

## THE BIG IDEAS



### True Belonging

The Quest.

### Paradox

Seemingly absurd. Yet true.

### The 4 Practices

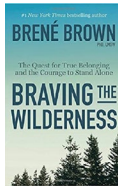
Of true belonging.

### Cover It All in Leather

Or... Get your mind right.

### Permission Slips

To be you.



# Braving the Wilderness

The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone

BY BRENÉ BROWN · RANDOM HOUSE © 2017 · 208 PAGES

*“True belonging.*

I don't know exactly what it is about the combination of those two words, but I do know that when I say it aloud, it just feels right. It feels like something that we all crave and need in our lives. 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 need true belonging.”

~ Brené Brown from *Braving the Wilderness*

*True belonging.*

That sense of connection to yourself and to others that's authentic, vulnerable, and courageous. Helping us navigate our quests for true belonging is what the book is all about. First step: We need to know that requires a trip into the hero's forest of the unknown. Which demands “braving the wilderness.”

Brené Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston. She's spent the last 15+ years studying courage, vulnerability, shame and empathy and is the author of three #1 *NY Times* bestsellers: *The Gifts of Imperfection*, *Rising Strong* and *Daring Greatly*. (We currently have Notes on two of those... Need to get to *Rising Strong*! :)

My hunch is you've probably heard of and/or watched her TED Talk on “[The Power of Vulnerability](#)”—which is one of the top 5 most-viewed TED talks ever, with 30 million views.

I think the reason why Brené is so popular and such a powerful teacher is that she's such a powerful EXEMPLAR of the very things she studies and teaches: courageous, vulnerable, whole-hearted living.

And, she's a great storyteller.

I loved this book as much as I did the others. It's a quick-reading, inspiring look at the four practices for discovering and living from that deep sense of true belonging. If you enjoy Brené and her work, I think you'll enjoy the book as much as I did. (Get a copy [here](#).)

I'm excited to take a quick look at some of my favorite Big Ideas so let's jump straight in!

## THE QUEST FOR TRUE BELONGING

“As I often say, I'm an experienced mapmaker, but I can be as much of a lost and stumbling traveler as anyone else. We all must find our own way. This means that, while we may be sharing the same research map, your path will be different from mine. Joseph Campbell wrote, ‘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.’”

The quest for true belonging begins with this definition that I crafted from the data. It will serve as a touchstone as we move through the work together:

*“Do not think you can be  
brave with your life and your  
work and never disappoint  
anyone. It doesn't work that  
way.”*

~ Oprah Winfrey

*"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."*

~ Brené Brown

**True belonging** is the spiritual practice of 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.

The only thing we know for certain is that on this quest we'll need to learn how to navigate the tension of many paradoxes along the way, including the importance of *being with* and *being alone*."

We'll talk more about the paradoxes involved in our quest to true belonging in a moment. For now, let's focus on the definition of true belonging and the QUEST to discover and experience it.

First, the beginning of that definition. True belonging is a SPIRITUAL practice. Two key words there: Spiritual and practice.

Brené offers this beautiful definition of spirituality: *"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."*

A central theme of the book is that our world is more polarized than ever before. (You notice?) The quickest way to get back to connection? "Recognize and celebrate" the fact that we are all "inextricably connected" to one another by "a power greater than all of us" and that the best way to connect to that power and to each other is via love and compassion. (Yes, I just repeated that definition. It's worth another read.)

That's the spiritual part. Then we need to PRACTICE that love and compassion that keeps us connected to ourselves and others. There are four practices. More on that in a moment.

What happens when we engage in those spiritual practices is that we discover and live from our most authentic selves. With THAT connection in place, we're free to be who we truly are and it's THAT authentic expression of ourselves that allows us to truly belong. If we don't bring our true selves to the party, then we feel alienation (from ourselves and others), not belonging.

And...

Discovering that true belonging is a QUEST.

And....

Like all (!) great heroic quests, we need to leave the known world and enter the wilderness. As [Joseph Campbell](#) says, we need to enter that wilderness at the darkest point. The one sure sign that we're not on the right path is if there's ALREADY a path there.

—> *"You enter the forest at the darkest point, where there is no path. Where there is a way or a path, it is someone else's path. You are not on your own path. If you follow someone else's way, you are not going to realize your potential."*

(btw: I actually riff on exactly this theme in a scene in the documentary [Finding Joe](#).)

One more thought from Uncle Joe as we enter that wilderness: *"What is it we are questing for? It is the fulfillment of that which is potential in each of us. Questing for it is not an ego trip; it is an adventure to bring into fulfillment your gift to the world, which is yourself. There's nothing you can do that's more important than being fulfilled. You become a sign, you become a signal, transparent to transcendence; in this way, you will find, live, and become a realization of your own personal myth."*

Here's to fulfilling the potential within ourselves, becoming "transparent to transcendence," and a sign of what's possible as we give our gifts to the world!

*"Living with air pollution increases your odds of dying early by 5 percent. Living with obesity, 20 percent. Excessive drinking, 30 percent. And living with loneliness? It increases your odds of dying by 45 percent."*

~ Brené Brown

*"It's important to note that loneliness and being alone are very different things. Being alone or inhabiting solitude can be a powerful and healing thing. As an introvert, I deeply value alone time, and I often feel the loneliest when I'm with other people. In our house, we call that sense of being disconnected 'the lonely feeling.'"*

~ Brené Brown

## PARADOX

"In many ways, the etymology of the word 'paradox' cuts right to heart of what it means to break out of our ideological bunkers, stand on our own, and brave the wilderness. In its Greek origins, paradox is the joining of two words, *para* (contrary to) and *dokein* (opinion). The Latin *paradoxum* means 'seemingly absurd but really true.' True belonging is not something that you negotiate externally, it's what you carry in your heart. It's finding the sacredness in being a part of something and in braving the wilderness alone. When we reach this place, even momentarily, we belong everywhere and nowhere. That seems absurd, but it's true."

Paradox.

Two little Greek words forming one Latin word that leads to our modern English word that, in a modern dictionary, means: "a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition that when investigated or explained may prove to be well founded or true."

Moving beyond the either/or false dichotomies and unnecessary polarization of our modern world by embracing the paradoxes of life is one of the core themes of the book.

In fact, each of the four practices for true belonging consists of a paradox. We will explore those next. Before we do, let's briefly chat about a couple of the other paradoxes we've explored in our Notes so far: *The Paradox of Choice* and *The Plant Paradox*.

The short story on those books? Well, how about we let the authors share their wisdom directly?

In *The Paradox of Choice*, Barry Schwartz tells us: "The fact that some choice is good doesn't necessarily mean that more choice is better. As I will demonstrate, there is a cost to having an overload of choice. As a culture, we are enamored of freedom, self-determination, and variety, and we are reluctant to give up any of our options. But clinging tenaciously to all the choices available to us contributes to bad decisions, to anxiety, stress, and dissatisfaction—even to clinical depression."

And in *The Plant Paradox*, Dr. Steven Gundry tells us: "I titled this book *The Plant Paradox* because while many plant foods are good for you—and form the bedrock of my eating plan—others that have been regarded as 'health foods' are actually to blame for making you sick and overweight. That's right, most plants actually want to make you ill. Another paradox: small portions of some plants are good for you but large amounts are bad for you."

Having too many choices is BAD for us? Contributes to clinical depression?

That's absurd!

Plants actually want to make me ill?

That's absurd!

Paradoxes. Seemingly absurd statements that, upon further reflection, are true.

btw: Brené also tells us: "Carl Jung argued that a paradox is one of our most valuable spiritual possessions and a great witness to the truth. It makes sense to me that we're called to combat this spiritual crisis of disconnection with one of our most valued spiritual possessions. Bearing witness to the truth is rarely easy, especially when we're alone in the wilderness."

But as Maya Angelou tells us, "The price is high. The reward is great."

Did you know that Carl Jung was one of Joseph Campbell's biggest influences? Yep.

Want an incredibly valuable spiritual tool on our heroic quest through the wilderness? Move beyond either/or false dichotomies. Embrace paradox. And make that a practice.

In fact, use these FOUR practices:

## THE 4 PRACTICES OF TRUE BELONGING

*"In all my research's two-hundred-thousand-plus pieces of data, I can't find a single example of courage that didn't require vulnerability. Can you, in your life? Can you think of one moment of courage that didn't require risk, uncertainty, and emotional exposure? I know the answer is no; I've asked too many people who say this—including special operations soldiers. No vulnerability, no courage. We have to show up and put ourselves out there."*

~ Brené Brown

*"Social media are helpful in cultivating connection only to the extent that they're used to create real community where there is structure, purpose, and meaning, and some face-to-face contact."*

~ Brené Brown

"What emerged from the responses to these questions were four elements of true belonging. These elements are situated in the reality of the world we live in today. The theories that emerge from this methodology are based on how we engage with the world in our everyday lives; they're not hypothetical. This means you can't develop a theory of true belonging without addressing how our increasingly polarized world shapes our lives and our experiences of connection and true belonging. I didn't intend to write a book about belonging set against a backdrop of political and ideological chaos. But that's not my call to make. My job is to be true to the data.

As you take a look at each of the four elements, you can see that each is a daily practice and feels like a paradox. They're going to challenge us:

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. Strong Front. Wild Heart."**

The four practices of braving the wilderness to find true belonging.

Each is a paradox. And each has its own chapter in the book. Let's take a super quick look.

**1. People Are Hard to Hate Close Up. Move In.** It's easy to dislike people when we stereotype them and dehumanize them and throw them into the big bucket that is labeled "them" while we hang out in our comfortable echo-chamber-bubble of "us."

But you know what? Those same people who are so easy to demonize when they're stereotyped are often pretty cool when we get in real close. The person who voted for the other party? They're also your neighbor who just ran after and saved your dog from getting hit when he sneaked out the gate and almost ran across the street. Or invited you and your kids over to pick apricots from their tree while it's in season.

People are hard to hate close up. Move in. Get to know them.

**2. Speak Truth to Bullshit. Be Civil.** Brené tells us about the difference between "lies" and "bullshit." (She also tells us that part of her experiencing true belonging is embracing the fact that she likes to talk about her faith and she likes to curse. :)

She makes the point that bullshit is actually more dangerous than lies. Bullshit is when you don't even address the truth. You brazenly make conclusions and false dichotomies. We need to step back and challenge all the either/or-ness and we need to do it with CIVILITY. We can have challenging conversations without being disrespectful and uncivil. And, we must.

Speak truth to bullshit. Be civil.

**3. Hold Hands. With Strangers.** Brené tells us about collective joy and collective pain and shares some powerful research about just how important both are. She tells us how powerful funerals are as an opportunity to share pain together. ("Show up!!" she says.) And, she tells us about moments of "collective effervescence," referencing [this YouTube video of ninety-five thousand Australian fans of the Liverpool Football Club](#) to bring the point home.

She also says: "Social interaction makes us live longer, healthier lives. By a lot. [Susan] Pinker writes, 'In fact, neglecting to keep in close contact with people who are important to you is at least as dangerous to your health as a pack-a-day cigarette habit, hypertension, or obesity.'"

Hold hands with strangers. Experience collective pain and joy.

*"The mark of a wild heart is living out the paradox of love in our lives. It's the ability to be tough and tender, excited and scared, brave and afraid—all in the same moment.*

*It's showing up in our vulnerability and our courage, being both fierce and kind."*

~ Brené Brown

**4. Strong Back. Soft Front. Wild Heart.** We need to be courageous AND vulnerable. In fact, Brené tells us that a \*requirement\* of courage is a willingness to be vulnerable. By definition, when you are acting courageously you are risking loss.

We need a strong back. And, we need to soften our hearts—letting in the vulnerability and the pain and the fear... While we embrace a wild heart that \*is\* the wilderness.

## COVER IT ALL IN LEATHER

"I love Pema Chodrön's 'Lousy World' teaching on this topic. In it, Chodrön uses the lessons of the Indian Buddhist monk Shantideva to make a very powerful analogy about moving through the world constantly pissed off and disappointed. ...

[She says]: "We're laughing, but that's what we all do. That is how we approach things. We think, if we could just get rid of everything and cover it with leather, our pain would go away. Well, sure, because then it wouldn't be cutting our feet anymore. It's just logical, isn't it? But it doesn't make any sense, really. Shantideva said, 'But if you simply wrap leather around your feet.' In other words, if you put on shoes then you could walk across the boiling sand and the cut glass and the thorns, and it wouldn't bother you. So the analogy is, if you work with your mind, instead of trying to change everything on the outside, that's how your temper will cool down."

That's from the chapter on our third practice: "Hold Hands. With Strangers."

Pema Chodrön is a Buddhist monk and teacher. We have Notes on two of her great books: [When Things Fall Apart](#) and [The Places That Scare You](#). Here's a link to wonderful [2.5-minute YouTube video of her "Lousy World" teaching](#).

Short story: We complain about everything and everyone. All the time. It's too hot. It's too cold. He smells bad. She's got too much perfume. All day every day.

We think the answer is to change the world—to lay leather over all the thorns and rocks in our way. The answer, of course, is to simply wrap a little leather over our feet and voila! Problem solved. In other words: Get our minds right and voila! The world is fine.

Here's how Shantideva puts it [The Way of the Bodhisattva](#):

*"To cover all the earth with sheets of leather—  
Where could such amounts of skin be found?  
But with the leather soles of just my shoes  
It is as though I cover all the earth!"*

[Byron Katie](#) has another great metaphor. She tells us that thinking the problem is "out there" is kinda like thinking the imperfect image on the movie screen is the problem. Nope. It's the lint on the projector's lens. Clean THAT off and the movie screen of life is golden. "As you inquire into issues and turn judgments around, you come to see that every perceived problem appearing 'out there' is really nothing more than a misperception within your own thinking."

## PERMISSION SLIPS TO BE YOU

"The next morning, as I was getting dressed to meet Oprah for the first time, my daughter texted me. She wanted to make sure I had signed and returned a permission slip for her school trip. After assuring her that I had, I sat on the edge of my bed and fought back tears. I started thinking, *I need a permission slip to stop being so serious and afraid. I need permission to have fun today.* That got the idea started. After I looked around my room to make sure no one was watching the incredibly ridiculous thing I was about to do, I walked over to the desk in my room, sat down, and wrote myself a permission slip on a Post-it note from my computer bag. It simply said, 'Permission to be excited and goofy and have fun.'

*"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."*

~ Brené Brown

It would be the first of hundreds of permission slips I would go on to write for myself. I still write them today and I teach everyone who will give me five minutes of their time the power of this intention-setting method. It totally works. But as with permission slips you give your kids, they may have permission to go to the zoo, but they still need to get on the bus. Set the intention. Follow through. That day, I got on the bus."

That's from the beginning of the book where Brené tells us about the first time she met Oprah. The night before, she was (understandably) feeling all uptight and in her head. Her manager noticed and asked her, "Where are you, Brené?"

She said: "I'm doing the thing I do when I'm afraid. I'm floating above my life, watching it and studying it, rather than living it."

He (brilliantly) replied: "Don't study this moment. Be in it."

The next morning she created her first permission slip. I created my first one after reading that: "Permission to be intense and focused and have fun being me."

Couple of questions: What do YOU do when you're afraid? (I overthink and overplan and under-be and under-do. And I LOVE Brené's description of what she does. Wow.)

And... What would you write on YOUR permission slip? Let's actually create TWO permission slips. One for today. What permission are you giving yourself today? And.. One for your LIFE. What permission do you hereby give yourself?

Fantastic. You've now set the intention. That's Step 1. Step 2? Step on the bus.

Set the intention. Follow through. And, most importantly, enjoy the ride of Braving the Wilderness and finding true belonging.

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note,  
you'll probably like...

[The Gifts of Imperfection](#)

[Daring Greatly](#)

[Self-Compassion](#)

[A Joseph Campbell  
Companion](#)

[The Power of Myth](#)

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## About the Author of "Braving the Wilderness"

BRENÉ BROWN



Brené Brown, Ph.D., LMSW is a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. She has spent the past decade studying vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame. Her 2010 TEDx Houston talk on the power of vulnerability is one of the most watched talks on TED.com, with over 15 million views. Connect: [brenebrown.com](http://brenebrown.com).

## About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives so they can actualize their potential as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + practical tools. Learn more and optimize your life at [optimize.me](http://optimize.me).