

In Belonging to Everything

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD September 21, 2025

A long, long time ago, the Buddha sat in contemplation alongside a group of his disciples. They reflected under the night sky scattered with an expanse of stars. One of his disciples inquired, “what is the foundation of life and the world?” The Buddha paused in introspection and offered an ancient Buddhist tale. “There was a God named Indra,” he began. “Who established the foundations of the world.” Indra, in all of his wisdom, created a great and powerful net. The net reached out in infinity, like a spiderweb encompassing all that is. At every place where the threads overlapped, he placed a gem that reflected all of the others. A disciple inquired, “Where are all those gems you’re talking about? I do not see them in this world.” The Buddha responded, “The gems are a piece of each human being, each animal, tree and plant, each speck of dust, each idea or thought, each feeling. At every moment, the whole world is [reflected] within you, and you are [reflected] inside everything that exists.” The student’s eyes were wet with tears, reflecting all of the stars in the night sky, as if a gem. We belong to everything, and everything belongs to us.¹

What do we mean by belonging? Between each human being, it is to feel accepted and welcomed by another as our full, genuine, and vulnerable selves. In belonging to everything, we take this sentiment and expand it to all that is rippling throughout time and space. A reciprocal moment of mutual acceptance, curiosity, and wonder, of blessed vulnerability and a place where we feel safe and cared for. Perhaps most succinctly, it’s a profound sense of interconnection. So many of us feel vulnerable, isolated, sorrowful, or lonely, this moment, past moments, future moments. It’s entirely inevitable. And it is heartbreaking, and it is difficult to traverse life in this frame of mind, we all know this. And this is why we need belonging; it provides hope that we will connect with love and acceptance. It provides solace that we hold the wisdom and strength of the ancestors inside of us. It brings peace knowing that we are

¹ <https://theearthstoriescollection.org/en/indras-net/>

connected to all things beautiful, awesome, and breathtaking. It provides inspiration knowing that we are connected to a beautiful future. No one religion or culture or scientific inquiry can teach us how to experience universal belonging. But there are certain insights that each one can help provide.

I want to begin with a short response from Buddhism. In this faith, we have each lived countless past lives. To reconcile the brief history of life on this planet, some believe there have been other universes where we at some point resided. We have been with the same living beings more times than we can count. As such, we belong, we are interconnected, intimately, to every life that ever has been. And yet it's more than this. When we encounter another being, at some point in time they were an attentive and blessed and caring mother to us. Whomever we encounter has at one point loved us fully and unconditionally, even those who today cause us great harm. We belong to each and every person – beloveds and enemies – in sacred and timeless ways.

Mysticism offers insights as well, lifting up all that is awe filled and wondersome. Mysticism is a deeply experiential faith. It is knowledge acquired by holy experiences. It is wonder and awe, it is sorrow and grief. It is a certain kind of knowledge that is inaccessible to the intellect, attained by contemplation and a surrendering of self. Deep and personal experiences allow mystics to become one with the divine or the absolute. This idea of mysticism is a piece of myriad faith traditions. I offer this quote by Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast, “Every one of us is a mystic, because we have this experience of limitless belonging, once in a while, out of the blue... But what we call the great mystics, they let this experience determine and shape every moment of their lives. They never forgot it. And we humans, the rest of us, tend to forget it.”² I’ve had my own mystical experiences of infinite belonging, and what I am challenged to reflect upon is how I can let these experiences shape and mold every moment of my life instead of forgetting the profound, sacred lessons these experiences taught me.

² On Being with Krista Tippett: David Steindl-Rast “How to Be Grateful in Every Moment (But Not for Everything)”

I think of a moment lying underneath a vast, seemingly endless, velvety night sky filled with stars and constellations, even the periodic shooting star. I lay on the cool sand of a nighttime beach, listening to the sound of the waves crashing on the shore. It was a sacred moment I have never forgotten. If I were to live as a standard human, I would appreciate the stars and then slowly forget the spiritual impact. If I were to live as a mystic, I would carry with me wonder, awe, beauty, and expansiveness into each moment of each of my days. So, too, is it with experiences that break our hearts and shatter our spirits. I think of standing by the bedside of one who is about to transition from this realm to the next, A poignant and sorrowful time. Death is one of the most sacred things we will ever encounter, filled with a holy and mysterious unknown. I think of the passing of my stepfather for which I was present, holding his hand and his rosary. I am called to take with me from this experience all that will continue to reverberate in my being, just as a mystic would: finitude, mystery, wonder, sorrow. Through the experiences of awe and grief, we experience what Steindl-Rast terms, “limitless belonging.”³

Christianity offers its own points of belonging and interconnection between humans and divinity. I use the word God in this reflection because that is the language of this faith. Some Christian theologians pose the question: What if God - what if all that is sacred and holy - is held in every object or being in this finite realm? The dirty dishes, the socks, each stranger on the street, just as in the flowers or a waterfall. God is in each of us, in our spirits and hearts and bones. We are held together in intimate ways. Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest, offers insights in her book *Wisdom Jesus*. Bourgeault writes, we are each held in God, but an intimate piece of the expansive unknown. The author writes that, furthermore, in acts of compassion, kindness, and love, we see the divine mirrored in ourselves. In acts of service and empathy divinity is in our touch and sight and breath. I offer a similar Christian ideology that touched me – that a broken world is the perfect place for divine love. Sorrow, grief, poverty, prisons, or brothels – that is where God is most present. Racism, sexism, xenophobia, God is with the least

³ On Being with Krista Tippett: David Steindl-Rast “How to Be Grateful in Every Moment (But Not for Everything)”

of these. Furthermore, we will all reside in the kingdom of heaven.⁴ To some, Heaven is another realm. To others, it is right here, right now. How can we work to build this heaven that is right within our grasp? We love each other, dear ones. When any of us connects with God, divine love is both everlasting and immediate. And we belong – human to human as well as human to God.

Beyond the spiritual is the cultural. Having majored in Cultural Anthropology, I have to say that this fascinates me. Each culture has its own spiritual meaning making, its own rites of passage, its own understanding of evil, its own medicinal practices, its own language, its own familial structure. Today we focus on indigenous meaning making, including interconnectedness and this idea of belonging. What is key is this: People, land, animals, and spirits are all deeply interconnected and interdependent. Where the dominant culture practices dominion over land, the indigenous practice stewardship, tending to the creatures and the vegetation. Ancestral lands serve as a bedrock for identity and spirituality. Indigenous beliefs offer that everything – finite and infinite, animate and inanimate – is deeply interconnected. This includes connections with both the ancestors and the descendants yet to be, and furthermore to their entire community. Everything is interconnected and everything belongs. We, alongside land, animals, and spirits, are crucial elements in the practice of reciprocity. This is a unique spiritual meaning making, just as we have ours.

I want to bring science into this too. Specifically, atoms. Every atom in our body has existed in eons in people, animals, plants, rocks, and waterfalls. Within our body we hold stardust. Astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson offers this: stars explode, scatter elements throughout the universe, needed to create more stars, which create planets, which create life.⁵ It is all interconnected. Within our body we hold the blood of our ancestors just as we hold within us a tiny, tiny piece of the expansive history of this ancient planet. Just as we were each a tree and a rainbow, so, too, will we each become a caterpillar and a rock and a snowflake. In our bodies

⁴ *Wisdom Jesus* by Cynthia Bourgeault

⁵ “We Are Stardust: Neil deGrasse Tyson’s Beautiful Explanation”

we tangibly hold all of history. Tyson again offers, even our breath is history. Every molecule in our breath spreads to all other breaths that have ever been and ever will be.⁶ We breathe the same molecules of air as Jesus, as Muhammad, as the Buddha. In this very real sense, we intimately belong to everything that has ever been, and upon our death we will return to whatever the future of our world holds.

We are each a gem, but one sacred piece of Indra's eternal web. We and our thoughts of compassion, the flowers in our garden, our beloved ancestors and the dust we inhale – each but a piece of a vast and beautiful expanse. We inevitably hold in our bodies vulnerability, isolation, sorrow, or loneliness, that is part of the human condition. And yet, all of us - in our joys and sorrow, in our grief and our accomplishments, we have belonged since the stars exploded and Indra's net first formed the world. We are intimately interconnected, like the web of a spider or the web of Indra. In each moment we hold the world within us, just as we are held within the world. Right now, in these pews. To divinity and mystical experiences and atoms and sacred land. Look at your neighbor and see yourself reflected in their eyes, their smile. Pause in your seat and feel infinity held within. Glance up at the stars this evening and know that you share the same dust. Know, this day and every day, that you belong.

May it be so, and Amen

⁶ "We Are All Connected" with Neil deGrasse Tyson