

*Belonging*  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo  
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To belong is a universal human need. It is human nature to be connected, and by our connections we know ourselves. When I review my own life, it looks like an inventory of how I have been connected, the ways and places I have belonged – the family into which I was born, the family I created; the church that my birth family attended, the church I later joined; Girl Scout troops, schools and universities, places I have worked; clubs and choirs and committees of which I have been a part.

Belonging is a universal human need. The need to be loved and protected, to be part of a larger family or social group, is deeply rooted in our biology and psychology – we are primates, and we take a long time to reach maturity – it takes years before we can move very far on our own, and we don’t even begin to grow a viable set of teeth for several months – so we are defenseless unless we are nurtured and protected when we are young. As well as being protected, our identity is shaped by the primary socialization that occurs in our early years as social beings – we learn how to communicate with others, how to interpret what we see and hear, how to behave, how we fit into the system – our social network teaches us who we are.

Our social networks – even our Facebook accounts -- are a sign of our belonging, the ways we are connected to each other, sharing commitments or activities, being part of the larger web of human community. Families, workplaces, associations, clubs and churches are all the places we weave the web of our social networks, finding and creating a place to belong. Much of our belonging, especially the networks we choose, follows a principle that social network researchers call “homophily” – the word literally means “love of being alike” – we tend to associate with people who resemble us. As one author says, “Whether it’s Hells Angels or Jehovah’s Witnesses, drug addicts or coffee drinkers, Democrats or Republicans, stamp collectors or bungee jumpers, the truth is that we seek out those people who share our interests, histories, and dreams. Birds of a feather do flock together.”

Real belonging, it is clear, must be authentic to who we are. Some people fit well into the families and communities into which they are born, and those networks expand naturally in their lives, and these people thrive there, always feeling the fit is right for them. Others may have a very different experience, finding they have to hide, disguise or adapt some part of themselves, not show who they really are, to fit into their families, their communities, their churches.

When that happens, their belonging starts to seem as though it is based on false premises, that it is not authentic. They may feel that their belonging has a high price, that it is conditional on doing and saying the right thing, wearing the right clothing, being the right gender, loving the right person, conforming so that they are acceptable to those in the group so they stay in connection. It does not feel authentic to who they truly are, no matter how much they love their family, no matter how much they may want really to belong. For those people, there comes a time of choice. Either they stay and simply manage as best they can, or they strike out on their own, seeking a place where they may more authentically belong. We talk about “belonging” to a church – and one would hope that any church, a place of shared values and commitments, would be a place of authentic acceptance and belonging -- but sometimes that not the case.

Many of the folks who come through the doors of our Unitarian Universalist churches have been raised in faith traditions where they did not feel they belonged, or perhaps they were raised in no religion at all, and they find their way to a church like this one seeking authentic belonging, a place where they can be who they truly are in a community of faith commitment. I know I felt that way when I first joined the First Unitarian Church of St. Louis, and I have heard that story again and again as people have discovered a

Unitarian Universalist church as a place they could authentically belong. I heard that theme again as I met our newest members last month, some saying very clearly that they were seeking and had found a place where it seems they can really belong. And we bid you welcome.

There is a set of principles that undergird our Unitarian Universalist tradition, and in joining a UU church we step into a larger covenant based on those principles, including an agreement that we will value each person's inherent worth and dignity, that we will accept and support each other's spiritual search for truth and meaning. This church, and our entire Unitarian Universalist religious movement, is based on a principle of authentic belonging, authentic membership, membership freely chosen and freely entered into, coming together as a community where our uniqueness and our searching are honored. And that is what people may be seeking when they come through our doors.

In a church where membership is freely chosen and entered into, belonging is closely linked to ownership. To own something is to name it as my own, and belonging and ownership imply responsibility, a relationship with obligations that are mutual and reciprocal. The men and women who nearly 200 years ago founded the Universalist and Unitarian churches in Buffalo, the early churches that evolved into this church – those women and men knew the importance of belonging, they knew they owned their churches, and they understood the responsibility that goes with the privilege of ownership and belonging.

Those early Buffalo Unitarians and Universalists were deeply committed to their ways of faith that did not conform with the Christian mainstream, and on arriving here they found no churches to which they could authentically belong. So seriously did they take their reasoned understanding of God, and their commitment to tolerance in the faithful search for truth, that when there were no churches here for them to join, they created them! They donated money and land and labor, in much the same way our churches are supported today; they put up buildings and provided the money to pay ministers and staff, they made decisions and charted the direction of their free churches. They believed that churches as an institution were important – important for the community they provided to their members, important for the principles they promoted, important for the work they did in the world. And they understood that if they did not create and sustain the church, it would not exist. Even so, into the present days, if we do not continue to sustain this church, it will not thrive, and in the worst case, it will not continue to exist.

We are all seekers in some way; we all arrive here, each time we arrive, seeking a home where we can belong, making a place for ourselves, with the need to be accepted by those who have arrived before us. The core responsibility of membership, of ownership, is to sustain the institution and carry out its purposes, and to provide a place for the newcomer, welcoming those who are exploring to see whether they belong here. The church can thrive into the future only by welcoming those who bring their presence, their skills and talents, their doubts and questions and needs, to enrich and enliven the community.

I have seen the search begin, during the week or on a Sunday, when someone takes the risk to come through our door to ask, "What sort of church is this?" When people arrive at this church on that search, as "seekers," they are asking – Is this somewhere I can belong? Will the people here be open to me; will they be the ones who share my religious questions, my doubts, my convictions, my dreams? Are these people who will accept me authentically, as I am, not conditioned on my doing or saying the right things, loving the right person, or wearing the right clothes? Can I be myself here, as I really am?

These seekers may not be very trusting at first, they may not pick up a name tag or fill out a visitor form – some would rather stay in stealth status, checking the church out before the church can check them out. I was one of that sort the first time I checked out a Unitarian Universalist church. I did my best to sneak in the back and sit near the door for quick escape, but unfortunately it was a small church and I was spotted

– and the enthusiastic greeting I received scared me off so thoroughly that it was about ten years before I got up my courage to try again!

So if newcomers sneak in without stopping at the membership table, and if they don't stay to talk with folks after the service, they may just be reducing their risk while they check out whether this is where they belong. And if we treat them with kindness – a gentle smile, a warm greeting, they may be back!

For those who have not been part of a Unitarian Universalist church before, it may be a bit puzzling how to belong here, and what it might mean. To help with that understanding I sometimes describe the church as a fountain from which anyone may drink. There are those who choose to build and maintain the fountain – those are the Members. They commit to being part of this community, and they understand that this fountain, even while it is public and available to all, requires their involvement to keep it in good repair, and they gladly offer their fair share of what it takes to keep the fountain flowing. Those who choose to be Members have accepted the full rights and responsibilities of belonging to and owning the church. Today we have welcomed into the church those who have most recently made the commitment not only to attend this church and name it as their religious community, but to become part of the team, bringing their time, talent and treasure to participate in the ongoing creation of this church.

When a person thinks they might want to become a member, we ask that they attend a Saturday class and learn more about this church, more about our history and our way of faith, get a tour of the parts of the building they might not otherwise see, and learn about the rights and responsibilities of membership so they know what they are committing to. We invite all Members, especially, to make a financial pledge to the church as part of their commitment, and to help us know what financial resources the church will have in the coming year.

There are other people who are not ready to make the commitment of membership; they show up here on a regular basis, get involved in activities, take a drink from the fountain and put in some coins, making a contribution as they are moved to help support the church and its programs. They may not be ready to take on the role of owners, even though they feel this is their faith community, and so many of those people choose to be Friends. Friends have a formal connection, they are in the directory and receive mailings and e-mails, and so they are networked with others here. They are welcome to participate in the church, but their responsibilities are fewer and they lack the voting rights and leadership prerogatives of full membership. It is very simple to become a Friend – you fill out a form at the Welcome table, and we get you on the lists and in the system, and make you a name tag so we can learn your name! Then you let us know you want to continue being a Friend by being involved, and by making a financial contribution to support the church, at any level that is comfortable for you.

And then there are others who simply show up on Sunday mornings and take a drink from the abundance this church provides – and we welcome them as well -- but they choose not to leave any permanent indication of their presence. They may have acquaintances here, but they never make themselves formally known, never get their names in our systems, so we don't have any way to keep them informed of what is going on, because we never have any official record that they are here.

I think of those as the stealth folks, those who have their cloaking devices firmly in place, perhaps until they decide we are a safe place to become more visible. There is room here for all these various sorts of folks, and we welcome everyone from the fountain-keepers to the stealth visitor.

Similar to the folks in stealth status, there are some who participate in specific programs, such as the choir or the women's society activities, without ever becoming a Friend or Member of the church. They, of course, are welcome as well, since they are part of our community even if they do not choose to become owners or supporters of the church.

Nearly every week, there are people who come in as visitors, give us some contact information and get on the list to receive our news in e-mails and electronic newsletters for a while – they are checking the church out to see whether it might be a good fit, and whether they might like to step up into Friend status, or eventually commit to membership with the time is right. And if anyone wants to continue being a “visitor,” or a stealth visitor, and just take a sip from the fountain from time to time, that is just fine – there is no pressure, and you may remain as anonymous as you like. Just be aware that if you call the office, or the minister, we might not know who you are, even if you consider this to be your church; or if you are still a visitor after several months, we may take you off the mailing list because we assume you have decided not to become connected here.

In an era of consumerism and “voting with our feet,” what difference does membership make? Why would anyone, if they did not have to, choose to be part of a church, fill out a Friend form or make a commitment to membership, commit to be part of a class or group or committee, promising to show up and bring their time, talent and resources into this church community? Why is belonging important?

It is important because we are designed for relationship, designed for belonging, and church can be a powerful and supportive choice to fill that biological and psychological need. And a church can be an institution worth supporting with our time, talent and treasure, more than just a place to come listen to a sermon and some great music on Sunday, but also a powerful way to be connected, and to promote our shared commitments in the world.

As we welcome and celebrate our newest members today, this is a good time to think about what belonging to this church means to each of us, and how it supports our lives as part of a connected network. If you have been hanging out anonymously around the church, while you consider this to be your church, you are welcome to keep doing that, but you are also welcome to move in closer, fill out a Friend form at the welcome table, get more involved, or maybe sign up for the next membership class to learn more about the church. And if you are a member, we hope that by now you have given us your pledge card so we can create the budget for next year, so that we know what resources we will have to keep the fountain flowing and in good repair, perhaps even expanding our fountain so our spirit flows with more power into the world.

Belonging to this community of faith is a statement of commitment to the power and possibility of human life, and to the prospects for a world of greater peace and justice for all. Your ownership of this community contributes to making it strong and resilient, open to the seeker, welcoming those who are seeking to be part of the work we do together. As a church, may we always go forward in the power of peace, faith and love. So may it be.

Sources:

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