

What does it mean to belong?

It should be no surprise that this is a really complicated subject. Who am I? What is my place in the scheme of things? How am I to be and act?

A common belief is that modernity has us all alienated from each other and the world, and there is some truth to that, but I see it as an incomplete truth. I think these questions of who are and where we belong have always been with us, but that in the past the answers were decided for us by our situation, by the world we were born into. Our social status and class were fixed, our beliefs defined for us, the ways of knowing were limited, and most humans never wandered very far from home.

Being able to make those choices for ourselves is really a new development in human history, and they are not easy decisions to make. Hence our unease. What if we get the answers wrong? I think this is the understandable motivation of many who look to traditional authority for answers.

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At the root of this question is our deep longing for connection and meaning.

We could say that a human being alone is not fully human. We are social beings, and we derive meaning and identity from our relationships. We are embedded in many different social structures: family, work, our friends, perhaps a church or synagogue, the local community, and our country, to name the primary ones. We may also be involved in groups around our interests, such as our hobbies, or political affiliations.

These are all present at the same time. As individuals, we may place more emphasis on one or more of these as contributing to our sense of self and identity. Being a member of a political party or a religion might be more important to us than our family, for instance. Maybe our

family of origin was a dysfunctional hell, and we choose to create a new one. Many of these social structures may impose boundaries on our behavior via law and custom, such as traditional gender roles. Some may help us feel liberated or welcomed. Others may make us feel trapped and out of place. They overlap in complex ways, and a feeling of belonging may be felt in one sphere and not another.

So yeah, it's complicated. I think we all feel like we belong more in some places than others. And that's ok. We don't have to belong everywhere.

But we all have the emotional need to be an accepted member of a group. That comes with some tensions.

As Brene Brown puts it: *Belonging* is being part of something bigger than yourself. But it's also the courage to stand alone, and to *belong* to yourself above all else.

She goes on to say that the opposite of belonging is fitting in, and that fitting in is about assessing a situation and changing who you are in order to be accepted.

And I want to push back a little on that, because doing a little bit to fit in is something we all do to some degree. It's when we compromise our values in order to fit in that we get into trouble. When we go along with something we think is wrong, or don't speak up when we disagree with something. When we fear to express ourselves for fear of being cast out.

Belonging, according to Brown, doesn't require us to change who we are; it *requires* us to be who we are. That requires a strong sense of self, and being secure in that knowledge, secure enough that we don't need the group to affirm who we are. That's healthy.

It also requires the other individuals in the group to have a strong enough sense of self to be accepting of who we are, and that's another tension. I think Brown is ultimately pointing to

the idea that true belonging is based on our collective ability to hold our differences in a generative way.

A group without differences seems rather flat and boring to me. But some people may need that kind of thing.

For me though, differences are a source of power and strength and creative energy. It's kind of like the potential between the positive and negative electric charges. The greater the energetic distance between those poles, the greater the energy available. I think when we look at it that way, we see that the people we may differ the most with also offer the greatest opportunities for a much wider circle of belonging.

To quote UU minister Lee Barker: *Anybody can create community with people who believe just like they do. The true test of community rests in the ability to create it with people who disagree with us.*

And then the question becomes, how do we create communities that can hold those differences and disagreements? That becomes increasingly difficult as a community becomes larger and more diverse. And the ways we've been doing it no longer seem to have traction in an increasingly polarized world.

So we start here in a community of choice, building the skills and processes needed to build such communities, and work to spread them into the world. That's what distinguishes us from a knitting circle. We're not just here for the coffee and companionship with like minded folks, although that's a perfectly good reason to be here.

We're also here to fill a much deeper longing in ourselves, a longing for a better world out of the ruins of the old. And that's a spiritual journey. One that I think John O Donohue express

very well, so let me end with this passage from his book, *Eternal Echoes: Exploring Our Hunger to Belong*.

*In post-modern culture there is a deep hunger to belong. An increasing majority of people feel isolated and marginalized. Experience is haunted by fragmentation. Many of the traditional shelters are in ruins. Society is losing the art of fostering community. Consumerism is now propelling life towards the lonely isolation of individualism. Technology pretends to unite us, yet more often than not all it delivers are simulated images. The “global village” has no roads or neighbors; it is a faceless limbo from which all individuality has been abstracted. Politics seems devoid of the imagination that calls forth vision and ideals; it is becoming ever more synonymous with the functionalism of economic pragmatism. Many of the keepers of the great religious traditions now seem to be frightened functionaries; in a more uniform culture, their management skills would be efficient and successful. In a pluralistic and deeply fragmented culture, they seem unable to converse with the complexities and hungers of our longing. From this perspective, it seems that we are in the midst of a huge crisis of belonging. When the outer cultural shelters are in ruins, we need to explore and reawaken the depths of belonging in the human mind and soul; perhaps, the recognition of the depth of our hunger to belong may gradually assist us in awakening new and unexpected possibilities of community and friendship.*

Let us stay hungry. Let our hunger open us to those possibilities as we journey together in the days ahead.

***Longing and Belonging***  
**Rev. Munro Sickafoose**

**Unitarian Congregation of Taos**  
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