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How Do I Feel?: A Review of Atlas of the Heart

Abstract

"If we can better understand and describe our emotional experiences and build skills that help us respond to others' emotions, we can connect more deeply with one another."

Posting about the book *Atlas of the Heart* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/how-do-i-feel-a-review-of-atlas-of-the-heart/>

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Comments

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How Do I Feel?: A Review of *Atlas of the Heart*

Angela Kroeze Visser

April 28, 2022

Title: *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*

Author: Brené Brown

Publisher: Random House

Publishing Date: November 30, 2021

Pages: 336 (Hardcover)

ISBN: 978-0399592553

“Are you excited?” I asked my daughter as I drove her to the opening night of the local high school play. In response, she told me she felt anxious, which meant a little bit nervous and a little bit excited. The words we use to describe how we feel can be tricky and we may not always be able to know or communicate exactly what it is that we feel. The premise and goal of Brené Brown’s latest book, *Atlas of the Heart*, is to build a shared vocabulary in order to foster shared connection. Brown writes, “When we don’t have the language to talk about what we’re experiencing, our ability to make sense of what’s happening and share it with others is severely limited” (xxi). The aim is to provide a way to talk about, to name, and to share emotions so that “we can learn more about the emotions and experiences that define what it means to be human – including the language that allows us to make sense of what we experience” (xxiii). and to find a “universe where we can share the stories of our bravest and most heartbreaking moments with each other in a way that builds connection” (xxiii).

When I first held the book in hand, I felt skeptical about its coffee table book appearance and its heavy paper and text call outs. This is a departure from Brown’s previous books, which have been published in paperback and are simultaneously easy to read and challenging to digest. That is, the concepts are simple to grasp, but challenging to engage—and put into practice. So, I was skeptical about how this might translate into a coffee table book, something whose purpose I take to be slow browsing rather than reading. Along the way, I began to understand that this is indeed the intent of the book, something meant to be browsed and re-read and pondered. *Atlas of the Heart* includes a few photos and illustrations, but Brown primarily describes it using the metaphor of a map or atlas, intending to help connect our emotions and experiences by providing “landmarks to orient us” and “language to label what we’re experiencing” (xxix).

The first part of the book is divided into sections describing “the places we go when...” As an example, the first grouping of emotions “the places we go when things are uncertain or too much” (2) covers the emotions stress, overwhelm, anxiety, worry, avoidance, excitement, dread, fear, and vulnerability. More pleasant emotions are also represented, such as “places we go when it’s beyond us” (56) which includes awe, wonder, confusion, curiosity, interest, and surprise. In each section, Brown connects to her own research, reflections on her life, or the work of other researchers, along with a definition of the identified emotion. For many of these emotions, Brown also suggests possible ways to respond when experiencing said emotion. For me, one of the most striking moments in the book is the discussion of anguish, in which Brown both shares a personal experience and points out that anguish is an emotion that social scientists have shied away from, but that “poets, artists, and writers approach... without apology” (90). Despite the book’s emphasis on the need for language to express emotion, there is an indication here that common language is not always adequate. Brown also makes connections between emotions and the potential for experiences of emotion to impact actions and reactions in relationships and within broader society, for example, in the way that disgust and dehumanization are connected and can fuel violence.

The second section describes Brown’s grounded theory of human connection. After providing a brief description of grounded theory, essentially a process of identifying patterns and making meaning of those patterns, she introduces a new theory of cultivating meaningful connection. This theory suggests that in order to cultivate connections, we must develop grounded confidence, practice the courage to walk alongside, and practice story stewardship. Within each of these concepts, there are skills needed in order to do this well and ways of responding that can hinder connection.

At times it can feel like Brown is trying to do too much—to catalogue the language of human emotion and develop a theory of human connection while also providing compelling connections to other research and to potentially helpful actions. Yet Brown does at least part of what she sets out to do, to “deliver work that is empirically based and accessible and that resonates with our lived experiences and lived language” (xxvii). She draws not only on her own research, but also on the work of others to deliver a concise summary of research on emotion that is accessible and designed for repeated readings. Parts of the book resonate for me, yet there are sections where I found myself wondering what I was missing because a description was brief or a connection did not seem to be fully described. In the final section describing a grounded theory of connection, the presentation of the theory itself is not fully developed by Brown’s own admission. Although Brown describes the process of developing a grounded theory in a concise way, it is difficult to grasp what this type of theory development involves, and the data and coding processes that support it. This is a challenge for Brown in her effort to create work that is both based empirically and is accessible. It is likely that some readers will be left with questions about the process of developing the theory, and others might wonder about the theory described and how it relates to the earlier sections of the book.

Atlas of the Heart opens the possibility of knowing we’re not alone in our experiences and feelings because we have shared language. Whether or not one resonates with Brown’s

approach or theory, she invites the reader into exploration. Brown concludes by reflecting on a question that connects to her experiences as a child: “Why do we cause each other so much pain, and why do we turn away from hurt when the only way to the other side of struggle is through it?” (272) Part of her answer is this, “We need to know we’re not alone—especially when we’re hurting” (272). What an invitation! If we can better understand and describe our emotional experiences and build skills that help us respond to others’ emotions, we can connect more deeply with one another, even in the midst of hurt.