

“Belonging to Ourselves”
October 6th, 2019
Rev. Laurel Gray

Last time we were together, I preached on transitions, about the process of finding our way to a new beginning, of the wandering through the wilderness back to ourselves. And next time I’m going to preach on what it means to belong to each other. But today, I’d like to invite you into a conversation about what it means to belong to ourselves, to be able to stand alone in what Brene Brown also calls the wilderness. That space where we stay true to ourselves amidst the pressure to take sides or abandon our principles - that space without simple answers or easy solutions.

So often I think we get coerced by the idea that belonging is something external, something we receive from others. And so in our desire to belong we end up seeking approval. We try to fit in, to squeeze ourselves into whatever we think we’re supposed to be. And rarely in that squeeze do we feel fulfilled, whole, loved as we are - and we dim our light in the process. There’s a kind of shame bound up in this approval seeking, a belief that we *would* belong if we were somehow different.

This can take obvious forms - a friend of mine tells the story of trying to make himself look like one of those cool, long-haired surfer dudes when he was younger - he wanted to fit in with his friends - but he has dark, thick, curly hair, and in the process of trying to achieve the perfect surfer blonde, he ended up with a frizzy orange mess. Perhaps you’ve made similarly disastrous attempts at fitting in.

But I think this can take much more subtle forms. I can tell you that trying to write a “good” sermon has similarly disastrous effects - as

does, I think, trying to make anything “good.” Because we’re operating from a place of approval seeking, using some contrived external gaze as our compass, and we abandon our spark in the process.

I have found in my own work that it’s actually impossible to try to write something that’s good, or eloquent or wise - even just saying that feels cringey. So here’s my metric: did I show up with my whole self and did I tell the truth.

Brown’s research has covered a whole variety of topics from shame to imperfection - perhaps you’ve seen one of her ted talks or read her books. As Unitarian Universalists we draw from six sources of wisdom and spirituality and one of them includes science. So I invite you to consider Brown’s research as a sacred text in the sense that it helps us understand something foundational about what it means to be human and what it means to be connected in a way that transcends our individual lives.

In her research, Brown tries to understand what she calls “the main concern” of her study participants, and in this case that was about belonging.

She writes that, quote, “over and over, participants talked about their concern that the only thing that binds us together now is shared fear and disdain, not common humanity, shared trust, respect, or love. They reported feeling more afraid to disagree or debate with friends, colleagues, and family because of the lack of civility and tolerance. Reluctant to choose between being loyal to a group and being loyal to themselves, but lacking that deeper spiritual connection to shared humanity, they were far more aware of the pressure to ‘fit in’ and conform.

She adds that:

Connection to a larger humanity gives people more freedom to express their individuality without fear of jeopardizing belonging.” end quote.

I wonder if it is that need to feel connected to a larger humanity that brings you here, that makes this place different from a social club or a community center. As Unitarian Universalists, our core is not a creed or confession of belief, but a covenant, an agreement of how we will live together. These are our seven principles - they're on the back of the order of service - and they are a statement of how we are agreeing to embody our values.

The first principle is that we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all people. Here, we are committed to knowing and cherishing our collective humanity. And our seventh principle is that we covenant to affirm and promote the interdependent web of existence. We often read this as the ecology principle, but I want to broaden that to an acknowledgement that there is something that transcends our individual lives, of which we are all a part. Maybe you call that God, maybe you call it life or love or reality - whatever the words we use, we are committed to living into the truth that none of us are the biggest thing in the universe, that we're all connected.

Here's how Brown defines spirituality, which she says is a significant part of creating true belonging:

“Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion.” end quote

Connected to this, grounded in our own humanity and our knowledge that we are enough as we are, that we are inextricably connected, this is

the place of true belonging, this is the source of courage, this is how we brave the wilderness.

You are only free when you realize that you belong no place—belong every place—no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great.

Throughout this book, Brown reflects on how true belonging is something that exists within us, that it is born of our self-acceptance and our willingness to offer ourselves to the world as we are, and it is through this that we come to belong to each other, to feel deeply connected with those we love. And this all takes a great deal of courage.

The word courage comes from the latin *cor* - in French it's *coeur* - which means heart. And according to the poet Mark Nepo, “the original use of the word courage meant to stand by one’s core: a striking concept that reinforces the belief found in almost all traditions that living from the Center is what enables us to face whatever life has to offer.”

I want to read that again:

“the original use of the word courage meant to stand by one’s core: a striking concept that reinforces the belief found in almost all traditions that living from the Center is what enables us to face whatever life has to offer.”

True belonging is about living from our core, our center. It’s showing up with your whole self and telling the truth.

So I’d like to tell you a story of someone living from their center and having the courage to stand alone. This was told by the reporter Cenk Uygur.

The 1968 Olympics were held in Mexico City, maybe some of you remember these games. This was the year that Tommie Smith and John

Carlos, two black American sprinters, raised their gloved fists in the black power salute as they stood on the medal podium. The photo is powerful and iconic. That was the year that Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King were assassinated, and Smith and Carlos were standing in protest of the racial inequality that was and is so rampant in our country. And, though you can't always see it in the photo, they had taken their shoes off and were standing barefoot as they received their medals in recognition of all those who live in poverty.

But there's a third man in that photo. The two Americans had won gold and bronze in the 200 meter race. Peter Norman had come in second. He was a white Australian sprinter who no one thought could win. But he ran so fast that day that his time still stands as the Australian record for the 200 meter race.

And what people don't know is that Peter Norman was the one who gave Tommie Smith and John Carlos those black gloves that they wore on their raised fists. He suggested that they each wear one, which is why Smith and Carlos are raising opposite arms in that photo - they're wearing a matching set of gloves.

Norman then asked Smith and Carlos what else he could do to support them, how he could participate in their protest. At that time there was something called the Olympic Project for Human Rights, which was a group working for equality in the Olympic games, and they had badges that athletes could wear to show their support. Smith and Carlos asked Norman to wear that badge on the medal podium. Norman agreed, borrowing one from an American rower.

In reflecting on the moment, John Carlos said, quote "I expected to see fear in Norman's eyes, but instead saw love."

Fear on Peter Norman's part would have been warranted because at that time Australia was still an apartheid state, like South Africa was. There were restrictions on non-white immigration, discriminatory laws against aboriginal people, forced adoption of native children into white families - things that feel eerily familiar in our country now. And so by wearing that badge on the medal podium, Norman was deemed to be collaborating with the two Americans in their protest.

Peter Norman was shunned in Australia from that day forward. In 1972 he qualified for the Australian Olympic team in eighteen different races and they refused to let him on the team because he had stood in solidarity with Tommie Smith and John Carlos.

In their reporting on this, "Films for Action" said this:

"For years Norman had only one chance to save himself: he was invited to condemn his co-athletes, John Carlos and Tommie Smith's gesture in exchange for a pardon from the system that ostracized him. A pardon that would have allowed him to find a stable job through the Australian Olympic Committee and be part of the organization of the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. Norman never gave in and never condemned the choice of the two Americans." end quote.

Peter Norman was a white man. And I think what he didn't do is just as important as what he did do. He didn't raise his fist in the black power salute. He didn't take off his shoes. He didn't keep one of the gloves for himself. He supported Smith and Carlos in their protest and asked what he could do and then did as he was asked. But he didn't pretend to be one of them. He stood alone. He didn't try to take the spotlight, he wasn't even disappointed that the protest on that medal stand completely overshadowed his incredible victory. When asked how he felt about it, he said simply, "I couldn't have been prouder to be part of that moment"

Peter Norman never condemned John Carlos and Tommie Smith, though it meant that he was never allowed to race again and his career was ruined. He spent the rest of his life working odd jobs and was never recognized for his achievements. In the year 2000, when the Olympic games were held in Sydney, he wasn't even allowed to march under the Australian flag, despite being one of the greatest Australian athletes of all time.

Finally, In 2012 the Australian Parliament passed a law saying: "Apologies to Peter Norman for the wrong done by Australia in failing to send him to the 1972 Munich Olympics, despite repeatedly qualifying; we belatedly recognize the powerful role that Peter Norman played in furthering racial equality."

But Peter Norman died in 2006, six years before Australia's apology. He was never recognized in his lifetime.

But when Peter Norman died, John Carlos and Tommie Smith carried his casket to his grave.

He had lost almost everything by supporting them, except the thing that matters most - he never lost himself.

He never lost his center.

You are only free when you realize that you belong no place—belong every place—no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great.

In showing up fully as ourselves, in belonging to ourselves, in standing alone like Peter Norman did, we invite others into their own belonging. Courage, I believe, is contagious.

And so I'd like to take a little time to do something that is, for me, unconventional, but I hear is part of the custom in this congregation.

Yesterday, we had a board retreat, which we'll be sharing more about in next month's newsletter, and one of the things I learned is that you have a custom of taking some time after the sermon to share your own stories with each other. And it feels fitting today to do that. So I'd like to take a few minutes to reflect on times in your own life that you've had the courage to stand alone, or times you've been moved by witnessing someone else stay true to their center. Please be brief so we can hear from multiple people.

Amen