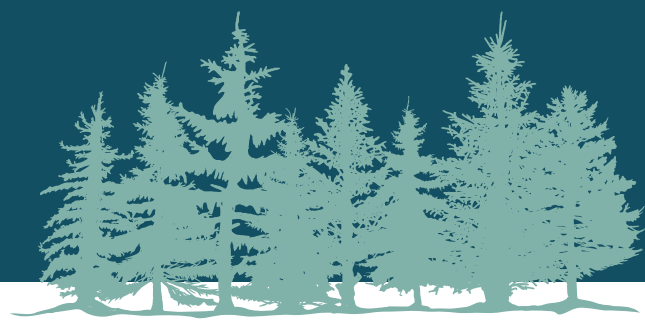


BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



BOOK DIGEST

THE QUEST FOR TRUE BELONGING

*“We want to be a part of something.. but we need it to be real
—not conditional or fake or constantly up for negotiation.”*

We don't want belonging for the sake of belonging, we want true belonging. In her book, *The Gifts of Imperfections*, Brene Brown defined it as:

“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 only 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.”

She explains that the definition still stands but is incomplete. It didn't include that we also need the courage to stand alone, totally alone, in order to belong to ourselves.

*“Belonging to ourselves means being called to stand alone
—to brave the wilderness of uncertainty, vulnerability, and criticism.”*

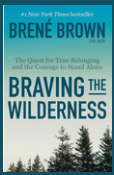
It is tough when the world can feel like what she calls a “political and ideological combat zone”. We tend to forget that we're all connected by something far greater than the group we identify with, we are connected by love and the human spirit.

DEFINING TRUE BELONGING

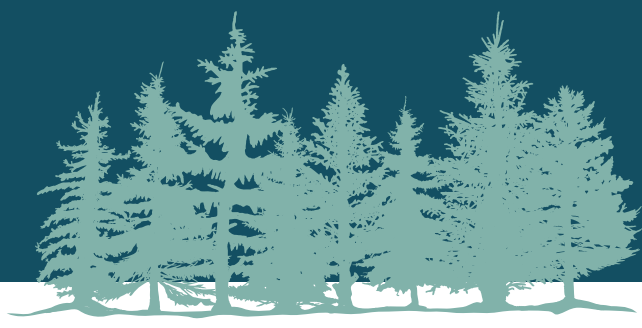
She reminds us that she's a grounded theory researcher. Her goal is therefore to develop theories based on people's lived experiences. She looks for what they call the “main concern” of the study participants, in our case “What are people trying to achieve? What are they worried about?” as it relates to belonging.

The answer she found was:

“They want to be a part of something—to experience real connection with others—but not at the cost of their authenticity, freedom, or power.”



BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



BOOK DIGEST

THE QUEST FOR TRUE BELONGING

People feel spiritually disconnected as defined by a diminished perceived sense of shared humanity. We tend to share fear and disdain nowadays instead of trust, respect, or love.

“Connection to a larger humanity gives people more freedom to express their individuality without fear of jeopardizing belonging”

Without this connection, there is pressure to fit in or conform and we face the heavy dilemma of choosing between being loyal to a group or to ourselves.

Here’s the definition for spirituality she shared in *The Gifts of Imperfections*:

“Spirituality is 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.”

Her data showed that a large part of the struggle for people seeking belonging is indeed spiritual (in a non religious based way) and not knowing how to stay connected to what binds us as humans.

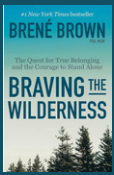
Brene Brown will first show us why we broke our “inextricable connection to each other” in the next chapter (same digest though!) and then how to fix it in the rest of the book.

She identified four elements of true belonging:

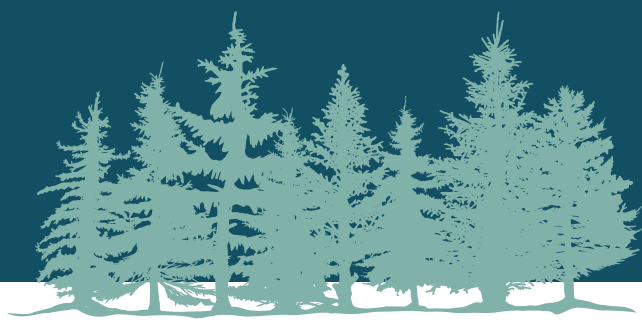
- 1. People are hard to hate close up. Move in.**
- 2. Speak truth to bullshit. Be civil.**
- 3. Hold hands. With strangers.**
- 4. Strong back. Soft front. Wild heart.**

Of note, they’re all situated in the reality of our world. Indeed, she writes:

“(…) you can’t develop a theory on true belonging without addressing how our increasingly polarized world shapes our lives and our experiences of connection and true belonging.”



BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



BOOK DIGEST

THE QUEST FOR TRUE BELONGING

THE WILDERNESS

“We must sometimes stand alone in our decisions and beliefs despite our fear of criticism and rejection.”

For Brene Brown, the wilderness is the image reflecting best that fact, because:

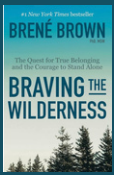
“What all wilderness metaphors have in common are the notions of solitude, vulnerability, and an emotional spiritual or physical quest.”

A sense of belonging to ourselves while staying in the world is something we all crave and fear. It comes from living from our hearts and not our hurts, as she puts it. There's no pre-designed road map, we have to create our own path into the wild. It requires our willingness to deeply listen, to hold uncomfortable conversations, to allow for joy and for pain and trade defensiveness for curiosity, while intentionally moving towards people who are different from us and seeking moments of togetherness. It's a very active process, a vulnerable and brave one.

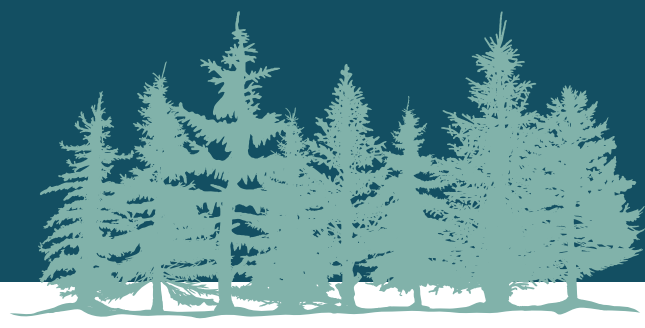
BRAVING SKILLS

Those are skills she shared in *Rising Strong* under the acronym BRAVING, skills we will need to wander into the wild. They allow us to trust ourselves and to trust others. She shares her favorite definitions of trust “Choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person's actions.” and distrust “what is important to me is not safe with that person in this situation (or any situation)”, from Charles Feltman.

- Boundaries (there is respect and clarity on both ends on what they are)
- Reliability
- Accountability
- Vault (the info we share are safe with the other person and their info is safe with us)
- Integrity (which implies choosing courage over comfort, always)
- Nonjudgement
- Generosity (especially while interpreting each other's intentions, actions and words)



BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



BOOK DIGEST

THE QUEST FOR TRUE BELONGING

“If you can see your path laid out in front of you step by step,
you know it’s not your path.

Your own path you make with every step you take.
That’s why it’s your path

—Joseph Campbell”

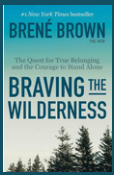
And here will be our definition of true belonging for the rest of the book:

“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.”

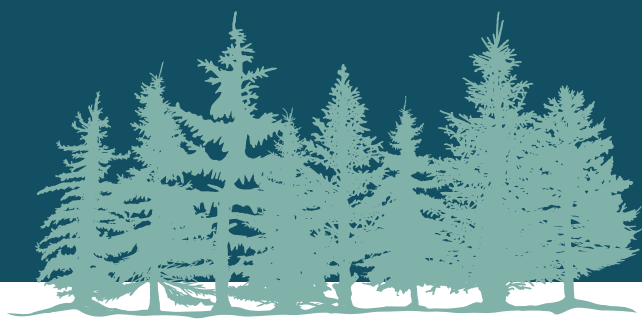
One final word before the next chapter, Brene Brown wants us to understand the importance of holding the tensions that come from paradoxes and to remember the origins of the word: In greek it meant “joining of two words” and in latin “seemingly absurd but really true.” To belong we must both brave the wilderness alone while finding the sacredness in being part of something.

She adds that:

“Carl Jung argues that a paradox is one of our most valued spiritual possessions and a great witness to the truth.”



BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



BOOK DIGEST

HIGH LONESOME: A SPIRITUAL CRISIS

High lonesome is a sound introduced into bluegrass music by Bill Monroe. It was inspired by the sound that made World War 1 Veterans while returning home, a sound she describes as “in between a spirited yippee and a painful wail.” A sound rooted in misery and redemption, of grief and freedom. Brene Brown refers to this music as “arresting” and full of pain.

“Art has the power to render sorrow beautiful, make loneliness a shared experience,
and transform despair into hope.

(...)

Music, like all art, gives pain and our most wrenching emotions voice, language, and form,
so it can be recognized and shared.

The magic of the high lonesome sound is the magic of all art:
the ability to both capture our pain and deliver us from it at the same time.”

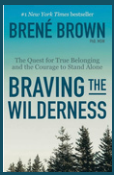
Art allows us to know we’re not alone. She writes:

“The world feels high lonesome and heartbroken to me right now. We’ve sorted ourselves into fractions based on our politics and ideology. We’ve turned away from one another and toward blame and rage. We’re lonely and untethered. And scared. So damn scared.”

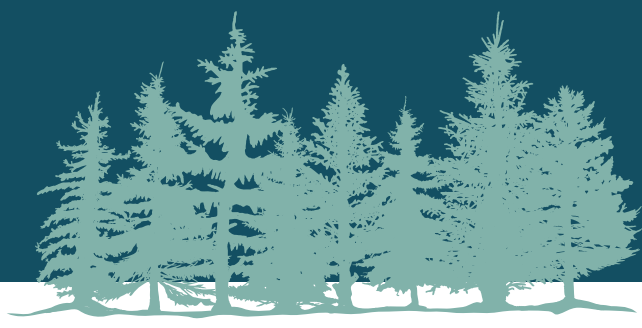
Unfortunately, instead of coming together to share our songs and stories, we scream at each other while distancing ourselves from each other more and more. We stay quiet apart from when in a comfortable echo chamber. Brene Brown concludes that we are in a collective spiritual crisis.

“For the moment, most of us are either making the choice to protect ourselves from conflict, discomfort, and vulnerability by staying quiet, or picking sides and in the process slowly and paradoxically adapting the behavior of the people we’re fighting.”

In both cases we end up feeling lonely and afraid.



BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



BOOK DIGEST

HIGH LONESOME: A SPIRITUAL CRISIS

SORTING OURSELVES OUT

Brene Brown describes how we've sorted ourselves into like-minded groups as it relates to geography, politics and even spirituality. We tend to live inside a giant feedback loop where we only receive facts that reinforce our current beliefs, leading us to ignore evidence that other opinions could also be valid. This prompts us to make assumptions about those who don't share our beliefs which reinforces disconnection even more. And of course those on the opposite side are doing exactly the same thing about us. We all scan each other to know what to say, do and who to trust or stay away from. We forgot that things cannot be that simple because we, human beings, are not that simple.

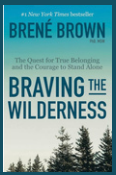
"The sorting we do to ourselves and to one another is, at best, unintentional and reflexive. At worst, it is stereotyping and dehumanizes."

She reminds us that we all crave and celebrate ready-made filing systems... until we are the ones being filed away.

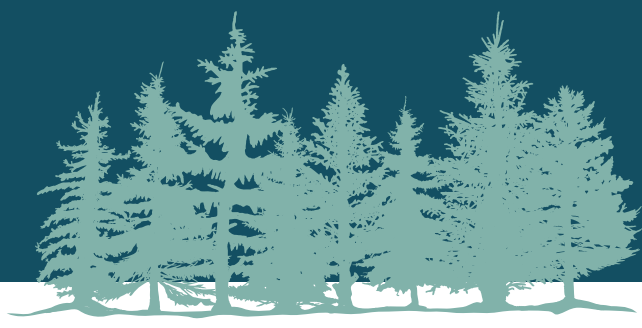
This sorting out habits can drive havoc into family systems. She reflects on how where she teaches—at the University of Houston, one of the most racially and ethnically diverse in the country—up to 85% of her students report mild to intense embarrassment towards the political beliefs of their elders. However none of them would want to sever their ties with them. But after the 2016 election, things were not as clear over the country where family feuds over political allegiances were expected and normalized.

And contrary to what could be assumed with people only communicating with those who think and act like them, this excessive sorting out does not increase our sense of social connection. Indeed, loneliness rates are at an all time high. They have more than double since 1980 when there were estimated at 20%.

"Clearly, selecting like-minded friends and neighbors and separating ourselves as much as possible from people whom we think of as different from us has not delivered that deep sense of belonging that we are hardwired to crave."



BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



BOOK DIGEST

HIGH LONESOME: A SPIRITUAL CRISIS

ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

She writes:

“At the heart of loneliness is the absence of meaningful social interaction—an intimate relationship, friendships, family gathering, or even community or work group connections.”

She also reminds us that loneliness and being alone are two very different things. As a lot of introverts, she feels the loneliest when she’s with other people. In her family they coined the expression having “the lonely feeling” when in a place or with people that make them feel disconnected. We can feel lonelier than when we’re alone if we’re either surrounded by people we do not feel close to or if we cannot imagine those we care about in the place we are at that moment.

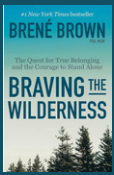
We’re wired for interdependence as a social species. She quotes the work of Cacioppo who showed that our need for connection is rooted in our genetic, neural and hormonal systems. Spiritually and biologically, we need it. That’s why it feels so painfully debilitating when we feel lonely. That’s why there is even shame associated with it. Loneliness is to be seen as hunger, it’s a signal that we need to connect the way hunger reminds us to eat. Loneliness is not only a driver of sadness, it impacts our entire health. It pushes us in self-preservation mode and it can become a vicious cycle because our brain’s attempts at self-protection can override any chance we have at connecting with others. Our brains create more and more disempowering stories around our fears and insecurities. She adds:

“That means less empathy, more defensiveness, more numbing and less sleeping.”

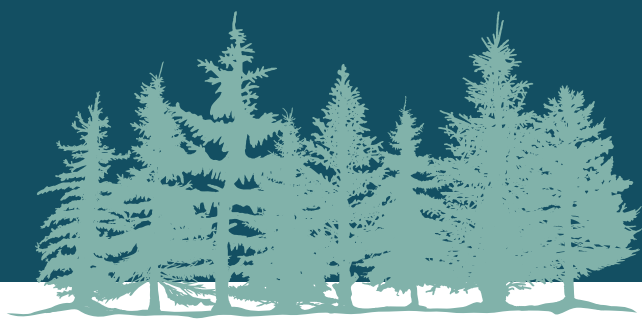
“Unchecked loneliness fuels continued loneliness by keeping us afraid to reach out.”

Our role is to learn how to identify loneliness within ourselves and to muster the courage to see it as a warning sign that we need to find connection. Which does not mean that we must focus on the quantity but on the quality of those we surround ourselves with.

As a final reminder, study shows that pollution increases our odds of dying by 5%, excessive drinking by 30%... and loneliness by 45%.



BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



BOOK DIGEST

HIGH LONESOME: A SPIRITUAL CRISIS

FEAR IS HOW WE GOT HERE

"(...) if I had to identify one core variable that drives and magnifies our compulsion to sort out ourselves into factions, while at the same time cutting ourselves off from real connection with other people, my answer would be fear. Fear of vulnerability. Fear of getting hurt. Fear of the pain of disconnection. Fear of criticism and failure. Fear of conflict. Fear of not measuring up. Fear."

Brene Brown reflects on how 9/11 changed us. How who we should fear and blame became the center of our national conversation. She describes terrorism as “time-released fear”, a tool to make sure that fear becomes a way of life for people, which in turn fuel anger and blame so much that people start turning on each other. Scarcity then takes over our mindsets and we become fractured and isolated. At first, trauma unites us but it doesn’t last if there’s no room to process our grief and fear, fully and openly. Vulnerability and love leads us to justice and accountability, but if hatred and fear are driving connection, emotional diversion slowly takes over communities and homes alike.

"What feels like a rallying movement is really a cover for fear, which can then start spreading over the landscape and seeping into the fault lines of our country. As fear hardens, it expands and becomes less of a protective barrier and more of a solidifying division. It forces its way down in the gaps and tears apart our social foundation, already weakened with those delicate cracks."

Tough and uncomfortable conversations need to happen—around race, gender and class especially. And that discomfort needs to be felt.

"Our lack of tolerance for vulnerable, tough conversations is driving our self-sorting and disconnection."

She writes:

"I do believe, however, that most of us can build connection across difference and fight for our beliefs if we're willing to listen and lean in to vulnerability."

Our ideological bunkers might feel protective but they can't protect us from the worst heartbreaks of all: disconnection and loneliness. If anything, they enable them. She reminds us that only by finding a way to FEEL hurt instead of spreading the hurt, can we change.

*"True belonging has no bunkers.
We have to step out from behind the barricades of self-preservation and brave the wild."*