

## **SPEAK TRUTH, BE CIVIL & HOLD HANDS WITH STRANGERS**

**Week #5 of a 6-Week Series Inspired by the Brené Brown Book, "Braving the Wilderness"**

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So, we are in Week #5 of a six-week series. We've been covering the book by sociology researcher Brené Brown, "Braving the Wilderness: the Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone."

So just to remind us -- because now we're five weeks into this, everyone -- so just to remind us Brené Brown's definition of true belonging. This is based on all of her research -- her own experience, but mostly her research. It's here on the screen so you can follow along: True belonging.

*"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 doesn't require you to change who you are. It requires you to be who you are."*

Isn't that great? True belonging. It's not about changing yourself to fit in. True belonging is about being yourself and then finding you belong; remembering you belong to the whole.

So tonight we have two chapters to cover, which means really two more practices in how do we come to this true belonging. And the first one is: "Speak Truth to Nonsense." She has a different title there. It starts with a B. [Congregants laugh] We churched it. [Congregants laugh] Speak truth to nonsense ... but be civil, and hold hands with strangers.

So when someone is, you know, telling us an untruth -- a little white lie, nonsense -- it's easy for us to just jump right in and probably call them out on it. The challenging part is to be civil while we do so; to be respectful. And as a society, we've really strayed away from civility. And the biggest reason why -- that she keeps coming back to in the book, and that I firmly believe and agree here -- is that we have forgotten that we're all connected by a Power greater than ourselves. That we're connected by a Life Force, an Energy, a Divine Presence ... which also applies -- that same idea applies -- to those we don't agree with or get along with. And yet, it's true that each and every one of us is connected by a Power greater than ourselves and that within us, around us, that we are expressing is that Divine Practice.

So, we've mastered the standing alone part of her definition and of true belonging. I'm going to stand alone, or I'm going to stand in my own group that agrees with me; that thinks the way I think; believes the way I believe. But our opportunity here for growth -- our growing edge, if you will -- is for us to be honest and civil to everyone. To offer emotional safety and respect to everyone.

Which ultimately leads to holding hands -- at least metaphorically -- with strangers, with those that we don't agree with. Now, I always want to put a little asterisk here because, of course, don't hold hands with someone who's harming you in any way. That's not what we're talking about. What we're talking about tonight really is ... because you can do that through your forgiveness practice, right? If there's someone who's harming you, you don't step towards; you actually step away. And you keep yourself safe, and you do your forgiveness practice, and you see them as an expression of God. Maybe they've forgotten that, but you do it with an arm's distance.

What we're talking about tonight are those moments when we are holding strangers or family who we don't see eye to eye with. What do we do then? How do we connect with those folks? With the ones who see the world differently than we do? How do we stop seeing them as "them" -- the "they" -- and start instead seeing them as the Divine? How do we bring them back towards our hearts?

Because there's a lot of division and separation. How can we -- everyone in this room; everyone listening -- how can we come back to: Okay, we're all one, we're all expressions of the Divine. How can I come closer to, hold hands with those I may be disagreeing with?

So, when we're in the midst of having a difficult conversation with another person, we can ask ourselves a couple questions. One would be: How can I listen fully with an open heart and really hear what's important to them? And how can I offer respect and a safe place for this conversation?

Those are the two questions all of us here can start to ask. How can I show up fully with an open heart? How can I really hear them -- what's important to them? Not to me; what's important to them? And how can I offer some respect and a safe place for us to have this conversation?

Because it's the safe conversations that help build those bridges. It's the safe conversations with respect and emotional safety that allow us to understand each other and remind ourselves that we all belong to the human race. That we all belong to one another.

So, whenever I teach a class, I always begin with heart agreements. Heart agreements are what we, as a group, are agreeing to in order to feel safe in sharing and learning with one another during our time together. We actually recently did this as a staff. What are our heart agreements as a staff? How do we want to be in relationship with one another as we're working with one another?

Because the more we can be emotionally safe with one another, then the more we can trust each other and work in a positive atmosphere. We can honor our uniqueness -- all the talents and gifts each one of us shares -- while also belonging to the larger group, belonging to one another.

So in a class setting, a heart agreement could be something as seemingly simple as one person speaks at a time. We don't speak over each other or we don't have side conversations. Because that agreement says what? It tells the person -- each person there -- that what they have to say is important. That they're not going to be interrupted. That they will be heard by everyone in the room; that what they have to say matters.

It's important that we have some of these agreements, whether they're spoken or unspoken with one another. Because feeling like you've been heard without judgment -- that makes us feel safe. And ultimately, when we feel safe with one another, we remember we belong to one another.

So, I want to return to ... Because a couple of chapters ago, Brené Brown, really at the beginning of this series, she gave us this B-R-A-V-I-N-G framework for building trust. And so, we can apply it to same thing with honest and respectful conversation. So just to remind you here on your screen:

BRAVING was an acronym for Boundaries; Reliability; Accountability; Vault (that's another word for confidentiality; don't "vault" it out here to someone else but keep confidentiality); Integrity; Non-judgment; and Generosity. So this is the framework for building trust. And now we can apply it to conversations that have honesty and respect.

So, when we apply it to honest, kind conversations/communications, it can remind us that healthy dialogue starts with knowing what's okay and what isn't okay to have that conversation about -- the boundaries.

It reminds us that we can show up honestly and consistently, because even small untruths can erode trust over time. We want to be reliable.

Her framework invites us to take responsibility for our words and actions; to make sure that, when we show up, we're holding each other with respect and a civil dialogue. Because it's not that we're not going

to, you know ... we're going to disagree from time to time. But the real question in disagreeing is: Can we stay respectful and civil when we do disagree with one another?

And this framework also reminds us to honor confidentiality. That's: *"What's said here stays here."* That's usually another heart agreement we have in our classes. The teenagers like to call that "Vegas rules," by the way. [Congregants laugh] What's said here stays here. But when you know someone will keep your confidence, don't you feel more trustworthy? And then you feel more connected to that individual.

And then that I -- the integrity -- it asks us to stay grounded in our values even when emotions rise. Or even when we strongly disagree with somebody. There's many times, you know, I need to pause. We need to take the pause to our own reaction. So even when we think the other person might be full of baloney, we take the pause. We breathe and get ourselves back to our own integrity, knowing that: *"Okay, my integrity is that I'm going to move forward in this conversation -- in this communication -- calmly and with kindness."*

And that N for non-judgment; it encourages curiosity. So, going into conversations not with a win-lose mindset; instead of trying to prove somebody wrong, we simply can ask questions like, *"Well, tell me more"* or *"Tell me why is that important to you?"* Again, watch your tone, everybody, right? *"Why is it important? I want to know more."* Being curious, adding that curiosity piece in there. *"Tell me more. Why is it important to you?"*

And then finally, the G -- the generosity. The generosity allows us in conversations to assume the best in others. And so, when we approach a conversation or situation, to assume the best with an open heart. Brené Brown writes, *"What's the most generous assumption we can make about the people around us?"*

And I know for some of you who have studied "The Four Agreements" with Miguel Ruiz, one of the agreements is: Don't Make Assumptions. And that's based on ... because usually we make assumptions that are negative. Usually we jump to conclusions and start making up a story. But here Brené Brown is inviting us, asking us to assume the best of people, the best of their intentions, and then get clarity.

Ultimately, when we speak truthfully and respectfully, we're honoring the divine expression of both ourself and that other person. Whether you are remembering that, they're remembering that, or not. But we can show up in our own integrity, in our own spiritual awareness, and honor the divine expression of that other person. Return to: *"This person is also an expression of the Divine; of life itself. So how can I best honor them while also staying sacred and respectful and loving to my own self?"*

Because as we move into her Chapter #6, we're reminded that humans are made for connection. We're made for connection. There's a sociology term. So, in 1912, they called it "collective effervescence." I love this term! It sounds so fancy. Now sociologists use the term "collective assembly." Much more scientific, right?

But according to the researchers who coined the term "collective assembly," collective assembly has been shown to fill a life with, quote, *"a sense of meaning, increased positive effect, an increased sense of social connection, a decreased sense of loneliness ... all essential components of a healthy, happy life,"* is what they reported.

And when I read that, it made me think about the difference between attending church and watching on YouTube. No slight to our friends who are watching on YouTube, because they may be out of town or have health stuff going on. But there really is a difference -- isn't there? -- between showing up and feeling the energy and the feeling of coming together in the same place in spiritual community with one another. It's why the pandemic hit us all so hard, because we're wired to be in each other's presence. We're wired to be in each other's presence.

Researchers have actually found this. They have found positive psychological benefits to humans experiencing life together in a group. And it's true whether we're gathering for a celebration or gathering for grief. It could be a concert or it could be a funeral. But there's a positive lingering effect that lasts past that event itself -- the gathering itself -- that reminds us that, in these moments of joy and grief, that we're connected to one another through community. That being together -- our shared humanity -- makes a long-term difference in our lives.

This is what Brené Brown writes. She says, *"These shared experiences of collective joy and pain are sacred experiences. These experiences tell us what is true and possible about the human spirit. We need these moments with strangers as a reminder that, despite how much we might dislike someone on Facebook or even in person, we are still intricately connected."* We're still intricately connected.

So, last month, as some of you know -- and now all of you will know -- I went to a Def Leppard concert. You know, the metal hairband in the 80s? Okay: I got a thumbs up back there; right on! Some of you said, *"Wow, Stacy; I wouldn't have taken you as a Def Leppard fan."* And you'd be right! I was more of a Duran Duran fan.

But I was there with people who were big Def Leppard fans. I was surrounded by people who were and are big Def Leppard fans. And it was joyous! It was so much fun being in an auditorium filled with 4,300 people all singing and swaying and wearing their 80s metal hairband t-shirts. And they were -- probably unsurprisingly -- mostly my generation: Gen X. You know, we're forgotten; we're overlooked. And yet, here we were! Here we were, Gen X: all together in our collective joy -- remembering each other, remembering our time celebrating music that shaped our teen years. The people in front of me, the people around me, we could have voted completely different in November. And in that moment, it didn't matter. In that moment, we were enjoying shared experience of that concert and music. The power of human connection.

And I shared in a recent Sunday service that there was a Saturday in February where, in the morning, I was officiating a memorial service and then that evening I was attending a wedding. And both services had laughter and tears. There was a coming together of family and friends and a celebration of life, itself. For a life that had been lived and for this new life, you know, as a couple that was going to get started.

We need each other. Humans need each other. It's up to each one of us to look for what connects us with our fellow humans. We are so busy looking at what we don't agree with or don't agree on. It's time for us to flip the switch, if you will, and start looking for what connects us with one another.

Here's what Brené Brown writes in the book. She says, *"The more we're willing to seek out moments of collective joy and show up for experiences of collective pain -- for real, in person, not online -- the more difficult it becomes to deny our human connection, even with people we may disagree with."*

Because these moments remind us of what's true about each other. They remind us of our shared human spirit. They remind us of our shared human experience. I'm not saying it's easy. I'm not saying it's easy to see the good in the people that we disagree with or we dislike.

So, in trying this out myself, I thought, *"You know what, Stacy? You need to return to those five Unity principles."* So, in Unity, we teach these five Unity principles. And I thought, *"You know, we need to apply them."* What do our teachings, how can we apply our teachings to this practice with Brené Brown?

So, our first Unity principle is that God is the goodness of the universe, present in every situation -- the universal love and wisdom that underlies all of existence. If this is true, here's your challenge, friends. Find it. Look for the good. Look for where the love is in every situation; in every person. Challenge yourself. Look for the helpers. Look for how you connect. Find the good.

Principle #2: Each of us is inherently good because we're expressions of Spirit; of this creative universe. Each of us! Whether we like that other person or not, we're all expressions of the Divine. Some of us have forgotten. Sometimes I forget our divine nature. And it's up to each one of us to remember our divine nature, our divine identity. To collectively together -- each of us here -- remember together so that we can raise the consciousness of our community and ultimately our world.

Principle #3: Our thoughts have creative power to determine our experiences. So, you can go into a conversation with anger, looking to win the argument, or you can go with an open heart. But you have the creative power to determine that experience.

Principle #4: Prayer and meditation align us to our own spiritual nature and to the One Power and Presence of the universe -- also called God. It's in prayer and meditation that we're reminded of our oneness. That we're reminded that we're all connected as human beings. It's the coming together in meditation -- whether it's a Wednesday night or a Sunday morning -- that we collectively, again, are raising consciousness and that we share together in a shared experience of spiritual community ... which then leads us to a feeling of belonging.

Principle #5: It's not enough to understand spiritual teachings. We must apply our learning in all areas of our life, incorporating them into our thoughts, words, and actions. In other words, be honest, be respectful and hold hands -- metaphorically anyway -- with strangers. We must be true to ourselves while also remembering we belong to the whole.

I want to share this quote by Irish priest John O'Donohue. Here on your screen; you can follow along: *"Only holiness will call people to listen now. And the work of holiness is not about perfection or niceness. It is about belonging. That sense of being in the Presence. And through the quality of that belonging, the mild magnetic of implicating others in the Presence. This is not about forging a relationship with a distant God, but about the realization that we are already within God."* We come together in holiness as a human race, knowing that we're already within a part of expressions of God.

So, Chapters #5 and #6 remind us, friends, that the path to true belonging -- it requires courage, it requires curiosity, and it requires compassion.

You know, maybe some of you saw that there was this study just this week of 25 countries. And of those 25 countries, Americans were the most likely to say of their fellow countrymen that they were bad or untrustworthy. We need to get past that. We need to heal that. We do that with compassion. We do that with curiosity. And we do that with remembering that we're all expressions of the Divine.

So, when conversations become difficult, Brené Brown invites us to move beyond that habit of even staying silent or withdrawing. But she's encouraging us to stay present; to speak truthfully; to listen deeply. Even when we're disagreeing with one another, that we can approach one another with curiosity rather than judgment. We can create space for understanding instead of mistrust and division.

At a deeper level, these chapters keep reminding us over and over the spiritual truth: that we must remember our shared humanity. That it becomes easier to see one another, not as opponents, but as fellow travelers when we do. That true belonging is not about staying in our own tribe who think like we do. It's not about winning arguments -- proving that we're right or our side's right.

It is about staying connected in our integrity, our compassion, and the deeper truth that we're all part of the human family. It's in that space of courage and generosity that we can help create the kind of compassionate community where authentic belonging becomes possible. But it's up to each and every one of us, my friends. So be honest; be respectful; be civil; hold hands with strangers. (Ask their permission first.) [Congregants laugh]

But the invitation tonight is to choose love over fear, connection over division, and to remember the truth that you already know that's already within you -- which is that we belong to one another. And that concludes our fifth lesson in our six-week series.

Thank you, everyone. Blessings!

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