

*The Courage To
Rise*

Praise For *The Courage To Rise*

“Charmaine has done something truly incredible. She has not only identified the challenges that come with loving and being loved fully. She has laid out for those wandering in the deserts of isolation the barriers set up that keep love out, and the keys to remove them. More than that, Charmaine reminds us that, despite the tumult or trauma of the past, letting love in is indeed possible.”

—**Dr. Nicole Bossard**, President and Positivity Strategist,
TGC Consulting Inc.

“*The Courage To Rise* is an authentic and honest journey into discovering the barriers that keep us all from experiencing all we can from love. Charmaine’s storytelling and connections are disarming and bold. A soul stirring composition of love.

—**BCR**, advocate, educator, doula, and feminist

“This book is the antonym of a scarcity mindset when it comes to love. When Heard encourages the reader to ‘rise in love’ she doesn’t mean ‘reach for what is outside of you,’ she means for you to stand up tall in the abundance that has always been there inside of you, just misrecognized because of a litany of obstacles (psychological, trauma induced, emotional) that have simply been blocking the view. With extraordinary gentleness and care, Heard is taking your hand and walks you through the steps it takes to let go of those obstacles to self love, and deepen a serious practice of radical loving-kindness both toward yourself and the world.”

—**Dr. Michael Washington**, lecturer in critical studies

MY PERSONAL QUEST TO HAPPY, HEALTHY LOVE

The Courage To Rise

*How To Transform
The Barriers That
Hold Us Back From
Healthy Relationships
And Real Love*

Charmaine Heard



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The Courage To Rise

How To Transform The Barriers That Hold Us Back From Healthy Relationships And Real Love

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*To my younger self,
You are my favorite—I love you.
I will continue learning how to love you best
and will always be your greatest friend.*



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Prologue

*Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult
as spending our lives running from it.*

BRENÉ BROWN

I finally had enough strength to sit up in my bed. My eyes were swollen, and my head was pounding from what seemed like hours of crying. My first thought was, “I’m not going to make it to December.”

That was in June 2021. My husband, Rick, had died unexpectedly the month prior. I was overwhelmed with grief and stress. From the moment I received the news of his death until a week after his funeral, my adrenaline was in high gear.

The adrenaline was how I was able to plan and execute his funeral. It carried me through, even though during that entire time, I was holding a tremendous amount of pain, hurt, confusion, and fear throughout my body. Those feelings had been living inside me for some time prior to his death, but they intensified to a level I was sure I could not withstand. His

death was untimely, and for me, it happened at the worst possible stage in our marriage.

Rick and I were separated when he passed away. I would have never predicted that our love story would end this way. Our separation was no reflection on the deep love I had for him. It felt unfair that it had ended the way it did. Now, any hope I had for us was gone. I knew my life would never be the same. But I had no way of knowing just how much my life was about to change.

Following Rick's funeral, all I wanted to do was talk to my Grandma Gray. I wanted to hold her hand while we sat in silence on her couch. I wanted to hear her voice and words of wisdom. I wanted to cry on her shoulder. She was a safe harbor for me. I knew I was loved by her no matter what.

However, I couldn't sit with her because she had passed away four months before Rick. I was grieving her death as well. I was deeply saddened that two of the most significant loves of my life died within months of each other.

My dear father-in-law, with whom I shared a kind love, had also died ten months prior to Rick's passing. I was missing him as well.

Now, sitting up, I slid back against my headboard, tilted my head back, and placed my hands on my heart. I began doing a breathing meditation in hopes that it would ease the pain in my head. I was also trying to slow down all of the thoughts that were swirling in my head.

It took some time, but I felt myself settle into a calm state. In that calm state, a passage from the book *Daring Greatly* by Dr. Brené Brown popped into my head.

“The Man In The Arena”

by Theodore Roosevelt

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

Brown’s teaching has been a source of encouragement over the years. She taught me to dare greatly, rise strongly, and brave the wilderness, with all my imperfections in tow.

Roughly thirty minutes into my meditation, the pain in my head eased.

I stretched, reached over, and grabbed the book, *A Course of Love* by Mari Perron, a book my therapist recommended. Chapter 20, “Wholeheartedness—The Embrace,” was where I had left off. The words in that chapter leapt off the pages and straight into my heart. I felt love was literally holding me through that entire chapter. The sentence that summed it all up for me in the chapter was, “Love is all that matters because love is all that is.”¹

Peace, comfort, and renewed hope settled in me for the first time since the day Rick transitioned. I pulled out my journal, which I keep next to

my bed, and began to write. That journal entry turned into me making commitments to myself.

I committed to allowing myself to take an honest assessment of my life. I promised myself that I would feel every emotion that came up for me instead of stuffing them away, even completely falling apart if I had to. I committed to allowing love to show me how to come back to a place of wholeness because I felt like I was broken into a million pieces.

My last commitment was that I would make something beautiful out of this seemingly hard, messy, and painful life for as long as I'm on this earth by loving myself and others well with all that I have.

For over ten years, I have been exploring the idea of love and healthy relationships. Maybe I watched too many Disney movies as a little girl, but I wanted to live out a great love story, too.

My exploration of love turned into a mission, a quest, if you will, to experience real love and to be in healthy relationships. I felt that I hadn't come into the full experience of love yet. There was always a feeling I had inside that there was something more.

During this quest, I've fallen short so many times that I wanted to throw in the towel. But I would always feel a gentle nudge. I'd hear a calm, steady voice encouraging me to get up, dust myself off, and move forward.

Sometimes, that voice would tell me to just rest. Somehow, I regained the stamina to rise and take the next step forward.

The hardship I faced in 2021 wasn't the first time things had fallen apart for me but it was the catalyst to healing some deep wounds I was still carrying. After making those commitments to myself, I decided to step away from any distractions that would keep me from working on myself. I chose to spend the majority of my time alone for almost two years, learning and healing.

This was my chance to go all in for love. I was determined to figure out how to live the life I'd always dreamed of for myself. At times, I had to walk through uncharted terrain, trying to navigate through some of the lessons I needed to learn.

But like the saying goes, when the student is ready, the teacher will appear. Each time I thought I was stuck, the right person came along to help me. Whether it was my coaches, my therapists, an author, a friend, a family member, or a YouTube video, it was perfect timing.

We all will face hardship, setbacks, and losses throughout our lives. What matters is how we come back from those experiences; what we do next matters. All of the great leaders and my ancestors faced far greater hardships and losses, yet they kept going. If they'd found the strength to keep going, so could I.

As I share my journey of rising in love, one of the healthiest things I've learned was the art of letting go while keeping love intact. I am letting go of wanting a specific outcome, including how well this book will be received.

I learned to let go of relationships that were unhealthy for me and still stand in love for myself and others. This statement isn't past tense—I'm still learning how to let go. Deeply connecting with others is nourishing to me, so relationships matter to me. There is a bit of a recovery period I go through when a relationship changes. Learning to let go has been one of the hardest practices of my life.

I've found that there is freedom in letting go, not just mine but for all involved. And I've learned to accept when others have decided to let me go as well. What's amazing is that letting go opens room for other beautiful relationships to blossom. So, my story continues.

The Optimist

To know genuine love is to invest time and commitment.

BELL HOOKS

I've had this insatiable curiosity about life and people since I was a young girl. To be more specific, my curiosity is about love and human connection. It fascinates me; it's perplexing too.

Throughout my life I was constantly hearing people say life is hard and painful. I would be warned that I would be let down if I had any expectations that other people would do right by me. I felt this sense of resignation in people to accept and expect poor behaviors of others.

Accepting this standard of life was just not going to work for me. It's like we were made to believe we are supposed to be in hell on earth. Here's what I was told: "People are awful, Charmaine. You better be lucky to have what you have because the world is not a nice place. Expect to be hurt because that is what people do."

But the thing is, I'm strong-willed and I have a bit of a stubborn streak in me. So, I refuse to accept as a life sentence that I won't have loving, healthy relationships. I do believe in the goodness of humanity.

Don't get me wrong, I've questioned it on numerous occasions, but I come back to the same conclusion. People do awful things, yes. But there's a lot of goodness to experience with some truly wonderful people.

I know I'm up to risky behavior here. I've risked my heart and got it crushed many times over. There were people who risked loving me, and I hurt their hearts as well. And for that, I am willing to do better every single day.

Choosing the path of love and healthy relationships is not what I thought it would be at the beginning of this journey. I've had to unlearn and learn new ways of relating. I've had to stand alone at times. I've had to stand in the face of hurt and pain. But along the way, I discovered that there's a fierceness to love, too.

All of the great leaders of love that I've learned from have harnessed a great deal of bravery. They risked being strange in society, being ousted by their community, and even losing their lives for love. If there's one thing we should never have to lose our lives believing in, love would be that one thing.

To love well is my nod to all who came before me. I will help carry the torch forward in honor of all that is. Mahatma Gandhi encouraged us to forge ahead by being the change we want to see in the world. That's where it all started for me: becoming more of what I want to see and experience.

My Aha Moment

Even before I graduated from college, I landed a job with a member-owned and member-governed organization and excelled at it. That job was followed by others at the vice president and director levels. As I grew in my career, however, I had an ongoing and pressing urge to learn about healthy relationships and love, which was sparked fifteen years ago.

In 2010, I received my first coaching certification from the Institute for Integrative Nutrition (IIN). I initially attended this program in New York City to learn how to live more holistically. I had been diagnosed with high blood pressure and polycystic ovary syndrome. I wanted to address those issues because I was planning to one day start a family with Rick. I had no idea that my pressing urge and curiosity about love and relationships were about to be ignited.

It was during one of our Saturday sessions inside the Lincoln Center. The instructor explained that we live off of primary and secondary foods. “The food we eat is actually secondary. Your primary food is made up of healthy relationships, regular physical activity, a fulfilling career, and spiritual practice. We are not only fed by food but also by the energy in our lives,” he explained.

The instructor’s explanation was my first huge aha moment—so much so that I wanted to leap out of my chair with excitement. I looked around to see if others were moved the same way I was, but no one else seemed fazed by it. While my peers in the program were planning for coaching practices in nutrition and exercise, I chose to follow the primary foods thread, particularly healthy relationships, since that is what both intrigued and eluded me.

Following my graduation from IIN, I started reading everything I could get my hands on about love, healthy relationships, and whole-person healing. I watched videos, read books, and listened to podcasts from thought leaders about these topics.

While I was still working full-time, I started a small business centered around romantic relationships. It seemed easy enough to begin there because I thought Rick and I had it down pat in that area and could inspire others. However, I couldn’t base love just on what I thought or experienced, so I came up with the idea of interviewing couples about their relationships and posting articles with their stories as inspiration.

During the interviews, I was always impressed with the close relationships I heard about. But it wasn’t long, however, before a few couples began contacting me to request that their articles be taken down because their relationships were ending for various reasons.

I decided to stop interviewing couples altogether. Many of the couples that I interviewed, however, are still doing well together.

After serious contemplation, I wondered if our own inner journey toward wholeness might determine the health of our relationships. Maybe relationships are as healthy or unhealthy as the individuals in the relationship. My exploration turned down the path of self-love.

Here We Go!

*Love is a form of sweet labor: fierce, bloody, imperfect,
and life-giving—a choice we make over and over again.
If love is sweet labor, love can be taught,
modeled, and practiced.*

—VALARIE KAUR

When I first started down this path of self-love, I had no idea where to go, how to do it, or what was going to come out of it. “Begin where you are,” my life coach Ed told me, and so I did.

I recognized that I had privilege when it came to figuring this out. Not everyone has access to the resources, methods, or people that could help. This work was never just for me. As I studied and put into practice what I was learning, I shared my insights with others to inspire and encourage them to find their paths as well.

My hope was that some of the things I learned could also help others along the way. Healthy relationships aren’t something we are taught in school. Healing through pain and hurt is not openly discussed. As a matter of fact, it is not socially acceptable to do that.

The practice of healing and restoring ourselves to wholeness when there is hurt is vital. My argument for why is that if we don’t address our pain and work on healing those wounds and scars, we end up throwing

our unresolved pain on those around us, inflicting more pain on ourselves and others.

I can see that my own experiences and past hurts prevented me from living peacefully with others. I couldn't experience relationships the way I wanted to because I was still holding on to some painful times in my life. I was also repeating the same patterns from my past, which resulted in the same outcome, just with different people, especially in friendships. I knew I couldn't do this alone; I needed help.

As a love nerd, I spent time gathering as much data as I could from thought leaders around the world. What I'd gathered early on is that real love begins with learning how to love ourselves well, nurturing that love, and being brave enough to allow ourselves to heal the wounded parts of ourselves. It's a practice. Practicing real love happens both with our individual selves and in relationships with others.

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I didn't need to disappear and figure it out and then come back. I used to think I had to go away and "fix" myself before resuming my relationship with others. Thankfully, I learned that it's in relationships with others that I learn how well I'm doing in love.

One of the pressing questions I had was, "How do other people define love?"

One of the pressing questions I had was, "How do other people define love?"

I needed to figure out how I could gather data that would give me context and understanding. That data could help me learn how to love more and love better. This was based on my novice assumption that we aren't doing well in love.

If you've been around me long enough, you know about the love boards. I got custom-made chalkboards so that people could write what love means to them. I captured their answers by taking a picture. I collected data on what they shared. Some of my friends joined in to help me.

Those boards have been all over the US and parts of the world. Some people shared their personal stories about love with me. Those boards caught a lot of tears as people wrote their answers. As I look back, that was such a beautiful experience for me. It was a gift to meet so many strangers, yet we had a brief connection over the idea of love.

This little movement opened the door for me a few years later. I began receiving invitations to speak at nonprofits, businesses, schools, and government agencies.

As my interest in healthy relationships, love, and personal growth grew, my interest in my other career lessened. I didn't know how to reconcile my budding fascination with this work and keep a career that was no longer interesting to me.

From the very beginning of our relationship, I made an agreement to always make life really good for Rick. I didn't want him to want for anything if I could help it. The memory that sticks with me the most from our wedding day was when I was sitting alone in the limo waiting to walk

down the aisle. I said to myself, “Charmaine, your job is to make that man so happy for the rest of his life.” I believed he deserved to live a great life. I set out to center him in my life and marriage. I now understand this was the wrong approach to a healthy marriage.

With all due respect, since he is no longer with us, what I share is from my experience and perspective. My passion for healthy, happy relationships is a part of the legacy I want to leave in honor of our marriage, as imperfect as it was. I loved him the best way I knew how. Only he and I truly know the truth about what happened between us.

It seemed Rick was comfortable with the life we had, but around year fourteen, I was growing unhappy and stressed, although not about us specifically. I was burnt out from my corporate job. I couldn't keep it all together. Tension between Rick and me heightened, and we hadn't built the skills needed to resolve our differences.

Rick and I didn't fight or raise our voices at each other. Not having the skills to deal with our breakdowns was damaging to the relationship. It was hard for me to know because he didn't share his true thoughts or feelings with me. I felt left in the dark. For our entire marriage, I tried not to upset him. We were conflict-avoidant, it seems. We both share responsibility for that.

It's Time To Heal And Grow

Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.

RUMI

Years ago, I read the quote attributed to the Sufi poet Rumi. His statement intrigued me. The intriguing part was the idea that barriers are holding me back from experiencing love fully.

I came across similar teachings from thought leaders who were saying the same thing. Jesuit priest Anthony De Mello puts it this way, in his book *The Way to Love*, “Understand the obstructions you are putting in the way of love, freedom, and happiness, they will drop.”² Michael A. Singer is another leader of love who shares a similar message.

I decided to challenge Rumi, De Mello, and Singer’s theory. I was going to explore all the ways I am blocking (obstructing) love, freedom, joy, and healthy relationships for that matter. It wasn’t a question of whether I had barriers; it was about understanding what they were, why I had created them, and how to remove them.

The game plan was to identify the barriers, understand them, recognize unhealthy patterns, establish healthy new patterns of behavior, and understand how I could relate to others from a healthier perspective.

This book will capture some of my personal journey, my quest to find the courage to rise and keep going. My relationship with Rick has been the most significant (romantic) relationship to date, so I will touch on it as it relates to the barriers.

I will share how the areas of holding on to the past, lack of self-care, lack of integrity, dishonesty, lack of emotional safety, resentment, forgiveness, boundaries, fear, comparison, criticism, and the need for approval were some of the barriers I addressed first. There are others, but this is where I started. These barriers were erected in response to experiences throughout my life. The experiences influenced how I have shown up in marriage, friendships, work, and my community.

In the next section, I will provide some background about my life and then share the work I've done in each of these areas.

When I set out to write this book, I wondered who this book would be for. I wrote this book for me, this work was getting to my own salvation. It's also for the person who is on their own personal journey to the greatest love they could imagine for themselves—the person who is willing to keep going no matter what gets thrown at them. It is for that one person courageous enough to bet on themselves by rising to love, in order to experience inner peace and freedom. It's for us.

My intention is to offer you a perspective that perhaps there are barriers that may be blocking the happy, healthy, and loving relationships you desire. Maybe dismantling the barriers will transform your relationship with yourself and others, allowing love to flow. As you read this book, I empower you to allow your inner compass to guide you.

It is courageous to actually allow yourself to be the powerful loving human you were born to be. May this book inspire you to live an even more authentic, beautiful life, no matter what. May your own journey inspire you.

The Foundation

"Poetry Is Not A Luxury"

by Audre Lorde

If what we need to dream, to move our spirits most deeply and directly toward and through promise, is discounted as a luxury, then we give up the core—the fountain—of our power, our womanness; we give up the future of our worlds.

There I was lying flat on my back in the grass, staring into the clear blue sky, letting my mind wander, dreaming away. That was until I heard my grandmother yell out to me, “Girl, get up off the ground like that before the chiggers bite you.” I slowly stood up and reoriented myself back to my surroundings.

I was in the front yard of my maternal grandparents’ house. Looking around, I saw my cousins playing. Some played basketball while others rode their bikes or played with their Barbie dolls. There was a light rhythm and harmony in view.

Grandma was right, I was itchy from the bites I had gotten lying in the grass, but I didn’t mind because lying there offered such peace. I felt at home with myself for that short time. I was nine years old then. Many years later, I still find myself lying on my back staring at the blue sky and sometimes the moon and stars too. It’s my way of finding myself at home again. It also gives me the chance to continue dreaming.

I’ve always been a dreamer. At nine, I had quite an imagination, so I dreamed about how fun life was and the adventures I would take. By the time I was a teenager, I was dreaming about being an actress, musician, and spending time with a cute boy I was crushing on at the time. As a young adult, I dreamt of traveling the world as a performer, enjoying life, and having gatherings with lots of food and fun with my beloved, my family and friends.

Around the age of nineteen, it became harder for me to dream. Life’s challenges got in the way of that. But the rare times I allowed myself to, I dreamt of a life where my friends, family, and the man I was lucky enough to love would move in that light rhythm and harmony of my childhood. We would gather for delicious meals, play games, travel, dance, and enjoy great music together. In all of my dreams, we were all safe, relaxed, happy, loved, and free.