

May 28, 2020

Brené Brown Commencement Speech Transcript for UT



Greg Fenves: (00:00)

Brené Brown is your 2020 Commencement speaker, and I'm pleased to welcome her now live from her home in Houston. Brené welcome.

Brené Brown: (00:10)

Thank you. Congratulations, 2020 graduates.

Greg Fenves: (00:13)

Isn't it wonderful that we're all here tonight, virtually?

Brené Brown: (00:18)

Yes, I wish we were in person. I wish I was giving a million hugs to everyone and every family member, but this is wonderful. We can do this.

Greg Fenves:: (00:26)

Well, thank you for joining us tonight. And I know the graduates are so glad to hear from you.

Brené Brown: (00:30)

Thank you.

Greg Fenves:: (00:31)

So now it's all yours.

Brené Brown: (00:33)

Thank you. Graduates, I again, I wish I was with you. I wish we were together. I wish we were in front of that tower, and I know that we will be in short order. Tonight, we're going to do this virtually. Got some words I've put together for you. I'm going to read it to you. I'm going to look at you. I'm going to give you some weird Zoom eye along the way, probably as I go back and forth. But this is for you.

(01:04)

I believe that what starts at UT changes the world. I know it's true because I've lived it. I also know that this is not how you and your family wanted to spend commencement. The best way I can honor you and everything that you've accomplished at UT during your time is to be very honest and tell you about the hard and wonderful and windy path of building a life and work that has the power to actually change the world.

(01:40)

What starts here changes the world, but it will not be on your terms and it will not be on your timeline. As we can see right now more than ever, the world does not ready itself for our plans. Your ability to live a life that's full of love and meaning, to make the world a braver and kinder place, to disrupt and reshape the future, has very little to do with the greatness of your plan. It depends completely on your ability to get back up and begin again when your plan fails. What starts here changes the world if you're committed to getting back up and beginning again, the exact same number of times that you fall, trip, and get pushed down.

(02:35)

When we see people myself included, when we see people that have achieved great things, who have set big goals and met them, we're often too quick to jump into comparison. Their path was easier. Their job was different. Everything was a lot less difficult. Fewer obstacles. We also make up stories about their efforts and obstacles that mostly highlight our fears and the worries we have about our own self-worth. Who am I to dream this? Who am I to believe I can change the world? Who am I to think I can overcome the challenges in front of me? Even the ones right now in May of 2020, in this world, in this pandemic.

(03:18)

I want to tell you who I think you are, who we all are by sharing a little bit more of who I am and my story. Two of my prize possessions growing up were a Bevo rug and a Bevo metal trash can. I loved these two things so much, wherever we moved, they went with me. There was no question in my mind that I would be a Longhorn. In 1982, my fall semester, senior year, I was accepted into the University of Texas and I got actually a room assigned to Kinsolving. And that was exactly how I had planned it. What I had not planned for was my family falling apart. My parents, after 20 years of marriage were on the brink of a divorce, and my father had taken early retirement from the company where he had spent his career and invested everything we had in an oil-related construction company.

(04:16)

Again, 1982, that was a huge crisis, oil glut crisis. And we lost everything. Paying for college came off the table, the divorce was imminent and I took my rage and grief and disillusionment and confusion and got as far away from Houston as I could get. I spent six months hitchhiking through Europe, came back to Texas, moved to San Antonio and spent several years in and out of college, doing every odd job you can imagine, including cleaning houses. It was the first and only job I've ever been fired from. I thought I made this table in their dining room really shiny, with some spray stuff and so I decided to pledge all the hardwood floors. But it turns out that wasn't a good idea because the owner came home and slid seven or eight feet through the entryway and then did a triple gainer and seriously injured their tailbone. And then I was, I guess what we would call today, gently coached out of that profession.

(05:28)

I finally settled into a full-time job at AT&T, it was going to be the perfect job for me because I could go to school during the day and this job was from 4:00 PM to 1:00 AM. The only tricky part was that I had to take all the calls in Spanish. Now, I had four years of high school French behind me, and two years of severe telenovela addiction. I'd watched two or three telenovelas with my roommates in San Antonio for two years. So I thought that would be enough. I actually did okay. I kind of winged it as I went.

(06:01)

The only problem I had were technical terms. Back then your telephone would plug into the wall in a jack and my first kind of full day out of training, I got a call from a woman who was panicked because she thought her phone was broken and we were trying to figure out whether it was the phone or the jack. And I didn't really know how to say jack, but I thought, well, Jack's a nickname for John and John and Spanish is Juan. So I told her to plug her phone into Juan, which happened to be her husband's name, which got really confusing. It turns out that telephone jack in Spanish isn't [inaudible 00:06:35] I loved my work at AT&T and to this day, I will tell you that it remains probably the most diverse, inclusive organization that I've ever been inside of.

(06:47)

I was led, mentored and coached by people who looked different than me, were raised different than me, thought different than me. I learned to trust people that were different from me. And I learned to be trusted by people who were different from me. I learned how to listen and believe people's stories, even though they didn't resonate or match my story. It was an incredible experience. About a year in I was offered a promotion. I took it. About six months later I was offered another promotion and I took it. This time I became a trainer, which is when I fell in love with teaching. I flew all over the country training people for AT&T. And then I received another promotion. And this promotion was kind of, I had to go to headquarters. I had to go to New Jersey. And I was so tempted because I loved my work and I would be close to New York and it sound incredible, but I couldn't stop thinking about the trash can and the hook rug with Bevo's picture.

(07:44)

So I went into my boss and said, "I'm turning down the promotion and I'm going to resign from the company." And she looked at me and said, "Are you going to be a VJ on MTV, on Headbangers Ball?" Which had been apparently not so secretive an ambition, but it turned out I did not get a job offer from MTV to be a VJ on Headbangers Ball. And I said, "No." And she said, "Are you going back to school full-time? Are you going to UT?" And I said, "I am." I wasn't too worried about the 1.1 GPA that I had accumulated over the years past, because that was a long time ago and I'd had a successful career at AT&T for several years. I had a lot of recommendations, I had a lot of confidence. And I went to the Dean of Students office at Admissions and I said, "Here's my story, and I'd love to come here and I've done this great work." And UT would have no part of it.

(08:38)

I don't remember his name, but he was in either to the Dean of Students or our admissions, maybe somewhere between. And he said, "I'll need to see two semesters of really good grades from you at a community college before I consider letting you into the University of Texas." And I said, "Okay." I moved to Houston. I had not been back since my parents had divorced. I lived with my mom, her new husband, my 16 year old twin sisters. And I got a job waiting tables at Pappadeaux. And I went to community college. A year later, I had taken 27 hours of transferable credit, I had a 4.0, and I sat in the waiting room of the same guy's office at UT. I was puffy and proud and ready. He looked at my transcript and he congratulated me on my grades and said, "I'm sorry. I'll need to see another semester of strong grades before I can let you into the University of Texas."

(09:39)

And I just remember bursting into tears and walking down 26th Street. I don't think it was called Dean Keeton then, but walking down 26th Street toward where my car was parked. And there used to be a convenience station there. And I found the quarters and called my mom on the payphone and told her, "They said no. They said no. They won't let me in." And as she assured me that I could come back to Houston and take more classes, I looked across the street at my car. I think it was probably illegally parked. And it was filled to the very top of the ceiling of that car. Because I had

packed all my belongings. Because I wasn't coming home. This was it. This was my time.

(10:27)

So I took a deep breath and I cried for a couple more days. I called my mom 500 times during those two days. I wasn't sure I could do it. Wasn't what I had planned. It wasn't my timeline. It wasn't what I wanted. But I registered at ACC. I stayed in Austin. I transferred to the Pappadeaux on 35. And I made the grades and I went back and I thought to myself the same thing I still think to myself today when things are hard, and when I fall, because I still fall. Get back up, begin again. I will never forget the day that I took my transcripts back to this guy's office. He looked at them and he stood up and he looked across his big oak desk at me and said, "Welcome to the University of Texas at Austin." And like this, I started crying and I don't know what came over me because it was like I was in bootcamp and he was a drill sergeant because the only thing I could think to say at the time was "Hook them horns, sir." I think I startled him a little bit.

(11:42)

I married Steve who had just graduated from UT. He started medical school in San Antonio at UT Medical School. I worked in a residential treatment facility in the Hill Country between San Antonio and Austin. I kept waiting tables. I worked on my bachelor's degree in Social Work at UT. I did an internship at the state hospital and another internship at child protective services. And I graduated. I went straight into my MSW. Steve and I ended up in Houston. I started my PhD program at the University of Houston. I was 32 or 33 at the time. We were ready to have a baby. I got pregnant. I remember coming to school and letting people know, and some people were happy for me. And I think some people were, one person said to me, "God we really thought you'd have a career." And I said, "Look, it's a baby, not a lobotomy. We're good."

(12:35)

It turned out I had Hyperemesis and I got really sick and I had to take a leave of absence from school for a semester. Get back up, begin again. I got out and graduated with my PhD. I wrote a book and I was really excited about it. It was rejected from every single person. I could wallpaper [inaudible 00:13:01] with rejection letters. Get back up, begin again.

Borrowed money from my parents. Self-published. The self-published book was a big hit. Penguin, big, proper publisher bought it. That book failed. Get back up, begin again. This is the rhythm of my life. And these are the seasons of every single person I know who has actually changed the world. I've collected over 400,000 pieces of data over 20 years. And I've never seen a single person who's built a life, a family or a career that did not have to scratch their way up from a fall and begin again a hundred times.

(13:42)

What starts here changes the world, but it will not be on your terms and it will not be on your timeline. The world will not ready itself for our plans. What starts here will change the world but it'll take your commitment to get back up and begin again the exact same number of times you fall, trip or get pushed down. So what's the key to getting back up and beginning again? Vulnerability. Now you all didn't think I was going to get through this whole thing without mentioning vulnerability, right? Come on. You knew it was coming. Getting back up and beginning again are risky. They both require courage and curiosity and courage and curiosity are born of vulnerability. Are you willing to show up and be all in when you don't know how it's going to end? The definition of vulnerability is simple. It's uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. We're raised to believe that vulnerability is weakness, but that's the greatest myth of all. It is not. It is actually the most accurate way to measure courage.

(14:48)

We've asked tens of thousands of people around the world, from special forces soldiers to professional athletes, to students and teachers, "Give me a single example. One example of courage in your life or in the life of someone else that did not require vulnerability. A single example of courage that did not require uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure." No one can. One day I found myself on base, military base in the Midwest talking to troops. I asked this question, "Give me an example of courage that didn't require vulnerability." There was silence. People buried their head in their hands. And finally, one young man stood up and said, "Three tours ma'am. There is no courage without vulnerability." A week later, I was with the CLC Hawks, asked them the same question, "No, not on the field or off. There is no courage without vulnerability."

(15:46)

If you can't manage, own, and lean into your vulnerability, you can't change the world. To get back up from a fall, to get back up from a setback, to get back up from what we're in right now, you have to acknowledge you're down, that you've fallen, failed, made a mistake. You have to be brave enough to acknowledge that you're hurting. That you're sad, disappointed, grieving, feeling shame, whatever feeling you're in, you have to own it. You cannot, we cannot begin again when we're dragging unspoken and unexplored emotions behind us. We have to be brave and curious and to dig into the feelings of a fall. And that's hard when[inaudible 00:16:35].

(16:38)

Emotional stoicism is not tough. Pretending that you don't have feelings isn't strength. Self-awareness is power. Acknowledging emotion and feeling doesn't give emotion and feeling power. It gives you power. You own the emotions or they own you. You own your hurt or your hurt owns you and you end up working it out on other people, or you take it out on your own self-worth. Once you get back up and acknowledge your hurt, that's when we're free to begin again. But beginning again also takes curiosity and courage. What have I learned from this fall that I can take with me as I begin again? And, does beginning again mean that there's a possibility of falling again? Yeah, it does. That's why they call it courage.

(17:33)

As I wrap up, let me tell you about the secret gift of being forced off the path, falling, getting back up and beginning again. Nothing wasted, muscles built. What I feared would be a shaming return home to Houston to go to community college, turned out to be an incredible opportunity to reconnect with my family. It was that Hill Country residential treatment facility that I worked in while I was working my way through UT, where I learned about the concept of shame. That defined my career. My falls have taught me a hundred times more about who I am than any of my achievements ever have, ever could, or ever will. I owe a hundred percent of my accomplishments to taking smart risks and trusting myself. While every fall is different and every learning is new, I'm not afraid to fall anymore because I've built the skills to get back up.

(18:35)

I've learned more about being human, how we think, feel, and behave from bartending and waiting tables and my weird odd jobs than I ever could in a classroom. Not a minute of that time was wasted. Not a minute. I learned more about the issues that are important to me like inclusion and diversity and leadership, living into those principles at a job that I never in a million years was a part of my plan. So what happens in the classroom, when I was a student or where I teach, that's where we learn to think critically. That's where we learn to connect the dots of our seemingly unconnected experiences. That's where we learn how to make meaning, how we learn to understand what struggle means and why we can't have anything without it. That's where we build muscles on top of muscles.

(19:30)

I spend 90% of my time working with leaders inside the organizations where many of you want to work. Three, six, 12 months from now when the job market is back and it will be back, my guess is that you'll end up being asked this question during one of your interviews. "I see you're a 2020 graduate. That was tough. How did you handle it? What did you do that summer for those six months after graduation?" My suggestion and my hope for you is that you do whatever it takes to be able to honestly say, "It was tough and disappointing. But it taught me about the importance of resetting. It taught me how to get back up and begin again. I spent the summer driving a truck for my dad's company. I volunteered. I took an online course. I got experience in this area. I got back up and began again."

Brené Brown: (20:29)

It will not be on your terms or on your timeline. The world does not ready itself for our plans. But make no mistake. What starts at the University of Texas changes the world. And for every individual person listening to this, I'm not talking to your class right now. I'm talking to you. Hearts open, curiosity and courage on, horns up. You've done it.