Almost everyone wants to belong to something or someone or some group. We humans are social animals. Some of us are more social than others, some of us are more loners than others. But all of us want to belong in some way, somehow.

And we UUs struggle a bit with belonging. We sometimes take pride in defining ourselves as a gathering of heretics. We take pride in our first principle - the inherent worth of each individual and then focus on the individuality not the concept of worth. And we forget that the first principle is balanced by the 7th principle the respect for the interdependent web. Which in our focus on individuality we see as the web of the natural environment but we forget that we are all interconnected not only with nature but with one another. Our principles tell us yes value the individual and value the network that they live within.

These following beloved values in UU world that might impede belonging

Protecting individual freedom over and against the value of community and accountability

Affirming inner authority to such an extent that I am allowed to say whatever I want whenever I want forgetting that I am also accountable to the impact of my actions.

Sometimes we value intent over impact instead of seeing that they are inextricably linked.

I was talking with, arguing really recently with a minister recently. He pastors a UCC church and is looking to broaden the appeal of his congregation and help it be more theologically eclectic. And he reasonably thought the UUA might be the place for his congregation.

As we talked it became clear to me that he was looking for a denomination that would leave his congregation alone and not expect much. He did not like the ever-growing liberal leanings of the UCC.

We got into a conversation about white supremacy culture. He did not like the term. He told me about all the civil rights work he had done in the 60s and his close friends who were people of color and how he had fought for women's rights.   When we got to talking about how we can fight white supremacy or how we can unbake it from the systems that we live in, he, an older white classically liberal male, felt that he was being asked to leave the table. That there was not enough room at the table and if we

invited "new" folks and understand here he meant people of color then there would not be room for him.

When you have held a place of privilege and the system is changing and the standards are changing so that you have less privilege and less power it sure can feel like you are being asked to leave the table.

As we talked we wondered what it would be like to make the table larger. And I do think that is a good idea. There is this saying - "When you have more than you need build a bigger table not a higher fence". I don't think the man I was talking to saw that he had more than he needed in the way of social power. I don't think he saw that he could share some of that social power and still have enough for himself. All he could feel was the grief of losing some of his power, and he could not admit it. Instead he blamed these "new people" for not following the rules he followed, for not being like him. Building a bigger table is one step it is not the solution it is still not enough. If we have a larger table and we invite more folks to that table we have done a good thing and it is still not enough. In this metaphor it still sounds like we own the table and are inviting the other in. That we are expecting them to sit at our table and behave like us.

I might be overworking this metaphor but maybe we should leave our table find as many folks as we can - a diverse group as is possible and simply build a new table together and, in the process, make new rules as to what it means to be a community together.

One of the reasons I love the Harry Potter books is that Harry struggles with this issue - How do I belong here - how do I fit in.   Because he had had so little growing up and was treated so badly, by the time Hagrid comes to him on his 11th birthday and takes him Diagon Alley, he is left amazed at all his learnings about the wizard world and how he might fit in. It is just the beginning of his understanding that the reason he did not feel he belonged with the Dursleys was not because there was something wrong with him but because the Dursleys simply wanted him to fit into their standards as opposed to the Dursleys affirming all the wonderfulness that Harry was.

At the end of his visit to Diagon alley Harry and Hagrid are having a bite to eat and have the following conversation:

"You all right Harry? Yer very quiet"

Harry wasn't sure he could explain. He'd just had the best birthday of his life - and yet - he chewed his hamburger, trying to find the words.

"Everyone thinks I'm special," he said at last. "All those people in the Leaky Cauldron, Professor Quirrell, Mr. Olivander … but I don't know anything about magic at all. How can they expect great things? I'm famous and I can't even remember what I'm famous for. I don't know what happened with Vol-, sorry, - I mean, the night my parents died."

Hagrid leaned across the table. Behind the wild beard and eyebrows, he wore a very kind smile.

"Don' you worry, Harry. You'll learn fast enough. Everyone starts at the beginning at Hogwarts, you'll be just fine. Just be yerself. I know it's hard. Yeh've been singled out an that always hard. But yeh'll have a great time at Hogwarts - I did - still do, smatter of fact." Harry Potter and the sorcerer's stone chapter 5 p 86

Hagrid could see Harry for who he was. Hagrid did not expect Harry to fit in - to change himself to fit into Hogwarts. And this is a key element of belonging

Brene Brown writes

"True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are."

She goes on to say

The importance of belonging [...] became very real to me years ago when I was interviewing a group of middle school students about the differences between fitting in and belonging. [...] When I asked a large group of eighth graders to break into small teams and come up with the differences between fitting in and belonging, their answers floored me:

- Belonging is being somewhere where you want to be, and they want you. Fitting in is being somewhere where you want to be, but they don't care one way or the other.

- Belonging is being accepted for you. Fitting in is being accepted for being like everyone else.

- If I get to be me, I belong. If I have to be like you, I fit in.

Brown, Brené. Braving the Wilderness (pp. 157-160). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

I will feel like I belong when I get to be me in a group, you will feel like you belong when you get to be your true self in a group.

Tina gave me a resource, a social justice curriculum for youth, about fitting in versus belonging.

- When we talk about inclusive spaces, often what we are really getting at is creating a space where more people have the opportunity to feel like they belong there

- Fitting in takes a lot of energy from the individual. Belonging may take special effort from the community, but a lot less energy from the individual

- It is the responsibility of people who create the norms of a group or environment to consider who feels they belong and who is simply fitting in
- Social justice education often helps us bring to light the work that some people are doing to "fit in" to our communities, as well as helps us acknowledge ways that we can make more people feel they have the opportunity to belong https://www.socialjusticetoolbox.com/activity/fitting-in-vs-belonging/

Belonging is a two-way relationship fitting it is a one-way relationship. And this is where my colleague, who I spoke of earlier, did not get it. He wanted to lead a community where people of color knew how to act like white folks and therefor fit in. He did not want to be in a community that was doing the work to see how they could be inclusive in a way that allowed people, no matter their color, to feel like they belong. In belonging the community has to be aware of its communal norms and how the community enforces them. And the community needs to be open to changing those norms. And the individual has to be willing to be open to being them self - to do more than simply try to fit in.

In her book Braving the Wilderness Brene Brown talks about having a strong back and soft front as a good way of being in the world. By this I think she means a strong back is the ability to be your own person, be independent, she quotes Buddhist teacher Joan Halifax

"All too often our so-called strength comes from fear, not love; instead of having a strong back, many of us have a defended front shielding a weak spine. In other words, we walk around brittle and defensive, trying to conceal our lack of confidence. If we strengthen our backs, metaphorically speaking, and develop a spine that's flexible but sturdy, then we can risk having a front that's soft and open…. How can we give and accept care with strong-back, soft-front compassion, moving past fear into a place of genuine tenderness? I believe it comes about when we can be truly transparent, seeing the world clearly—and letting the world see into us. —ROSHI JOAN HALIFAX

Brown, Brené. Braving the Wilderness (p. 147). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

You may wonder what this has to do with Belonging. How does having a strong back and soft front make it easier to belong.

I want you to imagine your most beloved person in the world. Hold that person in your mind's eye. Now I want you to imagine that person smiling at you and greeting you - you move toward them and give them a big hug. I bet they have a soft front and a strong back.

Imagine instead they have a hard front, literally a set of armor on their front - that hug is not going to feel very good. Or imagine that as you go to give them that great big juicy bear hug they have a soft back and you bowl them right over. That also won't feel good.

I would bet that most of you know intuitively that being received by someone who has a soft front strong back is wonderful. It is often easier to ask others to have a soft front and strong back so we feel welcomed. And it is OK to ask for that. And, and it is important for each of us to do our own work too – developing our own strong back soft front. Our work as Unitarian Universalists in becoming the Beloved Community is that each of us needs to work on having our own soft fronts and strong backs so that as a community we will have a strong back and soft front ready to welcome people in.

What Brene brown is saying in her books and lectures and what Harry Potter finds out in his adventures in the wizardry world is that in order to belong to another or to a community first you must belong to yourself. You must have the courage to stand alone, to say what you believe even if it sets you apart. That is the strong back. I'm not a Harry Potter expert but somehow his saying of Voldemort's name instead of saying the usual "you know who" is strong back behavior.

And in order to belong and to offer belonging we cannot simply have a strong back. Our UU focus and comfort on rabid individuality is strong back behavior but not balanced with soft front behavior. We must also have a soft front. Remember that hug you imagined? In order to belong to someone or some group there has to be a soft space to be received, that is the soft front. We must as a community must remember that we are responsible for creating a soft-landing place for others, for new comers to our community so that they know that there a place for them.

I'll end with these words of Brene Brown

People are hard to hate close up. Move in.

Speak truth to bullshit. Be civil.

Hold hands. With strangers.

Strong back. Soft front. Wild heart.

Brown, Brené. Braving the Wilderness (pp. 157-158). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

In a world without end may this be so.