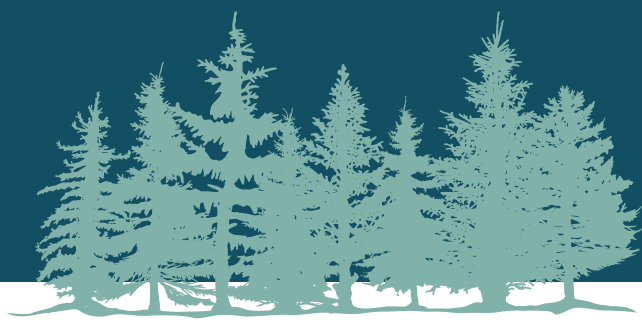


# BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



## BOOK DIGEST

### **SPEAK TRUTH TO BULLSHIT. BE CIVIL.**

*“Someone who lies and someone who tells the truth are playing on opposite sides, so to speak, in the same game.*

*Each responds to the facts as he understands them, although the response of the one is guided by the authority of the truth, while the response of the other defies that authority and refuses to meet its demands.*

*The bullshitter ignores these demands altogether.*

*He does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and opposes himself to it.*

*He pays no attention to it at all.*

*By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are.—Harry Frankfurt”*

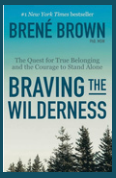
It’s really hard to combine our choice to speak truth to bullshit AND our choice to stay civil. And yet it’s our only way into true belonging, once again.

### **BULLSHIT**

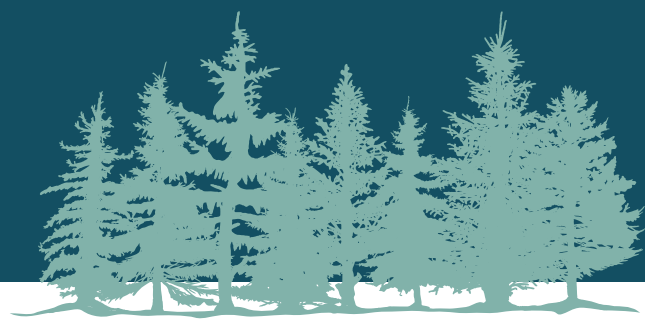
Harry Frankfurt, a Princeton professor of philosophy and author of *On Bullshit*, allowed Brene Brown to realize that lying is a defiance of the truth, while bullshitting is a dismissal of it. She also realized through her research that we feel most compelled to bullshitting when we follow the compulsion to speak about something we don’t understand—especially as it relates to world events that we just don’t know enough about to form an informed opinion on. If we don’t know where we stand, we default to the stance taken by someone from “our side” or “our group”. She notes that:

*“In a fitting-in culture—at home, at work, or in our larger community—curiosity is seen as weakness and asking questions equates to antagonism rather than being valued as learning.”*

Frankfurt also believes that those bullshitting habits are grounded in skepticism and denial towards the idea that there is even a truth that can be uncovered, that any actual truth exists. That’s the surest way to make one give up on the idea of objective inquiry. And it empowers the “you’re either with or against us” argument. It’s not about retrieving the truth anymore, it’s about protecting our shared beliefs.



# BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



## BOOK DIGEST

### **SPEAK TRUTH TO BULLSHIT. BE CIVIL.**

#### **IF YOU'RE NOT WITH ME, THEN YOU'RE MY ENEMY**

Brene Brown reminds us of the emotional power of that “you’re either with or against us” statement and how it has been used by politicians in real life and heroes or villains in movies alike. From Mussolini to Dark Vader, and including both Georges Bush and Hillary Clinton after 9/11.

In those moments of intense emotional stress, she acknowledges that:

*“Our intentions may not be to manipulate, but to force the point that we’re in a situation where neutrality is dangerous.”*

She also quotes Elie Wiesel who wrote that: “We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.” but then adds:

*“The problem is that the emotional plea is often not based in facts, and preys on our fears of not belonging or being seen as wrong or part of the problem. We need to question HOW the sides are defined.”*

And here is the most important question to anchor in: are there really only two options? Is the debate framed accurately or is it bullshit? In philosophy, it is considered that this either with us or against us framework is a false dichotomy. It’s meant to force people to take sides. She highlights that this emotion-driven approach can quickly become a tool of weaponized belonging.

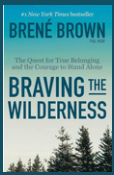
*“The ability to think past either/or situations is the foundation of critical thinking, but still, it requires courage.”*

Of course it feels easier to take sides. It also feels safer! We don’t risk being seen as the bad guy before we “refused” to stay with the good ones. But we must realize that this either/or mentality is meant to silence dissent and to prevent any debate, discussion or room for questions—which means that it cuts us from the very tool we need for effective problem solving.

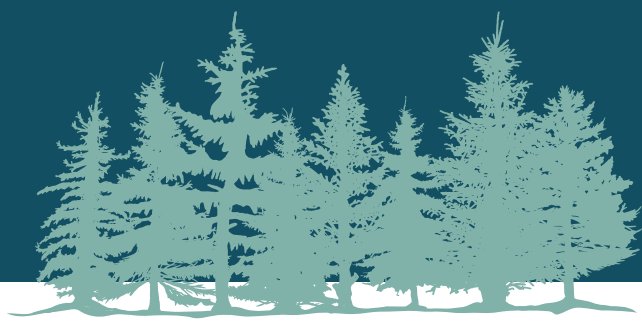
This silence has a huge personal and collective cost. We pay with our integrity and as a community, we pay with the consequences of divisiveness and disempowerment.

*“Answers that have the force of emotion behind them but are not based in fact rarely provide strategic and effective solutions to nuanced problems.”*

Of note, fear, lack of knowledge and acute emotions drive bullshitting—not intention.



# BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



## BOOK DIGEST

### SPEAK TRUTH TO BULLSHIT. BE CIVIL.

#### CIVILITY

Our work now is mostly to rehumanize those who've been targeted by dehumanizing systems and tactics. We must stay aware of how political and ideological debates have set us up for failures and how tricky it is to stay grounded in our humanity in the era of social media where anonymity and lack of accountability prevail.

Interestingly, it's actually easier to stay civil in front of a lie than in front of bullshit. Brene Brown explains that it's hard not to imitate the behavior of the bullshitter who implies that truth doesn't matter, only what they think does. She reminds us of the Brandolini's law: "the amount of energy needed to refute bullshit is an order of magnitude bigger than to produce it."

In the face of bullshit, we can rely on two approaches to help us: generosity and civility.

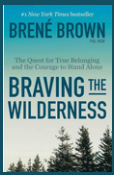
Why generosity? Because the person might not be intentionally bullshitting us. They may feel shame about not knowing the answer or the facts well enough to form an opinion. Or they can be so caught in their own pain and fear that they lose sight of objectivity in their need to be validated. And finally, we've all at least once believed we were responding from facts, without realizing that there is in fact no proof backing up what we misguidedly believed.

"Generosity, empathy, and curiosity (e.g., Where did you read this or hear this?) can go a long way in our efforts to question what we're hearing and introduce fact."

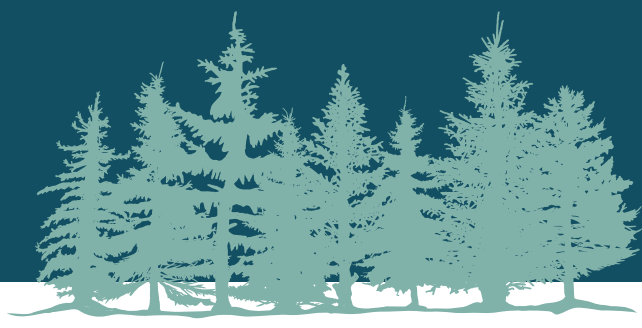
And how to ground in civility?

This quote from Cassandra Dahnke and Tomas Spath might help:

"Civility is claiming and caring from one's identity, needs and beliefs without degrading someone else's in the process... [Civility] is about disagreeing without disrespect, seeking common ground as a starting point for dialogue about differences, listening past one's preconceptions, and teaching others to do the same."



# BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



## BOOK DIGEST

### **SPEAK TRUTH TO BULLSHIT. BE CIVIL.**

She goes on by sharing two powerful stories about her own journey towards speaking truth to bullshit, civilly.

#### STORY ONE

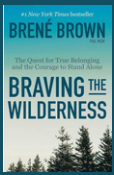
The first one is about an encounter she had with a woman who could not accept that Brene Brown, who came from a family where hunting was a very important tradition, could be a gun owner and not believe in the NRA lobbying. She chose to not shy away from the conversation and to try to explain that she did support responsible gun ownership but that she did not however support the NRA in any way. For the other woman, you could either support all guns or none—and there was no place for nuance or explanation. The conversation was uncomfortable, and made everyone uncomfortable beyond the two parties involved. It would have been easier to stay quiet. Speaking her truth was the wilderness. And she's glad she did it because she honored her integrity. She did not betray herself.

*“To know you can navigate the wilderness on your own—to know that you can stay true to your beliefs, trust yourself, and survive it—that is true belonging.”*

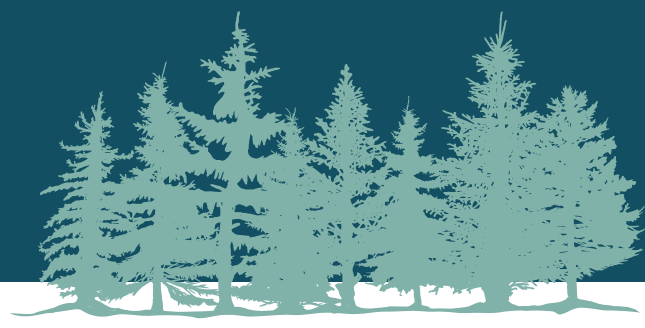
#### STORY TWO

In the second story she goes back to a meeting that took place because Brene Brown was sinking underneath all the added responsibilities that had accumulated on her shoulders when her work started to be recognized. Someone suggested creating a position close to a “chief of staff” to support Brene and her organization, and better even, someone she trusted volunteered! She was so relieved she wanted to start working on the job description right away. She fell into the either/or trap and started saying that if they did not decide everything about everything just then, it would be like pretending that things can be better without doing anything to make sure they could. She also reflects on how intimidating it can be for people to interrupt her when she's that inspired and passionate or something.

But someone from her team, that same person who had volunteered for the job, Suzanne, had the courage to speak up and remind everyone that it has been stated that no decisions regarding hiring or reassigning one's position would be decided in a large group meeting. She reminded them that they had committed to making those decisions slowly and with a smaller team. It felt like an icy downpour had fallen on Brene Brown's parade and she was crushed.



# BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



## BOOK DIGEST

### **SPEAK TRUTH TO BULLSHIT. BE CIVIL.**

She hid to the bathroom to cry her exhaustion and frustration out, which allowed her to remember that:

*“Desperate times call for desperate measures, and desperate measures are often fertilized in bullshit.”*

It was the wilderness for Suzanne to speak up and a deeply scary and vulnerable moment. It paid off though: Brene Brown realized that day that she could trust Suzanne with anything and everything.

She shares:

*“This experience is also when our team started to understand how important it is to build a culture that supports true belonging.”*

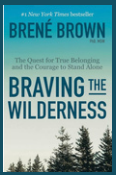
*“If leaders really want people to show up, speak out, take chances, and innovate, we have to create cultures where people are safe—where their belonging is not threatened by speaking out and they are supported when they make the decision to brave the wilderness, stand alone, and speak truth to bullshit.”*

She warns us about how easy it is to underestimate the importance of civility at work, and how it hurts even those who are the targets of the uncivil behaviors.

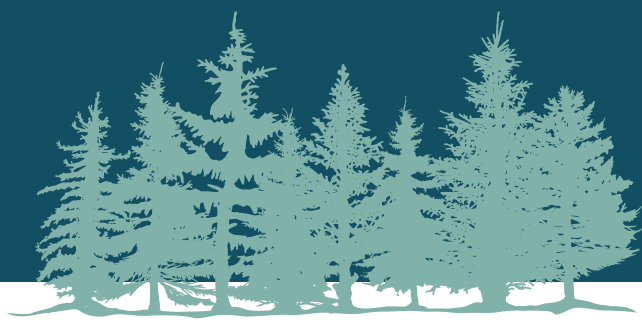
And she closes that story with a quote from NFL coach Pete Carroll of the Seattle Seahawks:

*“There’s no question that it’s easier to manage a “fitting-in” culture. You set standards and rules. You lead by “put up or shut up”. But you miss real opportunities—especially helping your team members find their purpose. (...) Leading for true belonging is about creating a culture that celebrates uniqueness. (...) A strong leader pulls players toward a deep belief in themselves.”*





# BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



## BOOK DIGEST

### **SPEAK TRUTH TO BULLSHIT. BE CIVIL.**

#### WORDS AS WEAPONS

The author highlights that sometimes civility is best shown through generosity and respect. She writes about a workshop she did with psychologist Harriet Lerner about apologizing and shares:

*“As Harriet invited me to practice listening and apologizing without disclaimers and exceptions, I learned that when armored up, I’d rather be right than connected and invested in my relationship.”*

And the more unsafe or under attack we feel, the more our need to be right can overpower us.

One thing we need to always stay very mindful of is the language we choose to use. Brene Brown reminds us that:

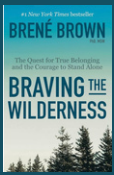
*“Given what we know about dehumanizing, I believe inclusive language is critically important, absolutely worth the effort, and a function of civility.”*

None of us ever wants to be reduced. And she chooses an example that might hit home for a lot of us: no patient would want to hear their physician refer to them as their disease (“I’ve got my anxiety disorder coming at 2pm”).

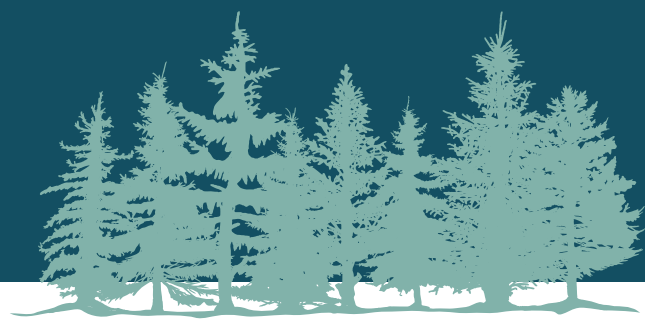
And we also must stay aware that there is a shadow side to inclusive language: when it is used a tool or weapon to shame and belittle others.

*“Even tools of civility can become weaponized if the intention is there.”*

She shares two examples to illustrate this, one shared by a research participant and one personal account. She was once accused of anti-semitism for using the word gyped without realizing what it actually meant or referred to. She was 100% grateful to have learned about it. AND she wished she could have felt grateful and not ashamed during the conversation, where she learned about her misstep. Indeed the woman in the audience did not remember to give Brene Brown the benefit of the doubt and confronted her in a very aggressive manner after her talk. In the same way, a young man misguidedly shamed his father who was using the word “oriental” to speak about his neighbors he considered as friends. The son realized too late that his Dad just didn’t realize that what he was saying could be hurtful and how much his father actually cared about his new found friends.



# BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



## BOOK DIGEST

### **SPEAK TRUTH TO BULLSHIT. BE CIVIL.**

And so Brene Brown acknowledges that it can be frustrating to have to teach others about the impact of their words, but that it's paramount to remember that most of us do want to know when our choice of words is unfortunate and meant no harm or disrespect. We should all be accountable for the words we use and we all can benefit from the generous assumption that we're trying our best and deserve a chance to be corrected kindly. Words matter deeply. Being kind and thoughtful about how we talk to others works both ways.

### **BRAVING**

Going back to that acronym can help us know what puts us into our own BS or get the way of our ability to remain civil. It all starts with deeply knowing ourselves.

We must understand our **B**oundaries in conversations, commit to remain **R**eliable, be clear on how we hold others and ourselves **A**ccountable, respect our **V**ault of confidentiality, ground in our **I**ntegrity, and heavily rely on **N**on judgment and **G**enerosity.

*"We are complex beings who wake up every day and fight against being labeled and diminished with stereotypes and characterizations that don't reflect our fullness.*

*Yet, when we don't risk standing on our own and speaking out,  
when the options laid before us force us into the very categories we resist,  
we perpetuate our own disconnection and loneliness.*

*When we are willing to risk venturing into the wilderness, and even becoming our own wilderness,  
we feel the deepest connection to our true self and to what matters the most."*