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Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone – A Book Review

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Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone – A Book Review

Abstract

Brené Brown, PhD, LMSW, flipped the script on courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy in personal and professional situations through her research, writing, and scholarship. Widely known for her TED talks on these topics, including The Power of Vulnerability over ten years ago in Houston, in 2017, Brown released "*Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*", a self-help memoir, in the United States by Random House. In this review, I provide a highlight of each chapter in relation to its use for practitioners working in community-engaged programs with urban youth at-risk.

Keywords

brave, leadership, growth, youth development, book review

Cover Page Footnote

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Social justice work, including diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, for all students, for all people can be challenging. Practitioners who work directly with youth are inevitably going have infinite dissimilarities. Without adequate education, support, and "wokeness", authentic allyship can easily turn to performative allyship. When I was offered my first graduate assistantship, my biases had me believing that I could not, should not, would not be able to work with urban youth, since I was raised in a rural area. This comparison happens with race, ethnicity, ability, class, education levels, sexual identity, and more.

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Brown's work in *Braving the Wilderness* introduces a self-assessment and four practices of true belonging. Practitioners can stumble through the wilderness into 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" (p. 40).

Changing the Cultural Climate
In Chapter 1, Brown shares her experience with her research in vulnerability through a shift in her personal understandings about her writing. Originally, she believed in the voices of her "harshest and most cynical colleagues" (p. 4). She now relies on "brave innovators and disrupters whose courage feels contagious" (p. 3), like bell hooks, Ed Catmull, Shonda Rhimes, Ken Burns, and Oprah. Imagine how community-engaged work with urban youth at-risk would shift if practitioners had these voices, among others, whispering in their ears, driving their intrinsic motivation, instead of performative allyship memes and sharable posts on social media.

As Brown falls down the rabbit hole of literature in defining what "true belonging" means, she relies on her qualitative research knowledge as her flashlight. Grounded theory takes her back to the start, where she provides a clearer picture of what the "wilderness" is and why we need to brave it. In our work, practitioners may not face an actual wilderness with wild animals, but instead, "an untamed, unpredictable place of solitude and searching" (p. 16). True belonging is not about fitting in but about accepting sacrifice in individual selves and trusting yourself and others. To trust yourselves and others, practitioners can ask specific BRAVING (boundaries, reliability, accountability, vault, integrity, nonjudgment, generosity) questions (p. 38-39).

In chapter three, Brown starts by using storytelling of World War 1 Veterans in Kentucky to address the feeling, and sound, of the "high lonesome" (p. 44). This sound is heard throughout bluegrass music and has been taken up in art, since both "gives pain and our most wrenching emotions voice, language, and form" (p. 44). She goes on to address the want for togetherness when we are in our "high lonesome". Instead of coming together, our culture pushes us apart and forces us to be individualistic, unless we are facing a spiritual crisis.

This crisis has arisen from three personal and communal misconceptions. The first faction is in sorting ourselves out, by sorting ourselves away from people and having others sort us out. Brown argues, "The sorting we do to ourselves and to one another is, at best, unintentional and reflexive. At worst, it is stereotyping that dehumanizes" (p. 48). Practitioners are encouraged to consider their cultural biases in their work. We must be careful not to judge or stereotype others or ourselves, as it is easy to file someone else away under a specific characteristic. This filing only leads to loneliness in ourselves and those we work for and with.

The second faction is the biological need for social interaction. There lies a difference in loneliness and being alone (p. 52). Brown's work shows, "to combat loneliness, we must first learn how to identify it and to have the courage to see that experience as a warning sign" (p. 55). This coping strategy changes, as each individual needs something different to feel connected to those around them. As an introvert, like myself, Brown finds peace in being alone and finds herself unable to connect personally in large groups. As youth development practitioners, we must take the time to get to know ourselves through the wilderness so we can gain the courage to counter our loneliness, even in being alone, knowing that we may be in small or large group settings.

The third faction Brown addresses is to understand why we sort and desire connection with others. *Fear*. Fear of a variety of topics drives our behaviors. When we allow fear to overtake us, "it's only a matter of time before we become fractured, isolated, and driven by our perceptions of scarcity" (p. 56). This fear can push us away from our communal and societal members through sorting. But, if we change how we approach fear and strive for that biological need for interaction, the narrative shifts towards acceptance and understanding. Our work requires us to be in the community (what would community-engaged work be without it), so an extra step toward that fear in a positive manner assures we "reclaim human connection" (p. 59). This also revives hope in our youth by (re)establishing positive youth-adult relationships.

Practices of True Belonging

Youth development work requires practitioners to focus on more than just themselves in the wilderness though. Changing our own personal, cultural climate around true belonging is just the first step. The second step requires us connect to those around us. Brown's text moves into four practices 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.

These chapter titles and practices allow us to get to know someone, hear their story, and become a part of their journey. We start to see them for who they are and not the file we sort them in. Brown's political rhetoric's challenge the reader to consider people as humans with feelings and emotions. People are quick to judge someone that may not know well. It is our responsibility as practitioners to move in with our youth and families. This does not mean packing up our belongings and laying down at their place. This means that we must be active in our work to get to know those we are serving.

People are hard to hate up close. Move in. "Maintaining the courage to stand alone when necessary in the midst of family or community or angry strangers feels like an untamed wilderness" (p. 70) and it is vital that we remember to place boundaries on our physical and emotional safety. Brown connects this emotional safety as the push against *dehumanizing* language (p. 71). She refers to David Smith's *Less Than Human*, where he "argue[d] that dehumanization is a joint creation of biology, culture, and the architecture of the human mind" (2011, p. 4). Brown encourages readers to find "the courage to embrace our humanity" by changing the narrative of any storyline that comes across our path. Dehumanizing, in any form, should be removed.

Speak truth to bullshit. Be civil. Encompassing the most compelling case for community-engaged practitioners working with urban youth at-risk, Brown uses Carl Jung's paradox to divide bullshit from civility. With "bullshitting as a wholesale dismissal of the truth" (p. 90), Brown questions the foundation behind the "'you're either with us or against us' argument" (p. 92). This *false dichotomy* (p. 91) forces us to sort without question in a matter of seconds and usually places a shield between individuals that is not easily removed. There are often more sides to a single story and Brown asserts, "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" (p. 115).

Hold hands. With strangers. Brown starts by giving readers a statement to guide by, "I can stand up for what I believe is right when I know that regardless of the pushback and criticism, I'm connected to myself and others in a way that can't be severed" (p. 117-118). She diverts back to storytelling to provide real life situations of announce and joy to "cultivate and grow our belief in inextricable human connection internally" (p. 120). In each of these situations, the lead could have dwelled in their "high lonesome", but instead used BRAVING techniques to shift toward true belonging. Readers are reminded that "we don't always have to walk alone" (p. 145).

Strong back. Soft Front. Wild Heart. Brown closes her work by sharing an experience she had at an event with Joan Halifax, who coined the term "strong back, soft front" (p. 148). She uses an adaptation of the BRAVING model to explain how readers can implement a strong back in their lives by strengthening their courage muscle (p. 149-150). Youth development practitioners are known to do this in our work, as well, by setting boundaries, being reliable, holding ourselves accountable, keeping confidences in a vault, practicing integrity, being nonjudgmental, and showing generosity. Our communities would not have trust in us without these characteristics.

The next step is to "exercise the vulnerability muscle that allows us to soften and stay open rather than attack and defend" (p. 154), or simply, have a soft front. By doing these two things,

people become brave and not weak, we are removed from sorting and being sorted. None of this can be accomplished without a wild heart- "the ability to be tough and tender, excited and scared, brave and afraid" (p. 155). It is easy for us to feel safe by ourselves in places that we create and only we enter, but true belonging exists with ourselves and strangers (*those youth and community members you may not have met yet)*. We must find the ability to accept ourselves in the wilderness.

True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone.
Throughout the text, Brown remembers her initial confusion with Maya Angelou's quote on belonging, "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" (p. 5). She details stories of her life where she felt discouraged for not belonging *(something I think we can all relate to).* Brown explains three outcomes that occur when we feel the suffering of not belonging:
"1. You live in constant pain and seek relief by numbing it and/or inflicting it on others;
2. You deny your pain, and your denial ensures that you pass it on to those around you and down to your children; or
3. You find the courage to own the pain and develop a level of empathy and compassion for yourself and others that allows you to spot hurt in the world in a unique way" (p. 14).

Community-engaged work with youth is challenging. As practitioners, if we are not taking care of ourselves (mentally, emotionally, physically) within our work, our suffering leads to one of these three outcomes. Inflicting the pain on others, including youth, is damaging. We may not be trained to enter this quest for true belonging which allows us to deny our pain and reciprocate that to those around us. Finding our own personal courage benefits more within our communities in the long run. When we can see and accept our pain, we can see and accept it in others and respond courageously.

Work with youth often directly ties to community-engaged practices. These practices in our communities often begin with the work we do with ourselves. It is truly a never-ending cycle. After reading this book, I encourage others involved in community- engaged work with youth at-risk to invest in themselves by investing in this book and its resources. Brown's Braving the Wilderness "challenges everything we think we know about cultivating true belonging in our communities, organizations, and culture".

References

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