

**SMALL
GROUP
GUIDES**
from HarperOne

LIVING
BRAVE

LESSONS FROM HURT,
LIGHTING THE WAY TO HOPE

SHANNON DINGLE

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INTRODUCTION: YOU HAVE PERMISSION (AND SO DO I)

1. The death of Shannon's husband, Lee, marks a before and after point. What are some before and after points in your life?
2. "Living brave requires us to know ourselves and give ourselves permission to be that person" (p. 5). What do you need to give yourself permission to be or do?
3. We don't have to follow cultural scripts for what brave looks like in movies, or the news, or even what we've seen other people do (p. 8). What cultural scripts do you have around bravery? Who are your models? What would "brave" look like if you didn't follow these scripts and models?

PART I: SURVIVING IS BRAVE

CHAPTER 1: HARD STEPS

1. As you read through the hard steps Shannon had to take after her husband's death, what are your initial reactions? What thoughts or experiences does her story bring up for you?
2. "Give yourself permission to take one step at a time while holding the anticipated steps loosely," (p. 27). Does it make it easier to approach whatever challenge

is ahead knowing you just have to start with one step?
What's one step you might be able to take now?

CHAPTER 2: NECESSARY GRIEF

1. Shannon questions the assumption that healed scars are prettier than unhealed wounds: "Maybe the most beautiful scene is that of a bloody and bruised heart still beating. Maybe the miracle isn't in the healing but in the living, even through hell" (p. 30). How do these words challenge your ideas of healing, beauty, and a good life?
2. Why is it so rare to speak and write from a place of raw honesty (p. 33)? What holds us back from sharing our experiences in this way?
3. Shannon writes that the platitude "God works all things for the good" is twisted and poorly timed" while "God will never give you more than you can handle" is false (p. 37). Why don't these statements help? What has helped you the most in your times of grief and suffering?

PART II: CHOOSING YOUR VOICE IS BRAVE

CHAPTER 3: POWERFUL WORDS

1. After Lee died, some of the most powerful words Shannon received came in the form of a tweet from her

friend Rabbi Ruti Regan: “For what it’s worth, I’m not afraid of you or your grief and I don’t need you to reassure me that things are ok that obviously aren’t at all ok” (p. 48). Why are we so often afraid of people in grief? Discuss ways of talking about grief that are helpful and unhelpful. It’s good practice for when you are talking to those walking through loss.

2. Shannon writes about times when she has spoken up “because silence made me feel like I was going to vomit” (p. 53). Can you relate to that feeling? How have you navigated when to speak and when not to?
3. “You don’t have to speak out to live brave. It’s the living of the story, not the telling of the story, that makes you brave” (p. 56). Shannon goes on to suggest that it would be better to invest in and empower people whose voices have been stripped from them rather than speak on their behalf. How does this approach compare to the ways we have tended to serve or advocate for people on the margins?

CHAPTER 4: NOT KEEPING SECRETS

(Trigger warnings: childhood sexual abuse and sex trafficking)

1. This is a hard chapter to read, a chapter that may require the box breathing that Shannon introduced in the beginning (p. 10). How are you processing Shannon’s story

- here and the feelings it brings up? (This can be something you discuss or simply think about or journal about).
2. “Drowning doesn’t look like drowning until it does,” (p. 62). How does this statement resonate with your own experiences? How can we better recognize the warning signs of emotional and psychological drowning? How can we help others who may feel like they are struggling?
 3. Shannon writes that her knees told some of her story before her words could. She also shares how later in college her story emerged in her body in the form of binge drinking and bulimia (pp. 62–63). What might change about how we approach mental and physical illnesses and disorders if we understand that they are the body’s way of telling a story?
 4. Shannon used to value consistency in viewpoints as a sign of integrity but has learned that “real integrity includes room for growth and change and learning and unpacking, of being somehow the same and yet completely different all at once” (p. 67). How is integrity different from consistency in viewpoints? How could having integrity mean not being consistent?

CHAPTER 5: HARD TRUTHS

1. The opening poem starts with these lines: “I’m learning to befriend the flashbacks // as teachers // as reminders

// as remembrances // as commemorations . . . ” (p. 79).
How do these words speak to you? How do we face the truth of our past and present traumas without being consumed by them?

2. “We do well with resolution and happily-ever-afters; we’re not so keen on grief and not-yets,” Shannon writes (p.85). How have you witnessed our cultural discomfort with ongoing pain? What has helped you accept uncertainty as a natural part of life?
3. “I know from experience that speaking the truth about trauma can end up as a new trauma by itself. And it’s okay to protect yourself from future trauma” (p. 91). How do these words challenge or support your approach to trauma—in others or yourself?
4. “The hardest truth,” Shannon writes, “is that no path is guaranteed to be safe” (p. 93). How do you reckon with that truth personally? What enables you to move forward knowing that truth?

PART III: TRUSTING IS BRAVE

CHAPTER 6: KEEPING THE FAITH (SOMETIMES BY LOSING IT)

1. Shannon isn’t able to sing about God’s goodness currently and is unsure if and when the day might come

- when she can. Have you felt the expectation to always sing of God's goodness and muster joy, even in suffering? What would it look like for you to be honest with God? What would it look like for our faith communities to make space for that honesty?
2. "Faith says, 'I don't understand why life is what it is, at least not right now, but I'm going to trust that maybe there's something I'm not seeing'" (p. 99). How does this definition of faith compare with your own understanding?
 3. Shannon writes about furnace living—living through ongoing trials, chronic medical conditions, and pain without resolution (p. 104). "Are we willing to radically accept life in the furnace?" How are you wrestling with that question in your own life?
 4. "Maybe the beauty of the furnace is in how it delivers us from the cheap goods we might have chosen otherwise," (p. 107). What beauty have you seen coming out of furnace living? (And it's okay if you haven't seen any).

CHAPTER 7: HARD TRUST

1. "I think sometimes hope and trust and faith are woven into one," Shannon writes (p. 115). How are hope, trust, and faith related for you?

2. Shannon thinks C. S. Lewis's analogy that death is an amputation is wrong because it is based in an ableist framework that assumes amputation lessens a person (p. 115). She writes that Lee's presence in her life and others' made their hearts more whole. If death doesn't diminish a person, what *does* it do?
3. "You have to ask the hard questions if we belong to each other. You have to be willing to possibly offend someone, possibly break the trust you once had, by asking if they're safe with their partner," Shannon writes (p. 120). How have you navigated asking hard questions that might be offensive to someone you care about? Why was it important for you to ask? This last question is for personal reflection and not for discussing aloud: Are there any situations you know of where it might be worth asking a hard question like "Are you safe at home?" or "Does this person hurt you?"?

PART IV: TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF IS BRAVE

CHAPTER 8: OUR DESIRES MATTER

(Trigger warning: suicide)

1. Shannon writes about women's roles: "Jesus says we're supposed to be like Mary, but churches across America offer Martha's role as the only one we're allowed to fill or even desire," (p. 129). Why do you think there is

- such a disconnect between Jesus’s teaching and the reality of women’s roles taught by many churches?
2. It is important to name desires, even if they can’t happen or are unhealthy, because “telling the truth about what we want helps us connect better with ourselves and others” (p. 133). Can you name some of your desires, in this discussion group or to a trusted friend? How has naming desires helped you in becoming known and connecting with others?
 3. After a first therapy session, Shannon’s therapist, Heidi, pivoted to self-care, something Shannon was not used to doing (pp. 144–145). What does “self-care” mean for you? Is it important in your life? Why or why not?
 4. Shannon writes that “abuse is inevitable whenever we equate the power or privilege (or lack thereof) of a person with their worth or intrinsic value or even their degree of humanness” (p. 147). How do you see the power and privilege dynamics of abuse working out in our society—in overt or subtle ways?

CHAPTER 9: OUR FEELINGS ARE GOOD INFORMATION

1. In this chapter, Shannon explores how feelings are important, but they don’t need to take over. How have you handled emotions in the past? How can we view our feelings as “information” but still maintain control over them?

2. “Grace is God saying, ‘yes, this is yours, and I say you deserve it because it’s mine to give’ ” (p. 152). How does focusing on God’s declaration that we deserve good things because they are God’s to give differ from focusing on our undeservingness? How does it change our approach to good things in life?
3. Shannon’s therapist, Heidi, tells her, “You don’t need permission to feel what you’re feeling” (p. 157). Do these words speak to you? Are there feelings you haven’t allowed yourself to fully feel? What might happen if you let yourself fully feel them?

CHAPTER 10: KEEPING OUR HEALTH

1. In the opening poem Shannon writes you don’t need permission to feel, “to admit need // be strong enough // to depend on others” (p. 163). Why does it take strength to depend on others?
2. Shannon writes that our past hurts and traumas affect our health today. “If we don’t speak the truth about our trauma—not to everyone, of course, but to those who have earned the right to hear it and help us carry it—then our bodies will cry out” (p. 168). How does your body reflect your history? What does caring for your body and honoring the truth of your history look like?

3. “Keeping healthy isn’t about following other people’s rules, because they weren’t made for your body. Keeping healthy is about being at home in your body and loving her well” (p. 172). What rules have you followed to keep healthy? How might you redefine what healthy is for you, given Shannon’s definition?

PART V: RELATIONSHIPS ARE BRAVE

CHAPTER 11: HARD CONVERSATIONS

(Trigger warning: childhood sexual abuse)

1. There is a difference, Shannon writes, between intent versus impact (p. 180). What we intend is important, but not as important as how it lands. Is there a situation where you have been on the receiving end of something well-intentioned but hurtful? How does the “intent versus impact” concept inform how you approach conversations?
2. Because our society is so polarized, many people shy away from hard, vulnerable conversations. Shannon also stresses that “you never have to enter the public conversation to be brave” (p. 190). Where are you at with having hard conversations in personal relationships or in the larger public sphere? Where do you find yourself unable to engage? Are there ways you want to improve here? If there are points where you are able to engage vulnerably, what enables you to do so?

3. “Often it requires more courage to discern what isn’t meant for public consumption than it does to click POST or TWEET or PUBLISH,” Shannon writes (pp. 190–191). How do you discern this for yourself?
4. What might living brave look like for you in public or private conversations?

CHAPTER 12: CHOSEN FAMILY

1. Do you have any chosen family? How do these relationships compare with relationships with your family of origin?
2. Shannon has learned to receive help as part of belonging to a chosen family (p. 197). How do you feel about asking for and receiving help? Where do your feelings come from?
3. “Boundaries are at the heart of the health or lack thereof of families,” Shannon writes (p. 198). How does this play out in your own observations and experiences?

PART VI: HOPE IS BRAVE

CHAPTER 13: HOPE IS THE BRAVEST THING

1. Though hope isn’t always fulfilled and offers no promises of safety, neither does caution (p. 203). Does it

- change your approach to life to realize that no approach promises safety? If so, how?
2. “None of us is broken,” Shannon writes. Trauma responses are normal “when humans experience more than we ever should” because “we weren’t made for trauma” (p. 208). Will Shannon’s words change how you understand and talk about brokenness, whether about yourself or other people?
 3. There are some places where Shannon feels like she belongs, but other places where she doesn’t (p. 212). Where are places you feel you belong or don’t belong? What contributes to these feelings? What information do your feelings provide?
 4. As you finish the book, what does hope look like for you? What does living brave look like for you? Are there any topics you read about that surprised you, made you feel seen, or invited you to think, speak, or act in a different way?

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