



Brazen

The Courage to Find the You
That's Been Hiding

LEEANA TANKERSLEY



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To Laura, who is brazen



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Note to Reader

If you were attending one of my workshops—where we spend three hours focused entirely on reflection and expression—I would tell you that these practices of reflection and expression will heal you, enliven you, return you to yourself, create space for God to speak to you, and therefore bring you home.

So when it came time to write a book about coming out of hiding, I could not help but include an opportunity for you to engage in the lifelines of reflection and expression for yourself. These two movements—like inhaling and exhaling—are literal soul sustenance. And I didn't want you to miss out on that spectacular opportunity.

To that end, I've included prompts at the conclusion of each chapter that will help you interact with the material. Sorry if this feels presumptuous, annoying, or overly aggressive.

But if by chance these prompts feel like an invitation—even if that invitation is a bit uncomfortable—I'm right here, cheering you on, believing that examining your inner landscape will pay off big time and that getting your hands moving will always

help heal your mind. Oh, and grabbing a couple of friends and talking through your findings could be (and I don't want to overemphasize this, of course) life-changing.

If you do the prompts, I hereby affirm the employment of “legal bribes” to yourself. You, Brazen Warrior, get to reward yourself with something delicious, frivolous, or otherwise longed for. Might I suggest a metallic Sharpie. Or a coconut La Croix. Maybe a fresh new journal. Or a walk in the woods.

Let's call it positive reinforcement.

You might also want to invest in a candle you love that you could light and enjoy when you are doing your Brazen Work. And, I don't want this to come across bossy in any way, but I think scouting out a little nook in your house or out in the world that could be the place where you go to reflect and express would be supremely helpful.

What we want to do is set up an environment that is so warm and friendly and safe and nurturing that our souls can't help but come out and play. For some of us, the most sacred parts of us have been in hiding for too long, and we need to create a place where we are just comfortable enough to emerge.

In addition to the prompts at the end of each chapter, you will see suggestions for building a Brazen Board. Think of it as a storyboard for your soul.

You are going to collect images, ideas, and words that we'll combine—throughout the book—to create a Brazen Board, a physical manifestation of the ways in which you want to exercise your brazen.

If you decide to create a board, it will be helpful to have some of the following on hand: poster board (or some kind of canvas), glue stick or rubber cement, scissors, magazines or any kind of visually stimulating papers, cards, images. As you are reading, keep your eye out for anything found that speaks to

you in your daily life—shells, leaves, keys, dried petals, colors, textures, an old photograph, you name it. You might also want markers, Mod Podge, or paints.

You can make this project as sophisticated or as simple as you'd like. There are no rules, and you do not need to feel the pressure to Martha Stewart it to death. Let your board be a process, a prayer, more than a product.

I have found that sometimes we need help exploring our own soul, nurturing our voice, remembering our identity. And these interactive elements can help us access what has gone dormant.

But not if you feel like punching me in the face upon the mention of these exercises. In that case, certainly, just keep movin' right along.

Part One

Receive
{YOUR IDENTITY}



1

Honor Your Created Center

When they heard the sound of God strolling in the garden in the evening breeze, the Man and his Wife hid in the trees of the garden, hid from God. *God called to the Man: "Where are you?"* He said, "I heard you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked. And I hid."

—Genesis 3:8–10 Message (emphasis added)

I sat on my back patio very late at night, after everyone else was in bed, and I scribbled on a legal pad. Through the palm trees around our patio, I could see lights from the city beyond our house. Every once in a while I would look up so I could take in the visual spaciousness I was longing for internally.

I wanted to start a couple of new creative projects. In fact, the persistent desire for self-expression was working itself into a lather inside my soul. I could feel the energy behind it, because creative self-expression is a language formed by

God in eternity itself, a language I love, so it whispers to the very core of me.

But the Soul Bullies—those bullies who are in hot pursuit of my freedom—would have none of it, and they started in with their old stories about me: how I get myself into messes, how I can't be content, how I'm not someone who can be happy, how I'll regret my creative decisions. The Soul Bullies are the ancestors of that insipid garden snake, slithering around me until they turn me upside down and inside out and shake the treasure right out of me. They scare me off, rattle me to the point that I no longer have any idea who I'm supposed to be listening to. What is God's voice? What is my soul voice? What is the bully's voice?

Commence the tangle.

On the night of the back patio session, the tangle was taking over, so I did what I do now, what I've learned—the hard way—I must do when I'm in these scrapes. I set my phone timer for twenty minutes and listen with deep compassion to myself instead of jumping right to judging, overriding, denying. Instead of assuming the longing is coming from an untrustworthy source, I simply give myself permission to listen.

Immediately I hear the following two sentences of doom:

1. How dare you.

and

2. Who do you think you are?

If I really take a minute to consider the source of these two sentences, I realize they are the mantras of fear and shame. They are the calling cards of the Soul Bully. But, when my soul is cornered by these convincing lies, I can't quite discern their origin. They hiss:

How dare you dabble.
How dare you romp, frolic, play.
How dare you desire.
How dare you try and fail.
How dare you follow an inkling.
How dare you believe in yourself.
How dare you trust your perceptions.
How dare you see yourself as a reliable observer of this world.
How dare you go big.
How dare you speak up.
How dare you let your gorgeousness off the leash.
How dare you sing.
How dare you paint.
How dare you write.
How dare you make magic.
How dare you love what you offer this world.
How dare you feel fabulous in your own skin.
How dare you take a single step without having it all figured
out first.
How dare you let anyone see your holy and holey humanity.
How dare you not know.
How dare you learn the hard way.
How dare you believe any of this matters anyway.
How dare you say how you really feel.
How dare you create a boundary.
How dare you clear space for yourself.
How dare you announce your arrival.
How dare you feel entitled to your own soul.
How dare you don a bold lip and a statement necklace.

“Who. Do. You. Think. You. Are?” And then he finishes me off with the sucker punch, “I’ll tell you who you are. You, Leeana, are the world’s biggest imposter.”

I’m tired of fighting. I’m tired of pushing back against them and their attempts to disconnect me from myself. Their entire agenda is to convince me I’ll be better off if I abandon the pure gold in my gut. The problem with this is that every time I do, every time I decide I’ll just give up or settle or let go of the longings, I end up feeling like an actor in my own life. I feel like I’ve lost myself, like I don’t know for sure who I am anymore, like the best parts of me are hiding. And it’s no good. In fact, it’s soul death.

Do you ever feel like this? Something true inside you is trying to emerge—pressing up from the depths—but because it feels sacred and mysterious and wildly free and therefore gloriously dangerous, some dark and tormenting Soul Bully is immediately on your case. A desire, whisper, longing, stirring is welling up, but so is fear, so is an unnerving anxiety. A bully is lurking, and you find yourself in what could best be described as a soul tug-of-war. You find yourself skeptical of you.

This is basically the story of my entire life. Or at least it feels that way some days. I want to follow this voice, this beat, the creative itch in my hands and heart, but something, or someone, is invested in keeping her quiet. Keeping her small. Keeping her confused. Keeping her confined. Keeping her paralyzed. Someone is trying to talk me out of living from my Created Center.

Many theological giants have described this “Created Center” I’m talking about. Henri Nouwen identifies it as the “divinely endowed center.” Thomas Merton calls it “the God-given center of our being,” St. Augustine writes about “the divine center,” and John Calvin terms it “the divine spark.” Some call it the true self or our essential identity, the image-bearing part of

you, your spirit, or your soul. I believe this untouchable place inside you is the part of your being where God himself put his hands in the wet concrete of your existence and said, “You are formed in my image” and “It is good.”

Not only is it good. It is God-in-you good. It is the part of you that longs for truth, beauty, breath, home, love. It is the part of you that notices sunsets and holds a baby close to smell his neck and longs to rescue those who do not know freedom. It is the part of you that sees with eternal eyes and feels with divine intuition. It is the part of you that is both complete *and* becoming. It is the you and the me that is fiercely free.

Where is she?

Some people would have you believe you are inherently, essentially flawed because of your sin and your humanity. My deepest conviction, and the basis for this entire writing, is the opposite: that underneath all of the parts of us that are wrecked and wounded and flawed and human is God-in-us. Our essential God-image. And while we will never be perfect—we will never be God—one of our greatest temptations in life is to believe that the God-image is not enough, and one of our greatest longings in life is to live from what we already, deep-down know . . . that, in fact, the God-image stamped in our souls is more than enough. It is everything.

In *A God to Call Father*, Michael Phillips writes, “Goodness lies deeper in the heart of man’s nature than sin, which came later and entered from the outside. Goodness lies deeper in man because God put himself there. It was very good! Goodness is intrinsic to man’s nature; sin is not. Sin is the corrupting virus that has temporarily corrupted goodness.”¹

Do I believe God put something good inside me on the day of creation that I am to investigate, nurture, return to? Or do I believe the Soul Bullies—that I am a fraud and a fake and a fool

for thinking I am entitled to the eternity God set in my heart?² Could I change the course of human history each morning by waking up and choosing to honor the Created Center inside me instead of abandon her? This is the most courageous work. And. I'm. Ready.

I'm writing this book at age thirty-nine, just a couple of months away from crossing over into a new decade, and this threshold has my attention like none other. I feel a little scrappy, like I'm ready to pick a fight. On the defeated days, I want a do-over on my thirties, a chance to go back and be the more brazen version of myself. I want redemption for all the days I was sad and tired and recovering and barely breathing. Once again, this is the voice of the Soul Bullies who are always telling me it's too late and that I'll be stuck forever. This is the voice telling me I cannot trust the process, that things will always feel the way they do right now, which are two of the biggest lies we're told.

On the days when I'm clearer, I see that it has all—and I mean ALL—led me to this moment. Nothing is wasted. I peer over the fence, looking at the next decade, and I push up my sleeves.

What would it be like to try something completely different on this threshold of eras? What if, instead of trying to outrun the Soul Bullies and their lies, I simply stopped, sat down, and—in the presence of my Maker—returned to the Created Center in me. Asked him to show me the way *home* instead of letting the Soul Bullies convince me to *hide*?

Could these words from the incomparable Maya Angelou be the battle cry rising up from my Created Center, “Your crown has been bought and paid for. Put it on your head and wear it.”³

So I go to the patio, I confront the serpentine “How dare you” and “Who do you think you are?”

Because no matter how many times I tell the Soul Bullies to go away, they come slithering back around. No matter how many times I welcome them and sit them down and tell them they're not in charge, they start hissing louder than all the other voices. So I had to begin again with the reality that my soul has legitimate longings I need to listen to and that the bullies want to scare off all the really good, God-designed beauty living in my being.

Talking about our souls, our dreams, our desires, our longings can seem very romantic. Excruciatingly romantic. I have talked about these things as if they were pedicures and bubble baths. What I'm realizing is that these soul pursuits require guts. Blood and guts. Because every dark force in the world wants to keep us from exploring our God-given wild.

The garden snake convinced us that what we had already been given was not enough. We must seek out something more or different, because what was created in us and for us will not satisfy.

So we grabbed for more, forged ahead of the plan, tried to secure our own sense of self. And it did not produce. Then we ran for cover. We hid because we weren't sure who to trust anymore, especially whether or not we could trust ourselves.

I sat on that back patio for far longer than twenty minutes, to tell you the truth. Maybe ninety. Maybe more. I couldn't quit the inky sky and the breeze. I didn't want to short-circuit the sacred moment. I didn't want to move, actually. In the way that you don't want to scare off the most intrepid butterfly that has somehow come to light on your shoulder. Or in the way that you don't want to get out from underneath your coziest blanket on a crisp morning.

What presented itself was not so much a solution but an encounter, which is its own kind of solution, I guess. Treading into eternity can, ironically, help us become much more present

to what's happening right here, what's happening right now. In a matter of ninety back-patio moments, I felt a shift. There I was . . . *me catching up with me* . . . realizing, once again, something eternal lives and breathes in me, and it is good. God-given good.

Some days I crumble under the weight of the Soul Bully's finger wagging. Not today. Today, I'm armed with my legal pad and my phone timer. I write out each of these sentences. One by hideous one. I look at them. I make eye contact with the venom.

This is a good thing to do regularly. Look all that crap right in the eye and see if it holds. See if it really, actually holds. See if these words are anything God would ever come close to saying to us, dear daughters. Our blind belief in lies is the greatest enemy of our God-given wild. When you put the lies in front of you, you start to see how grotesquely overrated shame is. It's hot air, but it burns if we breathe it in.

I'd like to tell you that at this point in my life I'm done with all that. I'm done believing all the very things that will hurt me most. I'm done walking hand in hand with fear and shame. I'm done giving them the power. The truth is, I don't have that kind of control. I am not God. So, because I can't cure myself of these hot-breathed Soul Bullies, I have to learn how to trick them. And one of the most interesting and exciting ways I know to trick these bullies is by getting to know my soul a bit more intimately. In the presence of my soul's Maker.

The day after my time on the patio, my daughter Lane has found my legal pad. On every page she has gone through and written "I Luv You Mom" and "I Luv You." She's written over the top of my words, my musings, my stirrings, my notes—none of which she can really decipher yet. "I Luv You" in her six-year-old-magic printing that includes a little heart here and a curly swirl there. This recurring note reduces me further and further with every page I turn. It's her big, looping letters written

across my own hurried handwriting, my own restless scratchings, the how dare you insults, and the who do you think you are accusations. I feel like I might fall down dead, it is so tender. I'm given a visual manifestation of my previous evening's dabble into eternity, where this wild, looping love meets all my longings. I'm reminded love covers us.

I'm tired of the story of deception, shame, hiding. I'm ready for a different cycle, a new trajectory. It is time. Time to reach down into the annals of your being and explore all the dimensions of who and what God knit there. It is time to come out of hiding. Let's go after what's been silenced, hidden, lost, bruised, abused, abandoned, bullied. Let's do it together, sisters, linking arms and heading into the fray.

"Leeana," he says to me, and he says to you, like he did to those first humans so long ago, "where are you?"

This book is an exploration of that question.



Reflection & Expression

What is one persistent longing you carry?

For Your Brazen Board

Collage or write the words "My Created Center" or "My Inner Brazen" or "My God-Given Wild."