



You Always Belonged and You Always Will: a Philosophy of Belonging

Dr. Martin Clay Fowler

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You belong. You always did, and you always will. “You belong” is my benediction to you, not some claim about you. Belonging is the first gift of the living to the living. You ask : Belong to whom? Belong with what? Belong here? Belong now? On what terms? At the same time, you feel rightly that the benediction is a real gift which you needed even if you never asked for it. Working out the terms of belonging is the most human work we do together. Belonging is a basic human need and at the heart of global issues in the 21st century: refugees, immigration, and humanity's relationship with nature. But philosophers mostly ignore belonging, and some find it elusive to define or to put into perspective. Why does it matter to belong? Who can be sure of belonging? You may feel that you belong nowhere. My two words (which are now yours) mean that your belonging was never “nowhere.” Your belonging is not problematic and not probationary. It's neither inclusion nor attachment. It's no comfort zone, familiar setting, a piece of turf, or your peace of mind. It's your vulnerability to transformation. This vulnerable belonging is not precarious, but living as though you and others don't belong is extremely insecure. Transformation is more than change; not always momentous, discontinuous, or miraculous, irreversibly living in a right direction without seeing our destination. "You Always Belonged and You Always Will – a Philosophy of Belonging" argues that we only tell life's first story: striving to transform internal and external environments. Life then looks busy, busy, busy. Let's tell life's second story too. Life sustains itself, but it also enables life to belong. Belonging is no relationship between distinct lives nor interaction, connection among lives. I propose that each life belongs in every life, and every life belongs in each life. This inter-situated reality helps evolution, ecosystems, and communities to function. Life's borders like skin and turf, don't limit a life's scope and meaning. Lives have insides and outsides, but that's packaging not the gift. Sound strange? Is this stranger than believing you can belong only inside your skin or on some patch of ground? Is this stranger than picturing belonging as ever fainter concentric ripples extending from you? Relationships provide the adhesive between lives, but it's belonging which places lives smack within lives. We experience belonging not as inner glow nor by invitation, but by exercising capacities you probably associate only with physical fitness: power, speed, strength, flexibility, accuracy, agility, balance, coordination, stamina, and endurance. These capacities are more than muscular skills. They are how we engage the world to belong. We experience life's core values: courage, justice, truth, peace, and love as we exercise and combine these capacities. We mix striving and belonging in activity to get a kinesthetic feel for these values in our lives...if we haven't already given up on living with meaningful activity. Our society's numbing expanse of inactivity makes belonging and meaningful activity seem larger than life. But they are both exactly life-sized, and you're a perfect fit. Belonging is not probationary, problematic, scarce, nor restricted to the lucky and few. We say that “extremophiles” belong only in inhospitable circumstances. Inhospitable to whom? Flip this around and declare every life an extremophile! It would be stranger to find a life that belongs nowhere! Humans anchor their belonging in being unique, rational, in control, most favored by God, or having intrinsic value, but belonging is enough authority to live, whether you're Isaac Newton or a spotted newt. No one makes you belong. You can't make yourself belong (why did no one explain this when you were thirteen?) As striving makes your life possible, belonging helps to make your life matter. There's a reason that the lock seems to fit your key. Welcome home.

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