

Belonging

September 11, 2022

Rev. Dr. Judith E. Wright

It is delightful, wonderful this morning to have our choir singing in our loft, as we as a congregation gather in person and on-line for our first service of the new congregational year. Welcome back, choir!
This morning is special with our choir present, and masks optional. Our sincere hope is that the covid virus continues to recede. Whether or not that will remain so as the winter months come upon us, it is good for us to be here now together, this morning.

Over the pandemic our worship services have been kept together by a dedicated group of folks who have led services, as well as provided technical support every Sunday morning. Our wonderful choir director, Noelle Beaudin, led our choir in our hymns, and she recorded these as well as music for the rest of each service over the course of the pandemic. A Herculean task that was greatly appreciated! Thank you, Noelle! And because of Noelle's efforts, we now have a rich library of videos of our UU hymns and songs.

What is truly amazing is that our congregation weathered well this pandemic storm. Primarily I believe we did so because of the valuing and the love of our members and friends for UUSL, our beloved community.

What held this congregation together over such a trying time?
I believe in part it is the sense of connection and belonging, that members and friends, and yes, I myself feel by being part of this religious community.
Of course, our UU values and beliefs also held us together.

Many people when they first visit our congregation and have a conversation with me express that they are looking for a community of like-minded folks to ponder together questions such as "what is the meaning of life?" "what is the best way or ways to live one's life?" "Is there a God/gods?" "Do I have to believe in God/gods to be part of this community?" (The answer, of course, is no – there are a number of us who are humanists, agnostic or atheistic). Some folks come seeking a religious home for their children, as well.

The overarching agreement by those who decide that they belong here is following our Seven Principles and Six Purposes.
If you are unfamiliar with our Seven Principles and Six Purposes, I am certain that anyone of us would be delighted to share those with you.

Over my many years of being a UU minister I have found that what many people often are seeking is a place where they can explore their spiritual and religious beliefs, in a community where they feel they belong, where they can be who they truly are, without fear of criticism or censor.

What does it mean to belong to a UU congregation?

I resonant to the definition of belonging given by social scientist Brené Brown.

She says: *“True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness.*

True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are;

It requires you to be who you are.”

Thus, belonging is the opposite of acclimating or fitting in to whatever one may suspect is required to be accepted and loved.

Neurobiologists have recently studied our human need for belonging. Such research has shown that our own biology as human beings prepares us for love and connection.

It's not just how we were raised or the culture we find ourselves within that determine our need for connection, empathy and love. These researchers have discovered that the very design and function of our brains, as well as the inner workings of our bodies have evolved to have us naturally reach out and connect with one another. Researcher Matthew Liberman¹ states that “our brains are wired for us to connect.”

And not just connect, but to show compassion and love for others.

In an interesting study² James Rilling and his colleagues, anthropologists, asked 36 women to play a game based on a prisoner's game. Two women would play a game, each time. A player could be selfish and take all of the \$ 60 offered if she won the game, or she could decide to play the game cooperatively, with each woman then receiving \$ 40.

Dr. Rilling did brain MRIs of these woman and found that those who were mutually cooperative

activated parts of the rewards system within their brains. Importantly most of the women opted to share the winnings. Thus, his conclusion for this study is that people are rewarded for altruistic actions within themselves - rewarded within their own brains!

Further research has shown that we humans are wired to extend altruism beyond people we know with a sense of caring for a group of strangers.

¹ Matthew Lieberman. *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired To Connect*. Crown Publishing, 2014.

² James Rilling and others. *A neural basis for social cooperation*. NIH. National Library of Medicine. July 2002.

I can vouch for this research result just by the actions of all of you. Every month we as a congregation share the plate with some worthy cause.

For example, recently I received this thank you letter from the UU Service Committee for our donation last June as a congregation of \$ 1,345 for the Emergency Response Fund for the people of Ukraine.

Not only does a sense of belonging enhance our brains with rewards, it also can provide us with a sense of increase intimacy and love. Our human brains are wired as well to begin forming loving bonds with others, just as soon as we are born- or perhaps even before that. The biological interactions between mother or caregiver and child have significant important impacts on later relationships in our lives.

The hormone oxytocin is released in loving mother-child interactions, and this hormone continues later in life, to influence attachments to others “Its release decreases stress and anxiety, increases well-being and trust,

and may be a biological mechanism that underlies bonding between parent

and child, friends and romantic partners.”³

Thus, we humans are hard-wired for love.

What also helps with such bonding is touching. Whether by a pat on the back, a hug, a kiss, holding one’s hand –

All such touching conveys affection to people we care about. As we know, over the pandemic, touch was not encouraged, And sadly, some of our beloveds passed away without this source of healing touch that communicates so well belonging and being loved.

I had two experiences in the last couple of days that revealed to me how much I have missed being touched over this pandemic time.

The first was when at the end of a dinner party, a man I had just met that evening, took my hand in his two hands, as I had extended my right hand to him, to say good-bye and wish him well on his travels. He lovingly held my hand in his two hands, as we spoke. It was a strange but lovely feeling after two years of little touch.

The second was seeing Dan Carter suddenly in front of the church on Friday afternoon. For those of you who don’t know Dan he is a wonderful musician and was the primary caretaker of Gerald Knight, a past President of our congregation, who passed over three years ago. I hadn’t seen Dan since then. He surprised me by stopping in front of the congregation late Friday when I was helping a homeless person. He waited until I was finished, and then he gave me a huge hug. Again, while a little apprehensive at first, I was pleased to be hugged, as I realized later I had been hug-deprived for years as well.

Touch is part of our way as humans to be socially connected. When we don’t have touch, when we don’t have connection with others, then we fall back on relying solely on ourselves. And such solely self-focus has been shown through research to lead to distress, even ill health and lower achievement. So, with social connections, we humans are much more likely to be happier, healthier and more successful.

³ NeuroImage, Volume 21, issue 3. *The neural correlates of maternal love and romantic love*. March 2004, pp 1155-1166.

Of course, as the minister of our congregation, I am specifically making the point this morning of just how important it is for each of us to be connected here, and to feel that we belong.

Apparently within American society today about 40% of people say that they are lonely. The pandemic increased this sense of loneliness.

One definition of loneliness is “*a conscious, cognitive feeling of estrangement or social separation from meaningful others.*”

We need one another. We need connection. We need a sense of belonging.

One strategy to overcome loneliness, recommended by a study in Scientific America⁴, is to volunteer. Altruism beats self-absorption any day. One of the great benefits of belonging to our religious community is the many opportunities that arise over the course of a year to volunteer to help our congregation and the wider community. Volunteering is important not only for our congregation as a whole, but each of us benefits in so many ways when we volunteer.

How we volunteer is also important.

Wendell Berry reminds us, when he suggests “*that we have lived our lives by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. We have been wrong.*

We must change our lives so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption, that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires that we make the effort to know the world and learn what is good for it.”

Part of belonging to a religious community is learning again and again, how best to live one’s life.

Here is a story from the Christian Desert Fathers that teaches us one way to discern our spiritual path:

A brother asked Abba Matoes: What shall I do? My tongue causes me trouble and whenever I am among people, I cannot control it, and I condemn them in all their good deeds and contradict them.

What, therefore shall I do? The old man answered him:

If you cannot control yourself, go away from people and live alone. For this is a weakness –

Those who live together with others ought not to be square but round, in order to turn towards all.

*Further, the old man said: I live alone, not because of my virtue, but rather because of my weakness. You see, those who live among people are the strong ones.*⁵

So, here we are, you and I, living in the world and doing the best we each can, to make the world a little bit better.

May our coming congregational year be full of many blessings.

May we find numerous ways to volunteer and help others.

May we be intentional in inviting people into our congregation.

May we continue to love, trust, and connect with one another and know that this is indeed our spiritual home.

This is the place where we each belong.

The poet John O’Donohue has the final word on belonging this morning.

He said:

There is a lovely balance at the heart of our nature: each of us is utterly unique, and yet we live in the most intimate kinship with everyone and everything else.

Its more profound intention is the awakening of the Great Belonging

⁴ Kasley Killam. Scientific America. *A Solution for Loneliness. Get out and volunteer.* May 21, 2019.

⁵ Jack Kornfield and Christina Feldman, *Soul Food. The Desert Fathers.* HarperSanFrancisco. 1996. P. 124

*which embraces everything.
Our hunger to belong is the desire to awaken this hidden affinity.
Then we know that we are not outsiders cut off from everything
but rather participants at the heart of creation.*

Peace and love to you.