



## Reading Guide

# DARING GREATLY IT'S NOT THE CRITIC WHO COUNTS

Brené Brown, Ph.D., MSW

### PREFACE: WHAT IT MEANS TO DARE GREATLY

***“Vulnerability is not weakness, and the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional. Our only choice is a question of engagement. Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose; the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection.”***

Before jumping into the book, I think it’s helpful to discuss and/or write down your thoughts on vulnerability.

1. How would you define vulnerability?

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2. What are the beliefs you hold around vulnerability?

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3. How was vulnerability viewed in your family? What were the lessons (spoken or unspoken) about being vulnerable?

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4. Did you grow up seeing vulnerability modeled?

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5. What’s your current comfort level with vulnerability?

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INTRODUCTION: MY ADVENTURE IN THE ARENA

At the beginning of the introduction I share the conversation I had with my therapist about vulnerability. How would you respond to the questions Diana posed to me?

1. What does vulnerability feel like?

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2. What do you do with vulnerability?

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3. When do you feel the most vulnerable?

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***“We humans have a tendency to define things by what they are not. This is especially true of our emotional experiences.”***

How would you define vulnerability in terms of what it is not?

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***“Vulnerability is the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experiences.”***

Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?

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***“...when I look at narcissism through the vulnerability lens, I see the shame-based fear of being ordinary. I see the fear of never feeling extraordinary enough to be noticed, to be lovable, to belong, or to cultivate a sense of purpose.”***

When you think of behaviors that are often labeled narcissistic, can you see how the shame of being too ordinary or the fear of having a life that’s too small might drive those behaviors? Why or why not?

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***“I see the cultural messaging everywhere that says that an ordinary life is a meaningless life.”***

Think about what you watch on TV, the magazines you read, the music you listen to on the radio, and the billboards you drive or walk by everyday. What are some of the expectations and messages (subtle and not-so-subtle) that fuel the fear of being ordinary?

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***“How are our struggles and behaviors related to protecting ourselves? How are our behaviors, thoughts, and emotions related to vulnerability and the need for a strong sense of worthiness?”***

How do you fill in the blanks with your own tapes?

“Never \_\_\_\_\_ enough.”



***“What makes this constant assessing and comparing so self-defeating is that we are often comparing our lives, our marriages, our families, and our communities to unattainable, media-driven visions of perfection, or we’re holding up our reality against our own fictional account of how great someone else has it. Nostalgia is also a dangerous form of comparison. Think about how often we compare ourselves and our lives to a memory that nostalgia has so completely edited that it never really existed...”***

What idealized accounts (media, nostalgia, etc.) do you compare your life to most frequently? For example, do you sometimes find yourself comparing your house or apartment to the Pottery Barn catalogue? Do you compare your family holidays with the Hallmark commercials?

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## CHAPTER 2: DEBUNKING THE VULNERABILITY MYTHS

***“Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage.”***

How would you fill in the blanks?

Vulnerability is \_\_\_\_\_

Vulnerability feels like \_\_\_\_\_

***“Yes, we are totally exposed when we are vulnerable. Yes, we are in the torture chamber that we call uncertainty. And yes, we’re taking a huge emotional risk when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable. But there’s no equation where taking risks, braving uncertainty, and opening ourselves up to emotional exposure equals weakness.”***

Think of a time in your life where you did something really courageous or brave. What role did vulnerability play? Did you feel uncertain? Did it feel risky? Did you feel emotionally exposed? Does it make sense to you that “Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage?”

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When we operate from the belief that we “don’t do vulnerability” we should ask ourselves these questions:

1. What do I do when I feel emotionally exposed?

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2. How do I behave when I’m feeling very uncomfortable and uncertain?

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3. How willing am I to take emotional risks?

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I write about the idea of marble jar friends as a metaphor for the relationship between trust and vulnerability. Who are your marble jar friends?

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How did your marble jar friends get their marbles?

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***“Vulnerability and courage beget vulnerability and courage.”***

When have you experienced this in your own life? When has your vulnerability opened the door for someone else or vice versa?

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***“I did believe that I could opt out of feeling vulnerable, so when it happened – when the phone rang with unimaginable news; or when I was scared; or when I loved so fiercely that rather than feeling gratitude and joy I could only prepare for loss – I controlled things. I managed situations and micromanaged the people around me. I performed until there was no energy left to feel. I made what was uncertain certain no matter what the cost. I stayed so busy that the truth of my hurting and my fear could never catch up. I looked brave on the outside and felt scared on the inside.”***

Do you spend time and energy trying to make the uncertain certain? If so, how?

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Do you use “crazy busy” as armor? How?

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Are there certain situations or experiences where you feel the need to look brave on the outside while you’re really feeling fearful on the inside? What do those situations have in common?

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***“Nothing has transformed my life more than realizing that it’s a waste of time to evaluate my worthiness by weighing the reaction of the people in the stands. The people who love me and will be there regardless of the outcome are within arm’s reach. This realization changed everything.”***

How would your life look different if you no longer evaluated your worthiness by weighing the reaction of the people in the stands?

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Who are the people who are with you in the arena?

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Who are the folks that you most often picture in the stands?

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I’m often my harshest critic. I see myself in the stands criticizing and judging. Are you in the stands?

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***“In simple terms, if they love it, you’re worthy; if they don’t, you’re worthless.”***

Have you ever attached your self-worth to how something of yours was received?

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How did that affect your ability to share it with others and navigate the reaction of others?

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***“You know that you are far more than a painting, an innovative idea, an effective pitch, a good sermon, or a high Amazon.com ranking.”***

What are your “gremlins,” and what do they say to you to prevent you from moving forward?

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***“...every successful woman whom I’ve interviewed has talked to me about the sometimes daily struggle to push past ‘the rules’ so she can assert herself, advocate for her ideas, and feel comfortable with her power and gifts.”***

How do you feel pushing past “the rules?”

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Has not pushing past them helped or hurt you personally and professionally?

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Where do you feel the most resistance to push?

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Where is it easiest? Why do you think it's harder or easier in these circumstances?

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In this chapter I discuss the primary soft spots for men and women in regards to shame. I write, "They went after my appearance and my mothering – two kill shots taken straight from the list of feminine norms."

Additionally, I write, "Basically, men live under the pressure of one relenting message: Do not be perceived as weak."

Based on your personal experiences, do the list of masculine and feminine norms ring true for you? Why or why not?

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How do you protect these vulnerabilities and at what cost?

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***"...We ask them to be vulnerable, we beg them to let us in, and we plead with them to tell us when they're afraid, but the truth is that most women can't stomach it. In those moments when real vulnerability happens in men, most of us recoil with fear and that fear manifests as everything from disappointment to disgust."***

As a man, what have the reactions been when you were vulnerable with your family, friends, or partner?

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As a woman, how have you reacted to the men in your life when they were vulnerable?

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Did anything surprise you from the conversation between men and women about sex? If so, what did and why?

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***“Shame resilience ... is about finding a middle path, an option that allows us to stay engaged and to find the emotional courage we need to respond in a way that aligns with our values.”***

When have you traded in your values for a quick way out of shame? What would it have looked like to find the middle path and practice emotional courage in a way that kept you aligned with your values?

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***“To set down those lists of what we’re supposed to be is brave. To love ourselves and support each other in the process of becoming real is perhaps the greatest single act of daring greatly.”***

What’s on your “prerequisites for worthiness” list? How did it get there? What would you have to let go of in order to move toward Wholeheartedness? (I’m still working on this question in my own life. I don’t think there are easy answers, but I think it’s worth asking. Again and again.)

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CHAPTER 4: THE VULNERABILITY ARMORY

***“Vulnerability is the last thing I want you to see in me, but the first thing I look for in you.”***

How do you feel around people who don't let you in or who armor against vulnerability?

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How would you answer the following questions about the vulnerability armory?

How do I protect myself?

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When and how did it start?

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What would it take to put the armor away?

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Think about the ways you shield yourself from vulnerability. How would you fill in the blanks?

My first instinct is to \_\_\_\_\_ , but that never worked,  
so now I \_\_\_\_\_ , and that's changed my life.

I spent years \_\_\_\_\_ until one day  
I tried \_\_\_\_\_ , and it made my relationship stronger.



***“Scarcity and fear drive foreboding joy. We’re afraid that the feeling of joy won’t last, or that there won’t be enough, or that the transition to disappointment (or whatever is in store for us next) will be too difficult. We’ve learned that giving into joy is, at best, setting ourselves up for disappointment and, at worst, inviting disaster.”***

When are you most likely to experience “foreboding joy” in your life? What are the reasons you foreclose on your joy? Do you find yourself just waiting for the other shoe to drop?

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***“For those welcoming the experience, the shudder of vulnerability that accompanies joy is an invitation to practice gratitude, to acknowledge how truly grateful we are for the person, the beauty, the connection, or simply the moment before us.” (p. 123)***

How do you practice gratitude in your everyday life? Are there missed opportunities in your life to cultivate gratitude? If so, what could you do differently to make space for more gratitude and joy?

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***“If the opposite of scarcity is enough, then practicing gratitude becomes the highest form of acknowledging that there’s enough and that we’re enough.”***

The next time you get the “vulnerability shudder”, use this line to practice gratitude:

I’m feeling vulnerable about \_\_\_\_\_ ,  
and I’m so grateful for \_\_\_\_\_ .

How does it feel?

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How do you get past that immediate “vulnerability shudder” right now?

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***“I’ve never heard one person attribute their joy, success, or wholeheartedness to being perfect. In fact, what I’ve heard over and over throughout the years is one clear message...Perfectionism is not the path that leads us to our gifts and to our sense of purpose; it’s the hazardous detour.”***

Where do you think you are on the perfection continuum – where do you hustle most in your life?

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Do you use perfectionism as a shield? If so, what’s the threat? What scares you the most about putting down the shield?

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***“And numbing vulnerability is especially debilitating because it doesn’t just deaden the pain of our difficult experiences; numbing vulnerability also dulls our experiences of love, joy, belonging, creativity, and empathy. We can’t selectively numb emotion. Numb the dark and you numb the light.”***

What are the emotions you try to numb and what emotions would you like to experience more in your life?

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***“The participants who struggled the most with numbing, Group A, explained that reducing anxiety meant finding ways to numb it, not changing the thinking, behaviors, or emotions that created anxiety.”***

Do you find yourself in Group A or Group B? Why do you put yourself in that particular group?

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***“Are my choices comforting and nourishing my spirit, or are they temporary reprieves from vulnerability and difficult emotions ultimately diminishing my spirit? Are my choices leading to my wholeheartedness, or do they leave me feeling empty and searching?”***

How do you differentiate comfort and nourishment from numbing? Are there areas that are more difficult than others?

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***“I believe that owning our worthiness is the act of acknowledging that we are sacred. Perhaps embracing vulnerability and overcoming numbing is ultimately about the care and feeding of our spirits.”***

What are two ways that you feed your spirit? How do you know that you need more care? How do you know you are full?

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***“...when we lead, teach, or preach from a gospel of Viking or Victim, win or lose, we crush faith, innovation, creativity, and adaptability to change.”***

Have you experienced the Viking or Victim paradigm in your life? How has the “either/or” approach affected your ability to be vulnerable or be in a relationship?

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***“What we don’t see is that using vulnerability is not the same thing as being vulnerable; it’s the opposite – it’s armor.”***

When have you used floodlighting as a vulnerability shield? What were the circumstances and what did you learn about yourself?

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***“ ‘Serpentining’ means trying to control a situation, backing out of it, pretending it’s not happening, or maybe even pretending that you don’t care.”***

When are you most likely to “serpentine” to avoid vulnerability? Is it when you are preparing for difficult conversations? Or when you feel like you might disappoint someone or make them angry? Do you serpentine when you don’t know the right answer?

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What does your zigzag pattern look like?

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***“...there’s nothing that makes us feel more threatened and more incited to attack and shame people than to see someone daring greatly. Someone else’s daring provides an uncomfortable mirror that reflects back our own fears about showing up, creating, and letting ourselves be seen.”***

Who supports your daring?

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Who pushes back when you step into your power and let yourself be seen?

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CHAPTER 5: MIND THE GAP: CULTIVATING CHANGE AND CLOSING THE DISENGAGEMENT DIVIDE

On page 174, I list ten questions that I ask to help me better understand the values and culture of a group (organization, family, congregation, etc.). Think about your family, work, or community and answer these questions.

It's especially helpful to do this with someone in your group. What do your answers tell you about "how you get things done?" What values are important? Does the culture reflect your values and what's important to you?

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Make a list of your aspirational values. What's really important to you? What values guide your every-day decision making?

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Reflecting on your list of aspirational values, how do you practice these everyday? Calendars are truth-tellers. When you look at your calendar or schedule, do your commitments reflect what's really important to you? If so, how? If not, what does your calendar say?

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CHAPTER 6: DISRUPTIVE ENGAGEMENT: DARING TO REHUMANIZE EDUCATION AND WORK

Do you agree or disagree with my definition of a leader? In what situations do you hold yourself responsible for finding the potential in people and processes?

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In this chapter I talk about ways to identify shame and disengagement in systems (organizations, families, schools, etc.). What behaviors do you identify as shame red flags at work? At home? In your community?

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***“Blame is simply the discharging of pain and discomfort. We blame when we’re uncomfortable and experience pain – when we’re vulnerable, angry, hurt, in shame, grieving.”***

Blame is often a go-to place for me. When something goes wrong, I immediately want to know “Who’s to blame?” Do you blame? If so, how does it affect your relationships?

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What would it take to move from blame to acceptance and/or accountability?

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***“Vulnerability is at the heart of the feedback process.”***

What’s been your best experience with receiving feedback? What about the experience was effective or meaningful? What role did vulnerability and/or openness play in the process?

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If you’ve had a negative feedback experience (either giving or receiving), what didn’t work?

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If you compare your answers from these first two questions, what’s the lesson?

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Do you find the Engaged Feedback Checklist helpful? Why or why not?

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CHAPTER 7: WHOLEHEARTED PARENTING: DARING TO BE THE ADULTS WE WANT OUR CHILDREN TO BE

***“Who we are and how we engage with the world are much stronger predictors of how our children will do than what we know about parenting.”***

Do you agree that the behaviors, emotions, and values we model are more significant than the behaviors, emotions, and values we teach and encourage? What is an example from your own childhood?

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***“Shame loves prerequisites. Our if/when worthiness list easily doubles as the gremlins’ to-do list.”***

We all have worthiness prerequisites that we’re trying to overcome or let go. As parents, it’s important that we recognize what prerequisites we’re handing down to our children. If we don’t recognize what we’re doing, we can’t change it.

What are some of the prerequisites you are knowingly or unknowingly handing down? How? How did they get on your list? How can you talk about them with your children? How can you work together as a family to engage with worthiness and let go of the “if/when” list?

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***“You can’t claim to care about the welfare of children if you’re shaming other parents for the choices they’re making.”***

I argue that parenting is a shame minefield because it’s such a vulnerable endeavor and we’re always judging each other. How do you think we can be more supportive of other parents? How do you stay out of judgment when you feel strongly about a parenting issue or approach?

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***“One of the biggest surprises in this research was learning that fitting in and belonging are not the same thing. In fact, fitting in is one of the greatest barriers to belonging. Fitting in is about assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be in order to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, doesn’t require us to change who we are; it requires us to be who we are.”***

Do the definitions of fitting in and belonging ring true for you? Why or why not?

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What do you do to create a strong sense of belonging in your home?

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How do you model the vulnerability that is inherent in belonging?

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What conversations do you have with your children about vulnerability and courage?

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**Thank you for reading Daring Greatly!**  
**I'm so grateful for our wholehearted community.**  
*Let's be brave together.*

