

“Belonging: Ins and Outs”

Rev. Lynn Harrison
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
6 October 2019

*“I do not like them with a fox
I do not like them in a box.
I do not like green eggs and ham
I do not like them, Sam I Am!”*

It seemed to me, that after the wisdom teachings of Rumi and Jay Michaelson’s scholarly reflections, a little Dr. Seuss might be in order.

As we wrap up our series on “belonging,” let’s give a little airtime to rejection.

After all, it’s something we all know a thing or two about, and there is no greater text to teach it than the one written by Theodor Geisel in 1960.

*“I would not eat them here or there,
I would not eat them anywhere.
I would not eat green eggs and ham
I do not like them, Sam I Am.”*

I love this story, don’t you?

I love it partly because the hero is so direct about saying no.

He's not trying to be polite about it all,
he just tells it like it is.

Yet Sam-I-Am persists, putting that thing
our hero does not like one bit
in front of him, over and over,
despite his protests.

Kind of like those unwanted guests
in the Rumi poem...the ones that
just keep knocking at the door no matter how much
we want them to go away.

Yet the Teacher says, let them in.
They are a "guide from beyond."

That is to say:

What we reject...
What we are sure does not belong...

May be exactly
what needs to be included.

By looking more closely
at what we let in and what we keep out
of our inner circle of belonging...

We can be nourished
in ways that help us grow,

so that together we can build a world of greater love and justice.

§

One of my favourite slogans for life is “keep an open mind”... and I say “favourite” because I seem to need that reminder pretty often.

We say “keep an open mind” when we’re trying to suspend judgment... to not reject something... at least for the moment.

A closed mind pushes away, but an open mind invites something new to enter in.

Eden’s story held a wonderful example this morning.

The skeptic had made up his mind that the Rabbi could not possibly be going to heaven.

But after watching and learning with openness, he discovered that there was an entirely new definition of heaven awaiting him:

One that was “even higher” than before...

yet, at the same time, perhaps also more close to home.

§

Perhaps you've had the experience, as I have, of hearing a piece of music, or meeting someone, or trying a new food or activity for the first time, and thinking, "I will never get used to this... it is absolutely not for me..."

And then, over time, discovering that you truly love—and maybe even need—that thing.

A person I know well, who gave me permission to tell you this, once declared "I will never live on a street like this one. I won't even consider it!"

He then moved onto the street and has organizing its annual street festival for more than twenty years.

You may have similar examples in your own life, as I do.

§

What's going on here? How does this happen?

Well, at the very least, it may reveal that we often don't know ourselves very well, even—or especially—when we think we do.

There's also the interesting phenomenon of “you spot it, you got it”—in which we reject the very things in others that we are unaware of in ourselves.

(I say “interesting phenomenon” when in fact it's a really irritating phenomenon!)

In recent years, we've seen this writ large in a public figure who angrily denounces lies and fakery, when he is, of course, very deeply dishonest.

Of course this is an extreme example—and we might think it has nothing to do with us.

But in our own rush to judgment, we might miss the extraordinary yet tragic lesson that's being presented to us on a very big screen.

The very thing we reject, deny or fear...

Points us in the direction of what we need to engage with, for our own well-being...

and that of the world.

§

How do the rejected parts of ourselves influence what we reject in others?

How are we unconsciously dividing (and sadly, conquering) Life-- even when we say we "know" that we're part of one interdependent Whole?

When we notice in ourselves an aversion, a meanness (to use Rumi's word) we might ask ourselves, what is this revealing in me that might need to be welcomed in?

And by welcomed in, I don't mean encouraged and indulged like a bad habit...

Nor do I mean agonized over, with feelings of guilt or shame.

It's very important to highlight that.

Instead, I mean acknowledged with honesty.

Accepted and admitted.

Faced up to.

As Carl Jung wrote, "One doesn't become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious."¹

And as the more recent teacher Richard Rohr has said:

¹ C. G. Jung, *Psychology & Alchemy*, p. 99.

“Nothing inside us is as bad as our hatred and denial of the bad.

Hating and denying it only complicates our problems.

All of life is grist for the mill.”²

§

Over the years, I’ve become more aware of how I unconsciously judge others, both positively and negatively, often based on status, clothes, achievement and ability.

This awareness has deepened in me as I’ve noticed my own perfectionism—or more accurately, as it’s been pointed out to me.

My aversion to making mistakes, to needing help, to having limitations, to getting it wrong.

My dislike of my anxiety about all that.

Very gradually, I’m experimenting with being vulnerable.

(I’m doing it right now!)

² Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*.

And though it rarely feels comfortable,
I know it's taking me in the right direction,
toward a more open heart.

§

The great Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron writes:

We are told from childhood that something is wrong
with us, with the world, and with everything that
comes along:

It's not perfect, it has rough edges, it has a bitter
taste, it's too loud, too soft, too sharp, too wishy-
washy.

We cultivate a sense of trying to make things better
because something is bad here, something is a
mistake here, something is a problem here.

The main point [of the Buddhist teachings] is to
dissolve
the dualistic struggle, our habitual tendency to
struggle
against what's happening to us or in us.

These teachings instruct us to move toward
difficulties rather than backing away.

We don't get this kind of encouragement very
often.

Everything that occurs is not only usable and
workable but is actually the path itself.

We can use everything that happens to us as the means for waking up.

We can use everything that occurs—whether it’s our conflicting emotions and thoughts or our seemingly outer situation—

to show us where we are asleep and how we can wake up completely, utterly, without reservations".³

(Thank you, Leslie Solomonian, for bringing this excerpt to me.)

§

I’ve been focusing, so far, today, on the personal aspect of “ins and outs”—thinking that in our efforts to become more inclusive from a social justice standpoint, we can’t ignore the inner dimension.

To do our work out there...
we must do our work in here.

This is what the teachers say.

Could it be, at least in part, that because of our fear, reluctance or sheer inability to do the necessary inner work of reconciliation, we create societies that are

³ Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (Shambala: Boston, 1997), p. 123.

collectively unable to accomplish it?

How else can we understand the arising of something such as Bill 21 in Quebec, which prohibits anyone in a leadership position—such as a teacher or a police officer—from wearing any religious symbol, such as a kippah, hijab or cross...

...in a clear denial of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and basic principles of international human rights?

How else can we understand our collective rejection of the homeless, and continued injustice toward Indigenous people?

When we wonder what we can do in the face of these incomprehensible rejections of others...

We can start by looking deep into our own hearts, and notice how our own biases have helped form our sense of self...

And that we may need to dismantle the structures of bias, both within and without...

Before we can re-build a world of justice and compassion.

§

Right now, Jews around the world
are preparing for Yom Kippur, the Day of
Atonement.

Atonement can be seen as the “non-denying”
of our own rejected actions.

The owning up to all we are and have been.

The integration of all aspects of ourselves,
even the disliked parts.

Atonement.

At-one-ment.

Because this is such a challenging thing for
human beings to do,

It seems to me very wise
that the opportunity to do so
is built right the yearly calendar.

Whether we are Jewish or not,
perhaps we can ponder this wisdom and
be moved by it.

To acknowledge to God our mistakes,
in order that we may fully belong
in the eyes of Life, the world, and ourselves...

That we might become more at peace
with the “All That Is”—
and grow to become people of more
radical welcome.

In a few minutes we will hear the beautiful musical
piece
Avinu Malkeinu.

Its lyrics ask God to "forgive and pardon all our
inequities"
to "blot out and remove our transgressions and sins
from Your eyes."⁴

It is a healing song of atonement and reconciliation.

§

Many years after the Hebrew bible, it and the New
Testament
texts were rendered in Greek and then translated
into English
and other languages.

Many Christians are familiar with the line “Be ye
perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect.”⁵

It turns out that the word “perfect” was a
mistranslation of
the Greek word, which actually meant “whole.”⁶

⁴ My Jewish Learning website.

⁵ Matthew 5:48

⁶ Eckhart Tolle: *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*,
p. 184.

The phrase “Father in heaven” too,
may have drifted considerably from the intent of the
original
Hebrew or Aramaic.

So the revised text, closer to the intended original
meaning,
might be:

“Be ye whole, as the Source of All is whole.”

Or simply, “Be ye whole, as the All of Life is whole.”

I’m experimenting with the theology here,
which I think is a valid and creative and worthwhile
thing
for anyone to do.

And I’m reminded that the book by Jay Michaelson,
the Jewish scholar I quoted earlier is titled
“Everything is God”⁷—

— in the dismantling and re-imagining of what has
been
for so long a hierarchical and patriarchal concept.

(But that’s another sermon!)

§

As we widen the circle of belonging

⁷ Jay Michaelson, *Everything is God: The Radical Path of
Nondual Judaism* (Trumpeter: Boston & London, 2009)

to include the Whole of Life—

We may come to discover that we are welcomed,
exactly as we are, as never before.

And that we are nourished, for the work ahead.

*For I do like them in a box
For I do like them with a fox.
Yes, I will eat green eggs and ham,
Yes, I will eat them...Sam I am.*

§