

Belonging: The Building Blocks of Community

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I distinctly remember the door.

One of those doors with a narrow strip of glass,
allowing people to see in and people to see out.

I remember jumping up and down,
and waving when the teacher in the classroom wasn't looking,
all in a valiant effort to get the attention of Kristin,
my best friend in Grade Eight.

But what I now remember most acutely,
some thirty-six years later,
is the heavy hand of Mr. Davis,
the school's principal,
as it came to rest on the top of my head,
bringing both my bouncing
and my valiant though I'll-planned attempt to amuse Kristin,
to an abrupt and bitter end.

Mr. Davis then boomed words
that rightly caught my attention.

“Son, I don't think you belong here.”

“No, Sir.”

He escorted me back to my class,
and told my teacher that I seemed to have gotten lost
on my way to the washroom.

It could have been worse. Much worse.
I probably at least deserved detention.

But being a good student—
and this being my first infraction—

all I ended up with that day
was some embarrassment before my classmates.

As I've sat with the question of belonging recently,
I've been swept back to 1983, and to that corridor
at Apollo Junior High School in Richardson, Texas.

What has stayed with me across the years
is the principal's fairly obvious conclusion
that I was decidedly out of place.

Indeed, I wasn't where I should be,
and I knew it just as well as Mr. Davis.

It's a feeling I've had at many points in my life.
I'm guessing you have, too.

A feeling of being in a place where I didn't fit,
in a group where I wasn't truly welcomed.

In a place I knew I did not
and would not ever feel
that I really belonged.

This is, I would venture,
a fairly common experience among UUs,
both here within this community and beyond.

With some 90% of us having come to this faith
from another faith or no religious tradition,
most of us know something of what it means
to be "lovers of leaving,"
to borrow a phrase from Rumi,
the Sufi poet, who some 700 year ago,
penned the words we often sing around here
in the hymn "Come, Come, Whoever You Are".

For much of the 20th century in Unitarian Universalism,
we "lovers of leaving" were called "come-outers"—
people who had come out of other religious traditions.

It's why UUism is so often referred to as "our chosen faith,"
to signify that most of us have come to it, as adults,
by our own free choice.

Which means that our detractors are right.

We are heretics.

At least in the original sense of the word,
which simply means "one who chooses."

Now, it should be said that a few of us grew up in this faith
and are sometimes annoyed by our emphasis
on having come into this tradition from another,
when that, of course, isn't their experience at all.

I completely honour that, but would also say,
that any and all of us,
each and every day,
choose our faith.

We choose how we will invest ourselves—
through our time, our energy, and our money,
through our trust, our devotion, and our practice.

We choose how we will invest ourselves—
in support of what we say we believe,
in what nourishes our spirits,
in what gives substance and sustenance
to the dreams and hopes we have
for our own lives and for the world around us.

We choose how we will invest ourselves—
in order to belong
to know ourselves as part of something larger
than we alone can be.

For many of us, we choose to do that here.

To come together to build up community,
both within and beyond these walls.

In our day, in this city, in this country,
that is an increasingly counter-cultural thing to do.

It is also a creative act of hope, of love, of longing,
and I would even say, in this moment in time,
it is also an act of resistance.

It is a bold thing to do,
to get out of bed on a Sunday morning,
sometimes in foul weather, no less—
to come together in religious community,
especially when we don't even find in this place
a set of necessarily shared beliefs,
but are, instead, invited into a covenant—
into a set of promises we make—
for how we will be with each other and the world.

* * *

Across the years, it's often been said from this pulpit
that, "You belong here, because you are here."

And so you do.

"You belong here, because you are here."

But to truly belong requires more than simply showing up.
It asks you to reach out, to connect, and engage.
It asks you to grow,
by putting into practice the principles
at the heart of our faith.

While Unitarians don't tend to report dramatic conversion experiences,
the truth is that this is a faith
that, when practised, will change you over the long haul.

For it involves a steady opening of the heart
towards one's self and towards others
in love, in compassion, and in understanding.

* * *

A few years ago, I attended the last of the Massey Lectures given by Adrienne Clarkson on the topic of “Belonging.”

Over her five lectures,
she discussed “the paradox of citizenship.”

As an immigrant and now a citizen of Canada,
I deeply appreciated her reflections
on what it means to belong in this country.

As a minister, there were multiple times
when I thought how easily her words about Canada
could apply to our congregation, and to our faith.

She spoke of Canada’s stunning diversity and relative harmony.

She spoke of how leaders the world over are baffled
by the comparative success of multiculturalism in Canada.

She said, poignantly, that what is “hard
for people from other nations to understand
[is] that we do not treat people as outsiders
because they are different from us;
we have learned over the past forty years
how to accept difference because we ourselves were different.”¹

While her assessment of Canada
is still a bit aspirational,
she points to the commitment to hospitality and inclusion
as the central values that have shaped
and continue to shape life in this country.

What most strikes me, though, is that her point
unmistakably echoes
God’s admonition to the Jews in the Torah
to not oppress the stranger,
reminding them that they themselves

¹ Clarkson, p. 99.

were once strangers in a strange land.²

“Thou shalt neither vex nor oppress a stranger:
for ye were once strangers in the land of Egypt.”

It is a fitting commandment—
for this country comprised of immigrants,
and for this faith comprised of come-outers.

It is a call to a noble and ancient ethic
by which those who’ve most recently arrived
are taken in by those who’ve been around longer.

Such an ethic seemingly defies so much of what we know
of human competition and the survival of the fittest.

It begs the question of what could possibly ground
such an ethic of kindness.
Of what could inspire such acts of radical welcome and inclusion.

And it invites us to wonder
at how different our world and our lives might be,
if the circle of belonging were extended ever-wider.

* * *

A couple of years ago, Calgary mayor Naheed Nenshi,
told the story of speaking at a community forum
on welcoming Syrian refugees to the city.

He said:

I was a little bit nervous walking in
because it was an open invitation, anybody could come,
and I thought there might be some angry people
or people with a lot of very difficult questions.

And who was there were churches and synagogues and temples
and mosques and grandmothers and volunteers

² Paraphrase of *The Book of Exodus*, 22:21.

and people from across the community,
who were just asking the same question,
which is by the way
still by far the most common question I get,
how can I help?

And at one point a First Nations woman stood up.
I only knew that because she said,
I am a First Nations woman.

I thought she was going to say,
why are we having all this focus on these refugees
when we have so many problems closer to home?

And what she actually said was, I need some help.
Because I need to understand how and when they're coming
because I want to make sure,
and many of my First Nations colleagues,
want to make sure that when these people come,
we have an opportunity to have the elders there
to drum them in and to do a smudge ceremony
so we can welcome them to this land.

Mayor Nenshi then understandably said,
“I might have lost it at that point.”³

* * *

Early on in her lectures,
Adrienne Clarkson quoted the testimony of
Grand Chief John Kelly before the Royal Commission
on the Northern Environment in 1977,
where he described how “the Ojibway were cheated by Treaty 3,
originally signed in 1873 by the Ontario government
while the federal government stood by.”

Despite his people being cheated, he makes the point that,

³ Aaron Wherry, “I think we’re going to show people who we are, our generosity of spirit, what we’re capable of,”
November 20, 2015, www.macleans.ca.

“we work together by enlarging,
by allowing more people to join the circle...”

It is that commitment to the ever-enlarging circle
that has become Canada
that Clarkson, like her husband John Ralston Saul,
credits to the Indigenous peoples of this land.

Chief Kelly said:

It appears that as the years go by,
the circle of the Ojibway gets bigger and bigger.
Canadians of all colours and religions are entering the circle.

You might feel you have roots somewhere else,
but in reality, you are right here with us.

The chief then goes on to speak powerfully
of our interdependence.

I do not know if you feel
the throbbing of the land in your chest
and if you feel the bear is your brother
with a spirit purer and stronger than yours,
or if the elk is on a higher level of life than [are humans].

You may not share the same spiritual anguish
as [when] I see the earth ravaged by a stranger,
but you can no longer escape my fate
as the soil turns barren and the rivers poison.

Much against my will, and probably yours,
time and circumstance have put us together
in the same circle.

And so I come not to plead with you to save me
from the monstrous stranger
of capitalist greed and technology.

I come to inform you that my danger is your danger too.

My genocide is your genocide...”⁴

For better and for worse,
in words he spoke 42 years ago,
Chief Kelly holds up the ways we are bound together
by the threats and challenges that we face.

He points to our shared vulnerability,
and the deep need for us to recognize
that all of us are knitted together,
“for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer,
in sickness and in health, until death do us part.”

“The inescapable network of mutuality,” Dr. King called it.

“The interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part,”
our Seventh Principle teaches.

If there is anything that defines sin
from a Unitarian perspective,
it is our capacity to lose sight of the ties that bind us
one to another, and to all of life.

When we forget that we share a common destiny.

When we forget that we, too, were once strangers in a strange land.

When we forget that we belong to each other,
and think that we can somehow manage better on our own,
set apart from the web of life itself.

It can be a tempting story to tell.

To imagine that we’re self-sufficient, self-made.
In control, and on top of everything.

It can even work out for a time to seem true.

But the hard truth of this world is that we are all vulnerable,

⁴ Adrienne Clarkson, *Belonging: The Paradox of Citizenship*, p. 5-6.

susceptible as any other to life's hardship and its heartache.

This being human means that
we all face material, emotional, and spiritual needs
we cannot wholly fulfill on our own.

And so we live in a web of interdependence,
with everyone and everything else.

For me, the clearest sign of spiritual maturity
is having the deep awareness that we are in need—
and that we are needed.

For the recognition of our interdependence
is the great covenant at the heart of life itself.

* * *

When our religious ancestors, the English Puritans,
landed on the shores of this continent nearly four centuries ago,
they recognized that they were
truly reliant on one another for their very survival.

They established formal covenants with one another
to ensure their mutual well-being.

Such covenants were vital, as these early settlers faced
an uncertain future in a strange and often hostile land.

The shift within our faith in recent years
toward a renewal of the role of covenant among us,
is really a return to our earliest roots on this continent.

As in days of old, our congregations
can be religious laboratories for learning
how best to contend with the challenges we face,
with courage, grace, and resilience.

But only if we deepen our ties.
Only if we open our hearts.
Only if we are willing to be real

about the vulnerabilities we share.

May we who have known, in whatever way,
what it means to be strangers in a strange land
harness that feeling of not quite fitting in,
that feeling of alienation and isolation,
and use it with fierce and loving determination
to build up a place of true belonging for all.

So may it be. Amen.