

Belonging Together

by Rev. Michelle Collins, delivered September 21, 2014

25,086. It's not how many UU's there are on the east coast, and it's not how many yards the NFL ran last year. It's how many students there were at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville when I started there. 25,086. In many ways, I experienced the counterintuitive notion that the larger the crowd you're in, the lonelier it can seem. I came in as a transfer student my second year and so I had missed the freshman bonding and freshman dorm experiences at UT, which may in retrospect not been all that bad to miss. My dorm room and later on-campus apartment were a full 30 minute walk from the buildings where my classes were, and for all three years I was there, it was a sea of unknown faces that I walked through to get to my classes. Ditto for studying in the library – there were just too many people.

Of course, this makes sense. It's not the entire campus or an entire town where one forms relationships, but rather smaller groups. Classes, academic programs, Greek societies – no, I wasn't in one – clubs and religious groups. Tribal philosophies put a cap on the number of people that our human brains can form meaningful relationships with, and that number's not that large. Some say it's 150 people, and some say it's somewhere between 100 and 250. Regardless, it's not too terribly many, and it's fewer than even the number of members of this church.

In Marina Keegan's essay, she talks about both her graduating class but also about her smaller groups, too. Marina loved writing, both fiction and nonfiction essays. This particular essay of hers took my breath away the first time I read it. It was probably the last thing that Marina wrote – she was killed in car accident days after graduation. Shortly after her death, this essay went viral on the internet. She touched something deep. She touched on core human feelings – loneliness and one of its opposites, belonging.

Loneliness is a multifaceted idea, and since I've started talking with people about it I've heard many different perspectives on it. Alone and lonely are distinctly different things. There are some who need to be alone to recharge, some who need to be alone to be productive and creative. Even someone like me way on the extroverted side of the scale still needs my alone time, too. I see many new office plans jump onto the bandwagon of these open space office settings, including the UUA's new headquarters building – I wonder about the impact of what's lost with those changes, with less working time alone and not even having the regular space to be alone.

Distinct from being alone, there's also loneliness. It's experienced differently by each of us and valued differently from person to person and situation to situation. There's loneliness that one feels when you move someplace new and haven't made connections yet, there's

loneliness connected with depression also, and feelings of loneliness brought on by loss. And like in Marina's reflections, some of these feelings of loneliness touch places of fear.

"We don't have a word for the opposite of loneliness [she says], but if we did, I could say that's what I want in life. What I'm grateful and thankful to have found at Yale, and what I'm scared of losing when we wake up tomorrow after Commencement and leave this place."¹ Maybe she's afraid of losing her friends, maybe she's afraid of the feelings of loneliness that she feels she's found the opposite of and she's afraid of being back there again. Maybe she's just afraid of the change and not knowing what comes next. I can relate to these fears all too well.

It can be lonely to go someplace new or to start someplace new. I remember the first UU congregation I joined and how I started attending there about 6 months before joining. It was a hard first couple of months, and sometimes I'm amazed that I stuck around at all. It was maybe late spring when I started, and the congregation was on the tail end of some conflict of which I was completely unaware. Tension was still there and feelings were still raw, but I didn't know that. I had started attending because I was craving community and being able to be around people who had some similar ideas and values that I did. I was craving a sense of belonging. Unfortunately, that's not what I got at first. They had a coffee hour, much like ours – some version of it is fairly standard in UU congregations – and it was in a non-geometrically shaped lobby area where that took place. And for two months I stood there, beside a wall in that oddly shaped room, with my visitor nametag on, and spoke to hardly anyone. I remember only one person who spoke to me – someone with a 12-letter last name that took me a year to learn how to pronounce – he became one of my friends there – he made a point to say 'hi' but that was about it. It was a terribly lonely experience and not at all what I was yearning for.

I wasn't just hoping for a place to be but also a place to belong.

Shame researcher and author of *The Gifts of Imperfection* Brené Brown lifts up belonging alongside love as an irreducible human need that has persisted over the ages of human life and evolution. She defines belonging as the "innate human desire to be part of something that is larger than us."² The desire to be part of something that's larger than ourselves. I love that this can refer to an actual physical group of people, or an online group, or even part of an idea or sharing an idea that others have too, even if they aren't around. There are many ways we find belonging.

I lead a discussion group out at one of the local retirement communities and the last time we met we talked about belonging. It's something that I hear folks there talk about a lot and I've been curious to ask about their first experiences of feeling like they belonged there. They shared with me about their feelings of how the community feels more like a neighborhood with the emotional and relational connections that you find in close

¹ Marina Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, page 1.

² Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, page 26.

neighborhoods. They talked about their first visit or their first tour – one of the members of this discussion group is a volunteer who gives prospective residents tours on a regular basis – many of the folks remembered their own tour and how it felt. They described how it just felt right and how it felt like home, of how belonging is something that passes between people. Now not to seem too rosy eyed, but folks also shared about how it wasn't a sudden thing to feel like you belonged and how it also took work to get there.

Belonging isn't an automatic thing – it takes work and involvement on the part of the person who is seeking that belonging and it takes work and welcoming and connection-making on the part of those who are already in the group. It's important to not neglect the work on either side of this equation. It took work and risk for me to go to that church the first time, and then it took even more for the next several times after that. I can't tell you how many times I considered giving up during those lonely coffee hours. Moving to a new community feels like and is an incredible risk! I know so many people for whom thinking about that transition is frightening and unknown – a huge change to consider.

But this equation works both ways, too. We talk about welcoming and hospitality and even inclusion here, but they're more than just words or philosophies. They take work. Hospitality and welcoming and inclusion are a sum total of many different little actions done by every single one of us. And even more, it's a process that's ongoing. When someone comes here for the first time, none of the little actions done in the past matter, only the ones done right there in that moment. We seek for everyone to be able to feel safe, accepted, and love, and empowered to be their authentic selves here. This kind of belonging is transformative, and this kind of transformation is a fundamental reason for religion.

Former UUA president John Buehrens said this about why people join communities: "To be human is to be religious. To be religious is to make connections. To lead a meaningful life among the many competing forces of the 21st century, each of us needs support in making meaningful re-connections to the best in our global heritage, the best in others, and the best in ourselves."³ To be human is to be religious, to be religious is to make connections. We crave a place to be and the connections that give us that sense of belonging.

Mary Hunt is a contemporary feminist theologian, and she's done some specific work on the theology of friendships and relationships. Now, I realize that friendship is different from neighborhoods or church membership, but she has some neat ideas and also has a wide definition of this sort of relationship. Hunt designates friendship as "a voluntary association freely entered into by two or more persons."⁴ That does sound a bit like the larger groups we're talking about today that are also voluntary associations – we're here because we choose to be, we're members by our choice. She names four parts of this

³ Quote from John Buehrens, *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership*, a Commission on Appraisal report, page 1.

⁴ *Belonging*, page 23.

process of friendship which I'd like to extend this in terms of membership and belonging. They are: love, power, embodiment, and spirituality.

Love. We talk about love a lot in terms of religious communities, and I've struggled with whether it's the most accurate term to use. In fact, just this past week we grappled with this at our Board of Trustees meeting. We were talking about the church's first End, that we strive for everyone to feel safe, accepted, and loved here. It's an elusive thing, one that we may all define differently, and one that not everyone might even be coming here to find! Hunt has a particular meaning for the word love in terms of friendships – "love is a commitment to deepen bonds between persons without losing individuality."⁵ Now that's inclusion and acceptance! That's love in community that I think we can sink our teeth into. Love is a commitment to stay in relationship while respecting each person's individuality.

Power. In this context, power means the ability of each individual to make choices. Folks are not only there voluntarily, but they have the power to make choices, too. This starts with the use of the democratic process for our decisions as a community but it definitely goes further, too. We each have a part that we play and that we can choose to play as we belong.

Embodiment. The physical body and physical presence are part of making relationships and part of belonging. Have you ever seen what happens to a group as they eat together? Sharing a communal meal brings together physical needs with emotional and relational needs like nearly nothing else can. Now I'd probably have a bone to pick with Hunt about the necessity of physicality to form membership and belonging. I love to stretch the boundaries of ways that folks can be together, and I'm really looking hard at technology for new ways to expand our possibilities. This year we'll be running an online small group here – I'm hoping it'll be one of the ways of doing this.

And last, spirituality. In the context of relationships, Hunt describes spirituality as an intentional process for one to make choices, a process that takes into account meaning and value as well as the needs of others and the quality of life in the community. Membership is a spiritual expression as it is affixing oneself to a greater meaning, one that wasn't created just by oneself but rather is part of a larger group.

I want to come back to the question of scale and to the work that it takes to feel like you're a part of something. While saying you're a member of something might be a relatively straightforward thing to do, feeling like you're a member and feeling a sense of belonging are more elusive.

Back to the sea of 25,085 other people that I faced at the start of the school year. Of course I never felt like I belonged with that huge group. The scale was just too big. Instead I found smaller groups, little sub-communities, and that's where I fit in. My fellow math majors, the Presbyterian Student Center, and some other groups too. I tried out a number of groups,

⁵ Ibid.

and some of them worked for me and others didn't. I found places where I belonged. And the UU congregation that I ended up joining – I finally gave up on waiting for connections to happen in coffee hour – not to say that they can't! – I went and joined a committee instead. This one was much more like a small group that also got a little work done for the church than it was a traditional committee. I found a smaller group where I could belong and then settled into the church further from there.

What does it take for you to find a sense of belonging? What would you call the opposite of loneliness? And the question that I keep asking, what do we need to do to create those feelings here? Neighborhoods are one thing, but institutions are another. It takes involvement; it takes work; it takes love that's inclusion and acceptance; it takes finding small groups and niches where we can each fit in. Our Connection Circles are starting up right now – try one out if you haven't before. And lots of other church programs are starting up, too. It's a great time of year to explore some new ways to find connection and belonging.

We don't have a word for the opposite of loneliness, but if we did, I could say that's what I hope we can create right here. What I'm grateful and thankful to have seen and found in moments that we share. The opposite of loneliness. It's not quite love and it's not quite community; it's just this feeling that there are people, an abundance of people, who are in this together. People who are on your team.

We don't have a word for the opposite of loneliness, but if we did, I'd say that's how I feel right now. Here. With all of you. Humbled, inspired, challenged, and called to a greater purpose. And we can keep that growing. We're in this together. Let's make something happen in this world.⁶ May it be so.

⁶ Quoted from "The Opposite of Loneliness" essay by Marina Keegan, but edited liberally.