

THE WAY OF BELONGING



Reimagining Who We Are and How We Relate

SARAH E. WESTFALL



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OUT OF PLACE

I was born homesick. Maybe we all were.

ANDREW PETERSON

I could see her out the corner of my eye. A woman from church who I did not know well lingered just off stage, clutching a notebook to her chest. She was clearly waiting for me, but I paused to give myself a moment. Tiredness had settled deep in my body, and my introverted tendencies were in full force. All I wanted was to be home in my sweatpants, but I knew I could not slip silently out the back door. At a conference I helped plan. About community. (Listen, the irony was not lost on me.)

I stepped off stage, and the woman inched closer.

Her face was familiar from passing each other on Sunday mornings, but we had never been formally introduced. She extended her hand, “Hi. I’m Jolene. I’m the one who asked the question about doing all the right things . . .”

A knot formed at the base of my stomach. I knew exactly what question she meant. During the last session of the conference, we had opened the floor for attendees to submit questions anonymously. Many submissions were expected: What

opportunities does the church have for connection? What if I cannot attend a small group? You get the picture. But one question left me and the other speakers feeling like raccoons, wide eyes caught in stage lights with nowhere to run. In the moment, I had done my best to empathize with the struggle, but the truth was that I did not have an answer, at least not one that satisfied my soul. And with Jolene standing in front of me, it appeared the response had not satisfied her either.

We stood there, and Jolene softly repeated her question, “I have done all the things you guys talked about—showing up, inviting people over.” Her voice wavered. “So why do I still feel like I don’t belong?”

A moment of silence passed. Then another. And another. Part of me wanted to throw a blanket of “Oh, well just keep doing what you’re doing . . .” over her pain so we could both go home, but as I stood there, my gut turning and twisting, I realized I had no idea what to tell her. Outside the regular community mantras of “be vulnerable, show up, be intentional,” I did not know how to soothe her ache. I offered to meet her for coffee, but even as the words came out, the response seemed cheap in relation to the question with which she was entrusting me. Coffee and communion are far from the same.

How desperately I wanted to have a neat and tidy answer for her (and if I was being especially transparent, a neat and tidy answer for myself), but I knew Jolene was right. Belonging cannot be manufactured. It is not an idyllic destination “out there” waiting for us to arrive or a recipe we can cobble together in our kitchens (although a kitchen often seems a more likely place to find it than the round tables and hard chairs at

church). There is no secret formula or five-step program that guarantees the connection we crave. We can do all the right things and still feel so dreadfully out of place.

I know this reality well, because despite all I have learned, practiced, and even taught about cultivating connection at church, on college campuses, and in our home, I am the one who often feels more outside than in.

I am the one who makes dinner plans but considers faking a fever right up until the moment I have to leave.

I am the one who cringes when conversation stalls at small talk.

I am the one who walks into a room and makes my way to the food, just to have something to do with my hands.

More often than not, the thing that gets me out of bed and occupies most of my thoughts and conversations is also the thing that tucks me into bed at night full of questions. And while I could do without the perpetual self-doubt, I am exceedingly grateful for those questions, because I know I am not the only one asking them.

I am not the only one who wants more than surface relationships but struggles to know how much to share.

I am not the only one who wants to show up fully myself but often shrinks back in fear.

I am not the only one who has felt the sting of loneliness and wondered, *What does it really look like to belong?*

That day, Jolene and I said an awkward and inadequate goodbye. We never did meet for coffee, a regret that still causes twinges of guilt from time to time. But as I walked away, I knew I needed a better answer to the question we were both asking,

because if belonging is not finding the right place or the right people, then what is it?

Back to the Beginning

For as long as I can remember, belonging is a desire I have carried. Some people are born with birthmarks or unusually loud laughs, but I was born with a want for connection wedged into the deepest parts of my body. As a child, I pursued connection with curiosity and nothing less. Unhindered by expectations, the yearning flowed freely as I ran across the backyard, over the short fence, to ask whether my friend Emily could come out to play. I did not wonder whether Emily wanted to come over, what we would talk about, or how my disheveled hair cascaded wildly down my back. I had not yet learned how fragile relationships could be or the ways we tend to lose ourselves trying to fit in. I had not yet felt the sting of being on the outside. All I had was unfettered joy as I ran barefoot across the grass.

I often wonder if that's what Adam and Eve experienced in the Garden. Prior to experiencing the pain of separation, was belonging simply part of their daily existence, as natural as the air that moved in and out of their newly formed lungs? Without shame in nearness or nakedness, did they run through the grass with arms extended toward God and each other? At night, as wind whistled through the trees and the rivers sang their lullabies, did man and woman close their eyes without fear or hesitation, knowing they were already home?

Even now as I imagine that kind of communion, I take a deep breath, a familiar wanting rising in my chest. Perhaps we are all just trying to get back to where we started, back to the place

where we did not hesitate to run across the yard and find a friend. My pulse quickens at the thought of such safety and unbridled pursuit. Such purity of presence. What might it be like to return to our beginnings?

From the moment we come into the world, we are reaching. Our infant lips and limbs search for our mothers, craving attachment of body and soul. Without shame, we make known our need for the warmth and nearness of another person, tipping back our heads with primal yells and letting tears fall freely until we are safe and soothed. No hesitation. No second-guessing. All we know is that we want to be held.

As children, we looked for friends on playgrounds or down the street, because the desire for connection did not fill us with shame but moved us toward each other. If you were lonely, you simply asked to join the closest game of tag or knocked on a neighbor's door or climbed onto a parent's lap. Just last week my husband took our four boys to the park and our youngest son came home sweaty and eyes alight with excitement about a boy he met named Michael. They had played together only five minutes, but it was enough to call Michael a friend.

It is as if God's words "it is not good . . . to be alone" are molded into our marrow, wrapped around who we are like a double helix—unseen but always with us (Genesis 2:18). Belonging is central to who we are and how we interact, and unfettered, this desire moves us toward one another. But somewhere between that first breath and adulthood, we stop being so bold and outspoken about our need for one another. We stop knocking on doors and crying out quite as often. We get hurt and insecure and pull back, convincing ourselves that

independence and individuality are good substitutes. As a result, we learn to swallow our loneliness, busying ourselves before we taste its bitterness on our tongues. We choose distraction in all its forms rather than let ourselves imagine that maybe this desire to belong is not some aimless pursuit, some flighty insecurity, but the truest truth about ourselves. Because if we really stopped and paid attention, we would see that the desire for with-ness has always been a part of who we are.

Learning to Hide

Until I was eleven, we lived on a slow street in the middle of town, the kind of street where kids were always popping in and out of alleys on bikes or playing with Skip-Its up and down the sidewalks. Every backyard was an extension of the others, and we would run from house to house until the sun grew lazy and parents called us home. In the days leading up to my sixth birthday party, I invited every kid on our little city block to join us (and then some). The decision was generous on my part, no doubt. The problem was that I forgot to inform my parents of the expanded guest list.

The day of the party arrived—and so did the kids. In fact, so many kids kept showing up that Mom and Dad had to drag three picnic tables together end to end just to make room, and even then, the adults still stood. That day, I imagine Mom crossed her fingers and prayed that Jesus would multiply our homemade cake like he had the loaves and fishes.

I do not remember much about that party beyond our family's retelling and a few pictures, but I love that story. There's one photograph in particular where I'm in the middle of all

those kids standing on the picnic table bench, hands thrown over my head, red Popsicle dripping down my fingers, with a wide smile across my face. I marvel at that little girl, the one who did not hesitate to overextend an invitation. I wonder at her sense of safety to bring so many to the birthday table, to gather without expectation. Belonging was simple then, and all were welcomed. A little flurry of promise runs through me at the idea of being so openhanded and free. But I also have to ask: What happened to that little girl? When did I make the switch from gathering people to grasping for recognition? When did I begin to feel more outside than in?

For most of us, somewhere between those days of knocking on neighbors' doors and full-fledged adulthood, friendship gets complicated. The prerequisites seem to morph from proximity to acceptance, and any inherent sense of belonging fades beneath the desire to fit in. We begin to hesitate before walking into a room or choose isolation instead of sending the invitation. For me, the subtle shift began in kindergarten, just months after that summer birthday, and while the change was not caused by one person or isolated event, we all have moments that tend to collect and resurface from time to time, giving us glimpses into how we lost our way.

We had just come in from recess, faces red and eager for a turn at the drinking fountain. Securing a spot near the front of the line, I stepped forward. The white porcelain pressed against my small fingers as I balanced on tiptoes to take a sip. Stray water droplets trickled down my chin, and I was careful to catch them, not wanting a single dribble to fall onto the dress I had carefully picked out that morning.

To this day, I cannot remember the exact dress. In my mind the fabric was a soft blue cotton with puffed sleeves, because as a kindergarten girl in the 1990s, puffed sleeves were everything (thank you, Anne of Green Gables). What I do recall was how that dress made me feel. My shoulders squared proudly as I walked the halls of my small school. I loved who I was in that dress, and I was keenly aware that I did not want to ruin the fabric with a few drops of water.

Wiping my chin with the back of my hand, I finished my time at the fountain and turned toward one of my closest friends, Olivia. A slight frown spread across her face as she looked back at me and said, “That dress makes you look fat.” The sentence was declarative, as if she were simply restating what she had for lunch or that the sky was blue. But this fact was news to me.

As Olivia moved past to get her drink, my body slumped. Hurt welled in my chest, threatening to spill down the face I had just wiped clean. I arrived at school that day alive, free, and confident in the girl I saw in the mirror. Six words was all it took to replace that sense of security with the sinking feeling I did not fit in. Even my best dress was not good enough. My body was not good enough. I turned away before Olivia finished her drink and saw tears pooling in my eyes.

I do not blame Olivia. One comment did not diminish all the hours we spent playing Barbies or the summers spent floating in her parents’ in-ground pool, the smell of lemon juice wafting from our hair while Mariah Carey serenaded us from the boombox. Olivia was a dear friend, a steadfast companion, and I am certain I too uttered my fair share of careless words over

the years. Because that's what happens when you spend enough time with someone. Sooner or later, intended or not, our jagged edges rub up against each other.

Therapist Ryan Kuja once told me, "To be human is to know something of trauma." Seen or unseen, real or imagined, intentional or not, we collect wounds like paper cuts along the way. Some traumas leave slivers while others create gaping holes in our sense of connection. Differences morph into divisions, and instead of throwing our hands wide and running across the grass toward each other, we just start running. Like Adam and Eve after that first bite of fruit, we hide. We cover parts of ourselves from God and each other, too afraid to bare what is tender and too hurt to move toward healing.

And that's how our original belonging begins to fade. What began in the Garden becomes a distant memory as we bury loneliness beneath the belief *I am the one who is out of place. The odd one out. The one who can't quite get it. The one who is not wanted or the one who feels awkward entering the room.* We think we are the only ones alone on the sidewalk, watching through the window at a crowd who has it all figured out.

Shifting the Question

Not long ago, I picked up Henri Nouwen's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. I had been thinking a lot about Jesus' parable of the lost son (from Luke 15), and I checked out Nouwen's book hoping it would lend a little insight. But Nouwen's story tilted everything. I had one of those experiences where it felt like the words had been written for me and me alone, as if gears once clunky, banging and clanking against one another, finally fell

into place and began to move smoothly. He wrapped words around ideas that had long been swirling inside me.

I told my friend Carla the following night at dinner that *The Return of the Prodigal Son* did more than solidify my solidarity with the self-righteous older brother in Jesus' story (more on that to come). Nouwen helped me reframe the question I had long been asking, from "What does it look like to belong?" to "How can I be a place of welcome?" The shift altered my posture from *me* to *we*. Because instead of wondering how to fit in, I began to consider what it might look like if we could (in Nouwen's words) "be home" to one another.

The realization came like a fresh rush of freedom, as if someone had just opened a window and released a promise my soul had long been holding.

Belonging is not something to attain but someone to become.

It is not about finding the right place or the right people but about embracing our worth as God's beloved and then extending the welcome.

What I wish I could have told Jolene that day at the conference is that maybe we have been looking at belonging all wrong. Maybe the meaningful connection we seek is not "out there" waiting to be discovered. Maybe we do not need to bend ourselves into countless iterations or get sweaty in pursuit of some cosmic combination of perfect place and perfect people. Because belonging is already in us—part of who we have always been and who we are becoming. And maybe those very wounds we want to hide can help us find our way back to God and to each other.

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