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Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead

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Abstract

Author Brené Brown is not only a best-selling popular author, but also a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. This review examines the perspectives and findings she presents in Daring Greatly; summarizes the research method that led her to these findings, and discusses the potential utility of this book in the college student context.

David McCullough’s now-famous 2012 high school commencement address, “You are Not Special” (later expanded into the 2014 book You Are Not Special . . . And Other Encouragements), while controversial with some, struck a chord with many educators. But obviously, the first and intended audience was the graduates themselves. In short, McCullough told them not to believe their own press notices, not to believe that they were all above average. This is an illusion created by a life inside a protected bubble, where they were allowed to duck challenges, where they undertook only those “challenges” where there was a virtual guarantee of success. And this cheated them—cheated them of pushing themselves when afraid, overcoming self-doubt, and often experiencing the personally developing experience of failure.

We see that in college students, do we not? In a world of challenges and opportunities, too often they stick with the safe choices, ignoring dreams, risk, wonder. They are too often unwilling to open themselves to people unlike them (often based on superficial characteristics). They are still subject to peer pressure, even in the face of increasing awareness that is what they are doing is not prudent. How much education, how much personal growth, is possible with that self-hobbling?

This is territory that Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston, has explored for more than a decade, publishing on it extensively. For this work, Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way we Live, Love, Parent, and Lead, she wanted to explore shame. But in listening to the people she interviewed, she found that was not enough. They wanted to talk about, and she became focused on, vulnerability.

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The difference is significant for Brown. Shame, in short, is the feeling of unworthiness; failure is not a consequence of being human, but of fundamental, concrete flaw as a person. Vulnerability is acting and trying despite that fear. It is essential to change, growth, and development of deeper character.

The importance of recognizing and acting upon this difference is the core of Brown’s message, and she explores it in context as varied as parenting, marriage and relationships, and professional identity. One of the most interesting facets she explores is the distinction between how these things play out with men vis-a-vis women. With men, shame was often centered in a single fear: being perceived that one is not macho. It was hard to display vulnerability, to express doubt, un-masculine emotion, a lack of competence in anything. With women, the shame was centered on doubts that they did not, could never, measure up to judgmental norms of body type, attractiveness, being able to juggle multiple roles—all while being “soft.” Unwillingness to open up and confront these feelings, to risk, to drop socially assigned roles, is the source of much woe, misunderstanding, and stunted growth.

Brown begins and ends the book with a recitation of Teddy Roosevelt’s famous “Man in the Arena” speech, given at the Sorbonne in 1910. In part,

It is not the critic who counts. . . . The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena . . . who strives valiantly, and who comes short again and again . . . who at the worst, if he fails at least fails while daring greatly. (pp. 1, 247)

Brown tells us that he got it right.

_Daring Greatly_, a New York Times number one best seller, speaks to many audiences. Does it have relevance for direct reading by college students? Yes, is this reviewer’s conclusion. While nearly 300 pages, it is a comfortable read. What refrains me from using “fast” read is how often the reader might stop to contemplate a single paragraph or sentence. The book is that powerful. The discussions it could foster would be rich—and evocative of vulnerability, which is the point, the starting place for growth. Chapters might also be used, although they are so woven and essentially sequential that selection may prove a challenge. TED talks are also available online. (She has a website as well, brenebrown.com, but it is not particularly useful in terms of content usable for education or discussion.) Educators may find it personally useful to bolster the mindset, frameworks, and vocabulary of conversations and counsel with students—all of which may also help students understand why the easy way is not always the best path.

It is somewhat regrettable that there is not even a passing reference to college students as a specific audience for whom this book would be helpful. Her sample was large enough to isolate such respondents. Hence, no direct discussion of how shame and compensation for it contribute to substance abuse, questionable sexual behaviors, resistance to meeting new people in the collegiate environment, and so on. But the leaps from the general to the specific are not difficult.

While this is a smooth read, it is not to be dismissed as a self-help book that is just one person’s opinion. The academic and other references are there, but in an appendix, where they do not form speed bumps. The qualitative research method, interviews—1280 of them over 6 years—is explicated in an appendix, as is the rest of her protocol. This includes, for example, her influential method theorists, the coding and theme-developing practices she employed, and basically a short essay on the importance of intellectual and simple honesty in developing a grounded theory.

Brown has been a rather prolific author over the past decade or so. One suspects she has more contribution to make.
Reference
