

SUMMARY

BRAVING THE WILDERNESS BRENÉ BROWN



Summary of “Braving the Wilderness” by Brené Brown

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Learn what it means to truly belong.

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Introduction

If you want to feel alone, you have only to look at social media. Although technology was intended to bring us together, it often pushes us further apart. Maybe you feel alienated from your family and friends, all of whom are divided by polarizing political opinions. Maybe you've noticed that social media feels shallow, with everyone desperately clamoring for validation and attention. Or perhaps you've found yourself posting happy pictures on Instagram when you know that, deep down, you don't have one real friend you could call. All of us have struggled with these feelings at one time or another. And because loneliness is so powerful and so stigmatized by our society, we often find ourselves making unwise choices in an attempt to appear that we're part of a group.

However, the author argues that we can never use other people to truly fill the hole inside. Instead, if we want to feel complete, we must brave the wilderness of our own hearts and souls and learn how to be whole on our own. Over the course of this summary, we'll explore the author's wilderness survival guide.

The Search for Belonging

When people are asked what they're most afraid of, many people say "spiders," "heights," or "the dark." But many others say they're most afraid of being alone. And whether we admit to it or not, at the core, this is a universally human fear. For many of us, this stems from an early, formative experience with loneliness-- one that made us dread the prospect of ever feeling that way again. Maybe it started in elementary school when you were the only kid who didn't get invited to a birthday party. Maybe you were crushed by the awkward humiliation of standing beside a table with your lunch tray, asking, "Can I sit here?" only to be turned away. Maybe you experienced some form of racism or sexism that left an indelible print on your young heart.

Sadly, the author has experienced every one of the scenarios I just described. And, just as you might expect, these experiences had a powerful impact on her emotional development. From an early age, simple facets of her identity-- like her name and the color of her skin-- proved divisive. When she was only four years old, she felt keenly out of place in both white and Black circles and this lack of belonging generated a core shame that haunted her for years. It got even worse when she didn't make the cheerleading team in high school. When she starved herself and attempted to modify her body, her name, her identity in a desperate effort to fit in. As you might expect, these are heavy feelings to carry at such a young age. And so she began abusing alcohol in high-school and as a young adult.

Fortunately, however, a silver lining came when she accepted that she needed help and attempted to get on a path to recovery. But although this is typically a hopeful and definitive moment in a person's life, the author's path to recovery wasn't quite so optimistic. Because once again... she didn't fit in. The sponsors at Alcoholics Anonymous noticed that her alcoholism and her obsession with unhealthy, codependent relationships were inextricably linked. So, she was rejected from Alcoholics Anonymous-- yes, that's right!-- and pushed in the direction of another support group: Co-

Dependents Anonymous. But once again, a support group that should have offered help and hope proved to be a place of pain and rejection. Because although people aren't commonly rejected from support groups, the author found herself being excluded from not one, but two. Yet again, even at her lowest, she wasn't the right fit for a group. She wasn't the right fit for any group anywhere.

What Does it Really Mean to Belong?

As we've seen through the author's example, it's incredibly painful to feel as though you don't belong. Human beings are social creatures; we crave the comfort of conformity, of being surrounded by a "pack." We want to fit in rather than stand out. But the author's own experience has taught her that fitting in is actually the opposite of belonging. When you first hear that statement, it might sound a little wacky. After all, isn't "fitting in" the same thing as "belonging?" The author argues that, actually, nothing could be further from the truth. And that's primarily due to a little thing called "imposter syndrome," a mental health condition which affects a whopping 70% of all people.

The Harvard Business Review defines imposter syndrome "as a collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evident success. 'Imposters' suffer from chronic self-doubt and a sense of intellectual fraudulence that override any feelings of success or external proof of their competence. They seem unable to internalize their accomplishments, however successful they are in their field. High achieving, highly successful people often suffer, so imposter syndrome doesn't equate with low self-esteem or a lack of self-confidence. In fact, some researchers have linked it with perfectionism, especially in women and among academics." And this is especially true of the author! You may also have experienced it yourself, perhaps in high school or college.

Maybe, as a high school student, you dressed like everybody else, talked like everybody else, and hung out with the "cool kids" in an effort to appear like you belonged. But deep down, you may have felt that you had nothing in common with your friends at all. Why? Because you didn't have a real connection. You might have "fit in" on the surface but you didn't belong because that wasn't really your tribe. Your relationship with your friends was far from authentic and therefore, you still felt as though you didn't belong. The same is also true of college students or professors who go to great lengths to convince others that they fit in in their environment. But

under the surface, you might constantly think, “I don’t really belong here. Somebody’s going to figure it out. They’re going to know I’m not as smart, not as talented, not as worthy.” And so, in the end, it doesn’t matter if you appear to fit in with the right crowd; fitting in is not the same as belonging.

The author discovered this firsthand when, as an adult, she experienced an awakening. She realized that she had spent her entire life pursuing the acceptance and approval of others. She had wasted so much time trying to make other people like and include her. But in the end, she discovered that you can never really belong to anybody but yourself. That’s because people, places, and circumstances will come and go throughout your life. But you are stuck with you forever. And at the end of the day, you must only seek acceptance and belonging within yourself. It’s easy to define your worth in terms of other people’s validation and approval. But as hard as it can be to accept that, another person’s opinion does not define you. Ultimately, only you can define you. The author realized that her pain and her search for belonging ended on the day she decided to accept herself.

The Metaphorical Wilderness

As we progress throughout this book, you may be wondering why the author chose to entitle her work “braving the wilderness.” What does the wilderness have to do with belonging? (Especially when there is no hiking or travel anywhere within this story!) But the title stems from the fact that Brown finds inspiration in the concept of the metaphorical wilderness. When you think about it, the concept of the wilderness is both exciting and terrifying because it is vast and empty. In the wilderness, you are left with nothing but yourself and a wide, open terrain. And if you’re afraid of being alone or failing to become, the concept of being on your own in a vast wilderness might be the scariest thing in the world.

But the author posits that that’s exactly why we must brave the wilderness. Because if we want to truly accept ourselves and find peace, we have to be willing to face that emptiness. We must stand vulnerable, alone, and accepting of ourselves. We must learn to be okay with being on our own. That’s why the author invites every reader to consider their own personal wilderness. It may look different for everyone but one thing is for certain: we all have our own wilderness to face.

So, what’s yours? Maybe you need to get comfortable with going out and doing activities on your own. Have you been waiting to find your “tribe” before you go to the movies, go for cocktails, or try a nice restaurant? In this case, your wilderness might be doing those things alone! It might be difficult at first and you might worry that you will look lonely or pathetic for being on your own. But the truth is that there’s something empowering about being comfortable with your own company! Many people are so afraid of being alone that they spend time with people they don’t even like just to look like they have friends. And this is another sad example of trying too hard to fit in or belong. So, don’t fall into that trap! Go out, be brave, and empower others to do the same!

Similarly, your wilderness might take the form of validation through social media. Maybe you constantly find yourself posting pictures and judging your self-worth by the number of likes, followers, and comments you get. When a lot of people engage with your posts, you feel great! And when they don't, you feel like you're the scum of the earth. But seeking digital validation is no different from trying to fit in with a group of kids who will never accept you. The approval of strangers on the internet does not define you and it doesn't mean you belong. That's because you belong to yourself, not to your Instagram profile! However, facing these truths can be scary. Even if they aren't true, we sometimes find a sense of comfort in the lies we tell ourselves about belonging and identity. So, relinquishing those ideas can be tough. And that's why the author contends that you need some survival skills for your journey in the wilderness.

You can think of this book as your survival guide, but you're going to need a few extra things. And through her own experience in the wilderness, Brown has learned that there are a few key traits you must cultivate if you want to brave your own emotional wilderness. For starters, you have to be willing to be vulnerable and embrace painful truths. Neither of these things are easy to do, but they are absolutely critical if you want to grow as a person. It's also important that you give yourself the freedom to be goofy and free. When we're trying to fit in and belong to other people, we often neglect to give ourselves this freedom because we're afraid of what others will think. But you can't truly belong to yourself if you're afraid to be honest with yourself. So, embrace your own authenticity! Do what makes you feel like you even if it isn't cool.

And lastly, it's important to develop your sense of trust. This can be a tough one if you've spent your life trying to fit in. Because, at the core, fitting in is about conformity and hiding who you are. Imposter syndrome can also make it difficult to trust because you fear that others will "out" you as being a fake or realize that you don't belong. This in turn makes it difficult to open up and form trusting connections with others. But you can't belong to yourself unless you can be honest with yourself and with others. So, cultivate these seven trustworthy traits in yourself and look for people who

embody these qualities themselves. The author affirms that a trustworthy person is: reliable, willing to take responsibility for their mistakes, respectful of personal boundaries and personal information, ethical, open-minded, and willing to give of their time and heart.

Final Summary

Feeling like you don't belong is painful. Rejection can often haunt us for our entire lives. And if we're not careful, we can internalize our experiences with rejection until we come to view them as a part of our identities. This in turn can make us desperate to belong, so desperate that we become inauthentic and disconnected from ourselves. And that's exactly why Brené Brown believes that we must surrender that search for belonging.

Rather than attempting to fit in with others, we must brave the wilderness and face our own hearts so that we can truly belong to ourselves. Because as the author has seen through her own painful firsthand experience, fitting in is not the same as belonging. And you can only ever truly belong to yourself. So, shake off that need for someone else's approval and cultivate your relationship with yourself.



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