

“Atlas of the Heart” by Brene’ Brown - #1 Best-Seller nonfiction in the Northwest”

Book Club Discussion June 8, 2022

The author’s first sentence in her book, “I’m not a sentimental keeper of things”, did not relate to many of us who tend to keep, file, and continue to enjoy our papers, books, and “stuff” that our descendants may or may not want. Think about yearbooks, journals, albums, and letters as well of furnishings, linens, ceramics, and paintings.

This book explores emotions. After a survey of 7,000+ people, the average number of emotions named across the surveys was three: angry, happy, and sad. Brene’ asks what about shame, disappointment, wonder, awe, disgust, embarrassment, despair, contentment, boredom, anxiety, stress, love, overwhelm, surprise, and all of the other emotions and experiences that define what it means to be human? She says that couple this extremely limited vocabulary with the importance of emotional literacy, and you basically have a crisis. And that crisis is what she is trying to address in the book.

As we were encouraged to each choose one chapter or emotion to discuss, we touched about “anger” that most emotion experts consider a primary emotion, but Brene’ feels often anger is a secondary emotion behind which might be fear, frustration, guilt, grief, shame, vulnerability or many other of the 87 emotions and experiences that she explores in the “Atlas of the Heart”.

One participant highlighted “the four B’s” that play on her life, that human emotions and experiences are layers of **biology, biography, behavior, and backstory**.

Another participant responded to “connecting with others” with this book that was recommended to her by her 45-year-old son whose many-year relationship had ended during the pandemic years and saw this recommendation from him as “making a connection” with her as his mother.

Another participant noted “a silver lining” from the safe-distancing years enforced on us during the pandemic that brought an adult child moving home to be with his parents. The time has been a worthwhile bonding for all three of them.

The discussion about the book produced “vulnerability” among us as we each demonstrated “courage” to talk about an emotion. Some of the words we use can mean many other things – we need to take more care about what and how we say to each other.

“Stress” and “overwhelmed” emotions, not only within ourselves but also the world about us (divisiveness, pandemic, politics, January 6th, guns in public settings, war, impending revolution) can promote “fear” that also divides us. We need to remember there are many good people caring for humanity. While “news” can be fearful – think Fox News and CNN – we need to have an understanding about each’s point of view. Sometimes we are stuck in our own group, whether Red vs Blue, pro/anti gun ownership, etc. Sometimes we need a “time out”. “Fear” can be “anxiety” (in the future or a perceived threat).

Think about stalemate in politics. Are we fight, flight, or freeze? We were reminded of the recent “60 Minutes” TV news show about how the brain relates in a moment of crisis.

An anecdote from one participant was feeling he is not emotional and doesn’t get wound up about many things anymore. He can be emotional to music and another participant to a scent from years past. The soundtrack in some movies can take you back to another time in your life.

Other topics included “interest” (cognitive) and “curiosity” (a gap in your knowledge), “joy” (internal and short lived) and “happiness” (external and longer lasting).

Brene’ concludes her wonderful book with;

“My hope is that we find that solid ground within us, that shore that offers safe harbor when we’re feeling untethered and adrift. The more confident we are about being able to navigate to that place, the more daring our adventures, and the more connected we are to ourselves and each other. The real gift of learning language, practicing this work, and cultivating meaningful connection is being able to go anywhere without the fear of getting lost. Even when we have no idea where we are or where we’re going, with the right map, we can find our way back to our heart and to our truest self.”