

STRONG BACK. SOFT FRONT. WILD HEART.

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

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I have been a fan of Brené Brown since I very first heard of her years ago, and I have all her books. So, when they said they were doing this one, I said, *"I only get one chapter at the end? Okay; I'll take it."*

So, we're going to talk today about what the name of this chapter is. It's called "Strong Back. Soft Front. Wild Heart." You got part of that in the meditation, right? I wanted to connect that for you guys.

So, Brené talks in her book about true belonging, and it's a spiritual practice of believing and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being part of something and standing alone in the wilderness.

The first time I read her book, I probably would have never even imagined I could do that. That's how long ago it was. To be my authentic self in front of people? People were going to see me do that? No, they might not like me if they saw who I really was. They may not even understand how I got the way I was. But I was a different person back then, and there's a lot of journey that's happened between them. So, it took me a long time to be able to learn this with her.

So, we do this with a strong back, a soft front, and a wild heart, she says. And as I put this together, what came to my mind was: Mind, Body, Spirit – the principles in Unity, right? So the strong back being the Mind. And I'll break that down for you so you can get where my little mind went. Okay?

She shares that many of us know and feel – and it's a crisis in our country right now -- we're all disconnected. And we can blame it on COVID. We can blame it on AI or computers or whatever we want to blame it. But we are in an epidemic of disconnection. People are no longer connected.

And when I looked up the stats, it says that 50% of the adults reported feelings of loneliness, social isolation, and a lack of companionship. Fifty percent! That means if it's not you, it's the person next to you. One in two people feel that they're isolated and they have no companionship. And nearly 70% of Gen Z and millennials report feeling lonely, despite the high digital engagement. I mean, everything's online! You can get a hold of your friends all the time, right? You can text your spouse. You can text, you know, anybody; it's all right there. But it's not the same, because we're losing this personal connection.

And it also said that, wow! Twenty percent of the adults have no close friends outside their family. One in five. Well, quite frankly, if I didn't have close friends, I wouldn't have family. So, I'm kind of the opposite. But 20% of the people don't have any close friends outside of their family. That is disconnection! That is not staying together where we need to be.

So, the strong back is part of us that knows that we are in God and we are willing to stand in this space, strong and tall, even when it's uncomfortable. That's the hard part, right? I can stand there strong and tall, but then it gets uncomfortable and I don't want to be there anymore. It hurts. It might be too uncomfortable. It might make me feel very dis-eased, right? It's easy to fit in as long as we're fitting in with people that are like us. People that want to do the same things we do. People that think the way we do.

But when we're not -- and we're in a very polarized world right now -- so it's like you're either "us" or you're "them" right now. And each of us is individual. But we're not seeing it that way, because everything is so, *"We're in this group or we're in that group."* And she's here to say, we're ourselves. And we need to stand in that self. And Unity teaches this, right, in our mind.

So in doing so, along my lifetime – becoming my authentic self -- I've lost a few friends. I've lost a few jobs. I've lost partnerships. I've lost ... you know, sometimes there's losses. But are those losses more than the gains that I got? And the gain -- the biggest gain I've received all along the way – is to become who I'm really meant to be. That is where we're headed with this. And that's what she's trying to bring up in this book.

So, sometimes you will have to step away and it won't be easy. And it'll be okay. Because you're stepping into yourself. So, I kind of liken this to a teeter-totter. You see my teeter-totter up here, right? I work with a lot of traumatized women. And sometimes I tell them, look, the teeter-totter is way up on one side, basically. The pain of staying where you are has gotten so big that the pain of change is going to let you shift.

And a lot of times, people that are in that much pain, that's the only way they can do it. For years, that was the only way I could do it. The only way I could move into myself was because it had to get so bad that changing was easier on me and being that other person.

So, what if we didn't have to wait for that kind of pain? And what if we didn't have to abandon who we were? And that's what she talks about throughout this whole book. That's having a strong back and being true to yourself. Our unique oneness is knowing where and whom we are in our true life.

So, this is what I call Mind. What do you value in life? What are your true values? That's our strong back. That's our foundation. What is my real truth here? Do I stand by and watch somebody experience whatever, or do I stand up for them? What are my values? Am I valuing people that ...

For instance, I was talking earlier. I wasn't going to bring this up, but I was just speaking earlier. And I've had a very colorful life. And I can just tell you that almost 30 years and 12 steps will get you -- you've got a lot of color in your life, right? So, I was sharing earlier that every time I ran into somebody -- or a past somebody, or I'm stopped by and talk to somebody -- that I look at them and I realize that they're going through some of the stuff that I could have very easily been in. I look at them with compassion. That's my strong back. Because one thing is: I know I could have been them very easily.

And another thing is I don't know their journey. I really don't know. So, who am I to judge, them or me? Who am I to say? But I can say in my life, I'm going to stand up for this and I'm going to say hi and I'm going to interact as best I can.

When I lived in San Diego, I was actually a program manager for a homeless shelter. And I dealt with a lot of congregations, different denominations. And in these congregations, we moved the shelter throughout the congregations from one another. So, I spent a lot of time in these congregations with homeless people, for whatever situation. And it was like my foundation; I knew walking in that I was enough of myself that I wouldn't harm them by what I said or shared, but I could be that beam of light for them. That I could be that hope for them. That they could know that they, too, could make it that far. That they could get where they wanted to go and they could pick themselves back up at some time. It's about being ourselves.

When we remember to release judgment of ourselves and others. Don't just release judgment of other people. Come on, people! We've got to release the judgment of ourselves, too. Those things that happen; you can let them go. We did the best that we could in the moment with what we had.

And it says, *"I can love you deeply and still say no. I can respect you and still disagree. And I can belong to myself and still stay connected to you."* It doesn't have to be this polarization. It doesn't have to be one or the other. We can still be together and be ourselves. And we can have our strong back and our values and share them with others lovingly and kindly. And not blame them for theirs, but just be that person of

knowing that they are where they're at. They're going to be who they are and love them right in that light.

So, then we'll move to the soft front, okay? That is our Christ presence. If you've got your back up and you're strong, your front is open. It's exposed, right? That's your Christ light right here. That's the presence of God right inside you. It's really hard to have a closed heart if you've got your back strong. If you know who you are, if you're standing on your foundation, you will automatically open up your heart.

And Brené describes this with -- we know that we can often protect ourselves by numbing out. That's the numbing out. And I can tell you the history of that, right? So, people numb out in a whole bunch of different ways. So, we don't want to see; we don't want to feel; we don't want to know what's going on, so we stay in that position of not opening our heart. We keep it closed.

And she says that we can numb out or we can shut down or we can dehumanize people who disagree with us. That's happening a lot right now. Because people are just so polarized. And she also says sometimes that we do this through sarcasm, cynicism and contempt ... and hoping that, if we do that, we'll stay safe. I'll stay safe in my little box because I don't have to expose myself of who I am, right?

A soft front doesn't mean you're being a doormat. It's remembering that the same Divine Light that moves in me moves in you. The same Divine Light that moves in me moves in them. Maybe it doesn't come out looking the same, but it does nonetheless. That's what we know here at Unity, right?

So, in this Christ light, even if we disagree, and even if we have to part ways, we can still look at one another and silently bless each other. Because we bless the Christ in them and the becoming of who they will become. Maybe they won't always stay that way. Maybe they'll change. Maybe, like my mother, they'll die in their disease. Maybe, like my father, they'll have a reckoning someday, and they'll become who they're meant to be. And then he will have had 25 years with his family that was wonderful and kind and loving, instead of losing them to the disease or disorder.

So, here and always, we want to remain open and compassionate. And we do that automatically if you have your foundation and your strong back. Your chest automatically opens up. We just have to not armor it up. We have to not block it in some way and say, *"No, they don't deserve it or I don't deserve it."* Because really the truth of the matter is: if we're cutting somebody off, we're cutting ourselves off from the experience, as well. And we're losing that way. So, let's open that up.

And now we're going to go to a wild heart. This is our spirit, right? This is becoming the wilderness. And this is living as Spirit in the world of humanity. Can we do that? Because that's what we're asked here to do. That's what this church asks us to do. Live as the Spirit of Christ. Be the Christ light in the world. That's living in the wilderness.

So Brené describes the mark of a wild heart as the ability to hold the paradox: to be tough and tender. To be excited and scared. To be brave and afraid, all at the same time. The brave heart always stays awake to the suffering of the world -- fighting for justice and peace -- while also cultivating its own moments of joy and gratitude. That's walking a big path, right? That's becoming the wilderness.

Here's something I learned years ago. You guys will not believe this, but I was diagnosed with social anxiety in the late 1990s. My therapist told me I would never talk in front of a group. Don't tell me never anyway, but you know what I mean? That's just something you don't say to me. But I took ... When I was going through school, I took a class -- a public speaking class -- and I thought I could not stand up in front of it. It was a small class. There were probably 10 people in it. I'm like, "There's no way I'll be able to stand up in front of them." Right?

But then my teacher, my instructor, told me one very important thing that to this day I think about and I share with other people. Do you know that it's adrenaline that makes you scared? Right? It's that blood pumping through you. That adrenaline kicks in. Do you know that adrenaline, the same drug, kicks in excitement? They're like just that close to each other. So, the same adrenaline that pumps through your blood -- that pumps you into fear -- pumps you into excitement.

So why are we choosing fear? If it's the same chemical going through our bodies, why are we choosing to live it, to call it fear? To live into that fear instead of that excitement?

So, then what I learned was when I got up in front of people, as soon as I started getting scared, I'd go, *"Oh, I'm excited; I'm excited. I can't wait; I can't wait!"* And I would be excited, and then that fear would go away, because it's just -- it's the same thing. It's the same chemical. What do they call it? An arousal congruent emotion. This is what it pumps in. But they're just milliseconds away from each other -- the difference between fear and excitement.

Becoming the wilderness is choosing the excitement, letting go of the fear, and being able to -- even if you have the fear -- live into it. And be okay with living it and processing and still moving on.

It means, like I said: I have a choice. I can live in fear in this journey, or I can live in the excitement of becoming the wilderness. Venturing out on this; doesn't it sound exciting? It's not like something we could do, right?

Brené says true belonging means not just braving the wilderness, but becoming the wilderness -- embracing its unpredictability and its beauty. And that's what the wilderness is about, right?

Who goes hiking? I go hiking. I love the wilderness. Beautiful hiking, camping. We were raised with camping. So, the wilderness has always been an adventure for me. And I love living into that.

So, knowing we can trust our inner wisdom, and we can courageously step into the wilderness is how we will become the wilderness.

So here's the acronym if you want to take a picture of it. This is what she's been saying all along throughout the book, that B-R-A-V-I-N-G for her is called:

Boundaries;

Reliability;

Accountability;

Vault (which is keeping confidence -- It's a big one for me!);

Integrity;

Non-judgment; and

Generosity.

And I want you to give yourself all of these, as well ... not just to everybody else. This isn't just send it out. This is for us, too. We give ourselves these things. Because everybody knows if we don't fill our tank -- right? -- then we can't help everybody else fill their tank.

But this is what she talks about throughout the book is braving the wilderness.

So here's our mountain peak. We accept that our path may take us to the edges: to places where we don't quite fit into any camp. I can accept that. Yet, as Unity and as true seekers of Unity, we know this is where our deepest spiritual power lives. It has always, for me, been the edge where I grew; where I moved past; where I became.

People call it transition. You can call it the edge. That has always been when I finally took that step and moved forward, where my biggest growth has been. And that's what we're being called to do when we become the wilderness.

The truth of who I am lives in my heart, and no one belongs here more than I do. No one. And I know that truth, and I'm learning that truth.

And believe me, I'm not standing up here saying I've got it all figured out. Because y'all know me; I'm a work in progress. I'm still going to come to another edge. I am. Someday I'll be at that edge again. I don't know what it's going to look like, but I'm sure it's coming, because it always comes. But guess what? I'm still here. So, 100% of the time, I get over it and I get through it. And I learn from it and I grow from it.

So, if this week you find yourself stuck or just kind of out of sorts, I want you to ask yourself: Where am I tempted to trade my authenticity for approval? Where are you giving yourself up so you can fit in? Right? Where am I armoring up instead of meeting myself and others with compassion and curiosity? Where am I closing down instead of going, *"Okay, I'll look at this. Let's stay open to this."* And what brave and loving action am I willing to take, even in fear? Even if I'm afraid.

So, I invite you to practice daily. Put your hand on your heart. And just breathe into it and tell yourself this same affirmation: *"I stand tall in truth. I keep my heart open. And my heart is wild and free in spirit."*

Thank you.

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