What It Means to Belong

by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, October 13, 2019

To put down roots is an expression of belonging, to establish one’s presence, settling in, claiming one’s place on the ground, in the soil – taking root.

There is a purpose to belonging. A purpose larger than any one individual. A tree produces flowers, fruits, and seeds to propagate its kind into the future. These same flowers, fruits, and seeds are food for bees, birds, squirrels – animals of all sorts, including us humans. The branches of the tree are habitat, shelter for all kinds of creatures. Its leaves are humous, providing food for the soil, creating a nurturing environment for all variety of plants to take root. The health of any given tree or plant depends on the health of its roots.

In my life I have planted more than a few trees: locust, cottonwood, apple, cherry, mesquite, desert willow, and rosewood. Each was a transplant, uprooted from the soil where it first sprouted. One was a locust tree sprouted from seed in my parents’ back yard. The rest were from the local nursery. What I learned is that the larger the tree, the harder it is to plant and the longer it takes to fully establish itself, to truly belong in its new home.

Planting a tree is hard work: digging the hole, breaking up the root ball, getting it set at just the right depth, firmly covering all the roots, setting stakes in the ground with guide wires to hold the tree straight, and then watering it in. Once the hard work of planting is done, the persistent work of tending and nurturing begins.

There is a fine art to the watering and fertilizing of a transplanted tree. The watering needs to be slow and sustained, saturating the soil beyond and below the root ball, urging tender new roots to venture out beyond the original hole, spreading out deep and wide. Fertilizer needs to be placed not at the trunk of the tree, but at its drip-line, the widest part of its canopy, again to encourage robust root growth. The stakes can be removed only after the roots have become anchored in the ground, especially in places like wind-blown Iowa.

Belonging takes work. To find a place where you fit, where you are seen and accepted for who you are is truly a gift. It doesn’t happen all at once. It takes time for the tendrils of your being to burrow deep. It takes time for rootedness to happen.

This Unitarian Universalist Society grew and flourished in the same spot in downtown Iowa City for one hundred and seven years before uprooting itself and transplanting here in Coralville. The hard work of digging and building and conducting a capital campaign and moving is done. The persistent work of tending and nurturing has just begun.

When I look back on those fruit trees I planted, I remember that it was several years before there were more than enough apples and cherries than what fed the birds and squirrels. It was at least three years before there was enough for pies -- one cherry, one apple – and several more years until there was enough for pies and applesauce and cherry jam.

This is a stabilizing time in the life of this congregation, a time for deepening and spreading the tender roots making their way into a new community. The hard work of planting may be done but the persistent and fruitful work, the patient and enduring work, the tending and nurturing work has just begun. It is a time for each to ask how they may be a part of watering and feeding the roots.

Asking is hard to do. We worry that we are asking too much of each other, that our asking will be off-putting somehow. Amanda Palmer is an off-the grid musician who makes her music available for free on the internet. She gave a TED talk titled, *The Art of Asking*.

She tells of her first job as a self-employed artist. Each day, she painted her body white and then draped it in white toilet paper fashioned to look like a wedding dress. She stood on a milk crate with a bucket at her feet on a street corner in New York City. When passersby would drop money into the bucket, she would hand them a flower, and while doing so, make a connection with her eyes.

Palmer says that experience left her with a deep knowing of how hungry people are to be seen. When she started her music career, she wanted to keep that sense of direct connection with people. Since then, she has made asking into an art form. When touring with her band, using Twitter, she has asked for everything from a piano to practice on before her show, to a couch to sleep on for the night. She tells of a time in Australia when she asked where she could find a netti pot. Within minutes, a nurse who happened to be in the vicinity, personally delivered a netti pot to the café where Palmer was dining.

Palmer says that to ask is to connect – that when you ask, people want to help. She doesn’t charge admission to her shows, but passes the hat. It makes her band uncomfortable. They say it feels like begging. Palmer says it is simply asking. She says that at every show, there are people who put extra money into the hat to pay for her music that they downloaded from the internet. Palmer says that asking people to help is asking them to join, that when people see each other, they want to help each other.

Belonging means being seen. It means showing up to be seen. Belonging means asking, giving, and receiving.

It is a joy for me and I hope gratifying for you to know that this place you have given to so generously has become habitat, shelter, and a gathering place for your congregation, your members. Not only that, it has become habitat for various groups and agencies doing good work in the larger Iowa City area. Like a tree that exists not just for itself and its kind, but for creatures that live in its branches, eat its fruit and seeds, for plants that grow in soil nourished by its leaves, so it is with a religious society such as this.

In his book, Thoughts From a Gentle Atheist, the Rev. Dennis McCarty writes: “Religious community does not just happen. Every church is a body of covenanted seekers, sharing their enthusiasms and their resources, their love and their substance, their inspiration and their perspiration.” True words, these.

We all long for a place to belong, a place where we are seen, where we are welcome for who we are, gathered in, encircled with care, a place where we are asked to give and participate. Some of us hang out in one branch or another, some of us are fed by the fruits and seeds, but it takes all of us together to nurture the roots, these new, tender and tenuous roots, unseen and underground, roots that feed the larger whole. Like the tree with many parts, we are part of one body, together, dependent on each other to do the persistent and fruitful work, the patient and enduring work of watering these roots, fertilizing them at the perimeter, encouraging them to spread and deepen into the neighborhood where this congregation has been transplanted.

More traditional churches often speak of their mission field. For Unitarian Universalists, our mission field is anywhere where there are those we have yet to reach with our liberal and liberating message. I’m certain that there are people in Coralville, Tiffin, and North Liberty, your newest neighbors, who are hungry for an open and inclusive place to belong.

One of my early mentors in ministry was the late Rev. Til Evans, a religious educator. One of her mantras was “We must care for what we have created.” What you have created here is astounding, this building and these grounds that embody your deeply held values of caring for the earth, of ecological sustainability, of accessibility and inclusion, of being a good neighbor in the community. What makes it even more astounding is that a group of 300 or so people made it happen. The building itself is an accomplishment, but what is truly astonishing is the covenanted community that gathers here to nurture and be nurtured, a place of belonging.

This is a time of watering in, asking and being asked to saturate the ground with gifts of time, talent, and treasure, a time for tending roots that have held this congregation for one hundred and seventy-seven years, a time for tending roots that will hold and sustain this congregation for years into the future. Whether you have been coming to this Society for years or months or weeks, it takes every gift and contribution, large, small, and in-between.

Tend these roots so this tree of life will anchor, hold, and sustain you now and into the future.

May it be so.