

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 377: BRENÉ BROWN (ENCORE)

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm your host Whitney Johnson, CEO of Disruption Advisors, where we help you build high performing teams and people -- because organizations don't disrupt, people do.

Is there a particular conversation you've had with someone, that keeps resurfacing as you grow and get older? In difficult moments, you find yourself traveling back to that day at the cafe or whatever it was, sitting down for a conversation you didn't know would shape you as much as it has. For me, it's my talk with Brené Brown, all the way back in 2019.

In case new listeners need an introduction, she holds the Huffington Foundation Endowed Chair as a research professor at the University of Houston. You might know her best as the writer of *Daring Greatly*, or *The Gifts of Imperfection*, or as the speaker for one of the most popular TED Talks ever. When we spoke, she had just released her Netflix special, *The Call to Courage*, and it was a conversation that reminds me even today to appreciate the meaning that emerges from the human condition.

I want to bring back that conversation today in light of her most recent book, *Atlas of The Heart* - all about the thousand different ways our body generates emotion. Like Emma McAdam says, stop trying to feel better, and get better at feeling - that's something I'm still working on today. Brené's work on the link between emotion and the meaning we make for ourselves is just as important today as it was in 2019.

I hope you enjoy.

**Whitney:** Brené Brown, we are delighted to have you today, and congratulations on your [Netflix special](#). We watched it, and it was fantastic.

**Brené:** Aw, thank you, Whitney, I appreciate it. It's such a weird thing to have out there, but I'm- I'm, you know, you know the feeling, equal parts, uh, vulnerable, brave, scared, excited.

**Whitney:** One of the first questions I ask people on the podcast is where people grew up. So, most of us know that you grew up in Texas. The question is where in Texas did you grow up, and what did you want to be when you grew up?

**Brené:** Born in San Antonio and raised in San Antonio and Houston. I either wanted to drive long haul - a long haul truck, like an 18-wheeler, um, because we had CB's in our cars, growing up, and like once you got to be 10 or so, you got your own handle, and you could do the whole like, "Breaker 1-9." So, I either wanted to do that, or I wanted to be a Dallas Cowgirl cheerleader, or, after "Love Boat" started, I wanted to be a cruise director.

**Whitney:** You wanted to be Julie.

**Brené:** Yeah, Julie...

**Whitney:** The cruise director.

**Brené:** For sure.

**Whitney:** Okay. So, you did not have a plan to become an academic?

**Brené:** (laughs) No. You know, it's- is it- I don't know who said it, maybe Maya Angelou, you know, you've got to be able to see it in order to be it, like, so what I saw, growing up, were, you know, long haul drivers, cheerleaders at football games, and television, which was, you know, "The Love Boat."

We drove up and down 10 a lot because, you know, we lived in Houston where all of my- both of my parents are from San Antonio, so when we weren't living in San Antonio, we were, you know, going to San Antonio every other weekend to visit family, and so, you know, so I spent a lot of time talking on a CB.

**Whitney:** So, do you have a CB now?

**Brené:** No, but I think about it all the time, I think about, like, when I pass a trucker sometimes, I'll be like, "Breaker 1-9, what's your 10-20?"

**Whitney:** (laughs).

**Brené:** Like, I think about that sometimes.

**Whitney:** I think you should totally buy one, that would be so fun.

**Brené:** (laughs) Could you imagine? My kids would be like, "Mom, just put it on Waze."

**Whitney:** (laughs).

**Brené:** (laughs) I'm like, "No, that's not- that's not as cool."

**Whitney:** No. No, no, not at all. Okay, so when did you decide that you wanted to become an academic?

**Brené:** It was actually the culmination of two or three junior college teachers that, one guy at San Antonio College, and then Cecile Durish at Austin Community College, um, because, you know, I was on the 12-year college plan, like, seriously, like I graduated from high school when I was 17. I graduated from my undergrad when I was 29.

And so, I worked a lot, took classes here and there where I could, until I got, you know, to like- when I graduated with my bachelor's degree, I went straight in the next year to my Master's, then my Ph.D. But I had these amazing junior college teachers who were like ... I remember in San Antonio College - I don't know remember the political scandal, but I remember my teacher, he wore a different Hawaiian shirt every day, and he jumped up on the desk, um, and then he was- he was yelling and screaming about a group of politicians who were "pissing all over the Constitution."

And then Cecile Durish got really enraged about something going on in Austin, so she took our whole class down to the legislator to you- legislative session to, like, observe and make appointments to see our legislators, and I was like, "Oh my God, I want to be a teacher like this."

**Whitney:** Wow.

**Brené:** Yeah. It was-

**Whitney:** Did they know? Did they know, those two professors, did they know the impact-

**Brené:** You know-

**Whitney:** They've had on you.

**Brené:** I tried to find- I tried to find Cecile Durish not too long ago, but, um, I'm gonna look again because it- and it was funny 'cause, you know, I went to, like, you know, UT, which is this amazing university, and I had some great teachers there, um, for sure. But I ha- also had a lot of TAs, you know, Teaching Assistants, in big rooms, and, um, and I just remember it was really the junior college, you know, just a bunch of scrappy people in a classroom at night, working during the day, I think I was bartending and waiting tables, that really- I really thought, "God, you just changed my life, and what a- could- could you really have a job where you were talking about what you were passionate about, and change someone's life?"

**Whitney:** Wow. Wow. That's great. An- and just that the power of- of a teacher, of a professor, that's really wonderful.

So that's when- when you- you saw what they were doing, you realized, "Oh," as you said, you could see it, and now you realized you could be it?

**Brené:** Yes. I think that- that's exactly right, yeah. And it was a long haul, and it was scary, and I had a lot of imposter stuff I had to work through along the way, um, but that's exactly right.

**Whitney:** So, in one of your books, because I have all four sitting in front of me, you talked about your mother, and the gift that she gave your family. And I don't know that she would've described it this

way, but she seems to have made a decision to be a transitional figure in your family. Could you talk about the decisions that she made, and- and how that influenced you?

**Brené:** Yeah. I mean, there were just so many decisions that she made, and hard decisions - you know, hard decisions. I think both my mom and my dad came from, you know, very working class. My grandmother was, you know, a beauty operator, or, you know, I think you would say a stylist now. Her husband drove a forklift at Pearl Brewery in San Antonio. And my parents came from very, kind of, pretty tough working-class backgrounds, um.

My mom came from a lot of alcoholism. She kind of compensated for that by, you know, being the head of the drill team, and, you know, the valedictorian, and the, you know, the president of different clubs. But, yeah, it still- my grandmother had been divorced twice, and was an alcoholic, and so people weren't allowed to come over to her house, and, you know, that was the 1950s, that was like "Leave it to Beaver" era. Um, and I don't think my- my mom's house was the Cleavers.

Um, so I think in raising us, she and my dad really tried to give a, you know, they were married for 21 years maybe, I feel like every family that turns direction has that person who's kind of the fulcrum up for it, you know, and that fulcrum was on my mom's back. She got into therapy, she made us go, she made us talk about our feelings, she- she talked about what was vulnerable and hard.

Um, right around, maybe the year after my parent's divorce, her only sibling, um, was shot and killed in just in kind of a random act of violence. And we were definitely raised that vulnerability is weakness and for suckers, I mean that was definitely the messaging growing up, you know, that 5<sup>th</sup> generation Texan, tough, you know.

It was hard because Ronnie was killed, and then my grandmother, who I adored more than anyone in the whole world, I named my daughter after her, Ellen, she had quit- she quit drinking the week I was born because that was the condition under which she could see me. But she never really got sober or did her work, and so when Ronnie was killed, she kind of- she just, I don't know, went crazy, I guess, um.

And so, it was just this horrible year. And I remember telling my mom at one point, saying, "You know, I'm just scared. I'm not used to seeing you, you know, weak like this," 'cause she wa- she was crying a lot, and I'd never really seen her cry my entire life, and I was 21 at this point. And she said, "I'm vulnerable, for sure, and sad, and scared, but I'm not weak. If I was a weak person, I'd be dead now."

And I remember thinking that was the first time I thought, "There's a difference between vulnerability and weakness, and my mom's the strongest person I know, and so what the hell's going on? Like, what is- what kind of bill of goods have I been sold here on vulnerability?" And so, yeah, she just transformed my life and- and the lives of my brother and my sisters in- in meaningful ways. She was- she turned the ship.

**Whitney:** That's so beautiful, Brené, it makes me cry. I love what you just said, what she said, "I'm vulnerable, but I'm not weak." So powerful.

**Brené:** Yeah. Yeah, she's a- she's an amazing person, and still, it's so fun to see her now with ou- all of our kids, and she's still, uh, you know, (laughs) her Christmas tree topper is, like, an ACLU-

**Whitney:** (laughs).

**Brené:** Gay pride statue of liberty, like, she's still no- she- no joke, man. Do not mess with the Texas woman, like, in the Molly Ivins, Ann Richards strain of Texas women.

**Whitney:** Wow. So, okay. So, I think that leads us to something I wanted to ask you. Um, in the [Netflix special](#), you quoted *Daring Greatly*, and what I would love for you to do is to read that- read that out loud, and then tell us why that passage had so much significance for you.

**Brené:** Sure. Okay, so, this is Teddy Roosevelt. "It is 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's actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes up short again and again, and who, at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who, at worst, when she fails, at least does so daring greatly."

That says it all to me. I found it in a, such a hard time in my career. I had just done [the TEDxHouston talk on vulnerability](#), and it was, like, rapidly going viral, and there was a lot of media coverage, and there was so much love and support for the talk, and people were so grateful for, you know, having words to talk about vulnerability and courage and wholeheartedness, but, you know, along with that, as you know, comes, like, just the trolls, and kind of the hatefulness.

And so, I found it at a really hard time in my life, when I needed to be reminded that I was in the arena, and that I was trying to be brave with my life and my work, and it's not the critic who counts. And so, it's, like, not hyperbole to say my life changed when I read that quote, 'cause what- I was just flooded with this belief that, "You know what? One, I'm gonna be in the arena. Two, vulnerability is not weakness, it's showing up when you can't control the outcome, including the trolls on, you know, Twitter. And I'm not- I'm gonna stop taking feedback from people who are not also being brave." And so there was really my life before that moment, and my life after that moment.

**Whitney:** It's so interesting to me because you look at it, and I think so many people, except for the trolls, would have looked at this and said, "Okay, you know, your talk just went viral, you- you've- you've made it, right, you're- you're on the road to- to making it, whatever "making it" means," and yet, that wasn't the experience that you were having at all. And it's just so interesting to me that ... I remember you had written a book prior to that, called *The Gifts of Imperfection*.

**Brené:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Whitney:** And yet that gift that you gave to every single person that listened to that talk, your TEDx talk, that gift that you gave came at a very huge price for you.

**Brené:** Yeah, I think ... I think when we put our work out in the world, and when we're brave in doing that, no matter what the work is, it becomes a very uncomfortable mirror for people who are sitting on their work, holding their work, and not putting themselves out in the world, out of fear, and it- and- and the response is hatred and pain and, you know, we're so much- we're so much better at causing pain than we are at feeling pain.

**Whitney:** Hmm.

**Brené:** And so, I think that's so much what I experienced, um. And, you know, and it was one- one crappy comment for every, you know, 1,000 ... not "supportive" necessarily, but- but engaged, "I disagree with you, but here's why, and I appreciate the conversation," like, I don't mean you have to blindly accept what people put out in the world, or I want people to do that with my work, I think my work gets better when I'm challenged, and I love, love debate and discourse. I mean I

got into a great debate last night on Twitter about the nature of emotional labor, so I mean I love, I love debate. But these were like, "You're ugly. I hope you die." Like, these were-

**Whitney:** Ad hominem attacks.

**Brené:** Yeah.

**Whitney:** Yeah.

**Brené:** And so, yeah, and so I think ... Unfortunately, I think this is ... I'll be curious what you think, I mean my sense is this is the new normal.

**Whitney:** Well, and- and people are afraid, and I- I- I have to say, I really admire your courage because I have had, um, I think a very small taste of the experience that you had, an- and I remember I had written a piece on LinkedIn about how, um, how, you know, based on the research that girls had to be two and a half times more competent than- than a-

**Brené:** Oh-

**Whitney:** A man to be judged on equal footing, and-

**Brené:** I read it, yes. It was so powerful.

**Whitney:** And the trolls just came out. And I remember it just, I felt, inside of myself, like- like I was desolated, or violated in some way, and I remember going out to my people, and I was like, "You need to- I need you to write comments to shut them down." And- 'cause usually when people get out of hand, if I go in and I start talking back, most of them will kind of slink back to their corner.

So, to your point, I think it does take a tremendous amount of courage, and I'm really grateful that you've been willing to say what people said. Now, I have a question for you about that because when you're in the arena, there are people in the stands, and like you said, there are some people who are, um, in the cheap seats, but there are also people who are rooting you on. Can you talk a little bit about some of those people in your life?

**Brené:** Yeah, I think, um, yeah, we always talk about we, you know, in *Dare to Lead*, we do this leadership training where we talk about when you go- when you walk into the arena, and the arena doesn't have to be necessarily a post, or a book, or a talk, it can be a hard conversation, it can be speaking up in a meeting, but when we go in the arena, there's always the season ticket holders, you know, shame, scarcity, comparison, those- those are the season ticket holders.

Then up high there's the cheap seats, where those are folks who will never be brave with their stuff but will hurl really hurtful stuff at you. Then there's the two most important seats in the arena, which are empathy and self-compassion, and you have to really train yourself to look for those when you're in a hard moment, because what you end up wanting to do is you end up looking at the most hurtful folks, and trying to hustle for your worthiness for them.

And so, when I think about empathy and self-compassion, you know, I think about my empathy seat, and, you know, people always, like, you know, "Is that a whole section of people cheering you on?" And what we found in the research is you really just need one or two people. And I'm lucky because I have, you know, I think that the chief holder of my empathy seat is probably my husband, Steve.

And for me, my empathy section is not filled with "yes people" or "you're awesome people," they're- it's filled with people who, you know, don't love me despite my vulnerability and imperfection, but because of it, and are willing to tell me, "Hey, you felt like- it felt like you were out of your integrity, and you need to circle back and clean that up." Like, these are people who are saying, "No, I don't think it was your best."

**Whitney:** So, the way I describe is, um, my husband, um ... so I wouldn't have described it ... I love have you anthropomorphize these- these adjectives, or ways of being. Um, but I- I describe it as a truth teller. So, my husband's my truth teller-

**Brené:** Yes.

**Whitney:** So, I know that he loves me, no matter what, no matter what, and I also know I trust him that he will tell me the truth, and when he tells me the truth, I can believe him, but it comes only from love. And-

**Brené:** Yes.

**Whitney:** I think that's what you're saying, right?

**Brené:** Exactly. I mean I think and that's what empathy is, and- and- and it's hard, and so I think I, you know, I have Steve, and I have, you know, my sisters work with me, and my- my daughter's 20 now, and she's, you know, she's a truth teller with me, and, um, so I've- I've collected a little gang of ragtag, vulnerable, wholehearted people who believe in the work, and are trying to live it, and it's just so easy, for me, maybe for a lot b- a lot of us, to dismiss what the people who matter the most say, in order- and take in with the strangers who really don't have anything valuable to add, like it's really hard to keep focused on the right group of people.

**Whitney:** Yeah, you know what, Brené, I just had a thought when you said that, because you said, you know, "A thousand comments to one, and, you know, listening to the people who really care about you that have empathy and compassion," I was reading this- I was reading this quote from, um, a guy who is an expert in the psychology of killing, and we'll include it in the show notes, but, basically, he said, paraphrasing, "There is nothing more, um, overwhelming or violating than some type of assault from a person, from another human being." And so, he's talking about killing, but it's-

**Brené:** Right.

**Whitney:** Any kind of assault. And so that's why I think we take it so hard is that-

**Brené:** Yeah.

**Whitney:** It feels like they are assaulting us, like they are really, truly trying to kill us dead. So- so anyway, I-

**Brené:** No, I mean and that's- and it's so crazy 'cause that's how it feels, and it's- what's weird is cognitively, you're like, "Why am I taking this so seriously? Like, I don't know who this person is, and I don't care about this person, and they don't care about me." But then the other part of your brain is, like, hard-wired to take that as a threat, you know?

**Whitney:** Right.

**Brené:** And so, it's-

**Whitney:** Right.

**Brené:** So crazy.

**Whitney:** I think it's evolutionary, I really do.

**Brené:** I think it's evolutionary, too.

**Whitney:** So that- that's why it's so hard. Okay, so. So, you've got this thing that you say, that I love, and I've been using it all the time, is "The story I am telling myself."

**Brené:** Yeah.

**Whitney:** Where did that come from? How did you come up with that?

**Brené:** Well, you know, it's so important to- to understand that, like, I am- I am the gatherer of stories and data, and I choose words, and I- I let people know what I have found. But that- that phrase, or some variation, "The story I'm telling myself," "The story I'm making up," "What I'm sayin- what I'm- what I'm making up right now," like, that floated around in my data for probably 10 years.

Then, when I did the research for *Rising Strong*, and we just really said, "Who are the- What do the most resilient research participants that we've interviewed, people who can get up and bounce back after setback, disappointment, failure, what do they share in common?"

And what they share in common is a process, um, it- it's really like a recovery bounce process, and part of that process, in every single one of these research participants, was some form of "The story I'm telling myself." Every one of these research participants, whether they were a Special Forces, you know, active duty person, or a s- you know, or a attorney, or a teacher, or an artist, every one of them had the capacity and awareness to reality check the stories they made up about what was happening.

**Whitney:** Interesting.

**Brené:** And so I didn't really t- so it didn't really saturate for the first, you know, three books, but then in *Rising Strong* is when I first started writing about it.

**Whitney:** Brené, what do you mean when you say, "It didn't saturate," what does that mean?

**Brené:** Well, I'm a qualitative researcher, I'm a Grounded Theory researcher, and we just crossed 400,000 pieces of data. And so, what we do is, for qualitative data, we, instead of starting with a theory and testing it quantitatively, we start with nothing, and build a theory based on people's lived experiences. And we do interviews, focus groups, um, we- sometimes we use secondary data. And we look for patterns and themes that saturate across the data.

And so, for example ... I couldn't find a definition of vulnerability that made sense with the data, and existing, you know, in the dictionary, that made sense with the data we were seeing. And so, I interviewed and interviewed around it, until what started saturating was, "Oh, vulnerability is an affect, or an emotion, of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure." So, we develop a definition based on people's li- lived experiences, once it's saturated as a full pattern in the data.

**Whitney:** Got it. Okay. That makes sense.



**Brené:** Just a geek moment, for those of y'all interested.

**Whitney:** Oh, I- I love it.

**Brené:** Me, too.

**Whitney:** So, I'm- I'm gonna give you a hypothetical. So-

**Brené:** Shoot.

**Whitney:** I- I work with the S-curve of learning framework, and people, you know, you're on a learning curve, and then you get to the top, and you jump to a new one. So I would love to do a quick little role play of what you do when you have a person on your team, and, um, they've got to the top of the learning curve, it's time for them to do something new, and they're just really reluctant to do it.

**Whitney:** What would you say if you're the- the manager who you're trying to get this person to jump, you know that there's all this latent innovative capacity, their brain, you know, has started, they're- they're not getting dopamine, they're not learning, etc. As the leader or the manager, what would you say to them, um, using- based on your research?

**Brené:** I would say, um, and it- i- i- if I knew someone really well, let's say it's you and me, I would say, "You know, Whitney," and it- and- and we knew- we had this shared language, I'm assuming that we have some shared language about trying to jump for something new.

**Whitney:** Right.

**Brené:** Um, "I've watched over the last two years a- as you have really mastered the competencies and skills in this role. And I see the mastery because now you're teaching other people how to do it. I think it's time to take on some new challenges. I think you've got the ability to do it. I think you've got the- the skill and time to do it, and so what I'm wondering is what's getting in the way? What story are you making up about leaving this- this competency that you've mastered, and starting a new one? Tell me- tell me what you're thinking."

**Whitney:** Hmm. That's perfect. And then that opens it up- that opens it up-

**Brené:** Yeah because the thing is, we can never, you know, one of the things that I tell leaders all the time is we can never control- I mean an- anyone that's ever managed teams through change knows this- here's- here's a sentence, Whitney, you can take to the bank: in the absence of data, we make up stories.

**Whitney:** Oh.

**Brené:** We are a meaning-making species. It is tied all the way back to the limbic system; we make up stories, as stories help our brain understand how to protect us, how to take care of us, which is the brain's number one, you know, it's what it's wired for above all else. And so, we can't control the stories that people make up, but we can be the kind of leader that offers a sp- space for people to check out those stories.

So, if we have to let someone go from our organization, we will always have, like, a story rumble hour, where I, or somebody, will sit in a room, available to everyone, to check out stories. Tell me what your stories you're making up. And, you know, and- and we'll say, "Look, we can only share so much, um, but we wanna- we wanna check the stories you're- you're- we want you to check your stories out with us."

**Whitney:** So, you give everyone an opportunity to come in?

**Brené:** Everybody.

**Whitney:** Everyone?

**Brené:** Everybody.

**Whitney:** That is brilliant. So that you've- you've had the conversation with the person who's leaving. Then the person who's leaving, also has the opportunity to say, "Here's the story I'm telling myself"-

**Brené:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Whitney:** So they can check with you, but then everyone else ... because- that's fascinating because your- your point I think you're making is that when you need to let someone go, they're leaving a community, and so the community is having an experience, it's not just the manager's experience, it's not just the person who's leaving, it's the communal- it's a communal experience.

**Brené:** Yes, it's- it's- I mean its plain Systems Theory. There's been- there's been a- a- there's been a change, and a massive change, um, to the system, everyone in the system's affected by it, and you either address that, or the system will self-regulate with a false narrative. That will be costly. To performance, to culture, and to people.

**Whitney:** Love it. Okay. Next question, so, um, I had a conversation with my daughter, she's a little bit younger than yours, um, she's 18, and she's a senior in high school. And I said, "Miranda, I'm about to talk to Brené," she watched the special, too, I'm like, "What would you ask her?" And she said, "You know, I'd like to know how we can have a productive conversation around mental health."

This is a conversation that's very much on the minds of all of her classmates, etc., and, um, and she said- she said, kind of paraphrasing, that we talk about, you know, if someone has diabetes, or if they've broken a leg, we say, "That's bad." But when we talk about anxiety, or depression, they're- even if we don't say it, the subtext is that "You are bad."

**Brené:** Mmm.

**Whitney:** And so-

**Brené:** It's true.

**Whitney:** What are your thoughts on that?

**Brené:** Well, first of all, just congratulations, and, like, a thousand, like, big hearts to the fact that you have raised a daughter who's a senior in high school and asking that question. I think- I think having young people, like your daughter, asking that question is how- is part of the solution. I think that the m- the m- the main reason we don't have honest conversations around mental health is shame.

And it's so interesting that you use that example of diab- diabetes versus, you know, like, anxiety, and anxiety disorder because the difference between shame versus guilt, guilt is, "I did something bad," shame is, "I am bad." So, when we, you know, when it's a physical injury, "I broke something." When it's a- when it's a mental health issue, "I am broken."

**Whitney:** Mmm.

**Brené:** And so the more we talk about it, like, the more we're honest, and normalize it, and it has changed so much in the 20 years, even, that I- it- not enough, you know, I'd say we're at the halfway point, at least, maybe- maybe a third of the way, but it has changed so much since I started the research 20 years ago, but I think we have to normalize- normalize it, and not use it when we learn something about someone, like, you know, if- if you learn that, you know, I can- I can get really overwhelmed and have anxiety, or that I- I- let's- let's just take a real, which is true, um, I've been in recovery, it'll be twenty, oh my God, 23 years-

**Whitney:** Yay.

**Brené:** Yay, yeah.

**Whitney:** That's awesome.

**Brené:** Yeah, 23 years, I guess, next weekend, or some- on the 12th, I think. Um, one of the problems, and one of the things that sets us back is I've been- I'm brave, I tell my story, and I have a lot of women that say, "Thank you for talking openly about recovery, and being sober, and that's great." But then what happens when someone reduces to me that, to explain away a behavior ...

**Whitney:** Hmm.

**Brené:** "Well, she's not very much fun, well she knows she's sober," like ...

**Whitney:** That's hurtful.

**Brené:** Yes. Or, you know, like, "God, she- I- I- I, you know, I really hate that idea Brené shared," "Well you know she has anxiety." But, like, when we get reduced-

**Whitney:** Oh, it's like a bludgeon- you're bludgeon- bludgeoned-

**Brené:** Yes.

**Whitney:** Bludgeoning people, yeah.

**Brené:** Yeah, when we get reduced ... You know, Harriet Lerner, who's one of my favorite writers, says that "No one wants to be defined by their hardest struggle." And so, we have to find this really interesting space between owning it, and identifying it, but reject being labeled by it, and reduced by it. You know?

**Whitney:** Do you have thoughts on how to do that?

**Brené:** Yeah, I think- I think we need people like you, and people like me, who have some wind at our backs, you know, some success, saying, out loud, "Hi, yes, I'm Brené, I'm- I'm an introvert, I can get super overwhelmed and anxious in big groups. I can speak in front of 10,000 people, that's not a big deal, but I- if I have to go to a party where there's 30, you know, I can pick a fight with my husband and do anything to get out of it because I get really anxious and those soc- social settings. I'm sober, it's been the best part of my life," but, you know, like, we need people to tell their stories.

**Whitney:** Mmm.

**Brené:** And we need people to say, if, you know, if you're in a room, and someone says, "You know, Whitney, I don't know what happened to her, you know, maybe she had one of those anxiety things she has sometimes," I need you to say, "You know what, that's not my experience of Brené."

**Whitney:** Right.

**Brené:** "And I'm not comfortable with you using something she shared against her to explain her behavior, maybe she was pissed off because you were out of line in that meeting."

**Whitney:** Yeah. It's interesting, too, and when you just said that I'm thinking ... I- I teach a group of girls at our church who are 16 and 17-years old, and one of the things that came up the other day is someone talked about depression and anxiety, and- and I did, I said, "Well, you know, I struggle with depression, I struggle with anxiety," and I think your point is that we can destigmatize it when we're willing to talk about our own struggles.

**Whitney:** And I think a couple of the girls were so relieved, like, "Oh, I'm not alone. I- I'm not the only person that's struggling with this," and as soon as I start talking about it, and you start talking about it, then it does make it easier. And- and to your point, not then reducing people to that thing that they struggle with, so-

**Brené:** Yes.

**Whitney:** That's so, so, so important.

**Brené:** That we- we contain multitudes, you know, the Walt Whitman, like, "I am large, like, I am a lot of different things defined my ne- by none of them."

**Whitney:** Oh, that's so great. Okay. So, one of the things that you said, I'm setting you up here, so-

**Brené:** Yeah.

**Whitney:** Get ready.

**Brené:** I'm ready.

**Whitney:** You said, "Joy is the most vulnerable of all emotions." So, what about your work, and your life, gives you deep joy?

**Brené:** Mmm. I've been thinking about that a lot. I've been thinking that- about it a lot, you know, I was even gonna a- you know, it's interesting 'cause I'm coming to this really weird career transition place right now, and so one of the things that I talk about in *The Gifts of Imperfection* that I ha- I need to do my researcher heal thyself a little bit right now, is a joy list, like, what's going on in your life when you're at your happiest?

And I came across my joy list a couple of weeks ago, and realized I wasn't doing almost anything on it, so I'm cooking, I'm practicing photography, I'm editing photos, I'm making family albums. I'm, you know, in what the AA, what the big book would call "spit spiritual condition," like, I am praying and meditating. Um ... I'm with my family, I'm near water, I'm hiking, like, all of those things bring me intense joy.

**Whitney:** So, when you read the list, you started to make- you started to make changes, is what you're saying?

**Brené:** I'm definitely making changes. I think ... It's interesting because I- I read your work a lot, and I- I take so much wisdom from it because one of the things, if I look back on the last three years, I, like so many people, thought, you know, "I think some of these ideas are important, and I think they can make the world a better place. How do I scale them?" And so, I started businesses, and, unbelievably, they did really well, and I hated it.

**Whitney:** Hmm.

**Brené:** Like, I hated it. And we even had investors come and say, "How-" you know, "We want to help you go further faster." And what I realized, in this last, I don't know, maybe six months, is that I'm better, more joyful, and my work is more meaningful when I am slower closer. ...

Um, and so for me, a big business learning for me was I need to find great partners who are- who are scalers, and who are further faster partners, Netflix is a great example. But the way I spend my days has to be about slower closer, um, for me. Like, I don't ... When the businesses started taking off, and then it was like, "Okay, we need, like, we need to hire an engineering team, and we need to full stack this, and we need ..."

So, for me, it's been this really hard transition, and I think it goes back a lot, to be honest with you, Whitney, to your work, about the two and a half times. I think I've spent a lot of my career proving, and I'm at the place now where I'm trying to inhale, and ask myself, "Am I doing this to prove that I can? Or because I want to, and it brings me joy?"

**Whitney:** Mmm.

**Brené:** And those two things are not the same all the time, for me.

**Whitney:** For most of us, no.

**Brené:** Yeah, and so- so now I'm really trying to make sure that when a new project comes a- along, or when a new opportunity comes my way, instead of looking at what it could do for the work, and the platform, and, you know, I ask myself, "What is it- what is it going to look- what are my days going to look like? What are my next 180 days going to look like?"

**Whitney:** If you say, "Yes."

**Brené:** If I say, "Yes." ... And that's really been a changer for me, like, that's- that's been big.

**Whitney:** It sounds to me like this is a new arena moment for you.

**Brené:** Oh my God, it really is. Ugh, I hate it. Like ... I just want to sit in the stands, and have some popcorn-

**Whitney:** (laughs).

**Brené:** And, like, kick- kick back for, like, I don't know, six months or so? Um, yeah, it's definitely a new arena for me. You know, I think I need to be intensely and joyfully in my life, in order to write about things that are meaningful for people.

**Whitney:** Yeah. So-

**Brené:** Does that make sense?

**Whitney:** It does, completely.

**Brené:** I was gonna totally ask you as, like-

**Whitney:** Yeah.

**Brené:** You know, you're a scaler, and you understand this whole thing, and, like, I was gonna ask you, like, "Is there any way that could make sense?"

**Whitney:** It makes complete sense. What you're saying is that you know you're- you now know you're capable of scaling. You know that the work is scale-worthy, if you will. You know that-

**Brené:** Yeah.

**Whitney:** People want it to scale.

**Brené:** Yes.

**Whitney:** Um, but the question you're asking yourself, if I understand correctly, is, "What do you want your role to be in that?"

**Brené:** Yes.

**Whitney:** "What does that look like for you?"

**Brené:** Yes.

**Whitney:** And they're- and- and the challenge that you're having, because, because of who you are is, well, you know you could do it all yourself, and there's some piece of you that wants to prove that you can do it yourself, but then that pulls you back into the trap of "Am I worthy?" And so, you're trying not to be called by the siren song of wanting to be worthy, and saying, "What actually makes Brené happy?" And that-

**Brené:** That- that's hard.

**Whitney:** That's- it's an ir- it- it- it's super ironic, right, because it's an arena moment, but it's a totally different arena moment because it's you in the arena, and there's actually no one in the stands except for you, and you're making the decision.

**Brené:** Oh, yeah, but let me tell you something, no o- no one occupies those season tickets, the critic seats, like me.

**Whitney:** (laughs). So, you're the arena, you're the critic, you've got the cheap seats, you've got the empathy and compassion-

**Brené:** Yes.

**Whitney:** On your good days.

**Brené:** Yes. I think it- And I think- I think that's all of us. I mean one of the things about self-compassion, it's, like, my little trigger to help m- to help me is "Am I talking to myself like I talk to someone I love?"

**Whitney:** Mmm.

**Brené:** Like, Ellen's a year older than Miranda, she's 19, or she'll soon be 20, she's a sophomore in college, and so if I make a mistake, or I'm trying to practice some self-care, do what I really love, is that how I would talk to Ellen, embarking on something? And 90% of the time, the answer is like, "I would never say that to Ellen."

**Whitney:** So, here's- here's my final question for you.

**Brené:** Okay.

**Whitney:** It's 180 days from now-

**Brené:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Whitney:** Now that you're in this moment of transition, and you're really-

**Brené:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Whitney:** Battling it out with yourself, what will it look like, if you can say, "I was brave, and I won."

**Brené:** You're literally killing me. Um. ... God. I ... keep showing up for the hard stuff, and the hard decisions, and the hard conversations, and I am not just teaching and writing my work, I'm living my work, and I'm- and I'm at water polo games, and Parents Weekend, and reading books, and working out, and fighting the fight in a way that makes me feel spiritually grounded.

**Whitney:** You're whole.

**Brené:** I'm whole.

**Whitney:** You're whole.

**Brené:** I'm whole, yeah.

**Whitney:** Brené, thank you so much. It was so generous of you to take the time. It's been really fun, and a pleasure. Thank you.

**Brené:** This was like the best therapy session ever, are you kidding me? Thank you (laughs).

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I used that phrase from Emma McAdam up top, stop trying to feel better and get better at feeling. But getting better at feeling is hard, because you open yourself up to all those feelings that you've spent a lifetime trying to keep yourself shielded from. We all have our little mechanisms, ways that we tamp down on ourselves to keep us from feeling shame or regret. We can forget that lowering our walls is an act of bravery. Deflecting those feelings probably feels very comfortable – dealing with them can seem impossible.

So why is it important to get better at feeling? Well, it's because the sum total of all your emotions often dictate what you'll do along the S Curve. What we feel in the moment becomes the catalyst to behavior, and we can use that pathway to make predictions. Embarrassment at the cusp of the sweet spot, for example, could be enough to knock someone off the curve entirely. The S Curve bundles together that flow from emotion into behavior, showing you what growth looks like and feels like.

When you know what you feel, you can finally honor it, instead of resorting to your old deflecting techniques. You can say, I've wrapped my arms around this emotion, I know its shape and container, and I see where it sprouted from. I recognize it as a part of me.

Then, and only then, can you go to what's next.

If you're looking for more of Brené's insight, I can't recommend enough her newest book, *Atlas of the Heart*. On the stories we tell ourselves and the meaning that grows from that soil, there's [episode 365](#) with StoryBrand CEO Donald Miller. And for some more help on getting better at feeling, of course there's [episode 243](#) with Emma McAdam.

Thank you again to Brené Brown and thank you for listening. If you enjoyed today's show, hit subscribe so you don't miss a single episode. If you want to know more about how DA can support you and your organization, whether through executive coaching and leadership workshops, you can reach us at [workwithus@thedisruptionadvisors.com](mailto:workwithus@thedisruptionadvisors.com).

Thank you to our producer, Alexander Tuerk, production assistant Etta King and production coordinator, Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this has been Disrupt Yourself.