

“I Belong to Me”

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, Oct 27, 2019

Our first reading comes from Dr. Brené Brown

“True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn’t require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are.”

Our second reading today is a poem entitled “Love After Love” by Derek Walcott

The time will come
when, with elation
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

I Belong to Me

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Reverend David S. Blanchard, a Unitarian Universalist minister, traveled to East Africa, and encountered a group of people that understood that each and every one of us was created with our own song; a song unique to our individual lives. In this culture, each person's song is sung to them when they are born, in illness, in celebration, and in death. The traveling minister reflects, very few of us know our song. He indicates, it takes many of us quite some time to figure out which song is ours, and which is the song that others want us to sing

When do we hear our songs? Not just in the extraordinary, but in the mundane as well. Not only while exploring unique terrain or delving deep into soul searching, but also laughing with a cousin or reading a favorite book.

When we hear our song we hear something of our essence, a personal truth, and rhythm reflecting our own unique selves. These songs mean we belong to this intricate web that is the human family.

These songs are the songs of life; praising us and giving us hope and above all giving a voice to the mystery that is life. We know these songs because they were a part of us before we were born.

Now, both Reverend Blanchard and myself speak from our own unique perspective – a perspective in which we hear songs. But there are many ways to experience music. I invite you

to use a metaphor that works best for you – that works best for you and your own personal song.

What is your song? What is your beat, your harmony, your refrain? Is it a classical melody like Bach or Beethoven heard on piano keys, or the classic rock of The Rolling Stones. Are there vocals – perhaps reflective of an operatic soprano or the unique sounds of Tom Waits' voice?

What is your song? What melody belongs to you? For your song is you – your whole you – every bit. And it is always playing. When we take a moment, we can hear it. Our own songs belong to us. Just as our song belongs to us, we need belong to us.

We just heard the words of Dr. Brené Brown, a professor of social work and best selling author.

Dr. Brown draws a distinction between fitting in and seeking approval versus being authentically us. Fitting in and seeking approval is to be insecure with ourselves, seeking outside validation for what we can truly find in ourselves – in validating ourselves through love and compassion and deep soul work. Fitting in requires us to change, whereas belonging calls for us to be. Before we can belong anywhere else, we need to belong to ourselves. Not to change who we are, but to be who we are. We need to hear and accept and celebrate our songs! To stand alone in the wilderness in a sacred way. Just as the setting sun can illuminate an ancient tree amongst a field of grasses, thick and strong, branches reaching to the sky, leaves fluttering as the breeze passes through, so can we, too, be strong and sacred in our own wilderness. In order to belong, we must be our true selves; we must belong to ourselves, we must offer ourselves love and compassion and acceptance.

Sometimes, folks may hide. Like a child playing hide-and-go-seek, our spirit and our essence find temporary comfort in hiding. Instead of accepting all pieces of us, we may hide these pieces, as if to be ashamed. We may tuck them away.

We may do this as if these pieces of us were bad or unnatural, when they are simply a part of us! A part of our song.

What if we were able to be open about all of us. If there were no longer a need to hide our mistakes or mess ups or insecurities – but to be the grandparent tree, branches thick and strong bearing life sustaining leaves illuminated by the setting sun in our own wilderness.

When we aren't pleased with ourselves there can be an emphasis on pleasing others, we may begin to cultivate our self-worth based on the worth others prescribe us. What about the worth we can prescribe ourselves?

Can a tree ever pretend it is not a tree? Can a mountain ever hide or try to become something it is not, or is a mountain always a mountain?

Like a tree is a tree or a mountain is a mountain, so must we claim our own selves- and live true to who we are.

Many people have heard at some point in their life that they are not worthy; sometimes this is repeated. The traits that arise from this repeated refrain of not being good enough are reflected in what a 12-step support group for people who grew up in an alcoholic or otherwise dysfunctional households call the “laundry list.” This is a list of character traits typical of a person who has grown up in a dysfunctional household. The second character trait in this list is

“we became approval seekers and lost our identity in the process.” We became approval seekers and lost our identity in the process. When a person can’t find that approval within, when a person does not belong to themselves, they may try so desperately to find that through others. And yet this is the opposite to true belonging- the opposite of belonging to ourselves. And no one need live in a dysfunctional home to struggle with this idea and this feeling of not belonging. Anyone, for any reason, can struggle with this.

In my childhood, I remember my parents listening, quite often, to the musical group Talking Heads. Perhaps the tunes of the Talking Heads were reminiscent of their own songs. In one of the Talking Heads songs, the lead singer sings,

“Home is where I want to be

But I guess I'm already there

I come home, you lifted up your wings

I guess, this must be the place”

These lyrics comfort my soul!

We are each one of us home. We are already there! All we need do is note this; cherish this.

Home is ourselves, is our bodies, is us. We are each home. There is nowhere to go but here.

Home is our bodies, the only true home we will ever have. Our fingers, bent with age, or covered in freckles, or bedazzled with rings, light or dark and anything in between. Our eyes, seeing or not seeing, blue or dark brown, glossed over with cataracts or clenched tight in tears.

Our mouths, uttering phrases in English or Bengali or Russian or not uttering phrases at all –

this is our home

Our thoughts – loving, caring thoughts, kind compassionate thoughts, forgiving thoughts – these occupy our home. Our thoughts – critical, unkind, judgmental, belittling – these occupy our home as well. In which home would you rather reside? For this home is permanent.

Dr. Kristen Neff is a scholar who has dedicated her life to mindfulness and the power of self-compassion. Dr. Neff writes, “You will encounter frustrations, losses will occur, you will make mistakes, bump up against your limitation, fall short of your ideals. This is the human condition, a reality shared by all of us. The more you open your heart to this reality instead of constantly fighting against it, the more you will be able to feel compassion for yourself and all your fellow humans in the experience of life.”

How can we possibly belong to ourselves if we are not compassionate to ourselves? Can we truly belong to ourselves if we are not kind, accepting, and loving? How can we hear our song, hear our tune, hear our melody if there are layers of frustration, of self judgement, of a critical inner voice layered on top, like heavy blankets, muffling those beautiful notes.

Yes, frustration. Yes, losses. Yes, mistakes. Yes, limitations. Can we open our hearts to this, instead of fighting the inevitable? Can we even love this?

Lady Gaga tells us, yes. This international pop artist, known for her unapologetically unique style, tells us, we are born this way!

She sings her own song on stages across this plant earth, telling her followers:

I'm beautiful in my way

'Cause God makes no mistakes

I'm on the right track, baby

I was born this way

Don't hide yourself in regret

Just love yourself and you're set

These lyrics have touched the heart and souls of so very many young people – calling these young folks to be who they were born to be! Are you LGBTQIA+? You were born this way. I wonder if this is the song she heard when she was born, and in illness and in celebration

Lady Gaga co-founded a non-profit entitled Born this Way to live her song – to use her music and her status to help young people belong to themselves – to help struggling teenagers know that, whoever they are, they were born this way. “Don’t hide yourself in regret, just love yourself and you’re set”

Her goal with this foundation is to prevent bullying and encourage acceptance. She focuses on LGBTQIA+ youth and teenagers struggling with mental illness - who struggle with bipolar disorder or depression or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or schizophrenia or anxiety – you were born this way! God makes no mistakes. Lady Gaga, dedicating her life to making sure these young people belong to themselves – not trying to fit in but feeling strong alone in the wilderness – like her. Like her with her dresses made of meat, with fake blood dripping from her mouth, her own struggles with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression – she was born this way.

“We belong to every part of our lives and every part of our lives belongs to us.” Rev. Scott Tyler reflects, “the failures. The cruelty. The betrayals. The addictions. The cowardice. Until we embrace those scared and tender parts with the kindness and forgiveness we so generously give to others we will never be whole. We will never be home.” Home, like the Talking Heads. Home – our noses and stomachs and souls. I like the idea that those pieces of us are scared and tender! What would we do with a scared and tender animal? With a scared and tender child? Would we act with fear and disgust or compassion and love? Those parts of us that have known cruelty or addiction or cowardice, let us be kind and nurture. Let us forgive. I belong to me. All of me belongs to me. Let these parts of you sing in harmony in your own personal song. May you hum the tune of cowardice gently and lovingly.

Belonging to ourselves is the first step to belonging to anything else.

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote a book about true love and mindfulness. In the book, the Vietnamese Zen monk wrote a chapter about the importance of restoring peace within yourself. For only then can one truly love another; belonging to oneself is a prerequisite to loving another.

Thich Nhat Hanh reflects, “The Buddha said this: ‘The object of your practice should first of all be yourself. Your love for the other, your ability to love another person, depends on your ability to love yourself.’” In Buddhism, this caring about others radiates out like ripples in the water. In Metta Meditation, we first focus our attention on peace, happiness, and health for ourselves. Only then can we wish this for, first, someone we love, then acquaintances or strangers, then people with whom we have difficulties, then all beings. But it all begins with loving kindness for

oneself. Thich Nhat Hanh writes, “If you are not able to take care of yourself, if you are not able to accept yourself, how could you accept another person and how could you love [them]?”

We must know and love our own song before we can know and love the song of another. We must know and honor and love and accept each of our measures and refrains, each of our insecurities and passions, for only when we do this can we hear and acknowledge the song of another. How can we possibly love another if we do not love ourselves? How many relationships have begun and ended because a partner is looking for validation from the other. Looking for validation of the other because it cannot be found in oneself. A cyclical, painful, trap. A scared and tender piece of you. Before we can love another, we must belong to ourselves – we must be able to validate ourselves – we must hold ourselves like those thick, sturdy, tree branches raised to the sunlight, in the sacred wilderness.

Branches raised to the sunlight, in the sacred wilderness. What is your beat, your tempo, your refrain? When you occupy that sacred space, truly caring for every piece of you and celebrating those pieces, when you hear that song that is always playing, that is when you belong to you. Embrace all of those scared and tender pieces. Look at your fingers and know you are home

Derek Walcott writes,

The time will come

when, with elation

you will greet yourself arriving

at your own door, in your own mirror

and each will smile at the other's welcome.

May it be so, and Amen.