

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author

**BRENÉ BROWN**

PhD, LMSW

The Quest for True Belonging  
and the Courage to Stand Alone

**BRAVING THE  
WILDERNESS**



# **BRAVING THE WILDERNESS**

---

The Quest for True Belonging  
and the Courage to Stand Alone

---

**BRENÉ BROWN, PHD, LMSW**



RANDOM HOUSE | NEW YORK

This is a work of nonfiction. Nonetheless, some of the names and personal characteristics of the individuals involved have been changed in order to disguise their identities. Any resulting resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

Copyright © 2017 by Brené Brown

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

RANDOM HOUSE and the HOUSE colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Hardback ISBN 9780812995848

International edition ISBN 9780525508694

Ebook ISBN 9780812995855

[randomhousebooks.com](http://randomhousebooks.com)

Title-page art: borchee/iStock by Getty Images

Chapter-opening art: kovalto1/Shutterstock.com

Cover design: DESIGNHAUS CREATIVE STUDIO

Cover photograph: © borchee/iStock

v4.1

ep

# Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

Chapter One: Everywhere and Nowhere

Chapter Two: The Quest for True Belonging

Chapter Three: High Lonesome: A Spiritual Crisis

Chapter Four: People Are Hard to Hate Close Up. Move In.

Chapter Five: Speak Truth to Bullshit. Be Civil.

Chapter Six: Hold Hands. with Strangers.

Chapter Seven: Strong Back. Soft Front. Wild Heart.

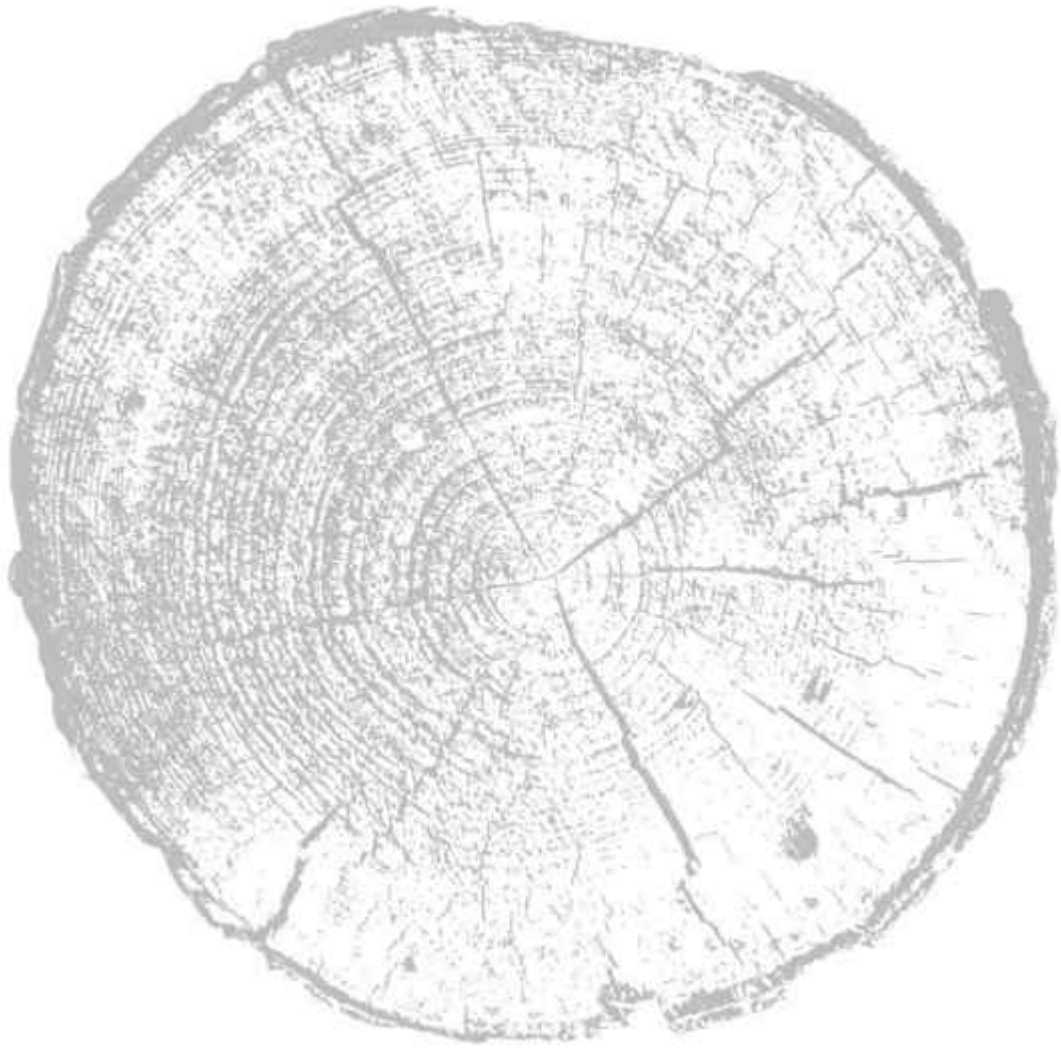
*Dedication*

*Acknowledgments*

*Notes*

*By Brené Brown*

*About the Author*



ONE

...

# Everywhere and Nowhere

When I start writing, I inevitably feel myself swallowed by fear. And it's especially true when I notice that findings from my research are going to challenge long-held beliefs or ideas. When this happens, it doesn't take long before I start thinking, *Who am I to say this? Or, I'm really going to piss people off if I call their ideas into question.*

In these uncertain and risky moments of vulnerability, I search for inspiration from the brave innovators and disrupters whose courage feels contagious. I read and watch everything by them or about them that I can get my hands on—every interview, every essay, every lecture, every book. I do this so that when I need them, when I'm living in my fear, they come to sit with me and cheer me on. Most important, while watching over my shoulder, they put up with very little of my bullshit.

Developing this process took time. In my earlier years, I tried the opposite approach—filling my mind with critics and naysayers. I would sit at my desk and picture the faces of my least favorite professors, my harshest and most cynical colleagues, and my most unforgiving online critics. *If I can keep them happy, I thought, or at the very least quiet, I'll be good to go.* The outcome was the worst-case scenario for a researcher or a social scientist: findings that were gently folded into a preexisting way of seeing the world; findings that carefully nudged existing ideas but did so without upsetting anyone; findings that were safe, filtered, and comfortable. But none of that was authentic. It was a tribute.

So I decided that I had to fire those naysayers and fearmongers. In their places, I began to summon up men and women who have shaped the

world with their courage and creativity. And who have, at least on occasion, pissed people off. They are a varied bunch. J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter books I love so much, is my go-to person when I'm struggling with how to introduce a new and strange world of ideas that has only just emerged from my research. I imagine her telling me: *New worlds are important, but you can't just describe them. Give us the stories that make up that universe. No matter how wild and weird the new world might be, we'll see ourselves in the stories.*

The author and activist bell hooks comes to the fore when there's a painful conversation happening around race, gender, or class. She's taught me about teaching as a sacred act and the importance of discomfort in learning. And Ed Catmull, Shonda Rhimes, and Ken Burns stand behind me, whispering in my ear, while I'm telling a story. They nudge me when I become impatient and start skipping the details and dialogue that bring meaning to storytelling. "Take us with you into that story," they insist. Countless musicians and artists also show up, as does Oprah. Her advice is tacked to the wall in my study: "Do not think you can be brave with your life and your work and never disappoint anyone. It doesn't work that way."

But my oldest and most steadfast counselor is Maya Angelou. I was introduced to her work thirty-two years ago when I was studying poetry in college. I read her poem "Still I Rise" and everything shifted for me. It contained such power and beauty. I collected every Angelou book, poem, and interview I could find, and her words taught me, pushed me, and healed me. She managed to be both full of joy *and* unsparing.

But there was one quote from Maya Angelou that I deeply disagreed with. It was a quote on belonging, which I came across when I was teaching a course on race and class at the University of Houston. In an interview with Bill Moyers that aired on public television in 1973, Dr. Angelou said:

You are only free when you realize you belong no place—you belong every place—no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great.



I can remember exactly what I thought when I read that quote. *That's just wrong. What kind of world would it be if we belonged nowhere? Just a bunch of lonely people coexisting. I don't think she understands the power of belonging.*

For over twenty years, whenever that quote popped up in my life, I felt a rush of anger. *Why would she say that? That's not true. Belonging is essential. We must belong to something, to someone, to somewhere.* I soon realized that the anger came from two places. First, Dr. Angelou had come to mean so much to me that I just couldn't stand the thought that we disagreed on something so fundamental. Second, the need to fit in and the ache of not belonging was one of the most painful threads in my own life. I couldn't accept the idea of "belonging nowhere" as freedom. Feeling like I never truly belonged anywhere was my greatest pain, a personal suffering that threaded through most of my pre-adult life.

It was in no way my liberation.

Experiences of not belonging are the time markers of my life, and they started early. I attended pre-K and kindergarten at Paul Habans Elementary on the west bank of New Orleans. It was 1969, and as wonderful as the city was and still is, it was a place suffocated by racism. Schools had only become officially desegregated the year I started. I didn't know or understand much about what was happening, I was too young; but I knew that my mom was outspoken and tenacious. She spoke up a lot and even wrote a letter to the *Times-Picayune* challenging the legality of what today we'd call racial profiling. I could sense that energy around her, but to me, she was still just a volunteer in my homeroom and the person who made me, herself, and my Barbie matching yellow plaid shift dresses.

We had moved there from Texas, and that had been hard for me. I desperately missed my grandmother, but I was eager to make new friends at school and around our apartment complex. It quickly got complicated, though. Homeroom lists were used to determine *everything*—from attendance records to birthday party invitations. One day my mom's room-mother partner waved the list in front of my mom's face and said, "Look at all of the black kids on here! Look at these names! *They're all named Casandra!*"

*Huh*, my mom thought. Maybe this explained why I was being left out of so many of my white friends' parties. My mom goes by her middle name, but her first name is Casandra. My full name on that homeroom list? Casandra Brené Brown. If you're African American and reading this, you know exactly why white families weren't inviting me over. It's the same reason a group of African American graduate students gave me a card at the end of the semester that said, "OK. You really are Brené Brown." They had signed up for my course on women's issues and almost fell out of their chairs when I walked to my desk at the front of the classroom on the first day of class. One student said, "You are *not* Casandra Brené Brown?" *Yes, ma'am*. It's also why, when I walked into a job interview for a part-time receptionist at a doctor's office in San Antonio, the woman said, "*You're Brené Brown! Well, what a pleasant surprise!*" And yes, I walked out of the interview before we sat down.

The black families were welcoming to me—but their shock was noticeable when I walked through the door. One of my friends told me I was the first white person who had ever been inside their house. That's hard to wrap your head around when you're four years old and you're really there for pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey and to eat cake with your friends. As simple as belonging should be in kindergarten, I was already struggling to understand why I felt on the outside of every group.

The next year we moved to the Garden District so my dad could be closer to Loyola, and I transferred into Holy Name of Jesus. I was an Episcopalian, which made me one of the only non-Catholic students in my school. Turned out I was the wrong religion, yet another wedge between me and belonging. After a year or two of sitting out, being called out, and sometimes being left out, I was sent to the office, and arrived to find God waiting for me. At least that's who I thought it was. It turned out to be a bishop. He handed me a mimeographed copy of the Nicene Creed and we went through it, line by line. When we were done, he handed me a note to take home to my parents. The note read, "Brené is Catholic now."

Still, things were relatively good for the next couple of years as I started to get into the groove of my new life in New Orleans, mostly because I had the best BFF in the world—Eleanor. But then came a bunch of big moves. We left New Orleans for Houston when I was in fourth grade.

Then we left Houston for Washington, D.C., when I was in sixth grade. Then we left Washington when I was in eighth grade and moved back to Houston. The normal turbulence and awkwardness of middle school was magnified by perpetual “new-girl-ness.” My only saving grace was that during all of these transitions, my parents were in a good place and getting along. This meant that despite the turbulence around me with ever-changing schools, friends, and adults, home was safe. It even felt like a refuge from the pain of not belonging. When all else failed, I belonged at home, with my family.

But things started to break. That last move back to Houston was the beginning of the long, miserable end to my parents’ marriage. And right on top of that chaos, there were the Bearkadettes.

When we moved back to Houston at the very end of eighth grade there was, thankfully, just enough time to try out for the high school drill team, called the Bearkadettes. This was to be my everything. In a house that was increasingly filled with the muffled sounds of my parents arguing, heard through the walls of my bedroom, that drill team was salvation. Just picture it: lines of girls in white-fringed blue satin vests and short skirts, all of them wearing uniform wigs, white cowboy boots, small white cowboy hats, and bright red lipstick, strutting into high school football stadiums filled with crowds afraid to leave their seats during halftime lest they miss the high kicks and perfectly choreographed routines. This was my way out, my new, pretty, impeccably ordered refuge.

Eight years of ballet was plenty to get me through the task of learning the routine, and a two-week liquid diet got me through the brutal weigh-in. All of the girls swore by the cabbage soup and water diet. It’s hard to think of letting a twelve-year-old go on a liquid diet, but for some reason it seemed normal.

To this day, I’m not sure I’ve ever wanted anything in my life more than I wanted a place on this drill team. The perfection, precision, and beauty of it would not only offset the growing turmoil at home, but also deliver the holy grail of belonging. I would have a “big sis” and she would decorate my locker. We’d have sleepovers and date football players. For a kid who had seen *Grease* forty-five times, I knew this was the beginning of

a high school experience that included sudden, spontaneous sing-alongs and the 1980s version of sock hops.

And most of all, I would be a part of something that literally did everything together in lockstep. A Bearkadette was belonging personified.

I didn't really have any friends yet, so I was on my own for tryouts. The routine was easy to learn—a jazzy number performed to a big band version of “Swanee” (you know, the “how I love ya, how I love ya” one). There was a lot of sliding with jazz hands and an entire section of high kicks. I could kick higher than all of the girls except one dancer named LeeAnne. I practiced so much that I could do that routine in my sleep. I still remember parts of it today.

Tryout day was terrifying, and I'm not sure if it was my nerves or the starvation diet, but I was lightheaded when I woke up, and I stayed that way after my mom dropped me off at the school. Now, as the mother of a teen and a tween, it's a little hard to think of how I had to walk in by myself, surrounded by groups of girls who were piling out of cars and running in together, holding hands. But I soon realized I had a bigger problem than walking in alone.

All of the girls—and I mean *all* of the girls—were made up from head to toe. Some were wearing blue satin shorts and gold shirts, and others had blue and gold tank tops with little white skirts. There was every iteration of blue and gold bows that you could imagine. And they were all in full makeup. I had on no makeup, and I was wearing gray cotton shorts over a black leotard. No one had told me that you were supposed to get decked out in school colors. Everyone looked so bright and shiny. I looked like the sad girl whose parents fight a lot.

I made the weigh-in with six pounds to spare. Even so, the sight of girls stepping off the scale and running into the locker room weeping traumatized me.

We wore numbers safety-pinned to our shirts and danced in groups of five or six. Lightheaded or not, I nailed the routine. I felt pretty confident when my mom picked me up and I went home to wait it out. They would post the numbers later that evening. Those hours in between moved in slow motion.

Finally, at five after six, we pulled in to the parking lot of my soon-to-be high school. My entire family—mom, dad, brother and sisters—was in the car. I was going to check my number and then we were headed to San Antonio to visit my grandparents. I walked up to the poster board hanging on the outside of the gym door. Standing next to me was one of the girls from my tryout group. She was the brightest and shiniest of all the girls. And on top of all that, her name was Kris. Yes, she even had one of those coveted girl-boy names that we all wanted.

The list was in numeric order. If your number was there, you'd made the team. If your number wasn't there, you were out. I was number 62. My eye went straight for the 60s: 59, 61, 64, 65. I looked again. I just couldn't process it. I thought if I stared hard enough and the universe knew how much was on the line, the number might magically appear. I was ripped out of my negotiation with the universe by Kris's screaming. She was jumping up and down, and before I could make sense of what was happening, her dad had jumped out of the car, run up to her, grabbed her, and twirled her around, just like in the movies. I would later hear through the grapevine that I was a solid dancer but not really Bearkadette material. No bows. No shine. No group. No friends. Nowhere to belong.

*I was alone.* And it felt devastating.

I walked back to our station wagon and got in the backseat, and my dad drove away. My parents didn't say one word. Not a single word. The silence cut into me like a knife to the heart. They were ashamed of me and for me. My dad had been captain of the football team. My mom had been head of her drill team. I was nothing. My parents, especially my father, valued being cool and fitting in above all else. I was not cool. I didn't fit in.

And now, for the first time, I didn't belong to my family either.

My drill team story is one that's easy to dismiss as unimportant in the larger scheme of what's going on in the world today. (I can already see the #firstworldproblems hashtag.) But let me tell you what it meant to me. I don't know if this was true or it was the story I told myself in that silence, but that became the day I no longer belonged in my family—the most primal and important of all of our social groups. Had my parents consoled me or told me I was brave for trying—or, better yet and what I really wanted in that moment, had they taken my side and told me how terrible it

was and how I deserved to be picked—this story wouldn't be one that defined my life and shaped its trajectory. But it did.

---

Sharing this story was so much more difficult than I thought it would be. I had to go to iTunes to remember the name of the tryout song, and when I played the preview, I just started sobbing. I didn't break down because I hadn't made the drill team, I wept for the girl that I couldn't comfort back then. The girl who didn't understand what was happening or why. I wept for the parents who were so ill equipped to deal with my pain and vulnerability. Parents who just didn't have the skills to speak up and comfort me or, at the very least, run an interception on the story of not belonging with them or to them. These are the moments that, when left unspoken and unresolved, send us into our adult lives searching desperately for belonging and settling for fitting in. Luckily, my parents never harbored the illusion that parenting ends when your kids leave the house. We've learned about courage, vulnerability, and true belonging together. That's been the little miracle.

Even in the context of suffering—poverty, violence, human rights violations—not belonging in our families is still one of the most dangerous hurts. That's because it has the power to break our heart, our spirit, and our sense of self-worth. It broke all three for me. And when those things break, there are only three outcomes, something I've borne witness to in my life and in my work:

1. You live in constant pain and seek relief by numbing it and/or inflicting it on others;
2. You deny your pain, and your denial ensures that you pass it on to those around you and down to your children; or
3. You find the courage to own the pain and develop a level of empathy and compassion for yourself and others that allows you to spot hurt in the world in a unique way.

I certainly tried the first two. Only through sheer grace did I make my way to the third.

After the Bearkadette nightmare, the fighting got worse at home. They were often no-holds-barred battles. My parents just didn't have the skills to do it another way. Telling myself that my parents were the only ones in the world who were struggling to keep a marriage together, I felt tremendous shame. All of the friends of my brother and sisters who played at our house called my parents "Mr. and Mrs. B" with a casual cool, like they were great. But I knew about the secret fighting and knew I didn't belong with those friends whose parents were as awesome as the ones on TV. So now the shame of secrecy was piling in, too.

Of course, perspective is a function of experience. I didn't have the experience to put what was happening around me in context, and my parents were just trying to survive without inflicting catastrophic damage, so I don't think it dawned on them to share their perspectives with us. I was *certain* that I was the only one in town, even in the world, living through this specific kind of shit show, despite the fact that my high school was in the national news for the alarming number of students there who had committed suicide. It was only later, once the world changed and people started to actually talk about their struggles, that I found out how many of those perfect parents ended up divorced, dead from hard living, or, mercifully, in recovery.

Sometimes the most dangerous thing for kids is the silence that allows them to construct their own stories—stories that almost always cast them as alone and unworthy of love and belonging. That was my narrative, so rather than doing high kicks during halftime, I was the girl hiding weed in her beanbag chair and running with the wild kids, looking for my people any way I could. I never tried out for a single thing again. Instead, I got really good at fitting in by doing whatever it took to feel like I was wanted and a part of something.

During my parents' ongoing and worsening fights, my brother and two sisters would usually come into my room to wait it out. As the oldest, I started using my newly formed fitting-in superpowers to identify what had led to the fighting, so I could concoct elaborate interventions to "make things better." I could be the savior for my siblings, for my family. When it worked, I considered myself a hero. When it didn't, I'd blame myself and double down on the data finding. It's only just dawning on me as I write

this—this is actually when I started choosing research and data over vulnerability.

As I look back, I realize I probably owe my career to not belonging. First as a child, then as a teenager, I found my primary coping mechanism for not belonging in studying people. I was a seeker of pattern and connection. I knew if I could recognize patterns in people's behaviors and connect those patterns to what people were feeling and doing, I could find my way. I used my pattern recognition skills to anticipate what people wanted, what they thought, or what they were doing. I learned how to say the right thing or show up in the right way. I became an expert fitter-in, a chameleon. And a very lonely stranger to myself.

As time passed, I grew to know many of the people around me better than they knew themselves, but in that process, I lost me. By the time I was twenty-one years old, I had dropped in and out of college, survived my parents' divorce, hitchhiked through Europe for six months, and engaged in every self-destructive, dumb-ass behavior you can name, short of hard drugs. But I was growing weary. I was running on fumes. Anne Lamott quoted an observation from one of her sober friends that sums up that kind of running away perfectly: "By the end I was deteriorating faster than I could lower my standards."

In 1987, I met Steve. For some reason, I was more myself with him than I had been with anyone since my first BFF, Eleanor. He saw me. And even though he caught the tail end of my self-destructive days, he saw the real me and he liked me. He came from very similar family trauma, so he recognized the hurt, and for the first time in both of our lives, we talked about our experiences. We cracked open. We would sometimes talk for ten hours over the phone. We talked about every fight we witnessed, the loneliness we battled, and the unbearable pain of not belonging.

What started as a friendship turned into a huge crush, then a total love affair. Never underestimate the power of being seen—it's exhausting to keep working against yourself when someone truly sees you and loves you. Some days his love felt like a gift. Other days I hated his guts for it. But as I started to catch glimpses of my true self, I was filled with grief and longing. Grief for the girl who never belonged anywhere and a longing to figure out



who I was, what I liked, what I believed in, and where I wanted to go. Steve wasn't threatened at all by my soul-searching. He loved it. He supported it.

So no, Dr. Angelou, belonging nowhere couldn't be a *good* thing. I still didn't understand what she meant.

Seven years after we met, Steve and I got married. He went from medical school to residency, and I went from undergrad to grad school. In 1996, the day after I finished my master's, I decided to make my clean living commitment official and quit drinking and smoking. Interestingly, my first temporary AA sponsor told me, "I don't think you *belong* in AA. You should try the codependents' meetings." The codependency sponsor told me to go back to AA or try OA, since "you're not exactly one of us." Can you believe it? What kind of shit is it when you don't even belong at AA?

Finally, a new sponsor told me I had the pu-pu platter of addictions: Basically, I used whatever I could find to not feel vulnerable. She told me to find a meeting that spoke to me—it didn't matter which one as long as I stopped drinking, smoking, caretaking, and overeating. *Sure. Gotcha.*

Those early years of marriage were tough. We were broke and mentally strung out from residency and grad school. I'll never forget telling a school therapist that I just didn't think it was going to work out. Her response? "It may not. He likes you way more than you like you."

My journey from expert-level fitting in to true belonging started in my early twenties and took a couple of decades. Through my thirties, I traded one type of self-destruction for another: I gave up partying for perfectionism. I still wrestled with being an outsider—even in my work—but what changed was my response to not seeing my number on the poster board. Rather than suffering in silence and shame, I started to talk about my fears and my hurt. I started questioning what was important to me and why. Was living in lockstep really how I wanted to spend my life? No. When I was told I couldn't do a qualitative dissertation, I did it anyway. When they tried to convince me not to study shame, I did it anyway. When they told me I couldn't be a professor and write books that people might actually want to read, I did it anyway.

It wasn't that I swung from one extreme—finding value only in fitting in—to another—finding value only in being different, defiant, or contrarian.

Those are two sides of the same coin. I was actually still craving belonging, and my decisions to be on the outside of my profession kept me in almost constant anxiety and scarcity. It wasn't ideal, but I had come far enough to know that the price of assimilating and doing what was expected of me would have cost me too much—possibly my health, my marriage, or my sobriety. As much as I wanted a crew, I'd stay on the outside before I sacrificed any of those.

Then, in 2013, a series of little miracles happened that led to one of the most important moments of my life. Oprah Winfrey invited me to be a guest on one of my favorite shows, *Super Soul Sunday*.

The night before the show, I went out to eat with one of the producers and my manager, Murdoch (a Scotsman who lives in the West Village and who now says *y'all* as easily as I do). After dinner, as Murdoch and I were walking back to the hotel, he stopped on the corner and called to me as I kept walking, "Where are you, Brené?"

When I gave him a smart-ass answer—"On the corner of Michigan and Chicago"—I knew I was feeling vulnerable. And as Murdoch proceeded to explain how "not present" I was at dinner—Polite and friendly? *Yes*. Present? *No*.—I knew right away what was happening. I looked at Murdoch and admitted, "I'm doing that thing I do when I'm afraid. I'm floating above my life, watching it and studying it, rather than living it."

Murdoch nodded. "I know. But you need to find a way to stop and bring yourself back here. This is a big deal. I don't want you to miss it. Don't study this moment. Be in it."

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 to have fun."

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 the 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.

I didn't realize it then, but looking back, those permission slips to myself were actually an attempt to *belong to myself* and to no one else.

Oprah and I had our emotional first meeting on camera, and within minutes we were cutting up and laughing. She was everything I thought she'd be. Fierce and kind. Gentle and tough. The hour went by in a flash. When our time was up, Oprah turned to me and said, "We should do another hour—another episode." I looked around uneasily, like we might get in trouble for even thinking this.

"Really?" I asked. "Are you sure?"

Oprah smiled. "Really. We have a lot more to talk about."

I squinted into the darkness of the studio toward what I assumed was some kind of control room and said, "Do you think we should ask?"

Oprah smiled again. "Who do you think we should run it by?" She didn't say this in an arrogant way. I think she thought my question was funny.

"Oh, right. Sorry. Then, yes. *Yes!* I'd love it! But shouldn't I change clothes? Oh, shit. I only have this outfit and the jeans and cowboy boots I wore here."

"Boots and jeans are great. I'll lend you a top."

She walked away to change her own clothes, but before she took more than a few steps, she turned back and said, "Maya Angelou is here. Would you like to meet her?"

Tunnel vision. Time slowed down. *It's all too much. Maybe I'm dead.*

"Brené? Hello? Would you like to meet Dr. Maya?" I was thinking that this really might push me over the edge when Oprah asked again, "Interested?"

I jumped out of my seat. "Yes. Oh, my God! *Yes.*"

Oprah took my hand as we walked to a second green room across the hall from the one where I got ready for the show. We went in, and the first thing I noticed was a TV screen across from where Dr. Angelou was sitting. The image on the screen showed the two empty chairs where Oprah and I had been sitting.

Maya Angelou looked straight at me. “Hello, Dr. Brown. I’ve been watching you.”

I walked up and took her extended hand and said, “It’s such an honor to meet you. You’ve meant so much to me. You’re such a big part of my life.”

She kept holding my hand and placed her other hand on top of mine. “You’re doing important work. Keep doing it. Keep talking about your work. Don’t stop and don’t let anyone get in your way.”

Then I told her that sometimes, when I teach, I turn the lights out and play for the class an old cassette tape I have of her reciting her poem “Our Grandmothers.” I told her how I would sometimes just replay that line, “I shall not be moved....”

She held my hands even tighter, looked right into my eyes, and with a slow and deep voice sang, “Like a tree planted by the river, I shall not be moved.” Then she squeezed my hands hard and said, “Do not be moved, Brené.”

It was as if she bundled up all the courage I’ll ever need in my entire life and handed it to me. Rarely do you have the gift of knowing you’re inside a moment that will be part of what defines you. But I knew. What do you do when you’ve spent the majority of your life moving to try to fit in, and all of a sudden Maya Angelou is singing to you and telling you not to be moved? You learn how to plant your damn feet is what you do. You bend and stretch and grow, but you commit to not moving from who you are. Or, at the very least, you start trying.

Six months after that unbelievable day, I found myself sitting in another green room in Chicago. This time I was speaking at one of the largest leadership events in the world. The event organizers had *strongly* recommended that I wear “business attire” to the event, and I was staring