

To be one's true self, and to belong.

This is the heart of our desire, from the day we emerge from our mother's womb, until the day we pass into the waiting arms of the Earth.

To be one's true self, and to belong.

From that first day, there are people and circumstances that would deny us these things. By ideas about who we should be because of the nature of our bodies, or the color of our skin. Possibilities denied to us by family and culture and beliefs. By roles and labels that existed before we even drew our first breath.

For some of us, those roles and labels give us advantages. For others, less so, or not at all.

Some of us accepted this, others questioned, knowing that the roles and labels didn't fit, that our inner lives and true selves were different.

And that this denial of people's true selves is damaging, and crippling, and in some cases, lethal.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are fighting to end this. We are trying to create a world in which anyone can be their true self, and really feel like they belong.

And even in such a world, it is a lifelong task to fully realize who we are.

The labels of roles and identity are endless.

Mother. Daughter. Sister. Aunt. Uncle. Doctor. Lawyer. Clerk. Social worker. Teacher. White. Black. Red. Brown. Father. Son. Brother. Cis. Gay. Queer. Trans. Socialist. Communist. Capitalist.

We become many of these things, sometimes by choice. Others we reject. Others we try to nuance. We can be all of these things, and more, or none of them at all.

Our identities are multi-layered and complex, and we can't really speak to our sense of self, our sense of being, with these kinds of words. You could string a list of these labels together, and it can't really tell you much about a person.

The labels don't really talk about who we are. They don't really tell us what kind of person we are, or the person we want to be.

And they don't tell us how we feel internally about our lives, and how we affect the lives of others, and those two things – Being and Belonging - are deeply intertwined.

None of us stand alone. We are all part of larger groups – families, friends, communities of place and belief, communities of identity, of work, of knowledge, of action.

When we ask what it means to fully Be, what we're really asking is whether our lives are meaningful and fulfilling. Whether we've been supported in being our true selves. Whether we mostly feel good about who we are, and how we've shown up for ourselves and others. And I say mostly because we've all made mistakes, we all have inner anxieties about our lives.

When we have a fully developed sense of Being, we are at peace with who we are, grateful for blessings, aware of frailties in ourselves and others. We are grounded, compassionate and empathic.

We have achieved some degree of self-understanding, and we know that answering the question "Who Am I?" is a life-long pursuit.

We know that we aren't "perfect". We recognize our shortcomings, our mistakes, the bad behaviors of our past. But we have regrets, we've repented and made amends. We aren't plagued by burdening guilt or self-recriminations.

We are largely content with the ways we've usually behaved - alone and in relationships, and in what we've been able to achieve. We've reached a state of self-acceptance, and no longer have to prove our worth to ourselves or others.

We have a realistic assessment of our strengths and our flaws. We appreciate our talents and gifts, and have learned how to make up for our weaknesses.

We are humbler and less judgmental. We've experienced both depressions and elations, recognized the impermanence of each, and have shown resilience. We are more loving and

forgiving, and are deeply conscious of the crucial place of generosity and kindness in our everyday lives. We are more tolerant of ourselves and others.

This sense of Being can happen at any age. It's an evolution, a process of knowing more and more about who we are, and becoming more and more comfortable with ourselves.

It is a lifelong journey. And it is the birthright of each and every one of us.

And to have a sense of completeness in our Being, we need to Belong. To be part of a larger community. To have meaningful relationships with others who like and appreciate us. To have close bonds based on shared values and activities, customs and rituals. To receive comfort and support from these relationships, which are mutual and cherished.

These relationships can be in a variety of groups: family, friends, colleagues, congregants, professional associations, unions, troupes, platoons, teams or even gangs. When we feel a sense of belonging to one or more groups, our lives feel enhanced and more meaningful.

A big part of our identity comes from being part of a group. We define ourselves in relation to others, and our sense of self is elevated or diminished by how we treat, and are treated by, other people. We can also derive a sense of belonging from place, from the land, a town, a city, a country.

But Belonging itself can trip us up, if our identities become too tangled up in our sense of being part of a group or a place.

The Irish poet and theologian, Pádraig Ó Tuama, says that "Belonging Creates and Undoes Us Both".

"We belong here" has often been coupled with "And you don't". Implicit in Belonging are those who don't belong, who aren't "one of us", and so deserve to be treated without respect.

As Unitarian Universalists, we reject these notions.

This distinguishes Unitarian Universalism from many other groups we can choose belong to, this ideal - that everyone belongs, regardless of who or what they are. That who and what they are is valued and respected.

And it is an ideal, a higher standard than what we see around us, a dream we fight for.

Yes, we are born into this life with roles expected of us, and labels imposed on us, that we didn't choose.

But we say these things are not fixed. They are not who we are. They are not our fate. We choose otherwise, to be other and wise.

To be our true selves, and still belong.