



# ‘I can make someone cry in three words. But I try to use my powers for good’

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRYAN SCHUTMAAT

A tough-talking, take-no-prisoners Texan, Brené Brown was never one for touchy-feely stuff. But then she had a nervous breakdown, signed up to ‘the power of vulnerability’ and became a six-million-hits internet wonder. Yet call her a self-help guru at your peril. By HELENA DE BERTODANO

Brené Brown is a shame-and-vulnerability expert. I know: that was my reaction, too. I’m really not wired for this sort of stuff, but bear with me.

Here’s the thing: Brown, whose talk in 2010 on ‘the power of vulnerability’ has been viewed nearly six million times on ted.com (the organisation dedicated to ‘ideas worth sharing’), is actually not wired for it either. A few years ago she had a nervous breakdown and started to see a therapist. “The therapist said to me, “You have to embrace your vulnerability,” and I was like, “Screw that.””

Brown, 46, chortles heartily. We meet at her home in Houston, Texas, which she shares with her husband, Steve, a paediatrician, and their two children, Ellen, 13, and Charlie, seven. To my relief it soon becomes clear that she is not a half-witted, floaty, self-help nutcase but a straight-talking shoot-from-the-hip Texan. Barefoot in jeans and a colourful silk shirt, she knows she has her work cut out when she comes to Britain next month to

promote her new book, *Daring Greatly*. ‘If I show up with some kind of therapist outfit on and say, “Let’s all get in touch with our vulnerable side,” I don’t think that’s going to go over well.’

As a ‘fifth-generation Texan’ she feels a certain kinship with the British. ‘In some ways Texans are like you. We’re probably more like the boots-on-the-ground version of y’all, but we look at people on the West Coast and East Coast who are much more therapy-centred with some distrust – like, “Get your s— together, soldier on, suck it up.”’

The daughter of a lawyer, she was the eldest of four children. ‘I was raised in a family where vulnerability was barely tolerated: no training wheels on our bicycles, no goggles in the pool, just get it done. And so I grew up not only with discomfort about my own vulnerability, I didn’t care for it in other people either.’

Her ambition in those days, she says, was to be ‘a cheerleader married to a quarterback. Either

that or a truck driver'. In fact she spent most of her twenties flitting between jobs. 'Nothing really captured my imagination. I waited tables and bar-tended for six years. I didn't graduate with my bachelor's degree until I was almost 30. I was on the fricking 12-year plan!'

Although Brown, now a research professor at the University of Houston, went on to earn master's and doctoral degrees in social studies, she became an expert on shame and empathy almost by accident. She wanted to understand people and how they connected but did not want to do social work per se because, as she puts it, 'It's messy.' One of her professors told her that research, on the other hand, was about prediction and control. 'I had found my calling,' she jokes.

In her new book she writes, 'We are hardwired to connect with others, it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives... Before I knew it, I had been hijacked by my research participants who, when asked to talk about their most important relationships and experiences of connection, kept telling me about heartbreak, betrayal and shame – the fear of not being worthy of real connection.'

As part of her work she tried first to understand why a handful of people believe in their own worthiness; she calls these people 'Wholehearted'. She loses me a bit here. Is Wholehearted another word for happy, I ask her? 'No,' she says adamantly. 'In fact I think our capacity for Wholeheartedness can never be greater than our willingness to be broken-hearted. It means engaging with the world from a place of vulnerability and worthiness. It's about being all in, saying, "I'm here and I'm going to love you fully and if you cheat on me you're going to devastate me and break my heart, but I'm not holding back because this is short."

Tears spring to her eyes as she says this. In fact, it was her realisation that she herself fell far short of Wholehearted that tipped her over the edge. 'I sat making a list of what Wholehearted women have in common. I ended up with two lists: what they're working towards and what they're trying to let go of. I called the second list the s— list and it described me completely: judgmental, perfectionistic, always comparing myself to other people, ranking everything, very little play, too much work, afraid, no vulnerability. And on the other list was creativity, laughter, joy, play, authenticity. I turned those lists into a syllabus

and took it to my therapist and said, "I have six weeks. I need more of these and less of these. And I want no childhood bulls—."

Brown describes her breakdown with poignant humour. 'You just wanna open the door and shout, "I'm really crazy. And if you're really crazy we could hang out. [She is literally yelling now.] And if you need me to bake brownies I'm not going to." There comes a time when we just get tired of those Ps – proving, pleasing, perfecting, performing – and it normally happens between 35 and 55. I started crying all the time. Once I was unloading the dishwasher and I thought, "I'm just going to take this glass and throw it through the kitchen window. I need someone to know I'm going crazy." But then I thought, "Who's going to fricking clean up the mess? I'll have to clean it up and then I'll have to explain why Mommy made bad choices..."

'I really lost it for a solid year. I had debilitating anxiety attacks. Basically my body said, "We're halfway to dead. You can't keep being everything to everybody and trying to do everything perfectly: lunchboxes and academics and blah-blah-blah."

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With Chris Anderson of TED at this year's conference

Looking at her house, I would hazard a guess that she still has a problem with perfection. It looks like something out of the catalogue for Pottery Barn, the upmarket American home-furnishing store: a vision of perfect order, vases of flowers on every surface and chock-full of mottos, from TO LIVE A CREATIVE LIFE WE MUST LOSE OUR FEAR OF BEING WRONG to WE CAN DO HARD THINGS.

In her eggshell-blue kitchen there are four jars holding cupcake cases of varying sizes next to a pastel-pink food mixer. And in her office she has a ribbon organiser nailed to the wall: more than 30 different colours and patterns and widths of ribbon to choose from. I'm beginning to realise why she had a breakdown. Above the ribbons is a poster with the motto KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON. Well, quite. I would defy anyone to keep calm when confronted with that sort of choice in the

ribbon department. But when I comment on the staggering neatness she marches over to a cupboard and flings open the door. 'I stuck all my s— in this closet when I knew you were coming.' Frankly, the cupboard looks pretty organised, too.

With the help of her therapist, Brown says she allowed herself to get in touch with her vulnerable side, but it was a slow and painful process. 'It was like a street fight, it was not a glamorous thing, there were very tough moments. I learnt as much about my life from the research participants as anyone else. I didn't come in with this wisdom.'

Her message, she feels, is applicable to anyone. 'I think if you follow anyone home, whether they live in Houston or London, and you sit at their dinner table and talk to them about their mother who has cancer or their child who is struggling in school, and their fears about watching their lives go by, I think we're all the same.'

Both women and men could benefit from allowing themselves to be vulnerable. 'I think vulnerability and shame are deeply human emotions but the expectations that drive shame are organised by gender. For women it's "Do it all, do it perfectly and never look as if you're working very hard" - which is a disastrous set-up. And for men it's "Don't be perceived as weak"'

She makes it clear that there is a difference between vulnerability and laying it all out there. 'Live-tweeting your bikini wax is not vulnerability. Nor is posting a blow-by-blow of your divorce. That's an attempt to hot-wire connection. But you can't cheat real connection. It's built up slowly. It's about trust and time.'

Despite her subject matter, Brown hates being described as a 'self-help' author. 'I fricking loathe to be filed in that category. You can tell the Brits that I have no interest in being shelved there.' So where would she like to be shelved? 'I don't know - maybe "human studies" but nobody goes to that section except academics and eight out of 10 of them are just checking if they are referenced!'

It is her humour that makes her so engaging. 'I don't think anything I say is new. My talent is wrapping words around [feelings], connecting dots that other people can't connect and "linguaging" them.'

Brown believes there are three shields we use to protect ourselves from vulnerability: perfectionism (doing everything perfectly); numbing (using alcohol, drugs, food or work to deaden true feeling); and 'foreboding joy', the dread that kills happiness. 'I was convinced that I was the only one

Brown at 16



who stood over my children while they slept and, in the split second that I became engulfed with love and adoration, pictured something really terrible happening to them.'

Her argument is that we should drop those shields. But when she visits corporations she says she encounters as much resistance to vulnerability from female leaders as male. 'Men say, "Hell, no, that's weakness," and women say, "I'm successful because I haven't been vulnerable."'

Vulnerability, insists Brown, is not weakness. 'I'm a much braver person than I used to be. You would think the hard-ass would be the braver person but it was this change that gave me the courage to talk about my life and to do the TED talk. I didn't realise until after [the talk] went viral that I had subconsciously engineered my career to be very small. People don't know this about me but I'm an intensely private person.'

When something shaming happens to Brown, she tries to take stock before reacting. 'My mantra is "Do not talk, text or email anyone". I'm the kind of person who, when backed into a corner, comes

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out swinging. I'm dangerous because I study vulnerability for a living so I don't have to know people long to know exactly what to say to be *really* hurtful. I can make someone cry in three words.' She chuckles. 'But I try to use my powers for good.'

She feels she has fundamentally changed and hopes she can engineer a similar change in others, but can still feel her old self resurfacing at times. 'If you're driving slow in the passing lane I'm still going to flip you off [give you the finger]. But now I'll do it under the steering wheel.'

I ask her how people react when she tells them what she does. 'If I want to keep talking to them I tell them I'm a vulnerability researcher and within five minutes they're crying and telling me about their lives. If I don't want to talk to them I say I'm a shame researcher. They back away from me saying [she adopts a tight, scared voice], "Cocktail?"' ●

*Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead (Gotham)*, by Brené Brown, is available from amazon.com