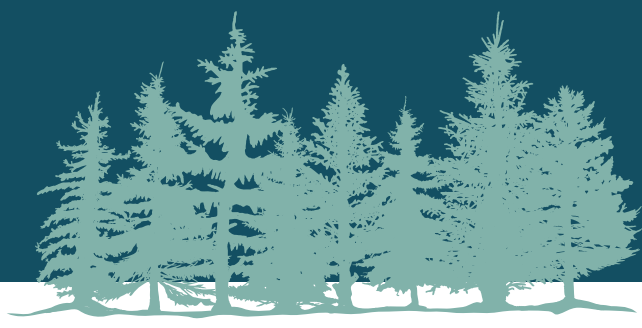




BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



BOOK DIGEST

STRONG BACK. SOFT FRONT. WILD HEART.

“All too often our so-called strength come from fear, not love; instead a having a strong back, many of us have a defended front shielding a weak spine. In other words, we walk around brittle and defensive, trying to conceal our lack of confidence. If we strengthen our backs, metaphorically speaking, and develop a spine that’s flexible but sturdy, then we can risk having a front that’s soft and open...

How can we give and accept care with strong-back, soft-front compassion, moving past fear into a place of genuine tenderness?
I believe it comes about when we can be truly transparent, seeing the world clearly
—and letting the world see into us.

Roshi Joan Halifax”

Brene Brown met Dr Joan Halifax, a Buddhist teacher, anthropologist, Zen priest and activist at the Omega institute in New York, where they were giving a talk together. That’s where she heard her talk about the Buddhist approach “strong back, soft front” for the first time. She also recalls how compelled she felt to join the pre conference meet-and-greet, despite how tired she felt, and how Joan Halifax reminded her that when one has a lot exhaling to do—which would be the case for both of them when teaching—one must inhale first.

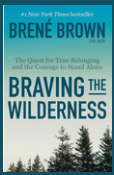
And those are also the pillars of true belonging: we need courage AND we need vulnerability. We need to be able to stand alone in the wilderness and say what we believe, despite fear and criticism. By doing so, we develop what she calls a *wild heart*, the third component of true belonging. Indeed, once we’ve proven to ourselves that we have the courage to make it on our own, we cannot lose that awareness when facing our next decisions. We know that the choice is either to betray ourselves or to *fit in*. The bar is really high after that and she writes:

“A wild heart fights fitting in and grieves betrayal.”

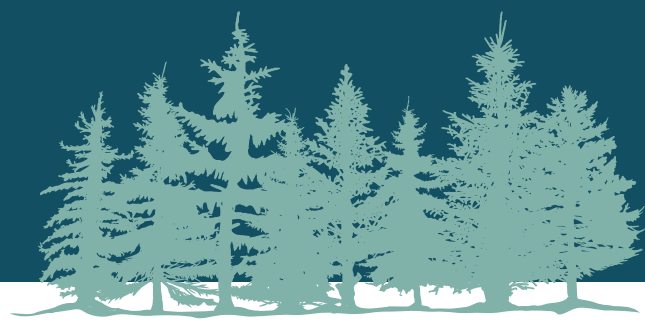
STRONG BACK

Depending on how advanced we are on our path to belonging, our role will be to either strengthen our back as we go, or to develop a strong back in the first place. She reminds us that:

“Perfecting, pleasing, proving and pretending get in the way of the strong back.”



BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



BOOK DIGEST

STRONG BACK. SOFT FRONT. WILD HEART.

She gives us a map using her BRAVING acronym once more.

Boundaries: The task? Learning to set them, hold them and respect them. The challenge? Letting go of being liked.

Reliability: The task? Saying what we mean and meaning what we say. The challenge? Stop over-committing and over-promising.

Accountability: The task? To take responsibility (which includes meaningful apologies). The challenge? Letting go of blame while staying out of shame.

Vault: The task? Knowing what is ours to share (or not). The challenge? Quitting common enemy intimacy, gossiping and oversharing tendencies.

Integrity: The task? Practicing our values. The challenge? Choosing courage, not comfort.

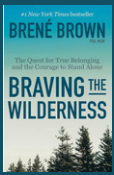
Nonjudgement: The task? Giving AND receiving help. The challenge? Finding our sense of identity and self-worth outside of the helper or fixer role.

Generosity: The task? Setting boundaries compatible with our most generous assumptions about where others are coming from. The challenge? Honesty and clarity about what we're okay with and not.

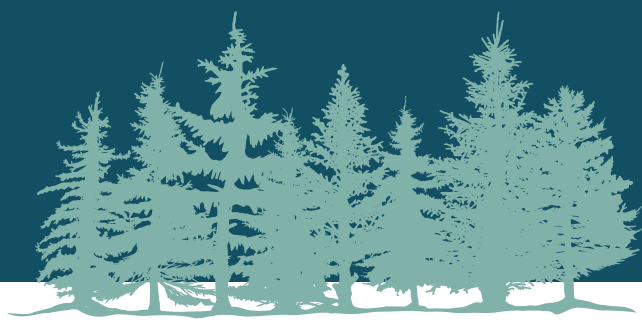
“Our work is to get to the place where we like ourselves and are concerned when we judge ourselves too harshly or allow others to silence us. The wilderness demands this level of self-love and self-respect.”

She shares the lived experience that the well-known religious leader, Jen Hatmaker, lived through when she chose to publicly support LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion in front of her community. Brene Brown reflects on how her friend traveled into a brutal wilderness with strength, grief and grace and she shares a letter that Jen wrote. Here are some powerful parts of it:

“(…) Because belonging is so primal, so necessary, the threat of losing your tribe or going alone feels so terrifying as to keep most of us distanced from the wilderness our whole lives. Human approval is one of our most treasured idols, and the offering we must lay at its hungry feet is keeping others comfortable. (...) The wilderness sometimes feels very lonely and punishing, which is a powerful disincentive. (...) But put one foot in front of the other enough times, stay the course long enough to actually tunnel into the wilderness, and you’ll be shocked how many people already live out there—thriving, dancing, creating, celebrating, belonging. (...) The wilderness is where all the creatives and prophets and system-buckers and risk-takers have always lived, and it is stunningly vibrant. The walk out there is hard, but the authenticity out there is life (...)”



BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



BOOK DIGEST

STRONG BACK. SOFT FRONT. WILD HEART.

A SOFT FRONT

That's the second part of the equation! And it's no easy task when we're hurting...

Brene Brown shares that when she feels attacked:

“My visceral response is “strong back, armored front. But that’s no way to live. Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, joy, trust, intimacy, courage—everything that brings meaning to our life.”

We learn to armor up as children because we have no other way to protect ourselves; but as adults we have a choice. And more importantly that armor stands between us and our gifts. She writes:

“Just like we can strengthen our courage muscle for a stronger back by examining our need to be perfect and please others at the expense of our own life, we can exercise the vulnerability muscle that allows us to soften and stay open rather than attack and defend.”

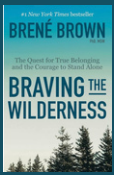
There are valid reasons that drove us to wear an armored front; we must become aware of them to let them go. First, we might be uncomfortable with our emotions and confuse vulnerability and weakness. Second, we might have traumatic memories during which our vulnerability was actually dangerous. If our soft front has once been a liability, it can be very hard to feel safe enough to be vulnerable again. Vulnerability includes risk, emotional exposure and uncertainty; there's no way around that truth.

“But vulnerability is not weakness; it’s our most accurate measure of courage.”

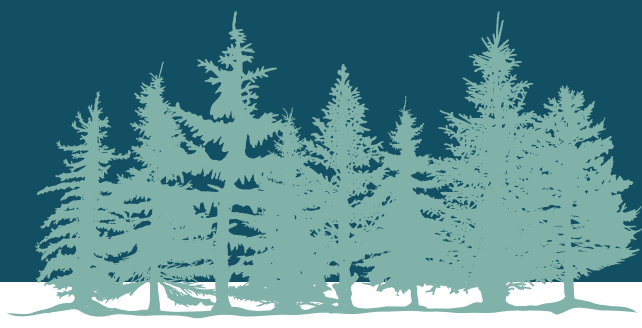
To soften our front, we need to ask ourselves two very important questions:

- *Am I willing to show up and be seen when I can't control the outcome?*
- *Am I willing to create courageous spaces so I can fully be seen?*

“A soft and open front is not being weak; it's being brave. it's being the wilderness.”



BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



BOOK DIGEST

STRONG BACK. SOFT FRONT. WILD HEART.

WILD HEART

A wild heart is not complacent, a wild heart holds the paradox that life is always a yes/and. Life is always a “BOTH” (the so-called goods, the so-called bads, and all their shapes and forms.)

She writes:

“A wild heart can also straddle the tension of staying awake to the struggle in the world and fighting for justice and peace, while also cultivating its own moments of joy.”

We must remember that we can’t give to others what we don’t have, and that we can only stand up for what we believe if we let ourselves believe it. This is why we must honor our irreducible needs for love, belonging and joy, no matter what is going on in the world at that moment! And we must learn to do so without needing to deny that others are suffering while we’re not. We must learn to hold both the knowledge that we deserve moments of joy AND that there are things happening that need us to stay present and aware.

Gratitude is the antidote to guilt while we learn to honor both our moments of joy and the struggles of the world. She shares also that the people she interviewed will feel validated by that sense of gratitude. She writes:

“When you are grateful for what you have, I know you understand the magnitude of what I have lost.”

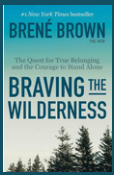
It’s also important to remember that denying our own pain or constantly measuring it on the scale of “who’s suffering the most” actually drains our empathy. And when we give up on our joy, we deplete ourselves of what makes us feel fully alive and what can fuel us with a sense of purpose and the will or ability to help.

“A wild heart is awake to the pain in the world, but does not diminish its own pain.

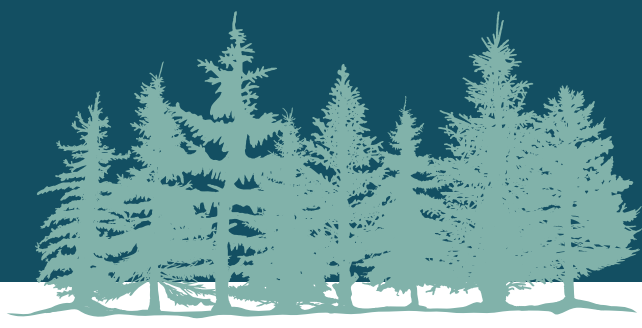
A wild heart can beat with gratitude and lean in to pure joy without denying the struggle in the world.”

She urges us to have a “front made of love and a back made of courage.”

“True belonging doesn’t require you to change who you are; it requires you to BE who you are.”



BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



BOOK DIGEST

STRONG BACK. SOFT FRONT. WILD HEART.

So here are our four practices:

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

She quotes one of her previous books to share this powerful reminder:

“Stop walking through the world looking for confirmation that you don’t belong. You will always find it because you’ve made that your mission. Stop scouring people’s faces for evidence that you’re not enough. You will always find it because you’ve made that your goal.

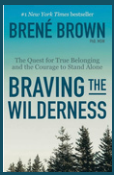
“True belonging and self-worth are not goods; we don’t negotiate their value with the world. The truth about who we are lives in our hearts. Our call to courage is to protect our wild heart against constant evaluation, especially our own. No one belongs here more than you.”

She shares the best descriptions she found about the difference between belonging and fitting in—they were drafted by middle school students and amazed her by their accuracy:

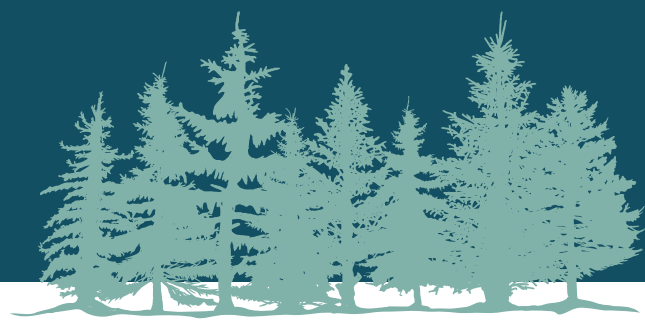
- **Belonging is being somewhere you want to be, and they want you. Fitting in is being somewhere where you want to be, but they don’t care one way or another.**
- **Belonging is being accepted for you. Fitting in is being accepted for being like everyone else.**
- **If I get to be me, i belong. If I have to be like you, I fit in.**

They also reminded her that:

“Not belonging at school is VERY hard. But it’s nothing compared to what it feels like when you don’t belong at home.”



BRAVING THE WILDERNESS



BOOK DIGEST

STRONG BACK. SOFT FRONT. WILD HEART.

So here's her main takeaway as it relates to parenting:

"We have to resist following them into the wilderness and trying to make it safer and more civilized." We must teach children to believe in themselves AND to belong to themselves.

And as a leader, she invites us to reflect on the words of Seattle Seahawks coach Pete Carroll, who chose to stand in the wilderness and experienced the consequences that come with that choice :

"I'm aware of what's generally accepted from a NFL coach. But sometimes you have to be bold and take chances. And there's a special kind of resilience that comes from the level of scrutiny that happens in the wilderness. I know those experiences left me with a truer belief in myself and a much stronger sense of when I'm not being true to what I think is right."

In her final words the author illustrates how each of her books led her to decide to live a different message:

- She confronted her perfectionism to write *The Gifts of Imperfection*.
- She faced the roots of criticism and courage to write *Daring Greatly*,
- She challenged the stories she was using to protect herself to write *Rising Strong*,
- She moved into the wilderness to write this one!

"When we degrade and diminish our humanity, even in response to being degraded and diminished, we break our own wild hearts."

She writes:

"Of all the calls to courage that I've asked readers to answer over the last decade, braving the wilderness is the hardest. It can hurt the most. But, as the quote from Maya Angelou reminds us, it's the only path to liberation."