



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

We Belong Together

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Nearly two years into my ministry here at Neighborhood Church. I am finally starting to have my routines, the rhythms that start to make a place feel like home. For me, this process of settling has had a lot to do with creating a home. After living for a year in Pasadena, I moved into a new home with my partner Sam in Mount Washington. We got a dog and became regulars at our local dog park. I've been slowly making new friends and finding ways to keep in touch with my east coast friends and family. Where I've felt most at home is in the kitchen. I love to cook, and treasure my time in the kitchen preparing elaborate meals. I collect cookbooks and read them for fun and relaxation.

My whole adult life, I have always dreamed of having a dining room table big enough for a larger dinner party—a place where people could comfortably mingle and talk for hours, sharing courses of food and wine. My tiny New York City apartments would never have allowed such a thing. For holidays, I would move my small dining table from into the center living room, losing the couch altogether in favor of a few extra place settings.

When I moved here, enamored with the kind of space Los Angeles could provide, I longed to find that dinner table. I decided that Thanksgiving would be the holiday debut for this new table, and I was on the hunt. Together, my partner and I looked everywhere and finally settled on a reasonable and spacious craftsman style table would seat at least 10. We ordered it to be delivered right before Thanksgiving, and it did arrive, but only partially. The tabletop had arrived, but not the legs. For our Thanksgiving meal, we propped the table up on rickety wire crates, advising our 12 guests huddled around it not to lean too hard for fear of flipping it. We luckily averted Thanksgiving disaster, and people even wanted to come back for Christmas. Since then, I've delighted in welcoming old friends and new to our table for dinners. This week, I was delighted to fulfill another dream of having new members of this congregation gathered around my table to celebrate their membership in our church community.

To me, the symbol of the table where all are welcomed and experience the gift of hospitality is one of the most powerful images of belonging. It's around the table where people can be nurtured and at ease, meeting strangers and making new connections, discussing new ideas and making sense of this intense and difficult time in history. Being able to offer my table to my friends, family and members, and to share your tables with you, makes me feel at home here in a place still very new to me.

Farmer poet Wendell Berry, known for his deep connection to the green hills of Kentucky once wrote: “If you don’t know where you are, you don’t know who you are.” Inspired by Berry’s words, his friend and fellow Kentuckian writer bell hooks embarked on a pilgrimage to search for a sense of belonging after a feeling a profound disconnect from New York City, the place in which she found herself, but felt she did not belong. hooks felt called back to her native Kentucky to rekindle a connection with her childhood, feeling called by the land and her ancestors who farmed the land and made it home.

As she settled back into Kentucky, she delighted in setting up her home and inviting people in. For hooks, her new front porch was the place she felt a profound sense of belonging, and community. From her book *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, listen to her words about her porch:

A democratic meeting place, capable of containing folks from various walks of life, with diverse perspectives, the porch was free-floating space, anchored only by the porch swing. The swing hinted at the underlying desire to move freely, to be transported. A symbol of play, it captured the continued longing for childhood, holding us back in time, entrancing us, hypnotizing us with its back-and-forth motion. The porch swing was a place where intimacies could be forged. It is a porch for short sittings, a wide standing porch, for looking out and gazing down, a place for making contact — a place where one can be seen. In the old Sears and Roebuck catalogue, houses were given names and the reader was told what type of life might be imagined in this dwelling. My “starlight bungalow” was described as “a place for distinct and unique living.” When I first sat on the porch welcoming folk, before entering a dwelling full of light, I proclaimed, in old-South vernacular, “My soul is rested.” A perfect porch is a place where the soul can rest.

I wonder if you have a special place that makes you feel especially at “home” these days. Maybe it is a place in your own home, or the home of a relative or friend. Your garden, your woodshop, your garage or your art studio. Maybe it is a therapist’s couch. Maybe it is a place in nature where you return to again and again to feel a sense of connection with the natural world. Perhaps here at Neighborhood, you have discovered such a feeling of belonging in the weekly rhythms of the sanctuary, the sights, sounds and feelings of worship. Perhaps your place is out on the patio each week where you find a familiar face to catch up with, a bench or table where you share stories about your week. Perhaps in our Neighborhood house, where you have committed to a chalice circle or committee meeting, or the chapel for yoga. Maybe it is even in the parking lot, where you find yourself having the best conversations after the meetings and lingering with doors open, reluctant to leave. Or maybe it is Camp de Benneville, where you go each year to find community in the woods.

These places of belonging are rare and special. In her book, hooks quotes the essay, "Local Matters," Scott Russell Sanders explains the importance of finding a place of belonging:

It is rare for any of us, by deliberate choice, to sit still and weave ourselves into a place, so that we know the wildflowers and rocks and politicians, so that we recognize faces wherever we turn, so that we feel a bond with everything in sight.

The challenge, these days, is to be somewhere as opposed to nowhere, actually to belong to some particular place, invest oneself in it, draw strength and courage from it, to dwell not simply in a career or a bank account but in a community... Once you commit yourself to a place, you begin to share responsibility for what happens there.

Today we are welcoming new members into our community, and affirming this congregation as a welcoming place where we can belong together. To join a congregation at this time in history is to make a statement that belonging matters. There are so many ways that we are so divided from one another, especially here in Los Angeles, where our car culture and the "sorting" that happens around class, race and ethnicity and political orientations collide to make a perfect storm for isolation and disconnection. Belonging is at the center of our religious life— we believe that people fundamentally belong to one another, and to the earth, and need one another to create vibrant communities where our gifts are combined into a tapestry much more rich and beautiful than we could create on our own.

And of course, this belief is constantly being tested in our nation.

Just this week in New York City, a young Sikh woman, born in Indiana, reported being verbally attacked on the subway-- repeatedly told "she didn't belong" there, and told to "go back to Lebanon." This racist and xenophobic bullying continues to happen all over our country, whether with our Muslim or our undocumented Mexican neighbors are told to "go back to your country where you belong." As we know these words are often the precursor to violence, and are directly feeding into policy making like the travel ban. If belonging truly mattered, would any human being be illegal?

When many people first join a spiritual community like ours, it is to affirm that sense of belonging at the center of our community life. We make promises to the places we belong to, and offer our gifts and our resources to them to help them to thrive. This is what we call our "covenant" to one another, and to this congregation-- connected by love, spirit and service. To belong to a place means that we care about it, as it cares for us.

Our covenant carries us into a deeper commitment and investment. Community organizers Peter Block and John Mc Night talk about commitment as the first real step to belonging—without it, we can't belong, but instead stay on the periphery, judging, criticizing, withholding our gifts, and holding onto resentments and past hurts. It is only in examining the risks of commitment honestly, facing the human nature of community itself—weighing its strengths and failings, learning its history and imagining its future-- and deciding to give ourselves to it fully that we can truly understand what it means to belong. Only then can we freely share our gifts, contribute our resources, time and attention abundantly and authentically, and to be a part of shaping a positive future. Only then can we truly feel the benefits of having our lives supported and witnessed fully by others and feeling our individual power amplified for justice and service. Unfortunately, according to Block and McNight, many people mistake the sometimes challenging process of discerning this commitment for a failure of the community itself, rather than the failure of the individual to commit fully to the community, and reap the full benefits of belonging.

We are at an important and critical time in our congregation's history. Two years into our new settled ministry, we have committed to a new mission "to create and grow an inclusive religious community, connected by love, spirit and service." We are receiving a steady stream of visitors each week, and as we welcome new members today we can visibly see how we are growing.

Your board, finance committee and I are in process of creating next year's church budget. As you know from our current political climate, budgets are moral documents. They communicate the values that we hold dear and communicate our priorities. I think about what our Neighborhood Church budget might look like if it reflected the priorities of our proposed national budget. Perhaps we would propose firing all of the staff, except for me, and allocating all of our funds to build a wall around the church, complete with armed guards to keep out terrorists and anyone who we judged didn't belong. We would eliminate education, pastoral care, worship arts and social justice programs.

It's an extreme comparison, but one worth considering as we shape our congregation's future. Obviously, this is not the budget we hope for our country, nor is it the budget we hope for our congregation next year. Our goals for this year's budget are to increase our membership and outreach, lifespan education and pastoral care programs, and to finally make the important budgetary move we have been discussing for years—ensuring everyone on staff makes a living wage of \$15 an hour. This would be accelerating the commitment we made with the city of Pasadena to bring wages up by 2020. To make this budget, we need everyone's recommitment and investment to the

health of our congregation. Part of belonging to an organization like ours is acknowledging our responsibility for not just for imagining our vision, but funding it too. We don't have tax dollars to allocate, but we do have the pledges and gifts of our members.

One of our ministers George K. Beach once remarked of our Unitarian Universalist congregations: "People do not join a covenanted community; rather they constitute it; there is no it without them and each time new folks join, the whole is literally reconstituted." Reverend Beach reminds us that whenever new members join us, it's important to remember who we are, why we gather, and make a recommitment. It all starts with reconnecting to that sense of belonging we first felt here.

Every day, when I walk up onto the campus, I smell the warm pine needles, I look up at the tall canary island pines and the beautiful architecture. I see the children playing at the preschool, and the high schoolers laughing and feeling at ease. I think to myself, what a truly amazing place, where we can all belong together. How blessed I am to serve as your minister, how blessed we all are to have this place we can all belong, and invite others to join us on this amazing journey. How much we have to be grateful for. So let's roll up our sleeves, each of us bringing our gifts and our vision. The work of building our future is ours.

Welcome home.