

Preparation for Belonging

We all have a hunger for belonging, for connecting with others. No one likes standing outside the circle; we want to be included and accepted. From the time we are little, belonging is the thing we seek. As we move through life, our connections have a huge impact on our identity.

Our first connections and first images of our identity are formed in the family. As children grow, however, they often take social identity cues from their peers. This process continues through the teen years and early adulthood as we identify with various groups and form our identity through those connections. Identities involving gender, race, class, and country of origin are in play throughout our maturation. For those of us who grew up in what we might think of as a “mainstream” or “dominant” US identity like white middle-class, these cultural groups still define us, even if we have come late to understanding their significance in our lives.

As we move into early adulthood, our identities are in part shaped by what we do in life. If we become a teacher or a doctor or a parent, we incorporate parts of those social roles into our sense of self. In these troubled times for our country, our political groups seem to be a part of our identities whether we like it or not.

In adulthood we forge a variety of connections. Some serve us well and we maintain them throughout life. Other connections become uncomfortable. Sometimes we no longer feel a need to belong to a certain group. Other times we feel the group has rejected us. The disconnect can happen because of personality differences, not having shared purposes, race, class, and a variety of other reasons.

Some of us join a religious community to find a sense of belonging. However, we should also consider the ways in which our own UU community has not always extended the sense of belonging to others. We have claimed to be “welcoming congregations.” But in some ways, particularly in matters of race and class, we haven’t made that welcome work out very well.

Our sense of self is bound up with our personal narratives, the stories we tell about ourselves. Even our deepest stories are often about connections. Whether we maintain our connection to our family of origin or we break it, there is often a story about our identity. When we re-create ourselves through a change in a career, a relationship, or a location, there is often a story about the loss of a former self and the remaking of a new one. It is worthwhile to reflect on our most powerful personal stories and to see what part our connections play in them.

Many of us love to think about the question “Who Am I?” We examine our identity in terms of our personality, our talents, our inner longings, our deepest sense of self. But to get the fullest sense of our identity, we should also look at our connections.

Here are some quotations that may help you think about various aspects of belonging.

We all belong here equally ... Just by being born onto the earth we are accepted and the earth supports us. We don’t have to be especially good. We don’t have to accomplish anything. We don’t even have to be healthy. *Polly Horvath*

The essential dilemma of my life is between my deep desire to belong and my suspicion of belonging. *Jhumpa Lahiri*

Although I am a typical loner in my daily life, my awareness of belonging to the invisible community of those who strive for truth, beauty, and justice has prevented me from feelings of isolation.

Albert Einstein

Each person with his or her history of being accepted or rejected, with his or her past history of inner pain and difficulties in relationships ... is different. But in each one there is a yearning for communion and belonging, but at the same time a fear of it. Love is what we most want, yet it is what we fear the most. *Jean Vanier*

Some of us aren't meant to belong. Some of us have to turn the world upside down and shake the hell out of it until we make our own place in it. *Elizabeth Lowell*

We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now. *Martin Luther King Jr.*

Traditions are our roots and a profile of who we are as individuals and who we are as a family. They are our roots, which give us stability and a sense of belonging – they ground us. *Lidia Bastianich*

Where you belong is where you choose to constantly choose to show up. *Karina Antonopoulos*

There are invisible lines / connecting everything / together,
and I am particularly fond / of the one that connects / me to you.

Gabriel Andreas

Questions to Ponder

1. Consider your life story in terms of the groups you have been associated with. How did these connections shape you? Which have been most important?
2. Do you feel a sense of connection to something other than people – a career, a passion, a place, a belief, an ideology? How does this make you feel connected?
3. What groups have you belonged to that were uncomfortable? How have you handled the discomfort?
4. How have race, class, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation affected your ability to fit in? Have you ever intentionally or unintentionally excluded someone due to one of these factors?
5. What “belonging” connections would you like to strengthen in your life now?
6. Unitarian Universalists claim to be welcoming congregations. What has your experience been? How can the denomination better welcome people from a variety of races, classes, sexual orientations, and political ideologies?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the gathering, think of a situation where you feel a sense of belonging. The prompt for the Words of the Day activity will be to complete this sentence:

“I feel a sense of belonging when ...”

This session is dedicated to Alicia Hawkins, who founded the covenant group program at First UU Albuquerque.