

Book Review

***Braving The Wilderness*, Brené Brown (2017), reviewed by Jasmin, January 2020**

Brené Brown, a social scientist and research professor at the University of Houston, is a five times #1 *New York Times* bestsellers author. Brown has spent the last 20 years studying courage, vulnerability, shame and empathy and discusses these topics in her books, her TED talk- “The Power of Vulnerability”- (which is one of the top five most-viewed TED talks world wide) as well as in her public speaking engagement events. Below I have summarized what I felt to be the most valuable points from Brown's 2017 *New York Times* bestselling book *Braving The Wilderness*.

Firstly, what is this book about? Secondly, what does it even mean? This book, *Braving The Wilderness* focuses on two main concepts: **Braving The Wilderness** and **True Belonging**. In her book Brown discusses what it means to brave the wilderness, how to brave the wilderness and what the wilderness actually is. In answering these topics she introduces us to the concept of True Belonging, what it means to truly belong and why that is important. So, let us back up a bit and answer some questions.

1. What is 'The Wilderness'?
2. What Does 'Braving The Wilderness' Mean? How Can I Do So?
3. What is 'True Belonging'? What Does it Mean to Truly Belong?
4. How Can I Truly Belong? And Why is it so Important?

In order to understand and/or practice other concepts and theories from this book, I firmly believe that one must not only understand what Braving the Wilderness and True Belonging is/means but one must conscientiously practice true belonging and have made their own journey into the wilderness. Until then, one will never know the true value of Braving the Wilderness and True Belonging.

What is 'The Wilderness'?

In my opinion, everyone's definition will differ slightly, depending where they are in their life's journey. However, Brown explains the wilderness as a place of solitude and searching. More specifically she states on her website that “the wilderness is an untamed, unpredictable place of solitude and searching. It is a place as dangerous as it is breathtaking, a place as sought after as it is feared. But it turns out to be the place of true belonging, and it’s the bravest and most sacred place you will ever stand” (<https://brenebrown.com/blog/2017/07/18/my-new-book-braving-the-wilderness/>). To me, the Wilderness represents the unknown: a beautiful yet feared, scary place where one is alone and searching outside of their comfort zone for their true belonging.

What Does 'Braving The Wilderness' Mean? How Can I Do So?

So, now that we know what the wilderness is, what does it mean to brave it? Well to put it simply, to brave the wilderness means to stand up for what you believe and you can do this by putting yourself out

there, even if you are alone in doing so.

Here is an example. Say you support same-sex marriage and you are in a group of people that express their strong disapproval of same-sex marriage. This thought, opinion, belief you have about marriage equality is your wilderness. It is a feared place to go for in this moment you are alone in your belief. Now, it would be easy to agree with the group when they say “hey, marriage is for heterosexual couples only, do you agree?” However, you brave the wilderness by standing up for what you believe in and saying “Well actually no. I do not agree. I support marriage equality”. By standing up for what you believe in, even if it meant standing alone, by putting yourself out there, you just stepped outside your comfort zone, went to a scary place and explored the unknown. You just braved the wilderness. You just braved an untamed, unpredictable place of solitude and searching for you can't know the group's response to your answer.

What is 'True Belonging'? What Does it Mean to Truly Belong?

In her book, Brown gives us two definitions. The first one is the for belonging:

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. (Brown, pg 32).

The second one is for true belonging:

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. (Brown pg, 40)

Brown takes the definition of belonging and, through research, she builds off of it to define what it means to truly belong. In the book she states that true belonging is not the same as the belonging that is associated with joining a group, fitting in or playing it safe. True belonging is a practice that requires one to be vulnerable, uncomfortable and become present with people without sacrificing who we are (pg 37).

She goes on to explain that we belong when we try to acquire our desire to be part of something larger than us by fitting in and by seeking approval. We truly belong only when we are our real true selves and sometimes being ourselves means having to find courage to stand alone. To truly belong means to belong to yourself and have courage to be yourself and stand alone when no one wants to stand with you.

How Can I Truly Belong? And Why is it so Important?

Now that we understand what is meant by braving the wilderness and true belonging you may be wondering, well how can I truly belong? And why is that so important?

In her book, Brown list 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

Let us take a closer look at what each one means.

People Are Hard To Hate Close Up. Move In

What this means is that it is easy to hate a large group of strangers because “the members of the group who I happen to know and like are the rare exceptions” (Brown, pg 64). However, this is not how we are meant to live. We need not let our anger turn us into people/things that we are not. This element is all about anger, how to acknowledge your anger and how to use it to become better, not bitter and miserable. Brown explains that “anger is a catalyst... and that internalizing it will take away our joy and spirit and that externalizing it will make us less effective in our attempt to create change and forge connection” (Brown, pg 68). Thus, we need to turn this emotion into something life-giving such as courage, love, compassion. To focus on our anger is to focus on our hate. So, move in, get close, know your emotions and change the outcome.

Speak Truth To Bullshit. Be Civil

In this element, Brown digs into what drives BS, the form it often takes and how we can stay civil when we know we are knee deep in it. My main take away from this one was that it is OK to not have a opinion on a matter. It is OK to say “I do not actually know much about said topic. Please tell me more about it”. Brown explains that we usually use the “with me or against me” argument when in emotional situations, where the emotional plea is often not based in fact, in order to sway a side. This preys on our fears of not belonging or wanting to be wrong. But, when in this situation, one needs to look at all sides as there are usually more than just with me or against me. To think past the with me or against me situations requires a lot of courage for one is stepping outside their comfort zone of picking a side (usually the side of the one proposing the question) and into the wilderness; it is much safer to just pick the proposers side and say yes, I am with you. However, if you truly belong then you stand alone in your proposal that there is more than just with me or against me.

The be civil part comes into play when combating BS as someone who is BSing is not interested in the truth as a shared starting point they are simply saying “the truth doesn't matter, what I think matters” (Brown, pg 94). It is hard to combat BS without mirroring that behaviour, but staying civil is an important

part to this element of true belonging. Why? Because, as Brown explains:

Civility is claiming and caring for 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 dialog about differences, listening past one's preconceptions and teaching others to do the same. (Brown, pg 95)

Therefore, to practice true belonging it is important to stay civil when speaking truth to BS.

Hold Hands. With Strangers.

This element is all about inextricable human connection. On page 117 Brown states that connection is not what is broken, it is our belief in the connection that is constantly tested and broken. Brown explains that when our belief that there is something greater than us is broken we are more likely to retreat to isolation, hate from afar, tolerate BS, dehumanize others and avoid the wilderness. But, we can stand up for what we believe in when we know that regardless of the push back and criticism we are connected to ourselves and others in a way that can't be severed.

So how do we build inextricable human connection? According to Brown it is actually quite simple: show up for collective moments of joy and pain so that you can actually bear witness to inextricable human connection. Simply put, to build inextricable human connection we must first bear witness to inextricable human connection and we do this by showing up for and experiencing collective moments of joy/pain with strangers. An example of an experience of collective joy is attending a sports game. An example of collective pain is a funeral. Gathering with others to celebrate the end of a life is perhaps one of the most powerful experiences of inextricable human connection. The book goes into a lot more detail on the importance of collective joy and pain and even presents some interesting statistics on the subject. Another point that Brown brings up at the end of this chapter is that, although social media is great for developing a community, real true belonging, real connection and real empathy requires face-to-face meetings. If you do not meet face-to-face, you can never develop that real connection and empathy towards that online community.

Strong Back. Soft Front. Wild Heart

The final element of true belonging is exactly that. A strong back is our courage to stand alone; to speak our beliefs and do what we feel is right, despite the fear and push back. A soft front is our vulnerability. Brown explains that vulnerability is the birthplace of everything that brings meaning into our lives when we let people steal our vulnerability we end up giving them our entire life. Vulnerability is not a weakness; it is an accurate measure of courage. A wild heart is one that fights fitting in and grieves betrayal. It is the ability to live a paradox, to be tough yet tender, excited yet scared, brave yet afraid all at the same time.

When braving the unknown, have the courage to stand alone and face the uncertainty stemming from you speaking your truth. Have the courage (strong back) to walk into the wilderness with your back to it. But, stay vulnerable (soft front) so that you love, trust and grow, for vulnerability and risk is the birth place of courage. Lastly, keep a wild heart, fight fitting in fiercely with love.

Understanding each of these elements and then putting them into active practice will allow ourselves to truly belong to us. This is important because, as Brown explains, “we are experiencing a spiritual crisis of disconnection” and thus we must find our way back to ourselves and each other. Belonging is mostly about learning to belong to ourselves. We must learn how to stand up for what we believe in, even if it means standing alone. We must practice love, not hate, acceptance, not exclusion, tolerance for our differences, not intolerance for someones desire to stand apart, yet walk parallel with us. We are all responsible for making this world a better place and co-existing amongst each other cannot start until we are ready to brave the wilderness and find our true belonging. Imagine the world we could build if we all braved the wilderness together and practiced true belonging.