



# Purposeful Wanderings

A Monthly Newsletter for Clients and Friends of **The Road Not Taken**

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## Belonging ... from the Edge, not the Center

*If you're not living on the edge, you're taking up too much room.*

The desire to *belong* is part of what it means to be human. Connectedness and community run as deep as our roots, even for strong introverts and staunch individualists. As our world becomes more uncertain, chaotic and complex, it seems we're "*longing* for belonging" even more. Yet, as our world becomes more uncertain, chaotic and complex, we also risk "*looking* for belonging" in odd places and in ineffective ways. When we belong, we're choosing to share part of ourselves with another (person, group, idea, intention) ... so as to *benefit both*. Yet it doesn't always turn out that way. Two aspects of belonging have the potential to guide you toward meaning, freedom, wholeheartedness and peace .... or not.

The **Who**: when you connect with others in meaningful relationship, do you do so from the desire of your heart – to love, to care, to share, to serve – without need or expectation of return or personal gain? Or do you connect so as to gain the approval or acceptance of others, more as a way to fill in a missing piece of you? Both are kinds of belonging, but while the first enriches you and makes you part of something bigger than yourself, the second serves only to keep you afloat in life's storm. It would be a tall order to suggest you always have a level of self-awareness and self-trust to allow "expectation-free" belonging. But it's *not* a tall order to suggest you always can be aware of your *intention* for belonging. (By the way, belonging without expectation or need *doesn't* mean you *don't* gain something in return; it means only that *expectation* of a return isn't a pre-condition of your choice.)

The **How**: when you connect with others in meaningful relationship, do you do so in a way that allows you the personal freedom and autonomy to both participate *and* ask questions, both share your gifts *and* think for yourself, both benefit others *and* benefit self? Or do you connect in a way that you lose yourself to group rules and norms, that you become complacent in the comfort and support offered by others, that you may feel buoyed up but not encouraged to fly? The first is a beautiful example of *detachment* – releasing connection with outcomes so as to be fully present for the process that creates them. The second offers enticing comfort, yet at the expense of needing constant feeding from others; it's unsustainable. It would be a tall order to suggest you always enjoy the both-ness of autonomy *and* sharing – at the same time. But it's *not* a tall order to suggest you can always be aware of the risk of losing yourself to demands and opinions of others, or being trapped by the latest big idea.

So, what is a healthy recipe for belonging ... in a world that invites and needs it more than ever, yet at the same time, asks us to be someone we're not? Here's my vote:

- Belong to yourself first. When you know yourself deeply, and thereby trust who you are, you can bring your unique gifts to others ... without risk of losing either the gifts or yourself in the process. You're free to enjoy "belonging *with*" others, while not "belonging *to*" them. Your personal principles are not for sale. Your truth is a gift. When you belong to yourself, you can share your gifts freely, yet hold them sacred at the same time.
- Belong (with others), but from the edge, not the center. Belonging from the center often feels comforting, but with it comes the risk of complacency ... simply because what you "see" from the center looks "like you." By contrast, to belong from the edge gives you a very different perspective. From here, you experience the value offered by community, *and*, at the same time, are free to ask questions, retain your own self as sacred, and not be trapped by "group think" of the whole. It's what is often called detachment – the ability to disconnect from the outcomes, thereby being free to connect more deeply with the *intention*, *people* and *process*. Detachment doesn't mean you don't care. Seeing both/and, rather than just either/or, allows free expression of your passion and intention, which are sustainable energies, because they're continually regenerated inside you. **Your** truth doesn't need, or depend on, **their** approval.

Belonging – to another, to a group, to an idea or to an ideology – is a choice. When you make that choice with conscious awareness and trust (of yourself, others), both you *and* others grow.

**Exercise #1: *Toward self-trust.*** The path to self-trust is one of silent inquiry, self-reflection and openness to change – all the things “everyday belonging” tries to convince you are a waste of time. I mean, if you can “have lots of friends, right now,” why would you bother with a process of introspection instead? Well, because it leads you to your truth, where you find the energy of your potential, and the self-trust to honor it. That energy is sustainable for a lifetime; social media isn’t. Growing that self-trust in yourself is a gradual process, but the “work” is relatively simple. Create quiet time each day (15-30 minutes is ok), and just be with yourself in silence. Thoughts will invariably fill the “empty” space. With time, you can learn to **notice** a thought without **becoming** it. As an **observer** of yourself and your thinking, you **get to know** yourself and your thinking very well. You may be surprised at what you “thought” you knew (including *who* you “thought” you *are*) before.

**Exercise #2: *Toward finding the edges.*** You are part of many communities. Like individuals and like nature, communities are ecosystems, collections of parts united by common purpose. Reflect quietly a few times a week on communities of which you are a part. You might include self, family, friends, workplace, nature, social, faith, town, nation, planet. Notice how you contribute to each, and how each contributes to you. Notice how, in their most positive sense, communities help expand the “you” you’d otherwise know, and how *you* expand the community to something bigger than it could be without you. What *meaning* do you find in how *your* story overlaps the *community’s* story? How does your belonging enrich your life? Do you find places where you “lose the real you” in the pressure to conform to the group? Do you find places where you’re belonging so as to gain approval, acceptance, love? Do you find yourself feeling resentful, perhaps that you didn’t “get back” what you expected? Do you find “stress points” in your connection with a community? If so, trace stress back to its cause (perhaps in one of the preceding questions). Whom do I admire most in this community? Why? Whom do I look up to least in this community? Why? How does each of these people embody or teach me something about myself?

**Life lessons from nature:** From early in childhood, I have always felt a sense of belonging in nature. Even my own back yard served as a “place of peace” in the midst of constant pressures to conform. As an adult, I “conformed” unwittingly for years through my work as a manager in high tech. Although this stressed my sense of balance with nature, the thread of nature’s wisdom continually wove the fabric that supported my life. When Digital Equipment Corp. failed, I went back to graduate school for a master’s in Environmental Studies – in support of my passion for nature’s gifts in my life. Afterwards, I recall “making a deal” with a new [high tech] employer, that as a condition of employment, I’d have 12 weeks off each year (without pay) so I could continue to lead Arctic nature tours. It blew me away that they said “yes.” (The more amazing part was that they never did figure how to not pay me. It ended up being a good deal on many accounts, yet most significant among them was the continued weaving of the fabric that connected me with the natural world.)

Reflecting on my “nature story” today, I’d say it like this: My deep sense of belonging comes from knowing that I am part of life, part of nature, part of the mystery of the unfolding of the universe, and that I have a role in all of them. None of this requires anybody else’s approval. Not surprisingly, I feel most at home – the greatest sense of belonging – when I’m alone, immersed in nature. No, this doesn’t mean I dislike people or that I’m anti-social – although some would say a good case could be made for both! – but rather that my sense of self doesn’t depend on whether they like me or not. This leaves me *free* to *choose* how, when and with whom I connect. I’ve learned that to allow others to decide whether I’m “good enough to belong” is to give my life away to them. Simply stated, I’m not willing to try to pretend I’m someone I’m not in order to gain their approval.

Curiously, yet not surprisingly, all of nature (except human “nature”) follows this same theme. Just curious.

**My book: *Living Authentically ... in a World That Would Rather You Didn’t.*** Its *premise* is simple: in the midst of a world that has lost its way, you need never lose your own. Get to know, then honor, your unique truth; the self-trust that emerges will light your way forever. Insights, perspectives, personal reflections and exercises ... so you can make your life your own, not someone else’s. All you need to know [here](#) – intro, samples, purchase link – for you or as a gift.

**Book of the month: *Welcoming the Unwelcome: Wholehearted Living in a Brokenhearted World*, by Pema Chödrön.** Her work is always deep, meaningful, filled with [often difficult-to-accept yet extraordinary “truthful”] insights, as well as practical steps for “welcoming the unwelcome,” or ... accepting “*the way it truly is*” in life, with both curiosity and grace. Create a strong personal foundation in a growingly divisive world – a foundation based in self-reflection, awareness, compassion and learning. And if you’re on Cape Cod, you’ll find this book at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons; 508-539-6985.