



Streets to Dwell In

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

*It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood,
A beautiful day for a neighbor,
Would you be mine?
Could you be mine?*

I trust that most of you remember Mr. Rogers' neighborhood, perhaps as well as I do. Mr. Rogers knew his neighbors—people who dropped by his home all the time to share some useful tidbit of information. Mr. Rogers lived in a community, a group of people bound together by location, common care and concern. And yes, I realize it was a TV land of make-believe.

Nonetheless, it inspires me to ask: how many people who live in your immediate vicinity do you know on a first-name basis? More than ten? More than five? More than two? Modern life is hardly conducive to the notion of neighborhoods. Many of us work long hours, and can barely find time to hang out with our families, let alone the people who live down the street or around the bend. Many of us drive from our garages to our destinations and home again, all but hermetically sealed from the people around us.

Most of us have been taught, one way or another, that the family unit, whatever it may be, should be sufficient unto itself. We've learned about our property rights and we've held fiercely to our privacy. But along the way we seem to have lost something else.

Technically speaking, a neighbor is someone who lives near you. But what we tend to forget is that just the fact of living close to another means that we are mutually dependent. A neighborhood is an ecological niche every bit as much as a pine forest or saltwater marsh. When we think about the ruin of modern cities, what comes to mind is likely to be urban blight—dusty, trash-filled lots and battered store-fronts. But there is many a tidy suburb that is sterilized of human interaction, devoid of the interchange that makes any ecology healthy.

All vital ecology is built on a complex, interrelated web of beings; human ecologies are no exception. When Gary down the street asked me to watch his baby for an hour while he dealt with an emergency, what Gary needed was not to hire the highest quality daycare service. He needed a neighbor. When we needed a 30-foot ladder to paint our upstairs windows, Diane and Alan kindly lent us theirs—for the better part of two summers. We didn't need to spend \$400 on a ladder we only wanted for one, admittedly lengthy, task. We needed folks within ladder-carrying distance, neighbors, who were willing to share.

Wendell Berry comments on this dubious evolution: "We have given up understanding...that we and our country create one another.... As we and our land are part of one another, so all who are living as neighbors here...are part of one another, and so cannot possibly flourish alone."

That connection is easier to see when, like Berry, you live in a rural area. Things, however, are somewhat different in the city. When your neighbors crowd in on every side it's tempting to feel that "good fences make good neighbors," that what makes life possible are all of the things that draw our boundaries and give us some personal space. We tend to define good neighbors not as people we depend on, and who depend on us, but as those who are invisible. Good neighbors don't play loud music, good neighbors don't let their dogs leave messes on our front grass, good neighbors don't practice piano at 1:00 in the morning, etc.

Quest

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**"Perhaps home is not
a place, but simply an
irrevocable condition."**

—James Baldwin

A monthly for religious liberals

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Pledging Our Troth

BY TOM OWEN-TOWLE, MINISTER EMERITUS, FIRST UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

As a religious heritage bonded not by creed, confession or common prayer, but by covenant, Unitarian Universalists vow to stay at the table long enough to understand one another and mold a viable community. Ours is a fellowship united not by law but by loyalty, by faithfulness of vows rather than sameness of beliefs. We promise to hold and be held by one another. We pledge our troth or trust. Fidelity, internal discipline, and mutual responsibility are required in a covenantal faith in order to work out our differences together.

As a youngster I joined nearly everything. I managed to say *no* to membership campaigns so seldom that my *yes* was rendered nearly meaningless. In the second half of life, my attitude has altered drastically. I relate to, and certainly support, various enterprises, but I join few of them. Joining literally means “yoking oneself” in serious, abiding commitment, and I have become more discriminating. I prefer to travel my life’s final laps lightly, with but a handful of solid devotions.

So, joining a Unitarian Universalist community is no idle matter; it has become one of my primary life alliances. Freethinkers generally identify with this reluctance to pledge our troth to people or institutions, but, once given, such commitments carry immense power in our lives. ■

From Freethinking Mystics With Hands: Exploring the Heart of Unitarian Universalism. Published by Skinner House Books in 1998, this book is available from the UUA bookstore (www.uua.org/bookstore or 800-215-9076).

Certainly there are “good fences”—sensible limitations that allow us to live in close proximity without driving one another bats. Certainly my life was improved when we repaired the hole in our back fence, through which my dog and the neighbor’s dog were carrying on a bark-off that had escalated to a canine version of “American Idol.” But sometimes I even wonder about our fences.

I came out the door one day to find that our neighbor, Dick, had built a new fence—a four-foot-high vision of white plastic latticework separating the granite chips of his front yard from the concrete side walkway of ours. It was an ugly fence, to be sure, but more than that, it stuck out like a cow in the middle of a golf course. What, we wondered, was the point? Why fence off his nothing much from our nothing in particular? What was so egregious that it needed to be walled off from view?

The only conceivable answer was, of course, us. For some reason we had been consigned to whatever circle of hell is ringed by tacky plastic fencing. By now we were starting to get mad. What was his problem, anyway? Did he hate us because of our rainbow flag? Without a word being exchanged, hostilities escalated. Kelsey and I started trotting out all of Dick’s prior bad acts, like the way he parked his RV practically in our driveway for days at a time, grooming it before and after weekend outings.

In a matter of hours we went from cordial, if less than enthusiastic, neighbors to something resembling North and South Korea. It turned out, when we interrogated Bob, our neighbor on the other side, that Dick had built the fence because he was “tired of looking at our trash cans.” The trash cans, that is, that my wife Kelsey pushed up to the side of the house when she left for work on Friday, trash day. There they would sit for—horrors!—eight hours or so, until she put them behind our fence when she came home.

So Kelsey began to move the trash cans back behind the fence every Friday morning. We still said hi to Dick when we saw him, but the chill was noticeable, at least to us. “Why didn’t he just ask us to move the cans?” we asked each other. But we didn’t ask Dick.

Dick was our neighbor, in the sense that we lived next door to one another, but the fence escapade—both his lack of communication and ours—blunted our sense of neighborliness, our understanding of what it means to have connecting lives. I wish I could claim that we worked our way around to a deeper sense of neighborliness, but I’m afraid we never did.

Martin Luther King said that “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.” It’s when we manage to invest in that network of mutuality, to bind the threads more tightly, to weave in a few new colors, that we discover what it really means to be neighbors. Sometimes that weaving is deceptively simple. One summer, when we lived in Chicago, we decided to have a block party—the first that anyone on the block could remember. Betsy from downstairs made up a flier and Kelsey got permission from the city to close off the street, and there we were.

Now, perhaps I should explain a little bit about where we lived. Chicago is divided up into neighborhoods, and you can feel like you’ve literally gone from one country to another in the course of walking a city block. We lived in Albany Park, one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the city, but mere houses to the east of us was Ravenswood Manor, which is overwhelmingly white and well-to-do. Not surprisingly, mostly white folks lived on our end of the block, and mostly Latino and Black folks lived on the western end. In some odd articulation of the hierarchy of race in this country, Asian folks lived in the middle.

Well, on the day of the party, by the time I came home from officiating at a

wedding, the gathering was well under way. Folks from our end of the block had barbeques out, and some of the kids were starting to play together. It was charming, but it wasn't really a *block* party. It was more like people watching a parade from in front of their houses, only without the parade. But as time wore on, the most amazing things started to happen.

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About 5:00, close to when the party was scheduled to end, the Vietnamese folks who lived in the houses around the center of the block started barbequing. Mr. Li, who's pretty much a wild and crazy guy even before he starts drinking, began waving and calling people over to share their food. And so those of us who had been munching on bratwurst and watermelon at the east end of the block made our way over to sample their noodles and ribs. Some of the folks who were hosting us in the middle of the block spoke hardly any English, but food is a pretty universal language, and we were smiling, and learning names and who lived where, and Saul put on some Salsa music and it was beginning to feel like a real party.

Two adults with a rope became a limbo bar, and the kids who weren't busy riding their bikes through sprinklers in the middle of the street started playing limbo together. By this point the Mexican and Guatemalan-American folks at the end of the block had fired up *their* barbeque, and when they saw that the party was still lingering in front of Mr.

Li's house, Raúl came up with a plate of tacos, saying: “If you're not going to come down to share our food, we'll bring it to you.”

So everyone ended up down at the western end of the block, eating tacos—made, rather surprisingly, with hotdogs—and chatting in mostly, but far from exclusively, English. By the time that the stars and the tequila came out Mr. Li was hugging Tony and declaring brotherhood and everyone was agreeing that next year we'd just start out with all the tables in the middle of the block.

Somehow in the course of that afternoon we made the journey to a larger home. I'm not sure whether it happened for me when I sampled Bin's noodle dish or when I dared to try my lamentably bad Spanish with Serena, or when I watched Eddie, the red-headed ten-year-old trouble maker, proudly write his name in chalk on the sidewalk in front of our house. Somehow, in the course of eating and talking and daring to step a little bit outside of what we each knew, we became neighbors, real neighbors, people bound to one another not because we were alike, or even because we were comfortable together, but rather because we shared a common place.

There are other ways, easier ways, for people to be bound together. On the internet you can join up with people who share your enthusiasm for quilting or pinocle or Bernese Mountain Dogs. In the cyber world you can select the people who interest you, who share your tastes, and let the filters take care of the rest. But in the real world we are plagued with people whose dogs bark and whose landscaping is ugly, people who listen to music we don't like and speak languages we don't understand. And it's only when we take the time to be with those people, to need them and to help them and to play with them, that we live in the real world at all.

We're all familiar with the great lament about our isolated society. But what we

tend to forget is that just as we so often choose to be isolated, so can we choose to be connected. You can put your kids in the wagon and walk to the store, waving and stopping to talk with people as you go. You can take the folks next door a pie at Christmas. You can offer to feed the neighbor's cat while they're away. You can go across the street and ask for a cup of sugar. You can rake leaves or shovel snow for more than your own patch of ground. You can have a block party, and turn your street, if only for a day, into a meeting place, a playground, a place for people to connect.

We choose to build fences, and we can also choose to tear down walls, to make a place for a sense of belonging to flourish, even in a society that expects us to stay apart. You can, if you so choose, fulfill the vision of the prophet Isaiah (58:12), who proclaimed that “you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.” ■



Connecting with the CLF

Belonging. Connecting. The CLF helps you contemplate your context in this world by presenting different view points, asking questions and telling stories. Each of you has a rightful place in this loving community. Whatever our differences and commonalities, we embrace your presence.

It is your spiritual as well as your monetary contributions that enable us all to expand, examine and explore our journeys together. Please visit our website or use the enclosed envelope to make a gift to the CLF in support of this community; a place where you are always welcome and where you always belong. ■

Behaving, Believing, Belonging

BY STEFAN JONASSON,
DIRECTOR OF LARGE
CONGREGATION SERVICES, UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION



It is astonishing how certain human bonds are able to transcend time and place. Early one year, my brother Chuck made contact—on the Internet, no less—with a long lost relative in Iceland. As genealogists reckon relationships, Kiddi is our second cousin once removed; in the simpler reckoning of the American South, he might be called a “kissing cousin.” What matters, of course, is that however it is measured, we are kin! We belong to something that crosses generations. We belong to one another.

You may be familiar with the old saw that you can choose your friends but you can’t choose your relatives. When one is dealing with distant relations, this observation doesn’t really matter much—unless they come to visit. Well, Kiddi did come to visit that summer, accompanied by his wife, Bára, and their youngest daughter, Gunna. They stayed with my brother and his family. Now, I admit that I found myself a little anxious about the prospect of distant (read: virtually unknown) relations coming to town.

What if we had nothing in common? What if we couldn’t easily communicate with one another? What if our expectations of behavior were incompatible? What if differing beliefs proved to be barriers? *What if... what if... what if...!*

There was no need for anxiety. Almost immediately, we connected through the swift, sure bonds of kinship. In the days and weeks that followed, our affection grew—at the dinner table, around the campfire, along the beach. I shall not soon forget this

glorious time. We were blessed by their visit. And we were moved to tears when it came time for them to return home.

What is it about kinship that transcends the normal boundaries of human relationships? How is it that, as distantly related as we are, somehow we felt an almost instant bonding with one another—a connection, a sense of belonging to one another and, more importantly, belonging to something that transcends time and place?

Sometimes families cannot bridge even the smallest distances of time and geography. But it has been my experience that, more often than not, families do rise above their differences and, despite their imperfections, we can rely on them as on few other human institutions. Even after a distance of many generations, we can embrace those we call kin, often sharing a remarkably common set of beliefs and behaviors, feeling clearly that we belong to one another.

This can happen for more than just families. It happens, too, in the political realm and in social matters. Ideally, it happens in religious circles. In his book *Sacred Fragments*, Rabbi Neil Gillman notes how the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, Mordecai Kaplan, taught that:

There are three possible ways of identifying with a religious community: by behaving, by believing, or by belonging. Kaplan himself insisted that the primary form of Jewish identification is belonging—that intuitive sense of kinship that binds a Jew to every other Jew in history and in the contemporary world. Whatever Jews believe, and however they behave as Jews, serves to shape and concretize that underlying sense of being bound to a people with a shared history and destiny.

In many ways, Unitarian Universalism is akin to this, though with a difference. If we accept Mordecai Kaplan’s

analysis that people in religious communities tend to identify with those communities by behaving, believing or belonging, we will find ample evidence to support this view. There are the behaving religions, such as puritan traditions, from which we are religiously descended, and pietists of all religious communities, who tend to place tremendous emphasis on the way we behave. Of course, the easy route to excommunication in pietistic and puritan groups involves inappropriate behavior.

“There are three...ways of identifying with a religious community: by behaving, by believing, or by belonging.”

But a behavioral emphasis is not all negative. In the late nineteenth century, our own “Issue in the West” presented two competing claims for the basis of membership in Unitarian churches. On the one hand were those who affirmed that membership demanded a common devotion to the Christian faith, as interpreted by Unitarians, of course. They felt that Unitarians needed to believe in and worship God as their object of devotion and acknowledge Jesus as their spiritual leader.

On the other side of the issue were those who argued for what was called the “Ethical basis.” For these Unitarians, what really mattered in religion was how we treated one another, how we cared for our neighbors—how we behaved towards one another. In time, those who advocated the Ethical basis came to advance an even more broadly-based interpretation of their position. But, at first, they argued that behavior was the primary characteristic that bound people together in religious community. It mattered less

to them what people believed than how they acted.

There are also the believing religions. Creedal Christianity comes immediately to mind. The defining characteristic of such religions, which are the most numerous, involves assent to a particular creed or statement of faith. If the classical philosophers had been given to creeds, they might have said, "I believe, therefore I belong." To be honest, creeds are not always obvious at first glance. Even some varieties of humanism and certain secular philosophies come dangerously close, at times, to credalism. It is credal religion that Unitarians and Universalists have most clearly rebelled against in the course of history.

Nevertheless, even while rejecting creedal approaches to religion, Unitarian Universalists have affirmed that, in the words of Sophia Lyon Fahs, "It matters what we believe." But while recognizing the importance of belief, Unitarian Universalists have been reluctant to exclude people from their religious communities on the basis of belief alone.

That brings us to the "belonging" traditions. Judaism and Shinto stand out as two important examples of religious traditions that emphasize the importance of shared identity, spiritual kinship, and belonging to one another, beyond what we may believe or how we may behave. Belonging to one another is what is most important in such traditions. There is at least a kernel of this sense among the Mennonites and in ethnic churches in general, where the creeds often bow before the altar of ethnic cohesiveness.

In recent times, it can perhaps be said that Unitarian Universalism has over-emphasized belonging, sometimes to the exclusion of behaving and believing. I sometimes wonder if we UUs have come to emphasize belonging so strongly because—collectively, at least—we wish to avoid accountability

for what we believe, not to mention the things we do. Yet there is something holy—well, at least wholesome—in the quality of belonging that we seek to nurture.

But we seem to lack much of the richness or depth of "belonging" possessed by our friends in the Jewish community or other ancient traditions. Ours is, after all, largely an association of converts. Nonetheless, we do have a glimmer of this sense of belonging—an intuitive sense that we belong not only to one another, but to the whole of humanity. The human family is, indeed, one great kinship.

The human family is, indeed, one great kinship.

I would argue that all three aspects—behaving, believing and belonging—are essential to any religious group that aspires to integrity. At different times and in differing circumstances, a religious movement might emphasize one aspect or another, but an ongoing emphasis of one to the exclusion of the other two is idolatrous. If behaving, believing and belonging are not held together in some sort of creative tension then we risk falling into the same sorts of idolatry that have led many a religious movement to the rubbish pile of human history.

Earl Morse Wilbur's classic threefold slogan of Unitarianism—freedom, reason and tolerance—reflects our ways of behaving, believing and belonging. Our behavior is characterized by freedom. Our beliefs are built upon reason. Our way of belonging is characterized by tolerance.

It does matter *how* we behave. It does matter *what* we believe. But it matters, more importantly to us, that we maintain a sense of belonging to one another and to the larger tradition, the

cloud of witnesses who have testified to the enduring ideals and vision of liberal religion.

There may be something incredibly naïve about the notion that we can have meaningful human relationships without any mandated behavior or commonly-held belief. Perhaps if it were more easily accomplished, divorce lawyers would find themselves out of work. Yet we try as a religious community to live into this noble ideal. We do not say that behavior and belief are unimportant, but we do say—through word and deed—that our distinguishing characteristic is that we are a people who belong to one another. We covenant together, making voluntary commitments with our spiritual neighbors, viewing one another as kindred spirits, and interacting with love and compassion.

It is interesting and inspiring to see how that sense of belonging can transcend the differences of time and place. To meet a Unitarian Universalist from another community (whether a rural crossroads or a large metropolitan center) or with a different theological perspective (be it Christian or humanist, theist or eclectic) is to immediately recognize a kindred spirit. It is almost like coming across a cousin—say, a second cousin, once removed—who turns out to share many of our own values and behaviors, idiosyncrasies and passions.

When we encounter a kindred spirit—a person to whom we belong and who, in turn, belongs to us—we are reminded of the holiest of religious truths: all of us are sisters and brothers in the things that matter most. We are one great human family and those religious traditions that find their distinctive emphasis in recognizing that we belong to one another are, in fact, those religious communities that are best positioned in a broken world to bring healing to the Earth and a sense of kinship to all who dwell here. ■



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

When do you feel as if you—your opinions, your experiences, your beliefs—matter? And when do you feel as if you are marginal, that you and your life are invisible?

During a workshop, years ago, we were asked to respond to these questions. I paired up with a woman named Nancy, who said:

I grew up in a religion where I always felt as if I had to hide what I really thought and believed or I would be rejected. So in a way I felt invisible inside my own skin. When you feel invisible inside your own skin, you carry that sense with you everywhere else. I guess it wasn't until I made peace with what I think and believe, and found a community that accepted me and encouraged me to know my own thoughts and beliefs, that I could feel as if I mattered in any situation at all!

I was moved by Nancy's profound words. If we are not at home in our own skin, because of real or feared rejection from those around us, it becomes very hard to belong anywhere on the planet.

I realize that many people, for a variety of reasons, have had the misfortune of actually hearing the words, "You don't belong here." Although I can't think of a time when someone said that to me directly, I have certainly been told in many less obvious ways that I might want to consider being someplace (or someone) different. I have felt this in religious congregations, in workplace meetings, in social gatherings, in restaurants, at hair salons, at the gym, in particular parts of particular towns and cities and suburbs.

Spiritual communities, we imagine, would be the one place where belong-

ing could be experienced in the deepest, most complete way. And yet when being part of a community is more about belonging to a club of people who are just like us than connecting with people who share abiding care for one another and for the world, it becomes more of a negative force than a positive one.

The real question is not *who belongs to our spiritual community*, but rather *to whom does our spiritual community belong?*

Recently, in Minneapolis, a Methodist Church burned down. This was a church that I had visited during worship and found was not a good match for me. And yet, like thousands of other people in the city, I was in and out of the church constantly for meetings, cultural events, trainings and to see community groups. When the church burned down, we all went to the smoldering lot to grieve together. Signs were everywhere saying things like *Love* and *Thanks*—from the Latina mothers' group, from the Hmong community gardeners, from the GLBT teen group, from the community radio station, from the puppet theatre, from peace activists, etc.

I stood in the rubble, reading these signs, and I felt profoundly moved by the generosity of this small urban congregation. While many of us present did not belong to that church, we felt that the congregation belonged to us, that in a profound way we were part of it and it was part of us.

This in turn caused me to wonder: if any other congregation, including CLF, burned down, who would grieve? If it was only the members themselves, would that be a congregation, or would it be a social club? Now, I know this is a trick question, because CLF is a con-

gregation without walls and can't burn down. But it is a sincere question, nonetheless. The real question is not *who belongs to our spiritual community*, but rather *to whom does our spiritual community belong?*

If we are to be worthy of our aspirations, we must continually offer ourselves more widely, more deeply, more generously. We are not here only for ourselves, or even only for each other, though certainly it is important that we are here for ourselves and each other. But in order to create a community in which belonging is deep enough to hold our whole selves, we must constantly be widening the circle, inviting more in, sharing with all kinds of folks, offering what we have to the world.

One of the songs we often use in our online worship services is called "We Belong," by the singer Namoli Brennet. A transgender woman, Namoli has certainly experienced others telling her, both implicitly and explicitly, that she does not belong. Her song's chorus says:

*And when the same old voices say
That we'd be better off running
away,
We belong, we belong, anyway.*

She asserts that belonging is not joining a club, but rather is an act of both courage and resistance.

May the CLF be a place where belonging is big. Rather than being a gated spiritual community, may the doors and windows of our congregation be thrown open wide to all who seek entry. May all who seek to join our spiritual expedition and live our shared principles know their deepest and most generous selves here, and find strength together that we could not know alone. May our belonging here mean that we have more to share with the world.

And may we always find the kindness to look at one another, in all of our differences, as we walk around this wonderful and frightening planet, affirming to all that "We belong." ■

Ambiguity

BY MITRA RAHNEMA,
MINISTER, UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
OF LONG BEACH,
CALIFORNIA



What are you? Are you a man? A woman? Person of color? Are you straight or gay, able or disabled, citizen, immigrant, settler? Are you legal or illegal? Do you belong here?

Where is it documented? Your birth certificate, in your skin, on your wheelchair, the shape of your hips, or your DNA—does it have a US stamp of approval? Tell me, what are you?

That question: “What are you?” is the clash of cultures working itself out in the flesh of those of us with identities on the margins. In this process we can experience and re-experience pain, sadness, embarrassment and fear of our deepest selves.

We try to respond, wanting to make a connection and to know ourselves, but are often left feeling fenced in, stripped down and depleted. As a result, our humanness is squashed and evolution is halted. The beauty of migrating identities is lost.

In life we often encounter forms that ask “what you are.” We check boxes of gender, age, race and so on. Sometimes, at the bottom of the list, we are given the option: “OTHER” with a space for a description. We might pick “Other” out of desperation to numb ourselves and move on. Or we check it with frustration: *Ugh, I’m always Other.* And, there are times when “Other” is the ambiguous place that saves us. *I am an Other! Hallelujah!*

Ambiguity is a saving grace. Ambiguity is that vast space between two clasped hands, the sound of silence, a breath-taking glance from another, an anger that surfaces our love, a deep belly laugh in the midst of great sorrow. At times ambiguity can be anxiety

-provoking and unpredictable, making us want to clarify the rules. Yet it can also encourage us to be more than what is documented in laws or bylaws.

Ambiguity knows that in welcoming the stranger we ourselves become the stranger by crossing the borders of our consciousness. Ambiguity gives us permission to imagine a new being, within and outside the walls of our bodies, communities, states, countries. It is becoming “the other” and responding with a *Hallelujah*.

Ambiguity is a saving grace.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith insists that we do not limit the infinity of grace. Therefore our job is to cultivate possibility in response to isolation and suffering. The feeling of chaos that is inherent in possibility makes us uneasy. But when we embody possibility, we are creating a new story to explain the world and our participation in it.

We are taking an evolutionary step forward, one that allows for a future in which our children themselves can be creatively ambiguous in heart, body, and mind.



You know, sometimes those forms ask: “What is your religion?” We are given a list. At the bottom of the list is that nebulous “Other.” That is the space where we can write in: *Unitarian Universalist*. Because, What are we? We are religiously “Other.”

Therefore, let us embrace another ambiguous “Other” together; and respond with *Hallelujah!* ■

Belonging

BY JOHN O'DONOHUE

To be human is to belong. Belonging is a circle that embraces everything; if we reject it, we damage our nature. The word “belonging” holds together the two fundamental aspects of life: being and longing. Being and Longing, the longing of our Being and the being of our Longing. Belonging is deep; only in a superficial sense does it refer to our external attachment to people, places and things. It is the living and passionate presence of the soul. Belonging is the heart and warmth of intimacy. When we deny it, we grow cold and empty. Our life’s journey is the task of refining our belonging so that it may become more true, loving, good and free.

We do not have to force belonging. The longing within us always draws us towards belonging and again towards new forms of belonging when we have outgrown the old ones. Postmodern culture tends to define identity in terms of ownership: possessions, status, and qualities. Yet the crucial essence of who you are is not owned by you. The most intimate belonging is self-belonging. Yet your self is not something you could ever own; it is rather the total gift that every moment of your life endeavors to receive with honor. True belonging is gracious receptivity. ■

From Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections on our Yearning to Belong, published in 1999 by Cliff Street Books, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.



Church of the Larger Fellowship
Unitarian Universalist

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Web Site www.QuestForMeaning.org — **E-mail** clf@clfu.org — **Jewelry** 617-948-6150 — **Toll-Free Line** 800-231-3027
CLF Unitarian Universalist, 25 Beacon St., Boston MA 02108 USA — **Telephone** 617-948-6166 — **Fax** 617-523-4123

Whose Are You?

BY VICTORIA SAFFORD, MINISTER, WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Whose are you?

Who carries you in their heart, thinks of you, whether you think of them or not?

Whose are you?

Who are your people, the ones who make a force field you can almost touch?

Whose are you?

Who is within your circle of concern?

Whose are you?

To whom are you responsible, accountable? Whose care is yours to provide?

Whose are you?

When you look in the mirror in the morning, whose bones do you see? Whose blood runs in your veins? Who are those people, stretching back in time, beyond memory?

Where did you come from?

Whose are you?

When you walk out of your room, out of your house, into the sunlight of the day, to whom in this wide world do you belong? Where is your allegiance, by whom are you called?

Whose are you?

At the end of the day, through the longest night, in the valley of the shadow of death and despair, who holds your going out and coming in, your waking and your sleeping?

Who, what, holds you in the hollow of its hand?

Whose are you? ■

Excerpted from Victoria Safford's sermon "Love's Conditions."

