***The Wholehearted Parenting Manifesto***

By Brené Brown

Most of us would love a color-coded parenting hand-book that answers all our unanswerable questions, comes with guarantees, and minimizes our vulnerability. We want to know that if we follow certain rules or adhere to the method espoused by a certain parenting expert, our children will sleep through the night, be happy, make friends, achieve professional success, and stay safe. The uncertainty of parenting can bring up feelings in us that range from frustration to terror.

Our need for certainty in an endeavor as uncertain as raising children makes explicit “how-to-parent” strategies both seductive and dangerous. I say “dangerous” because certainty often breeds absolutes, intolerance, and judgment. That’s why parents are so critical of one another – we latch on to a method or approach and very quickly our way becomes the way. When we obsess over our parenting choices to the extent that most of us do, and then see someone else making different choices, we often perceive that difference as direct criticism of how we are parenting.

Ironically, parenting is a shame and judgment minefield precisely because most of us are wading through uncertainty and self-doubt when it comes to raising our children.

I’m not a parenting expert. In fact, I’m not sure that I even believe in the idea of “parenting experts.” I’m an engaged, imperfect parent and a passionate researcher. I’m an experienced mapmaker and a stumbling traveler. Like many of you, parenting is by far my boldest and most daring adventure.

One of the very best pieces of parenting advice that I ever received was from the writer Toni Morrison. It was May of 2000 and my daughter Ellen was just shy of her first birthday. Ms. Morrison was on Oprah talking about her book “Bluest Eye.” Oprah said, “Toni says a beautiful thing about the messages that we get about who we are when a child first walks into a room,” and she asked Ms. Morrison to talk about it.

Ms. Morrison explained that it’s interesting to watch what happens when a child walks into a room. She asked, “Does your face light up?” She explained, “When my children used to walk in the room when they were little, I looked at them to see if they had buckled their trousers or if their hair was combed or if their socks were up…. You think your affection and your deep love is on display because you’re caring for them. It’s not. When they see you, they see the critical face. What’s wrong now?” Her advice is simple, but paradigm- shifting for me. She said, “Let your face speak what’s in your heart. When they walk in the room my face says I’m glad to see them. It’s just as small as that, you see?”

I literally think about that advice every day – it’s become a practice. When Ellen comes bounding down the stairs dressed for school, I don’t want my first comment to be “Pull hair back” or “Those shoes don’t match your dress.” I want my face to convey how happy I am to see her \_ to be with her. When Charlie comes in the back door and he’s sweaty and dirty from catching lizards, I want to flash a smile before I say, “Don’t touch anything until you wash your hands.” So often we think that we earn parenting points by being critical, put out, and exasperated. Those first looks can be prerequisites or worthiness-builders. I don’t want to criticize when my kids walk in the room, I want to light up!

I wrote the following parenting manifesto because I need it. My husband Steve and I need it. Putting down the measuring stick in a culture that used acquisitions and accomplishments to assess worth is not easy. I use the manifesto as a touchstone, a prayer, and a meditation when I’m wrestling with vulnerability or when I’ve got that “never enough” fear. It reminds me of a finding that changed and probably saved my life: ***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.***

***THE WHOLEHEARTED PARENTING MANIFESTO***

*Above all else, I want you to know that you are loved and lovable. You will learn this from my words and actions – the lessons on love are in how I treat you and how I treat myself.*

*I want you to engage with the world from a place of worthiness. You will learn that you are worthy of love, belonging, and joy every time you see me practice self-compassion and embrace my own imperfections.*

*We will practice courage in our family by showing up, letting ourselves be seen, and honoring vulnerability. We will share our stories of struggle and strength. There will always be room in our home for both.*

*We will teach you compassion by practicing compassion with ourselves first; then with each other. We will set and respect boundaries; we will honor hard work, hope, and perseverance. Rest and play will be family values, as well as family practices.*

*You will learn accountability and respect by watching me make mistakes and make amends, and by watching how I ask for what I need and talk about how I feel.*

*I want you to know joy, so together we will practice gratitude.*

*I want you to feel joy, so together we will learn how to be vulnerable.*

*When uncertainty and scarcity visit, you will be able to draw from the spirit that is a part of our everyday life.*

*Together we will cry and face fear and grief. I will want to take away your pain, but instead I will sit with you and teach you how to feel it.*

*We will laugh and sing and dance and create. We will always have permission to be ourselves with each other. No matter what, you will always belong here.*

*As you begin your Wholehearted journey, the greatest gift that I can give to you is to live and love with my whole heart and to dare greatly.*

*I will not teach or love or show you anything perfectly, but I will let you see me, and I will always hold sacred the gift of seeing you. Truly, deeply, seeing you.*