On Belonging

by Karen Mohr  
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If the concept of god has any validity or use, it can only be used to make us freer and more loving. If god cannot do this, then it is time that we got rid of him!

James Baldwin

Throughout this sharing I will share reading and thoughts from the Author Cole-Arthur Riley’s book *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us***.**

I want to share an old man’s story:

One night, I did leave the house and walked for hours, wishing to disencumber myself. But my bones failed me, and the light of an all-night diner were irresistible. I entered the steamy, greasy warmth, felt the meat smell clinging to my clothing. I sat down at the counter and picked up a matchbox. On it was printed, ***ACE 24-Hour Cafe • Where Nice People Meet.*** And tears came to my eyes for the hopefulness, the sweetness, the enduring promise of plain human love. And I understood the incarnation. For, I have believed for the first time: Christ took on flesh for love, because the flesh is lovable.

The waitress looked at me, an old man with a night’s growth of grey-green beard. My eyes, I knew, were feverish, the mad eyes she must have gotten used to on the late-night shift. She said, “How about another cup of coffee, dear?” I smiled and thanked her.

-Mary Gordon, “In the Company of Women”

Ephesians 4:2-6, Inclusive Bible

* Treat one another charitably, in complete selflessness, gentleness and patience.
* Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the peace that binds you together.
* There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called into one hope when you were called.
* There is one Savior, one faith, one baptism,
* One God and Creator of all, who is over all, who works through all and is within all.

While living in Thailand Steve and I were part of a small group associated with the church we attended. This was like what we at 8th Day called call a Mission Group without the emphasis on mission. On Tuesday evenings, Steve and I hopped on our motorbike and travelled up and down a steep hilly terrain to the top of a mountain where our host opened their home for us to meet. There were six of us from different parts of the world. Yanni & Merija from Finland, another woman from Malaysia, and an occasional drop in from the UK.

We read and discussed scripture, prayed for one another, snacked, and fellowshipped together. We marveled at the idea that each of us being so far away from home became community to one another other. We shared a sense of belonging. As we unpacked stories of our personal lives, we soon discovered that our backgrounds could not have been more different. Yet we received each other with openness, honor and respect. We then descended the mountain re-entering our individual lives until our next meeting or Sunday church. You know how it works.

We also found belonging in our local neighborhood where we did not speak the Thai language, but we spoke the language of community. Stopping at the market to buy the warm coconut filled pastries of Steve’s favorite street vendor. Stopping by the carts of women who sold fruit where they always gave me a sample of something new to eat and waited for the expression of my like or dislike of what I was eating. They always got a good laugh when my face scrunched up at the sour taste of something. They also taught me how to work with Thai baht, the currency of Thailand, and they would actually quiz me on my counting money to help me learn. So many stories of getting to know the people within our local communities. Steve’s coffee guy who always gave him coffee and a little something extra to eat. Such a rich community. Even if we saw them passing by on a motorbike or bumped into them at a street festival, we would hug, speak in our native languages and enjoy the knowing of each other in the moment. They knew us or at least what we liked to eat, and we supported their business and felt a deep sense of belonging to our neighborhood.

In speaking of community Arthur Riley-Cole says,

Each part of our community has agency to affect the whole. There is mutuality in our relationships. We don’t just welcome you or accept you; we need you. We are insufficient without you. In mutuality, belonging is both a gift received, and a gift given.

Community is a group of people committed to being a collective. Here is another simple definition of community. Play [“Cheers” Theme song](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-mi0r0LpXo), “You Wanna Go Where Everybody Knows Your Name.”

Cole quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s writings saying,

In Christian community everything depends upon whether each individual is an indispensable link in a chain. Only when even the smallest link is securely interlocked is the chain unbreakable. A community’s survival would depend on each link.

As Christians we are compelled in Ephesians 4 verses 2and 3 to treat one another charitably, in complete selflessness, gentleness and patience. To do all we can to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the peace that binds you together.

Exclusion operates by the same rule of mutuality as welcome, for it harms both the excluded and the excluder. If you exclude others for long enough, you learn to accept someone else’s exile. You learn belonging as competition, not restoration.  **(Repeat this)**

The energy that you expend forbidding others to walk through the door of community is also matched by the energy you expend competing to stay inside community. Exclusion compounds any shame that already dwells in the body

Here at Eighth Day, we work very hard to ensure a sense of belonging within our community. In our journey together we worked to be inclusive by changing our membership structure and selecting a diverse council that is more reflective of who we wish to be paying attention to, to include black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) within roles of leadership.

We have found that even in our efforts to include BIPOC members in leadership, the task has not been easy. The work done to create a sense of belonging for opening up a community to further integrate our worship services with readings, visual images and even BIPOC speakers has sometimes been met with questions about our own identity as a congregation. What type of church are we? Are we trying to become a black church when our history is that of a predominantly white church? Why do we need to revisit race discussions. We have already done the seminars. Aren’t we already an anti-racist church? Are the problems that we have actually about race?

Cole Arthur Riley poses some questions a different way. What color is the God that we worship at Eighth Day? Do the rituals that we practice support a Eurocentric, white culture? Could Eighth Day believe that the God we worship looked like a Latino person, black person, homeless or disabled person or woman, gay, lesbian or non-binary person. Who do you see?

Eighth Day has gone through significant changes over the years especially with the remodel of Potter’s House, changes in leadership, Zoom worship, and we still await the transition to a remolded worship space at the Festival Center. These changes are never easy and not without controversy. In the midst of this sometimes chaotic change, do we maintain our sense of belonging and continue to offer a place of belonging to other who want connection.

These questions need to be asked continually. For so long the White Eurocentric Patriarchal God has dominated the greater nationwide religious Christian community. Cole Arthur Riley says, “Undoing the whiteness of God takes time and effort.” I believe because we are made in the image of God. If our image of God is white, there may be a temptation to judge BIPOC people with this bias. *Anything less than what is expected will never measure up resulting in exclusion for some and inclusion only for those who look like they belong.*

The sense of belonging might be based on a set of preconditioned ideals.

We must avoid the tendency to say that we have arrived at being an anti-racist church or that we have completed our task of sharing power. Anyone can go through the motions; however, if there is not an inward sharing of power in our minds among the individuals within our community, then we have done nothing. The strong-linked chain that Brueggemann spoke of is weakened.

Paul gives us a taste of love and acceptance in action in Romans 12: 9-16:

**9**Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. **10**Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. **11**Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. **12**Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. **13**Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

**14**Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. **15**Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. **16**Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+12%3A+9-21&version=NIV#fen-NIV-28262a)] Do not be conceited.

I would like to share a “Lizzo goes to Washington” moment from the September 27th Washington Post. Heather Phares of the *Washington Post* shares a bio of Melissa Jeffries, aka “Lizzo!” She is a Charismatic Grammy-winning singer/rapper. Lizzo combines her roots in Houston rap, gospel soul, and classical flute as confidently as she addresses race, sexuality, and body positivity.

Every time I watch [this clip](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3mb62QNXY0g) I am in awe of the “Black Girl Magic” that she shares with her fans and that representatives of the Library of Congress reached out to include her in American History.

As Lizzo was invited by the Library of Congress to step into American History and be the first to play this 100-year-old flute from James Madison, there are those who questioned the Library of Congress in choosing Lizzo to receive this honor.

They called Lizzo disgusting and said that she denigrated our history. They preferred that someone more important, white, and respectful play the historic collections of flute and wooded instruments. They needed someone with more skill than Lizzo because they thought she wasn’t enough!

This congressman chose to alienate Lizzo from what he called “our” American History and voiced his displeasure over her inclusion into history by the Library of Congress. He disagreed with, who she was, her body shape, how she dressed, how she played and, how she presented herself.

Call Arthur Riley writes

I wonder if God feels as alienated from us as we do from him. Sometimes it cracks me up to think of the stories that describe Christ just boldly inviting himself over to people’s houses for dinner. Roaming around telling people to stop everything and follow him. Multiplying food but making everyone sit down in groups to eat it. He knew how to make his own belonging. Do we?

Readings:

Brussat, Frederic and Mary Ann. *Spiritual Literacy Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*. New York: Scribner, 1996.

Riley, Cole Arthur. *This Here Flesh Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us*. New York: Convergent Books, 2022.