

THE QUEST FOR TRUE BELONGING

Week #2 of a 6-Week Series Inspired by the Brené Brown Book, "Braving the Wilderness"

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Hey, everyone! So exactly two years ago today -- February 25, 2024 -- was my first day here at Unity of Phoenix. [Congregants applaud] It was a Sunday. It was my very first Sunday, and they just threw me right in and said, "Give two talks." So I just want to say thank you for, gosh, embracing me. I'm getting emotional. Thank you for just embracing me and bringing me into your community. It's just been a really lovely, lovely two years. So, I just want to thank you all first for a fantastic two years together. So, thank you. [Congregants applaud]

So, tonight we're in Week #2 of our series based on Brené Brown's book, "Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and The Courage to Stand Alone." It's a long title, but it's a fantastic book. I know a couple of you have said you've picked it up now. It's an easy read.

And Brené Brown -- just so everyone knows; we're all on the same page -- she is a social scientist; a researcher. She's often featured at TED Talks and other ... She's got a podcast now, I think, as well. But she's really well known for her work on vulnerability, empathy, belonging and shame -- all those feelings that a lot of times we don't want to look at or feel uncomfortable with.

And it's through her most recent research that she discovered that we're living in what she calls "a spiritual crisis of disconnection." I was really -- I mentioned that last week, and I really was sitting with it last week and this week: a spiritual crisis of disconnection. And can you feel that? I can kind of feel that in our world right now -- that we're in this spiritual crisis of disconnection. How do we all come back together?

And so, last week I spoke about the importance of being vulnerable -- being our authentic selves -- in order to, first, belong to ourselves. Because when it comes to belonging, first we have to belong to ourselves so that we can remember and reawaken that truth that we belong to the Allness of God; that we're an expression of God, of the Divine.

And then we can be vulnerable and allow ourselves to belong to a group, whether it's a group of friends or a hobby, or family, or work. Whatever that group is, now we can belong to them in that group in an authentic way, because we're remembering who we really are. We're remembering our divine identity.

So being ourselves -- she talks about in this book a lot -- means we have to stand alone in our personal truth. And that standing alone in our personal truth is the "braving the wilderness": braving the wilderness of uncertainty, of criticism, of vulnerability, of being vulnerable. And yet, when we honor our true nature, our divine nature, we realize that we're one big human family. We realize that we actually have this spiritual connection to one another.

And, in fact, when we're honoring who we truly are and the unique gifts that we share -- well, then we're contributing positively to the whole; allowing for that spiritual connection to occur. As we express our own unique God gifts -- the gifts that we were born with: those interests, our strengths -- now when I express that, I'm contributing to the whole.

So, we're going to look at that a little bit more. We're going to go deeper tonight into this exploration of true belonging. So here's what Brené Brown writes about true belonging. It's on the screen here. She writes, "We seem to have forgotten that, even when we are utterly alone, we're connected to one another by something greater than group membership, politics or ideology -- that we are connected by

love and the human spirit. No matter how separated we are by what we think and believe, we are part of the same spiritual story."

And that's it right there -- that we're all part of the same spiritual story. And yet, we get distracted by the outside, and calling ourselves and dividing ourselves up into different groups. In other words, we're so worried about either not belonging to a group or what group we belong to that we forget that we're all connected in spirit.

And hence, that's why we have polarization right now. Everyone feels like they need to identify with a group. Whether they agree 100% or not with that group, everyone's feeling like, *"I need to be part of something. I need a connection."* Because if I don't have that spiritual remembering of who I truly am, I need to connect to something, then I need to find a group. And so, we start to find this polarization happening.

So, in her recent research, Brené Brown found that individuals wanted, *"connection to a larger humanity that gives people more freedom to express their individuality without fear of jeopardizing their belonging."*

So, we want to belong, but we want to do it in a safe way. And she emphasizes this idea that the struggle for people seeking true belonging is spiritual. It keeps coming back to spiritual. Not religious, not a dogma but, instead, what binds us as human beings.

And here's the thing, everyone. I believe that our souls are longing to be one: to be in harmony with one another. Because that's our true essence. Our true essence at a soul level is that we are all one from the same infinite Spirit, that same energy: Star Wars -- the Force. Separateness is not really our true nature. Oneness is.

And so, really what our souls are trying to do is: we keep trying to come back to and be connected to one another. So how do we get there? How do we get to true spiritual belonging?

And she mentions that in her 2010 book, "The Gifts of Imperfection." She had a definition of belonging, and then she updated it to true belonging. So, here's her definition now of true belonging here on the screen: *"True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness."*

"True belonging," she writes, *"doesn't require you to change who you are. It requires you to be who you are."*

So, was anyone watching the Olympics? I love the Olympics! I've watched the Olympics since I was a little girl. I love the Olympics. I was a figure skater when I was little also. So, I was watching those women's Olympics, figure skating. So, Alysa Liu -- do you all know about her? She was the gold medal winner. First gold medal for the U.S. for women's figure skating since 2002. She wasn't even born yet! This is what made me really feel old, because I was an adult when I watched Sarah Hughes win that gold medal, so that's kind of weird.

So, 2002 was the last time we had a gold medal. She just won the gold medal for us. She started skating when she was five. She won the national championship when she was 13; she was the youngest to ever do so. She went to the Olympics four years ago. She came in seventh and, at the very tender age of 16, decided to retire. Because she said, *"I don't have my own life. I don't have agency over my own life. I want to be a teenager."*

So, she became a teenager at the age of 16. She went out, and she started doing teenager things. She actually went to UCLA. She's there now. And she went on a ski trip with some friends two years ago; only

two years ago. And it was the adrenaline rush of that skiing that made her miss ice skating. And so, she thought, *"Wow; maybe I want to go back to competitive ice skating again. But if I do so, I'm going to do it on my own -- with my own authority here. I get the final say."*

So, she went back to her coaches. She said, *"I'm doing this on my own terms."* She doesn't stick to a grueling schedule. If there was a concert she wanted to go to, she went out to a concert with her friends. She didn't diet; she doesn't diet. Thank you, girl! [Congregants laugh] She has final say over her skating costumes, music, choreography ... because now she sees skating, not just about winning medals, but about a creative expression. She says, *"I skate because I want people to see my creative expression."* Her hair is striped. Did you all see this? She has big, wide stripes.

And some of her coaches said, *"You know, the judges and some of the ice skating higher ups are not going to be -- they're not going to like that. You might be concerned about your look."* And here was her response ... And it reminds me of last week with Brené Brown, when she was asked to wear a suit to the conference to speak, and she changed her clothes and said, *"Nope! I'm showing up in my jeans and my cowboy boots."*

So, here's what Alysa Liu said when her coaches said, *"We're kind of concerned about your hair."* She said, *"I told them if they tell me to dye my hair back, I will quit. If they don't like it and they want to give me less scores or treat me differently, that's on them. If I change my hair, it's going to be because I want to."*

So I was watching the Olympics, because -- like I said -- I love the Olympics. And I'm watching the figure skating competition. And the other women skating looked like they had the weight of a medal on them. They were very intense. They were very serious. You could tell there was nerves there. And then Alysa came along, and she skated to Donna Summer, of all things. [Congregants laugh] And she was joyous! It was absolute joy. You could not tell that she wanted to get a medal. She was just out there having the time of her life.

Juan and I were saying, *"She doesn't have any nerves in her. She's just having a great time."* And guess what? She won gold. The point being: she belonged to ice skating again. But more importantly, she truly belonged to herself. She belonged to herself again. She belonged to ice skating -- competitive ice skating. But more importantly, she brought her own authentic true self -- true belonging -- to the group.

And so, how do we have this true belonging? And Maya Angelou says this about belonging. She said, *"The price is high; the reward is great."*

And if we want true belonging, then we need to realize -- just like Unity's fifth principle says -- that it takes action. We need to take action. True belonging is not passive. It's not just about joining a group, and now you have true belonging. True belonging is -- like all spiritual practices -- a practice. It requires us to get uncomfortable; to be true to ourselves while staying connected and authentic with other people. To have weird hairdos; to wear jeans at the business event when they tell you to wear a business suit.

As Brené Brown says, *"True belonging is living from our wild hearts rather than our weary hut."* I like that. Living from our wild hearts instead of our weary huts. So, first we belong to ourselves, and then we allow for true belonging with others.

Now, there's going to be four practices that we'll go into with even more depth over the next four Wednesdays. But they don't necessarily sound easy. They sound challenging. One is: people are hard to hate close up -- move in; peak truth to BS -- be civil; hold hands with strangers; strong back, soft front, wild heart. Those are about taking action. They're challenging! But to truly belong, we need to start breaking down the walls that divide us; abandon our ideological bunkers; live from the awareness of our

divine nature as loving awareness that's connected to all living beings. Not easy right now during these times ... But we're here. We're the ones to take up that call. How can I live from the awareness of being loving awareness -- my divine nature: connected to all living beings; the Oneness of the universe? How can I live from that understanding as I reach out to another person?

We need to have intentional open hearts with people who are different from us. That involves listening. Not just hearing, but listening. It means looking for shared joy and pain. It means being curious, not defensive. And it means finding moments of connection and togetherness.

So those are the ones I've been really trying to focus on myself with family; even friends who might have different ideological beliefs as myself. How can I find connection and togetherness? How can I connect with that shared joy and pain as human beings -- as spiritual beings having a human experience?

And it comes down to trust. Trust is huge to true belonging. Trusting yourself; trusting another; being trustworthy to others. Here's what Brené Brown says. She says, *"To brave the wilderness and become the wilderness, we must learn to trust ourselves and trust others."*

So, there's a great story in the Bible that reminds us about trusting others that are different than us. So, It's the Samaritan woman at the well. It's John Chapter 4. So, Jesus is leaving Judea. He's on his way back to Galilee. It's a long walk. He has to go through Samaria. And there's a well there. He's tired. He's hot. He's thirsty. So, he sits down and he drinks from the well. And while he's sitting there drinking from the well, the Samaritan woman comes to draw water from the well. And he speaks to her.

Now, this is a big deal -- for a man, for a Jew, for someone of a higher class, a prophet. Jesus is crossing all sorts of cultural/religious/gender boundaries to speak to this woman at the well. This is what has divided them for generations. Everything about this encounter is socially unacceptable. And yet, he doesn't avoid the moment. He speaks to her.

He doesn't even try to deny their differences or point out their differences. He doesn't shame her. He doesn't argue. He doesn't try to persuade her to his beliefs. He just engages. He's present. He's compassionate. He's honest. From a Unity perspective, we would say that this is Christ consciousness recognizing itself in another. That, even from the outside -- even though it doesn't look like we are one; we're the same. But the Divine in him is recognizing and calling forth the Divine in her. He's not seeing her as a label. He's not seeing all of her past mistakes. He's seeing her as a sacred being standing before him.

And she speaks honestly, and she questions him. She owns her story, and she's got a story! She's had five husbands, and the one she's with now is not her husband. She owns it, because he says, *"You have five husbands. The one you're with now is not your husband."*

She's like, *"Um. Yeah."*

But that's a courageous conversation. That's a courageous belonging. To belong to yourself so much and remain in the conversation. Not to get defensive or crawl away with shame, but to just be there and have that conversation. So, part of the lesson here of true belonging is that true belonging is not without the absence of tension. It is the presence of love, sometimes within the tension.

And then something beautiful happens in this story. So, this woman becomes the messenger, even though she's an outsider, really, in her own city and community. And again, she's a woman, so that's even lower class.

But she goes back to the city, and she shares with them the story of her interaction with Jesus. And they all say, *"Oh, wow; so it's true what they're saying about Jesus."* And she becomes the bridge. Now, she

could have easily felt like an outsider here to even her own community, but instead came the bridge to. So, it's her authenticity that becomes the doorway to transformation for a whole other community.

And see, and this is what happens when we're grounded enough, and remember our divine nature, so that we can move forward with people, instead of away from them; so that we can trust that the same divine life -- the same Spirit within -- it lives in each of us. It lives in each and every one of us.

So, to authentically belong, we have to stay present, even when things feel uncomfortable. It's about resisting the urge to shut down, to lash out, to walk away when we encounter differences.

So, in this story, Jesus shows us that true belonging isn't about choosing sides or sticking with the social rules, or what his group says is okay ... but it's about choosing love. To be brave enough to cross the line. To be grounded enough to remain yourself; open enough to recognize that Divine Love is everywhere. Divine Love is everywhere.

Brené Brown writes, *"True belonging is not something that you negotiate externally. It's what you carry in your heart."* It's what you carry in your heart. It's finding the beauty and being part of the Oneness of that spiritual connection while you also honor your own path alone, which we saw in examples both of Brené Brown and Alysia Liu. And it involves trust.

So Brené Brown shares that there's seven elements to establishing trust: again, trust with ourselves, but trust with another person. How can we do that for our own relationships? How can I take this on?

So, she has an acronym. It goes with the book. It's called -- it's B-R-A-V-I-N-G. So, seven elements to establish trust – BRAVING.

So the first one is **B: boundaries**. Being willing to say *"No,"* and to respect others' boundaries. What is okay and not okay to do. Honoring their *"No,"* and holding your own boundaries. When we hold our own boundaries -- it's like when we raise our kids; they know that we have these boundaries. Then they know, *"I'm safe, I'm loved."* Same thing with our relationships.

The next element in trust is the **R: reliability**. You do what you say you'll do. You don't over-promise; you don't under-promise. You're realistic. You say what you're going to do; what you said you'd do.

Then the next is **A: accountability**. Own your mistakes. Apologize and make amends. How many people have friends that you've had a long time, and it's because each of you have been able to say, *"I'm sorry. It was on me; I apologize."* Those are our deepest friendships; our deepest relationships. The ones where we own our own mistakes, apologize, make amends, and forgive one another.

Another way to build trust, she says, is the **V: vault**. Vault means: keep it in the vault. Keep it confidential. Don't share information or experiences that aren't yours to share. Whenever I'm up here, I've always asked my family if I can share the story before I share it. But even within personal conversations, you know, you feel safer and trust someone if you know that whatever you have to share with them, you know that they're not going to go out and tell this friend and that friend and this family member. So, we keep it in the vault.

For trust, we need **I: integrity**. Choosing courage over comfort. Choosing what is right to do over what is fun and easy and fast. Here's a good one. Practice values rather than simply professing them. Don't say it; show it. Follow up your words with your actions. Integrity is about practicing our values, rather than simply just saying, *"Here's my value."* Show up and take the action towards it. And that's what builds trust within our relationships and within our larger communities

N: non-judgment. That we can ask for what we need from each other and share feelings with one another with no judgment, no criticism, again, no gossip. That I can share with you and just know that

you'll just hold my heart, that you'll just listen, and there won't be judgment or criticism there. Doesn't that feel good for you? And so then we offer that to someone else, and trust is built.

And then the last is **G: generosity**. Extend generosity with your intentions, words, and actions. This includes, of course, being generous with yourself. Being generous.

So, B-R-A-V-I-N-G. Braving is how we build trust. And when we build trust, we build community. And building community built on trust, then we build true belonging.

Here's what she says: *"True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are it requires you to be brave."* To be B-R-A-V-I-N-G. Brave to remember who you are.

It's a spiritual ... that you are a spiritual being having a human experience. That you're an expression of infinite Spirit -- of a wise universe. And to know your divine identity and to express it. And to express it.

So, we brave the wilderness, not by winning arguments, but by choosing connection. Because when we're anchored in the Divine Presence within us, then we can move toward one another with compassion. Then we can move with one another even during disagreements. Because we can be that bridge instead of a barrier.

So true belonging is to open your heart to those who are different; to allow for human and spiritual connection while continuing to honor your own uniqueness. Because ultimately true belonging begins with us.

And that wraps up our week Chapter #2 of our series, "Braving the Wilderness," everyone. Blessings.