



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Brené Brown's *Atlas of the Heart*

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

September 25, 2022

frederickuu.org

Are you a fan of [Brené Brown](#)? For the uninitiated, she is a Research Professor of Social Work at the University of Houston, who has spent the last two decades studying courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy. She is the author of six #1 *New York Times* bestsellers, hosts the *Unlocking Us* and *Dare to Lead* podcasts, and her TED Talk on the "[Power of Vulnerability](#)" is one of the top five most-viewed in the world.

Over the years, I've preached three sermons inspired by some of her books: [The Gifts of Imperfection](#), [Rising Strong](#), and [Braving the Wilderness](#). She has distilled her core themes to the following:

- 1. Be you. All of you.**
- 2. Be all in.**
- 3. Fall. Get up. Try again.** (2016: xix)

Her latest book is titled *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*; it has also been made into a five-episode television series, streaming on HBO.

I recommend a lot of books to you over the course of a year, but this book is particularly great. Indeed, I liked it enough to put it on my list of "[Top 10 Best Books Read in 2021](#)." It is not only inspirational and well-written, it also has beautiful graphic design, and is organized in a really helpful way that compares and contrasts the

nuances of various emotions (xxvii). And although it is worth owning a physical copy of this book, the Audible version is also excellent, read by Brown herself. She even includes some updated bonus materials about new research findings since the print version of the book was released.

Some of you may recall that I already preached a sermon back in June inspired by this book. But, as one of my colleagues said, “There might be a sermon on every page of this book.” And this morning fulfills the promise I made to you all this summer, to preach a sequel to that first sermon.

Let me begin by briefly revisiting the question of why we even need an “atlas” of the heart? Why do we need a map to guide us around our feelings? What do we gain by spending time expanding and refining our vocabulary around human emotional intelligence?

Surveys show that the average number of emotions most people can name is *three*: “happy, sad, and angry.” Or, if you prefer your emotions to rhyme: “glad, sad, and mad.” Far beyond those basic three emotions, Brown’s *Atlas of the Heart* gives us a guided tour through 87 noteworthy emotions, usefully organized into 13 categories.

Since researchers have identified at least 150 emotions, the *Atlas of the Heart* still only gets us a little more than halfway, but expanding from three up toward 87 is a good start (xxv). As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said, “**The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.**” Having a larger emotional vocabulary expands and deepens our experience of ourselves, one another, and the world (xii).

A technical term for this capability is *emotional granularity*. And numerous studies have shown that having a limited emotional vocabulary makes it “difficult to communicate our needs and get the support that we need from others.” In contrast, *expanding* our emotional vocabulary is strongly correlated with “greater emotional regularity and psychosocial wellbeing” (xxii).

There is power in accurate naming. As the psychoanalyst Carl Jung said, “**Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.**” Having an atlas of our heart to guide our emotional vocabulary helps us become more conscious of what was previously unconscious. I’m not saying that increasing our emotional vocabulary will suddenly make our emotional life easy, but it will at least

make our emotions more workable. As the saying goes: **“What we resist persists, but what we feel, we can heal.”**

In June, in the prequel to this sermon, we explored highlights from *three* of Brown’s thirteen emotional clusters:

- “Places we go when things are *uncertain or too much*,”
- “Place we go when we *compare*,” and
- “Places we go *with others*.”

That sermon is available in our online [sermon archive](#).

For this morning, we still will not come anywhere close to covering all thirteen of the emotional clusters in Brown’s *Atlas of the Heart*, but I do want to lift up four more. We’ll begin with two difficult clusters (“Places we go when things *don’t go as planned*” and “Places we go when we’re *hurting*”), then we’ll turn to two more pleasant ones (“places we go when we search for *connection*” and “places we go when the *heart is open*”).

Let’s start with “places we go **when things *don’t go as planned***,” which include boredom, disappointment, *expectations*, regret, discouragement, resignation, and frustration. Can I get a shout out from anyone who feels like the last few years have not gone as planned?! From presidential politics to the pandemic to January 6th and beyond, things have *not* gone as planned—or at least not any plans I was privy to. And that’s just the beginning of a very long list of things many of us wish had gone differently, including climate change, racial injustice, a widening wealth gap, and so much more. In the wake of trauma upon trauma, where do we go when things don’t go as planned?

Brown writes, **“There are too many people in the world today who decide to live with disappointment rather than risk feeling disappointment”** (51). Let’s take a second just to breathe that in: “There are too many people in the world today who decide to *live* with disappointment rather than risk feeling disappointment.” Remember that saying from earlier: “What we *resist* persists, but what we *feel* we can heal.” Sometimes the first step in moving forward is opening ourselves fully to really feeling the predicament we’re in.

This world can be a hard place to be lately. But to give ourselves the best chance to move toward a better future, we have to make sure we're not stuck in denial. We must open our ourselves fully—heart, mind, and spirit—to the “full catastrophe” of our situation.

And as important as politics are these days with election day looming on November 8th, I don't want to get lost in the overwhelming political morass of the news and neglect the interpersonal dimension of our lives. I love that Dr. Brown lifts up an excerpt from author George Saunder's commencement address at Syracuse University a few years ago. Regarding the “places we go when things don't go as planned,” Saunders said, “**What I regret most in my life are failures of kindness.** Those moments when another human being was there, in front of me, suffering, and I responded...sensibly. Reservedly. Mildly” (52). Even as we work together against systemic oppressions, I deeply appreciate this encouragement that, —even as things inevitably continue to not go as planned—we might yet be *kinder* to ourselves, kinder to one another, and kinder to this planet?

As we sit with that question, let's turn our focus to the “places we go **when we're hurting**,” which include anguish, hopelessness, despair, sadness, and grief. Brown writes a line that many of us could likely use emblazoned in a gigantic-sized font, posted where we could see it daily: “**We need hope like we need air**” (97). And here's the thing: “Hope is a function of *struggle*—we develop hope not during the easy or comfortable times, but through adversity and discomfort.” So, at this point, I guess we should all have a lot of hope?!

In all seriousness, as some of you have heard me quote before from the democracy activist Václav Havel, “Hope...is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, **[hope is] an ability to work for something because it is good**, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.” Hope is a practice we can choose, and we desperately need people committed to hope to co-create the future we need for ourselves and future generations.

To that end, let me share with you one of the most useful practices I've found that gives me perspective when I am hurting and perhaps feeling a bit hopeless. It's

called the five “Fs.” If you are feeling scared, worried, overwhelmed, or stressed, try asking yourself, “**Will this issue be a big deal in five *minutes*? Five *hours*? Five *days*? Five *months*? Or five *years*”** (105)? I’ve found these five “Fs” to be tremendously clarifying on a whole host of issues. Thinking through these increments of time helps me discriminate what is really going to have reverberations months or years from now from what is going to fizzle within hours or days (105). What is happening in your life of late—and “will this be a big deal in five *minutes*? Five *hours*? Five *days*? Five *months*? Or five *years*?”

OK, those first two emotional clusters were hard. And life *is* hard sometimes. But life can also be wonderful. So let’s turn next to the first of our two more pleasant emotional clusters: “places we go **when we search for *connection*,**” which includes belonging, fitting in and connection, but also disconnection, insecurity, invisibility, and loneliness.”

This first quote I want to share with you feels like it deeply relates to what we are trying to do here at UUCF as a congregation seeking together to build beloved community. Brown writes, “**True belonging is 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 both in being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness**” (156-157). That’s really interesting—and a big part of what we’re trying to do here: being a place where each of us can show up with our full self.

I especially love that Brown’s definition of true belonging includes both “being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness.” It’s important to be realistic that even with our best efforts and intentions, there’s no way that we at UUCF can be all things to all people. It’s an impossible task. But we can do our best to co-create a place here where each of us can bring all of who we are that already fits—and all of who we are that doesn’t yet fit—the part of us that’s still a “voice crying in the wilderness.” And our hope is that being here can help give you permission to embrace—and give voice to—those estranged parts of yourself.

Relatedly, here's another crucial point: Brown writes, "Because we can feel belonging only if we have the courage to share our most authentic selves with people, **our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance** (160)." Wow. At least for me, that quote alone might be worth the price of admission: "our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance."

Finally, let's turn to "places we go **when the heart is open**," which include love, lovelessness, heartbreak, trust, self-trust, betrayal, defensiveness, flooding, and hurt." I'll limit myself here to sharing with you only two examples. The first is "foreboding joy" (215). I appreciate Brown naming this experience because it has heightened my awareness of times when I find myself holding back, keeping my heart closed out of a fearful apprehension that something bad might happen. The deep cost of this compromise is to inhibit ourselves in advance from experiencing joy. I have found power in naming the emotion of foreboding joy. Naming it makes me more aware of it, and creates the opportunity to potentially choose to set it aside and open my heart to the joy of each new present moment.

The other example of "when the heart is **open**" that I want to lift up is the experience of *tranquility* (217). For all the reasons around current events we named at the beginning of this sermon, tranquility has been in far too short supply lately for many of us. And that makes tranquility perhaps more important than ever.

Cultivating experiences of tranquility is one of the reasons I meditate. Thich Nhat Hanh spoke of reaching this state through being a "businessless person" with "nothing to do and nowhere to go." And with the recent fall equinox, with the falling of autumn leaves, nature increasingly invites us to notice what we might *let go* of in our lives.

This has been an all-too-brief tour of Brené Brown's *Atlas of the Heart*. Across two sermons, we've had a chance to touch on highlights from seven of Brown's thirteen emotional clusters, so for those who are curious, there is much more to discover in her book. For now, I will give the last words to her—words on the power of increasing our emotional vocabulary:

In this life, we will know and bear witness to incredible sorrow and anguish, and we will experience breathless love and joy. There will be boring days and exciting moments, low-grade disappointment and

seething anger, wonder and confusion. The wild and ever-changing nature of emotions and experiences leaves our hearts stretch-marked and strong, worn and willing. My hope is that we find that solid ground within us, that shore that offers safe harbor when we're feeling untethered and adrift. The more confident we are about being able to navigate to that place, the more daring our adventures, and the more connected we are to ourselves and each other. The real gift of learning language, practicing this work, and cultivating meaningful connection is being able to go anywhere without the fear of getting lost. Even when we have no idea where we are or where we're going, with the right map, we can find our way back to our heart and to our truest self. (273)