

“A Community of Active Belonging ” by Kolya Braun-Greiner



Recommitment Season

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At Seekers we talk a lot about accountability. This may scare some out of fear of falling short of whatever commitment one makes. What's meaningful to me is responsibility or ability to respond, individually or collectively. I understand community

as a context for reciprocal relationships in which call upon our ability respond with our unique gifts, callings and mutual support. What if the foundation for accountability within community is the ability to respond to the invitation of commitment to belonging, what I'd like to call active belonging? This is different from what seems common in our society – a kind of passive belonging which I dare say this true for many churches. One's name is on the roles or membership of an organization, people have paid their dues, but not a lot is expected of people beyond that – especially in hierarchical structures.

M. Scott Peck describes the kind of churches many of us have experienced, I'd call a culture of passive belonging, in which the dreaded coffee hour is when everyone talks about "niceties" and when asked "how are you doing?" the common response is "fine" whether or not they are. He contrasts these "pseudo-communities" of superficial interactions with communities in which the organizational culture promotes honesty and vulnerability. Here at Seekers I affirm that our "do-it-yourself" church promotes active belonging through participatory engagement and intimacy.

A chapter entitled "Belonging" is found in Cole Arthur Riley's *This Here Flesh*, which some of us are reading and discussing in the School for Christian Growth. She talks about the yearning for this kind of belonging, something I like to think of as a longing to be, in which being and longing are held in common, something sorely lacking in our society. Riley describes the mutuality of belonging, which is in her words, "both a gift received and a gift given. There is a comfort in being welcomed, but there is dignity in knowing that your arrival just shifted a group toward deeper wholeness." Could each of us embrace that our arrival and commitment to belonging here supports the deeper wholeness of the Seekers

community?

Consistent with our community culture of sharing personal stories in which vulnerability is an expression of how we actively belong, I want to offer how belonging has been a particularly powerful yearning for me. Reflecting back on my family of origin, even my birth may have been fraught with unbelonging – as some of you have heard, my mother didn't pick me up for a month with anorexia and other complications following the birth of myself and death of my twin brother. My father's erratic alcoholic behavior and employment during the first 5 years of my life led us to move 6 times. Looking back on it now, how can one forge a sense of belonging with that amount of detachment and transience? Then there was my family's social life, which was practically nil. We didn't belong to church or any other social group. Nor did my parents appear to have friends. We never had people visit us, have anyone over for dinner, nor did we visit people other than our relatives two or three times a year. I was a very shy child. My social life was school and I kept quiet and to myself for the most part. I was often shunned as being "stuck up" – but I honestly did not know how to socialize or engage in belonging. The first memory I have of feeling like I really belonged to something outside of my family was Girl Scouts – there was even an uniform with badges I wore proudly to show that I belonged! Learning HOW to belong has been a long journey for me, coming from what seemed to have been either an agoraphobic or autistic kind of family environment. The next vivid belonging was in college when I was invited to join a campus activist group by a woman who became one of my dearest lifelong friends, Peg Callahan, who passed away earlier this year, without any memorial service due to COVID and other reasons. While also in college I participated in the anti-nuclear actions initiated by the campus minister of Wesley Foundation at Central Michigan University. That began my journey of becoming a Christian, joining the United Methodist Church and subsequently United Methodist Women where I found

my “chosen family” to which I deeply belonged.

Riley affirms that “we need other people to see our own faces—to bear witness to their beauty and truth.” She voices the desire we share that “we could behold the image of God in one another and believe it on one another’s behalf.” This was my experience when I chose to belong to a Christian community in my 20’s, and I witness that here at Seekers.

I think that this is what Paul is doing in this epistle to Timothy, showing God’s image within himself and encouraging him to do that for others. Paul believes in Timothy’s image of God. The passage from 2nd Timothy today appears to offer many clues about what active belonging looks like when we too behold the image of God in one another:

- Acknowledge the faith that lives in us passed on and taught to us by our elders or ancestors (in the case of Timothy, his mother and grandmother)
- Rekindle the gift of God within you through blessing one another
- Nurturing not a spirit of fear, but of power, love and self-discipline
- Recognizing that we each and as a community have a “holy calling”
- Holding on to “sound teaching”

This epistle is part of a collection called the “pastoral letters” which includes the 1st & 2nd Letters to Timothy as well as to Titus, both of whom were dear to Paul and the pastoral theology of these letters is primarily about church life and practice. What the New Jerome Bible Commentary said was striking and seemed very relevant to Seekers: “What the author of these pastorals did not intend was to urge the church leaders to value and maintain ecclesial and societal structure.” Wow.

So if we were to take Paul’s (or a secretary writing for Paul)

teachings and encouragement of Timothy and apply them to our community?

How are we doing?

- Acknowledging the faith that lives in us passed on to us: Through many avenues I witness the story and teachings of Seekers faith offered during worship, classes in the School for Christian Growth and governance through Stewards
- How do we bless and rekindle the gift of God one another? In the myriad ways that we celebrate the milestones and attend to the miseries of one another's lives, we serve as a blessing and rekindling the gifts given by God that are uniquely ours to give.
- Nurturing a spirit of power, love & self-discipline: we support and encourage both inward spiritual practices which strengthen our spirits, bolstering our outward expressions of love in action to promote justice, serving underserved communities for whom resources are scarce and systems too often ignore.
- Recognizing our "holy calling" as individuals and as a community. Paul is calling Timothy to renew the spiritual gifts given to him. Core to our belonging is our collective affirmation and encouragement of one another's gifts – each of us is uniquely called by God. We live out the community described elsewhere by Paul in which *there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 Our mission groups, diverse in their own calling reflect the "holy calling" in which people find one another's callings echoed. Members of a mission or ministry group have committed to belonging to a common calling. Whether they focused on the spiritual

enrichment of the community through retreats, as Living Waters does, or Eyes to See, Ears to Hear's focus on engagement in social and racial justice, or Earth & Spirit, of which I am a member, focused on deepening our connection with God's Creation and advocating for it, we are all enriched when members are fulfilling their "holy calling."

- Sustaining "sound teaching" – which is ever new, evolving and growing in this community. We belong to a teaching and learning community in which we share our understanding of God's message for us relevant to current circumstances, whether they be personal, community wide, or global.

Speaking of current conditions, another expression of active belonging is to voice our lament or grief for the many ways we see and hear that the world is full of brokenness. Lamentations today speaks of a lonely people, full of grief, a people who can find no resting place and whose former festivals no one attends. For some of us, voicing our lament is stepping outside our comfort zone because it's mostly counter-cultural in this white dominated society. I do witness that this is a struggle and our organizational culture encourages such expression of the pain we hold in our hearts. In *This Here Flesh*, Riley distinguishes despair as "lament emptied of hope." She proclaims that lament "is something that can be taught" and not only that, she says "lament is a form of hope. It's an innate awareness that what is should not be." And that "our hope can be only as deep as our lament."

The huge question which is foremost on my mind and heart and which I sometimes feel is an "elephant in the room": my lament is about the severity of the climate crisis. What kind of life will my child and people around the world be living in the decades ahead. The question I feel most deeply calling to be answered is how do we spiritually and socially prepare for an uncertain future of climate catastrophe? As the Psalmist

poses: What song can we sing us in this strange land of the climate crisis? Perhaps as we struggle find that answer together our community can support others who are avoiding or holding that question silently. It's a question that has been talked about in my mission group Earth & Spirit with heavy hearts while seeking what hope looks in this context. It's a question that compels me to read what several authors are suggesting as ways to navigate the "great unraveling" as Joanna Macy calls it. Spoiler alert: Belonging to community is the most important thing to do. But not a closed enclave of survivalists!

I want to offer an example of holding both lament and hope together through active belonging in community.

Recently I've been inspired by the model that of refuge or refugia. This term refugia is drawn from the field of ecology and is the title of a recent book where I find hope that is fueled by our lament and expressed through active belonging: *A Refugia Faith: Seeking Hidden Shelters, Ordinary Wonders, and the Healing of the Earth* by Debra Rienstra.

Her book suggests practices and spiritual resources in accord with the liturgical seasons aimed at supporting our preparation for an altered Earth upon which we live. The term reefugia (reh-FU-jee-ah) is drawn from biology. Refugia are places where pockets of life continue in spite of being surrounded by an environment that appears uninhabitable. New life emerges in these protected places where life is sustained against the apparent odds. An example is when Mount St. Helens erupted, the ash and debris smothered 210 square miles, killing 57 people along with 10 million trees and countless wildlife. The landscape looked devoid of life. To scientists amazement, in a much shorter time span than they expected, life began to emerge from pockets that had been protected. These pockets of protection are called refugia. Debra Rienstra asks the provocative question: How can Christians become communities of refugia? She offers examples

through biblical stories as well as current churches implementing acts of refugia in their care of one another and the earth in their community. Indeed these, and many of the acts that Seekers is already doing are acts of love and justice in a community of active belonging that support refugia.

What will our community contribute to spiritual resilience for the future? What gifts do each of us uniquely bear for midwifing these times calling for a new birth of consciousness and relationships. How can our commitment to belonging live out and model this as an answer to the pleas of the apostles to Jesus and I dare say, ourselves, to "Increase our faith!"?

Indeed, we too live in a time characterized by social scientist, Brene Brown, as a collective time of spiritual crisis. In her book *Braving the Wilderness*, she shares results of her research about the "quest for true belonging" that shows true, or what I'm calling active, belonging is based upon "maintaining our belief in inextricable human connection." As we said in together in our confession today however, many of us even with meaningful relationships feel a deep inside." Brene Brown says that the way to that the way to cultivate the experience of inextricable connection is to "show up for collective moments of joy and pain so that we can actually bear witness" to that connection. I witness that here at Seekers and that is a reason I choose to recommit during this Season of Commitment.

Active belonging is a place where we continue to sing the Creator's song as the Psalmist invites us, through the trials and triumphs of our lives as well as in this strange and troubling land of climate chaos and unraveling of the Creation's biodiversity.

I return to my own story to answer "why do I actively belong to Seekers?" When I heard of Seekers from a fellow seminarian 30 years ago, I was already struggling with making the

decision to leave the ordination process in the United Methodist Church. I had come to realize that my theology really is founded upon a priesthood of all believers. When I heard that here in DC was the Church of the Savior founded upon a similar commitment to a lay led worshipping community, I thought "that sounds like the church for me!" After nearly 20 years of being a "one church family" in the churches that my husband pastored, I joined Seekers 6 years ago when there really wasn't any reason to do otherwise. I felt and still feel like I finally "came home" to actively belong in a community consistent with my faith and values.

I continue to actively belong because we are a learning community holding on to "sound teaching" that is ever changing, non-dogmatic, always struggling to be relevant to our lives and the world, and discerning together what may be "sound teaching." That's one reason I recently joined another mission group Learners and Teachers. We don't have experts, though some have more experience than others in a subject; our learning together is founded upon the same principle guided by our open pulpit: We believe that each of us has a unique message of God's Word to be shared with the community. Together we answer for one another the plea of the disciples "Increase our faith!"

Active belonging is enacted in shared communion, a community communing with one another in the Spirit of God. So let us take to heart the blessing that Paul offers to Timothy, "Guard the treasure entrusted to you with the help of the Holy Spirit," –a treasure ever evolving, a living faith expressed through our shared community of active belonging, rooted and grounded in the love of Christ.

Amen.