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True Belonging & the Courage to Stand Alone

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Dr. Brené Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston, who has spent nearly two decades studying courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy. If you are looking for a quick introduction, her two TED Talks are amazing. Over the past few years, she has written three bestselling books: The Gifts of Imperfection, Daring Greatly, and Rising Strong. The core themes can be distilled 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 Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone. She additionally has a fifth book scheduled for publication next month, but I'll save that for the future. For now, I would like to invite us to reflect on her ideas about "True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone."

On this topic, it is important to name that we are living in the midst of a case study on the "Courage to Stand Alone" in the person of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, who has bravely offered to share her story about why she believes Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh should not be confirmed.

This moment is also an auspicious time to revisit Anita Hill's 1998 book, Speaking Truth to Power. The updated blurb for that book reads, "**Twenty-six years before the #MeToo movement, Anita Hill sparked a national conversation about**

sexual harassment in the workplace.” Regardless of what happens in the case of Judge Kavanaugh, this story is yet one more reminder of the culture of toxic masculinity that we are all called to be a part of dismantling. And Dr. Brown’s work around courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy is one of many related potential paths toward a better, healthier, and more equitable future.

As a way into Brown’s perspectives around belonging, I want to start with a common experience that many people describe after attending a Unitarian Universalist congregation—or after reading our UU Principles for the first time: **“I’ve always been a UU, but I didn’t know it.”**

That’s not true of everyone’s experience. Some people grow up UU. Others find that Unitarian Universalism generally—or a particular UU congregation specifically—is right for them at certain points in their lives, but not at other points. That was true for me. I attended the UU congregation in Greenville, SC a few times during college, as well as a congregation in Fort Worth, TX a few times during seminary; but for a confluence of reasons, neither of those congregations felt like where I belonged at the time.

But I do think Brown is correct in that, underneath what led me to visit both of those congregations, and what eventually led me through the door here at UUCF and other such communities, was the **“desire to be part of something larger than” myself** (31). There’s an important insight there, about why any of us would ever take the risk of leaving home to try being part of a new community: we want to belong.

But there’s an important additional shift that Brown’s work highlights: **“Because true belonging only happens when we present out authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance”** (32). Those words are challenging, but what I appreciate most about this perspective is that it turns the focus *away from* what we have little control over (what other people say and do) and turns the focus *toward* what we have at least somewhat more control over: our own self-acceptance. Don’t get me wrong: self-compassion is much easier to talk about than to practice, but I appreciate the encouragement to start there.

But before I go too quickly into the details of true belonging and the courage to stand alone, allow me to spend a little time on some counter-examples. After all, it's important to be honest that, for many of us, what finally gives us the courage to brave the wilderness is that our current situation has gotten bad enough that we are ready to risk trying something different.

Specifically, Brown's research has found that when we feel like we *don't belong* in enough aspects of our lives, we tend to respond in one of three ways:

1. We live in constant pain and seek relief by numbing it and/or inflicting it on others.
2. We deny our pain, and our denial ensures that we pass it on to those around us....
3. We find the courage to own the pain and develop a level of empathy and compassion for ourselves and others.... (14)

In a lot of ways, it's a fairly Buddhist worldview. Remember the First Noble Truth, that being alive means you will experience suffering and unsatisfactoriness. The first two strategies of numbing or repressing do not tend to work out well long term. As the writer Anne Lamott has said about her attempts to numb her suffering, "**By the end I was deteriorating faster than I could lower my standards**" (17). At such points, when you are nearing bottom, it's more important than ever to practice self-compassion, and to seek a community larger than yourself in which other people are also seeking to bring their authentic, imperfect selves.

It is also clear that Dr. Brown's latest book, which was published last year, in 2017, is explicitly written at multiple points in response to the 2016 Presidential Election. She knows it is no small thing, in such a time as this, to challenge oneself—and challenge us—to practice courage, vulnerability, self-compassion, and empathy. But I think she's right that such practices can begin to change us and the world.

So for such a time as this—when our country is deeply divided in many ways—Brown has tried to distill the lessons of her research into four specific practices:

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. (36)

I'll say a few words about each of these practices in turn. As I share about each of them in more detail, I would encourage you not to feel overwhelmed, as if you need to try all four at once. Notice if one or more resonates with you in particular for this season of your life.

First, Dr. Brown's research has shown that, "**People are hard to hate close up. Move in.**" There's a lot to explore here, and since we have limited time, I'll go straight to the top of quite a few people's lists. Speaking for myself personally, I have found it unhelpful to hate President Trump. And if I try move closer—metaphorically speaking, of course—I have found that I can feel compassion for him. Remember what Brown said about the two common responses to feeling like you don't belong: (1) "seek relief by numbing it and/or inflicting it in others" or (2) "deny your pain, and your denial ensures that you pass it on to those around you." Well, from what I can tell, Trump had a toxic childhood that he is, in turn, inflicting on his children, a series of wives, and now the whole world. And although he is a teetotaler in regard to alcohol, one of his unhealthy coping mechanisms appears to be trying to constantly binge-watch television news all day and late into the night—and multi-tasking by tweeting about it.

Here's the important caveat: feeling *compassion* for someone does not entail thinking that person should remain in a position of power. But whereas hating someone eventually feels poisonous to my system, feeling compassion allows me to advocate for social change from a place that feels less constricted, more free, and more aligned with our UU First Principle of "The inherent worth and dignity of every person" (75).

For a more commonplace practice, I appreciate this line from Dr. Brown. She says that if you find yourself suddenly in the middle of a difficult and uncomfortable conversation, **the most courageous thing to say is "Tell me more"** (83). That's the best way she's found to experiment with the truth that, "People are hard to hate close up. Move in." Get curious about the stories and experiences behind why some others think differently than you do, which might open up space for you to share your stories and experiences of why you experience the world differently.

The second of Dr. Brown's four practices for such a time as this is also transparently born out of current events: "**Speak truth to bullshit. Be civil.**" Along

those lines, have any of you ever read the little book by the philosopher Harry Frankfurt titled On Bullshit? It really is a tiny little book, weighing in at 67 pages, and it makes important distinctions between merely lying and spinning a web of bullshit.

For instance, some of you may be familiar with Alberto Brandolini's Bullshit Asymmetry Principle also known as Brondolini's law: "**The amount of energy needed to refute bullshit is an order of magnitude bigger than to produce it**" (94). And while that is true, Dr. Brown's research maintains the wisdom of speaking truth and remaining civil. It's not easy to do. But adding yet more bullshit into the fray will never build the world we dream about. And authentic, vulnerable people remain deeply compelling, which is one reason there is so much fear in certain quarters about the potential testimony of Dr. Christine Ford.

Brown's third practice is "**Hold hands. With strangers**" (117). The heart of this practice is our UU Seventh Principle of the "interdependent web of all existence." In a time when it can be easy to feel broken, fractured, and disconnected, our approach to other people, ourselves, and the world can be transformed if we shift from a starting point of *isolation* to a starting point of *interdependence*—a deeply felt sense of connection. The good news is that even when we feel alone, the deeper truth is that we are always already connected. In Dr. King's words, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be."

Finally, Brown's fourth practice is "**Strong back. Soft front. Wild heart.**" This mantra is inspired by the Buddhist teacher Joan Halifax, who writes that:

All too often our so-called strength comes from fear, not love; instead of having a strong back, many of us have a defended front shielding a weak spine. In other words, we [move through the world] 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 us.

That final piece of the mantra of “wild heart” is about what can happen when we move from fear to love. Surprising transformations can happen if we open ourselves to the fullness what is really happening in ourselves and others around us in each present moment.

So, for such a time as this in our world—and in this season of your life—I invite you to consider if one or more of Brown’s four practices particularly resonate with you:

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.

The promise of these and other related practices is to help us experience a deeper sense of true belonging, such that we might then be ready to act with courage whenever the wilderness presents itself.

For now, I will leave you to consider this quote from Dr. Brené Brown:

Stop [moving] 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. (158)

Another way of phrasing this insight is question “**Are you identifying *in*? Or are you identifying *out*?**” Whether here at UUCF, in relationships at home, relationships at work, or elsewhere, do you tend to look for all the ways you are *different* or all the ways you are the *same*? Both tendencies have value and are important to honor, but at least for this moment, Dr. Brown invites us to consider this wisdom: “**Our call to courage is to protect our wild heart against constant evaluation, especially our own. No one**

belongs here more than you.” That also means, of course, that no one belongs here *less* than you.

But the core question remains. Remember the proverb that says, “Wherever you go, there you are?” Well, what might change for you and for your relationships with others if, wherever you are, you start from a conviction that, “No one belongs here more than you?”