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THE
GIFTS OF
Imperfection



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Let Go of Who You Think
You're Supposed to Be
and Embrace Who You Are

YOUR GUIDE TO A WHOLEHEARTED LIFE

remote possibilities
Brené Brown, Ph.D., L.M.S.W.



could be enough

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Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed
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by **Brené Brown, Ph.D., L.M.S.W.**

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Editor's note

The names, details, and circumstances may have been changed to protect the privacy of those mentioned in this publication.

This publication is not intended as a substitute for the advice of health care professionals.

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To Steve, Ellen, and Charlie.
I love you with my whole heart.



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preface

Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do.

Once you see a pattern, you can't *un-see* it. Trust me, I've tried. But when the same truth keeps repeating itself, it's hard to pretend that it's just a coincidence. For example, no matter how hard I try to convince myself that I can function on six hours of sleep, anything less than eight hours leaves me impatient, anxious, and foraging for carbohydrates. It's a pattern. I also have a terrible procrastination pattern: I always put off writing by reorganizing my entire house and spending way too much time and money buying office supplies and organizing systems. Every single time.

One reason it's impossible to un-see trends is that our minds are engineered to seek out patterns and to assign meaning to them. Humans are a meaning-making species. And, for better or worse, my mind is actually fine-tuned to do this. I spent years training for it, and now it's how I make my living.

As a researcher, I observe human behavior so I can identify and name the subtle connections, relationships, and patterns that help us make meaning of our thoughts, behaviors, and feelings.

I love what I do. Pattern hunting is wonderful work and, in fact, throughout my career, my attempts at un-seeing were strictly reserved for my personal life and those humbling vulnerabilities that I loved to deny. That all changed in November 2006, when the research that fills these pages smacked me upside the head. For the first time in my career, I was desperate to un-see my own research.

Up until that point, I had dedicated my career to studying difficult emotions like shame, fear, and vulnerability. I had written academic pieces on shame, developed a shame-resilience curriculum for mental health and addictions professionals, and written a book about shame resilience called *I Thought It Was Just Me*.¹

In the process of collecting thousands of stories from diverse men and women who lived all over the country—ranging in age from eighteen to eighty-seven—I saw new patterns that I wanted to know more about. Yes, we all struggle with shame and the fear of not being enough. And, yes, many of us are afraid to let our true selves be seen and known. But in this huge mound of data there was also story after story of men and women who were living these amazing and inspiring lives.

I heard stories about the power of embracing imperfection and vulnerability. I learned about the inextricable connection between joy and gratitude, and how things that I take for granted, like rest and play, are as vital to our health as nutrition and exercise. These research participants trusted themselves, and they talked about authenticity and love and belonging in a way that was completely new to me.

I wanted to look at these stories as a whole, so I grabbed a file and a Sharpie and wrote the first word that came to my mind on the tab: *Wholehearted*. I wasn't sure what it meant yet, but I knew that these stories were about people living and loving with their whole hearts.

I had a lot of questions about Wholeheartedness. What did these folks value? How did they create all of this resilience in their lives? What were their main concerns and how did they resolve or address them? Can anyone create a Wholehearted life? What does it take to cultivate what we need? What gets in the way?

As I started analyzing the stories and looking for re-occurring themes, I realized that the patterns generally fell into one of two columns; for simplicity sake, I first labeled these *Do* and *Don't*. The *Do* column was brimming with words like worthiness, rest, play, trust, faith, intuition, hope, authenticity, love, belonging, joy, gratitude, and creativity. The *Don't* column was dripping with words like perfection, numbing, certainty, exhaustion, self-sufficiency, being cool, fitting in, judgment, and scarcity.

I gasped the first time I stepped back from the poster paper and took it all in. It was the worst kind of sticker shock. I remember mumbling, "No. No. No. How can this be?"

Even though I wrote the lists, I was shocked to read them. When I code data, I go into deep researcher mode. My only focus is on accurately capturing what I heard in the stories. I don't think about how I would say something, only how the research participants said it. I don't think about what an experience would mean to me, only what it meant to the person who told me about it.

I sat in the red chair at my breakfast room table and stared at these two lists for a very long time. My eyes wandered up and down and across. I remember at one point I was actually sitting there with tears in my eyes and with my hand across my mouth, like someone had just delivered bad news.

And, in fact, it was bad news. I thought I'd find that Wholehearted people were just like me and doing all of the same things I was doing: working hard, following the rules, doing it until I got it right, always trying to know myself

better, raising my kids exactly by the books ...

After studying tough topics like shame for a decade, I truly believed that I deserved confirmation that I was “living right.”

But here’s the tough lesson that I learned that day (and every day since):

How much we know and understand ourselves is critically important, but there is something that is even more essential to living a Wholehearted life: loving ourselves.

Knowledge is important, but only if we’re being kind and gentle with ourselves as we work to discover who we are. Wholeheartedness is as much about embracing our tenderness and vulnerability as it is about developing knowledge and claiming power.

And perhaps the most painful lesson of that day hit me so hard that it took my breath away: It was clear from the data that we cannot give our children what we don’t have. Where we are on our journey of living and loving with our whole hearts is a much stronger indicator of parenting success than anything we can learn from how-to books.

This journey is equal parts heart work and head work, and as I sat there on that dreary November day, it was clear to me that I was lacking in my own heart work.

I finally stood up, grabbed my marker off the table, drew a line under the *Don’t* list, and then wrote the word *me* under the line. My struggles seemed to be perfectly characterized by the sum total of the list.

I folded my arms tightly across my chest, sunk deep down into my chair, and thought, *This is just great. I’m living straight down the shit list.*

I walked around the house for about twenty minutes trying to un-see and undo everything that had just unfolded, but I couldn’t make the words go away. I couldn’t go back, so I did the next best thing: I folded all of the poster sheets into neat squares and tucked them into a Rubbermaid tub that fit nicely under my bed, next to my Christmas wrap. I wouldn’t open that tub again until March of 2008.

Next, I got myself a really good therapist and began a year of serious soul work that would forever change my life. Diana, my therapist, and I still laugh about my first visit. Diana, who is a therapist to many therapists, started with the requisite, “So what’s going on?” I pulled out the *Do* list and matter-of-factly said, “I need more of the things on this list. Some specific tips and tools would be helpful. Nothing deep. No childhood crap or anything.”

It was a long year. I lovingly refer to it on my blog as the 2007 ~~Breakdown~~ Spiritual Awakening. It felt like a textbook breakdown to me, but Diana called it

a spiritual awakening. I think we were both right. In fact, I'm starting to question if you can have one without the other.

Of course, it's not a coincidence that this unraveling happened in November 2006. The stars were perfectly aligned for a breakdown: I was raw from being newly sugar and flour free, I was days away from my birthday (always a contemplative time for me), I was burned out from work, and I was right on the cusp of my *midlife unraveling*.

People may call what happens at midlife “a crisis,” but it's not. It's an unraveling—a time when you feel a desperate pull to live the life you want to live, not the one you're “supposed” to live. The unraveling is a time when you are challenged by the universe to let go of who you think you are supposed to be and to embrace who you are.

Midlife is certainly one of the great unraveling journeys, but there are others that happen to us over the course of our lives:

- marriage
- divorce
- becoming a parent
- recovery
- moving
- an empty nest
- retiring
- experiencing loss or trauma
- working in a soul-sucking job

The universe is not short on wake-up calls. We're just quick to hit the snooze button.

As it turned out, the work I had to do was messy and deep. I slogged through it until one day, exhausted and with mud still wet and dripping off of my traveling shoes, I realized, “Oh, my God. I feel different. I feel joyful and real. I'm still afraid, but I also feel really brave. Something has changed—I can feel it in my bones.”

I was healthier, more joyful, and more grateful than I had ever felt. I felt calmer and grounded, and significantly less anxious. I had rekindled my creative life, reconnected with my family and friends in a new way, and most important, felt truly comfortable in my own skin for the first time in my life.

I learned how to worry more about how I felt and less about “what people might think.” I was setting new boundaries and began to let go of my need to

please, perform, and perfect. I started saying *no* rather than *sure* (and being resentful and pissed off later). I began to say “Oh, hell yes!” rather than “Sounds fun, but I have lots of work to do” or “I’ll do that when I’m _____ (thinner, less busy, better prepared).”

As I worked through my own Wholehearted journey with Diana, I read close to forty books, including every spiritual awakening memoir I could get my hands on. They were incredibly helpful guides, but I still craved a guidebook that could offer inspiration, resources, and basically serve as a soul traveler’s companion of sorts.

One day, as I stared at the tall pile of books precariously stacked on my nightstand, it hit me! *I want to tell this story in a memoir.* I’ll tell the story of how a cynical, smart-ass academic became every bit of the stereotype that she spent her entire adult life ridiculing. I’ll fess up about how I became the middle-aged, recovering, health-conscious, creative, touchy-feely spirituality-seeker who spends days contemplating things like grace, love, gratitude, creativity, authenticity, and is happier than I imagined possible. I’ll call it *Wholehearted*.

I also remember thinking, *Before I write the memoir, I need to use this research to write a guidebook on Wholehearted living!* By mid-2008, I had filled three huge tubs with notebooks, journals, and mounds of data. I had also done countless hours of new research. I had everything I needed, including a passionate desire to write the book that you’re holding in your hands.

On that fateful November day when the list appeared and I sunk into the realization that I wasn’t living and loving with my whole heart, I wasn’t totally convinced. Seeing the list wasn’t enough to fully believe in it. I had to dig very deep and make the *conscious choice* to believe ... to believe in myself and the possibility of living a different life. A lot of questioning, countless tears, and a huge collection of joyful moments later, believing has helped me see.

I now see how owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do.

I now see that cultivating a Wholehearted life is not like trying to reach a destination. It’s like walking toward a star in the sky. We never really arrive, but we certainly know that we’re heading in the right direction.

I now see how gifts like courage, compassion, and connection only work when they are exercised. Every day.

I now see how the work of *cultivating* and *letting go* that shows up in the ten guideposts is not “to-do list” material. It’s not something we accomplish or acquire and then check off our list. It’s life work. It’s soul work.

For me, believing was seeing. I believed first, and only then I was able to see how we can truly change ourselves, our families, and our communities. We just have to find the courage to live and love with our whole hearts. It's an honor to make this journey with you!





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Wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness. It means cultivating the courage, compassion, and connection to wake up in the morning and think, *No matter what gets done and how much is left undone, I am enough.* It's going to bed at night thinking, *Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn't change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging.*

The Journey

Wholehearted living is not a onetime choice. It is a process. In fact, I believe it's the journey of a lifetime. My goal is to bring awareness and clarity to the constellation of choices that lead to Wholeheartedness and to share what I've learned from many, many people who have dedicated themselves to living and loving with their whole hearts.

Before embarking on any journey, including this one, it's important to talk about what we need to bring along. What does it take to live and love from a place of worthiness? How do we embrace imperfection? How do we cultivate what we need and let go of the things that are holding us back? The answers to all of these questions are courage, compassion, and connection—the tools we need to work our way through our journey.

If you're thinking, *Great. I just need to be a superhero to fight perfectionism*, I understand. Courage, compassion, and connection seem like big, lofty ideals. But in reality, they are daily practices that, when exercised enough, become these incredible gifts in our lives. And the good news is that our vulnerabilities are what force us to call upon these amazing tools. Because we're human and so beautifully imperfect, we get to practice using our tools on a daily basis. In this way, courage, compassion, and connection become gifts—the gifts of imperfection.

Here's what you'll find in the pages that follow. In the [first chapter](#), I explain what I've learned about courage, compassion, and connection and how they are truly the tools for developing worthiness.

Once we get some clarity about the tools that we're going to use on this journey, in the [next chapter](#) we move to the heart of the matter: love, belonging, and worthiness. I answer some of the most difficult questions of my career: What is love? Can we love someone and betray them? Why does our constant need to fit in sabotage real belonging? Can we love the people in our lives, like our partners and children, more than we love ourselves? How do we define worthiness, and why do we so often end up hustling for it rather than believing in it?

We encounter obstacles on every journey we make; the Wholehearted journey is no exception. In the [next chapter](#), we'll explore what I've found to be the greatest barriers to living and loving with our whole hearts and how we can develop effective strategies to move through the barriers and to cultivate resilience.

From there, we'll explore the ten guideposts for the Wholehearted journey, daily practices that provide direction for our journey. There's one chapter for each guidepost, and each chapter is illustrated with stories, definitions, quotes, and ideas for making deliberate and inspired choices about the way we live and love.