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Cover Page Footnote

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The Phenomenon of Belonging

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A central problem facing humanity is that we have forgotten our sense of belonging. We no longer feel like we belong to ourselves, each other, and the world in deep and meaningful ways. Modern culture has uprooted the heart felt bonds of authentic connection and replaced them with false experiences of belonging through the addictive qualities of materialism, narcissism, and rationalism. As a result we suffer from our lost experiences of soul, spirit, and the aliveness of the world. In this article, we will explore belonging as the process of growth, forever pushing away the old and pulling towards new ways of being. The qualities of belonging explored herein reveal a heroic journey of remembrance from the innocence of being in childhood to the wounds of betrayal, alienation, and growth. This narrative exploration guides us from disillusionment and isolation to a remembering of what more authentic belonging feels like and how we are called to it as a homecoming to ourselves.

KEYWORDS existential, myth, developmental process, adaptation, hero's journey

The mystery of belonging presents itself fundamentally as relationship, in “properly relating to” and “going along with” as the word’s origin reveals. Through life’s wide perspective, everything somehow belongs through natural order, that mysterious push and pull of ethereal hands stirring the night sea of the soul’s vast interior, onto the land’s changing seasons, and up into the expanding ocean of the cosmos. All of those seemingly chaotic parts are integrating into a harmonious whole, cycling as the processes of death and rebirth, creation and communion, and diversity and indivisible unity into and through belonging. The Indigenous wise ways of knowing have always felt the essence of belonging through their relationship to the land and to each other, stating, “All things are related and intricately woven into a web of existence that holds specific meaning and value, whether this was known in a general sense or yet to be discovered when needed” (Grayshield & Mihecoby, 2010, p. 14).

Through the perspective of the human being, belonging rests between being and longing. Like Goethe’s notion of the *Urflanze*, the archetypal flower who’s longing looms behind each particular bloom, so to the Self longs to belong to the natural order. Within the body, belonging moves with the in-breath of the lungs, the push of the heart beat, connecting the body to the present. Longing is being’s constant shadow, the downbeat of the heart and the out-breath of the lungs, always pulling into the future. Resting in the gap between breaths is belonging, the mysterious third note in the trinity relationship, spiraling the Self upward in a pattern of push/pull rhythm into ever higher realms of conscious life. What guides belonging remains unanswerable, perhaps a divine intelligence, the gods, God, or evolution? The tribes and cultures of old explained their felt sense of belonging through myth, ritual, dance, and song; an *Imago Dei* re-membering them in the Great Chain of Being.

Remembering, it seems, is another way into the qualities of belonging as another of the word’s origin is “to be a part of.” Modernity has severely eroded the feeling of belonging, both individually and collectively, and we no longer remember our place in the universe. We suffer from our lost memory and long to re-member. The gods who once crackled with fire on

the land are now but embers smoldering in the fabric of the heart and the soul. When Jung (1973) observed that the modern fell off the medieval cathedral, he was acknowledging the crisis of meaning in which Western culture finds itself. (p. 569).

In the following exploration of this phenomenon, belonging presents itself most in the individual and the collective as the developmental process behind growth; forever pushing away the old and pulling towards new ways of being. This compulsion to grow is longing; longing to connect our own soulful truths with the truth of the natural world. The qualities of belonging explored herein reveal a journey in remembrance through the lived experiences of several graceful interview participants. They show us how belonging is innocently lived in childhood, is forgotten by the wounding of growth, and is remembered again through grace and wisdom. Many of belonging's qualities are revealed via *negativa*; the shadow aspects of belonging like alienation, homelessness, and betrayal that scars the innocence of being. Those wounds, paradoxically, call the hero out on her journey of re-remembering as many of the participants wisely observed. Belonging it seems still belongs to us, but having been concealed in our modern flatland, will not be found until we find ourselves; again and maybe for the first time. "The world, I've come to think, is like the surface of a frozen lake. We walk along, we slip, and we try to balance and not to fall. One day there is a crack, and so we learn that underneath us is an unimaginable depth." (Joyce, 1954, p. 286).

Belonging Lives in Childhood:

For many of us, belonging was the strongest, most intimate, and direct during childhood wherein time was wild and primal, moored only between morning's push and evening's pull. The world shook our senses through its wonder, awe, and aliveness and everyone felt innocently connected to everything in one enormous fabric. As Hart (2003) asserts, "A child's openness and directness of perception allows for this intimate and intuitive awareness of the world; the child seems to dwell nearer the light."(p. 9). We were allowed to be ourselves, for the most part and for some time, by our parents and the world at large and were set free to roam. Roaming intuitively unencumbered belonging because the ones who feel alive in the rhythms of life are free to move as the heroes on the land and in fantasy. One participant, Warren, observed regarding roaming and belonging,

"My earliest memories are of the times I spent on the lake in Austria as a child. It was a time of adventure where everyday was spent swimming the lake and roaming the forest behind the lake house. My brothers, cousins, and I would leave in the morning and rarely return until after the sun went down. Swimming in the cold lake under a crystal blue sky with the Alps in background, I felt a deep sense of being at home or being part of this place. I had no worries other than watching out for the creatures under the water getting ready to eat me."(Informal Communication: Warren, April 2017).

Childhood offers an open invitation to dwell in close proximity to the mysterious channel of myths and images pushing into dreams and pulling themselves from the pages of storybooks. The powerful villains, unrealized princesses, and the menacing monsters in between all parleyed in the labyrinths, forests, and castles of dreams. They belonged to us in secretly intimate ways and we carried them longingly from their nighttime dwellings into our daydreams. The personal images, rising up from the furnaces of our souls, aided us in feeling more alive than our awkward environments permitted. Adam remembers his childhood dreams by saying,

“I remember a time when I was five or six when I was completely fascinated and haunted by picture books of monsters. I would stare at old characters like Dracula, the Wolfman, and Frankenstein. I would have the most intense dreams, nightmares really. I was a warrior, pirate, and hunter sort of character being chased by the most frightening monster. It was like the girl from the Exorcist movie with wings flying around trying to kill me and I fought her like a mad man. These dreams lasted for a while and were super vivid...like they were absolutely real. I can still remember the dreams after all this time.” (Informal Communication: Adam, April 2017).

For some of us, the place of childhood belonging was most embodied in the home. The home was the meeting place between the aliveness of being and the soul’s dreamy longing. It was the place of being safe, familiar, and rested; a shelter away from the longings of the world. As children, we sat in our designated place at the table, taking in the stories of strange longings and beings from the other characters and felt a part of the drama. The blood and breath of family circulated around us where elders and offspring performed in the rhythms of “going along with” and “being a part of.”

“The smells of dinner cooking would hit me after getting home from school. My mom was always cooking and I’d go into the kitchen and say hello. She’d get startled like this was the first time she saw me. Playing in the basement or in my room, I would wait for my dad to come home. I knew he was home when the garage door opened and I knew we would eat soon. We sat at the table always doing the same things. My dad would talk with my mom about stuff I couldn’t understand and then turn to me and try to make me laugh. Everyday was the same routine.” (Informal Communication: Adam, April 2017).

Sleeping at home presents a uniquely innocent quality of belonging in childhood. In sleep, the body dissolves away from the mind’s chatter and surrenders itself to the longing in dreams. Dreams pull the child under to a land of dark wonder and sacred awe where the soul receives the holy pull from something greater. Resting in being, the child’s body is re-ordered through the somatic pulse of blood and breath. And like the sleeping child, the home rests in the in-between as the soul of night curls throughout, shifting shapes and sounds into something strange and tricky.

Belonging becomes Wounding:

Growth brings change and all of us experience the changed relationship of belonging, of feeling at home in world, and within ourselves. As the plant blooms, so too the Self *selves* and in self-ing, the resultant growth can wound in its progressive abandonment of the innocence of childhood. The one whose belonging rhythms were balanced well in early childhood can relate to and with the world in a more tuneful way, but only for a time. The rest of us experience in a myriad of ways a breach in our balanced environments and our rhythm of belonging becomes intensely wounded. The parental push/pull of attachment/abandonment disturbs us with pushing and pulling too hard or not enough.

In the parental wounding we become progressively estranged from our selves and begin to feel and believe as if we no longer belong. Hollis (2001) affirms, “In the face of an insufficiently nurturing environment, the child will internalize this provisional message as a statement about its own worthiness to be met half way. Identifying with this fantasy of

diminishment, he or she will live out repeating patterns of self-devaluation, self-sabotage.” He continues, “The greater the adaptation required, the more the individual suffers a split between the *instinctual truth* and the *provisional, adaptive* personality.” (p. 16, emphasis added). Instinctual truth is at its essence the felt sense of belonging and, by suffering the split away from truth, we are wounded and move as strangers away from our belonging. Several interviews yielded commentary regarding childhood wounding;

“My home life was lonely and isolating. I was made to feel different from my older brothers because I was kept, time and again, from playing with them. At night in my bedroom, I could hear the activity of my parents and brothers in the family room and longed to be a part of what they were doing. It was so hurtful and lonely because my family seemed to not want to know me and I retreated into myself.” (Informal Communication: Amy, April 2017).

“My dad died when I was two and my mom seemed completely overwhelmed by her life as a single mom. She was controlling and fearful of life and made me feel that way too. I remember being invited into my neighbor’s home bursting with color and warm smells. The woman had a parakeet and wanted me to meet it. I can still feel the sun coming into the kitchen basking everything with light, on my face and on the walls. It was such a contrast with my own home which was cold and smelled of cleaning product all the time. When my mom found me, she immediately broke that peaceful space, saying I was bothering the woman. The woman stood up for me, kind of in shock at my mom’s behavior. My mom wouldn’t stop saying I was a bother. That really hurt me.” (Informal Communication: Jan, April 2017).

The Wounds become our Parents:

As Adam’s fall from the garden is wounding so to are the paths out of our childhood innocence. We begin to carry our wounded vision, *hamartia*, into the world and belonging moves into the shadow lands of its negative qualities. Alienated, betrayed, and estranged away from our instinctual truths, we become wanderers on the stormy seas of our fate; a fate which presents us with a set of givens, a genetic inheritance, a family of origin weighted by its own mythological burden in the unconscious, and a *Zeitgeist* loaded with implicit and explicit messages about one’s identity. (Hollis, 2001, p.17). Some can hide their wounded identity within adaptation, finding belonging in the tribal collective of required social expectations while others identify with the pull of addictions of every sort. The drama of belonging then plays out in dependencies and over identifications and the soul protests it’s continued wounding through disturbance, turbulence, and heart ache. Hollis (2001) again observes, “The more you are like the others, the more secure you will feel, yet the more your heart will ache, the more dreams will be troubled and the more your soul will slip off silences. Finally, one day, you will have forgotten that you have a soul – you will rise, drive through traffic, arrive at work, and not remember how you got there.” (p. 11).

Remembrance, it becomes clear, was the Father’s desire in pushing Adam from the Garden and the wound becomes the holy reminder of belonging to and with the world. As Hillman suggests, “that which wounds us can also parent us. Our wounds are the mothers and fathers of our destinies.”(p. 8). The myth of the hero in the wisdom literature of the ancients comes into focus in the context of wounded destiny. The hero is rarely without a great flaw, many times the flaw is a result of a physical wound, and that wound is central to that hero’s

journey back home to where he belongs. In the hero's journey, the Odyssey, Odysseus was wounded in childhood by being gorged by a boar. The wound, his lost innocence, becomes a scar which he carries through out his many trials. The message suggests that the wounded body has become the embodied wound, and, as embodied, as built into his existence in the leg that carries him and walks with him, his wounded-ness is also his hidden understanding and grounding support. (Hillman, 2005, p. 23). Heroes like Odysseus are attempting to tell us something important in that, human existence is wounded from beginning to end. The wound is the gift because it reminds us of our central task in the uniqueness of our individual lives; to remember how we belong to the greater mosaic of being and to bring forth our selves into the world. Without the scar, we remain asleep in the garden and forever lost in the fragments of our ego consciousness.

Wounded Creativity:

As the drama of young adulthood wounds us, dismembers us, in parental and societal expectation, we long to relate authentically with the world again like we did in childhood. Some among us feel the longing so strongly that we pull our instinctual truths from the dark lands of soul and into the world, creatively. Our creations bring us back into a more balanced relationship with being and longing and the soul begins to roam again around the walls of the rigid environs. Wounded creativity steps in to parent and soothe our suffering as some of the participants made clear:

“Because of my isolation at home, all I did was read books. My mom would take me to the library every week and I would check out a massive pile of titles. The books became my escape and introduced me to things in the world that no one in my family even knew about. I got really smart really fast because of my reading and honestly it contributed to my feeling like I didn't belong. But I know my interest, really my passion for the ancient world started here. I would not have studied and become a Ph.D. if everything was well adjusted for me.”(Informal Communication: Amy, April 2017).

“The only thing that soothed me was music. I would listen to moody, gothy, new wave music in the dark of my room for hours. I feel the notes, the textures, and the waves of interplay between the instruments. I loved every second of it and it loved me back. I'm the only person that I know that has and still has this relationship to music. My mom got so sick of me breaking everything that she got me a drum set and allowed me to play in the basement for as long and as often as I wanted. I became a really good drummer and it stayed with me throughout my life. Music saved me many times through out my life. I would not have experienced life and music the same way had I not been so messed up because of my dad.”(Informal Communication: Warren, April 2017).

While most others retreat into the pull of adaptations by trading their childhood images for the relative safety of the herd, the wounded creative pushes herself forward by belonging to her own creative expression. As she is left behind by the herd, her longing to belong is met by wounded others similarly cast off. Relationships form through the blood bonds of creativity, forged in the wilderness, hinterlands, and other dark places slightly off center from

the expectations of normalcy. These souls meet through the wounds and a community of belonging develops around creative expression.

“Poetry was my life in high school. I met so many others who shared my passion, from all different high schools and backgrounds. We spent our evenings on the streets of Denver, in the cafes smoking and drinking coffee. Being ostracized from the jocks and popular kids was hard at first, but after a while we thought we were special or better somehow. It became a badge of honor to be a poet among other poets.” (Informal Communication: Devin, April 2017).

“We called ourselves “the Plague” because we felt toxic to the popular kids in high school. We liked it. Most of us formed our friendships at St. Vincent’s grade school and went on to different high schools. Our friendships lasted and we would gather every weekend as a group. We got into a lot of trouble, pulling lawn jobs, stealing stuff, and breaking into abandoned buildings. Within the group we were all unique and creative. I was the music guy, Michael the artist, Colin the writer, and on and on.” (Informal Communication: Warren, April 2017).

Re-Membering Belonging:

It is rare indeed for the individual to hold onto the creative forces of belonging and carry forth a realized destiny, one that incorporates the images of childhood into a creative calling, for the duration of one’s life. Most often, adulthood pulls us into the wills of ambition, seeking belonging in relationship, social status, wealth, and power. It is in adulthood where we trade our souls’ images, the ones felt strongly in childhood, for the soulless images of consumerist ambitions. We forget the larger calling of the soul’s agenda, the one that calls us to belong to the natural order in ever higher forms. As Jung (1973) suggests, the traditional task of religious and mythic imagos was to channel energy into evolutionary development. With the erosion of such numinous imagos, their energy has retreated into the unconscious and become pathology (par. 553). It is in the suffering of pathology from inauthentic growth where humanity finds itself.

The human experience in our modern age as the Existentialists point out is alienated, estranged, homeless, lonely, anxious, and profoundly disconnected. In our time of intense left brain rationalism, materialism, and narcissism, we are largely asleep to our right brain’s intuitive nature. Modern culture has uprooted the relational bonds of “properly relating to” and “being a part of” with the more possessive quality of belonging; “That belongs to me!” As a result we suffer; suffer our changed relationship to the numinous, suffer from not remembering the living experiences of the world, and continue to suffer from willful longings to possess what cannot be possessed. Our addictive culture wills us into a false experience of belonging, further pulling us away from the receptivity and remembrance of authentic belonging. Maybe God is not dead after all, but we are, and maybe our primary task is to search out the truths of how and why we belong – to re-member ourselves in the greater whole.

Remembrance can come to us again in a call to live one’s values in service to the world rather than in service to our ambitious selves. A participant’s experience of service points toward the qualities of the calling:

“Divine acceptance was my saving grace. It brought me out of the dark places and connected me to God. No one else had my back. Now, I have outgrown the need to have people in my life that make me feel like I didn’t belong. I’ve let go of the notion that I have to be the good sister or daughter. I was never enabled to be that because I was never empowered to belong. Belonging is a feeling, not a place, for me and I am driven to serve others. Teaching is a lonely thing, but connects me to a bigger picture. I am rooted in helping others try to understand their world.”(Informal Communication: Amy, April 2017).

The call comes to us like it did for Oedipus at Thebes, after suffering through a humbling defeat in the world. We moderns like to forget that part, the one where the hero gets flattened, gracelessly yet thoroughly, by his own hubris. It is the best part because the hero finally learns the truth about himself and his place in the world; he remembers how he belongs in the greater whole. We, like him, must slip and fall through the surface of the frozen lake to experience the unimaginable depths underneath.

In the darkness of the depths we hold ourselves against the rush of cold indignity and lost opportunity, lamenting our fall from grace. Our hearts are jolted by the freezing water and our minds are stunned by the silence. Rising up from the silence come the images again, those strange and colorful creatures not unlike the ones from childhood, and we start to ask the hard questions again about our life. The images remind us of our souls’ intentions, the ones we felt intimately as children, and we are reminded to listen carefully. By listening in silence we begin to remember ourselves and are spared a drowning fate. We are cast anew from the icy waters to serve the intention of the gods through the images of our souls. Belonging is recovered through remembrance because we remember that we belonged all along.

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