

True Belonging: Owning Your Story

Guided Self-Study

The material in this guidebook is synergistic, broadening and building on what came before. It's also a lot of information. Please read through this entire manual, but select only those exercises that "speak to you."

The format of this guidebook is set up for you to practice and integrate what you learn and to work at your own pace. Additional copies of all the worksheets are located at the end for your convenience.

To get the most out of your journey, you will be keeping a journal. There will be many prompts and questions for you to reflect on. Feel free to use them or go with the flow of whatever comes up for you. Your journal is your free zone.

Allow your journal to evolve and change as needed. Your handwriting, style of writing, even your voice will change. This is one of the ways journaling is a profound tool for self-knowledge.

There are no grammatical rules. You don't have to limit yourself to words exclusively. Let it flow. Doodle. Draw pictures. In the end, you'll get as much out as you bring in to it.

To begin, sit quietly for a few minutes reflecting on the most compelling or important feeling/event of the day. Or use one of the prompts offered in this manual. Let that be your first sentence. At the very least, you'll have recorded what is most significant to you. It could be a bit of a dream, memory of chance encounter. Maybe you are worried or feel grateful about something.

Set a timer for 10 minutes or whatever you have time for. Grab your journal. Keep your pen moving as you write the thoughts, feelings, and images that arise in the moment. Accept all that you write - the pretty, the ugly, the absurd and the boring. Discover what wants to be felt, known, expressed, and released.

After the timer goes off. Put your pen down and close your journal.

In the beginning, you're just learning how to stop editing yourself. This is hard to do, so give it time. Image management is a part of identity formation, but it can quickly turn into a security blanket hiding our real Self.

While there are no "rules," a few basic guidelines are worth noting:



- 1) *Write spontaneously.* Let the words flow on their own. Self-expression is the only goal. Write without caring or editing in regards to what others might think. Also, allow yourself to write when you want to and not because you should.
- 2) *Write honestly.* Be open to what is instead of how you wish it was. No one needs to read this but you, so don't be shy. Get curious about yourself and formulate a few guiding questions like, "How did I respond?" or "How do I feel?"
- 3) *Write deeply.* Dare to be boring. Lack of intimacy and engagement is what creates boredom. The solution is to go all in and get in touch with the feelings. When all else fails, get curious about what's behind it and go from there.

Allow the flow without question. Just go with it. The discovery comes later. Write from your gut, don't hold back and accept what comes. Like yoga and meditation, free-flow writing is a goalless practice that cultivates mindfulness, self-acceptance, and spaciousness. You write briskly to a prompt, ignore spelling and grammar, and notice what arises.

One last thought...

I love a beautifully bound journal as much as the next person, but it ups the ante to get my thoughts "just right." I don't feel as free to scribble, rip, tear, doodle – whatever I need to do to keep the thoughts flowing. I recommend getting a very simple, spiral bound journal. Nothing fancy, yet something that you will turn to. If you want to splurge, do so on a few really good pens.

Note of integrity: This guidebook is the product of many voices, mine included. Respectfully, it is the intellectual property of Kerry Ogden. Please honor the time, thought and commitment put forth by not sharing it freely with others without written permission.



A Word about Practice

Practice is doing something over and over so that we reach proficiency, and then we keep going, keep practicing to go beyond proficiency into a more intimate state where the activity becomes who we are – and who we are is that activity, that new habit. And then we keep practicing to deepen this, and because we can never be done with deepening, we keep practicing. And since who we are has become intimate with this activity, we are never not practicing!

In other words, we merge with the activity but we never stop growing, deepening and becoming. This is as true for learning how to cook as it is for playing the violin or doing yoga or wanting to get rid of old ways of thinking. When we notice, appreciate and deepen our experiences, everything we do becomes practice. This is what it means to live a whole-hearted life.

You are about to come face to face with some parts of yourself that are tender and vulnerable. Vulnerability is difficult to feel, yet alone learn from. Make friends with your fears, your tender places within. Become their most ardent fan and protector. Simply asking, “What am I learning?” will open you to growth and possibility.

When we approach our lives as practice, we can relax a little, for we aren’t caught up in judgment – striving toward perfection. We see our lives as a process, which gives us more room to experiment, to fail and recover, to meander and discover. Enjoy the process and be open to whatever the lesson is that is seeking you.

Hustling for Worth

Excerpt from *Trance of Unworthiness* by Tara Brach

Our most fundamental sense of well-being is derived from the conscious experience of belonging. Relatedness is essential to survival. When we feel part of the whole, connected to our bodies, each other, and the living Earth, there is a sense of inherent rightness, of being wakeful and in love. The experience of universal belonging is at the heart of all mystical traditions. In realizing non-separation, we come home to our primordial and true nature.

When inevitable pain arises, we take it personally.



Both our upbringing and our culture provide the immediate breeding ground for this contemporary epidemic of feeling deficient and unworthy. Many of us have grown up with parents who gave us messages about where we fell short and how we should be different from the way we are. We were told to be special, to look a certain way, to act a certain way, to work harder, to win, to succeed, to make a difference, and not to be too demanding, shy or loud. An indirect but insidious message for many has been, “Don’t be needy.” Because our culture so values independence, self-reliance and strength, even the word needy evokes shame. To be considered as needy is utterly demeaning, contemptible. And yet, we all have needs—physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual. So the basic message is, “Your natural way of being is not okay; to be acceptable you must be different from the way you are.”

In the most fundamental way, the fear of deficiency prevents us from being intimate or at ease anywhere. Failure could be around any corner, so it is hard to lay down our hypervigilance and relax. Whether we fear being exposed as defective either to ourselves or to others, we carry the sense that if they knew, they wouldn’t love us.

For a child to feel belonging, he or she needs to feel understood and loved. We each feel a fundamental sense of connectedness when we are seen and when what is seen is held in love. We habitually relate to our inner life in the same way that others attended to us.

Understanding Shame

“Vulnerability is about showing up and being seen. It’s tough to do that when we’re terrified about what people might see or think.” ~ Brené Brown

Brené Brown, Ph.D. is a shame and empathy researcher and a faculty member at University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. Since her first Ted Talk she’s gone on to superstar fame in the field.

Shame research is new. We are still learning about it. Very few scholars have worked on it. Yet shame is the dominant emotion experienced by mental health clients.

Shame is a basic, universal human experience. It runs across all cultures. We experience shame daily, and our culture sends continuous shaming messages. For example, we accuse mothers of not doing what’s best for their children, accuse women of not looking good enough, and accuse men of being weak. We try to use shame to teach people—to reinforce or control behavior. But shame only makes people feel rejected, diminished, and ridiculed. It causes excruciating and scarring damage. Shame only teaches us to feel alone.



In *I Thought It Was Just Me*, Brené Brown defines shame as:

“The intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging.”

Ultimately, shame isolates one person from another. It disconnects people. Ironically, shame can be thought of as the fear of disconnection. Because people want to be connected, they feel desperate when they feel shame. They are desperately afraid of being disconnected.

Courage, compassion, and connection help us overcome experiences of shame. They help us become resilient to shame, or shame resilient. It takes courage to speak about our inner experiences of shame. It takes compassion to listen to another’s story of shame. And the combination of courage and compassion creates connection. Connection heals shame. Empathy is the ability to put ourselves in another’s place.

Empathy is essential to creating the connection that shame breaks. Embarrassment, guilt, and humiliation are related to shame but different.

- *Embarrassment* is fleeting, normal, and eventually becomes funny. We know that the embarrassing experience is something other people have had, and that makes it bearable.
- *Guilt* is motivating. When we feel guilty, we feel that we did something wrong that we can correct in the future.
- *Humiliation* feels bad but makes us angry because it is something someone does to us. When we feel humiliated, we feel that we don’t deserve the experience.
- *Shame*, in contrast to these, is the feeling that we are fundamentally flawed and deserve to feel small and inadequate.

Shame and fear are linked. This is because shame is about the fear of being disconnected from other people. When we experience shame, we are steeped in the fear of being ridiculed, diminished, or seen as flawed.

Shame, blame, and power are interrelated. Usually when we experience shame, blame follows: Either we turn inward and blame ourselves, or we lash out at others to relieve the pain of shame. Power is the ability to make change happen. Shame makes us feel confused, afraid, and unconnected. In other words, shame makes us feel powerless. When we experience shame, we are in a crisis mode: All we can do is react.



Exploring Shame Worksheet

Use the blank spaces to complete the following sentences with your own thoughts and ideas. Each of the following could also be used as a writing prompt.

1. When I hear the word shame, I think of...

2. If shame were a color, it would be...

3. When I'm in shame, I feel...

4. When I talk about shame, I feel...

5. I can talk about shame with...



Healing Shame

Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging. There are three things to know about shame:

1. We all have it.
2. We're all afraid to talk about it.
3. The less we talk about shame, the more we have it.

Shame is all about fear. We're afraid that people won't like us if they know the truth about who we are, where we come from, what we believe, how much we're struggling, or, how wonderful we are when soaring (sometimes it's hard to own our strengths as our struggles).

Shame needs three things to grow out of control in our lives: secrecy, silence, and judgment. When something shaming happens and we keep it locked up, it festers and grows. We need to share our experience. Shame happens between people and it heals between people.

So much of worthiness and shame resilience is about owning our story and sharing it with someone who has earned the right to hear it. Shame thwarts connection. Connection is our ability to forge meaningful authentic relationships with other people. It gives meaning to our lives.

Think of connection as a continuum. Empathy is at one end of the continuum; shame is at the other. Empathy connects us; shame isolates us. Now think of the continuum as a knob on a stereo system. The "knob" is vulnerability. When we are relating at a good level of vulnerability – being open and receptive with minimal activation – it moves us toward other people. When we are at our best vulnerability, we are most empathic. Slide the knob over to shame and you see our worst vulnerability. This occurs when a person feels "I can't let you see pieces of me because I fear you will judge or reject me."

To tolerate a "high volume" of vulnerability, three items are critical: *ordinary courage, compassion, and connection.*

Ordinary courage is to speak your mind with your heart. It's finding a way to tell your story. Shame breeds fear, blame, and disconnection. It is hard to practice courage in a culture where we fear not belonging. Yet the only way to get out of shame is to tell stories. Telling your story is an act of ordinary courage.



Compassion is the act of truly hearing someone else's story. Though shame is universal, it is triggered by very different things. Just listening to one person's shame can be shaming for another person. As a result, it can be hard to stay open while listening to someone else's story. Compassion is the capacity to sit with people in their vulnerability - when they are sharing their shame - without moving to blame, judgment or advice-giving. In our culture, we tend to confuse blame with holding someone accountable. They are not the same! You can still be compassionate or empathic with someone while holding the person accountable for their actions. Blaming only isolates that person.

Connection occurs when we listen empathically as someone else communicates. Stories of imperfection and shame connect us. It's hard to hear how isolated and alone people feel. Nevertheless, we are hardwired at a cellular level for connection. For example, as children, connection equals survival. Shame is the fear of disconnection. When we feel shame, we feel that something about us makes us so flawed that we don't deserve to be in connection with other people. Most people in our culture feel very disconnected because they feel a lot of shame and don't know how to talk about it.

 *writing prompt*

"I feel most connected when..."



Getting Unhooked

The Shenpa Syndrome by Pema Chödrön

Someone criticizes you. They criticize your work or your appearance or your child. At moments like that, what is it you feel? It has a familiar taste in your mouth, it has a familiar smell. Once you begin to notice it, you feel like this experience has been happening forever.

The Tibetan word for this is Shenpa. It is usually translated as "attachment," but a more descriptive translation might be "hooked." When shenpa hooks us, we're likely to get stuck. We could call shenpa "that sticky feeling." It's an everyday experience. Even a spot on your new sweater can take you there. At the subtlest level, we feel a tightening, a tensing, a sense of closing down. Then we feel a sense of withdrawing, not wanting to be where we are. That's the hooked quality. That tight feeling has the power to hook us into self-denigration, blame, anger, jealousy, and other emotions which lead to words and actions that end up poisoning us.

Shenpa thrives on the underlying insecurity of living in a world that is always changing. We experience this insecurity as a background of slight unease or restlessness. We all want some kind of relief from that unease, so we turn to what we enjoy--food, alcohol, drugs, sex, work or shopping. In moderation what we enjoy might be very delightful. We can appreciate its taste and its presence in our life. But when we empower it with the idea that it will bring us comfort, that it will remove our unease, we get hooked.

In practicing with shenpa, first we try to recognize it. The best place to do this is on the meditation cushion. Sitting practice teaches us how to open and relax whatever arises, without picking and choosing. It teaches us to experience the uneasiness and the urge fully, and to interrupt the momentum that usually follows. We do this by not following after the thoughts and learning to come back to the present moment. We learn to stay with the uneasiness, the tightening, the itch of shenpa. We train in sitting still with our desire to scratch. This is how we learn to stop the chain reaction of habitual patterns that otherwise will rule our lives. This is how we weaken the patterns that keep us hooked into discomfort that we mistake as comfort. We label the spinoff "thinking" and return to the present moment.

What we really need to do is address things just as they are. Learning to recognize shenpa teaches us the meaning of not being attached to this world. Not being attached has nothing to do with this world. It has to do with shenpa - being hooked by what we associate with comfort. All we're trying to do is not to feel our uneasiness. But when we do



this we never get to the root of practice. The root is experiencing the itch as well as the urge to scratch, and then not acting it out.

Courage, Compassion, and Connection

“When we practice generating compassion, we can expect to experience the fear of our pain. Compassion practice is daring. It involves learning to relax and allow ourselves to move gently toward what scares us.” – Pema Chödrön

Practicing courage, compassion, and connection in our daily lives is how we cultivate worthiness. The key word is *practice*. We invite compassion into our lives when we act compassionately toward ourselves and others.

Shame hates courage, compassion, and connection. Shame thrives in the dark corners of soul. It loves secrecy and isolation and whispering self-defeating thoughts in your ear. The most dangerous thing to do after a shaming experience is hide.

Our first response to pain – ours or someone else’s – is to self-protect. We protect ourselves by looking for someone or something to blame. Or sometimes we shield ourselves by turning to judgment or by immediately going into fix-it mode.

In the quote above, Pema Chödrön speaks to our tendency to self-protect by teaching that we must be honest and forgiving about when and how we shut down. “In cultivating compassion we draw from the wholeness of our experience – our suffering, our empathy, as well as our cruelty and terror. It has to be this way. Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It’s a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity.”

The heart of compassion is acceptance. The better we are at accepting ourselves and others, the more compassionate we become. And we have to start by setting boundaries and holding people accountable for their behavior. Our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.

Our primal need for connection makes disconnection all the more real and has turned technology into an imposter, making us believe we’re connected when we’re really not – at least not in the way we need to be. We’ve confused being communicative with feeling connected.



The Disconnected Self

From a very early age, we all begin to develop a social version of ourselves. This “social self” is influenced by the people and places around us. Its role is to build relations, establish safety and maintain homeostasis.

Additionally, we are all born with an essential, core self. Your core self formed before you were born. It’s the essence of your personality, desires, preferences, and emotional reactions. It’s the basic you, stripped of options and special features.

To put it in context, our essential self yearns for the freedom of nature while our social self buys the backpacking equipment. Your essential self falls in love, while your social self is on the lookout for reciprocal feelings.

The social self plays prominently in our lives. Between birth and this moment, it has been learning a variety of important skills shaped by cultural norms, family values and societal expectations. It has the gumption and horsepower to get us aligned with our highest purpose, our North Star. But we need the core self can tell us where it’s at.

Taoists believe there is a force flowing through all reality and that each of us are a part of that force. We align with the Tao when we turn off the culturally proscribed rules and mores and allow the core self to run the show. The core, essential self is the author of what Brené Brown calls the “shitty first draft” of our lives.

As we set out on the paths chosen by our social selves, the core self is busy laying traps and blowing up bridges in a desperate attempt to reroute us. If we don’t learn how to recognize the warning signs, we’ll end up in a Faustian *Ground Hog Day* cycling through self-sabotaging situations until we do.



“I feel intimately alive when...”



Hustling for Worth

"You either walk inside your story and own it or you stand outside your story and hustle for your worthiness." - Brené Brown

If we spend a lifetime trying to distance ourselves from the parts of our lives that don't fit with who we think we're supposed to be, we stand outside of our story and have to hustle for our worthiness by constantly performing, perfecting, pleasing, and proving.

You are living your life on the sidelines when you:

- *are trying to make sure everyone approves of you.* "Everyone" has differing views, opinions, and needs, so it is exhausting to try and keep "everyone" happy. And since it is impossible to please "everyone", the hustle is perpetuated.
- *are hiding parts of your story for fear of rejection and judgement.* Your story is YOUR beautiful mess and glory-of-a-story. When you deny speaking and living your story and delegate your worth to "everyone" else, you end up missing out on true connection, healing, and joy.
- *are avoiding dealing with deep soul pain (or even surface wounds) for fear it will leave you alone or cause you more pain.* Hustling for worthiness is an excellent numbing agent to fear, shame, pain, and keeps you from reaching out and asking for help. But this hustle is not sustainable and can become a gateway to some serious issues emotionally, physically, relationally, and in your faith journey.
- *believing the lies that you are not worthy of love and belonging.* This is the ultimate lie of shame. And when this belief is driving the motivation behind your thoughts and actions, then you are living life on the sidelines but deeply longing for a sense of worth and belonging – for which you are hardwired.

The Generalized Other

We have all learned to muffle our core self with cynicism, doubt, fear, righteous wrath and despair. We've received messages from our collective "Everyone" that we will lose love, respect and belonging if we do what Joseph Campbell calls "following our bliss." This message is not meant to be malicious. Your social self is just trying to protect you. It just wants "Everyone" to like you.



Most people have a generalized other made up of the people who raised them, plus a few individuals who became very important to them at crucial developmental stages in their lives. If we dig deep, we invariably discover the collective “Everyone” is really a very small pool of people that we have unconsciously given our power to.

The way to solve this problem isn’t to reject or condemn your social self. It’s to give your social self exactly what it wants and needs. Everybody’s approval. How are we going to do this magical feat? By exchanging your present generalized other for a whole new other.

If you have not already done so, fleshing out the unconscious internalized voices that are controlling your decisions is of critical importance. It’s key to owning your story. Otherwise, a really scared and scarred social self will set these views in cement, blocking messages that contradict the unquestioned beliefs.

You are a beautiful, creative, intelligent being and you knew this to be true before you were sold you a pack of devastating lies. It’s time to take back what was always yours: an inner knowing of your true worth.

The Big Switch

No matter how old we are, we see “Everyone” through the worshipful eyes of a child. If you feel you’re floundering on your true path and are unsatisfied with life, it’s quite possible you’re unconsciously living by external expectations.

The social self will turn virtually anybody into a generalized other given two conditions: exposure and repetition. Repetition wears deep ruts in the brain. The only way to counter this is to consistently lay down new thoughts for your mind to follow. Be patient. This is not the fast track. It took time to create those grooves, it will take time to create new ones. For now, take comfort in knowing you are paving a way to a greater personal truth.

Also, be prepared for the social self to start scrambling to maintain the status quo. It fears you going rogue. Over time, if you stay on course, the social self will jump on board. It will align with your core self and that dynamic duo will catapult you to the next level of well-being. Your mind will still know that you can’t please all the people all the time, but your heart will live in a much friendlier world.

The best way to align your social and essential self is to get “Everyone” on your side. There are a number of ways to make the switch. The following are just a few:



- 1) *Post Positive Feedback.* Write down any positive feedback you've ever gotten, from other people or from circumstances. Put copies of this feedback everywhere and read it often.
- 2) *Build A Fan Club.* Display pictures and mementos of people who believe in you. Make a photo collage of the peeps who think you're the best thing since sliced bread.
- 3) *Own Your Story.* Be the hero of your autobiography. You're the captain the now.
- 4) *Hang With Your Tribe.* Spend as much time as possible with people who support your true self. Spend as little time as possible with those who don't.

Love and Belonging

Love and belonging are essential to human experience. If we want to fully experience love and belonging, we must believe that we are *worthy* of love and belonging. When we can let go of what other people think and own our story, we gain access to our worthiness. Our sense of worthiness lives inside our story.

If we want to live and love with our whole hearts, and if we want to engage with the world from a place of worthiness, we have to talk about the things that get in the way – especially shame, fear and vulnerability.

Belonging is so primal to survival that the threat of losing it is terrifying. Some abandon their beliefs to avoid the risk. What they don't know is that if they can look past the conditional approval of others and put one courageous foot in front of another, a path will emerge that will lead to a new tribe of like-minded souls.

Shame thwarts belonging. By definition, it is an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.



My greatest strengths are...



Shame Resiliency

There are four steps to building shame resilience:

- 1) Name it.
- 2) Talk about it.
- 3) Own your story.
- 4) Tell your story.

The heart of resilience is often a slow unfolding of understanding. We peel away the layers of defense until we get to our personal truth. Discovering what the experience meant takes time. Not only do we need to own our story and love ourselves in the process, we have to figure out our story is and what our story is not! We also need to learn how we protect ourselves from shame if we want to develop worthiness.

Pioneering psychoanalyst Karen Horney, describes three primary ways we cope with anxiety. Some of us *move away* by withdrawing, hiding, silencing ourselves, and keeping secrets. Some of us *move toward* by seeking to appease and please. And some of us *move against* by trying to gain power over others, by being aggressive, and by using shame to fight shame. Most of us use all of these at different times, with different people for different reasons.

Shame is about fear, blame, and disconnection. Story is about worthiness and embracing the imperfections that bring us courage, compassion and connection. If we want to live fully, without the constant fear of not being enough, we have to own our own story.

Emotional Stuckness

Healing is a combination of emotional, physical and spiritual work. And we all have unfinished business from childhood that needs resolving. These early patterns set the stage for our relationships throughout our lives. Addictions, avoidance and pleasing are common behaviors that become lifestyle habits. To have healthy relationships to ourselves and others, we must learn how to unapologetically express our emotions.

Pain avoidance is an instinctual survival skill. By the time we reach adulthood, most of us have become highly skilled at walling off our pain. Additionally, our culture doesn't encourage the natural expression of emotions. Naturally, after a few decades, a lot of stuff



gets tucked away. The problem is that those feelings don't go away, they continue to seek expression and healing outside of our awareness, very often showing up later somatically in "unexplainable" aches, pains and disease.

The message of illness and pain may often be *"It's time to bring healing love into your life. Look within. You've been in emotional pain long enough. You're ready. Let me turn up the volume by creating physical pain so you'll notice and tend to your heart."*

When the pain of staying stuck is greater than the pain it takes to set you free, you are at the threshold of true healing. Once you reach this stage of readiness, the deeper emotions will surface. Give it time. All painful emotions are a sign to be more loving toward ourselves and others.

Emotions have an energetic and physiological component. When an animal "plays dead" to save its life, it temporarily freezes fear. But as soon as the threat is gone, the animal will run and jump about. This movement is more than just a happy dance. Its body instinctively knows it must clear the fear. Our body is a great intelligence and will do whatever it takes to restore us to our rightful place of deep self-loving.

Shifting our thoughts and mindset is crucial, but the only way to get rid of anger, guilt, shame, grief or fear is through emotional release. Otherwise these feelings get lodged deep within us. We must face our emotions, learn from them and then cry it out, dance it out, write it out - whatever works for you. Just get those emotions out!

Four Emotional Truths

- 1) We store emotions in our energy fields and bodily tissues, where they can remain for years, suppressed and waiting for us to have the courage to express them.
- 2) Unprocessed emotions of anger, grief, sadness and shame are a serious threat to health and well-being. They cause the body to create and hold on to stress hormones that lead to cellular degeneration, inflammation, and all sorts of physical ailments.
- 3) You must process your emotions, which involves more than thinking. Full processing includes learning what they signify and then releasing them through movement, sound, and tears. It may take a repeated cycles of processing to bring forth and release old emotions.



- 4) There are no “good” or “bad” emotions. They are just information and the sensation does not last forever. There is no need to fear them. You may think you can't handle it or that you will get too overwhelmed. We are biologically designed to feel and release emotions regularly.

Tribe

We aren't meant to live alone and disconnected. Feeling a sense of belonging is a fundamental human need. Throughout all of human history, social groups are what helped us survive. They provide psychological benefits, safety and security.

The happiest and healthiest people are those who have tribe. People who have varied community connections live longer and enjoy a longer health span. We are wired to connect, but in the age of technology this fact has become a bit too literal. We have more way to connect than ever before, but are left hanging and lonely more and more.

When it comes to your tribe, be judicious about who is in it. We truly are the sum total of the five closest people around us. The people around you can help you reconnect to your life force or drain it right out of you. You may have to adjust or even let go of relationships that no longer nourish you. Loyalty is lovely, but not at the cost of your life force.

There will be people who are attracted to your lightness of being who bring their old, negative emotions to the relationship. They will love what they get from you, but will drain you because they're not committed to becoming lighter themselves. You may have emotional vampires without even knowing it. You just know you feel a bit tired and fatigued after hanging out with them or not quite yourself.

Energy is precious. Cultivating vitality and aliveness takes work. Encourage family and friends who want what you've got to get it for themselves. Stop being their Source and help them connect to their Source.

If this is an area of your life you struggle with, try the following visualization exercise:

Cutting Energetic Cords Exercise

Use this exercise whenever you suspect you have an energetic connection to someone who is draining you of life force. You can do this when the cord is between you and a living person or when it's between you and someone has crossed over into the spiritual realm.



This exercise may need to be repeated multiple times at different settings. Be patient. Emotional healing and release takes time. Do imprint removals as the need arises, by yourself or with another person leading the process.

Cords can find a way of reattaching if you do not make changes to your daily relational patterns. Do your best to firm your boundaries when you interact with someone you've had a draining energetic connection to in the past.

- 1) Take a few minutes to become quiet and relaxed as you focus on your breathing.
- 2) Breathe out any dark, critical energy that may interfere on the exhale.
- 3) Draw your attention to your lower chakras, from your solar plexus down. Tune into this area of your body. Sense, feel or see a cord or hook extending outward toward someone or coming in toward you. Then visualize yourself cutting the cord while saying, "I cut all attachments." As you do this, make sweeping movements around your body with your hands, swooshing the energy away. Visualize the cord and draining energy being sent up into the sky or down into the earth or absorbed by another Source that is larger.
- 4) Identify where you feel an uncomfortable sensation in your body. This is commonly felt in the belly, where the third chakra is located. Identify the person who is connected with this feeling who requires your release. If you are ready and able to forgive this person, allow forgiveness into your heart at this time.
- 5) Now say out loud: "_____, I release/forgive you for _____." Name everything you to release and/or forgive the person for: betrayal, abuse, abandonment, not stepping up, etc. Allow yourself to feel the full power of your emotions as they come up. Do not hold back.
- 6) When you are ready, say "I send you on your path of healing. In freeing you, I'm choosing to free myself."
- 7) Repeat steps 3 through 6 until you feel finished, until you have no more emotions to release or words to say.



- 8) When the work feels complete, draw your attention to the area of your body where you'd felt discomfort. Chances are the discomfort will have resolved. If so, well done! You did good work. Time to wrap it up.
- 9) You just did a little soul surgery by removing an energetic imprint, which leaves an energetic hole. For your protection, visualize filling the hole with healing midnight-blue and golden light. Continue until it is full of healing light energy.
- 10) Make sure you get rest and drink plenty of fluids. Don't fight it if you feel tired. Give in. you just did some big energetic healing, it's very important to honor the healing process by giving yourself plenty of time to relax afterward.



Tasmanian Devil

Anger has gotten a bad rap. Because it can be wild and unruly, it is feared more often than not. It has a hard time sharing the room with intimacy and pushes others away from us – which can be the very opposite of what is needed. It tends to be all reactionary. Something is happening that we don't like and in a very forceful way, we want it to go away.

People often deal with their anger in two ways: either flying off the handle or trying to smooth it over. Either way, we don't want to feel what we're feeling. These two approaches may feel like the "right" thing to do, but they deny us the chance to explore it and learn from it.

Somewhere in the middle of all that heat and mayhem, there's a truth that might be a wee bit too hard to bear but is still necessary to know. If we lash out, to rid ourselves of the discomfort, we lose out on the lesson. We need to see clearly into the anger even when we're caught up in it. Not easy.

When you find yourself in the throes of anger, stand in it. Name it. Be the eye of the storm: calm, observing, seeing clearly while on the edge of chaos. By standing straight up in the middle of the fire, you will find the nugget of truth that will release you. The trick is to stay connected to your anger without controlling it.



Naming Tool Worksheet

Opening up to emotional experience is a process. "Naming" our experience helps bring awareness to our feelings and behavior.

Staying with our feelings is skill. It takes practice. When it is developed it has the ability to relax the nervous system.

When you're anxious or uncomfortable, *name the emotions* by taking the following steps:

- 1) Notice that you may be having a feeling.
- 2) Focus your attention inward on your bodily felt experience and stay present.
- 3) Try to identify and name what you are feeling. Are you angry, sad, happy, loving, fearful, guilty or shameful? If the feeling isn't clear, make room for it by tuning into it and the sensations that surround it.
- 4) Notice the reaction to the naming. See if it fits and "clicks" into place.

When you're able to accurately label your feeling, you'll notice a shift in the energy in your body. Take a moment to sit with this new awareness.

Soul Shrapnel

Hemingway wrote that although life breaks us all, some of us manage to become "strong at the broken places." It's a poetic way to see our pain as a source of strength, which it is. Psychologist John Welwood speaks of the broken heart as being "broken open," enlargening from the pain.

A lack of enthusiasm for life is *always* a sign that the deep self is hurt. Here is a short quiz to help you determine whether you're being held back by emotional wounds.

Radiant Relating

All women need to do some deep soul searching to excavate the remnants of fairy tale romance. We need to let go of any notion that we will be rescued by a handsome prince. We can intellectually know we are more liberated, while this myth continues to live unchecked in our inner child.



We women need to reach inside and rescue ourselves. Healthy relationships require us to question everything we've been taught at the deepest level. It's about taking the reins on our own happiness. We must take charge of what lights us up, so we can use our radiance as a guide for creating the relationships we want.

So many of us have been misled into believing our radiance comes from the other. That tingling spark that we so often attribute to the "other," all that aliveness, turn-on, power, and radiance comes from *within*. What you are actually experiencing is a felt sense of your own radiance – amplified because someone is reflecting it back to you.

We have been deeply conditioned that the spark is external - that we are passive creatures to be pursued. It's simply not true. *Women set the course of desire*. The spark starts within her. And this isn't just about sex.

We can misplace our spark in a variety of ways. It could be dislocated in a job that will make *all* our dreams come true. Maybe it's a school that we *really, really have to get into*. Or it's a baby, that house on the hill or a pair of Manolo Blahnik stilettos. Okay, the last one might work.

If we believe, even on a subtle level, that we need that outside source to ignite us, we're giving away an opportunity to empower ourselves. Knowing and owning the source of our feminine power is the antidote to the crisis of confidence experienced by too many women in the world today.

Radiant Partnership

We live in an unprecedented time. Women have more leeway to marry or not, have kids or not, or raise a family solo or with a partner or not at all. For those who want to partner, there are even more options. What matters, is knowing what you want and what you want will change through time. The object is to listen, experiment, and stay in touch with what you want. Living your truth requires courage and bravery.

We must approach relationship from a place of wholeness, a felt sense that you are complete. You may can be a work-in-progress. We all are. But do so knowing you are not broken. If you are in relationship and have work to do, roll up your sleeves and do it now.

A big part of the "doing" is practicing exquisite self-care. Imagine arranging your time to include daily Epsom salt baths with a few drops of essential oils, quality time with friends and a massage to round out the week. With this kind of attention, you are operating at a



high level of self-care. While you still want to have pleasurable exchanges with your partner, you are not dependent on them and can receive whatever is given without judgment.

The quality of your life is up to you. The greatest ongoing love affair you will ever have is the one with yourself. Too many women export their radiance to their career, partner, parents or kids. They displace their vital energy to service the needs of others. These women good-heartedly, but mistakenly believe their happiness stems from making others happy or being indispensable.

Once we own our radiance, we must find ways to infuse that light into our partnerships. Your partner's job is to amplify and encourage your turn-on. It's your job to pursue your radiance at all costs. You cannot expect your partner to know what lights you up. He or she has their own pleasure to learn and pursue. It's up to you to do the research and then share what you learn.

Locating your radiance can be provocative. You might be living in the city and realize that you are more turned on by living in the country. You might have agreed with your parents and partner that it's time to have kids, but find yourself unwilling to get off the pill. You might be in the middle of a divorce and then decide that you really, really want to stay married. Such a discovery can throw a curveball into your partner's or your family's life. But if that is what lights you up, you need to take a deep breath and open an honest conversation about what you need.

Emotional Wounds Worksheet

Answer each of the following questions as honestly as possible. If you are reluctant to answer the questions, or if you feel you're being tricked the game is already up. You likely have some emotional shrapnel.

- | | | |
|-----|-----|---|
| (1) | (2) | |
| N | Y | Do people ever tell you that you seem cold, aloof, or distant? |
| Y | N | Is there at least one person who really understands almost all your feelings? |
| N | Y | Is there anything you do compulsively, even though you wish you could stop? |



- N Y Do you feel exhausted and irritable after being with a group of friends for few hours?
- N Y Do you often seek solitude to “recover” from social interactions?
- Y N Do you feel comfortable crying in front of the person/people you love the most?
- Y N Do you talk about your feelings at least once a week to at least one other person?
- N Y Are there any events in your life you would not be willing to talk about to anyone?
- Y N Do you regularly engage in activities that allow you to express your feelings such as writing in a journal, singing emotional songs, acting crying or laughing hard at a movie?
- N Y Do you have strange or unexpected emotional reactions, such as feeling shame when you are praised, relief when you fail, or anxiety when you are loved?
- N Y Do you have any “dark” secrets?
- Y N When someone makes you angry, do you tell him or her how upset you are?
- N Y Are you lonely even – or especially – when you are with other people?
- Y N Are you comfortable being touched affectionately by the people you love most?
- N Y Are you *only* comfortable being touched by a sexual partner, or does all touch seem sexual to you?
- Y N When you get good news, are there people you’d call just to share your happiness?
- N Y Do you pride yourself on never being upset or angry?
- N Y Would you rather “stuff” your anger than cause conflict by standing up for yourself?
- Y N Are you comfortable verbally expressing your love for family and friends?



- N Y On a typical day, do you laugh – genuinely, not out of politeness – less than five times?
- N Y Do you laugh at inappropriate times, such as when you hear bad news or when someone else is expressing anger?
- N Y Do you often cry without know the reason why?

Count the number of responses in column 1 and column 2. Getting more than three column 2 responses indicates the likelihood of an emotional wound.

Emotional Release

Forgiveness is at the core of emotional release. Like all emotions, it involves both mind and body so be prepared for it to be a messy, slobbery, wet mess of raw emotion.

Forgiveness is not condoning what the other did. It's deciding to release the toxic feelings that are compromising the quality of your life. It's a process of reclaiming the worthiness you inadvertently gave to the person who hurt you by releasing your old emotions and replacing them with self-love and compassion.

Simply allowing yourself to have a good cry can be cathartic and healing. When I learned my dear, sweet dad had months to live I was inexplicably drawn to sitting in a hot sauna listening to his favorite musician, Neil Diamond. I was a hot mess of tears, sweat and snot. This ritual allowed me to front load my grief while he was still alive which freed up my other emotions to be present with him during his final months. As a result I was emotionally available to receive his final lesson, how to die with grace, which I am eternally grateful for.

You don't have to deep dive as I did to receive the benefit of emotional release. You can watch a sad movie, get a massage, talk to a friend or therapist. You can sing, dance, stomp and wail. The point is to feel it, express it, and learn from it. Never force it. Coax it, invite it, but never force trauma to surface.

When you do finally allow yourself to feel and express your emotions, you may be surprised by how quickly they move through you. More often than not, big emotions are bursting to be let out but we tend to fear being engulfed by them. The irony is that not expressing them is what gives them power. One way to by-pass the fear of overwhelm is to create a container for releasing your emotions, such as the "Snap It Out" exercise below.



After an emotional release, always follow it with a healing ritual and a reward for the hard. Taking an Epsom salt is an excellent way to “treat” yourself. It’s relaxing while further pulling toxins out from the body. While in the bath, take a moment to close your eyes and visualize every last bit of emotional waste leaving your mind, body and soul. This is also a good time to fill yourself with loving affirmations.

Snap It Out Exercise Worksheet

To do this exercise you’ll need a timer, a small towel and an empty chair.

Set the timer for five to ten minutes, no more. The time is used as a container so you don’t become overwhelmed by your emotions or fatigue your arm – you’ll be whacking a hard surface with that towel and it can give your muscles quite a workout.

Facing the chair, imagine that the person you are angry with is sitting there. Then let that person verbally have it. Really let it rip. Don’t hold back. This is the time to use all your favorite swear words. You know the ones. As you do, turn and snap the towel against a hard surface such as a sturdy wall or door frame.

Often the anger and grief you feel inside is caused by the fact the person’s heart was closed to you. This other was able to hurt you because they were not able to accept the pain they were inflicting. Their heart was closed to you and you knew it, even as a child.

After a few minutes of towel snapping, cursing and shouting you may be ready to declare, “I hate that your heart was (or is) closed to me!” This acknowledges and releases the grief along with the anger that you weren’t able to have the experience that you wanted, needed, and deserved.

This is not the time to be compassionate toward the other or work on forgiveness. This is YOUR time to express the justified anger and grief you feel. Once you begin, you may notice pressure release in your body. Tune into the energy of your body.

Emotional release work should always be followed with healing work, such as the “Releasing Ritual.” Emotional release will need to be repeated regularly until you feel a shift inside. In all likelihood, you’ve been carrying this around for years so it will take a few rounds to release. There are no shortcuts to healing pain. The only way is to walk through it.



Learn From Your Emotions

Experiencing pain is a part of being human, but it's also a source of wisdom and learning. The more you try to dull the pain with drinking, eating, shopping, sexing, texting or whatever your favorite form of distraction may be, the pain does not go away. It just gets buried deeper.

Of all the challenging emotions we tend to avoid, shame is the most detrimental because it stops us from facing other emotions. Shame thrives in the dark corners of soul. It loves secrecy and isolation and whispering self-defeating thoughts in your ear. Still, even when talking about shame, there are no "good" or "bad" emotions – only degrees.

Healthy shame alerts that we're off track. We've lost sight and are acting selfishly. It re-establishes good boundaries and serves to balance our needs with those of those around us. It's an "oopsie" that can be quickly corrected by taking ownership of what we've done.

Unhealthy shame is toxic. It's the feeling that you not only made a mistake, but that you are a mistake. It's a dark pit in the gut that sucks the life out leaving little energy to course correct because it's all being directed toward self-loathing.

We come by this feeling or fear of being wrong or not enough honestly. Women get the message all the time that they are too thin, too fat, too pretty, too plain, too bubbly, too serious, too emotional, to cold, too sexy or not sexy enough. Enough already!

Shame is not only bad for your health, it stifles creativity, learning and growth. It's critical that you learn to spot this cultural dictate to make women doubt themselves and feel small. As Marianne Williamson said, "Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine..."

Thankfully, no matter where we currently reside on the shame spectrum, we can increase our resiliency, or what Brené Brown calls our "wholeheartedness." It's a skill that starts simply by accepting where you are right now and extending love.

Releasing Ritual Worksheet

After doing the hard work of an emotional release exercise, follow it with a releasing ritual to close the work.



Ritual is incredibly powerful because it gets us out of our head and right into our bodies. Set aside 15 to 30 minutes to do this ritual.

Collect a pen and paper or journal, a glass bowl or ceramic plate and be ready to play a long set of music that touches your heart.

Light a candle and set an intention for releasing your feelings. You can invoke help from a larger source by saying something like, "I invite my spirit to join me now to help assist in releasing my anger or grief concerning _____. I invite my guides, teachers, spirit animals, Mother Nature (or whomever you need or feel comfortable calling on). For the next 30 minutes, help me release whatever needs to be released."

Note that the words aren't as important as your intention to be healed through the release of old emotions.

Start the music.

Take one deep breath and then begin writing a letter to the person who has hurt you. Pour out all your feelings on paper. Do not edit. Do not worry about punctuation or penmanship. Just write, free-flow with feeling.

After 15 to 30 minutes, read out loud what you wrote. Feel the emotions as they rise. Take time to cry as needed.

Burn the paper. Toss into bowl, plate or fireplace. Shut off the music. Thank your guide and blow out the candle.

Repeat the ritual as needed. You may need to go through many rituals, releasing one layer at a time, for complete healing.

Getting to "No" You

The language centers of your brain, the part that processes and verbalizes, is dominated by the social self. The core self uses language, but it is more likely to occur unconsciously while the social self is doing its personal best to maintain the status quo.

It takes enormous energy to oust the social self from its command post and the core self will use everything it's got. If the social self won't heed the mild signals, the core self will simply hijack the system. You may be unaware of a festering resentment until the moment you snap and rip someone's head off. To get back in synch with the core self, you must learn to speak its language.



Teaching your social self to pay attention when your essential self says “no” is the most basic way to reconnect the two sides of your personality. When you listen to your deep “no,” you begin to rewire the navigational devices that lead you toward your right path.

Studies have shown that the most compassionate people are the most boundaried people. They say no like champs. The irony is that we often say yes because we can't tolerate the discomfort to our no. So the social self steps in and signs on for more than we can handle. The following is a list of potential “no” signals your core self is sending:

- 1) *Feeling drained.* It takes a tremendous amount of energy to fuel the social self. The more time we spend satisfying the needs of our social self, the less “oomph” we have for our true self.
- 2) *Getting sick.* Few things compromise immunity like toxic load of stress. When we make choices that run counter to our core self, we get a hit of stress hormones – whether we are aware of it or not.
- 3) *Forgetting.* The essential self will conveniently forget things that help you go in a direction it doesn't like. Whereas you can probably remember remarkable details from experiences you enjoyed.
- 4) *Blundering.* Your core self will thwart you by committing blunders when you violate your own values. That's our consciousness at work. What looks like foolish mistakes is likely your essential self trying to steer you toward your North Star.
- 5) *Committing social suicide.* When you are in a situation that threatens your core, all the subtle mechanisms that make for smooth social interaction get gummed up. You stutter, trip and tell ill-timed jokes. The essential self knows that life is short. It doesn't want you to be equally comfortable around just anybody.
- 6) *Flooding.* The fight-or-flight mechanism is one of the most powerful tools in the core self's armamentarium. When it gets triggered, the social self has to muster all their powers to force a calm façade.
- 7) *Getting hooked.* Whenever you're headed away from your true path, your essential self feels a yearning emptiness. If you stumble across a substance or activity that dulls this feeling, your core self may mistake it for your North Star. The result is often addictive behavior.
- 8) *Emoting.* Mood control is another of the essential self's many skills. If you're experiencing moods you can't explain, or think your emotional reactions are on the “inappropriate” side, you can be sure your social and core selves are at odds.



If you find yourself in these situations more often than not, it's a sign you are veering away from your path. Your true path will take you through frightening challenges, saddening departures, angry resistance, and a number of profoundly unpleasant experiences. But the pain you experience *en route* to your North Star feels clean, necessary and right.

"Yes" Signals

Now that we've covered a few no signals, let's find out how the essential self says "Yes!" We're going to go through a list of "symptoms" similar in type but opposite in content. Try to remember times when you have felt any of the following:

- 1) *Nuclear energy.* It takes a lot of energy to go against our best interests. Whereas living in alignment with what restores and vitalizes us requires very little energy. There is zero resistance, only flow. And where there is flow, there is life.
- 2) *Improved health.* The core self has the power to shut down the immune system but it works in the other direction, too. Mind, body and soul are strengthened in a healing, aligned environment.
- 3) *Better recall.* With all that energy being freed up in the nervous, limbic and immune systems the mind is free to record life in greater detail. This is especially true when engaged in something that interests us. Many people dismiss their special knowledge because it came "easy" without seeing it as a sign of life alignment.
- 4) *Flow state.* When we are in what positive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi refers to as "flow," we are caught in the joy and pleasure of an activity and lose all sense of time. We temporarily enter a different time/space dimension called "fun."
- 5) *Interpersonal harmony.* When you meet someone who is part of your true path, you may be surprised at how well the whole social-interaction unfolds. You'll feel waves of positive energy gravitating toward you. You'll feel relaxed, engaged and empathic.
- 6) *Magnetic attraction.* There will be a strong, irresistible urge toward someone, place or thing. Yes, sometimes this is lust. But it differs from romantic, sexual love in that it isn't always about another person. You can become obsessed with butterflies, geology or basket-weaving.
- 7) *A natural high.* Wandering along your true path, you'll often discover that you're in a freakishly good mood most of the time. You're doing the work you love, hanging out with people who support you and are caring for yourself in nourishing ways. The overall cumulative effect is elevating.



Rewiring

“Expectations are resentments waiting to happen.” – Anne Lamott

The brain rewards us with dopamine when we recognize and complete a pattern. And it doesn't even have to be accurate for it to click into place. We just need to believe it. The stories we tell ourselves work in this same way. Well-oiled patterns of observation encourage our brains to compose a story that we expect to hear.

The stories we tell ourselves were often dictated to us by others growing up. They are an interplay of emotions, thought and behavior. Problems arise when unconscious story-telling becomes our default setting and those thoughts become our core beliefs. Suffering is getting stuck in our stories. “I'm unworthy,” “I'm not enough,” and “I can't” are just a few examples.

Capturing our stories requires practice. We have to turn down the volume on the “woulda-coulda-shoulda” and tune into curiosity.

Examples of rumbling topics include:

failure	blame	perfectionism	belonging	criticism
shame	regret	vulnerability	heartbreak	love

When it's time to rumble with our story, these three questions can help get to our truth:

- 1) What more do I need to learn and understand about the situation? What do I know objectively? What assumptions am I making?
- 2) What more do I need to learn and understand about other people in the story? What additional information do I need? What questions or clarifications might help?
- 3) What more do I need to learn about myself? What's underneath my response? What am I feeling? What part did I play?

The difference between what we make up about our experience and the truth we discover through the process is where the meaning and wisdom of the experience live.

When asked if he thought people were doing the best they can, Brené Brown's husband Steve said: “I don't know. All I know is that my life is better when I assume that people are



doing their best. It keeps me out of judgment and lets me focus on what is – not what should or could be.”

Disappointment is an unmet expectation. One way to address this is to be up-front about our expectations by taking the time to reality-check what we’re expecting and why.

Stealth expectations coast under the radar, making themselves known only after they’ve bombed something we had hopes for.

We can heal from disappointment, but it’s important not to underestimate the damage it inflicts on our spirit. Whole-heartedness requires being conscious of the stealth expectations lurking beneath the surface.

Personal Narrative Worksheet

Jot down a few key words or phrases as you read the following questions. Please give yourself time to give thought and reflect further in your journal.

If your life was a novel being written by someone else and you were the main character, what great strength would the writer be developing?

What great challenge would the main character be working on her life?

Has your life story developed the way had hoped?

How was vulnerability modeled in your family? What were the lessons (spoken or unspoken) about being vulnerable?



How do you fill in the blanks with your own tapes? "Never _____ enough."

Cultural messages abound that say an ordinary life is a meaningless life. What are some of the expectations and messages that fuel the fear of missing out and being ordinary?

Digging Deep

From *Rising Strong* by Brené Brown:

Midlife is not a crisis. Midlife is an unraveling. By definition, you can't control or manage an unraveling. You can't cure the midlife unraveling with control any more than the acquisitions, accomplishments, and alpha-parenting of our thirties cured our deep longing for permission to slow down and be imperfect.

Midlife is when the universe gently places her hands upon your shoulders, pulls you close, and whispers in your ear:

It's time. All of this pretending and performing – these coping mechanisms that you've developed to protect yourself from feeling inadequate and getting hurt – has to go. Your armor is preventing you from growing into your gifts. I understand that you needed these protections when you were small. I understand that you believed your armor could help you secure all of the things you needed to feel worthy and lovable, but you're still searching and you're more lost than ever. Time is growing short. There are unexplored adventures ahead of you. You can't live the rest of your life worried about what other people think. The time has come to let go of who you think you're supposed to be and embrace who you are.



If you look at each midlife “event” as a random, stand-alone struggle, you might be lured into believing you’re only up against a small constellation of “crises.” The truth is that the midlife unraveling is a series of painful nudges strung together by low-grade anxiety and depression, quiet desperation, and an insidious loss of control. By low-grade, quiet, and insidious, I mean it’s enough to make you crazy, but seldom enough for people on the outside to validate the struggle or offer you help and respite. It’s the dangerous kind of suffering – the kind that allows you to pretend that everything is OK.

We go to work and unload the dishwasher and love our families and get our hair cut. Everything looks pretty normal on the outside. But on the inside we’re barely holding it together. We want to reach out, but judgment (the currency of the midlife realm) holds us back. It’s a terrible case of cognitive dissonance – the psychologically painful process of trying to hold two competing truths in a mind that was engineered to constantly reduce conflict and minimize dissention (e.g., I’m falling apart and need to slow down and ask for help. Only needy, flaky, unstable people fall apart and ask for help).

It’s human nature and brain biology to do whatever it takes to resolve cognitive dissonance – lie, cheat, rationalize, justify, ignore (if you need examples, look toward Washington, D.C. or Wall Street). For most of us midlifers, this is where our expertise in managing perception bites us on the ass. We are torn between desperately wanting everyone to see our struggle so that we can stop pretending, and desperately doing whatever it takes to make sure no one ever sees anything except what we’ve edited and approved for display.

What bubbles up from this internal turmoil is fantasy. We might glance over at a shabby motel while we’re driving down the highway and think, I’ll just check in and stay there until they come looking for me. Then they’ll know I’m crazy. Or maybe we’re standing in the kitchen unloading the dishwasher when we suddenly find ourselves holding up a glass and wondering, “Would my husband and kids take this struggle more seriously if I just started hurling all this shit through the window?”

Most of us opt out of the dramatic displays. We’d have to arrange to let the dog out and have the kids picked up before we checked into the lonely roadside motel. We’d spend hours cleaning up glass and apologizing for our “bad choices” to our temper tantrum-



prone toddlers. It just wouldn't be worth it, so most of us just push through until "crazy" is no longer a voluntary fantasy.

Many scholars have proposed that the struggle at midlife is about the fear that comes with our first true glimpse of mortality. Again, wishful thinking. Midlife is not about the fear of death. Midlife is death. Tearing down the walls that we spent our entire life building is death. Like it or not, at some point during midlife, you're going down, and after that there are only two choices: staying down or enduring rebirth.

It's a painful irony that the very things that may have kept us safe growing up ultimately get in the way of our becoming the parents, partners, and/or people that we want to be.

Maybe, like me, you are the perfect pleaser and performer, and now all of that perfection and rule following is suffocating. Or maybe anger and lashing out kept people at a safe distance and now the distance has turned into intolerable loneliness. There are also the folks who grew up taking care of everyone else because they had no choice. Their death is letting go of the caretaking, and their rebirth is learning how to take care of themselves (and work through the push-back that always comes with setting new boundaries).

Whatever the issue, it seems as if we spend the first half of our lives shutting down feelings to stop the hurt, and the second half trying to open everything back up to heal the hurt.

Sometimes when the "tear the walls down and submit to death" thing overwhelms me, I find it easier to think about midlife as midlove. After a decade of research on shame, authenticity, and belonging, I'm convinced that loving ourselves is the most difficult and courageous thing we'll ever do. Maybe we've been given a finite amount of time to find that self-love, and midlife is the halfway mark. It's time to let go of the shame and fear and embrace love. Time to fish or cut bait."



Trusting my intuition means...



Shitty First Draft

When we create a story from limited data, it's usually an inaccurate one. Brené Brown calls this "the shitty first draft" (SFD). Our SFD is the story we tell ourselves, mostly driven by feelings of shame, guilt or fear.

For example, how often do we think we're the reason a friend, partner or colleague is in a bad mood? A grumpy look or gruff tone is easily misinterpreted when our fears or inadequacies are close to the surface. Unlike actual fiction, where a writer knows the first draft is indeed almost always a 'shitty' one, our brain doesn't challenge the narrative.

We all make up stories based on incomplete information. That's why we need to reality-check our stories. When we take back our projections and rumble with our story, we're moving away from our typical knee-jerk responses and to seek a deeper understanding of our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors about who we are and how we engage with others.

First, we identify the story we make up by writing our shitty first draft. A great way to do this is with the prompt, "*The story I'm telling myself...*" It's important that we don't filter the experience or worry about how our story makes us look. That's why you have a journal. We just need to dig deep and find the courage to witness our life without flinching. The purpose is to find the hidden story we're telling ourselves.

After we identify the story we're making up, it's time to probe our assumptions, which are usually self-defeating. Brené recommends asking ourselves:

- What's true?
- What do I know for sure?
- What do I need to learn about myself?
- What do I need to learn about the situation?

Actually writing down our *shitty first draft*, the stories we tell ourselves, can help disempower our fears. Brown's research found that people who challenge their assumptions in this way tend to be more resilient.

Owning our Story

The best part about the *shitty first draft*, is that we can always rewrite our story. We are the authors of our lives and it is the process of taking up the pen that empowers us.



We must not defy the story but defy the ending by rewriting our story and wrestling with the truth until we get to a place where we think, "Yes. This is what happened. This is my truth." This is where wholeheartedness is cultivated and change begins.

The most dangerous stories we make up are the narratives that diminish our inherent worthiness. We must reclaim the truth about our lovability, desirability, needs, passions, values, and creativity.

Even simply rephrasing it as: "The story I'm telling myself ..." is a powerful tool. For example, "The story I'm telling myself is that I'm no good at my job and scared people will realize I'm a fraud". When we reframe these thoughts as a "story", rather than a fact, it's easier to deconstruct and rewrite them.

When you own your story, you get to write the ending. If you deny the story, the story owns you.

Brené Brown, in her customary downhome way, admitted that she didn't want mindfulness to be an essential tool for the rewriting. It's a common reaction, not wanting to believe that something as simple as breathing can be so powerful. But after interviewing thousands of people over the decades, she can no longer deny the importance of incorporating mindfulness-based techniques. To hear our truth, we need to quiet our minds.

Owning Our Story Worksheet

"Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we'll ever do." Brené explains that for her, this statement means "You better be able to tell the truth about who you are and where you come from and what you're up against and like yourself in the process of telling that truth" because our sense of worth lives inside that story.

Read over the questions and right down a few key words or phrases. When something catches your attention, grab your journal or talk about it with another.

What does the statement mean to you? How would you explain it to someone else?



Are there parts of your story that are more difficult to own than others? What makes them difficult?

What would reclaiming those exiled stories mean for you?

Brené shares that it is difficult to own our story because when we look at the world we get a "pretty, scripted fable that we're supposed to live by."

What is the fable you were told? This can be conveyed verbally and non-verbally and can be learned unconsciously through modeling.

What does it feel like when your life doesn't match the story you were told?

Who are you afraid of disappointing?



Who is worthy and will hold space for your full story?

Brené explains that if we don't claim worthiness inside our story, we end up hustling for worthiness outside our story – who we are and what we believe becomes secondary to who you want me to be and what you want me to believe.

What does it look like when you hustle for worthiness on the outside of your story?

How have your needs been written out of the story?

What does your hustle look like? Is it perfectionism, pretending, pleasing, always being right, staying quiet, ...?

Courage

"Courage starts with showing up and letting ourselves be seen." — Brené Brown

It takes courage to face our pain. The most common ways we off-load hurt:

- Chandeliering - stuffing our pain down so deep that some random thing causes it to resurface



- Bouncing - using anger and blame instead of feeling the pain
- Numbing - using other things to avoid the hurt (including burying ourselves in busyness)
- Stockpiling - accumulating pain until physical symptoms start appearing
- Fear of high centering - telling ourselves, "If I recognize my hurt or fear or anger, I'll get stuck."

The first thing we have to do is figure out what's keeping us leaning into the discomfort. What's the fear? Where and why do we want to be braver? Then we have to figure out how we're currently protecting ourselves from vulnerability. What is our armor? Perfectionism? Intellectualizing? Cynicism? Numbing? Control? It's not an easy walk into that arena, but it's where we come alive.



I feel most seen when...

Perfectionism

There's a significant difference between perfectionism and healthy striving. Perfectionism is the belief that if we do things perfectly and look perfect, we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgment, and shame. Perfectionism is a twenty-ton shield that we lug around, thinking it will protect us, when in fact it's the thing that's really preventing us from being seen.

Perfectionism is also very different than self-improvement. Perfectionism is, at its core, about trying to earn approval. Most perfectionists grew up being praised for achievement and performance (grades, manners, rule following, people pleasing, appearance, sports).



Somewhere along the way, they adopted this dangerous and debilitating belief system: "I am what I accomplish and how well I accomplish it. Please. Perform. Perfect."

Where healthy striving is self-focused: "How can I improve?" Perfectionism is other-focused: "What will they think?" In other words, perfectionism is a hustle.

Oddly enough, research shows that perfectionism hampers achievement and is correlated with depression, anxiety, addiction, and life paralysis. The fear of failing, making mistakes, not meeting people's expectations, and being criticized keeps us outside of authentic being.

Lastly, perfectionism is a form of shame. It's an attempt to keep feelings of inadequacy at bay. Where we struggle with perfectionism, we struggle with shame.

Vulnerability

"Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change." — Brené Brown

In the 2010 TED Talk that would go on to launch a shame-busting empire, Brené Brown laid bare *The Power of Vulnerability*. Learning how to deal with vulnerability is learning how to deal with uncertainty and how to manage emotional risk. It's also how we grow.

Theodore Roosevelt gave a speech called "Citizenship in a Republic," that is sometimes referred to as "The Man in the Arena." Brené Brown said that everything she learned from over a decade of research on vulnerability culminated in this passage from his speech:

"It's not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.

The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly . . . who at best knows the triumph of high achievement and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly."

Vulnerability is not knowing victory or defeat, it's understanding the necessity of both; it's engaging. It's being all in, showing up and being seen. This is tough to do that when we're terrified about what people might see or think. We end up hustling for our worthiness rather than standing in it.



Vulnerability Exploration Worksheet

"Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go." - T. S. Eliot

The whole point of exploring our vulnerability is to develop the courage to rise from our falls, overcome mistakes, learn, and face hurt in a way that brings more wisdom and wholeheartedness into our lives.

Use the following questions for further reflections. Write down the first words or phrases that come to mind. Later, pick one or two and elaborate further in your journal or with a friend.

How would you rewrite a new daring ending to an old story?

When do you feel vulnerable? How do you experience it?

How do you know when you're (emotionally) hooked?

When have you been inspired by the courage of someone around you?

What's the most courageous thing you could for yourself when you feel hurt and small?



Body Talk

The body is a great intelligence and one of the most accessible and reliable true path finders you will ever have. The body knows what your core self wants, even when the social self muddles things up. The minute you make a decision contrary to your heart's desire, the body will let you know. The message may be subtle, but it's there and it's usually in the gut.

By the time people reach adulthood, they've had years of practice using their body to keep sensations, thoughts and feelings at a distance. They employ unconscious strategies like muscle contraction, shallow breathing and stress hormones to keep awareness from surfacing.

The problem with cutting off is the same with self-medicating, we can't selectively numb. It's all or nothing. When we sever the connection between desire and the knowledge of that desire, we cut the line to our joy and aliveness leaving a dull, hollow ache that cannot be fully satisfied with second-best solutions.

In order to climb back into your body, you'll need to quiet the monkey mind and open your heart to what you're feeling. Once you have connected head and heart, explore the sensations. Ask the body questions. Listen deeply.



In this moment, I feel...



Compassionate Body Scan Worksheet

To begin, it's best to lie down on a bed or the floor. Lie flat on your back and gently rest your arms about six inches away from your sides with your legs about shoulder-width apart. Place a hand on your heart as a reminder to be kind to yourself. Feel the warmth of your hand and take 3 deep, relaxing breaths. Then place your arm by your side again.

- Start with your feet. Notice what your feet feel like. Are they warm or cool, dry or moist? Then notice if there's any discomfort there. If so, mentally soften the area as if you were placing a warm towel on it.
- Just feel the sensations of your body - pleasure, pain, or nothing at all - and let every sensation be just as it is. You can send a little love by saying, "There is some pain and it's okay."
- Now bring a measure of gratitude to your feet. Your feet have such a small surface area yet they hold up your entire body all day long. They work hard for us although we rarely pay any attention to them. If your feet feel good today, you can also extend gratitude for the discomfort that you don't have.
- If you have a lot of time, carefully move your loving attention from one toe to the next, or from one part of each foot to another, first one foot and then the next. Make sure that your awareness is saturated with tenderness, gratitude, and respect for each area of your body.
- When you notice your mind has wandered, as it will after a few seconds, just return to the sensations in your body. If you are flooded with judgment or associations to a particular body part, put your hand on your heart again and breathe gently, and then return to the simple body sensations. If an area of your body is very difficult to stay with, then move to another body part for now. Let this exercise be gentle and peaceful.
- After you have given compassionate awareness to the sensations in your feet, move slowly to other parts of your body, right up to the crown of your head.
- As you move from one part of your body to another, return your awareness again and again to whatever sensations are present at the moment, making sure to bring



gratitude, kindness, and respect to each body part. For example, remind yourself how hard your stomach works to digest your food, the effort of your neck holding up your head, and the way your eyes and ears guide, inform, and delight you all day long.

- When you have paid loving attention to each individual body part, put your hand on your heart again and give your entire body a final shower of affection. Then gently open your eyes.

The Healing Power of Affirmations

Affirmations are powerful medicine and one of the easiest ways to nourish your entire being with compassionate thoughts and loving intentions. You can use affirmations to address emotional issues, personal health goals, positive self-image or just about anything that is blocked by negative thinking.

If telling yourself what you believe sounds a little woo-woo, just remember your mind is generating thoughts all the time. If they are negative, they affect you - even if you're not aware of them. So why not make them helpful?

Affirmations train your brain to feel comfortable with a new reality that you are choosing for yourself. This is a powerful way to hand back the reality someone else gave you.

When formulating an affirmation, keep these simple guidelines in mind: 1) state your goal positively and 2) keep it in the present tense. For example, "I am strong and healthy" versus "I want to be..."

An affirmation always involves making a choice. Don't let the inner critic distract you. It's okay if the statement isn't entirely true. Declaring "I am strong and healthy" taps unconscious beliefs. You are affirming the decision to start now, from this day forward.

Repeat your affirmations daily, out loud, for a month. Say it with feeling, like you mean it, until you sense an internal, energetic shift. Affirmations don't make something happen. They make something welcome. Invite the shift.



Here is sampler platter of affirmations to get you started:

1. I am Infinite. I am one with the Spiritual Energy (Nature, God, Yahweh, etc.).
2. I have the courage to go beyond my ordinary, limited perceptions.
3. I listen for and accept inner guidance from Spirit.
4. I accept negativity as a learning experience and transmute it into an opportunity for growth.
5. What I know about the world I've learned from prevalent belief patterns. I now look beyond those patterns for my own infinite good.
6. I commit myself to building my highest wisdom and power beyond the weakness of the ego.
7. My mind is centered.
8. What I believe I am, I am.
9. My word is law to me.
10. I find freedom through acceptance.
11. I have no need to defend my will or force my views.
12. I respect all living things – including myself – and I acknowledge their beauty and magnificence.
13. My power rises from within.
14. I dedicate my life to the sacred way.
15. I have an abundance of inspiration and creative expression.
16. I observe nature and align myself to it.
17. I do not fear death, but accept it and get on with living.
18. My energy is my message.
19. I do not invest energy in things that don't resonate for me. I live my truth and let the rest go.
20. I am spiritually disciplined. I acknowledge the source of my light and power regularly and often.



21. I trust myself to make the right choice.
22. I live mostly in the present.
23. I am willing to take the pain without the blame.
24. I trust there is a purpose for everything.
25. I realize that reality is created by thought, language and action.
26. I accept what is: the good, the bad, and the neutral. I keep coming back to the intention of love.
27. I surrender to a higher order.
28. I am kind to myself and others.
29. I strive to fully engage and participate with all of life.
30. I keep a sense of humor and openness.

Pleasure Playback

Radiant relationship is all about learning to live at a higher level of orbit, inside of our connection with another person. When we are plugged into what turns us on and lights us up, we are able to bring so much more connectivity and creativity into our relationship life.

Over the next few days, keep an eye out for pleasurable experiences. They may be obvious ones like a great date night, or more subtle like good morning with your kid. For each pleasurable experiences, pick one or two of the highlights and share them with the person involved.

When a positive moment is shared, the brain experiences has happening in real time. Positive “feel-good” chemicals are released. This practice not only strengthens relationships, it solidifies new neuronal pathways for more pleasure.

Make a daily habit of sharing gratitude, joy, and appreciation with someone in your life and you’ll notice your life enjoyment will increase exponentially.



Needs

“How can we be truly comfortable and generous in the face of someone’s need when we’re repelled by our own?” — Brené Brown

We all come into this world with needs. At the very basic level of survival is food, clothing and shelter. But in order to thrive, we need love and belonging. For many people, especially those who have learned not to listen to their body, there is great confusion over what we want versus what we need. For example, we need food and we want chocolate.

Almost everyone lives out of the misguided belief that they aren’t enough. Caught in the comparative mind, we judge ourselves against unrealistic ideals. What most don’t realize is that, at a primitive level, this need to prove our worth is rooted in the need to belong.

Once you see how your life has been guided by limited beliefs, you can work on the fears that drive them. As you free yourself from those fears, you come closer to living from your most authentic self. That’s the freedom of true belonging.

Three needs that are essential for the quest of belonging are: solitude, boundaries and connection. Master these and you master yourself.

Solitude

To successfully own ourselves we must build the capacity to be contentedly alone. Philosopher Paul Tillich said “language has created the word ‘loneliness’ to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word ‘solitude’ to express the glory of being alone.”

Be prepared. The brain will tell you stories, blurring the lines between loneliness and solitude. It will confuse self-reflection with boredom and encourage you to choose comfort over courage. It will convince you something compelling is waiting elsewhere.

One of the great rewards of solitude is an increased capacity to reflect on who we are and want to be. In quiet moments come thoughtful questions like, “What gives my life meaning? What do I want in life? What is holding me back from best self?”

Boundaries

Another non-negotiable requirement for true belonging are healthy boundaries. The journey of self is ripe with vulnerability. Doubt and uncertainty are a given. Your beliefs will be challenged and the need to please will rear its ugly head. But without a clear sense of where you stand, it will be hard to draw the line.



Boundaries help determine what is acceptable and what is dehumanizing behavior. They encourage us to name our values and identify our physical, emotional and spiritual limits. Take a moment to consider what you can tolerate and accept and what makes you feel uncomfortable and stressed. Those feelings will help point to where your limits are.

Another clue is when you're feeling resentful. It's often a sign that you're pushing yourself beyond your limits, or someone else is imposing theirs onto you. We can't control what others say, do or think any more than we can the weather. We can only take responsibility for our own actions and let go of the rest.

Connection

We must stay in love with humanity. This is a tall order during times of chaos, but the more we can allow ourselves to take in the beauty, sorrows, joy and pain, the more human we become. It's that simple.

One of the most powerful barriers in life is being caught in divisive emotional reactions, such as anger, fear and despair. When we get caught in these negative patterns, we armor over our hearts.

Pain hurts and it's natural to protect against it. When life feels unbearable, the pull is strong to turn toward hopelessness and blame. But such thoughts take us further away from each other and from ourselves.

True belonging is the awareness that you're never alone. That we are inextricably connected by our shared humanity and need for belonging. This is not about faith, god or religion. It's the basic knowledge that we all come into this world with the same basic needs.

Value-Based Living

Among the many outstanding and life-changing contributions Brené Brown has made is her research in Wholehearted living. She does not give instructions for how to live by them, as that will be different for everyone. For this reason we will be highlighting a guidepost each week for the remainder of the program to help you find ways to cultivate more of it into your life.



Guidepost #1 Cultivating Authenticity

“Often people attempt to live their lives backwards: they try to have more things, or more money, in order to do more of what they want so that they will be happier. The way it actually works is in reverse. You must first be who you really are, then do what you really need to do, in order to have what you want.” - Margaret Young

Authenticity is a practice, a conscious choice of how we want to live. It’s about the choosing to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen.

Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we’re supposed to be and embracing who we are.

Choosing authenticity means:

- Cultivating the courage to be imperfect, to set boundaries, and to allow ourselves to be vulnerable.
- Exercising the compassion that comes from knowing that we are all made of strength and struggle.
- Nurturing the connection and sense of belonging that can only happen when we believe that we are enough.

When we put ourselves out there, some people will feel threatened by it and make thoughtless remarks. It’s natural and normal to feel hurt by these statements. Don’t let the naysayers get you down. That’s their stuff, not yours. Stay true to what is right for you.

Guidepost #2 Cultivating Self-Compassion

“Being satisfied with what we already have is a magical golden key to being alive in a full, unrestricted, and inspired way.” – Pema Chödrön

We cannot exile undesirable parts of ourselves without dulling the rest. That’s because our juiciness and aliveness is all mixed up with our craziness and confusion and why it is crucial we make friends with our selves by treating our perceived flaws and inadequacies with the same gentle, loving-kindness we would a friend.

The non-judgmental study of our selves lends a sensitive view to all humanity. Seeing others suffering with their own perceived short-comings helps loosen our resentments –



the primary block to compassion. By knowing ourselves, just as we are, we're in position to accept who we are with great love and kindness.

Self-compassion is the ability to accept oneself, particularly in the face of failure.

Guidepost #3 Cultivating a Resilient Spirit

"People are like stained-glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within."

– Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

Research on resilience describes "protective factors" as the things we do, have, and practice that give us bounce. The most common factors resilient people have are:

- 1) They are resourceful and have good problem-solving skills.
- 2) They are more likely to seek help.
- 3) They hold the belief that they can do something that will help them to manage their feelings and to cope.
- 4) They have social support available to them.
- 5) They are connected with others, such as family or friends.

When asked what the foundation of their "protective factors" was, people in the resilient study said spirituality, defined as recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion.

If we want to cultivate a resilient spirit and stop falling prey to comparing our ordinary lives with manufactured images, we need to know how to reality check what we see.

Guidepost #4 Cultivating Gratitude and Joy

"Most folks are as happy as they make up their minds to be." – Abraham Lincoln

Gratitude is an emotion, a practice, a choice and a way of being in the world. It's delivered best with sincerity and when felt deep within our hearts. At its core, it is an experience of universal belonging.



Dr. Robert Emmons has devoted his career to the study of gratitude. He found that those who make it a habit are more optimistic and experience greater joy in their lives. And for good reason:

- Gratitude fosters connection. When people feel appreciated they're more likely to want to hang out with you.
- Grateful people tend to exercise more often and eat better, which contributes to better health. They don't take their body for granted.
- Those who practice listing "three good things" daily see improvements in depression and overall happiness, sometimes in as little as a few weeks.
- In a similar study, writing down a few thankful thoughts before bed can increase both quality and duration of sleep.

Gratitude helps us find our strength, open our hearts and experience the fullness of our lives. It liberates us from the prison of small mind/ego. Like exercise and eating right - it's not a matter of knowing what to do. It's about overcoming the obstacles that get in the way of it.

Guidepost #5 Cultivating Intuition and Trusting Faith

Intuition is not independent of any reasoning process. It's a rapid-fire, unconscious associating process. The brain makes an observation, scans its files, and matches the observation with existing memories, knowledge, and experiences. Once it puts together a series of matches, we get a "gut" feeling.

Faith is a place of mystery, where we find the courage to believe in what we cannot see and the strength to let go of our fear of uncertainty.

Guidepost #6 Cultivating Creativity

Creativity is the expression of our originality. It's the ability to look at the ordinary and see the extraordinary. It helps us stay mindful that what we bring to the world is completely original and cannot be compared.



Whereas comparison is all about conformity and competition. For most of us, letting go of comparison requires constant awareness. More often than not, what gets in the way of the full expression of our creative nature is the belief that it won't be "good-enough."

Creative expression can lead us to a deeper level of understanding and self-discovery. There are so many ways to express it, through movement, visual arts, music, the written word – even one's life. The point is to let the joy of creative contact move you.

Guidepost #7 Cultivating Play and Rest

A critical component to wholehearted living is play. Play shapes our brain, fosters empathy, helps us navigate complex social groups, and is at the core of creativity and innovation.

In today's culture – where our self-worth is tied to our net worth and our worthiness on our productivity – spending time doing purposeless activities is rare. We've got so much to do and so little time to seemingly do it, we've convinced ourselves that play is a waste of time. What we don't realize is that we have a biological need for play. The opposite of play is not work – it's depression!

We have the same need for rest. Our bodies need time for renewal yet we view it as a luxury. We are a nation of exhausted and overstressed adults raising overscheduled children. We use our spare time to desperately search for joy and meaning in our lives.

If we want to live a wholehearted life, we have to become intentional about cultivating sleep and play, and about letting go of exhaustion as a status symbol.

Guidepost #8 Cultivating Calm and Stillness

"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." - Viktor E. Frankl

Calm is the result of creating perspective and mindfulness while managing emotional reactivity. Unless we had calm modeled by adults when we were young, it's unlikely that it will be our default response to stress. In order to be slow to respond yet quick to think, we have to actively practice it.



Stillness is an integral part in quieting the mind. It's about creating an emotionally clutter-free space and allowing ourselves to feel and think and dream and question. In our increasingly complicated and anxious world, we need more time to do less.

Guidepost #9 Cultivating Meaningful Work

"Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." - Howard Thurman

Self-doubt undermines the process of finding our gifts and sharing them with the world. Overcoming self-doubt is about believing we're enough and letting go of what the world says we're supposed to be.

We all have gifts and talents. When we cultivate those gifts and share them with the world, we create a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives. Squandering those gifts brings distress to our lives. Using our gifts and talents to create meaningful work takes a tremendous amount of commitment – because in many cases it is not what pays the bills.

Make a list of the work that inspires you. Don't be practical. Don't think about making a living; think about doing something you love. There's nothing that says you have to quit your day job to cultivate meaningful work. Question is, what brings meaning to you?

Guidepost #10 Cultivating Laughter, Song, and Dance

"Dance like no one is watching. Sing like no one is listening. Love like you've never been hurt and live like it's heaven on Earth. " - Mark Twain

A good belly laugh, singing at the top of your lungs, and dancing "like no one is watching" are unquestionably good for the soul. But they are also exercises in vulnerability. There are many shame triggers around the vulnerability of laughing, song, and dance. The list includes the fear of being perceived as awkward, silly, spastic, immature, and foolish.

When we value being cool and in control over granting ourselves the freedom to unleash the goofy and passionate expressions of who we are, we betray ourselves. When we don't give ourselves permission to be free, we rarely tolerate that freedom in others. So we put them down, make fun of them, ridicule their behaviors, and sometimes even shame them. We can do this intentionally or unconsciously.



The Hopi Indians have a saying, "To watch us dance is to hear our hearts speak." It takes courage to let people hear our hearts speak, but life is too precious to spend it pretending or holding back.

 writing prompt

I'm happiest when...

Wholehearted Guideposts Exercise

Wholehearted living is Brené Brown's answer to getting out of our way and owning our story. She describes wholehearted individuals as people who learn to own their own story and live with authenticity, resilience of spirit, sense of love, belonging, joy and gratitude .

Our capabilities for love and belonging hinge on our ability to love and accept ourselves. Use the following questions to help you gain a better sense of what that means in your life.

What person(s) in your life live wholeheartedly? How do you see the aspects of authenticity, love, belonging, resilience, gratitude and joy in their life?

What does the courage to be imperfect look like in your life? What boundaries do you need to set in your life?



Do you think we can give people what we don't have or are not in touch with?

How do you numb or take the edge off? What struggles are most likely to numb?

How do you practice or would like to practice gratitude? What is something you can do daily to acknowledge what you are grateful for?



20 Life Lessons from Brené Brown

1. What other people think of you is none of your business.

"I carry a small sheet of paper in my wallet that has written on it the names of people whose opinions of me matter. To be on that list, you have to love me for my strengths and struggles."

2. Open yourself up only to those people who have earned the right to hear your story.

"If we share our shame story with the wrong person, they can easily become one more piece of flying debris in an already dangerous storm."

3. If you trade your authenticity for safety, you will be very unhappy.

"Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It's about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen."

4. You are worthy of love and belonging.

"When you get to a place where you understand that love and belonging, your worthiness, is a birthright and not something you have to earn, anything is possible."

5. We are all different yet we are all the same.

"As unique as we all are, an awful lot of us want the same things. We want to shake up our current less-than-fulfilling lives. We want to be happier, more loving, forgiving and connected with the people around us."

6. Happiness is right in front of you.

"Want to be happy? Stop trying to be perfect."

7. Embracing your vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love, belonging and joy.

"Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light."



8. Good marriages are when you can go home and know that your vulnerability will be honored as courage, not as weakness.

“The best marriages are the ones where we can go out in the world and really put ourselves out there. A lot of times we’ll fail, and sometimes we’ll pull it off. But good marriages are when you can go home and know that your vulnerability will be honored as courage, and that you’ll find support.”

9. Be the adult you want your children to be.

“First and foremost, we need to be the adults we want our children to be. We should watch our own gossiping and anger. We should model the kindness we want to see.”

10. The dark does not destroy the light; it defines it.

“The dark does not destroy the light; it defines it. It’s our fear of the dark that casts our joy into the shadows.”

11. Perfectionism it’s often the path to depression, anxiety, addiction, and life paralysis.

“Why, when we know that there’s no such thing as perfect, do most of us spend an incredible amount of time and energy trying to be everything to everyone? Is it that we really admire perfection? No – the truth is that we are actually drawn to people who are real and down-to-earth. We love authenticity and we know that life is messy and imperfect.”

12. Our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.

“The truth is: Belonging starts with self-acceptance. Your level of belonging, in fact, can never be greater than your level of self-acceptance, because believing that you’re enough is what gives you the courage to be authentic, vulnerable and imperfect.”

13. Love is not something we give or get; it is something that we nurture and grow.

“We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness and affection. Love is not something we give or get; it is something that we nurture and grow, a connection that can only be cultivated between two people when it exists within each one of them – we can only love others as much as we love ourselves. Shame, blame, disrespect, betrayal, and the withholding of affection damage the roots from which love grows. Love can only survive these injuries if they are acknowledged, healed and rare.”



14. When you numb the painful emotions, you numb the positive emotions as well.

"We cannot selectively numb emotions, when we numb the painful emotions, we also numb the positive emotions."

15. Faith is a place of mystery.

"Faith is a place of mystery, where we find the courage to believe in what we cannot see and the strength to let go of our fear of uncertainty."

16. Nostalgia is a dangerous form of comparison.

"Nostalgia is also a dangerous form of comparison. Think about how often we compare our lives to a memory that nostalgia has so completely edited that it never really existed."

17. Practicing spirituality brings a sense of perspective, meaning and purpose to our lives.

"Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion. Practicing spirituality brings a sense of perspective, meaning and purpose to our lives."

18. There is no innovation and creativity without failure.

"There is no innovation and creativity without failure. Period. Talk about your failures without apologizing."

19. We judge others because we judge ourselves.

"We judge people in areas where we're vulnerable to shame, especially picking folks who are doing worse than we're doing."

20. The opposite of scarcity is not abundance. It's enough. I'm enough.

"For me, the opposite of scarcity is not abundance. It's enough. I'm enough. My kids are enough."



Exploring Shame Worksheet

Use the blank spaces to complete the following sentences with your own thoughts and ideas. Each of the following could be used as a writing prompt for journaling, as well. 😊

1. When I hear the word shame, I think of...

2. If shame were a color, it would be...

3. When I'm in shame, I feel...

4. When I talk about shame, I feel...

5. I can talk about shame with...



Cutting Energetic Cords Exercise

Use this exercise whenever you suspect you have an energetic connection to someone who is draining you of life force. You can do this when the cord is between you and a living person or when it's between you and someone has crossed over into the spiritual realm.

This exercise may need to be repeated multiple times at different settings. Be patient. Emotional healing and release takes time. Do imprint removals as the need arises, by yourself or with another person leading the process.

Cords can find a way of reattaching if you do not make changes to your daily relational patterns. Do your best to firm your boundaries when you interact with someone you've had a draining energetic connection to in the past.

- 1) Take a few minutes to become quiet and relaxed as you focus on your breathing.
- 2) Breathe out any dark, critical energy that may interfere on the exhale.
- 3) Draw your attention to your lower chakras, from your solar plexus down. Tune into this area of your body. Sense, feel or see a cord or hook extending outward toward someone or coming in toward you. Then visualize yourself cutting the cord while saying, "I cut all attachments." As you do this, make sweeping movements around your body with your hands, swooshing the energy away. Visualize the cord and draining energy being sent up into the sky or down into the earth or absorbed by another Source that is larger.
- 4) Identify where you feel an uncomfortable sensation in your body. This is commonly felt in the belly, where the third chakra is located. Identify the person who is connected with this feeling who requires your release. If you are ready and able to forgive this person, allow forgiveness into your heart at this time.
- 5) Now say out loud: "_____, I release/forgive you for _____." Name everything you to release and/or forgive the person for: betrayal, abuse, abandonment, not stepping up, etc. Allow yourself to feel the full power of your emotions as they come up. Do not hold back.



- 6) When you are ready, say "I send you on your path of healing. In freeing you, I'm choosing to free myself."
- 7) Repeat steps 3 through 6 until you feel finished, until you have no more emotions to release or words to say.
- 8) When the work feels complete, draw your attention to the area of your body where you'd felt discomfort. Chances are the discomfort will have resolved. If so, well done! You did good work. Time to wrap it up.
- 9) You just did a little soul surgery by removing an energetic imprint, which leaves an energetic hole. For your protection, visualize filling the hole with healing midnight-blue and golden light. Continue until it is full of healing light energy.
- 10) Make sure you get rest and drink plenty of fluids. Don't fight it if you feel tired. Give in. you just did some big energetic healing, it's very important to honor the healing process by giving yourself plenty of time to relax afterward.



Naming Tool Worksheet

Opening up to emotional experience is a process. "Naming" our experience helps bring awareness to our feelings and behavior.

Staying with our feelings is skill. It takes practice. When it is developed it has the ability to relax the nervous system.

When you're anxious or uncomfortable, *name the emotions* by taking the following steps:

- 1) Notice that you may be having a feeling.
- 2) Focus your attention inward on your bodily felt experience and stay present.
- 3) Try to identify and name what you are feeling. Are you angry, sad, happy, loving, fearful, guilty or shameful? If the feeling isn't clear, make room for it by tuning into it and the sensations that surround it.
- 4) Notice the reaction to the naming. See if it fits and "clicks" into place.
- 5) When you're able to accurately label your feeling, you'll notice a shift in the energy in your body. Take a moment to sit with this new awareness.



Emotional Wounds Worksheet

Answer each of the following questions as honestly as possible. If you are reluctant to answer the questions, or if you feel you're being tricked the game is already up. You likely have some emotional shrapnel.

- | (1) | (2) | |
|-----|-----|---|
| N | Y | Do people ever tell you that you seem cold, aloof, or distant? |
| Y | N | Is there at least one person who really understands almost all your feelings? |
| N | Y | Is there anything you do compulsively, even though you wish you could stop? |
| N | Y | Do you feel exhausted and irritable after being with a group of friends for few hours? |
| N | Y | Do you often seek solitude to "recover" from social interactions? |
| Y | N | Do you feel comfortable crying in front of the person/people you love the most? |
| Y | N | Do you talk about your feelings at least once a week to at least one other person? |
| N | Y | Are there any events in your life you would not be willing to talk about to anyone? |
| Y | N | Do you regularly engage in activities that allow you to express your feelings such as writing in a journal, singing emotional songs, acting crying or laughing hard at a movie? |
| N | Y | Do you have strange or unexpected emotional reactions, such as feeling shame when you are praised, relief when you fail, or anxiety when you are loved? |
| N | Y | Do you have any "dark" secrets? |
| Y | N | When someone makes you angry, do you tell him or her how upset you are? |
| N | Y | Are you lonely even – or especially – when you are with other people? |



- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| Y | N | Are you comfortable being touched affectionately by the people you love most? |
| N | Y | Are you <i>only</i> comfortable being touched by a sexual partner, or does all touch seem sexual to you? |
| Y | N | When you get good news, are there people you'd call just to share your happiness? |
| N | Y | Do you pride yourself on never being upset or angry? |
| N | Y | Would you rather "stuff" your anger than cause conflict by standing up for yourself? |
| Y | N | Are you comfortable verbally expressing your love for family and friends? |
| N | Y | On a typical day, do you laugh – genuinely, not out of politeness – less than five times? |
| N | Y | Do you laugh at inappropriate times, such as when you hear bad news or when someone else is expressing anger? |
| N | Y | Do you often cry without know the reason why? |

Count the number of responses in column 1 and column 2. Getting more than three column 2 responses indicates the likelihood of an emotional wound.



Snap It Out Worksheet

To do this exercise you'll need a timer, a small towel and an empty chair.

Set the timer for five or ten minutes, no more. The set length of time is used as a container so you don't become overwhelmed by your emotions or your arm – you'll be whacking a hard surface with that towel and it can give your muscles a workout.

Facing the chair, imagine that the person you are angry with is sitting there. Then let that person verbally have it. Really let it rip. Don't hold back. This is the time to use all your favorite words. You know the ones. As you do, turn and snap the towel against a hard surface such as a sturdy wall, door or door frame.

Often the anger and grief we feel inside is caused by the fact the person's heart was closed to you. This other was able to hurt you because they were not able to accept the pain they were inflicting. Their heart was closed to you and you knew it, even as a child.

After a few minutes of towel snapping, cursing and shouting you may be ready to declare, "I hate that your heart was (or is) closed to me!" This acknowledges and releases the grief along with the anger that you weren't able to have the experience that you wanted, needed, and deserved.

This is not the time to be compassionate toward the other or work on forgiveness. This is YOUR time to express the justified anger and grief you feel. Once you begin, you may notice pressure release in your body. Tune into the energy of your body.

Emotional release work should always be followed with healing work (see "Releasing Ritual") and repeated regularly until you feel a shift inside. In all likelihood, you've been carrying this around for years so it will take a few rounds to release. There are no shortcuts to healing pain. The only way is to walk through it.



Releasing Ritual Worksheet

After doing the hard work of an emotional release exercise, follow it with a releasing ritual to close the work.

Ritual is incredibly powerful because it gets us out of our head and right into our bodies. Set aside 15 to 30 minutes to do this ritual.

Collect a pen and paper or journal, a glass bowl or ceramic plate and be ready to play a long set of music that touches your heart.

Light a candle and set an intention for releasing your feelings. You can invoke help from a larger source by saying something like, "I invite my spirit to join me now to help assist in releasing my anger or grief concerning _____. I invite my guides, teachers, spirit animals, Mother Nature (or whomever you need or feel comfortable calling on). For the next 30 minutes, help me release whatever needs to be released."

Note that the words aren't as important as your intention to be healed through the release of old emotions.

Start the music.

Take one deep breath and then begin writing a letter to the person who has hurt you. Pour out all your feelings on paper. Do not edit. Do not worry about punctuation or penmanship. Just write, free-flow with feeling.

After 15 to 30 minutes, read out loud what you wrote. Feel the emotions as they rise. Take time to cry as needed.

Burn the paper. Toss into bowl, plate or fireplace. Shut off the music. Thank your guide and blow out the candle.

Repeat the ritual as needed. You may need to go through many rituals, releasing one layer at a time, for complete healing.



Personal Narrative Worksheet

Jot down a few key words or phrases as you read the following questions. Please give yourself time to give thought and reflect further in your journal.

If your life was a novel being written by someone else and you were the main character, what great strength would the writer be developing?

What great challenge would the main character be working on her life?

Has your life story developed the way had hoped?

How was vulnerability modeled in your family? What were the lessons (spoken or unspoken) about being vulnerable?



How do you fill in the blanks with your own tapes? "*Never* _____ *enough.*"

Cultural messages abound that say an ordinary life is a meaningless life. What are some of the expectations and messages that fuel the fear of missing out and being ordinary?



Owning Our Story Worksheet

"Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we'll ever do." Brené explains that for her, this statement means "You better be able to tell the truth about who you are and where you come from and what you're up against and like yourself in the process of telling that truth" because our sense of worth lives inside that story.

This worksheet is intended to spark further exploration, reflection and discussion. Read over the questions and right down a few key words or phrases. When something catches your attention, grab your journal, contact your Health Buddy or think it out with a friend.

What does the statement mean to you? How would you explain it to someone else?

Are there parts of your story that are more difficult to own than others? What makes them difficult?

What would reclaiming those exiled stories mean for you?



Brené shares that it is difficult to own our story because when we look at the world we get a “pretty, scripted fable that we’re supposed to live by.”

What is the fable you were told? This can be conveyed verbally and non-verbally and can be learned unconsciously through modeling.

What does it feel like when your life doesn’t match the story you were told?

Who are you afraid of disappointing?

Who is worthy and will hold space for your full story?



Brené explains that if we do not claim worthiness inside our story, we end up hustling for worthiness on the outside of our story – who we are and what we believe becomes secondary to who do you want me to be and what do you want me to believe.

What does it look like when you hustle for worthiness on the outside of your story?

How have your needs been written out of the story?

What does your hustle look like? Is it perfectionism, pretending, pleasing, always being right, staying quiet, ...?



Vulnerability Exploration Worksheet

"Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go."

- T. S. Eliot

The whole point of exploring our vulnerability is to develop the courage to rise from our falls, overcome mistakes, and face hurt in a way that brings more wisdom and wholeheartedness into our lives.

Use the following questions for further reflections. Write down the first words or phrases that come to mind. Later, pick one or two and elaborate further in your journal or with a friend.

How would you rewrite a new daring ending to an old story?

When do you feel vulnerable? How do you experience it?

How do you know when you're (emotionally) hooked?



When have you been inspired by the courage of someone around you?

What's the most courageous thing you could do for yourself when you feel hurt and small?



Compassionate Body Scan Worksheet

To begin, it's best to lie down on a bed or the floor unless you will fall asleep. Lie flat on your back and gently rest your arms about six inches away from your sides and hold your legs around shoulder-width apart. Place a hand on your heart as a reminder to be kind to yourself. Feel the warmth of your hand and take 3 deep, relaxing breaths. Then place your arm by your side again.

- Start with your feet. Notice what your feet feel like. Are they warm or cool, dry or moist? Then notice if there's any discomfort there. If so, mentally soften the area as if you were placing a warm towel on it. If you wish, bring some compassion to the area with words like "There's some pain there and it's okay."
- Just feel the sensations of your body—pleasure, pain, or nothing at all—and let every sensation be just as it is. (You can take action to help your body feel better after the meditation.)
- Now bring a measure of gratitude to your feet. Your feet have such a small surface area yet they hold up your entire body all day long. They work hard for us although we rarely pay any attention to them. If your feet feel good today, you can also extend gratitude for the discomfort that you don't have.
- If you have a lot of time, carefully move your loving attention from one toe to the next, or from one part of each foot to another, first one foot and then the next. Make sure that your awareness is saturated with tenderness, gratitude, and respect for each area of your body.
- When you notice your mind has wandered, as it will after a few seconds, just return to the sensations in your body. If you are flooded with judgment or associations to a particular body part, put your hand on your heart again and breathe gently, and then return to the simple body sensations. If an area of your body is very difficult to stay with, then move to another body part for now. Let this exercise be gentle and peaceful.
- After you have given compassionate awareness to the sensations in your feet, move slowly to other parts of your body, right up to the crown of your head.



- As you move from one part of your body to another, return your awareness again and again to whatever sensations are present at the moment, making sure to bring gratitude, kindness, and respect to each body part. For example, remind yourself how hard your stomach works to digest your food, the effort of your neck holding up your head, and the way your eyes and ears guide, inform, and delight you all day long.
- When you have paid loving attention to each individual body part, put your hand on your heart again and give your entire body a final shower of affection. Then gently open your eyes.



Wholehearted Guideposts Exercise

Wholehearted living is Brené Brown's answer to getting out of our way and owning our story. She describes wholehearted individuals as people who learn to own their own story and live with authenticity, resilience of spirit, sense of love, belonging, joy and gratitude .

Our capabilities for love and belonging hinge on our ability to love and accept ourselves. Use the following questions to help you gain a better sense of what that means in your life.

What person(s) in your life live wholeheartedly? How do you see the aspects of authenticity, love, belonging, resilience, gratitude and joy in their life?

What does the courage to be imperfect look like in your life? What boundaries do you need to set in your life?

Do you think we can give people what we don't have or are not in touch with?



How do you numb or take the edge off? What struggles are most likely to numb?

How do you practice or would like to practice gratitude? What is something you can do daily to acknowledge what you are grateful for?



30 Affirmations

1. I am Infinite. I am one with the Spiritual Energy (Nature, God, etc.).
2. I have the courage to go beyond my ordinary, limited perceptions.
3. I listen for and accept inner guidance from Spirit.
4. I accept negativity as a learning experience and transmute it into an opportunity for growth.
5. What I know about the world I've learned from prevalent belief patterns. I now look beyond those patterns for my own infinite good.
6. I commit myself to building my highest wisdom and power beyond the weakness of the ego.
7. My mind is centered.
8. What I believe I am, I am.
9. My word is law to me.
10. I find freedom through acceptance.
11. I have no need to defend my will or force my views.
12. I respect all living things – including myself – and I acknowledge their beauty and magnificence.
13. My power rises from within.
14. I dedicate my life to the sacred way.
15. I have an abundance of inspiration and creative expression.
16. I observe nature and align myself to it.
17. I do not fear death, but accept it and get on with living.
18. My energy is my message.
19. I do not invest energy in things that don't resonate for me. I live my truth and let the rest go.
20. I am spiritually disciplined. I acknowledge the source of my light and power regularly and often.



21. I trust myself to make the right choice.
22. I live mostly in the present.
23. I am willing to take the pain without the blame.
24. I trust there is a purpose for everything.
25. I realize that reality is created by thought, language and action.
26. I accept what is: the good, the bad, and the neutral. I keep coming back to the intention of love.
27. I surrender to a higher order.
28. I am kind to myself and others.
29. I strive to fully engage and participate with all of life.
30. I keep a sense of humor and openness.



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