

On Belonging
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First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
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Reading from “A Blessing Called Sanctuary” by Jan Richardson

Sermon

Can you think of a time when you felt you didn’t belong? I can. I think of my first day of Divinity School. That’s when I learned that the average age of my classmates was exactly the age of my oldest child. Or, in an early career, when, fresh out of law school, I was hired by a firm with 30-some attorneys, all male.

And when I was growing up - I still remember times of not belonging with my peers, when I wasn’t cool enough or pretty enough or wealthy enough, or in the know. Times when I felt different. And, hungry to be gathered in, I worked hard to “fit in,” leaving behind parts of myself, or carrying them in silence or in shame.

Perhaps you know what that’s like.

That feeling when a piece of who we are is met with rejection is a feeling we tend to remember, even decades later, because belonging is a basic human need. We’re constantly seeking that elusive combination of being fully who we are and meaningfully connected beyond ourselves. We crave belonging.

Those who study what is increasingly called the “loneliness epidemic” say that a lack of belonging is getting more common.¹ Researchers cite things like smaller families, frequent moves, and technology (especially social media); the pandemic seems to have exacerbated the situation; AI is starting to have an impact as it mimics human relationships. But the biggest challenge may be that belonging only happens when we are at-home in ourselves. Sociologist Brene Brown says that belonging begins with accepting and honoring who we are, as we are, and refusing to settle for “fitting in,” or conforming, even if that means disapproval or rejection.² That takes courage, but there’s no way around it, she says - when we sacrifice a key piece of ourselves, trying to meet that need to belong, we will never belong. Fitting in is no substitute for belonging.

A community, or a person can’t give us belonging, but can help us learn to be at home in ourselves, by accepting and loving us as we are and giving us space to grow. Some have known this experience in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Sometimes, that’s what it’s like to grow up here. And for people who arrive as adults ... over and over, I hear people say they walked into one of our churches and knew right away that they’d found a home. Perhaps that was you. Or perhaps, like me, it took longer, but eventually you found that a part of yourself you had to deny somewhere else was OK here. Or maybe in this moment you’re not sure if all of you is welcome here, but there’s hope in the possibility. For once you belong somewhere ...

You begin to breathe again,
to move without fear,

¹ <https://www.kff.org/report-section/loneliness-and-social-isolation-in-the-united-states-the-united-kingdom-and-japan-an-international-survey-introduction/>

² Brene Brown, *Braving the Wilderness*, 32-33.

to speak with abandon
the words you carry
in your bones,
that echo in your being.

We need to belong. And when it happens, it is good. It's like the end of the journey.

Or is it? In case you're not counting, I've been speaking for about 4 minutes – it's not quite the end.

... the deal with this blessing says the poet
is that it will not leave you alone,

will not let you linger

The time will come
when this blessing
will ask you to leave ...

because it desires for you
to become the sanctuary
that you have found ...

Sometimes we do need to rest in whatever belonging we've managed to find. If that's you today, stay there as long as you need to. But, when the time comes, the blessing of belonging will ask us to leave – not as a physical departure – but something even harder. It asks us to risk a change in our own belonging, so that we might draw the circle wider, welcome others as they are, and become the sanctuary.

I've learned a lot about “becoming the sanctuary” from Unitarian Universalist youth. That's where - about 10 years ago - I first encountered covenants that included the phrase: “croissants, not donuts.” [[slide]] Oddly enough, this had nothing to do with snacks. It was about welcome and belonging. Being open, like a croissant, to new people as they are, rather than closed off, like a donut.

“Croissants, not donuts”

I've seen youth groups live into this by keeping an extra chair in their circle, so any new person will find a space waiting for them. And if that chair was occupied, the circle shifted as another was brought out, and left empty. I've seen youth live into this by very intentionally bringing new people up to speed on the in-jokes and unwritten practices of the group. And, I've seen them intentionally change group behavior to become more open, more welcoming.

I once watched a particularly boisterous group figure out how to accommodate a new member who was sensitive to loud noise. That wasn't easy. But it's that openness to being changed by those welcomed in, risking one's own belonging, in a way, that is at the heart of being a croissant. “Croissants not donuts” is about becoming the sanctuary. [[end slide]]

It's hard to do. Partly because – like most binaries – it's incomplete. The fact is, we shouldn't give up donuts entirely. (At least not the metaphorical ones.) There will always be ways in which our needs, values and identity require drawing some boundaries around things that are not negotiable – that we will not change for anyone. A life of integrity requires some of that.

But most of us overdo the donut, because that's our natural human tendency. We want to settle in, hunker down and rest in our belonging, with people who are as much like us as possible. Especially now, when differences of opinion can quickly escalate, and when the future seems

so uncertain, there's a longing to just be with "our people" (whoever that may be) and have at least that be comfortable. And so, we may start to imagine that our belonging requires shutting other people out. Or we imagine that we are inviting others to belong, when in fact we're inviting them to "fit in" be like us. We become donuts with delusions of croissant-ness.

Earlier I mentioned my first experience working as an attorney – me and all the men. I thought it was going to work, because I was welcome. My work was appreciated; I was treated with respect. Comments about my clothing were mostly appropriate. I was even invited to play golf. They wanted me to belong; I wanted to belong. There were good intentions all around.

And. It didn't work. It didn't work because I was welcomed as someone like the people welcoming me. But that's not who I was. My goal was not fast track to partnership – it was doing interesting work while supporting my family and spending time with them. I needed some flexibility to meet demands on my time that were unimaginable to people whose spouses handled all the household management and childcare. And I don't like golf. It was a friendly and welcoming donut, but a donut just the same. After a year of "fitting in," I quit.

But the story doesn't end there. In fact, my quitting brought out the question that no one, including me, had thought to ask – what do I need? We made some changes – and I ended up staying 6 more years. A law firm, of all things, could kind of learn to be a croissant – not out of charity, but because the group benefited when someone a little different could belong, even if that meant everyone else's belonging shifted a little.

If they could do it 35 years ago, so can we.

Our religious heritage has some things to say about belonging – the Unitarian side is a little complicated, but the Universalists had a strong tradition of pushing the boundaries of who belongs. It started centuries ago with the heretical belief in universal salvation (the radical idea that everybody goes to heaven!) grounded in an understanding of God's love as too big and inclusive to shut anyone out. The Universalists recognized that we're all in this together. Not just the ones who think or act like you or me. Everyone. All are loved, and all belong, without exception, said the Universalists.

The extension of God's love to everyone didn't mean that the Universalists actually welcomed everyone into their churches – they didn't – but that message was bigger and more enduring than their particular institutional limitations.

All are loved and all belong, without exception. It's still our message. It's at the heart of Unitarian Universalist values. This message is there in our conversations about purpose, and how we want to respond to this moment.

The message that all are loved and all belong, without exception, is also our challenge. Back in the 1970's, when more women began to pursue Unitarian Universalist ministry, there was pushback - some were worried that more women in leadership would change our congregations, and that they wouldn't belong in quite the same way. And they were right. There's a very real tension between our innate desire to protect our belonging and group identity, and our call to invite others in, as who they really are.

We see this challenge playing out today in our denomination's very public efforts to become more inclusive than we have ever been. That work bumps up against often subconscious expectations of "fitting in," as well as fears that making way for diverse people to be at home, as their full selves, might affect the belonging of those already here. That could happen.

How willing are we to risk changes in how we belong in order to become the sanctuary that we have found? Where might we be open like a croissant, and which boundaries around our identity must we hold, donut-like?

There aren't easy answers. But if we want our groups, our institutions, our congregations, our nation, to be places where more people can belong, grow and transform, we have to be less like donuts. We are called (by our ancestors and our aspirations) to pay attention to the ways in which we still expect, or settle for, fitting in. We are called to be croissants.

The challenge for this church, and each of us, is to hold on to the core of who we are – that central donut that we will not allow to change, while being a croissant in as many other ways as possible. If we aren't sure what is central to our being, we can end up losing that core, or holding tight to everything, fearing that any change will damage who we are and our own belonging. Oligarchs and tyrants use that fear to their own ends. Knowing what is at the core of a country or a community or an individual – and what is not – allows us to expand the belonging, and be the sanctuary.

For every moment in our lives, over and over, we encounter a choice: to protect our own belonging (as it is now) by keeping out those who might ask us to change, or to risk inviting others (as they are) to belong.

May we find clarity about when we must be a donut, and when we might be a croissant.

May we, more and more, seek our own belonging in wider circles, and find the courage to make them wider still.

And may you always know, deep in your bones, that you belong.

Amen.