

Chapter Five: BELONGING

In this culture, in our quest for privacy, we have succeeded magnificently – and have ended up isolating ourselves. Many people have forgotten that they belong to each other, and end up not knowing how to reach out to others, or how to accept the reaching out that others do (see "Saying Yes").

One of the problems is that when we feel isolated, we absolutely *radiate* the quality of loneliness, which unfortunately is extremely unattractive, and can tend to isolate us further.

One of the pitfalls of this state of being is that we can tend to think that everyone but us is joyfully connected, and that we alone are doomed to solitude and loneliness.

I can confidently tell you that this is not true. Scratch the surface of many people who seem to be the center of a crowd of beloved friends and family, and you will discover loneliness there, as well. Even the most plugged-in, socially networked folks may feel isolated from life itself, from their spiritual selves, or from nature. But even the most lonely and isolated person *can* connect and belong.

We may know, but tend to forget over and over again, that we are connected to all of creation, and that nothing can separate us from that connection and belongingness. What if you were to practice your awareness of Belonging? What if you thereby relaxed around the loneliness stuff, so that you could reach out with confidence to the people and groups that you would like to belong to? I'm betting that you would be more attractive and start to be a magnet for exactly the types of comradeship you most desire.

One of the main troubles with loneliness is that our needs for connection tend to get bottled up, and then when we do find someone who seems sympathetic, we pour out all our thoughts and feelings, forgetting that friendship is a two-way street.

If this is true for you, try to develop the persona of a detective – demonstrate a healthy and genuine curiosity about people, listen much more than you talk, look people in the eye, smile, and practice being a nonjudgmental, compassionate presence.

You will find your painful awareness of your solitude melting away as you enter into the world of the other person. Also practice maintaining healthy boundaries, so you can safely withdraw from any connections that don't feel life-giving.

Just as you might experience gratitude when you practice Owing Your Gifts, you might experience the gratitude of the Cosmos for *your* own existence when you practice Belonging. Have you ever thought of yourself as a deeply loved and appreciated gift belonging to the Divine, to your community, to the All-That-Is?

When you practice this attitude of Belonging, and start acting joyfully from that, you may well be surprised at how quickly you start experiencing small miracles of connectedness.

The Joyfulness Games in this chapter are designed to help you practice this attitude of Belonging, to help you gain the courage to take the risks you'll need to take to become more connected, whether that's to others, to your own deep wisdom, or to the world of nature.

Questions for Yourself

When have you most acutely felt the absence of Belonging? What was that like?

When have you most strongly felt that you belonged? Can you get in touch with the essence, the core, of that feeling? Where might you possibly be able to experience that kind of Belonging today? What ideas does this suggest to you?

Meditation for BELONGING

Settling into my heart, my breathing... I'm imagining being outdoors on a beautiful sunny day. Looking up at the sky. Seeing how blue it is – pale blue at the horizon, increasing in intensity of blue as I look overhead.

Breathing into myself that color blue, that deep refreshing blue, that peaceful, infinite blue sky.

Bringing into my awareness the fact that I belong to this sky and to the earth that I am walking on.

Starting with myself, I'm saying "I belong to..." and finishing the sentence with a wider and wider range of awareness of the circles to which I belong.

"I belong to this moment...to my mind...to my body...to the path I'm walking on...to my home...to my friends..."

I'm noticing how this feels.

And now, I'm revisiting all those things and saying to myself, "This belongs to me. This body belongs to me, this moment belongs to me..."

Continuing until I reach the outermost realms of the Cosmos; noticing how this feels.

Then, without letting go of my awareness of each of my circles of belonging, I'm returning to my own body and to this moment.

Journaling

Jot a note about anything that you noticed, perhaps something that surprised you, when doing this meditation.

Joyfulness Games to Try: BELONGING

- Choose a few people you'd like to get to know better. Send them an email saying you're trying to expand your network of friends, and ask if they'd like to do something with you. Suggest a specific list of activities, but leave it open for them to get back to you. Don't take it personally if they don't respond as you wish they would.
- Go for a walk. Practice belonging to the universe, and practice the idea that the universe belongs to you. Belong to this moment, let this moment belong to you. Keep expanding your circle of belonging.
- Take a class. Volunteer. Find people who share your favorite hobby or enthusiasm, and join them. Join a group that is working for a cause you believe in. Be active in it. Ask someone to be your buddy, if it's hard for you to get across the threshold for the first time. Reward yourself for attending the class or meeting.
- Adopt a charitable project online where you can actually connect with the people you are helping – for instance, an organization that makes microloans to small entrepreneurs in a Third World country. You'll receive updates on their progress, and you'll belong to the creative efforts of people in another part of the world.
- Try a few sessions with a therapist, spiritual director, or life coach to get a non-judgmental perspective on your situation and to gain some ideas about how to connect.
- Start a "Neat Stuff" group -- a bit like a book group, but everyone brings a tangible sample of something exciting they have recently discovered. Could be a poem, a work of art or music, a web page, something in science, culture or the arts -- whatever it is, it must be tangible, audible, or visible, and shareable by everyone there. Great way to get to know people; non-competitive, horizon-expanding. Show-and-tell for adults!
- Try attending a church, synagogue or temple. There are books and websites that can help you know what to expect and how to dress. You don't have to stick with the first one you try – shop around until you find one that feels right. Again, adopt the persona of a detective, and make curiosity your guiding principle. At coffee time following the service, ask people how they came to that religious community, and what they like about it.
- Develop a relationship with a specific spot of land, whether in the wilderness, a park, or your yard. Ask it what you need to do to belong to it. Visit it as often as you can, and notice and appreciate any small changes that come with the seasons. Give it some small gifts – pick up some litter, or make a little statue to live there.
- Get outdoors, and practice the idea that whenever you set your feet down, you're caressing the earth.

- Nurture your connection to humanity by sending loving-kindness to someone you barely know, but see fairly regularly. Don't let that person know you are secretly sending him or her silent blessings and wishes for good things – simply notice what the effect is on your own soul.
- At the end of the day, as you're preparing for sleep, review your day and bring into your mind the moment of the day when you felt most connected. Savor that moment again, explore it, let your heart expand around it.

Covenant for BELONGING

I hereby covenant to practice experiencing the joyfulness of Belonging.

I will do this by:

Signed: _____ Date: _____