



BE TRUE TO YOURSELF

It's the Secret to Belonging

by Brené Brown

Contrary to what most of us think, belonging is not fitting in. In fact, fitting in is the greatest barrier to belonging. Fitting in, I've discovered during more than a decade of research, is assessing situations and groups of people, then twisting yourself into a human pretzel in order to get them to let you hang out with them. Belonging is something else entirely—it's showing up and letting yourself be seen and known as you really are—love of gourd painting, intense fear of public speaking and all.

Many of us suffer from this split between who we are and who we present to the world in order to be accepted. (Take it from me: I'm an expert fitter-inner!) But we're not letting ourselves be known, and this kind of incongruent living is soul-sucking.

In my research, I've interviewed a lot of people who never fit in, who are what you might call "different": scientists, artists, thinkers. If you drop down deep into their work and who they are, there is a tremendous amount of self-acceptance. Some of them have to scrap for it, like the rest of us, but most are like a neurophysicist I met who essentially told me, "My parents didn't

care that I wasn't on the football team, and my parents didn't care that I was awkward and geeky. I was in a group of kids at school who translated books into the Klingon language and my parents were like, 'Awesome!' They took me to the Star Trek convention."

He got his sense of belonging from his parents' sense of belonging, and even if we don't get that from Mom and Dad, we have to create it for ourselves as adults—or we will always feel as if we're standing outside of the big human party.

The truth is: Belonging starts with self-acceptance. Your level of belonging, in fact, can never be greater than your level of self-acceptance, because believing that you're enough is what gives you the courage to be authentic, vulnerable and imperfect. When we don't have that, we shape-shift and turn into chameleons; we hustle for the worthiness we already possess.

Brené Brown, Ph.D., a licensed master social worker and research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, has spent 13 years studying vulnerability, courage, worthiness and shame. This essay is from her book, "The Gifts of Imperfection", used with permission.