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**Awkward, Brave, & Kind:  
A Valediction from Brené Brown**

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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 five #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 (299).

Over the years, I've preached three sermons inspired by some of her previous 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).

As one of my colleagues said, “There might be a sermon on every page on this book.” And although it is worth owning a physical copy of this book, I have heard that the Audible version is also excellent, read by Brené herself. She even includes some updated bonus materials about new research findings since the print version of the book was released.

Before diving into the details of the book, I’ll add that I have also been listening to a lot of Brené Brown’s podcasts. There is a mantra she uses to sign off at the end of each episode: “**Stay awkward, brave, and kind.**” That valediction is another important distillation of her work, and I would like to invite you to spend a few minutes unpacking it.

If you could offer your fellow human beings only three simple words to live by, what words would you choose? I will confess that *awkward* would not be at the top of my list, but that’s one of the reasons I find Brené Brown so compelling: she challenges me to be more fully authentic about *all* of myself, even when I inevitably stumble into situations in life that feel awkward.

Staying authentic when awkwardness happens is easier said than done. I wonder if some of you, like me, have not only an inner Brené Brown encouraging you to lean in to being awkward, brave, and kind, but also an inner adolescent, an inner middle schooler desperately begging you to be anything but awkward around your peers. *Please don’t be awkward! Please don’t be awkward!*

Here’s the thing: life *is* awkward sometimes. Human beings are all flawed—period. Me, you, others around us are gonna mess it up periodically, despite our best intentions. As you’ve heard me quote before, “**We are saved from perfection**” ([Rev. Elizabeth Nguyen](#)); it’s an impossible ideal. That doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t try our best or seek to improve. But it does mean that we can give ourselves permission to be imperfect, and to learn from our mistakes.

When Brené front-loads *awkward* in her advice to “Stay awkward, brave, and kind,” she is inviting us not to feel like we have to sweep the awkward under the rug or try to pretend like it didn’t happen. Instead, she encourages us to lean in to the power of vulnerability, transparency, and authenticity.

In a line that I think about all the time, Brené Brown says it this way: **“I’m here to get it right, not to be right”** (247). I love that: I’m not here to *be* right; I’m here to *get* it right. If I’m here to *be* right, I’m setting myself up to be defensive and guarded—to protect an impossible ideal of perfection. But if I’m here to *get* it right, I’m stipulating up front that awkwardness is going to happen sometimes, setting us up for feedback and perspectives we had not previously considered.

That phrase begins to get to the heart of what it means to *stay awkward*: “I’m here to *get* it right, not to *be* right.” In each moment, I’m going to be the best “myself” that I know how to be, while staying open to learning how to be wiser, more compassionate, more generous, and more inclusive.

What about the second part of Brené Brown’s admonition to “Stay awkward, *brave*, and kind.” If it’s not too awkward, I’ll confess that when I think of the word *brave*, the first quote that comes to mind is from *Game of Thrones*. Those of you who know the books or the TV series may remember that young Bran Stark asks his father, **“Can [you] still be brave if [you’re] afraid?” His father replies, “That is the only time [you] can be brave.”**

If we are seeking to “Stay awkward, *brave*, and kind,” those words are sage advice. Being brave doesn’t mean being unafraid. It means choosing to act courageously even when that courage requires you to push through fear.

There is also a related quote from Brené Brown’s previous book *Dare to Lead* that is the passage I’ve thought about the most from that book. She writes:

Don't grab hurtful comments and pull them close to you by rereading them and ruminating on them. Don't play with them by rehearsing your badass comeback. And whatever you do, don't pull hatefulness close to your heart. **Let what's unproductive and hurtful drop at the feet of your unarmored self.** And no matter how much your self-doubt wants to scoop up the criticism and snuggle with the negativity so it can confirm its worst fears, or how eager the shame gremlins are to use the hurt to fortify your armor, take a deep breath and find the strength to leave what's mean-spirited on the ground. You don't even need to stomp it or

kick it away. Cruelty is cheap, easy, and chickenshit. It doesn't deserve your energy or engagement. Just step over the comments and keep daring, always remembering that **armor is too heavy a price to pay to engage with cheap-seat feedback** (21).

That quote also has much to do with honoring Brown's admonition to "Stay awkward, brave, and kind"—even while staying open, authentic, vulnerable, and transparent.

Let me add one more Brown-ism that connects us back to being awkward and brave. Brown regularly says that, "**Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind**" (130). We need to be willing to risk being awkward, and brave enough to communicate what kindness really looks like: to share kindly, what we really need and want is to invite others to share likewise with us. "Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind."

I wanted to start with those three simple words because there's so much wisdom to unpack just in Brown's parting advice to "Stay awkward, brave, and kind." But now let us turn our attention to Brown's new book.

First of all, why do we even need an "atlas" of the heart? Why do we need a map to guide us around our feelings? Why refine our understanding of the useful 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 merely those basic three emotions, Brené Brown's book gives us a guided tour through 87 essential emotions, usefully organized for us into 13 categories.

Researchers have identified at least 150 emotions, 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 expanding our emotional vocabulary helps us become more conscious of what was previously unconscious—which doesn’t mean it’s easy, but at least it becomes more workable. As the saying goes: **“What we resist persists, but what we feel, we can heal.”**

For now, I only have time to share a few highlights from three of Brown’s thirteen emotional clusters; however, I am going to schedule a “Part Two” of this sermon for the fall so that we can explore Brown’s insights further—together.

I chose explicate the first cluster of emotions because they feel so relevant to our current state of affairs. Brown labeled this cluster: **“Places we go when things are *uncertain or too much*.”** Has anyone felt like that in recent years, like everything was too uncertain or too much? The emotions in this cluster include stress, overwhelm, anxiety, worry, avoidance, excitement, dread, fear, and vulnerability. With this list of nine emotions, we’ve already tripled our vocabulary beyond glad, sad, and mad.

When I think about “places we go when things are uncertain or too much,” I’m reminded of a line from the singer-songwriter Carrie Newcomer that says, **“I’ve been traveling faster than my soul can go.”** Have you felt like that lately? With politics, the pandemic, climate change, and all the various personal tragedies that have come our respective ways, have you felt like it’s all been “unfolding faster than our nervous system and psyche are able to manage” (7)? This is one of those places where a more nuanced emotional vocabulary can be invaluable.

Let me give you an example. When things are uncertain or too much, Brown invites us to discern the difference between stress and overwhelm. Before I share this distinction, consider whether there’s a difference in the way you might typically use or understand the terms. Are they really interchangeable?

Brown challenges us to consider that the nuances within emotional vocabulary matter. To Brown, **“Stressed is being in the weeds. Overwhelmed is being blown”**

(6). If we're stressed out, we may have too much on our plate and need to reevaluate our commitments. But if we're overwhelmed, we are no longer able to function. In Brown's words, **"Doing nothing is the only way back for someone totally overwhelmed"** (7).

Such small distinctions make a difference. Are you merely a bit *stressed* out, in which case you may need to let go of some responsibilities and/or ask for help? Or are you genuinely *overwhelmed*, in which case you may be beyond even being able to ask for help, to just let go and let someone else take over for a period of time?

Along these lines of letting go and allowing others to help when we are stressed or overwhelmed, let me share with you one more quote from the writer Elizabeth Gilbert: **"You are afraid of surrender because you don't want to lose control. But you never had control; all you had was anxiety"** (9). Can anyone identify with that? As Brown might say, *I feel a little called out*, but in a good way!

The second cluster of emotions that I want us to explore is titled: **"Place we go when we compare."** Here, the central emotions include "comparison, admiration, reverence, envy, jealousy, resentment, *schadenfreude*, and *freudensfreude*" (16).

The Buddhist tradition warns against "comparing mind," the proclivity to evaluate oneself based on one's own projected sense of others. Or, as the recovery community sometimes puts it: **"Don't compare your insides to someone else's outsides."** In Brown's words, "Comparison is the crush of conformity from one side and competition from the other—it's trying to simultaneously fit in and stand out. Comparison says, 'Be like everyone else, but better'" (22-23).

Also from that chapter, Brown compares and contrasts the German words *Schadenfreude*, literally "pain-joy" — "pleasure at other people's pain" — with *Freudensfreude*, "enjoyment of another's success" (33-34). A rarely used English equivalent is confelicity, "pleasure in another's happiness." Or in the Buddhist tradition, there is the related practice of *empathetic joy* (*mudita* in Pali)—opening one's heart to experiencing another person's joy. Empathetic joy can be a wonderful way to be on social media: instead of feeling jealous or envious, try opening to another person's joy.

For our third and final cluster of emotions, let's explore "**Places we go with others,**" which includes the emotions of "compassion, pity, empathy, sympathy, boundaries, and comparative suffering."

Here, I want to underscore two particularly salient insights from Brown. The first is the difference between *compassion* (being in solidarity with someone) and trying to *fix or save* someone. In a poignant example of parenting, Brown shares that, "**I used to race to flip on the metaphorical lights when my kids were suffering. Now, I try to sit with them in the dark and show them how to feel the discomfort**" (119). Can you feel the difference there, between compassion and fixing?

Remember that saying we explored earlier: "What we resist persists, but what we feel, we can heal." Sometimes the only way out is *through*. But it can help to have someone in compassionate solidarity with us, accompanying us on the emotional rollercoaster of our lives.

Compassion, however, can also lead to overwhelm. How much can we open to the suffering of others? Prentis Hemphill says it this way: "**Boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously**" (129). That's worth spending quite a bit of time considering.

We've only just begun to explore three of Brown's thirteen emotional clusters, and we'll return this fall for part two on the wisdom of *The Atlas of the Heart*. For now, I will give the last words to Brené Brown—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)