



Soulful Home

Finding the Sacred in
Our Everyday Spaces

October 2019 - Belonging

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The Welcome Mat

What Does it Mean to be a Family of Belonging?

There is a quote I love, from Joan Didion, that goes like this: “A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his own image.”

Are our homes open to this kind of soulful reshaping by all its inhabitants? Does our shared physical space reflect our entire family? Is time shared in a way that honors each member of the family? I hope the answer is yes, and I hope we can offer ourselves grace when the shaping of our space and time accidentally leaves a family member feeling a bit outside of the belongingness between us.

In our packet this month, we’ll be reckoning with belonging in our most intimate spaces, beginning with our own hearts--to whom do ours belong, and in whose do we belong? We ponder these and other questions in our On the Porch section for parents. At the Bedside presents the story of Nasruddin and the Hungry Coat--a funny and familiar folk tale--with a message about the kind of belonging that doesn’t feel great. (And get ready; this one calls for a couple of quick props!) Our At Play activity has our families scanning familiar environments for a hidden something that doesn’t belong where it’s been placed, as well as texting our teens Two Truths and a Lie--can they and we spot which one doesn’t belong in the list?! These are opportunities to foster more and deeper belonging within your family by enriching your shared narrative about who you all are.

And, if where you live, the nights are beginning to grow cool, consider setting aside one special evening, after dinner, to do the really lovely Extra Mile activity (“Belonging on our Blue Marble”), watching, listening, and then walking hand-in-hand with your loved ones as you contemplate belonging to the great story of life on our beautiful blue marble in space.

Getting back to Joan Didion’s quote above, we, sadly, have very little control over how our children will remember and refashion the childhoods that were lived under our love and protection. But, we sure can make some memories that will help those stories to include a good deal of bonding, knowing and being known, including, and otherwise experiencing a sense of belonging in our first and most powerful group: family.

From our Soulful Homes to yours, where we belong and invite each other into belonging,

Teresa, on behalf of the whole Soul Matters team



At the Table

Exploring Belonging Through Discussions

At the Table questions explore the monthly theme through a discussion for all ages. They are designed for a family gathering - maybe during a Friday night meal, a quiet moment in the living room or before a board game night.

Introducing the Activity

Family members who are readers can alternate who reads the questions. Those who are not readers are invited to share their own impromptu questions. Discussion partners might answer as thoughts come to them or take turns in a circle.

1. Outside of your family home, where do you feel you most belong? Your friendship group? At school? On a sports team? At church? With grandparents? Outside, keeping your own company?
2. Was there ever a time you wished to belong to a group but weren't invited or didn't get in? How did you handle that feeling of loss and longing?
3. When was a time you helped somebody new feel that they belonged? (Think here of classmates, neighbors, newcomers to scouting troops, new babies or children in the extended family, etc.)
4. Is there a place or group to which you hope you never belong?
5. What is the opposite of belonging? We know what belonging feels like; what do we feel like when we don't belong?
6. We talk about our pets as belonging to us. Is that the right word for it? Why or why not?
7. What group of animals would you most want to belong to: a herd of sheep? a pack of wolves? a flock of birds? a herd of elephants? a colony of ants, or bees? a pod of dolphins? or another?
8. How does it make you feel when your possessions are out of place, somewhere they don't belong?
9. Which of your belongings do you really not like people touching or using? Which of your belongings are you most cool with sharing?
10. What outdoor place do you feel you most belong? Why?
11. In which do you feel like you most belong: in a crowd of people or when you are by yourself?
12. Besides your family, name one person in your life that most helped you feel like you belong.



Discussion Support

Parents, to tie many of these ideas together, check out this TED talk, by educator and social justice organizer Chitra Aiyar. In it, Aiyar describes the difficult but essential work of creating belonging for self precisely by facilitating belonging for others. She says there are three parts to this: 1) seeing the success of one's community as aligned with one's own success, not in competition with it; 2) having a role that allows one to connect with others and invest in them and their success, and 3) adopting an identity that is one of helper, facilitator, convener, etc., and which translates to other spaces that may not have been created with us in mind. Here's her 9-minute video:

https://www.ted.com/talks/chitra_ayiar_ted_salon_belonging

Ways to Return to the Discussion Throughout the Week

Thoughts develop with time. Find opportunities to bring up particularly compelling questions again during the month, maybe on walks, rides home, when tucking your child in to bed, etc. If thoughts grew or changed, notice that together, how we are all evolving beings, opening ourselves to new truths and understandings as we live our lives and connect with others.



Around the Neighborhood

A Treasure Hunt for What Belongs... and what DOESN'T!

Around the Neighborhood activities engage families with their surroundings through the lens of the theme. It's about perceiving your well-known world in new ways. Take our monthly treasure hunt list with you on your trips to the grocery, walks around the neighborhood or bike rides, and transform your everyday travel into a family adventure.

For this month's treasure hunt, we'll be finding things in our neighborhoods that exist in the liminal spaces between belonging and not belonging. We're delighting in the paradox and hoping the complexity creates interesting discussions in your family!

FINDING WHAT'S OUT OF PLACE

- An invasive species of plant (If you're not sure, make your best guess while you're out and about and then look it up later. Common invasive species include bush honeysuckle, kudzu, and English ivy, and more are described here: <https://insider.si.edu/2013/04/top-six-invasive-plant-species-in-the-united-states/>)
- Broken glass on the ground (Why doesn't this belong?)
- A car parked where it's blocking the sidewalk, part of a handicap spot, a fire hydrant, or a driveway.
- A wild critter--or evidence of a wild critter--inside a building (mouse, moth, cricket, ladybug, etc.--why is it problematic for humans and these bugs to cohabitate? Is it always so?)
- Trash... and people seeing it but just keep walking by
- The first fall leaf or the last green leaf of fall
- A cat and dog playing together rather than fighting

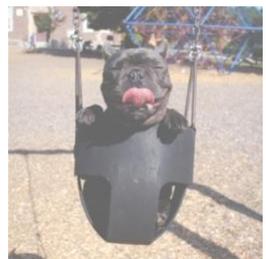


FINDING PLACES THAT ALLOW US TO BELONG

- A business or public place that is fully accessible to someone who uses a mobility aid.
- A locally owned business that you frequent where they know your name or your usual order
- A bike lane, signaling to bicyclists that they belong on the road, too
- Parking spots reserved for visitors, which signal they are welcome
- Crosswalks that have sounds from the street poles to people who are deaf and hard of hearing to navigate their way across
- Parks that have “Dogs Allowed” signs
- Restaurants that have menus with vegetarian and vegan options listed

Reflection

Making an assessment of what belongs and what doesn't--and who belongs, and who doesn't--is seldom a straightforward endeavor. It is an exercise in lifelong learning, because we are being challenged to look again and in different ways at people, places, and things that we may have thought we already knew all about. Let this treasure hunt for belonging spread out to other areas of your life, beyond your neighborhood. Maybe develop a habit of asking yourself and each other in your family, when you arrive in a new space: Who will find belonging here? Who is left out? And...What can I do to *be* belonging for someone while we are here?



At Play

Playing Games with Belonging

At Play activities and questions are a way to joyfully, playfully, and imaginatively experience the theme. We offer a brief framework to introduce the game and another to reflect upon it, so that the insights learned in play can stay with us throughout the month and beyond.

Option A: Two Truths and a Lie--One Doesn't Belong!

As a collection of cultures, we have a mixed relationship with slanted truths and outright misinformation. On the one hand, we condemn lying and dishonesty. On the other hand, we admire clever trickery and slyness, especially if it results in the restoration of justice. With this game, play with these ideas by trying to fool each other about which statements belong to the truth, and which one does not.

Among family members, who know each other well, this game is especially challenging. Come up with three statements each, about yourselves, two of which are true, and one of which is a lie. Make the three statements to each other and have the other family members try and guess which one is the lie. (Note: This works especially well with teens over text!)

You can also mix it up by telling two truths and a lie about friends or neighbors that your family kind of knows but you know better. For instance, tell two truths and a lie about your best friend and see if your parents and siblings can figure it out. Or, as a parent, you might tell two truths and a lie about your mom or dad (your kids' grandparents). There surely are still things your kids don't know about their grandparents! :)



Option B: Out of Place, in Plain Sight: Huckle, Buckle, Beanstalk!

This game traditionally relies on visual awareness. If that is not going to let everyone in your family fully participate, consider changing that part of the game to a version of “Hot and Cold.”

The point is to hide an object in plain sight (or in easy reach) and then have each player call out “huckle buckle beanstalk!” when they’ve found the object, but they don’t let on where it is. This gives other players the chance to find the object, too. This game helps us engage with our place in new ways, and to reconsider what belongs and what doesn’t in our most familiar settings. The first player who spotted the hidden object gets to hide it next time.

It’s most fun to play this game when you hide the object in a silly place. In my sister’s house, hiding an object on the taxidermized deer head is a favorite spot. With older kids, think of challenging spots such as the tops of door frames, peeking out from under couches, tied to the dog’s collar, etc. Soon enough, all the “good” spots in your own space will be known to all the players, so be ready to take this game to a friend or relative’s house to play in a new soulful home!



On the Message Board

A Monthly Mantra

The On the Message Board section lifts up a theme-related mantra for your family to carry with them throughout the month. Think of these “family sayings” as tools for the journey, reminders that help us re-focus and steady ourselves and our kids as we navigate through life’s challenges and opportunities. Write them on sticky notes to put in your car, on kitchen cabinet fronts, in lunch boxes, on computer screens and, of course, on your family message board. Share them out loud at home and out in the world, where and whenever the need arises.

October’s Mantra:

“You belong here.”

Maya Angelou said, in a 1973 interview, “You are only free when you realize you belong no place--you belong every place--no place at all...More and more, I belong to myself.” Our mantra this month attempts to help our children, and remind ourselves, to walk in our belonging.

The average adult moves about 11 times in their lifetime, sometimes for opportunity or other circumstance, but also from a sense of restlessness. The temptation to cut ties and move on is strong, at every age. It comes from a sense of not belonging, of not feeling safe, included, accepted, known, celebrated, cherished, loved. Connection with others is crucial to our wellbeing, and yet, we cannot look to others to fulfill our sense of self. That is the paradox of belonging no place / every place, of belonging to all humankind / to self.

So, when your child comes to you, out-of-sorts, with something along the lines of, “I wish we lived in a different neighborhood,” or “Can we move so I can go to a different school?” Remind them with this mantra--putting emphasis on the word *belong*--that they carry the deepest sense of belonging wherever they are, because they are true to self.

The mantra might also come in handy when our children--or we, as caregivers--are overcome with feelings that make us want to run away from ourselves--stress, loneliness, shame. Saying to one’s self, in that fragile moment, “I belong here,” reminds us of the greater truth that even in our most difficult experiences, there is belonging to found sitting with those hard feelings rather than running away from them. Embracing the hard times and allowing ourselves to belong to them often allows us to receive a lesson or grow.



At the Bedside

The Bedside activities engage the theme through storytelling. This takes place during the dreamy, almost otherworldly hour or so before children or youth drift off to sleep.

Looking Like We Belong: Nasruddin's Hungry Coat

This is an old story that comes from the Middle East. The retelling we're linking to here is in the popular UU children's program, Moral Tales, by [Alice Anacheka-Nasemann](#) and [Elisa Davy Pearmain](#). The story uses silliness and surprise to grab and keep listeners' attention, which helps ensure they're present for the main idea, revealed at the end, which is that too often, we rely on others' appearance to determine whether or not they belong with our group, when in fact our faith calls us to draw the circle of belonging very wide indeed, regardless of others' looks. Consider using an old coat (especially a very large one) and a few food items as costume and props as you tell this month's story:

<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/tales/session6/123344.shtml>

Here are a few questions to consider together after reading the Nasruddin tale:

- What did the other party guests do that led Nasruddin to feel as if he didn't belong?
- If you had been a guest at the party, what might you have said, and how might you have felt, after Nasruddin explained why he was feeding his coat?
- When someone points out to us how we've been less than inclusive, how do we usually react? What's a good and helpful way to respond? What do we learn about belonging in those moments (which all of us have!)?*
- What would you wish happened next in the story, after Nasruddin tells the host why he's feeding his coat?
- If you tell the story on a school night, or a night before you and your family have an activity together with other families, ask your child what they plan on wearing the next day. Ask them if they think their clothes matter to the friends they'll see. Consider together times when our appearance signals to others that we belong or don't belong, and when this can be helpful, and harmful.

*This is a crucial skill to develop as we collectively dismantle white supremacy culture--being able to receive a criticism as a learning opportunity instead of getting locked in defensiveness that blocks us from any lessons or truth that might hold value for us, as individuals and as a community.



On the Porch

Raising a Child of Belonging Together

On the Porch supports sharing realizations, challenges and hopes around the theme with other supportive adults. It connects parents with their co-parents, with their close circle of supporters, with extended family or whomever they turn to for love and fellowship. Perhaps this happens on a literal porch or front stoop, but it could happen wherever parents and their circle of support gather and talk over the soulful parts of parenthood.

A Sip of Something More: Becoming Belonging for Others

Often times, we strengthen the sense of belonging of our families and friends by noticing their needs and “being belonging” for them. Often we think about place and space being key to belonging, but, as the below poem by Chen Chen reminds us, the way we carry ourselves and offer ourselves to others is also essential. In the poem, Chen Chen creates a list of beloved people and what he hopes he can be or make possible for them.

As you head to the porch with your parenting companion, bring this poem and activity along with your usual cup of coffee or tea:

**When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities,
by Chen Chen**

<https://poets.org/poem/when-i-grow-i-want-be-list-further-possibilities>

Suggested Structure: Read Chen Chen’s poem aloud twice, taking turns between you and a parenting companion to help give it “a different voice” each time.

- After your first reading, share which line or phrase spoke to you the most and why.
- On your second reading, listen to it through the lens of your personal history, asking yourself, “To which people in my life does my heart belong? And whose heart belongs to me? How do they need me to be belonging to them? What poetic object or idea (think of Chen’s hospital bed, backpack of PB&Js, etc.) do they need me to be?”



Spiritual Snacks to Share

In addition to the poem above, bring one or two of these questions with you when the time comes to hang out with your co-parent or buddies. Don't treat the questions as a list to go through one by one. Instead pick the one or two that speak to each of you the most, using them as bite-sized opportunities to dive deeper into the role of a parent, partner, or person "of belonging."

1. Do we (*meaning you and the person you're speaking with*) belong to each other? In which ways does this phrase feel comforting and loving, and in which ways does it feel possessive and problematic?
2. Have you ever had to sacrifice belonging for integrity? How about right now? Is your current source of belonging asking you to compromise your personal sense of wholeness?
3. When you were growing up, what group did you belong to that had the most lasting influence on you?
4. How has your sense of belonging shifted lately in the spaces you inhabit the most? Work? Church? Gym? Friendships? Is belonging deepening? Slipping away for known or unknown reasons? Are you more and more feeling the itch to leave?
5. When you've moved to a new place, what's helped you feel as if you belonged the most? Did you take steps to create your own belonging?
6. Do you take as good care of your belongings--your possessions--as you'd like to? If not, what keeps you from doing so?
7. If you opened your home to a foster child, what would you do to be sure that individual felt as if they belonged?
8. Is it time to shift the question from "Who am I?" to "Whose am I?" How would your living and loving be different (and better) if it was a bit less about becoming and a bit more about belonging? What if "Am I succeeding?" was replaced with "Who needs me?" "Who loves me? With whose life is my own bound up?"
9. Have you ever found belonging in silence?



The Extra Mile

The Extra Mile section is for families who want to continue exploring the theme of the month through larger adventures, more complex projects or simply through additional modalities not otherwise included in the packets. The Extra Mile suggestions often surpass what is considered an “everyday moment” in a family, and may involve more preparation, planning, or time to accomplish. A bit more effort, but well worth it!

Option One: Mending Beloved Belongings

There are plenty of reasons to fix or mend your belongings rather than throw them out when they are in disrepair:

- To keep something you like or enjoy around longer
- To reduce your degree of consumerism
- To keep something out of the landfill
- To learn a new skill--repairing

For this Extra Mile, find something among your belongings that you’d like to try and fix rather than throw out. This might be a toy, an item of clothing, a game missing a few pieces, a bike or skateboard, etc. You might dive in and learn as you go or look for suitable tutorials on YouTube. Your community may have some handy resources, too: maker spaces, vocational programs, and 4-H clubs are all places filled with resourceful folks.



Option Two: Family Pizza Night!

Anticipating and being able to take part in traditions is one way that groups of people solidify a sense of belonging, which builds cohesion. Your family may already have a special-food-night tradition (Taco Tuesday, or Leftovers Lunches, etc.), but pizza night is a popular, interactive, and inexpensive one.

Pizza night will be just as enjoyable with take-out or delivery pizza, but because this is the Extra Mile section, we'll make a plug for trying to make your own! Using pre-made pizza dough or English muffins is a great time-saver. And if yours is a baking family, or you're up for the challenge of becoming one, this Tasty 101 video has a good, simple recipe for a pizza crust. (The chef who narrates the video suggests a pizza stone, which I had once upon a time, and broke with a fantastic CRACK! one day for reasons having to do with long heating and fast cooling that I still do not fully understand--so in my family, we just bake the pizza on cookie sheets. Still delish.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sv3TXMSv6Lw>

One nice thing about making your own pizza is that you can get highly specific in the distribution of your ingredients! You could literally make every single piece different (which is a fun challenge that might help someone try a new flavor or texture).

Adopting a new tradition isn't a simple thing. You have to make a special effort toward it at first, and then stick with it even when it's inconvenient. But consistency is what really makes it work its magic in fostering a sense of belonging. Try pizza night for a month, and that will give you a good idea of whether or not it brings your family together in a way that's worth repeating.

Option Three: Belonging on our Blue Marble

When talking about belonging, one soon meanders around to the idea that we all share the earth as our home, as the one place to which we all belong. And yet that fact rarely sinks into our daily consciousness. It is a concept stuck in science books rather than a truth that sits at the center of our spirituality. *Earthrise* is a short documentary that helps us change that. It's an award-winning short video that tells the story of the Apollo 8 astronauts and the first image captured of Earth from space in 1968. It's a story about "escaping" earth to realize how deeply we belong to it, and to each other.

Don't just watch it; turn it into a spiritual exercise by watching it after the sun has gone down and talking a walk afterward. Think of it as a "night walk meditation" and use it to deepen your experience of watching the film. Let the video and night walk take you where it will. Come to your group ready to share the one moment from the film or from your walk that affected you most deeply. Here's the link to the video:

<https://emergencemagazine.org/story/earthrise-film/>



Blessing

Wherever you are, dear one, that is where you belong, because life is an adventure of unfolding. Every step forward depends on and needs the step that has gone before. Let us take into our hearts the charge from Sufi poet Rumi, who instructs: when loneliness, disaffection, and disappointment--that crowd of sorrows--knocks on our door, welcome them! Invite them in as tired old friends, parts of ourselves whom we receive tenderly. May we claim and belong to the sacred work we are doing: building soulful homes for our whole selves, and the whole selves of our loved ones. May yours be a heart and home where all of you belongs.



Soulful Home packets are prepared by
Teresa Honey Youngblood,
Our Soul Matters [Family Ministry Coordinator](#)

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