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IMPERFECTION

THE GIFTS OF

IMPERFECTION

10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION
INCLUDING NEW TOOLS TO MAKE THE WORK YOUR OWN

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BY BRENÉ BROWN

DARE TO LEAD

BRAVING THE WILDERNESS

RISING STRONG

DARING GREATLY

THE GIFTS OF IMPERFECTION

I THOUGHT IT WAS JUST ME

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10th Anniversary Edition

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To Steve, Ellen, and Charlie.
I love you with my whole heart.

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CONTENTS

10th Anniversary Note from Brené xiii

Preface xxi

INTRODUCTION:
Wholehearted Living 3

Courage, Compassion, and Connection:
The Gifts of Imperfection 11

Exploring the Power of Love, Belonging, and Being Enough 32

The Things That Get in the Way 43

GUIDEPOST #1
Cultivating Authenticity: Letting Go of What People Think 66

GUIDEPOST #2
Cultivating Self-Compassion: Letting Go of Perfectionism 74

GUIDEPOST #3
Cultivating a Resilient Spirit: Letting Go of Numbing and Powerlessness 84

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GUIDEPOST #4

Cultivating Gratitude and Joy: Letting Go of Scarcity and Fear of the Dark 101

GUIDEPOST #5

Cultivating Intuition and Trusting Faith: Letting Go of the Need for Certainty 113

GUIDEPOST #6

Cultivating Creativity: Letting Go of Comparison 120

GUIDEPOST #7

Cultivating Play and Rest: Letting Go of Exhaustion as a Status Symbol and Productivity as Self-Worth 127

GUIDEPOST #8

Cultivating Calm and Stillness: Letting Go of Anxiety as a Lifestyle 134

GUIDEPOST #9

Cultivating Meaningful Work: Letting Go of Self-Doubt and "Supposed To" 141

GUIDEPOST #10

Cultivating Laughter, Song, and Dance: Letting Go of Being Cool and "Always in Control" 149

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Final Thoughts 159

ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROCESS: FOR THRILL-SEEKERS AND METHODOLOGY JUNKIES 163

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 169

NOTES 171

ABOUT THE AUTHOR 177

INTEGRATION INDEX 179

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10TH ANNIVERSARY NOTE FROM BRENÉ

It's been thirteen years since my 2007 ~~Breakdown~~ Spiritual Awakening and a full decade since I wrote *The Gifts*.

~~Life has been good. I mean it's been so easy and just about perfect since I started cultivating all of the great practices on the wholehearted list and letting go of all of the fear-based behaviors from the "shit list" that I write about in this book. It's like once you work your way through these ten guideposts, everything just falls in place. No more shame. No more anxiety. No more self-loathing. No more crushing busyness. No more "never enough."~~

Sigh.

In the past thirteen years, I have loved, lost, fallen down too many times to count, mercifully gotten back up that same incalculable number of times, broken my toes, broken my own heart, and had a couple of other people break it for me. I dropped my daughter off at college then stayed in bed crying for a week, fell back in love with Steve, questioned how Steve and I are ever going to stay married and how we should split

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the albums during the divorce, wrote four more books, lost track of a million great ideas and found ten good ones, buried people I love including parents, watched Charlie turn into an amazing teenager, lost my first pet, bought reading glasses, white-knuckled my sobriety, discovered that sobriety is my superpower, planned interventions, wondered if I needed an intervention, fought for social justice, continued to uncover more blind spots and areas of unacknowledged privilege, moved houses, started businesses, shut down businesses, swam in several pools of low-grade depression, splashed around in my magic Lake Travis with the people I love the most, practiced gratitude for every single gift in my life, and pissed and moaned for so long about the smallest irritations that I actually got sick of hearing myself complain.

It's been a full, amazing, hard-as-shit, beautiful thirteen years. Most days, I'd describe it as a wonderful life with really painful patches. However, not gonna lie—there are seasons when it feels like the painful patches will swallow us whole and I'm not sure how to scratch my way back to a balanced life, much less a "wonderful life." In fact, as I'm writing this, I'm quarantined with my family in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I'm getting ready for a podcast interview with Dr. Ibram X. Kendi on antiracism. It's June 3, 2020, and I want to believe so badly we're going to get through this pandemic and things will *not* return to normal. That we will become a country ready to own our history and do what it takes to put an end to the policies and practices that not only dehumanize the Black community but all of the communities that have suffered under white supremacy.

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When I look back on the past decade and think about the work, research, and words that make up the original *Gifts of Imperfection* book, there are two things that are gratifyingly and painfully clear to me:

1. Transforming the ten guideposts of wholehearted living into daily, lifelong practices is more work than I ever imagined.

2. Transforming the ten guideposts of wholehearted living into daily, lifelong practices is more valuable than I ever imagined.

It's not hyperbole to say that writing *The Gifts* changed my life and continues to do so. The adventure of wholehearted living launched my work, continues to inform my relationship with Steve, helps me find the courage to be the parent I want to be and the grace to try again when I'm not, and, most of all, this work continues to lead me back to myself. All of myself—the parts I love and the parts I've orphaned and keep bringing back home so I can wipe their noses, bandage their skinned knees, and be whole.

I wrote *The Gifts* in my early forties. Ellen was eleven years old when it came out, and Charlie was only five. Now Ellen is a senior in college, and Charlie is about to start high school. I haven't changed the stories or much of the text. The lessons are the same even though the kids are older, Steve and I have more wrinkles and gray hair, and some of the concepts have become the foundation of entire books.

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INTEGRATION

When we talked to readers about the 10th Anniversary Edition, people were very clear that the text shouldn't change. This book has become a reference guide and touchstone for many people, and we want to honor this. We did, however, add a new Integration Index so that you, as a reader, can start to embed the work in your life.

When we were doing the research for *Rising Strong,* we discovered more about how creativity is the engine that drives integration; it helps us transform knowledge into practice. Basically, we move what we're learning from our heads to our hearts through our hands.

The index in the back of the book is adapted from a system that I heard Maria Popova explain to Tim Ferriss during a podcast in 2014. Maria is a writer, poet, cultural critic, and the genius curator behind brainpickings.org, a newsletter and online publication that has been added to the Library of Congress's permanent digital archive of culturally valuable materials.

This was six years ago, and Maria may no longer use this approach; however, for those of us who spent many hours wondering how she tracked, connected, and wove together all of the source materials she shares on brainpickings.org, it was a brilliant illumination.

In the podcast, Maria explained that when you read a book, you walk away with certain takeaways that are thematically linked. In most books, these takeaways don't occur sequentially. An alternative index is based on ideas that are important to you—not just keywords—so a personalized

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index allows you to find and document the patterns that create personal meaning and understanding. I started creating alternative indexes, and it's transformed the way I read, learn, research, and integrate work. For example, in Ibram Kendi's book *How to Be an Antiracist,* my index included the following:

Beautiful language (borrowed this one from Maria):
Don't understand—need to learn more:
FD (stands for family dinner—something I want to discuss as a family):
Had no idea:
More books to read:
Organizational culture change:
Quotes:
RHR (this stands for rabbit hole research—it's my way of saying I want to look at original source material):
Share with Steve:
SO HARD:

Next to these, I have a list of page numbers separated by commas (e.g., 13, 46, 167, 229). When I turn to those pages (which I mark with tiny Post-it tabs), I see the highlighted passages. I'm telling you—it's a miracle. When you're done, you have new information *and* a blueprint of how to integrate it into your life.

For this book, I'm giving you pages and a list of suggested index ideas based on how I've seen thousands of people integrate this work into daily practices. I think there's some po-

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etry in the fact that the Latin root of the word *integrate* is *integrare,* which means "to make whole." *How do we use what we're learning about wholeheartedness to actually make ourselves more whole?*

There are two other integration tools that will help you own and embody this work. First, we've spent several years building, testing, and validating our Wholehearted Inventory, which consists of ten subscales that align with the guideposts. This free online instrument will allow you to assess your strengths and opportunities for growth around the main topics explored in the book. I recommend you make this inventory before you start reading. It's useful to engage with it after you've finished, but I think it's more useful to go into the book knowing where you've already got skills and where you can build them.

You can find that at brenebrown.com/wholeheartedinventory.

Another integration tool that we're building for you is a free online workshop that will launch in the fall of 2020. We'll walk through the ten guideposts, I'll take questions (and ask questions), and we'll DIG deep together.

WITH OUR WHOLE HEARTS

Over the past ten years, I've had the great honor of teaching and facilitating my work on courage and vulnerability all over the world. Although I am a teacher and a researcher, these experiences always afford me the opportunity to learn far more than I teach. One thing that's become very clear to me is that the experience of sharing our vulnerability is not the same for all of us. Let me explain.

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The greatest casualty of trauma—the thing that trauma often takes away from us—is the emotional, and sometimes even physical, safety that is necessary for us to be vulnerable. I've seen this in my work with the military, veterans, and survivors. And, in addition to the trauma of violence, neglect and poverty are trauma. Dehumanization—the core of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and all systemic forms of oppression and/or bias—is a form of daily trauma. You only have to witness someone who shares your identity suffering to experience real emotional and physical trauma.

Many of these systemic forms of trauma are so pervasive that asking people to embrace vulnerability and imperfections without taking into consideration their lived experience can be asking them to do something that is not emotionally or even physically safe in all environments.

So, what do we do? I believe that everyone deserves brave and safe spaces to be vulnerable. None of us can fully embrace the gifts of vulnerability, courage, and authenticity if any of us are denied those gifts because of who we are or what we've endured. Being imperfect, authentic, and vulnerable is a function of being human—not a privilege afforded to those who can get away with it without being labeled, dismissed, and judged.

We are all responsible for creating these brave, safe spaces and dismantling the systems that perpetuate trauma. Living and loving with our whole hearts is not just about self-work. It's how we change the world. Without awareness, work, and actionable change, we will continue to live in a world where we perceive some people as brave and strong for sharing their

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vulnerabilities, while for others, their sharing of struggles and fears becomes confirmation of the conscious or unconscious biases we hold.

The experiences that bring the most meaning to our lives are born of vulnerability—and that includes freedom. And, as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said, "No one is free until we are all free." There is no wholeheartedness unless we do everything we can to dismantle the brokenheartedness of injustice.

I still use the definition of authenticity that I first wrote for this book as a personal prayer. So, holding these words in my heart and in my hand, here's my prayer for all of us and my daily commitment:

> May we find the courage to let go of who we think we're supposed to be so that we can fully embrace our authentic selves—the imperfect, the creative, the vulnerable, the powerful, the broken, and the beautiful.
>
> May we show ourselves and others the compassion that comes from knowing that we are all made of strength and struggle.
>
> May we create a just and equitable world where privilege isn't a prerequisite for self-expression and authenticity, where everyone feels invited and safe to express their power and their vulnerability.
>
> And last, may we experience the strength of connection, the love of belonging, and the grace of pure joy.

Thank you for walking with me.

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PREFACE

Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do.

Once you see a pattern, you can't *un*-see it. Trust me, I've tried. But when the same truth keeps repeating itself, it's hard to pretend that it's just a coincidence. For example, no matter how hard I try to convince myself that I can function on six hours of sleep, anything less than eight hours leaves me impatient, anxious, and foraging for carbohydrates. It's a pattern. I also have a terrible procrastination pattern: I always put off writing by reorganizing my entire house and spending way too much time and money buying office supplies and organizing systems. Every single time.

One reason it's impossible to un-see trends is that our minds are engineered to seek out patterns and to assign meaning to them. Humans are a meaning-making species. And, for better or worse, my mind is actually fine-tuned to do this. I spent years training for it, and now it's how I make my living.

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As a researcher, I observe human behavior so I can identify and name the subtle connections, relationships, and patterns that help us make meaning of our thoughts, behaviors, and feelings.

I love what I do. Pattern hunting is wonderful work and, in fact, throughout my career, my attempts at un-seeing were strictly reserved for my personal life and those humbling vulnerabilities that I loved to deny. That all changed in November 2006, when the research that fills these pages smacked me upside the head. For the first time in my career, I was desperate to un-see my own research.

Up until that point, I had dedicated my career to studying difficult emotions like shame, fear, and vulnerability. I had written academic pieces on shame, developed a shame-resilience curriculum for mental health and addictions professionals, and written a book about shame resilience called *I Thought It Was Just Me*.[1]

In the process of collecting thousands of stories from a diverse group of research participants who lived all over the country—ranging in age from eighteen to eighty-seven—I saw new patterns that I wanted to know more about. Yes, we all struggle with shame and the fear of not being enough. And, yes, many of us are afraid to let our true selves be seen and known. But in this huge mound of data there was also story after story of people who were living these amazing and inspiring lives.

I heard stories about the power of embracing imperfection and vulnerability. I learned about the inextricable connection between joy and gratitude, and how things that I take for granted, like rest and play, are as vital to our health as nutri-

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tion and exercise. These research participants trusted themselves, and they talked about authenticity and love and belonging in a way that was completely new to me.

I wanted to look at these stories as a whole, so I grabbed a file and a Sharpie and wrote the first word that came to my mind on the tab: *wholehearted*. I wasn't sure what it meant yet, but I knew that these stories were about people living and loving with their whole hearts.

I had a lot of questions about wholeheartedness. What did these folks value? How did they create all of this resilience in their lives? What were their main concerns and how did they resolve or address them? Can anyone create a wholehearted life? What does it take to cultivate what we need? What gets in the way?

As I started analyzing the stories and looking for reoccurring themes, I realized that the patterns generally fell into one of two columns; for simplicity's sake, I first labeled these *Do* and *Don't*. The *Do* column was brimming with words like worthiness, rest, play, trust, faith, intuition, hope, authenticity, love, belonging, joy, gratitude, and creativity. The *Don't* column was dripping with words like perfection, numbing, certainty, exhaustion, self-sufficiency, being cool, fitting in, judgment, and scarcity.

I gasped the first time I stepped back from the poster paper and took it all in. It was the worst kind of sticker shock. I remember mumbling, "No. No. No. How can this be?"

Even though I wrote the lists, I was shocked to read them. When I code data, I go into deep researcher mode. My only focus is on accurately capturing what I heard in the stories. I don't think about how I would say something, only how the

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