



# Becoming and Belonging

BY RONA TYNDALL, OUTREACH COORDINATOR, GRACE CENTER INC., MASSACHUSETTS

Do you like elephants? I'm crazy about them. Elephants are not only naturally social creatures, they actually form complex multi-generational societies in which tradition is passed on from one generation to the next. The matriarchs coach the adolescent girls into elephant womanhood. The mature males bring the adolescent boys off on a retreat of sorts, after which they return as adult elephants, ready to take their place as leaders in their society. Fascinating.



It is also true that elephants bury their dead. They grieve and have complex mourning rituals. They return to the gravesite year after year, lovingly running their trunks over the tusks of the dead, just as they did to show affection when their loved one was still alive. Remarkably, elephants treat a dead human being in exactly the same way; they scoop up the body, cover it over with soil and leaves and stand

vigil over it for hours, leaving only when their mourning ritual has ended.

An incredible article by Charles Siebert entitled, "An Elephant Crackup?" (*New York Times Magazine*, 2006) chronicled the demise of elephant society due to poaching and habitat loss.

*(T)oday's elephant populations are suffering from a form of chronic stress, a kind of species-wide trauma. Decades of poaching and culling and habitat loss have so disrupted the intricate web of familial and societal relations by which young elephants have traditionally been raised in the world, and by which established elephant herds are governed, that what we are witnessing is nothing less than a precipitous collapse of elephant culture.*

In other words, when baby elephants don't know who they belong to, they don't know how to be in the world. Without a common culture, there is no context in which to grow into their truest selves.

While elephants and humans shared a social bond two generations ago, one result of the trauma of recent disconnection and un-belonging, I am sad to say, is that escalating episodes of intentional elephant-on-human violence have become epidemic, killing people and forcing whole villages of people to relocate. When their natural, communal life-style is destroyed, elephants, like people, have no culturally enforced boundaries of behavior; they have no society to teach them how to become what they are meant to be.

At the risk of being too personal, I will tell you where my fascination with elephants originates. It comes from a lifetime of observing the importance of shared cultures and the impact that the environments and people who make up home have on the geography of our souls.

My parents were immigrants from Scotland. We lived in Vermont, where we were fully part of neither Scottish nor American culture. But when Scottish friends and relatives threw parties I knew to whom I belonged, thanks to recitations of Burns poems, great quantities of Scotch, the Highland Fling and haggis. Then it would be time to go back to school—where I might use a phrase or a word unfamiliar to my neighbors and have to check with my sister to see if only Scottish people said that.

# Quest

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“Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition.”

—James Baldwin

A monthly for religious liberals

## THINKING ABOUT BELONGING

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I married Paul, a man from Ireland. People think that the Scots and the Irish cultures are similar, but they are not. He had an extensive network of friends and family here who had immigrated in the mass exodus of the 1980s. It was good to be surrounded once again by people who knew who they belonged to and who they were.

Our daughters, too, are first generation Americans, but fully part of neither American nor Irish culture, and certainly not Scottish. (It only takes two generations before a culture is lost.) We were happily absorbed by Paul's large family with their Irish music and food and humor. But like my sister and me, both of our girls would sometimes come home to ask about the meaning of a uniquely American word or if Americans use a particular phrase.

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**A sense of belonging is a precious, precious thing. Belonging helps us to become who we are meant to be.**

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When my youngest went to college, I noticed that every friend she spoke about was either an immigrant or 1st generation American. African, Greek, Italian—it didn't matter to her what their particular culture was, she just wanted to be around people who had one! No coincidence that she went into sociology. I understood why. When I was the pastor in Rockport, Massachusetts I would go to Café Sicilia once or twice a day just to be around people who knew they belonged to each other.

My eldest daughter also married an Irishman. A sense of belonging is important. If they are blessed with children, my grandchildren will be the third generation of first generation Americans, which says a lot about the value of belonging.

I haven't lived in my neighborhood long, but it's been long enough to feel

a sense of belonging—long enough to watch the kid at the end of the street progress from riding a unicycle to driving his own car; long enough for the young twins across the street to go from calling me *nice lady*, to *Ettore's* (my dog's) *mommy* and finally (shyly), *Wona*.

I've been here long enough to get to know every neighbor, every dog and every frequent visitor to the neighborhood by name. I now know who to turn to for gardening tips, who likes to trade leftovers and whether or not the older people need to be checked on, who to thank if lobster or bread or garden veggies or pasta or a good book are left on my porch. The people here know who they are and who they belong to.

A sense of belonging is a precious, precious thing. Belonging helps us to become who we are meant to be.

Back to the elephants, for a moment. Another quote from "An Elephant Crackup?":

*Elephants, when left to their own devices, are profoundly social creatures. A herd of them is, in essence, one incomprehensibly massive elephant; a somewhat loosely bound and yet intricately interconnected, tensile organism. Young elephants are raised within an extended, multi-tiered network of dotting female caregivers that includes the birthmother, grandmothers, aunts and friends. These relations are maintained over a lifespan as long as 70 years.*

Lest you think that I am anthropomorphizing elephants, I remind you that while animals aren't people, people are animals. Humans, when left to our own devices, are also social creatures. Young humans were once raised in an extended, multi-tiered network of relatives, neighbors and communities. That is not so true now. America, at any rate, has become a very mobile society. Most of us have family scattered throughout the nation or across the globe and we move for work, for marriage, for sunshine. We have learned to

live without a sense of rootedness or connectedness or stability. We have learned to live with the expectation that a sense of place and family is fragile. A sense of community is increasingly rare in our society.

A few years ago, I heard a Native American pastor preach at a gathering of several thousand people. He spoke about what the loss of Native culture and traditions and rituals and sense of community has done to his people. "We have forgotten who we are and whose we are," he said. "When we forget about where we have come from and who we belong to, we lose our very selves. Without a context of community with which to identify, we don't know who we are anymore. When community is destroyed, so is our society and our sense of belonging to something greater than ourselves."

Chilling words. Challenging words. Words to heed in these days amid violence of thought and word and deed. Words to heed in these days of loneliness and longing. Words to heed when we are forced to consider what the demise of even one little neighborhood can do to our common culture.

We, like the elephants, need one another to know who we are, where we belong and what we belong to. We belong to each other. ■



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## Why Belong?

BY JOE CLEVELAND,  
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UNIVERSALIST CONGREGA-  
TION OF SARATOGA  
SPRINGS, NEW YORK

I wanted to start this sermon by saying I am no good at joining, by proclaiming, *I don't follow the crowd! I am an individual!* But then I started thinking about all the groups and clubs and societies and associations I've been a member of.

I am now or have been a member of—well, I can't even keep track of how many organizations I've joined. Many environmental groups: The Wilderness Society, the National Wildlife Federation, the Sierra Club; but also groups like PFLAG (Parents Families & Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and a 1980s version of Students for a Democratic Society that didn't quite get off the ground. I have joined labor unions and book clubs and folk music societies and....

I'm hoping the FBI has the records on me because I just can't keep track.

But what if our gathering into so many groups and belonging to so many organizations is a good thing? The 20<sup>th</sup> century UU ethicist and theologian James Luther Adams believed that "Any healthy democratic society is a multi-group society." This conviction of Adams's grew especially out of his experience of living and studying in Nazi Germany in the 1930s.

The Nazi party was growing in its control of the country and was coercing people to join. For Adams, a free society is marked by what he called its voluntary associations. There need to be associations we can enter into by choice, and there need to be many of them.

But there is also a strong individualist, anti-joining thread in our UU identity. I'm not the only one who doesn't want to be seen as a joiner. When the American Unitarian Association (AUA) was

founded in 1825, William Ellery Channing, who seemed to be the logical leader for the new movement, refused its presidency. He had preached a sermon just six years before called "Unitarian Christianity" that became the touchstone for the emerging movement, a sermon that, when published, was "the second most widely circulated pamphlet ever, trailing only Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* in sales."

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I've thought some pretty good thoughts in my day, and I've got more pretty good thoughts to come, and all of them—*all of them*—are realizations about relationship.

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But Channing also set a benchmark for the aversion to centralized power that has characterized Unitarianism. He feared associations because they "injure free action," and especially because "they accumulate power in a few hands."

This aversion to centralized power is still with us. Rebecca Parker, former president of Starr King School for the Ministry, our UU seminary in Berkeley, California, observes in *A House for Hope* (2011) that "Many liberals, consciously or not, seem to prefer that their religious institutions remain weak, underfunded, or distracted by endless attention to 'process' and checks on the exercise of power."

In his "Remarks on Associations" (1829) Channing said, "In truth all great actions are solitary ones. All the great works of genius come from deep, lonely thought... That is most valuable which is individual."

I think Channing is great, and rightfully a source of inspiration for us. But on this point I think he's just wrong. I've been an individual. I've been "deep, lonely." I wouldn't recommend the

experience. When I think of the truly profound experiences of my life, they have all been in relationship.

I've thought some pretty good thoughts in my day, and I've got more pretty good thoughts to come, and all of them—*all of them*—are realizations about relationship. My thought is always related to something I've read or something I've seen or overheard or it's something my wife said. Moments of insight? They're always discoveries about new relationships that I can have with other people and other ideas.

We need community. I need community. When I couldn't find it in the Catholic Church, I tried to find it in academia. And when I couldn't find it there and I felt stuck in a deep lonely, I started following my love for music and that led to coming into community with people who liked folk music.

I love music. And music is all about relationships. It's about the relation of one note to the next, the relation of my body to the breath it holds and releases. And the banjo—can I talk about the banjo? The banjo got me into a style called Old-Time music, a big part of which is what gets called fiddle tunes. And I've gone to Old-Time music camps in Massachusetts and in the Great Smokey Mountains of North Carolina.

The best part of those camps is always the jams that take place at night. We've been together all day, getting to know each other, trying out one thing or another, and then in the evening we all sit down together. It's not a circle, usually. More like a crowd. And we've gotten to know each other a bit and are starting to trust one another and so we're huddled up real close to one another—on top of each other, really. It's very intimate.

And from that community of people, this amazing music pours out. Our feet are pounding away at the floor and maybe I can't play every note of this tune but I'm playing every other note,

and our guitars are banging and there's a bass thumping and banjos ringing and fiddles singing. It's amazing. It's an experience that takes me out of myself and into community—an experience of community like no other except one: being in church.

It is community like that that grounds the church.

A book by Gary L. McIntosh on connecting visitors to congregational life describes ten characteristics of the Emergent Church, a movement which is sort of a Gen X reaction to the megachurch movement. One of the characteristics of these trendy churches on the cutting edge of redefining what "church" means—these churches that are looking toward the future of faith—is this: *"They see community as more important than church.* Thus, community happens first, leading to church; rather than church happening first, leading to community."

I think contemporary Unitarian Universalism has a great aptitude for this point of view, and is getting better at thinking and behaving in this way.

Our aspiration is to beloved community. It may even be our vision of heaven. It was Dante's. In the last part of *The Divine Comedy*, in the *Paradiso*, Dante's vision of heaven is of a community of love that can't wait to welcome more into the community. A new soul comes to heaven and the present occupants say, basically: *O Goody! Someone else we get to love!*

James Luther Adams writes about this sort of community in an essay titled "Our Responsibility in Society." He describes how our ability to act for justice in the world is grounded in our ability to create community and how part of what we have to offer society is a church community built on love.

*It is just here, then, that we encounter our peculiar responsibility in society, the responsibility to offer a church in which there is an explicit faith in the community-forming power of God, a*

*practice of the disciplines of liberty, an eliciting of the participation of our own membership in creative fellowship.*

Based in such a fellowship, we extend fellowship—a just response to the love that will not let us go.

Community, being together, is difficult. And no, we don't always get along and we disagree over how to make decisions and over who is in charge of what. But it is vital that community is what we strive for.

There is a passage from a novel called *Jayber Crow* by Wendell Berry that illustrates the evolution of community leading to church—to a religious way of being. The main character, who loves his hometown, says,

*My vision of the gathered church... had been replaced by a vision of the gathered community. What I saw now was the community imperfect and irresolute but held together by the frayed and always fraying, incomplete and yet ever-holding bonds of the various sorts of affection... It was a community always disappointed in itself, disappointing its members, always trying to contain its divisions and gentle its meanness, always failing and yet always preserving a sort of will toward goodwill... My vision gathered the community as it never has been and never will be gathered in this world of time, for the community must always be marred by members who are indifferent to it or against it, who are nonetheless its members and maybe nonetheless essential to it. And yet I saw them all as somehow perfected, beyond time, by one another's love, compassion, and forgiveness, as it is said we may be perfected by grace.*

May we—through time and effort and attention to community—be perfected by the grace of belonging. ■



## My Tribe

BY CASSANDRA GAYLE FISHER, ARTIST, SOUTH BEND, INDIANA

When I say I have found my tribe what I mean is that I have found a community of people I enjoy sharing Earth with. Really. My tribe is the people I stand next to while I cook, while I work, while I play, while I mourn, while I grow—and who stand next to me. Life comes at us, one moment after the next, and how we respond defines us. My tribe is made simply of the people who have responded beautifully, as well as they could, as effectively and hilariously and deliciously and disastrously and helpfully as they could. During one of those moments, that person did it right. Not necessarily gracefully or even well, but right. It fit. They made it all work.

My tribe is not all people I like. It is not all people I agree with or even get along with. There are people I love dearly who I cannot stand to be in the same room with for very long. But those moments that come at us change everything. Sometimes it is subtle, sometimes startling, but there is always change. A deeper smile line. A new scar. A work of art.

My tribe is not a still pond. Some days it rages and thrashes like the ocean in a storm. Some days it is all four seasons at once. We are many and varied and ever, ever changing and we are doing it together here on this planet. We may not always be entirely happy about all of it—hell, some days, some moments, it's absolutely infuriating to be human. But I am. We are. And the fury is an energy that can be directed, blended, integrated. It need not be an isolated cold fury that hardens the heart, but can instead be shared and warmed and used to promote change. The further we share it the greater the chance that the change will integrate and spread out in a trillion little ways.

*(My Tribe, continued on page 5)*

## A Letter to a Cousin

BY PHIL MARSHALL, MEMBER OF THE FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

I had a bit of an epiphany the other day. Let me ask you a question. Suppose you were to get a letter from someone on the other side of the country, saying that they'd been looking into their family tree and had found out that the two of you were 15th cousins twice removed, and that they'll be nearby soon and would you like to meet up? What would you do?



I got an email a bit like this a while ago from my second cousin once removed, inviting me to the annual family reunion in Bournemouth. (I was living in England at the time.) I went, and it was great! It was my first time at the reunion, but everyone was really welcoming; I met many of my second cousins for the first time, and we had a lovely afternoon swapping stories together. Even though the main thing we have in common is a shared set of great grandparents, they treated me like family. Because, well, I am family!

I read once of somebody who had found out that they were Barack Obama's 8th cousin. This seemed amazing; they were certainly very pleased. According to Tim Urban, who

*(My Tribe, continued from page 4)*

And this is what we do. We offer of ourselves, we share and accept from one another, and who we are and what we want to do with our lives becomes part of what we are all doing with our lives. We become a whole by being together. By joining our flames, our passions, we light the way toward the future. Watch us shine. ■

writes the blog "Wait but Why," it turns out that we each have about 10 to 20 second cousins, around 300 fourth cousins, and something like 70,000 8th cousins. If you grew up in the Bay Area, most people you walk past on the street in San Francisco are your 12th cousin or closer. And *everyone on Earth is closer than your 50th cousin, and most are your 15th or 16th cousin*. Why stop there? Extending out to more and more cousins means going back in time to greater and greater grandparents. Urban says that our 50 times great grandparents were alive in the 11th century, and each one of them is the shared great grandparent of each

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...the only question for any pair of organisms is: What degree of cousins are we?

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pair of us 50th cousins today. And if we go back to about 340,000 BCE we get to my 14,000 times great grandparents, a couple who are also yours and *everybody else's* 14,000 times great grandparents.

Our shared 600,000 times great grandparents are interesting: these are the grandparents we share with the chimpanzees, all of whom are 600,000th cousins (many times removed, of course, as their generations are shorter than ours). It's an amazing thought, isn't it? The Hominid family *really is a family*.

Going to the Zoo will never be the same again.

"Cousin" is a marvelous word. English doesn't have a special word for second cousin, or any more distant cousins, and what a good thing that is! It means that we can honestly say that every single living thing on this planet is cousin to every other living thing. Cats, dogs, spiders, trees, your own gut bacteria, we are all cousins who share

the same trillion times great grandparent, who lived nearly 4 billion years ago, and whose frail body was a single microscopic cell. And so the only question for any pair of organisms is: What degree of cousins are we? Are you my second cousin, like Barbara, who emailed me to invite me down to the South coast for the day? Or my 50 millionth cousin, like the whales that call in to the Bay Area twice a year on their annual migration?

You may not have spent much time with your distant cousins, but they are family nonetheless.

As you might be able to tell, I wasn't fully aware of this incredible fact until quite recently. I mean, I knew about evolution, and felt some affinity with some animals, and liked plants, but hadn't *really* thought about the simple fact that life on Earth is *literally a family*. Now I know why people say grace before meals.

It's interesting to think about how your family and mine is doing, around the world. Your cousins in Syria and Iraq (the Sapiens) are having a hard time, displaced by climate change and desperately seeking security, one way or another. Our family is going to face more and more of these testing times over the next century, as the weather patterns change, land becomes unuseable, and many of us have to move. A lot of us won't make it, whole branches of our family tree coming to an abrupt halt at the beginning of the Anthropocene epoch. I have cousins in Florida, and in Bangladesh (not Fords, but more Sapiens). Which of us will be the first to pick up a pen as the sea levels get higher and higher?

I asked a friend my hypothetical question the other day. What would you do if you got a letter from a long-lost 15th cousin? He said he'd be happy to meet up with them, since they went to the trouble of writing. What about your 50th cousin, I asked. Would you meet up with them? He said, *sure*. ■



## From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY  
SENIOR MINISTER,  
CHURCH OF THE  
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

One thing I do to relax is to read mystery novels. Not the kind where you are continually terrified and can't breathe deeply while you read them—that's not relaxing to me. No, I read mysteries where a plucky heroine (and yes, it's always a heroine) will come near death while tracking down a murderer, but I know very well she'll be just fine in the end.

In each of these books, women do physically daring things: go to the murderer's house for a confrontation at midnight; ignore death threats and keep investigating; survive duct tape and being tied to chairs repeatedly. And in each of these books, there is a resting place, a place where the heroine belongs, where she can relax.

As tension builds in the book, those places of belonging become more important. It might be a relationship with someone trusted who is equally daring and brave. It might be a café where the food is reliable and the company is familiar. It might be dog shows or catering jobs or Chinatown in New York City, depending on the particular identities of the heroine. What or where doesn't matter. It might even be a relationship which is abrasive and annoying, but familiar. What matters is that there is a place where the heroine is known, and seen; where the heroine belongs.

Realizing how relieved I am when fictional characters, engaged in unrealistic activities, find places where they belong, I can only imagine how relieved I am—consciously or unconsciously—to have such places myself, and when people I care about have such places.

In some sense, CLF is one giant opportunity to belong. Our mission is to

bring Unitarian Universalism and liberal religious values to “Anyone. Anywhere. Anytime.” There are many things we cannot do for one another, such as take casseroles to each other's houses, drive each other to frightening doctor's appointments, or form a choir.

Yet I am always moved by how much belonging here matters to people, and gives us strength for our lives. Even people who don't ever write, call or visit us online, but simply receive this newsletter each month, tell me they feel connected in deep and meaningful ways.

I think of a story passed on to me by my mother, of an event that probably took place in the 1950s. My mom had a friend who, after deciding to marry in a Unitarian church and become Unitarian instead of staying in her family's denomination, went with fear and dread to tell her parents about this decision. The mother responded exactly as expected—terrified that this young bride would go to hell.

The father, however, took her into his office, and opened his desk drawer. From underneath a pile of business papers, he pulled out... a copy of the CLF newsletter. He had been secretly subscribing for years, held by reassurance that there was a place where his ideas were not going to be judged, but welcomed; reassured that others believed as he did.

This sense of belonging, of being connected to others like us, can keep us going, even if it is held as tenuously as this man felt he could hold it, secretly reading about Unitarianism as if it were something shameful and sinful. One friend of mine who knew at an early age that she did not want to marry a man said she would parse every word that adult women around her spoke. When my friend was in first grade an unmarried teacher gave her hope that she was not alone in the world. Another friend, African American, said that when she was growing up she would watch *The Lone Ranger*

because Tonto, the Native American sidekick, was the only person of color she could see on TV who actually had a name and a personality.

Some people have to work much harder than others to belong. Those with conventional ideas and/or personal identities favored by media and culture are told from birth that belonging is a birthright. Mirrors everywhere reflect back normalizing messages. Those who live with marginalized identities or are quirkiest—particularly if they are born into conventional families—have a harder time of it.

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“You belong here. You. Just as you are. This is your resting place.”

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Our large community of people with diverse lives and experiences means that, at CLF and in this publication, we try to include a variety of viewpoints which will connect with different people. We avoid printing authors (besides Lynn Ungar and me) more than once a year. We try to feature seasoned voices along with fresh and new ones. As much as possible, we try to feature diversity in race, age, experience, geography, and tone.

When I write my columns I am thinking of providing a constant touchstone amidst all of the diverse—and much more substantive—voices that make up the rest of each newsletter. I hope that my voice, no matter what I am reflecting on, is most centrally saying to you, “You belong here. You. Just as you are. This is your resting place.”

Many of us make more decisions in a day now than our ancestors did in their lifetimes. In all of this change and flux and choice, may you know that you belong on this planet by belonging to places and people that know and see you. And may CLF be one of those places. ■

October 2016

## REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

There are certain Big Questions that all of us deal with across the span of our lives. The answers may very well change over time, but our spiritual journeys are built around how we answer those questions. Questions like: *What do I love? What are my gifts to give? What is asked of me? Where is my deepest joy?*

And *Where do I belong?*

This is a question for really little children who are just figuring out that there is a world of people beyond their family, some of whom turn out to be a circle of friends. It's a question for older kids who have to work out complicated social networks that bring some people in while



deepest satisfactions. As a middle-schooler I remember seeing teens from our senior high youth group hanging out at the church

in piles, draped over one another in comfortable companionship. And I was so envious of that easy sense of belonging together, which I had never experienced with a group of people my age. Unlike most things that you wish for at 11 or 12, when I was old enough to join the teen group I discovered that what I imagined was real.

There was a place of belonging, of acceptance, of membership in a tribe that welcomed you because you showed up. None of us felt like we belonged in the typical high school cliques; all of us were in some way "weird." But together we found a place of acceptance and welcome that went beyond our local church group to include the network of UU youth

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excluding others. It's a big question for teens who are investigating separation from their family as well as connections with peers at a time when they feel like nobody understands who they really are. Young adults have to figure out where they belong as they build independent lives of work and community and family of choice.

And questions of where we belong don't go away in mid-life as we raise kids or have careers or try to figure out how it is that our lives have meaning. In societies that increasingly isolate the elderly, *Where do I belong?* can come to a crisis point for those who have lost friends or homes or relationships that have defined them in the past.

*Where do I belong?* Being able to answer that question is one of life's

groups of churches across our region and beyond. It was a life-changing experience for me, and one that led me into ministry.

But even in that beloved community there were times when I felt alone, out of place. Belonging is never complete. We all carry both our separate selves—that no one will ever completely see or understand—and also our longing to be known, to be accepted, to feel at home. It reminds me of a song by the late UU troubadour Rick Masten, about the Homesick Snail. *Where*, asks the song, *does the homesick snail belong?* If you carry your home on your back, then surely you can be at home wherever you are. But what if you are homesick in your own home? What if your heart aches for a sense of belonging even in the places where you most belong?

It occurs to me that the core of the word *belonging* is *longing*. The reality is that, while many of us are blessed with families that love us (however imperfectly), blessed with friends who listen to us and communities that share our values, none of us ever belongs in an absolutely complete way, as much as we might want to.



Individuals and groups will disappoint us, failing to live up to our expectations and their declared values. People (and we are all people) will choose selfishly, putting their own desires ahead of the needs of the group. Even at our very best, at our most compassionate and connected and loving, we will still fail to see and understand one another completely. That's just the nature of being human, walking around in our separate bodies without the capacity to mind meld.

The truth is that belonging is not a state, it's a process. It isn't something you have, it's something you build. It takes time, plus the willingness to listen and be wrong and work out a better way, a deeper understanding. And yes, sometimes it takes the willingness to walk away, to accept that there are places where you will never belong, where your core values are not shared. And then it takes the courage to walk forward through some new door, following that longing for connection into the delicate work of building trust and understanding.

It isn't easy. It isn't ever finished. But it is at the center of our hearts' longing. ■



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**Did you know**

that you can expand your sense of belonging to the CLF through connecting with other CLFers in conversation on Facebook?

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## Belonging

By **Jennifer T.**, CLF prisoner member

When I was released from prison the first time, I had been away from society and my family for ten years. I was incarcerated when I was 15, and as a young adult, suddenly thrust back out into the community, I felt bewildered and lost. My family was a great support, but the sense of not belonging was overwhelming. I remember sitting upstairs in the library at the college I was attending, staring out the window, watching the other students. *I don't belong here*, I used to think. Even in my family's living room I still felt like I didn't belong. There's such a sense of isolation and loneliness in that. At least in prison I felt like I wasn't alone, and that's where I returned.

Yet that didn't stop this incredibly sad ache. *Where do I belong?* Jesus said "Seek and you will find," and as I searched I discovered I belonged in the unity of God. This discovery filled a deep longing, but I began to want a community of my own. I said, *God, are you sure you accept me?* I'm different. I'm a lesbian. I'm an ex con. I believe you're in the wind, in classic poetry, in Jesus' suffering and the Buddha's enlightenment. God said, *I'm sure*. Then I saw a flaming chalice by chance and out of curiosity researched its meaning. Now my belonging feels complete, because God brought me to others that accept me, as an outward sign, as proof of God's love and acceptance of me. ■

