Executive Editor Frank Shushok, Jr. talks with Brené Brown about Learning and Failure
Executive Editor Frank Shushok Shushok, Jr. sits down with Brené Brown to talk about her new book, higher education, and her hopes for students.

By Brené Brown

Brené Brown Encourages Educators to Normalize the Discomfort of Learning and Reframe Failure as Learning

Shushok: First, thank you for creating space for us to talk, and especially for sending me an advance copy of your new book: Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution. I very much enjoyed reading it, and I'm certain it will be a hit, particularly for those of us working with students on college and university campuses. I'd like to begin our time by asking if you would be willing to share a little about your book, why you wrote it, and what you discovered about yourself in the process of writing it.

Brown: Absolutely, I would love to. I have always known, from my earliest work on shame resilience, that I wanted to write books that laid out problems, but that also talk about how we overcome them. Early on in writing Daring Greatly, and looking at the research on vulnerability, it struck me that if we are brave enough, often enough, we are going to fall. If you are being brave with your life, it's not a possibility that you are going to face struggle, it's an inevitability. If you love, you are going to get your heart broken. If you are engaged and you care, you are going to face disappointment. If you are innovative and creative, you are going to know failure. These things are coming, so I thought about writing about getting back up in Daring Greatly, but I really didn't have all the data I needed to make sense of some of the questions I had.

This book felt like the next right step. The Gifts of Imperfection is “be you.” Daring Greatly is “be all in.” Rising Strong is “let’s all get up and learn, and do it again.” They have all shaped who I am as a professor, as a partner, as a parent, and as a person. I feel that this book really saved me in some important ways because I made a commitment when I was writing Daring Greatly and learning about the power of vulnerability—why it's important to put ourselves out there and show up in our lives, even if we can't control the
outcome. I became very committed to living like that, not just in my work but in my personal life. I really got my ass kicked a couple of times by criticism, hurt feelings, and failure. I’m the CEO of my company, and I got my leadership team excited about trying some new things, and some of them were successful beyond measure, and some of them were just huge failures.

I really wanted to know the answer to the question, what do men and women who live great lives and fall down (and then get back up and are even more courageous) have in common? Rising Strong was born from that.

**Shushok:** Since your book is about changing culture and how we relate with one another—and since colleges and universities have the opportunity to influence the ways students prepare for the rest of their lives—I’m interested in your thoughts about the role educators can play in helping students prepare to live fuller and healthier lives. How can we encourage them to be brave enough to fail, and to get back up in a culture that views team failure as failure?

**Brown:** Someone asked me recently, “If you could get one group that has the most ability to change the world around your work, who would it be?” I said educators. I really believe that because we are in this really unique position to see people daring greatly. When you walk into a class, you see who is daring greatly, who is there to make a difference and to learn something.

Educators have the ability to position learning as discomfort. I have a sign in my office at the university that says, “If you are comfortable, I’m not doing my job,” because learning is not comfortable. It’s change, it’s pushing against old ideas, it’s challenging. There’s a lot of darkness in learning, a kind of trying to feel your way through. Educators have the ability to reframe the conversation into, “Look, this is a powerful experience precisely because it’s so uncomfortable, and if you are really going to engage and put yourself out there, you are going to fail.” Failure is not learning gone bad, it is not the opposite of learning. Failure is part of the learning process. I believe that could change everything. It could change the learning process, how we work when we get out of school, how we live around the world. There is this great quote, “Failure is an imperfect word, because the moment it becomes learning, it’s no longer failure.”

For example, when a student gets back an exam that he or she failed, it doesn’t end there. When grades come back, that’s the beginning, even for people who got that perfect “A.” What did you learn about yourself in the process of preparing, taking, and receiving this exam? What is the learning here for you? What would you do differently? What would you do the same? What do you know about yourself that you didn’t know before you took the exam? These conversations are about not just the product of our learning but the process of our learning. To me, these can be so powerful. It takes time, and it takes someone who believes in the transformative power of the classroom.

**Shushok:** One of the things that I most appreciated about your research is that it charts a hopeful path for learning—the kind of learning that changes the way we live. What is it that you think people most need to learn in order to flourish? What role do educators play in helping students learn these skills? Perhaps, you can also talk about what you describe as key to our learning—the “delta.”

**Brown:** The delta is part of “the rumble.” The Rising Strong process is that people who get back up from a hard knock, from a failure, a betrayal, or a heartbreak have things in common. The first is this “reckoning” piece—which they recognize when they have been smacked by emotion. They recognize that something is going on, and I’m emotionally hooked around it, and I’m willing to get curious about what’s going on.” And so, that is another reason why education is supposed
to be at the “soulful center of curiosity.” This line of inquiry into what is happening is one of the things that educators don’t know or don’t understand. When the hard things happen, whether it’s inside of the classroom or outside of the classroom, our emotions get the first crack at making sense of that, neurobiologically. So when something tough happens—a crappy comment from a classmate, a failed exam, a really tough call from home, your parents are getting divorced, or someone dies—the very first thing that happens is emotion has the wheel. Thought, cognition, and behavior are riding shotgun. Emotion drives when something hard happens. So, to be able to say, “Okay, emotion has the wheel here, let me get curious about what is happening.”

Then we go into the rumble, and the first thing we do in the rumble is we capture that very first thing that we are making up, before we reality-check, or fact-check, or dig into the story, what is the very first narrative we make? Because our brain, the second something hard happens, scrambles to make up a story, and we are rewarded for that story. The not helpful thing about brain chemistry is that we are rewarded for that story, whether it’s accurate or not. The brain wants a pattern to keep us safe, and it wants a story to make sense of what’s happening. I call that the “shitty first draft” [Thanks, Anne Lamott]. What is that first story we get?

For example, I get back a crappy grade, and the first story I make up is, “I should never have been in this class. My parents didn’t go to college—I don’t know who I think I am. I don’t understand what is happening. I’m not good enough to be here. I’m not smart enough to be here. This is our first story. Then we have to rumble with that story, and it’s really important.

Jane Baker from the University of Texas Austin does great research around the power of writing, and how writing down something (even if you just keep it yourself, jot it down on a note—I’m not talking about a dissertation) gives us something to hang on to and to hold in the midst of emotion. So that shitty first draft is just where our mind takes us.

Then we start rumbling with it, and we start saying, “Okay, what do I know for sure about this? I know that I studied for three hours, and I know I failed. I’m not smart enough—No, I don’t know for sure that I’m not smart enough, I’m making that stuff up. And then what more do I need to know about the situation, about myself? Do I need to talk to the teacher? To the Graduate Assistant? What do I need to do?”

And we come up with the truth. We come up with the real story, where we scoot over a little bit, let reality and thinking take over with a hand on the wheel, and we get to a story that is true. I talk to my teacher. I call my mom. I talk to some of my friends in the class. It seems like 60 percent of the students in the class got an F, 30 percent got a C or D, 10 percent got a B. There were no As in the class. I’m not the only one struggling. I’m not alone. I need some extra help on this. I meet with the teacher. Here’s what I need to work out. Here’s where I’m making some bad assumptions early on in these problems, which is why I’m not getting to the right answer.

And so, here is my new story: I failed an exam. I thought I studied for it the right way, but I really didn’t. There’s some philosophical stuff I don’t understand about these questions. I need some tutoring. There is a place for me to get help. I belong here like everyone else.”

That’s the story you get to write when you own it. The delta is when we compare that very first story, that shitty first draft, with our new story. What are the learnings from there? And for this student, I think the important learning would be, “The minute things go wrong, here, I cannot turn to, ‘I am not good enough to be here—I don’t belong.’ That cannot be my go-to place. I have to get to a place where, in the midst of struggle, a fight with a roommate, a bad grade, losing a key to the library, I need to go to a different place first, other than ‘I don’t belong here. I’m not good enough because I’m the first in my family to be here.’ I need a new story to tell in struggle.”

So the delta is when we hold that first draft up against the story we learned by rumbling with it, and we understand the difference. Delta is where learning happens. In topography, the delta is where the rivers meet the ocean. They are marshy and brackish and mucky, but they are also rich in growth and in soil. Things grow there that could not grow anywhere else.

I’m thinking about all the people in student affairs, who I’ve worked with over the years and interviewed, and how much of what they do is helping people own stories and take control of their narrative, observe the experience for the students, because it’s really hard.

Shushok: One of the reasons I was excited to talk to you was, not only do you know our system of higher education, you are entrenched in it. You are a research professor, and as one of my colleagues recently...

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said, “Colleges and universities and the people who encompass them are often very insecure places.” You are talking about a new way of being, a life that requires bravery, and that bravery is going to no doubt result in failure. This is not something that those of us in the academy have been used to doing very well and practicing ourselves, yet we are charged with helping our students do this more effectively. I’m wondering, since you are part of the academy, what counsel, or more bluntly, what hard words might you have for those of us responsible for influencing the culture of higher education on campuses?

Brown: You know, I think one of the things that was very hard for me as an academic was I was trained to believe that accessibility equals ignorance, and the more removed and detached you are, the smarter people will perceive you as being. So, accessibility was shaming—to be straight-talking, and to wrestle with real, plain issues in the classroom—somehow, that was beneath me. When you get your Ph.D. and especially when you become a faculty person, you are kind of issued some “armor” that you are expected to wear. That did not serve me. The hierarchical nature of the academy doesn’t serve me. And, there is something between faculty and staff and administrators running rough-shod over students, and students running rough-shod over them in a consumer model that does not work either. So I think that we need to re-conceptualize universities and colleges as learning partnerships. And when I say learning partnerships, I don’t mean the students are there to learn and I am there to teach. I mean I’m there to learn, they are there to learn, I’m there to teach, they are there to teach.

We need to see each other first as people, and second as roles and titles.

I’m thinking about sending my daughter off to college in a couple of years, and thinking about what I hope she sees, especially if she is to be a leader one day. If you ask me—having spent the last five years of my life working intimately in organizations with leaders from West Point to Pixar—if you ask me what good leaders share in common, I would say it’s these three things: a very high tolerance and respect for discomfort, a profound awareness of their own emotional landscape, and a profound awareness of how emotions work in other people as well. So what I would hope for the experience of students in college—and faculty and staff and administrators—is that we see each other first. This is the big problem in academics. We need to see each other first as people, and second as roles and titles. I think we have to cross those binaries—we have to all be learners, we have to all be teachers. We have to all be knowers, and we have to all be open-minded inquirers. I think that could fundamentally change us.

I think the mistake is when traditional universities look at on-line learning and all these things they see, they perceive them as threats to the establishment. I don’t think the reason that people are moving away and are looking for something different is because we don’t have value—we have tremendous value. As someone who loves on-line learning, I still don’t think there is anything that replaces being with people in community. I don’t think it is what we are doing, and I don’t think it is how we are doing it, but I think we’ve lost the why of what we are doing. I think the “why?” is that we are there to create a learning community and change cultural conversations. You can’t do that if you don’t see each other as people.

Shushok: I’m curious if your rise in popularity has changed the way that you operate or view the academy?

Brown: You know, I don’t think so. I think I am really lucky because I come out of a college of social work, and that’s where I’ve been since the beginning of my career. I’m in a graduate college of social work where I teach Masters and Ph.D. students. Because it’s social work, we stay keenly aware about power differentials, and those discussions are part of our classroom. We are required to have difficult conversations about race and class and gender and learning—that’s part of what we do as a profession. I’ve kind of always held the same ideas and values.

As I’ve gotten out and done all this interviewing and talking to people, and more people know about my work, I’ve gotten increasing numbers of emails (mostly from people who work for universities, people getting their Ph.D.s, or people who are resident assistants) saying, “how do we handle this? We are with people on some of the best days of their lives, and some of the worst.” I think it is those people struggling to say, “I want to be human. I don’t want to lead with a brave face, I want to lead with a brave heart. But I’m in a system that is resistant to that.”

So I think what I see more than anything is a cry from the people who work at universities more so than from the people who attend them, who want to be human, and be real and dare greatly.

Shushok: Your final chapter calls for a revolution of sorts—toward a new vision of what’s possible. What are your hopes for humanity and this sort of revolution that you are calling for? Specifically, how can people on the front lines of colleges and universities help?
Brown: To me, revolutionary change is tumultuous and difficult and requires a brand new lens for looking at the world. I think if there is anything that universities have the opportunity to do and have done incredibly well, it’s to help people try on new ways of being, look through new lenses, and understand new perspectives. This is the place where it can really happen. It doesn’t have to be the only place where it happens, but it could be one of the central places where it happens, even in relationships between the community and the university—not just the students.

For me, all these struggles that we have in front of us right now, around race and around class and gender and sexual orientation and the hatefulness and the fear—those are all cultural shitty first drafts. They are just big old, honking, shitty first drafts! After all, what are stereotypes? They are just the first draft I have about who a person is, or who a group of people are, based on bad information passed down to me. That can change at universities; we can have real conversations, but it is going to require discomfort. You know, until recently—I would suggest the last decade—no one did discomfort as well as universities. We knew how to do that. You can’t do discomfort with a political agenda. You can’t do discomfort and use shame or fear as a technique in the classroom. You really have to show up as a member of a university, regardless of what your position is there, as a person, and say, “Let’s dig into this uncomfortable position together, and see what we can learn.” Just the conversation and the curiosity are enough to change the world.

Shushok: I appreciate you carving out time to talk with me today, and thanks for helping us think differently about the academy and the way we work with students and the way we show up for work. We truly appreciate it.

Brown: You are welcome, and thank you for the work you do! I’m grateful!