

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author

# Brené Brown

PhD, MSW



we are the mapmakers  
and the travelers

# ATLAS → OF THE ← HEART

Mapping Meaningful Connection and  
the Language of Human Experience

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**Brené Brown**

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# **Atlas of the Heart**

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MAPPING MEANINGFUL CONNECTION AND  
THE LANGUAGE OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE



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# Introduction

*Heart is sea,  
language is shore.  
Whatever sea includes,  
will hit the shore.*

— RUMI

## How It Started

I am not a sentimental keeper of things.

Maybe it's because I come from a long line of people who hold on to everything—every receipt and photo and old department store box. From the time I was in my early twenties, I often had the unenviable task of packing up the houses of relatives who could no longer live at home or who had died. If the movie montage version of this chore exists, I've never experienced it. It's miserable.

First, no one in my family is going to admit that they might, at some point, get sick or die. My people die with a look of defiance on their face and shit in every drawer. This leaves me and my sisters packing, crying, cussing, and using every single tool we've learned in therapy to resist turning on one another when we're exhausted. That's actually the only time we laugh—when one of us says “I wish I could take out my rage on y'all” and the other two, without even looking up, say, “Yeah. Same.”

There is nothing sweet about packing up. It's hard physical work and an emotional minefield. *Do I keep it? Do I trash it when no one is looking? Should I feel bad? Am I bad? Maybe I should box it all up and let my kids deal with it when it's their turn?*

As far as my own stuff goes, I was Marie Kondo before Marie Kondo was cool. Just like I'm convinced that my car goes faster after I get an oil change, I can feel my house sighing with relief when I take five bags of stuff to the local shelter. There's a lift and a lightness. And a sense of control. The house stands a little straighter without the extra weight, and I feel freer with a little less baggage.

Becoming a parent made the purging tricky. In 1999, when I was pregnant with Ellen, I saw something on TV—a reality show or a movie or something—that showed how a mother had kept all of her son's drawings and used them to decorate for his wedding rehearsal dinner. *Jesus. So much pressure.* From that point forward, every one of the 5,684 pieces of art that my kids brought home became an emotional negotiation about their rehearsal dinner. At some point I realized that unless I was hosting this dinner in a stadium, one box of curated pieces was enough. I saved some, framed and hung pieces all over the house, photographed some of them, and, when no one was looking, put the rest in the garbage. Way down deep where no one could see.

So, given my tendency to throw out everything, I'm always fascinated when I come across an old box of my own stuff. I must have thought something was really important if it warranted saving. If you put all of my memorabilia and artifacts together, you would get the most accurate story of who I was and what I valued at any one point in my life. And you'd probably need no more than a standard issue dining room table to lay it out.

I came across this old college paper several years ago—when I was starting this book. It's not a great or even a very good paper, but it knocked me off



balance for a few months. *Why have I been thinking about emotions for so long? Why has this always been so important? Can I even remember a time when I wasn't thinking about emotions?*

As I unpacked a few other things in the box—a lifeguard whistle, poems I'd written, a mixtape from Steve, and a few pictures—my time capsule transported me back to my Flock of Seagulls asymmetrical haircut and a 1974 Volvo 240D with a floorboard that was so rusted out I could see the road pass beneath as I drove. I spent a couple of days with my 1987 self and learned some things that I had either never known or never acknowledged, or things I possibly once knew and pushed way down.

C. Irene Braun  
October 9, 1984



## Why We Feel the Pain We Feel

Throughout our lives we must experience emotions and feelings that are inevitably painful and devastating. In order to be able to cope with these situations, we must individually find explanations and justifications for having to endure this pain. Although my explanations are personal and based on my own needs, I feel they are good guidelines to help others who have not been able to understand the reasoning behind sorrow.

Because life's problems follow a very specific and planned sequence, it's necessary to understand the sequence of childhood

I come from a very tough, suck-it-up-get-it-done-and-don't-talk-about-feelings family. Both of my parents had a hard upbringing with a lot of trauma, and despite their own unhappiness, they considered the life they gave us the height of mythical suburban bliss. In their high school years, my dad was the rage-and-grief-fueled football captain and my mom was the head of the drill team and president of half a dozen clubs. She was everything she needed to be to redeem the reputation of what was inconceivable in the *Leave It to Beaver* 1950s—having an alcoholic mother.

When I was growing up, there was a lot of unpredictable behavior and intense emotion in our home. There was intense love and there was intense rage. There was intense laughter and intense hurt. But even the good times were dicey, because they could turn in an instant.

I am the oldest of four, so I often felt the brunt of the madness, along with the responsibility of protecting my siblings from the unpredictable swings. When things were bad, I was the protector. When things were great, I was the protector-in-waiting, always on the outside of the fun, easily teased for being too serious, and always knowing that we were one sideways glance or one smart-ass comment from chaos.

By the time I was in middle school, I had used a combination of my mom's magazines and after-school specials to diagnose myself as "crazy." I know that's a pathologizing word, but back then it was all I had.

First, nothing, I mean *nothing*, was discussed or normalized in my family. Not feelings or fears or periods or friend problems or puberty or money issues or extended family members who struggled with addiction and mental health issues—nothing. *We are all good*. Any question or attempt to understand the things that were clearly *not good* was immediately shut down in punitive ways. For children, it's easy for everything to become a source of shame when nothing is normalized. You assume that if no one is talking about it, it must be just you.

Second, my parents were confusing. My parents were and are good people who did the very best they could with the tools they had. Sometimes those tools weren't enough. Growing up, they seemed to be funny, loving, well liked, smart, great storytellers, and caring neighbors. People loved them. Because they were predictably good outside the house, and wildly unpredictable inside, I assumed it was us. And because I was the oldest, I assumed it was mostly me. And again, it was shaming for all of us when the inside behaviors didn't match the families on TV. Something was wrong and it must be us. We were wrong.

As if all of this wasn't enough to navigate, I had magic powers. And I couldn't talk about them or ask anyone what to do with them. I wasn't allowed to see *The Exorcist*, *Sybil*, or *Carrie*, but I knew enough about these movies to use them as my reference points for unwell teenage girls. Needless to say, I was worried. Can you imagine how this conversation would have gone over with parents who wanted nothing more than to fit in and be the suburban ideal? *Hey, Mom and Dad, I didn't make the drill team, I don't have a date with a football player to Homecoming, and I got in trouble for saying "shithead" in English. But I do have secret powers.*

At the time, I would have told you that I could predict the future. I couldn't tell you what was going to happen in twenty years, but I could tell you with stunning accuracy what was going to happen in twenty minutes. And when you're young and navigating a tough time at home combined with moving and changing schools in fourth grade, sixth grade, and eighth grade, twenty minutes is all the future you have. So, yes. I could predict the future.

I knew which snarky comment would produce a laugh and which one would set off a fight. And I knew why. I knew that the comment about too much dessert was funny when someone felt good about how they looked and how the same comment would unleash a screaming match if someone didn't feel good about themselves that day or that hour.

I knew everyone's shame triggers and the unwanted identities that elicited their shame. I knew how it was important for everyone to be perceived, when we could poke fun, and how long we had to get the hell out of Dodge if we got that wrong. I knew that everyone in our family was really smart and funny, yet there were flavors of teasing that people used to work out stress or hurt, and once unleashed, that type of teasing wouldn't stop until someone was crying.

I also knew every inch of the supposedly "socially acceptable" place for processing anger, like driving and sporting events. I started out as an athlete but quit as soon as I could. It was too humiliating. Today, when I see *that parent* at my kids' events, I have to put myself in a trance or leave. The irony is that the first time my dad came to one of Ellen's field hockey games, he got out of his folding chair in the middle of the game and started pacing along the fence line. When I went over to ask him what was wrong, he said, "These girls are under too much pressure. These parents and coaches are really piling it on. And someone's going to get hurt with those big sticks." *Who are you?*

The terrifying road rage moments of my childhood left me and my nervous system incapable of handling raging drivers. A couple of years ago, I had a driver pick me up at the airport for a work trip. He got angry when someone passed us on the right side of the freeway, so he started speeding up and slamming on the brakes to prevent that driver from sliding in front of us in the passing lane. I had to say, "I need you to pull over and let me out or stop driving like this." He laughed like I was joking until I put the driving service dispatch operator on speakerphone.

I was eight or nine years old the first time I realized that my superpowers worked outside the house. Our neighborhood swim team coach liked some people and disliked others, and his preferences seemed to change every day. Everyone tried to figure it out—some of the kids even ran experiments—but no one could solve it. Except me. I knew the secret.

This coach liked effort more than natural talent. He liked the kids who tried, even if they didn't win. And, my God, he loved backstroke. So every day when I got to practice, I'd pick the lane with the people who tried the hardest, not the best swimmers but the people who were dying by the time they reached the wall. Luckily, "dying by the time you reach the wall" was a good fit for me. And for free stroke, I'd always swim backstroke. He was a yeller, but I was never once on the receiving end of it.

I also had a really awful piano teacher who would shame and humiliate students. Because of my secret powers, I was never victimized by the teacher, but that wasn't enough. I could barely tolerate watching it happen to others, so I did my best to set the class up for success. One day, as I was showing my friend the scale we were working on, we both started giggling about something (probably how terrible I was at piano). The instructor went nuts and screamed "Why are you laughing?"

We didn't move a muscle.

Finally she said, "One of you is going to the principal's office—who's it going to be?"

It only took me a couple of seconds to work out that my parents would be okay with my getting in trouble, but this girl had an older brother who was constantly in trouble. I had even seen her mom at the school crying and picking him up from the principal's office. I shot straight up. "Me."

She told me to sit back down and set her sights on the girl sitting next to me, who was trembling. I looked at her and said, "No. I will not sit down. It was me." She lost her mind. But I was never afraid. I marched down to the office, gave the principal's assistant my home phone number, and refused to talk to anyone until my parents got there.

I told my parents that I had to stand up for someone who was getting picked on and who was afraid. My dad had me moved out of piano and we stopped for ice cream on the way home. He was proud of me for standing up to a bully. I was proud of myself for accurately predicting how everything would play out, but it wasn't a warm and fuzzy moment for me. The irony was too obvious.

Maybe I couldn't actually predict the future, but I did have top-level observation powers. I understood that people would do almost anything to not feel pain, including causing pain and abusing power, and I understood that there were very few people who could handle being held accountable for causing hurt without rationalizing, blaming, or shutting down.

What surprised me the most when I was growing up was how little other people seemed to understand or even think about the connection between feelings, thinking, and behavior. I remember often thinking, *Oh, God. Do you not see this coming?* I didn't feel smarter or better, just weirder and pained by the amount of hurt that we are capable of causing one another. The observation powers were partly survival and partly how I'm wired.

Everyone, including me, seemed so desperate to feel more connected to their own lives and to one another, but no one was looking in the right places. No one was thinking about how it all works together. Everyone seemed disembodied from their own inner world and disconnected from other people. Too many lonely and secret lives.

As I edged into my late teens and early twenties, my powers waned. Or, it's probably more accurate to say, my power of observation was dulled by a thick layer of beer, cigarettes, dance halls, and behavior that constantly jumped the line between girls-just-want-to-have-fun and self-destructive self-medicating. As it turns out, being able to see what's coming doesn't make it any less painful when it arrives. In fact, knowing probably just upped my anticipatory anxiety and my intolerance for vulnerability. The

eggshells weren't on the ground; they were duct-taped to the soles of my shoes. I could never step lightly enough or run fast enough to get away from the cracking, so I made everything around me so loud that it drowned out the sound.

It's awful that the same substances that take the edge off anxiety and pain also dull our sense of observation. We see the pain caused by the misuse of power, so we numb our pain and lose track of our own power. We become terrified of feeling pain, so we engage in behaviors that become a magnet for more pain. We run from anger and grief straight into the arms of fear, perfectionism, and the desperate need for control.

*Oh, God. Did I not see this coming?*

Over the course of several years, I learned that if understanding power and the connections between the way we feel, think, and act was my superpower, numbing was my kryptonite. Inspired by my mom, who, after my parents' divorce, worked several jobs and started therapy, I got help. I got sober and started doing my own work.

It may be just a couple of sentences here, but it was years of terrifying change, hard goodbyes, and boundaries—a truckload of boundaries. When we stop numbing and start feeling and learning again, we have to reevaluate everything, especially how to choose loving ourselves over making other people comfortable. It was the hardest work I've ever done and continue to do.

I learned that taking the edge off is not rewarding, but putting the edge back on is one of the most worthwhile things we can do. Those sharp edges feel vulnerable, but they are also the markers that let us know where we end and others begin.



Understanding and feeling those edges brings grace and clarity. The edges taught me that the more I used alcohol, food, work, caretaking, and whatever else I could get my hands on to numb my anxiety and vulnerability, the less I would understand my feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. I finally realized that trying to outrun and outsmart vulnerability and pain is choosing a life defined by suffering and exhaustion.

Still today, the more I pay attention to my life and the messages from the edges, the more I'm able to choose a way of life that doesn't demand constant vigilance and preparedness. And when there are things outside my control that do demand high alert—COVID, for example—I know running away from the pain and anxiety is way more risky than leaning in and locking eyes with it.

I've learned that power is not bad, but the abuse of power or using power over others is the opposite of courage; it's a desperate attempt to maintain a very fragile ego. It's the desperate scramble of self-worth quicksand. When people are hateful or cruel or just being assholes, they're showing us exactly what they're afraid of. Understanding their motivation doesn't make their behavior less difficult to bear, but it does give us choices. And subjecting ourselves to that behavior by choice doesn't make us tough—it's a sign of our own lack of self-worth.

I know more than I'd like about being subjected to this kind of behavior when I don't want to be, volunteering to experience it just to prove to myself and others that I'm tough, and, sadly, perpetrating it as well. I can get really scary when I'm scared if I'm not paying attention.

I also learned that when you hold someone accountable for hurtful behaviors and they feel shame, that's not the same as shaming someone. I am responsible for holding you accountable in a respectful and productive way. I'm not responsible for your emotional reaction to that accountability. Sadly, I've also learned that sometimes, even when the pain takes your

breath away, you have to let the people you love experience the consequences of their own behavior. That one really hurts.

Last, I know I will never have to stop learning these things. Over and over. I've made a lot of progress, but the learning will never stop. I'm just grateful that I can find *and feel* the edges today. I love that saying, "The center will hold." I believe that in the midst of struggle, the center will hold if, and only if, we can feel the edges.

## How It's Going

Although I started honing my power of observation in kindergarten, I officially began studying the connection between how we think, feel, and act over twenty years ago. In addition to researching, I now spend most of my time writing, talking to and learning from social scientists and experts on my podcasts, and working in organizations with leaders who are scaling courage-building skills and creating culture change.

In some ways a lot has changed, and in other ways not enough has changed. For example, today if you ask me to identify the biggest barriers to developing brave leaders or cultivating courage in our families or bringing justice to communities, I'd go right back to what I believed was true about people when I was a kid:

People will do almost anything to not feel pain, including causing pain and abusing power;

Very few people can handle being held accountable without rationalizing, blaming, or shutting down; and

Without understanding how our feelings, thoughts, and behaviors work together, it's almost impossible to find our way back to ourselves and each other. When we don't understand how our emotions shape our thoughts and decisions, we become disembodied from our own experiences and disconnected from each other.

Fifteen years ago, when we first introduced a curriculum based on my shame resilience research, we asked participants in the training workshops to list all of the emotions that they could recognize and name as they were experiencing them. Over the course of five years, we collected these surveys from more than seven thousand people. The average number of emotions named across the surveys was three. The emotions were happy, sad, and angry.

When I think about this data, I think back to a quote from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein that I came across in college: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." What does it mean if the vastness of human emotion and experience can only be expressed as mad, sad, or happy? What about shame, disappointment, wonder, awe, disgust, embarrassment, despair, contentment, boredom, anxiety, stress, love, overwhelm, surprise, and all of the other emotions and experiences that define what it means to be human?

Imagine if you had a shooting pain in your left shoulder that was so severe it actually took your breath away. The pain kept you from working, sleeping, and fully engaging in your life. When you finally arrive at the doctor's office and she asks what's going on, there's suddenly tape over your mouth and your hands are tied behind your back. You try yelling through the tape and freeing your hands so you can point to your shoulder, but there's no use. You're just there— inches and minutes from help and possible relief—but you can't communicate or explain the pain. I would imagine in that situation most of us would either fall to the floor in despair

or fling ourselves around the room in uncontrollable rage. This is not that different from what can happen to us when we are unable to articulate our emotions. We feel hopeless or we feel a destructive level of anger.

Language is our portal to meaning-making, connection, healing, learning, and self-awareness. Having access to the right words can open up entire universes. When we don't have the language to talk about what we're experiencing, our ability to make sense of what's happening and share it with others is severely limited. Without accurate language, we struggle to get the help we need, we don't always regulate or manage our emotions and experiences in a way that allows us to move through them productively, and our self-awareness is diminished. Language shows us that naming an experience doesn't give the experience more power, it gives *us* the power of understanding and meaning.

Additionally, we have compelling research that shows that language does more than just communicate emotion, it can actually shape what we're feeling. Our understanding of our own and others' emotions is shaped by how we perceive, categorize, and describe emotional experiences—and these interpretations rely heavily on language.

Language speeds and strengthens connections in the brain when we are processing sensory information. But newer research shows that when our access to emotional language is blocked, our ability to interpret incoming emotional information is significantly diminished. Likewise, having the correct words to describe specific emotions makes us better able to identify those emotions in others, as well as to recognize and manage the emotional experiences when we feel them ourselves.

Our ability to accurately recognize and label emotions is often referred to as *emotional granularity*. In the words of Harvard psychologist Susan David, "Learning to label emotions with a more nuanced vocabulary can be absolutely transformative." David explains that if we don't have a sufficient