

EXCERPT



The Way of Belonging *Reimagining Who We Are and How We Relate*

June 11, 2024 | \$18, 192 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0853-9

What if belonging isn't something to attain, but someone to become? Sarah E. Westfall turns our desire to be embraced into a reality of embracing those around us. Teaching a posture of hospitality in the way of the Father, she guides us toward a deep connection where our humanity draws us closer to people and envelops us in the heart of God.

A Desire for With-ness Is a Part of Who We Are

I could see her out the corner of my eye. A woman from church who I did not know well lingered just offstage, 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. While I wanted to be home in my sweatpants, 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 one another 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 were 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.

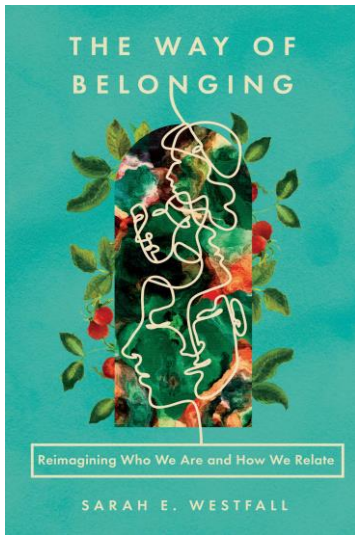


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Sarah E. Westfall is a writer, speaker, and host of the *Human Together* podcast. Her previous work includes serving as director of community for online writing groups and as a student development professional on college campuses. She has been published in *RELEVANT*, *Fathom Mag*, and *(in)courage*.

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 who 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?

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 the 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. Having not yet felt 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 our need for the warmth and nearness of another person known, 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.

—adapted from chapter 1, “Out of Place”



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Q & A



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“The Welcome of God Changes Everything.”

How long have you been wrestling with the idea of belonging, and how did your personal journey lead to the writing of this book?

Sarah Westfall: Belonging is a question I have carried for a really long time, but I often pursued the answer through acceptance or achievement (which were hollow ends). The longing remained, and I began to assume the lack I felt was me, as if I were the odd one out. But through personal conversations and my work on college campuses, I know I’m not the only one who wonders, *What does it really look like to belong?* We all carry an inherent longing to be safe, seen, respected, and enjoyed, but we often bend ourselves to expectations or wait for others to come to us.

Thirteen years ago, when our son died, I experienced community in a new way, where I was met down in the dirt of my worst nightmares by both God and other people. From there, I began a journey of naming my need for connection and asking what it looks like to live deeply alongside God and each other. I have been writing about community and connection and the complexity of being human since then, but a few years ago, I had an encounter with a woman in our church who desperately wanted connection. She was doing “all the right things” but still felt so dreadfully out of place. The book began to flow from there as I began to ask, “If belonging cannot be manufactured or contained to a specific place or people, then what is it?”

In your view what is belonging, and why is it such a felt need for so many of us?

Sarah: We often think about belonging as where we fit in, a perfect place or perfect people where connection comes quick and easy. But that recipe is rare, and even when we find it, relationships remain complex. People change. Life changes. Situations, opinions, and problems make human-ing together hard, leaving us to wonder whether we are more outside than in.

But belonging is not dependent on particular places or people. It is not a mold we must pour ourselves into, hoping we will fit. Belonging is a welcome we carry with us. It is folded into our personhood like a divine inheritance, tucked into the unseen corners of the soul but firmer than the bones in our bodies. We belong because we have breath, and every exhale is an echo of the love of God, setting us free to hold and be held. *The Way of Belonging* is an invitation to embrace a gentle-but-sturdy approach to belonging—not as something “out there” to attain but as part of who we are and who we are becoming.

What do you believe happens when we see ourselves as people of welcome?

Sarah: Seeing ourselves as people of welcome changes the way we enter a room. It changes how we approach others, respond, create boundaries, and open our homes. It changes how we see strangers at the grocery store and at the pickup line, because when we approach belonging in this way, we begin to find the overlaps between us. We see ourselves and others through the lens of God’s abundant, ever-present love.



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“In this kind and relatable debut work, Sarah Westfall offers a spiritually formative resource for anyone who questions their place with people, with God, or with themselves. While reading The Way of Belonging, I found myself nodding my head and sighing with relief. I’m grateful for this honest book.”

—Emily P. Freeman, author of *The Next Right Thing* and *How to Walk into a Room*

What are five key takeaways you hope readers will gain from your book?

Sarah: I hope readers may lean in to the following ideas:

1. Your belonging is already within you, found within the embrace of the Father.
2. Belonging is a way of being in the world.
3. You are welcome. You are welcome into the embrace of the Father, and you are welcome, an extension of that embrace in the world.
4. A posture of belonging is a posture of welcome.

Finally, I hope readers walk away with a tenderness toward themselves and others, as well as some ways to move closer to others in their everyday lives.



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