

Book Review

Brown, B. (2015). *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead*. Penguin books, ISBN 978-1592408412.

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I first came across Dr. Brené Brown and her research when a friend recommended that I watch her 2011 TED talk on YouTube entitled 'The power of vulnerability'. This video has now been watched by more than 4.5 million people and so it's likely that some people reading this review will have seen it. When something has become so popular there is the danger that it will become commodified and turn into a brand: a quick search on Google reveals that Brené Brown now has published more books, has her own website and other merchandising. However, the very popularity of the book should not detract from some valuable messages of her research. Not everyone will feel comfortable with her writing style, replete with homespun anecdotes – but she has some important insights about the challenges of bringing our self into our work. Whilst the book is not specifically aimed at those working with troubled children and young people, its insights are highly relevant in my opinion.

Brené Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston, Graduate College of Social Work. She has spent the past fifteen years studying vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame. Her book is based on the grounded theory research she conducted, interviewing more than 1000 participants as well as gathering more than 3000 pieces of secondary data. She had been led to the research through puzzling over the lack of connectedness in people's personal and professional lives. Brené Brown has an ear for a well turned phrase, as in the following sentence 'Shame derives its power from being unspeakable. That's why it loves perfectionists - it's so easy to keep us quiet' (p.58). This certainly touched a chord with me, I must admit, and led to a

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number of reflections on the way individuals are silenced in organisations. It remains a huge challenge in residential childcare to unsettle the status quo, the settled assumptions and habits about what it means to work professionally with vulnerable children and youth. The demands of the work and our own internal pressures can often combine with organisational practices to silence any of our questions as it is so much easier to 'get with the programme'. This can even go so far as subtle humiliation of workers who dare to disagree with the way things are done and discourage them from bringing about any change.

Ever since writers in the Child and Youth Care tradition such as Henry Maier in *The Core of Care* (1979) began exploring the emotional pressures on the residential worker and the need for care for the carers back in 1979 we have become increasingly aware of the importance of considering our own vulnerabilities and how they resonate with those of the young people we work with. How can workers deal with the emotional toll of being exposed 24/7 to children and young people's pain? As Maurice Fenton writes in his recent book *Social Care and Child Welfare in Ireland*, if we hope for the children in our care to trust us and expose their vulnerability we must be willing to do the same. In doing so we need to challenge the narrative that sees vulnerability as weakness that needs to be defended against and concealed. It is only through dealing with the emotional charge of our practice that we can come to the core of the demanding work we do.

However Brown does not just focus on individual vulnerability which could reinforce a deficit model of workers but she stresses the importance of looking at the narratives in wider society that we internalise. For example she considers the ways in which we take on board the cultural 'stories' that we are never good enough. In the book she develops the argument that we are all walking about hiding our vulnerability within a social climate of scarcity narratives (i.e. 'there's never enough time', 'I'll never be good enough', 'there's not enough interest in who I am' etc). She focuses on three aspects of this 'social climate of scarcity': cultures of shame in organisations, constant comparison and competition and disengagement that discourages risk taking. As she writes, '[s]hame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging' (p.69). If we don't question these stories they can become self-evident truths leading to a lack of motivation and disengagement. As well as that, we know that, as she writes, 'If employees constantly have to navigate shame, you can bet they're passing it on to their customers, students and families' (p.190). Fundamentally, we stop caring in any meaningful way - if we truly want to develop relational practice then the extent of this organisational malaise must concern us.

Some readers may feel that Brown's responses to this issue - becoming conscious of our vulnerability and maintaining clear boundaries - are not dissimilar from those of countless other authors. Another possible criticism is

that she devotes far more space to exploring the nature of the problem than offering practical solutions. This may be so, but in my view she places valuable emphasis on the need to accept discomfort as part of growth, vulnerability being an essential part of the feedback process. In a particularly helpful chapter she discusses this in relation to supervision, referring to the need to normalise discomfort. As she puts it, we need to learn 'how to lean into the discomfort of uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure' (p.55). This relates to our own highly personal struggles that often we are not given enough time and space to address in supervision with consequences for our own well-being. This is not a matter of techniques which can be easily transmitted but of developing self-awareness in a safe, confidential space.

In an age when workers can easily feel hemmed in by the competing demands of target setting, scarce resources and calls for evidence based practice it is refreshing to read a book that takes us to the core of our work. It can add to the research evidence that we need to counter the voices calling us to adopt increasingly technical approaches to our work whilst at the same time minimising its complexities. Perhaps it can also remind us of the importance of compassion – towards ourselves first of all but perhaps even more importantly towards the young people we work with. As this journal's current theme attests, we are now beginning to be more comfortable with talking about love and compassion in our daily work in residential childcare although understandably its meaning and application are often contested. However we make sense of the word in our context, I imagine most readers would agree with Brown when she states that '[I]ove is uncertain. It's incredibly risky. And loving someone leaves us emotionally exposed' (p.34). If we are to help kids struggling with the widespread lack of connectedness and sense of belonging in contemporary life we need to take the risk of facing our own uncertainties and vulnerability. Talk of love in residential care can easily become romanticised; it is tough, challenging, but vitally necessary for those we work with. As Leonard Cohen reminds us, '[I]ove is not a victory march, it's a cold and it's a broken hallelujah' – Brown suggests that one could replace the word 'love' with 'vulnerability' in these lines as they are so interrelated.

About the author

Chris Walter has worked in Camphill for approximately thirty years having a variety of responsibilities including that of house coordinator and class teacher. Following completion of MSc in Advanced Residential Childcare at the University of Strathclyde he jointly developed the St.Andrews Project as an innovative form of School Home support. He now works as a freelance consultant and practice mentor.

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