

Atlas of the Heart

Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience

Review by Lisa Murray-Roselli | Book by Brené Brown

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How is it that our experiences and connections can sometimes feel effortless and at other times go so very wrong? Brené Brown's *Atlas of the Heart* explains that meaningful connections and human experiences hinge upon the strength of our language.

Brené Brown's extensive research into the language of emotion provides a lush foundation for her theories on how to cultivate meaningful connection. At some point in our history here in the United States, it was decided that "rugged individualism" was the archetype to which we should all aspire. Nothing goes against human nature more than this ideal. We are forged in connection and cannot thrive without it. For anyone looking to communicate more effectively at work and in their personal lives, *Atlas of the Heart* is a vital resource for the language and strategies we need to make meaningful connections with one another and with ourselves.

Brené Brown has spent over 20 years as a researcher, author, speaker, and podcaster. She authored six #1 *New York Times* bestselling books, and her TED talks have garnered over 50 million views. Brown's relentless exploration of topics including courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy have made her an expert in the field of behavioral science. Her research is thorough and scientifically-based, but, as in *Atlas of the Heart*, she presents it in ways that are eminently understandable and useful.

Readers will discover resources to

- understand the language of emotions
- cultivate grounded confidence
- develop courage in their interactions
- practice caring for others' stories

INITIAL INSIGHTS

Language matters. Above all else, our ability to translate our thoughts using the right language is the key to effective communication. There are certainly times when we are so swamped by emotion that there is no hope for a clear transmission of what is going on in our hearts and minds. However, Brown believes that the better we get at properly naming those emotions, the better we will be at communicating, making connections, and potentially even avoiding being swamped by those overpowering emotions.

LANGUAGE IS EVERYTHING

The majority of *Atlas of the Heart* is devoted to a deep analysis of 87 emotions and their definitions. True to her thesis that language is the portal to human connection, Brown wants to make sure that readers have a complete and common understanding of what she means when she talks about dread, admiration, sarcasm, empathy and the other 83 emotions. It would not be possible to relate the research behind *Atlas of the Heart* without that common understanding.

Language is the key to understanding ourselves and the world around us, and to perceiving the complexities of life. Without the language to accurately express ourselves, to others and in our own minds, frustration and hopelessness can take over. What is the most marked characteristic of language-deficient human babies? Crying! From nerve-shattering wailing to quiet whimpering, attentive parents can often decipher those cries after a period of time, but the messaging is never crystal clear. Beyond this extreme example, however, Brown says that many of us are walking around with a language deficit, and we don't even know it. The only clue is the static that occurs when simple interactions somehow go badly.

If we could find ways to say what we mean and understand the intention behind what others say to us, it is possible that life would go along much more smoothly. We are wired for language, and language controls the extent of our knowledge of the world. With *Atlas of the Heart* as a guide, Brown would like us to find common language for our emotions, learn to understand and manage those emotions, and build connections. By naming our experiences accurately, we can create deeper and more complex meaning, heal, learn, and gain better self-awareness along the way.

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THE PURSUIT OF MEANINGFUL CONNECTION

Atlas of the Heart introduces the Buddhist concept of near enemies. Brown feels this concept offers powerful insight into human behavior.

Fundamentally, near enemies are similar on the surface, for example, sympathy and empathy. Although often used interchangeably, one works to promote separation, the other fosters connection. Brown clarifies that when we are sympathetic, we feel sorry for someone but are maintaining distance: you are in a bad situation, I am not. Empathy, on the other hand, is understanding someone's pain and reflecting that understanding through compassion—we make a connection. This concept of near enemies pervades Brown's Grounded Theory on Cultivating Meaningful Connection.

WORKING TOWARDS GROUNDED CONFIDENCE

Grounded confidence is the near enemy of knowing and proving. Truly confident people are curious and have an insatiable desire to learn—they know they don't know everything, and they are fine with that, even excited by it. Braggarts and know-it-alls come across as supremely confident, luring and ensnaring those who mistake the behavior for leadership and conviction. Their behavior belies fearfulness and a profound lack of self-confidence—any challenge to their positions or knowledge is not seen as an opportunity to learn something new but as a personal attack. When this happens, the response is often to lash out in anger or to belittle those who question their authority; they are in a constant state of self-protection.

In order to work towards grounded confidence, we must release ourselves from the idea that we have to be right all the time. Nothing makes a connection more quickly than asking, "I don't know the answer; will you help me find it?" This immediately forms an alliance, a common goal, and an equitable relationship—we are in this together. A person with grounded confidence is not threatened by those who may know more; they are happy to shine light in their direction.

Brown encourages readers to find connection with their own bodies as well, as a way to understand how our behaviors and thoughts show up in physical ways. We embody the habits we practice most. Therefore, if we are feeling ill at ease or physically unwell, our body is sending us the message that some habits are not serving us. Finding grounded confidence means

grounding ourselves to our own bodies and responding to their signals. Without this embodiment step, we cannot truly understand ourselves and, therefore, cannot fully connect with others.

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DEVELOPING COURAGEOUS CONNECTION

There is a dynamic in caring for others in which help and support are near enemies. Brown uses the phrase “walking alongside” as a portal to the idea of supporting others and practicing compassion without trying to “control the path” or direct the outcomes of another’s life. Anyone who has cared for a child or an elderly relative knows the feeling of working feverishly to have all of the best options lined up, only to have those options ignored or scorned. Getting to the root of intention is the only way to sort out this tension.

When we offer our help, it is vital to understand why we are doing so. There is a difference between wanting to insert yourself in a situation because you think you can fix it or make it better and wanting to be by someone’s side during a difficult time...to walk alongside. Often, what makes the most impact and the deepest connection is simply compassion and physical presence, not someone jumping around trying to fix everything. Walking alongside puts the focus on the person in need; fixing and controlling puts the focus on the “helper.”

Brown encourages readers to be courageous when taking care of people, to have the courage to simply be there for the other person without having to be in charge, and to listen and understand with empathy. In order to make meaningful connections when people are in a time of need, we do best when we are filled with grounded confidence and keep our egos out of the equation. When we can recognize the near enemy of walking alongside in ourselves, we can learn to identify it in personal, cultural, and political

situations in which the powerful are offering help that doesn't really feel like help. *Atlas of the Heart* provides excellent guidance in this regard.

HONORING THE STORIES OF OTHERS

In this realm, Brown tells readers that the near enemy of honoring the stories of others (or practicing story stewardship) is something she calls, “performative connection.” This happens when we choose to narrate people’s stories for them. For example, when someone is expressing regret or disappointment with regard to the outcome of a meeting or professional interaction, a performative connection type of response would be, “Don’t worry about it. Everything will be fine.” On the surface, this resembles compassion and encouragement; however, it is really a brush-off. A response like this says to that person, “I don’t value you enough to dig more deeply into your feelings about this or to offer my support as you find a resolution.”

Brown also writes about narrative takeover, which pulls the focus off of the storyteller and onto the person who is supposed to be listening. This happens when we tell people how they must be feeling or immediately jump to telling a story about a similar experience in our own lives. On the surface, again, this approach appears to be about making connection, but it really just serves to bring the focus back to ourselves.

A good steward of others’ stories has the confidence and the courage to allow people to tell their stories in full. A good steward is curious and caring enough to ask questions, to figure out the best way to be of service without having to be in charge, and to recognize when the story has been commandeered by one’s threatened ego. Making meaningful connections is not easy when all any of us really wants to do is talk about ourselves. We are desperate to connect, yet it is only when we make the effort to subdue the ego and open our hearts and minds to others, to their full expressions of themselves and their stories, that we can accomplish this.

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PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Here are some strategies for creating meaningful connection:

Say What You Mean

In order to say what you mean, you must use the right words. Skillful communication relies upon a common understanding of language. Use *Atlas of the Heart* as a profound resource for re-learning the vocabulary of emotion. Meaningful connections are made when emotions are accurately expressed and patiently understood. Language is the key to all of that.

Establish Grounded Confidence

Confident people are not right all the time, and they don't need to be. Establish grounded confidence by looking at the world with curiosity and a desire to learn rather than the need to prove and protect one's ideas. Meaningful connections are made when we show strength through vulnerability. Be open to learning from others and from the messages sent by your own body. Commit yourself to mastery, not perfection.

Find the Courage to Support Others without Ego

When helping is really just taking charge, this is not true support. Find the courage and confidence to listen without judgement or inserting your ego—tamp down the desire to make situations about you. Make meaningful connections with those in need by asking them how you can be of service and using whatever power you have to promote change on their behalf.

Be the Caretaker of Others' Stories

Recognizing emotions in others is often impossible: facial expressions and blanket emotions like anger rarely reveal the full extent of someone's story. Therefore, when people tell you their stories, rein in the impulse to story-swap unless invited to do so—false connections can be made this way. Likewise, avoid narrative takeovers: telling people how they must be feeling or how they shouldn't feel. Listen. Ask questions. Be a good caretaker of others' stories. They are as valuable as your own.

PARTING THOUGHTS

Atlas of the Heart is a bold concept. Brown's cartography takes readers deep into the many chambers of our emotional existence with clarity and purpose. Pursuing meaningful connection requires common definitions for emotions, accepting the fact that curiosity and the constant pursuit of mastery will always be more powerful than being right, and understanding that the need be in charge, or the focus of every story, can be the greatest barrier to connecting with others. Ancient philosophers and poets figured us out centuries ago, but language is fluid, so it is up to every generation to find a way to rewrite that wisdom. Brené Brown's exceptional research, humor, and passion infuse *Atlas of the Heart* with wisdom we can use today.

Without understanding
how our feelings,
thoughts, and behaviors
work together, it's almost
impossible to find our way
back to ourselves and
each other.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BRENÉ BROWN is a research professor at the University of Houston, where she holds the Huffington Foundation Endowed Chair, and a visiting professor in management at the University of Texas at Austin McCombs School of Business. She has spent the past two decades studying courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy. Brown is the author of six #1 *New York Times* best sellers and is the host of the weekly Spotify original podcasts *Unlocking Us* and *Dare to Lead*.

With Tarana Burke, she co-edited the best-selling anthology *You Are Your Best Thing: Vulnerability, Shame Resilience, and the Black Experience*. Her TED talk on the Power of Vulnerability is one of the top five most-viewed TED talks in the world, with over 50 million views. She is also the first researcher to have a filmed lecture on Netflix.

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