

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author

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The Quest for True Belonging  
and the Courage to Stand Alone

**BRAVING THE  
WILDERNESS**



SEVEN

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## Strong Back. Soft Front. Wild Heart.

*All too often our so-called strength comes from fear, not love; instead of having a strong back, many of us have a defended front shielding a weak spine. In other words, we walk around brittle and defensive, trying to conceal our lack of confidence. If we strengthen our backs, metaphorically speaking, and develop a spine that's flexible but sturdy, then we can risk having a front that's soft and open....How can we give and accept care with strong-back, soft-front compassion, moving past fear into a place of genuine tenderness? I believe it comes about when we can be truly transparent, seeing the world clearly—and letting the world see into us.*

—ROSHI JOAN HALIFAX

The first time I heard the term “strong back, soft front” was from Joan Halifax. We were doing an event together at the Omega Institute in New York—one of my favorite places. I’ll admit that I was a little intimidated to meet her; Dr. Halifax is a Buddhist teacher, Zen priest, anthropologist, activist, and author of several books on Engaged Buddhism. We met for the first time during the technical rehearsal for our evening talk. She was down-to-earth and, what I remember

most, she was funny as hell. As we were leaving I said, “I’m wiped, but I guess it’s off to the meet-and-greet.”

She looked at me and said, “I’m going to my room to rest before tonight. Why don’t you do the same?”

I told her that sounded great, but I felt bad saying no. I’ll never forget what she said back to me. “Tonight we will exhale and teach. Now it’s time to inhale. There is the in-breath and there is the out-breath, and it’s easy to believe that we must exhale all the time, without ever inhaling. But the inhale is absolutely essential if you want to continue to exhale.”

*Dang.*

During her talk that night she explained the Buddhist approach of strong back, soft front. As I was working through the research on this book, this image kept coming back to me. If we’re going to make true belonging a daily practice in our lives, we’re going to need a strong back and a soft front. We’ll need both courage and vulnerability as we abandon the certainty and safety of our ideological bunkers and head off into the wilderness.

True belonging is, however, more than strong back and soft front. Once we’ve found the courage to stand alone, to say what we believe and do what we feel is right despite the criticism and fear, we may leave the wilderness, but the wild has marked our hearts. That doesn’t mean the wilderness is no longer difficult, it means that once we’ve braved it on our own, we will be painfully aware of our choices moving forward. We can spend our entire life betraying ourself and choosing fitting in over standing alone. But once we’ve stood up for ourself and our beliefs, the bar is higher. A wild heart fights fitting in and grieves betrayal.

### **STRONG BACK**

All of us will spend our life constantly strengthening our back, softening our front, and trying to listen to the whispers of our wild heart. For some of us,

however, the focus of our work will be on developing that strong back. When strengthening our back is our particular challenge, we are often driven by what people think. Perfecting, pleasing, proving, and pretending get in the way of the strong back. One way to strengthen our courage muscle is learning how to put BRAVING into practice. That work looks like this:

**Boundaries:** Learning to set, hold, and respect boundaries. The challenge is letting go of being liked and the fear of disappointing people.

**Reliability:** Learning how to say what we mean and mean what we say. The challenge is not overcommitting and overpromising to please others or prove ourselves.

**Accountability:** Learning how to step up, be accountable, take responsibility, and issue meaningful apologies when we're wrong. The challenge is letting go of blame and staying out of shame.

**Vault:** Learning how to keep confidences, to recognize what's ours to share and what's not. The challenge is to stop using gossip, common enemy intimacy, and oversharing as a way to hotwire connection.

**Integrity:** Learning how to practice our values even when it's uncomfortable and hard. The challenge is choosing courage over comfort in those moments.

**Nonjudgment:** Learning how to give and receive help. The challenge is letting go of "helper and fixer" as our identity and the source of our self-worth.

**Generosity:** Learning how to set the boundaries that allow us to be generous in our assumptions about others. The challenge is being honest and clear with others about what's okay and not okay.

In her interview with Bill Moyers, Dr. Angelou said, "I belong to myself. I am very proud of that. I am very concerned about how I look at Maya. I like Maya very much." Our work is to get to the place where we like ourselves and

are concerned when we judge ourselves too harshly or allow others to silence us. The wilderness demands this level of self-love and self-respect.

A powerful example of a strong back comes from my friend Jen Hatmaker. Jen is a writer, pastor, philanthropist, and community leader. Last year I watched her navigate a brutal wilderness with grace, grief, and strength. As a well-known religious leader in a conservative-to-moderate Christian community, Jen wrote openly about her support of LGBTQ rights and inclusion. She experienced an openly hostile response from many in her community. I asked her about what that wilderness looked and felt like to her. Here's what she wrote:

I won't sugarcoat this: Standing on the precipice of the wilderness is bone-chilling. Because belonging is so primal, so necessary, the threat of losing your tribe or going alone feels so terrifying as to keep most of us distanced from the wilderness our whole lives. Human approval is one of our most treasured idols, and the offering we must lay at its hungry feet is *keeping others comfortable*. I'm convinced that discomfort is the great deterrent of our generation. Protecting the status quo against our internal convictions is obviously a luxury of the privileged, because the underdogs and outliers and marginalized have no choice but to experience the daily wilderness. But choosing the wily outpost over the security of the city gates takes a true act of courage. That first step will take your breath away.

Speaking against power structures that keep some inside and others outside has a cost, and the currency most often drafted from my account is *belonging*. Consequently, the wilderness sometimes feels very lonely and punishing, which is a powerful disincentive. But I've discovered something beautiful; the loneliest steps are the ones between the city walls and the heart of the wilderness, where safety is in the rearview mirror, new territory remains to be seen, and the path out to the unknown seems empty. But put one foot in front of the

other enough times, stay the course long enough to actually tunnel into the wilderness, and you'll be shocked how many people already live out there—thriving, dancing, creating, celebrating, belonging. It is not a barren wasteland. It is not unprotected territory. It is not void of human flourishing. The wilderness is where all the creatives and prophets and system-buckers and risk-takers have always lived, and it is stunningly vibrant. The walk out there is hard, but the authenticity out there is life.

I suspect the wilderness is a permanent home for me, which is both happy and hard. A dear friend sent me a text during those harsh first steps out, having broken party lines irreversibly after publicly wrestling through a fragile doctrinal interpretation. There is this wonderful and strange story in Genesis 32 about Jacob physically wrestling with God all night in the literal wilderness, and upon realizing that Jacob was positively not giving up and in fact hollered, *"I will not let you go unless you bless me!"*, he touched Jacob's hip and wrenched it out of socket, a permanent reminder of the struggle of a determined, stubborn, dogged man with God; an absurd and ballsy move, as outrageous as it was impressive. My friend texted me: *"You are like Jacob. You refused to let go of God until He blessed you in this space. And He will. You will indeed find new land. But you'll always walk with a limp."* So I've chosen the wilderness, because it is where I can tell the truth and lead with the most courage and gather with my fellow outsiders, but this limp will remind me of the cost, what lies behind me, what will always feel a little sad and a little bruised. Was it worth it? Unquestionably. And I hope the limp shows my fellow wilderness dwellers that I'm acquainted with pain and didn't make it out here unscathed either. Outliers, I suspect it won't hinder our wilderness dance party in the slightest.

A wilderness dance party? I'm in.

#### A SOFT FRONT

Jen's incredible story about her experiences in the wilderness drove home two points for me:

1. We have to maintain our strong back—it's not a one-time effort; and
2. Man, is it hard to keep the front soft when there's so much hurt.

Like Jen, I've shared opinions with my community and experienced pushback from some people that took my breath away. Everything from "Keep your mouth shut" to violent and graphic threats against my family. My visceral response is "Strong back, *armored* front." But that's no way to live. Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, joy, trust, intimacy, courage—everything that brings meaning to our life. An armored front sounds good when we're hurting but causes us much more pain in the end. When we let people take our vulnerability or fill us with their hate, we turn over our entire life to them.

Many of us armor up early as a way to protect ourselves as children. Once we grow into adults, we start to realize that the armor is preventing us from growing into our gifts and ourselves. Just like we can strengthen our courage muscle for a stronger back by examining our need to be perfect and please others at the expense of our own life, we can exercise the vulnerability muscle that allows us to soften and stay open rather than attack and defend. This means getting comfortable with vulnerability. Most of the time we approach life with an armored front for two reasons: 1) We're not comfortable with emotions and we equate vulnerability with weakness, and/or 2) Our experiences of trauma have taught us that vulnerability is actually dangerous. Violence and oppression have made our soft front a liability, and we struggle to find a place emotionally and physically safe enough to be vulnerable. The definition of vulnerability is uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. But vulnerability is not weakness; it's our most



accurate measure of courage. When the barrier is our belief about vulnerability, the question becomes: *Are we willing to show up and be seen when we can't control the outcome?* When the barrier to vulnerability is about safety, the question becomes: *Are we willing to create courageous spaces so we can be fully seen?*

A soft and open front is not being weak; it's being brave, it's being the wilderness.

#### **WILD HEART**

I wish there was a secret handshake for the wild heart club. I love that kind of stuff. I want the payoff for braving the wilderness to be some kind of ritual or symbol that says, *I'm part of this wild heart club. I know what it means to stand alone and brave the criticism, fear, and hurt. I know the freedom of belonging everywhere and nowhere at all. The reward is great, but believe me, when Maya Angelou said "the price is high"—she was not kidding. I have made this quest and I have the scars to prove it.*

But the wilderness doesn't issue membership cards. A wild heart is not something you can always see—and yet it is our greatest spiritual possession. Remember Carl Jung's words about paradox: "The paradox is one of our most valuable spiritual possessions...only the paradox comes anywhere near to comprehending the fullness of life." Learning how to navigate the tension inherent in the four practices and the many paradoxes outlined in this book is a critical piece of addressing our current spiritual crisis.

The mark of a wild heart is living out the paradox of love in our lives. It's the ability to be tough and tender, excited and scared, brave and afraid—all in the same moment. It's showing up in our vulnerability and our courage, being both fierce and kind.

A wild heart can also straddle the tension of staying awake to the struggle

in the world and fighting for justice and peace, while also cultivating its own moments of joy. I know a lot of people, myself included, who feel guilt and even shame about their own moments of joy. How can I play on this gorgeous beach with my family while there are people who have no home or safety? Why am I working so hard to decorate my son's birthday cupcakes like cute little *Despicable Me* minions when there are so many Syrian children starving to death? *What difference do these stupid cupcakes really make?* They matter because joy matters.

Whether you're a full-time activist or a volunteer at your mosque or local soup kitchen, most of us are showing up to ensure that people's basic needs are met and their civil rights are upheld. But we're also working to make sure that everyone gets to experience what brings meaning to life: love, belonging, and joy. These are essential, irreducible needs for all of us. And we can't give people what we don't have. We can't fight for what's not in our hearts.

Again, the key to joy is practicing gratitude. I've interviewed people who have survived serious trauma ranging from the loss of a child to genocide. What I've heard over and over from fifteen years of hearing and holding their stories is this: *When you are grateful for what you have, I know you understand the magnitude of what I have lost.* I've also learned that the more we diminish our own pain, or rank it compared to what others have survived, the less empathic we are to everyone. That when we surrender our own joy to make those in pain feel less alone or to make ourselves feel less guilty or seem more committed, we deplete ourselves of what it takes to feel fully alive and fueled by purpose.

And, sometimes, when we can't acknowledge the pain of others while experiencing our own joy, we close our eyes, insulate ourselves, pretend that there's nothing we can do to make things better, and opt out of helping others. This ability to opt out of suffering and injustice or pretend everything is okay is the core of privilege: *Today I choose not to acknowledge what's happening around me because it's too hard.* The goal is to get to the place where we can think, *I am*

*aware of what's happening, the part I play, and how I can make it better, and that doesn't mean I have to deny the joy in my life.*

A wild heart is awake to the pain in the world, but does not diminish its own pain. A wild heart can beat with gratitude and lean in to pure joy without denying the struggle in the world. We hold that tension with the spirit of the wilderness. It's not always easy or comfortable—sometimes we struggle with the weight of the pull—but what makes it possible is a front made of love and a back built of courage.

If we go back to the definition of true belonging, we can see that it's built on a foundation of tensions and paradoxes:

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.

And we feel the pull here again in our practices:

People are hard to hate close up. Move in.

Speak truth to bullshit. Be civil.

Hold hands. With strangers.

Strong back. Soft front. Wild heart.

The mark of a wild heart is earned in the wilderness, but there is also a daily practice that I learned from this that is critical to our quest for true belonging. This practice changed how I show up in my life, the way I parent, and the way I lead:

Stop walking through the world looking for confirmation that you don't belong. You will always find it because you've made that your mission. Stop scouring people's faces for evidence that you're not enough. You will always find it because you've made that your goal. True belonging and self-worth are not goods; we don't negotiate their value with the world. The truth about who we are lives in our hearts. Our call to courage is to protect our wild heart against constant evaluation, especially our own. No one belongs here more than you.

It's not easy to stop looking for confirmation that we don't belong or that we're not enough. At the very least this is a habit for most of us, at worst confirming our inadequacies is a full-time job. When this mandate first emerged from the research, I started working on it, little by little. I would set an intention to stop looking for confirmation that I wasn't smart enough when I walked into a meeting, or that I didn't belong at a parents' meeting at my son's school. I could not believe the power of this practice. My son, Charlie, is in middle school, and my daughter, Ellen, is starting her first year at college. We had a long talk about the validity of this practice, and they both said they could immediately tell a difference in how they were showing up with their friends and in their lives.

Given my personal history and my work, I've always parented with the belief that love and belonging are the ground zero of wholehearted parenting. If they know they are loved and lovable, if they know how to love, and if they know that no matter what, they belong at home, everything else will work out. However, as they got older and peer groups became more important, it was easier than I imagined to slip back into subtly teaching them how to fit in or do whatever it takes to find a crew. My own fear set a default of "Well, what is everyone else wearing?" or "Why weren't you invited to the sleepover—what's wrong?" I have to stay constantly mindful to practice what I believe as a parent and not let

fear take over when my kids are hurting.

The importance of belonging at home again became very real to me years ago when I was interviewing a group of middle school students about the differences between fitting in and belonging. I shared these findings in *Daring Greatly*, but it's worth sharing them again here. When I asked a large group of eighth graders to break into small teams and come up with the differences between fitting in and belonging, their answers floored me:

- Belonging is being somewhere where you want to be, and they want you. Fitting in is being somewhere where you want to be, but they don't care one way or the other.
- Belonging is being accepted for you. Fitting in is being accepted for being like everyone else.
- If I get to be me, I belong. If I have to be like you, I fit in.

They nailed the definitions. It doesn't matter where in the country I ask this question, or what type of school I'm visiting—middle and high school students understand how this works. They also talk openly about the heartache of not feeling a sense of belonging at home. That first time I asked the eighth graders to come up with the definitions, one student wrote, "Not belonging at school is really hard. But it's nothing compared to what it feels like when you don't belong at home." When I asked the students what that meant, they used these examples:

- Not living up to your parents' expectations
- Not being as cool or popular as your parents want you to be
- Not being good at the same things your parents were good at

- Your parents being embarrassed because you don't have enough friends or you're not an athlete or a cheerleader
- Your parents not liking who you are and what you like to do
- When your parents don't pay attention to your life

Now, with this new research on true belonging, I know my job is to help my children believe in and belong to themselves. Above all else. Yes, there's always the work of helping them navigate friend situations, and fitting in is a real thing for kids, but our most important task is to protect that tender, wild heart.

We have to resist following them into the wilderness and trying to make it safer and more civilized. Every cell in our body will want to protect them from the hurt that comes with standing alone. But denying our children the opportunity to gain wisdom directly from the trees and dance in the moonlight with the other high lonesome renegades and limping outlaws is about our own fear and comfort. Their hearts need to know the wild too.

As a leader, I want to cultivate a culture of true belonging. I don't want and can't afford fitting in. In my interview with Seattle Seahawks coach Pete Carroll, I was blown away by his answer when I asked him about his time in the wilderness. He said, "Oh, yes. I know that place. I've been fired in the wilderness a couple of times. I'm aware of what's generally accepted from an NFL coach. But sometimes you have to be bold and take chances. And there's a special kind of resilience that comes from the level of scrutiny that happens in the wilderness. I know those experiences left me with a truer belief in myself and a much stronger sense of when I'm not being true to what I think is right."

The resilience that comes from the scrutiny of the wilderness and that "stronger sense of when we're not being true to what we think is right" is the mark of a wild heart. Imagine an organization where a critical mass of people are leading and innovating from a wild heart, rather than following suit, bunkering

up, and being safe. We need a wild heart revolution more than ever.

If you want to dig deeper into *Braving the Wilderness* at home or at work, we have parenting and leadership reading guides at [brenebrown.com](http://brenebrown.com). In my experience, nothing changes until we start putting this work into practice with our families, friends, and colleagues. That's when the wilderness gets real.

Every time I write a book, I'm challenged to live the message. I had to face my own perfectionism when I wrote *The Gifts*. I had to come face-to-face with criticism and courage when I wrote *Daring Greatly*, and I had to challenge all of the stories I make up to protect myself when I wrote *Rising Strong*. Writing this book felt like months of living in the wilderness to me. I kept telling my editor, Ben, that we should just call it *How to Lose Friends and Piss Off Everyone*. If you have strong political opinions, something in here will probably frustrate you. I know there will be lots of disagreement and debate. I hope so. And I hope we'll be fierce and kind with one another.

This is not a call to stop advocating, resisting, or fighting. I will do all three and hope you will too. Our world needs us to show up and stand up for our beliefs. I just hope we're civil and respectful. When we degrade and diminish our humanity, even in response to being degraded and diminished, we break our own wild hearts.

Of all the calls to courage that I've asked readers to answer over the last decade, braving the wilderness is the hardest. It can hurt the most. But, as the quote from Maya Angelou reminds us, it's the only path to liberation.

You are only free when you realize you belong no place—you belong every place—no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great.

I'll leave you with this. There will be times when standing alone feels too hard, too scary, and we'll doubt our ability to make our way through the uncertainty. Someone, somewhere, will say, "Don't do it. You don't have what it takes

to survive the wilderness." This is when you reach deep into your wild heart and remind yourself, "I am the wilderness."



This is a work of nonfiction. Nonetheless, some of the names and personal characteristics of the individuals involved have been changed in order to disguise their identities. Any resulting resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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