

Brene Brown on Shame & The Courage to be Vulnerable by On Being

Krista Tippett, host: In a culture where we like to fix or prevent vulnerability, Brené Brown is reviving the knowledge that our struggles make us who we are. And it's based on data — social scientific research she conducted first into shame and then into qualities that distinguish lives with a strong sense of worthiness. She's frank about the resistance her own findings awakened in her, a classic American perfectionist who wore exhaustion as a status symbol. She also discovered a stark gulf between what we want to be true — and what is true — in vulnerability between men and women. And she exquisitely uncomfortably describes the difference between making our children happy or raising brave, engaged human beings.

Brené Brown: I think we lose sight of the beauty, the most beautiful things I look back on in my life are coming out from underneath things I didn't know I could get out from underneath. You know, the moments I look back in my life, and think, those were the moments that made me — were moments of struggle.

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett. This is On Being — from APM, American Public Media. Brené Brown is an Assistant Professor of Social Work Research at the University of Houston. She's the author of several books, including *The Gifts of Imperfection* and *Daring Greatly*. Millions of people have viewed Brené Brown's talk at a TEDx event in Houston and her later talk on the main stage at TED with the arguably unappealing title, "Listening to Shame."

Ms. Tippett: So, you know, I've been kind of steeped in you for the last few days and I thought I might start by mentioning one of the articles about you in *The Telegraph*, the U.K., that started out: "Brené Brown is a shame and vulnerability expert. I know — that was my reaction too. I'm really not hard-wired for this stuff, but bear with me." You often make the point that, as a fifth-generation Texan, you would not have believed that you'd be hard-wired for this stuff either.

[Laugh]

Ms. Brown: No, true.

Ms. Tippett: So can I just say the word "shame" is hard for me, you know? As I was reading you, especially in the beginning, I was thinking, you know, I get what you're talking about, but I don't identify with the word "shame." Then I wondered if maybe the fact that I'm so uncomfortable with it is part of what you're describing.

Ms. Brown: I mean, I think that is — I don't know about, you know, for you

personally, I don't know, but I think that is very often the case. I mean, I sometimes say that when I use the word "shame," people have one of two responses: I don't know what you're talking about, but I'm pretty sure it doesn't have anything to do with me, or I know exactly what you're talking about and I don't want to discuss it with you.

Ms. Tippett: Right. Well, to me, it has this connotation of ashamed of something.

Ms. Brown: Right.

Ms. Tippett: But you're talking about something that's actually a layer below. I mean, that can be part of it, but that doesn't capture it, does it?

Ms. Brown: No. I'm really talking about that kind of warm wash that we experience of not good enough. You know, I always say that shame drives two primary tapes: not good enough, and who do you think you are? So to me, it's a very formidable emotion. Its survival is based on us not talking about it, so it's done everything it can do to make it unspeakable.

Ms. Tippett: So vulnerability is this other word you use a lot that our culture is almost allergic to.

[Laugh]

Ms. Tippett: And I think it's really interesting how your work on vulnerability came out of your attempt to kind of put this shame learning into a positive context, right? To figure out what were the ingredients of the lives that you saw as wholehearted. And you say that you started with an assumption that people who were able to live it wholeheartedly were acting out of a place of knowing their worthiness.

Ms. Brown: Right.

Ms. Tippett: But then you started to see it differently. It kind of shape-shifted, and I wonder if you would tell the story of this epiphany that you had and you date it November 2006.

Ms. Brown: You know, it's so funny because I still have that painted red wood kitchen table where everything amazing has happened in my life and everything hard seems to have happened in my life too. I actually was running out of the house this morning and looked at it and thought about that moment this morning. You know, for me because I had spent the first six years really trying to understand the anatomy of shame and understand scarcity and fear and this struggle with worthiness.

It wasn't until, you know, I had really kind of put a theory together about what shame is and how it worked that I thought, oh, man, I have all this data and I've interviewed so many people who are just, you know, they're like me and they're like a lot of the people I know. You know, they struggle, they're trying their best, but their lives seem so different than mine. They really seem to engage with the world from this place of worthiness. You know, they say, yeah, I'm screwing things up and I'm imperfect and I'm afraid, but I'm still worthy of love and belonging, like their love and belonging wasn't on the table, it wasn't negotiable.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Ms. Brown: And, so I sent my husband and my kids to — they went to my in-laws for the weekend in San Antonio, and I stayed and pulled out a bunch of data and kind of spread everything across the house. I started thinking, you know, what I'm looking for are these kind of very wholehearted people. And the word actually came to me because I go to an Episcopal church and, in one of our prayers, there's a phrase that, you know, "I have not loved you with my whole heart." And I keep thinking these are people who are really loving with their whole heart, like even if they're getting hurt, they're still loving with their whole heart.

So I started coding data and looking for patterns and themes in words and they started emerging very quickly. And I just started to put together lists, like here are the things that wholehearted men and women really consciously choose and here are the things that they push away from and try to move away. So I ended up with two lists and, you know. I called one kind of the bad list and this was the wholehearted list. I was so in such a little kind of coding trance that I wasn't paying attention, and I think I finally sat down at the kitchen table and put these two huge poster-size post-it notes up with all these words. And I just remember looking up and looking at the kind of do-not-do list and it just described my entire life. I'm like I'm on the wrong list.

Ms. Tippett: So what was on it — well, what was on it? Well, let me just ask you this before that. So did you think that you were going to find that these people had been better parented or had less trauma or had had better support systems? I mean, what did you think?

Ms. Brown: Oh, I had a lot of self-righteousness about that. I think I thought, well, these people, you know, the people who believe in their worthiness, their lives probably panned out extremely well.

Ms. Tippett: Better, yeah, right.

Ms. Brown: Yeah, those are the people whose ...

Ms. Tippett: They were dealt a better hand of cards.

Ms. Brown: They were. Their nail polish doesn't chip, no stretch marks, no struggles, you know, but — but there wasn't the case. You know, there weren't fewer divorces or bankruptcies or history of trauma or addiction. I mean, they were just like the general population in terms of those variables. They were just like everyone else.

Ms. Tippett: So what was on the list that described you?

[Laugh]

Ms. Brown: Perfectionism, judgment, exhaustion as a status symbol, productivity as self-worth, cool, what do people think, performing, proving, quest for certainty. Such a pretty picture.

Ms. Tippett: Yeah.

Ms. Brown: You know, and the other side were things that I had really strong emotional reactions to, like the first one that I saw that just — oh, I just was so mad — was

creativity.

Ms. Tippett: Creativity was not correlated with perfectionism or productivity?

Ms. Brown: No, no. Creativity was on the other side and I think, before this, you know, I was one of those people who, if someone said, you know, "Hey, do you want to take this painting class with me, or do you want to scrapbook or do you want to ..." you know, I was like, aw, that's really cute. You know, "You do your A-R-T, I've got a J-O-B." You know, it's so funny because as a shame researcher, my lens on this was very different. My lens was not just like, oh, OK, so we should be more creative and we should incorporate more rest and play into our lives.

My question was like, OK, so I get rest, it's important, and play and creativity and all these things that make me super uncomfortable. But what are the shame triggers that get in the way of us doing these things? Like I wasn't satisfied with just knowing what we were supposed to do. I wanted to know what is it that the wholehearted, if they were just like us, what did they have to overcome in order to soften into some of these things? So like with creativity, the primary shame trigger around that is comparison.

Ms. Tippett: So that when you get into comparison, you're not going to be able to soften it to creativity.

Ms. Brown: No. It just kills creativity. For every one of these choices that leads to wholeheartedness, there is real shame work to be done about how we get there. I mean, how can we embrace rest and play if we've tied our self-worth to what we produce?

Ms. Tippett: And was vulnerability — the way you use the word now — just kind of an underlying quality of these lives of wholeheartedness ...

Ms. Brown: Yeah, absolutely.

Ms. Tippett: Creativity, play, rest?

Ms. Brown: Yeah, absolutely, because, you know, these were folks who they show up in their lives without a lot of guarantees. I remember sitting at that table a couple of days later kind of making the decision that I was going to put the data away and get a therapist — and I did. But I remember thinking does this mean that our capacity for wholeheartedness can never be greater than our willingness to be broken-hearted?

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being — conversation about meaning, religion, ethics, and ideas. Today I'm with grounded theory researcher — and vulnerability expert — Brené Brown.

Ms. Tippett: Here's a statement you made: "Vulnerability is the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experience." So explain that sentence to me.

Ms. Brown: Vulnerability, I think, you know, when I ask people what is vulnerability, the answers were things like sitting with my wife who has Stage III breast cancer and trying to make plans for our children, my first date after my divorce, saying I love you first, asking for a raise, sending my child to school being enthusiastic and supportive of him and knowing how excited he is about orchestra tryouts and how much he wants to make first chair and encouraging him and supporting him and knowing that's not going to happen. To me, vulnerability is courage. It's about the willingness to show up and be

seen in our lives. And in those moments when we show up, I think those are the most powerful meaning-making moments of our lives even if they don't go well. I think they define who we are.

Ms. Tippet: And it's easy to associate a word like vulnerability with a word like gullibility or even, like as a parent would associate it with, is that dangerous, right?

Ms. Brown: Oh, for sure.

Ms. Tippet: So how do you make that distinction because that's not really what you're talking about?

Ms. Brown: Well, I think it's part of — you know, I love that you said that we're allergic to vulnerability. I think it's a part of the allergy. I think it is part of the vulnerability's weakness, its gullibility, its being naive.

Ms. Tippet: Getting taken advantage of, getting hurt.

Ms. Brown: Absolutely, right. But to separate that from the reality of vulnerability, I always ask a very simple question to people. I just say think of the last time you did something that you thought was really brave or the last time you saw someone do something really brave. You know, I think, without question? and I can tell you as a researcher, 11,000 pieces of data, I cannot find a single example of courage, moral courage, spiritual courage, leadership courage, relational courage, I cannot find a single example of courage in my research that was not born completely of vulnerability. And so I think we buy into some mythology about vulnerability being weakness and being gullibility and being frailty because it gives us permission not to do it.

Ms. Tippet: Right. And one point you make also is — this is really important for me to hear. These people who live vulnerably in this healthy way don't find it comfortable, right? I mean, there's some place you say that part of the way to become this way is to practice being uncomfortable, right? So there's nothing flowery about this. You're not saying, oh, it's fun, you'll get to like it, and you're not saying it will go well all the time.

Ms. Brown: No, it doesn't. I speak from experience. You know, I think one of the things that happened for me, you know, I did this TEDxHouston talk in June of 2010 and then, in December of 2010, the talk was chosen to be on the main TED website and it went viral very quickly. And one of the things that happened during that experience for me, it was the most intense vulnerability I've ever experienced in my professional life.

Ms. Tippet: Yeah, it's like 6 million views for that TEDx talk now.

Ms. Brown: Right.

Ms. Tippet: And over a million for the other one.

Ms. Brown: And that thing was an experiment, like, I never had — if someone would have told me that was going to happen, I would have never said the things I said. And my experiment was let me just try being vulnerable while talking about vulnerability. Let me see what that's like. One of the things for me that happened in the midst of that is I realized that I worked very hard to get my work out as widely as I could without getting

too big and listening to too much criticism. I mean, I was so afraid of the hard, negative, terrible stuff that happens in our culture today, you know, the anonymous comments and just the crappy stuff.

Ms. Tippet: Right, and you were taking risks in your profession, right? I mean, you were blazing some new territory.

Ms. Brown: I was trying, yeah. I mean, very much like you, I think, trying to hold space for a new conversation. So it was really painful. There were parts of it that were very hard for me and that I felt very unprepared for. Somewhere I write something about, you know, I'm a big Leonard Cohen fan and there's the "Hallelujah" lyric that says, "Love is not a victory march, it's a cold and broken hallelujah." Vulnerability is not a victory march either.

Ms. Tippet: But, you know, the other lesson in that is success is not a victory march, right?

Ms. Brown: No.

Ms. Tippet: Because you are talking about what, for you, may have been the thing that you let in most, which was the criticism and the hard side of vulnerability and a lot of people would look at that phenomenon and see the 6 million views, right, and only see that as a nonqualified success.

Ms. Brown: Right. It's a very interesting premise here that you're talking about because a lot of people do define success as a strictly positive experience.

Ms. Tippet: Yeah, or they imagine that it would be, right? We're striving for that moment when it's just positive.

Ms. Brown: Right. So I think vulnerability has — you know, gritty and tenacious is kind of in my DNA. It's kind of who I am and I am very hardheaded about some things and I think being vulnerable has made me a lot stronger and a lot tougher because, when I reflect back on times where I've shown up and — you know, one of the reasons that I use the Theodore Roosevelt quote for book titles and I use it as kind of the arc to talk about vulnerability, this idea of daring greatly, is because I think there's something incredibly brave and daring about showing up and putting your ideas — I don't care if you're raising your hand at a PTO meeting, if you're putting your pottery on Etsy.

Whatever your daring is, however you're trying to show up in your life, I think there's something incredibly contagious and powerful about it. I think it makes the people around us a little bit braver and I think it helps us get very clear on the ideals and values that guide our lives.

Ms. Tippet: And how that's making sense to me as I hear you now is, you know, going back to what you described as kind of the default shame place in us, which is not good enough. Why do I forget the other one which is so familiar to me too? What was the other one?

Ms. Brown: Who do you think you are, yeah.

Ms. Tippet: Who do you think you are, OK, yeah, that one. So if you do something and

you think my identity is on the line here, like if it fails, I'm bad. The difference between that or being vulnerable and — well, the only thing that's at stake is it could fail. It could fail, but not that you are nothing.

Ms. Brown: I mean, that's the whole heart of it. That's the whole heart of it for me.

Ms. Tippett: And that's very hard.

Ms. Brown: And it's really hard and you can't have it both ways.

Ms. Tippett: Right, right.

Ms. Brown: Which I want it both ways.

[Laugh]

Ms. Tippett: Yeah, that makes sense to me too.

Ms. Brown: Just FYI, yeah. When it's really great and supported and successful, I want it to be about me. And when it sucks, I want it to be about the work. So I haven't figured that out yet.

Ms. Tippett: So something that I think is really important also that you've gotten into is the difference between men and women in this and the way women do shame and perfectionism and vulnerability and the way men do it. I want you to tell the story about the man in the yellow golf jacket.

Ms. Brown: OK. So when I started researching shame, I only studied women and I did that for a couple of reasons, the first selfish. I wanted to know — you know, that was my interest because that was my experience and because there was a lot of argument in the academic literature about men and women are different, that we don't experience shame the same way. So I thought, let me keep it really clean and just study women.

Ms. Tippett: It also kind of feels like a word that women would say more, like even if I said I didn't like the word, it feels like a word that's hard to imagine men talking about.

Ms. Brown: No, it's true. But I also came up under a pretty rigorous feminist academic upbringing in my studies, so I was really interested. Because, you know, you think about shame in women, you think about media, body image, you think about — yeah. So it made sense to me.

So I was at a book signing and a couple came up to me and I signed four books for the woman and she grabbed them and she's walked away from the table and her husband who was standing with her stayed. And she said, "Come on, babe, let's go" and he said, "No, I want to talk to her for a minute," meaning me. She said, "No, come on, let's go, let's go." He said, "I'm going to talk to her for a second." There was some tension in that conversation. I was thinking, oh, my God, you need to go. I don't know why you want to stay.

Ms. Tippett: Go with your wife.

[Laugh]

Ms. Brown: Yeah, go because you're hell bent for leather to talk to me and I'd rather you not. He said, "I really liked everything you said. I really like this idea of reaching out and telling our stories and showing up, but you didn't mention men." You know, my initial thought was, oh, gosh, thank God this is going to wrap up quick, because — I don't — you know?

So I looked to him and I said, "I don't study men." And he said, "Well, that's convenient." And my heart was just like, oh, God. And he said, "We have shame, we have deep shame, but when we reach out and tell our stories, we get the emotional [bleep] beat out of us." And he said, "And before you say anything about those mean fathers and those coaches and those brothers and those bully friends, my wife and three daughters, the ones who you just signed the books for, they had rather see me die on top of my white horse than have to watch me fall off." Then he just walked away.

You know, when truth hits you, it just hits you and you know what it is the second it comes to you. I knew that my research was going to be profoundly changed and I knew that it was going to be difficult and painful and that I was going to learn things about myself that I probably didn't want to know, and that's exactly what happened.

Ms. Tippet: I mean, I think you learn things also that women growing up now and feminist and post-feminist women, I mean, it's like a reckoning.

Ms. Brown: It felt like a reckoning and it felt like a reckoning for years talking to men about their experiences. I think, you know, shame is a universal human experience. Like you say, if it washes over me, it's going to be the same as it washes over, you know, my husband, Steve. But the messages and expectations that fuel shame, the messages and expectations that bring us to our knees, are so organized by gender. You know, for women, it's really about do it all, do it perfectly and make sure you make it look effortless.

Ms. Tippet: Right. It's also about how we look, right? I mean, part of that is, and look great while you're doing it too.

Ms. Brown: Oh, yeah, absolutely, no question. I mean, that's the part that better look effortless. Appearance and body image is still the number one shame trigger for women. For men, there's a really kind of singular, suffocating expectation and that is do not be perceived as weak. So for men, the perception of weakness is often very shaming and that one of the things that's interesting is, I talk to men and, you know, what I heard over and over was some variation of, look, my wife, my girlfriend, whomever, they say be afraid, they tell me, you know, share your vulnerability with me, open up, but the truth is, they can't stomach it.

The truth is that, when I'm very vulnerable, when I'm in fear, when I talk about it openly, it permanently changes the dynamics in our relationship. And when I started sharing this with women or whenever I started interviewing couples, women are like, oh, God, it's true. I want you to be open and I want there to be intimacy, but I don't want you go to there.

You know, and so, I've come to this belief that, if you show me a woman who can sit with a man in real vulnerability, in deep fear, and be with him in it, I will show you a woman who, A, has done her work and, B, does not derive her power from that man. And

if you show me a man who can sit with a woman in deep struggle and vulnerability and not try to fix it, but just hear her and be with her and hold space for it, I'll show you a guy who's done his work and a man who doesn't derive his power from controlling and fixing everything.

Ms. Tippet: That's really important. Really, it's jarring, right? It's like we needed to say that a lot and sit with it.

Ms. Brown: It's so jarring. I remember driving home and having this moment where I was like, oh, my God, I am the patriarchy, like I am facilitating this. I'm participating in this. It's just a conversation that's way overdue, I think.

Ms. Tippet: It sure is, yeah.

["Hallelujah" music]

Ms. Tippet: You can listen to this program again, or to my entire unedited conversation with Brené Brown at onbeing.org. And, on our blog, we've posted her popular talk at TEDxHouston. She presents more of her research on vulnerability and the personal discoveries that shook the ground beneath her own feet. Watch that video at onbeing.org.

You can also find us on Facebook and Twitter. Follow our show us @Beingtweets, follow me — @KristaTippet.

["Hallelujah" music]

Ms. Tippet: Coming up, if courage is a function of struggle, what are we doing to our children when we try to make their lives perfect?

I'm Krista Tippet. This program comes to you from APM, American Public Media.

[Announcements]

Ms. Tippet: I'm Krista Tippet, and this is On Being. Brené Brown, who has taken the world of TED talks, health care, and corporate leadership by storm with her research into vulnerability. She says vulnerability and struggle are fundamentals of "wholehearted" living — lives of relationship, courage, and creativity.

Ms. Tippet: I want to talk about parenting. You know, a joke I've made across the years about parenting is — I mean, there are so many joys about it, but it's also this unfolding, um, variety of reasons to feel guilty.

[Laugh]

Ms. Tippet: You know, and my daughter's in college now, and I've just found a new one and, um ...

Ms. Brown: Don't tell me that.

[Laugh]

Ms. Tippet: But, you know, it's funny, but I think one of the things I was most aware of when I had my daughter, my first child, is that it is utter excruciating vulnerability like

you have never known before. You are not in control, you do not know what's going to happen next.

Ms. Brown: Yeah. I mean, just to hear you say it takes my breath away. It is the ultimate experience in vulnerability, I think.

Ms. Tippett: And no one prepares you for that.

Ms. Brown: No, and I think first child, first time, that the intensity of that vulnerability can be crazy-making. Like I remember looking at Ellen sitting in her little bucket seat, you know, and thinking who has left her with me?

Ms. Tippett: I know, I know.

[Laugh]

Ms. Brown: And I just remember, you know, that completely universal car ride home from the hospital where you're like, "Jesus, they're in our lane! Move over! Slow down!" and it never ends. It is where the rubber meets the road.

Ms. Tippett: But as you write so well about, and this gets back to our cultural allergy to vulnerability, what we have done with this primal sense of vulnerability and, I think, you know, which is not a good and a bad impulse, our need to protect, is that we've gone perfectionistic on this.

Ms. Brown: We have.

Ms. Tippett: In that, I mean, I think we're kind of waking up to that, but you really, really point out why that is just destructive for us and for our children in a whole new way, I think.

Ms. Brown: It's so hard because, you know, one of the things I write about very openly is, you know, I call it the 2007 breakdown/spiritual awakening.

Ms. Tippett: At that red kitchen table.

Ms. Brown: At that red kitchen table where it all started. Then I took my syllabus to my therapist and said, you know, I need more vulnerability. I have six weeks, go. I think the part that really pushed me kind of to getting help and wanting to live differently was what I was seeing about parenting, that this whole idea that who we are and how we engage with the world is such a far more accurate predictor of how our children will do than what we know about parenting. I'll start by saying I agree with you. I think we're in a gentle, quiet awaking period right now.

Ms. Tippett: Yeah, yeah.

Ms. Brown: But I started my research just very coincidentally six months before 9/11, and so over the course of the last 12 years, I have seen fear absolutely run roughshod over our families. And I have seen us go to these crazy lengths to protect ourselves and our children from the uncertainty that the world has become. I've not only seen that through my lens as a researcher, but certainly experienced it as a parent, but as a college professor. You know, this is my 15th year teaching and I only teach masters and doctoral level students.

But I see students come to us who have never had experiences, real experiences, with adversity and how that shows up is hopelessness. You know, one of the most interesting things I've found in doing this work is, you know, something the wholehearted share in common is this real profound sense of hopefulness. And as I got into the literature on hope, very specifically C.R. Snyder's work from the University of Kansas at Lawrence, that hope is a function of struggle.

Ms. Tippett: Right. I think that's one of the most stunning sentences that I saw in your writing.

Ms. Brown: Yeah, and that hope is not an emotion, but hope is a cognitive, behavioral process that we learn when we experience adversity, when we have relationships that are trustworthy, when people have faith in our ability to get out of a jam.

Ms. Tippett: Right, which is different from this pattern of having faith in us which means telling us everything we do is wonderful and shielding us from pain as long as they can.

Ms. Brown: Right. And, you know, I'm literally — I don't even know how to talk about it. It really just floors me that, when I go out and I do a lot of talks for big corporations, you know, Fortune 100 companies, how many people tell me — like the HR folks who I end up — luckily, I love them and I get to talk to them a lot, who will tell me how often parents call to go over the performance evaluation of their children or to find out why they didn't get a raise or a promotion.

Ms. Tippett: Really?

Ms. Brown: Yeah, oh, yeah.

Ms. Tippett: I mean, I just took my daughter to college and we got this lecture, the parents and the families who were there, from like the Dean of Students and it was so clear that they were dealing with that same thing, right? I mean, they basically said I need you to understand that we're going to take great care of your gem and also that my relationship is to them and not to you. We got this lecture, which was clearly based on parents still trying to control. You know, again, it's like, boy, we know this, don't we, this desire that you have to create a beautiful world and life and experience for these people you love?

Ms. Brown: But you know what? I think we lose sight of the beauty. The most beautiful things I look back on in my life are coming out from underneath things I didn't know I could get out from underneath. You know, the moments I look back in my life and think, God, those are the moments that made me, were moments of struggle.

Ms. Tippett: Or I look back at things I did where, if my parents or I had understood how crazy it was, like if it had been me, I would have tried to intervene and rescue?

Ms. Brown: Oh, for sure.

Ms. Tippett: And you're right. Those are the moments you become who you are.

Ms. Brown: You know, and I've seen how this research has really changed, you know, like I'll give you just a very specific example. My daughter decides, you know, that she wants to try out for something that she's really new at. You know, a sport

or something that she's just taken up.

And I think before, maybe even three years ago, before this research, not only before I wrote it up, before I started trying to practice it and live it, I think I would have been the parent who said, you know, either let's get you in 34 camps before you try out so you've mastered it, or I don't think you should try out for that because there are girls who've been playing this sport as long as you've been playing soccer ...

Ms. Tippett: And you want to shield her from disappointment.

Ms. Brown: Right. And I want to take away that moment that I had. You know, it wasn't the moment. When I think back and I talk to parents a lot about this, it wasn't the hard moments that we don't want to expose them to. It was the isolation and shame we felt around those moments because a lot of us didn't have people to process them with.

Like I think when I went out for something and didn't make it, I don't think my parents were ashamed of me, but I think they were ashamed for me. I don't think they knew how to talk about that. I don't think we had a conversation. I know we didn't have a conversation that I can have with my daughter today where I say, you know what, I'm so proud of you not only for trying, but for letting the people around you who you care about, you let us know how much you wanted it, and it doesn't get braver than that.

Ms. Tippett: Right. Right. Well, I mean, here's this other sentence that's a corollary to the sentence hope is a function of struggle. You say you look at a baby, your newborn baby is hard-wired for struggle. It's built in us that that is how we are going to shape, that that's what we're going to encounter, that's how we're going to shape ourselves. That's actually a really hard thing to take in, you know, as a parent, especially thinking about those moments early on when you first meet this being that is going to have dominance over your life.

Ms. Brown: Yeah, because I think we look and think I can make this right. I can do for her or him what wasn't done for me. I can protect them from the things that hurt me. I think we are so much more hard-wired for who we are than what people, especially parents, want to believe. And I don't think our job as parents is to make everything right and perfect and beautiful and true. I think our job is, during struggle, to look at our kids and say, yeah, this is hard and this is tough and you're hurt.

Ms. Tippett: And you're not alone, you're not alone.

Ms. Brown: But you're not alone.

Ms. Tippett: I'm not going to fix it, but you're not alone.

Ms. Brown: Right, you're not alone and I want to make sure you understand that this doesn't change the fact that you're worthy of love and belonging.

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett with On Being, conversation about meaning, religion, ethics, and ideas. Today I'm with grounded theory researcher and vulnerability expert Brené Brown.

Ms. Tippett: It's interesting to me that you have taken up this subject and maybe this is partly why it's gone so viral at precisely at a moment in which Americans, I think after a few generations of pretending like collectively we weren't that vulnerable at least, have rediscovered geopolitical vulnerability, economic vulnerability. So I've been thinking about this a lot in terms of how that manifests itself in our civic life.

I mean, you have this really great sentence, "Feeling vulnerable, imperfect, and afraid is human. It's when we lose our capacity to hold space for these struggles that we become dangerous." It seemed to me now that that's one way to describe what is happening in our culture and our political life. We have no space to be honest about that, to be vulnerable, to be imperfect and afraid together, and it's become dangerous.

Ms. Brown: No, we don't, you know, on a micro level as individuals, we're not our best selves in fear and collectively we're certainly not our best selves when we're in fear. And the national conversation, and I think this is true politically, I think it's true socially, economically, I think in the sector where we talk about religion and spirituality, the conversation has really centered on what are we supposed to be afraid of and who's to blame for it.

Ms. Tippett: Right, right.

Ms. Brown: And I'm hoping it's not wishful thinking, but I'm thinking we've grown weary of that. I think we're sick of being afraid, and I think there's a growing silent majority of people who are really kind of thinking, at a very basic human level, I don't want to spend my days like this. I don't want to spend every ounce of energy I have ducking and weaving. I don't know where we'll go next, but I really believe with every fiber of my professional and personal self that we won't move forward without some honest conversations about who we are when we're in fear and what we're capable of doing to each other when we're afraid.

Ms. Tippett: Right. I do like that, again, that idea of hope as a function of struggle. It's almost like, you know, it would be counterintuitive, counterculturally, to say we need to struggle with this honestly, vulnerability, to cultivate the hope that we need to figure out what's next.

Ms. Brown: And I see it happening. I mean, I see some movement and I think ...

Ms. Tippett: Yeah, I do too.

Ms. Brown: I feel hopeful for it about it. I feel like I always think about things in terms of family. You know, I think about systems and organizations and this is probably a function of my social work training to always think about systems. But, you know, I think about families, I think about schools, I think about organizations, I think about community. I think we're awakening maybe from a period of deep disengagement.

Ms. Tippett: Mm-hmm, and we're all so sick of being disengaged.

[Laugh]

Ms. Brown: And we're sick of being disengaged. I think we are. I think it's, hey, not caring and choosing to live disappointed, because that's easier than feeling

disappointment has not paid off.

Ms. Tippet: You know, something else that runs through your work that I have to say it just so matches up in such a beautiful way with a question that I've asked myself over time about, you know — what are — well, the way I've asked the question, which is a very kindred question to yours, is what are the qualities of, you know, the genius in the art of living? It's kind of a phrase of Einstein's, spiritual genius. Wholehearted lives would be another way to say it.

It's not just that the things that go wrong for us are part of our wholeness, right, as you describe, that the vulnerability is what makes us — keeps us in, but also that what goes wrong for us is part of our gift to the world. It's what enables us to connect and be compassionate. I mean, that's a lovely way to think about, you know, the hard, possibly excruciating upside of the fact that so many of us are struggling and suffering right now.

Ms. Brown: I agree 100 percent, and I think it points to maybe one of the deepest paradoxes about vulnerability, which is when I meet you, vulnerability is a very first thing I try to find in you and it's the very last thing I want to show you in me because it's the glue that holds connection together.

It's all about our community humanity and, when we own our stories and we share our stories with one another and we see ourselves reflected back in the stories of people in our lives, we know we're not alone. And to me, that's the heart of wholeheartedness, it's the center of spirituality. To me, that's the nature of connection, to be able to see myself and hear myself and learn more about myself in the stories you tell about your experiences.

Ms. Tippet: I also see an upside of aging. When I see people aging badly in a sad way, it seems to me that the common denominator is they have not faced their demons and they just get smaller. It's like they just get eaten alive from the inside. And that's about being vulnerable and, you know, claiming what's gone wrong and the imperfection. But there's a way in which getting older, especially kind of getting into your 40s, you know, it kind of pushes you to finally do this if you haven't done it. You know, that's in your story. I just wonder if you think that, you know, this is something we can lean into almost as a gift.

Ms. Brown: No. I think what you're describing is what I have found as a very critical developmental milestone for us. You know, some people call it the midlife crisis. You know, I call it the midlife unraveling. I think there is a place and time in our lives where we realize that growing up, when we felt pain, when we felt small, when we felt unseen, we constructed walls and moats and we protected ourselves and we shut down parts of ourselves. Then I think this happens in midlife where we realize, oh, God, to be the person we want to be, to be the partner, to be the parent, we have to take down everything we put up that was supposed to be keeping us safe.

Ms. Tippet: And that has not served us.

Ms. Brown: And it has not served us.

Ms. Tippet: Right. Where do you say? You say if you shut down vulnerability, you shut down all these other qualities that you long to have, right?

Ms. Brown: Right, because, you know, vulnerability is the center of things like fear.

Ms. Tippet: You shut down joy, you minimize joy.

Ms. Brown: Yes. And when you describe those people who, you know, don't seem to be aging well, I think knowingly or unknowingly and probably more so unknowingly they get to that place where they say, I have to make a choice whether to pull all this stuff down and be seen or keep going with all this up. And I think they keep going, carrying all this, and I think it is just so heavy.

Ms. Tippet: Yeah. And do you think that we have an intuition for this? I mean, is there any advice you can give? Let me say this. When I look at your story, OK, from the outside, it seems to me that you were completely shocked that day at the red kitchen table when you discovered vulnerability, right?

Ms. Brown: I was, yeah.

Ms. Tippet: But on the other hand, if I look at it from this privileged removed perspective, it seems to me almost like you were heading towards it like a heat-seeking missile, you know.

[Laugh]

Ms. Tippet: Like you didn't want to go there, but you found exactly the way in in your research, which was a departure from the other research, that took you there.

Ms. Brown: Right.

Ms. Tippet: And you got there at a moment in your life when you realized you had, you know, it was a stark choice. I mean, do you think that we — do you — is it your experience that, you know, that maybe we all are kind of on that trajectory whether we want to be or not? And, you know, how can we listen to that impulse or how can we follow it? What can we cultivate to get there gracefully as possible?

Ms. Brown: I don't think — I think grace will have a lot to do with it. I don't think gracefully will be a part of it, unfortunately.

[Laugh]

Ms. Tippet: OK.

Ms. Brown: At least I don't see many people do it gracefully. I'm sure some people do it gracefully, not anyone I know. But, um, I think it's the long walk from what will people think to I am enough. I think it is recognizing that, if courage is a value that we hold as important, that vulnerability is the only way in and through.

It starts by an openness to seeing ourselves and seeing kind of how we're protecting ourselves from vulnerability. I think that's where it started. I think for me at that red kitchen table, even for me today, I am the most successful doing, you know, this work and trying to be real and transparent and me and feel good in my own skin when I stay very aware of what kind of armor I'm throwing up or when I feel afraid.

You know, I think maybe the definitive piece of knowing that has helped me with this is

that I was raised in a very kind of binary culture. If things were good or bad, you know, you were brave or you were afraid. You were courageous or you were fearful. And I think for me, one of the definitive moments in my life was realizing that most of us are brave and afraid in the exact same moment all day long.

Ms. Tippet: Brené Brown is Assistant Professor of Social Work Research at the University of Houston. Her books include: *The Gifts of Imperfection* and *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*.

To listen to this show again, or hear my unedited conversation with Brené Brown, stream it on our website or download it on iTunes. Find both links at onbeing.org.

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[Announcements]

Ms. Tippet: Next time an Israeli-Palestinian story that defies headlines of despair. We meet two courageous people — part of a network of families — who refuse to let their losses be a cause for more violence.