ever meant to carry. Unfortunately, shame drives us to secrecy. And secrecy then allows shame to thrive.

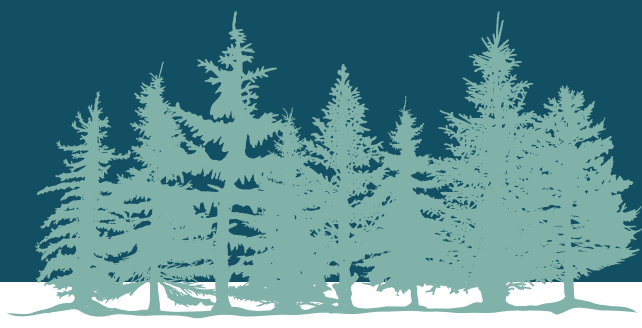
“Sometimes the most dangerous thing for kids is the silence that allows them to construct their own stories—stories that almost always cast them as alone and unworthy of love and belonging.”

She did learn a lot trying to shield her younger siblings from her parents’ anger and developed an acute awareness for the first signs of troubles and heightened abilities to figure out how to make things better. It allowed us to feel like a savior, like a hero when it worked. It drowned her in self-blame when it failed. And that drove her to look for an armor that she found by choosing data and research over her vulnerability. Trained in witnessing patterns in people’s behaviors after observing her parents for so long, she unconsciously made it her way of relating in the world at large, trying to understand people’s behaviors to anticipate their desires, thoughts and actions, she explains:

“I became an expert fitter-in, a chameleon. And a very lonely stranger to myself.”



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“As time passed I grew to know many of the people around me better than they knew themselves, but in that process, I lost me.”

It wasn't long before this inner estrangement led her to self-destructive behaviors and she quotes Ann Lamott who wrote that “By the end I was deteriorating faster than I could lower my standards.”

Thankfully she met her husband in 1987 and they've been together ever since. Having experienced similar family trauma, they could deeply see and understand each other. She invites us to:

“Never underestimate the power of being seen—it's exhausting to keep working against yourself when someone truly sees you and loves you.”

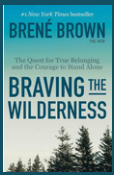
It woke her up and it also woke her grief and a deep sense of longing:

“Grief for the girl who never belonged anywhere and a longing to figure out who I was, what I liked, what I believe in, and where I wanted to go.”

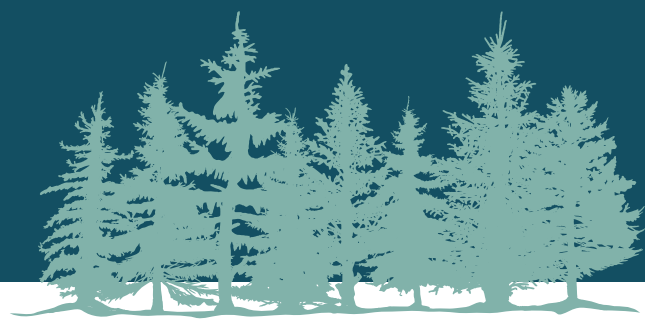
At that point she was no closer to understanding Maya Angelou.

Interestingly, she then tried to find help in diverse addiction groups (AA, codependent meetings...) and could not find one she belonged to either. She was not an alcoholic nor an overeater nor addicted to one particular substance, she was addicted to NUMBING. Including through the act of caretaking. And when everything failed (or when she was ready to quit partying), she fell into another trap: perfectionism. It was a particularly heavy burden to carry because she was interested in subjects such as shame and qualitative research, that were on the outside of her profession. She was facing her fear of not belonging in a whole new way and struggled with constant anxiety and scarcity.

Her life changed for good in 2013 when she was invited to Oprah's super soul Sunday. The night before she realized that when in fear, her default mode was to start floating above her life in order to study it instead of living it. That's not how she wanted to show up with Oprah. That's how she discovered the practice of writing herself permission slips: On a Post-it note she starting writing herself passes to be allowed to have fun, to be excited, to be goofy... anything. And she's been teaching it ever since, to anyone who will listen. It's not enough to free us of course but they're still very powerful because setting the intention is half the work. And, as she realized in hindsight, those permission slips are a way to remember that we actually really do belong to ourselves.



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Right after a wonderful and emotional interview, she also got the chance to meet her mentor from afar, Dr Angelou, who was on the premises too. Here is what Maya told her: “You’re doing important work. Keep doing it. Keep talking about your work. Don’t stop and don’t let anyone get in your way. (...) Do not be moved Brene” The last part being a reference to one of Brene Brown’s favorite poems of Maya: “Like a tree planted by the river, I shall not be moved—Our Grandmothers”.

“Rarely do you have the gift of knowing you’re inside a moment that will be part of what defines you.”

She then proceeded to prove it to herself as a public speaker when she was asked to either change the way she dresses (away from corporate dogma), the way she speaks (which includes cursing) or what she speaks about (including her religion). She realized that there might not be other “professor-researcher-storyteller-leadership-entrepreneur-faithful-cussers”, but she still belonged with her chosen family and to herself.

Her husband told her: “How do you figure that anyone belongs there more than you? You will always belong anywhere you show up as yourself and talk about yourself and your work in a real way.”

That was the moment she deeply understood—finally—what Maya Angelou had meant. This is the moment she freed herself on the disempowering lonely story she had told herself her entire life and realized she could start writing a new one. She could also accept the dichotomy that comes from being alone and still feeling like we belong. The dichotomy of true belonging.

She was still holding the wish to be part of something but something had shifted. Something that drove her to do the research that would then constitute this book...

“I belong to myself. I’m very proud of that. I am very concerned about how I look at Maya.

I like Maya very much. I like the humor and courage very much.

And when I find myself acting in a way that isn’t... that doesn’t please me—then I have to deal with that.”

Maya Angelou