

Here you are welcome. Here you belong.

These words have been used so frequently in our community, in worship, in announcements and newsletters, in groups small and large, that I am sure you know them by heart.

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The last time I was here with you during the water communion we spoke about belonging as being a part of something. Interestingly it is also defined as “to be in your proper place.”

What I find fascinating about this idea of belonging is that to belong is a verb. It is something we do. An action we take. We choose where and with whom we belong.

And this belonging, this choice to be a part of something, has two sides to it. The first being how we act out our belonging in the various spaces of our lives. And the second is how we invite others to belong with us. How we draw the circle wide.

And we can't belong to a place or a group or a people without action. Without doing. Even the simple act of showing up here today or turning on the TV or computer monitor and choosing to come together is a type of belonging. Being a part of something.

And this, of course, relates to our community here at FUSIT. But it also relates to all of the spaces in our lives where we look for and find belonging. Or where we don't. In our relationships, in our families, in the other communities of which we are a part, in classes and workspaces, in hobbies and groups of friends.

How long did it take for you to feel like you belonged here?

I imagine it didn't happen all at once, and that, for many of you, it didn't happen when you were sitting in the pews. For me it happened gradually as I became more involved in the community. First volunteering to help out in RE, attending events with my family, going to choir rehearsals, and then leading the children's choir myself. Something I hope to be able to get back to this year.

That connection and becoming a part of something greater, of feeling welcomed in, only happened when I made the choice to participate more fully. And maybe for you it was joining a small group ministry. Maybe it was singing with the choir. Maybe it was becoming a member of a team or committee, attending Pub Theology, or any one of the many ways we come together as a people. And maybe it hasn't happened yet.

And worship is important. I am not denying that. It is what separates us from organizations whose missions might be similar to ours. To build community. To promote justice and equality. We strive to do those things but we also come here to worship. To consider things of worth. To join into a collective spiritual practice each week.

And while worship may be the place that has helped us to continue to feel that we belong, or even the place where we first felt that initial moment of homecoming, finally finding a place where your own beliefs were in alignment with others. Still I would guess that for many of us, it was not what initially made us feel a part of this community.

During our Time for Wonder today we heard the story of Ethelred Brown, who found a faith and community to which he decided to belong. And here is that flip side to belonging, because we can work and work and work to become a part of a community, to forge connections and find belonging, but if we are not also being welcomed in openness and love for our full selves, then we cannot build trust and we cannot become a part of something greater than ourselves.

In many ways Ethelred Brown had to find his own way to belong to the Unitarian faith. He made a choice and he continued to act out that choice and live out our values of love and inclusion, at a time when he was not being met with those same values he himself was lifting up. The circle was not opened wide for him, he had to find his own way to belonging.

The hymn we sang earlier I'm On My Way says a lot about how well Ethelred Brown was welcomed. "If they say no, I'll go anyhow". If they say no I'll go anyhow. Perhaps for you this story and song feels inspirational. Here is a person who made a choice to belong and did not quit until he created his own place to be a part of, to welcome people into.

For me it feels aspirational. And not that I aspire to be him, always having to try to find a way to be allowed in. Honestly that sounds exhausting. No, it feels aspirational to me in the lesson that it teaches us about how we can create spaces for everyone. Here you are welcome, here you belong. That we can use this story to help us remember that we are not a wave, we are the ocean. I am a part of you and you are a part of me and we are all a part of this community and world. We can aspire to be the community that we should have been for Ethelred Brown.

The Archbishop Desmond Tutu said:

“Africans have a thing called ubuntu. It is about the essence of being human, it is part of the gift that Africa will give the world. It embraces hospitality, caring about others, being willing to go the extra mile for the sake of another. We believe that a person is a person through other persons, that my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours. When I dehumanize you, I inexorably dehumanize myself. The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms. Therefore you seek to work for the common good because your humanity comes into its own in community, in belonging.”

A person is a person through other persons. Your humanity comes into its own in community, in belonging.

How are we widening our circle? How are we creating a place of safety, of trust? For ourselves, for one another, for each person that walks in our doors?

And how are we creating the opportunity for each of us to belong? What actions would we need to take to make this the radically welcoming place that Ethelred Brown was searching for and didn't find? How can we honor our own path and find spiritual wholeness while cultivating community?

Douglas Steer said:

The ancient question, “Who am I?” inevitably leads to a deeper one: “Whose am I?” – because there is no identity outside of relationship. You cannot be a person by yourself. To ask “Whose am I” is to extend the question far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder: Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?

As Unitarian Universalists we do not follow one creed. No one here is going to offer you easy answers to the great mysteries of life and death. Instead we offer covenant. And what is covenant if not a promise to belong? To acknowledge our shared humanity and inherent worth. To invite you into relationship with us. To say we are yours and you are ours, and together we will be, community. We are the ocean.

Here you are needed. Here you are loved. Here we will answer the call of our hearts together. Toward oneness. Towards justice. Towards all encompassing radical love.

And I acknowledge that the past two and half years have made it challenging to feel like we belong anywhere, except maybe in front of our computers. We have lost that sense of belonging, that trust with the world at large that we understand how things work. Even here. We are working to rebuild that connection with one another, that trust in each other and this community.

And part of that is a choice we each have to make. Where do we choose to give the gift of our time and energy and attention? How do we act out belonging, for ourselves, and others?

For Gautama Buddha spoke this truth:

"Your actions are your only true belongings."

Emily Richards
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