

ARTIST'S NOTES ON BELONGING

by

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Abstract

This multi-sensory arts-based research paper is founded upon twelve different 18" x 18" oil paintings, mostly of the natural world, each symbolically representing one of a variety of aspects of the concept of belonging. Painted over a period of a year, the paintings include landscapes, water, close ups of flowers and birds, a child, and a village. Using the artistic strategy of bricolage, this (re)search method uses a writing-transformative context, capturing a polyphonous voice. With the paintings as a catalyst, this comprehensive paper explores belonging through many different lenses. The concept of belonging is examined extensively including research across many disciplines, current literature, fiction, non fiction, articles, and poetry. It is also explored through personal narrative including memories, reflections, thoughts and experiences as a child, a family member, an artist and as a high school art teacher. Both belonging and not belonging are discussed through a sequence of sub sets, each coupled with a painting: belonging and attachment to a partner, to a home, to an extended family, to a school, to a group, to a culture, to places, to a genealogy, to nature, to a sense of mystery, and to the divine. Twelve aspects of belonging are explored in sequence in separate sections of the thesis, with ideas and commentary interspersed in a non-linear fashion with research, prose excerpts and poetry within each section. How do we belong? To whom and to what and where do we belong? Why is it that at times we do not belong? This scholarly paper examines aspects of belonging including research and ruminations about our attachment to one another and our place in this world.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Chapter	
Every Story Has a Beginning.....	1
My Beloved.....	7
The Shelter of a Shaggy Wing.....	20
Extended Family: The In-Laws	30
You Are My Favourite Teacher.....	36
To Join or Not to Join	42
Where Do <u>You</u> Come From?.....	50
Belonging/Not Belonging	57
A Place to Hang Your Hat.....	62
Have You Watered the Garden Yet?.....	71
The Call of the Wild.....	80
Jewelled Wings.....	87
The Great Mysterious.....	93
A Painter Always Asks: Is it Finished Yet?.....	100
Bibliography	102

Prologue to Flight

When crows become too old, or too fat and lazy to fly away from soybean fields, they are fashioned into lacquer brushes. The lucky ones are ground into charcoal cakes, mixed with water, then brushed into written words. The ink is silent, low in static, and distilled to resemble a pool of black cormorant feathers. But if these birds are to glimpse immortality, they will become dark streams of calligraphy, tributaries of words that pour down paper scrolls, opaque screens, and mulberry walls. They are happiest when they splash through windowpanes, for the glass in this place is also made from paper.

A book's pages are usually doubled - all the better to support a bird's flight - each sheet is made by screening a cloth-covered frame through milk, rice, straw, bits of bone, roots, and water. A common sight in Japan: cormorants, spread out across a paper sky, leaning into the fibres as though bracing for wind.

And the words themselves? The stories that follow?

When narrative begins, a story takes to the air in a cataclysm of winged intent. Whatever the tale, meaning chases the birds' flight, as though the crows and cormorants have just glimpsed a haiku's trajectory. A story unravels, or pours, or drifts toward one outcome or another. And the birds try to outwit the ending - that moment of death, sudden closure.

You see, on the page, stories are frivolous collisions that place image just before idea. As if to compose a thought, the poet must first build a city. A context is given: the day, a shaft of light that gouges the earth. A hole in the ground that soon widens into a subway. And by the third line, an idea emerges like a tired salaryman. To fully understand this place the salaryman must piece the city's architecture together one journey at a time, commuting from one stop to the next, until he finally contains the whole city in his head. Like a novel.

Each day the salaryman steps into the gush of streetcar steam and momentum, letting the crowd pull him out, toward the city and toward the light of day. A fistful of paper flutters in his hand.

Peter Oliva, The City of Yes

EVERY STORY HAS A BEGINNING

I am naturally an inquisitive person. I like to know how things work and why. I don't like to take people's word for things. I like to know for myself. A certain streak of independence has always been a part of my makeup, as well as a deep passion for introspection. During those moments of deep thinking I have often amused myself with figuring out why I think the way I do. My mind is not linear. You cannot put in A and expect B to come out like a train on a track. Oh no. My mind is more like a path of water as it flows down a mountain side. It meanders. It trickles. It hits a rock and changes direction. In fact, my mind loves divergent thinking. The rock in the middle of the route is embraced with delight as the slight change in scenery just enhances the journey. And so it is with my art work and so it is with my research. You cannot remove me from my predisposition to create everything into an art piece. I see things visually, and my hands want to be involved in the knowledge production. Often, I search for meaning as though blind, with my fingers reading the texture of something, adding information, filling in missing bits of information.

Phenomenology explores the things and events of daily experience and emphasizes subjective meanings and intuitive descriptions of the world. Works by Husserl (1911) and Heidegger (1927) were a reaction to a sense that the sciences had lost their relationship to everyday life. Phenomenology as a method attempts to overcome this distance by bringing back subject-matter to original experience. In everyday existence, people are caught up in what the phenomenologists call the 'natural attitude', that is, the unquestioned acceptance of the things and experiences of daily living. The world of the natural attitude is called the 'life-world', the 'taken-for-granted- pattern and context of everyday life. The phenomenologist seeks to make this life-world a focus of attention and to re-examine the nature of the world afresh. Things in Nature, persons and personal communities, social forms and formations, poetic and plastic formations, every kind of cultural work all become headings for phenomenological investigation. (Husserl, p.14)

In the academy there are many circles of thought on how and what research is, how it should be documented and finally displayed. Fortunately for me, I have been guided by individuals who uphold alternative forms of research dissemination, alternatively called arts based research. My particular thesis is multi sensory. It invokes visual images as well as text displayed in a random format. And there is reflection asked of the viewer. I am reminded that I am in dialogue with many who have helped pave the way for alternate forms of research and need to make mention of many, but certainly cannot mention all of the voices that have helped shape my idiosyncratic way of approaching research.

In this writing-transforming context, I want others to speak within and interrupt my prose so that the development of ideas becomes reflexive and collective, rather than a process. (Ilcan, p.38)

Analytical representation that is explored through artistic modes pushes against boundaries. This is necessary. The academy has been based on logical and linear modes of thinking. $A + B = C$. This by definition creates thinking that is bounded. Tied to spaces that are narrowly prescribed. Trinh T. Minh-ha speaks of our need to break out of these boundaries:

Every artistic excursion and theoretical venture requires that boundaries be ceaselessly called to question, undermined, modified, and reinscribed. By its politics of transformation, critical inquiry is ever compelled to look for different approaches to the aesthetic experience, different ways of relating to it without categorizing it. Different inquiry by its very inquiry; different attitudes of self through knowledge, different knowledge of the self through the selves within (without) oneself. To maintain the indeterminacy of art, criticism is bound to test its limits, to confront over and over again the legitimization of its own discourse hence to bring about its own determinacy. (p.7)

What happens when an artist/educator starts to critically inquire about something without wanting a definitive answer? Without expecting any answers at all. Perhaps just expecting more questions or perhaps wanting to "stir up the pot". What if all you were hoping for through representing research was to create a site of comfort and discomfort?

And so, I was led to an idea. A concept. A place of comfort and discomfort. I have been interested in the idea of belonging for many years. Be(longing). Belong(ing). How does one belong? To what and where and whom does one belong? Where do these sites intersect, run parallel, repel each other? How does the idea of belonging affect teachers, students?

I beg you, to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given to you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

Rainer Maria Rilke

As I started on my research journey I began with my paint brush. Over the course of a year I painted twelve disparate paintings. Some of them I painted with definite narratives attached to the subject matter; with others the images begged to be painted without a definitive reason on how it would fit into the series. Some of the paintings were easy to paint. Some were frustrating. Some I liked at the end and thought... nice, I feel good about this, and with others I felt more ambivalent... I hadn't yet reached a level of end result that satisfied me. Satisfaction. The images that help to shape and define my installation thesis were chosen randomly, from photographs and images scavenged from a multitude of sources. In this way I take the perspective of Nicholas Paley who asks the question:

How is educational study an issue for art from a perspective that serves unregulated forces to come up with something that can't be contained, something that both formally punctures the existing language on the subject and then, through that hole, pours new information, provocation, and radical juxtapositions to provoke not the sympathy, but the imagination of the viewer(reader)- rather than reproducing perspectives where art might serve normalizing forces that smooth out experience into objectified analytic arrangements. (Paley, p.8)

To break through. That is the power of art.

The Dadaists knew how to break through existing language. Knew what it was like to want art to be provocative and radical. They created what they hoped was non-art. I think what they created was non-linear art, art that has subsequently been called bricolage. Bricolage is "an artistic strategy," it is a "method that juxtaposed unrelated, incongruous elements in order to liberate understanding from the mystifications of straight line thinking." Bricolage has many advantages as a form of research presentation or "analytic address." (Paley, p.9)

Several pivotal reasons warrant exploring the potential of bricolage as a language of analytic address. Characterized in large part by visual realities, by discontinuity and juxtaposition in overall form, and by a decentered, porous association among its discontinuous parts, bricolage provides a working alternative to compartmentalized systems of knowledge production/display. (Paley, p.9)

Bricolage helps to break down arbitrary borders around areas of knowing. If I took the idea of belonging and explored it within the traditional boundaries of educational research, my bibliography would have looked completely different. Current and not so current trends, as they specifically related to belonging in an educational forum, would have framed my research area. Instead, I started out with just the word "belonging" and using several different search engines

enjoyed the diversity of writings that emerged. From those very diverse sites emerged a visual, textual collage around the idea of belonging. Belonging became both the inside and outside of knowledge production.

Paley expresses another advantage to bricolage:

Bricolage invites a mechanics of interpretation serving imaginative rather than doctrinal concerns. By refiguring the page as an invention, bricolage provides for the possibility of creating an intertext, a no-space and an everyplace where writing can shift from topic to topic – a space whose center is everywhere and periphery nowhere (and which) demands a high level of participation but excludes the idea of goal and direction. (p. 9)

What Paley is speaking of is a metonymic space which curriculum theorist Ted Aoki has written about at length. A metonymic space is a “tensioned space of ambiguity, ambivalence, and uncertainty but simultaneously a vibrant site. It looks like a simple oppositional binary space, but it is not. It is a space of doubling, where we slip into the language of both this and that, but neither this nor that.” (Aoki, p.181) Hence, bricolage as an artistic form helps create such a vibrant space that helps resist any temptation at a master narrative or positivistic stance. In fact, the refusal to grant a univocal stance, to embrace a “polyphonous voice,” is precisely the benefit that bricolage brings to knowledge production.

The polyphonous voice makes note that meaning is created not through a univocal discourse or master discourse but rather through a multitude of voices. The inclusion of multiple voices is essential to meaning making or one ends up with a very stale, artificial understanding of experience.

The address of polyphonous voice ...provide(s) a presentation of multiple realities and experiences within a framework that reflects a variety of modes of voice. By variously integrating the personal, the poetic, the discursive, and the symbolic, this form of address displays an elasticity, layeredness, and reversibility in vocal status (“the sliding up and down the scales of importance, the destruction of scales of importance”), thereby exploring a range of associations generally excluded (repressed?) from conventional analytic discourse. (Paley, p.10)

Providing space that integrates multiple voices and modes allows us to sit on the edge of chaos.

a mapping - recognition of a space-moment(s) of learning

exploration through which action-process occurs utterly through form and simultaneously through the destruction of form

absence sounding presence
realized

suspended between
a precarious presence
a space-moment of learning
realized in creative action and interaction
on the edge of chaos

and recognized.
(Fels, p.9)

And so it is that I embark on a journey to the edge of chaos. There I sit perched, legs
dangling, throwing stones into the abyss. Laughing.

* * * * *

Eros

for Tim Lilburn

When desire opens wide as the sky
heavens, blue meteors, stars showering on your head

when it writes every word and the spaces between words
curling the commas, commas, commas punctual -
skidding to a provisional halt

then away with the swallow, up to the eaves
a fine down licked by a wind more urgent than breathing

erotic, elliptic, slipping into melancholy madness
of 4 pm, basho's *narrow road*,
reading words that multiply
 rise off the page like smoke, errant

erring watching with mounting concern by friars,
madonnas, gods nailed helplessly to crucifixes

following saint francis through the long silky grass
waxwings and finches hovering over his hands

Hilary Clark, More Light



La Conner
2002
18" x 18"
oil on board
Gailene Powell

MY BELOVED

*she speaks burgundy birds
blue gold wings flowers indolent on her breasts
she moves slowly her hair curled tightly
hands skimming my thighs she whispers into my ear
I want you*

Chrystos

I have always loved painting flowers. Flowers contain such awesome beauty. That is one reason why we give flowers as gifts. Most people enjoy the sight of flowers and they take on additional meaning when they have been given by the beloved. This painting of two daffodils helps to represent the time I first got together with my life partner. We were newly together and made a trip to La Conner to see the never ending acres of spring daffodils and tulips in this special spot on the coast of the state of Washington.

Love the moment, and the energy of that moment will spread beyond all boundaries.

Corita Kent

March 14, 2002

We have a deep sense of shared creativity. I am making videotapes of the gardens and my partner is taking close up photographs. We are knee deep in row upon row of magnificent daffodils, letting them fill our viewfinders. We are by moments quiet, reflective, concentrating, and alternatively exhilarated, laughing, leaping over rows of flowers to capture another view, another angle. We long for each other. We belong to each other. We belong to the sea of flowers around us.

*Living in process is being open to insight and encounter.
Creativity is becoming intensively absorbed in
the process and giving it form.*

Susan Smith

The painting of daffodils calls attention to how we negotiate our individual selves in order to belong to another person. The two daffodils are very separate flowers, each with its own stalk, roots, and centredness. But the two are together on the canvas, moving, bowing, weaving with the wind and the song of the other.

True love needs the foundation of physical affection. Bodies not only house our spirits, they express our spirits. They communicate, without words, the essence of our beings. If you received the blessings of physical kindness and attention from your parents, these are feelings you wish to return to, and if you never received such nurturance and affection, this is a state you long to finally arrive at. (Kingma, D. in Alvarez, p. 86)

January 3, 2002

Independent and unique, we merge our distinct sense of who we are as an individual with that of another person when we move into partnership and share the dailiness of living.

This is not always an easy process. A close friend of mine and I talk about our partners and discover that they and we have some similar qualities. Louise says that she is a grumpy guts in the morning. I nod my head in agreement since I wake up with a crabby disposition as well. Our two partners, however, are polar opposites to us in that respect. They wake up on fire, ready to face the world. I wake up and open one eye gingerly and then shut it. Then I try the other eye. And on it goes until my brain is certain it won't have a melt down with all of the sensory data that two open eyes bring in the *morning*. And so the dance that we do is like the dance of the daffodils. We negotiate, we float, we twirl and find ways of being in each other's sphere. We long to belong and we learn how to belong; creating the dance of partnership together. Belonging to another person, belonging to a beloved, is a marvellous thing. It is also filled with communication challenges, especially at the beginning of a relationship.

You'll want to first determine what you are feeling - describe your feelings to

yourself - and prepare to describe them to the other person. There are three guidelines about feelings that help you defuse anger and hurt: First, use "I" statements instead of "you" statements. Next, be prepared to talk about your feelings, not your opinions. Finally, connect "I" statements and "feelings" messages with specific behavior. (Brassell, p.224-225)

*Stieglitz to Georgia, New York City,
mid-January 1916, before they knew one another*

My dear Miss O'Keeffe,

What am I to say? It is impossible for me to put into words what I saw and felt in your drawings. As a matter of fact I would not make any attempt to do so. I might give you what I received from them if you and I were to meet and talk about life. Possibly then through such a conversation I might make you feel what your drawings gave me.

I do not want to tell you that they gave me much joy. They were a real surprise and above all I felt that they were a genuine expression of yourself. I do not know what you had in mind while doing them. If at all possible I would like to show them, but we will see about that. I do not quite know where I am at present. The future is rather hazy, but the present is very positive and very delightful.

With greetings,

Cordially,

Alfred Stieglitz

Georgia had told me in a letter that she had written to Stieglitz, and soon after she wrote again to me: "You probably were pretty much surprised at my popping up and writing him - I just wanted to - so I did... I didn't know whether he would be interested enough to answer me or not - No risk - no gain."

Anita Pollitzer, A Woman on Paper: Georgia O'Keeffe

December 18, 2001

My partner and I correspond regularly during the beginning of our relationship. Unlike O'Keeffe and Stieglitz, we do not put pen to paper, but instead type our thoughts and share poetry via email. The internet crackles with the energy of our correspondence, the excitement, the fire. Words can take on such importance. Translating the heart.

Our correspondences have wings - paper birds that fly from my house to yours - flocks of ideas crisscrossing the country. Once opened, a connection is made. We are not alone in the world. (Williams, p.84)

*Any discovery of form is a moment of memory,
existing in the historical moment - alone,*

*and existing in history - linear,
in music, in the sentence.
Each poem, each piece remembers us perfectly,*

*the way the earth remembers our bodies,
the way man and woman in their joining
remember each other before they were separate.*

*It's over twenty-five years and every love poem
says how your music and my words are the same:
praising the common air, the motive, the memory.*

To praise memory is to praise the body.

*And I find myself describing
the joining of hips and eyes,
the harbours of thighs and lips,*

*as the singing of two small bodies in a dark ravine,
as two small bodies
holding up the night sky in a winter field.*

Anne Michaels, The Weight of Oranges

High school is a wonderful and painful arena to watch hormones in action. A stereotype, perhaps, but one I have been privy to seeing again and again. Just lean against the lockers which line the school corridor and watch the pairings that happen; Romeo meets Juliet. The girls seem to have intense feelings and their emotions will be set on fire; the boys appear to be more interested in the physical, *let's have sex*. For example, in my high school it came to my attention that a group of Grade Twelve boys had made bets at the beginning of the year to see "how many Grade Nine girls they could fuck that year." A year earlier, a counsellor who had the grade nines was beside himself. There was one student in particular whose behaviour was one of a sexual predator – his prey was Grade \Nine girls. The counsellor couldn't believe how many of his students had been coerced into having sex with this student. The counselor said most of these situations bordered on rape.

Perhaps it is important to both teen males and females to demonstrate that they belong to another. Belonging to another person is the stuff of fairy tales, of soap operas and romance novels. We eat it up. But belonging to another, belonging in a healthy partnership, is truly a beautiful thing.

"The dichotomy between the spiritual and the physical is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which

connects them is formed by the erotic - the sensual - those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love in its deepest meaning." (Audre Lorde). For Audre Lorde, the self is a self in reciprocity, and sexuality in its most potent form is a joy of sharing that bridges the sharers and lessens the threat of their differences. (Segrest, p. 37)

However, there can be a negative side to belonging to another. The headlines are full of the shadow side of belonging to a partner, when one or both people are psychologically unhealthy, abusive, or desperate in their need. In many instances, girls or women who lack self esteem may use having a boyfriend to bolster their shaky sense of self.

Cody and Rosalyn

I remember one couple that I taught in my early years of teaching when I had mixed grade classes of students from Grades 9 through 12. This pairing was composed of a Grade 12 boy, Cody, and a Grade 10 girl, Rosalyn. I absolutely hated watching how this young man treated his girlfriend. Cody was verbally abusive, aggressive and mean. I couldn't understand why Rosalyn stayed with him. I even talked to her about her situation and was no wiser for our talks. I do know that this young man had anger problems, and at one point he told me a story, saying, "My mom jumped me." I didn't know what he meant, so I kept listening. Cody was in the parking lot and pulled a man out of his car and started beating him up. The man had stolen the parking spot that Cody and his mom had been waiting for. This action enraged Cody enough to start beating the man, even though the man's children were watching from within the car. To stop Cody from beating the man up completely, Cody's mother jumped on her son's back, in desperation. She was trying to stop her son from beating this driver up. I was horrified to hear all this. I wondered sometimes if my student Rosalyn dated him simply for the prestige of having a guy in Grade 12. Rosalyn. I taught her for three years and she always had a boyfriend. But Cody was by far the worst in his treatment of her. Cody confided in me one day that Ros kept talking to him about wanting to have kids and get married. He knew their relationship wasn't going anywhere as soon as he graduated. Those words were music to my ears.

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget our perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything,
That's how the light gets in,
That's how the light gets in.
Leonard Cohen, Anthem*

In any relationship there are pitfalls, disappointments, betrayal, frustrations. It is part of being human. Certainly, becoming part of a "we" often requires redefining "I." If there is too much merging into a we, there can be a psychological "cracking" upon the event of a partner leaving or dying. When we lose our partners, it is as though a part of ourselves dies as well. Our sense of belonging bounces on the high seas, and we feel lost and bereft.

THE SUN

by David Whyte

*This morning on the desk,
facing up,
a poem of Kavanagh's
celebrating a lost love.*

*"She was the sun," he said,
and now she still
lives in the fibre
of his arms,
her warmth
through all the years
folding the old man's hand
in hers
of a Sunday
Dublin morning.*

*Sometimes reading
Kavanagh I look out
at everything
growing so wild*

*and faithfully beneath
the sky
and wonder
why we are the one
terrible part of creation
privileged
to refuse our flowering.*

*I know
in the text of the heart
the flower is our death
and the first opening
of the new life
we have yet to imagine,*

*but Kavanagh's line
reminds me
how I want to know
that sun,
and how I want to flower
and how I want to claim
my happiness
and how I want to walk
through life
amazed and inarticulate
with thanks.*

*And how I want to
know that warmth
through
love itself,
and
through the sun itself.*

*I want to know
that sun
of happiness when I wake
and see through my window
the morning colour
on the far mountain.*

*I want to know
when I lean down to the lilies
by the water
and feel their small and
perfect reflection
on my face.*

*I want to know
that gift
when I walk
innocent through the trees
burning with life
and the green
passion*

of the pasture's first growth,

*and I want to know
as lazily
as the cows
that tear at the grass
with their soft mouths.*

*I want to know
what I am
and what I am
involved with my loving
this world
as I do.*

And I want time to think of all the unlived lives:

*those that fail to notice
until it is too late,*

*those with eyes staring
with bitterness,*

*and those
met on the deathbed
whose mouths are wide
with
unspoken love.*

*Every year
they keep me faithful
and help me
realize there is more
to lose
than I thought
and more at stake
than I could dream.*

*They remind me
why
I want to be found by love,
why I want to come alive
in the holiness
of that belonging,
and like Kavanagh*

*I want to be courageous
in my terrors.*

*I want to know
in life or death
all the ways
the warmth of that
great rose fire
sun*

*in its heaven
has made me.*

*And everything
that made me
has been
a sun to my growing,
that is the article
of my faith,
even the darkness
of that soil that went
before the time of light
was another
kind of sun.*

*What I am
is what I have
been grown by,
the sun,
that great love,
all the many small loves
and that one love too
who waited so long
to find me and
who has always
walked by my side
folding my
remembering
hand in hers.*

David Whyte, House of Belonging

April 7, 2002

Chris and I traverse between a couple of different churches and one of them is a Unitarian church in Vancouver. One of the times we went there was an interim minister and his talk was on "the soul of one." As someone who has been in a relationship for close to thirty years, he spoke about life partners and how we create a soul of one with our beloved. He asked us to be aware of what we bring to the dance with our loved one. What gift do we hold out to them? He talked of problems as tilling the soil so that our relationship is always fertile. He made beautiful, poetic sense. Life with a beloved is sacred and we can keep it sacred with our actions and thoughts. Our relationship can be our deepest arena for growth. Our belonging to another – a magnificent, wondrous gift.

May 17, 2002

My partner is a blessing to me. She is creative, intelligent, kind, gentle, spiritual, loving, and

my list could go on and on. One of her many talents is her music. She plays several instruments, composes songs and sings.

We are at a music and creativity camp for women. Chris writes a beautiful love song for me, performing it at the evening show. I am spellbound. The audience is riveted.

Chris sings her song, and then there is a break in the show. A woman comes up to me and says how moved she was by the song. "That is the most beautiful lesbian love song I have ever heard." *My feelings exactly.*

It took me a long time and many, many times of listening to this song before I could get through hearing it without crying.

Tomorrow in Your Eyes

*Chorus: Riding on the wings of a mighty wind storm
I found a love which took me by surprise
You are everything my heart was searching for
I can see all our tomorrows in your eyes*

*I am with you when my breath is warm upon your cheek
I am with you even when we are apart
I am with you from the dawn till night spins round the moon again
Cause the highway to my home leads to your heart*

Chorus

*I have memorized the language of your skin and bone
I have formed the words around each curve & bend
I reach through the tide pools to the syntax of your shore
In a sacrament of loving without end*

Chorus

*There are walks in the forest holding hands with God
There's a twilight sky and a dragonfly kiss
There's a flame rising higher as the two become one
While our sister moon caresses the mist*

Chorus

*I'm an amaryllis river, and you're an orchid sea
And a million rose petals land on our ravine
I will fashion you a dress from the wind and the breeze
We'll go dancing on the moonbeams in the trees*

Chorus

Deep and tender.... this love....

I surrender... to love

*a song written for Gailene
through the moons of January and February*

Voice-over

What if one day the feeling of having a dirty secret overwhelms me - what if I crack under the strain of never being out enough (how can I be out to the woman I'm standing next to at the bus stop, the child who smiles at me in the store, the man who asks me to spare a quarter?) What if I black out and I wake up alone midday in a house and I've been napping and find I'm married to a man-an honest man, who is devoted to me and I'm late to pick up the kids. What if all I do is sigh because it's not as late as I thought and I race off to pick up the kids with two umbrellas because it's raining but it wasn't this morning and I don't want them to catch a cold this early in the season.

I imagine the joy of kissing my husband in the supermarket and the wistful smile of the old woman who sighs quietly "young love." Mother insists that we come to her house for Thanksgiving because "it feels so good to have a man around the house again at holidays." I can sink into the comfort of being mother, wife, sister-in-law, grandmother - not always off to the side, uncoupled in a family portrait - not strapped with the awkward title of aunt.

I could live a life of gender-specific pronouns and answer truthfully about boyfriends and men only "good friend" when I say it, and leave off that desperate qualifier, "really good friend."

Sex would be a friendly ritual, always finite, never frightening, I could focus on respect while he fucked me-how I know he respects me and how it really feels kind of good if you eradicate the underlying image of the empty hole longing to be filled and try not to dwell on the satisfaction he thinks he's getting from filling it.

Double income; I could keep my own name, maybe hyphenate for a liberated feel - we could have anniversary dinners in lovely spots and he'd dash off to the waiter while I'm in the ladies' room so they can bring out an anniversary treat before the bill and the waitstaff will feel a warm glow.

What if I find myself with a more weathered face in a park, laughing saying "I was so young," holding hands with a parka and old spice who squeezes my hand and says, "I feel better, honey, knowing you've tried everything and still choose me."

It doesn't seem so far-fetched - like being caught in crossfire and dying or slipping on oil that someone else unwittingly spilled. I could chase a rabbit through the woods for sport and find myself falling down a long dark hole which ends in a life from which I can't escape.

It's the word "phase." It's finally coming out but still being called "gay." It's being fucked and sucked by a woman until you feel you could cry, all the while feeling in the back of your mind that no one knows what you really do. We're not waiting for a man. I'm not waiting for a man. I just hate this eerie feeling that a man is waiting for me.

On the last words of the voice-over, several women are lined up, staring into the camera for a moment and then walking off. They stare defiantly. The last woman in line has a more tentative look, and she is wearing the wedding dress.

guinever turner and rose troche, Go fish: the full original screenplay



Heron
2000
18" x 18"
oil on board
Gailene Powell

A SHAGGY WING

A heron stands on the edge of the lake, solitary and serene. The wind shinnies up her back, raising a few feathers, but her focus remains steady. This is a bird who knows how to protect herself. She has weathered the changes well. Throughout high water and now to its retreat, the true blue heron has stayed home. Perhaps this is a generational stance, the legacy of her lineage.

I would like to believe that she is reclusive at heart, in spite of the communal nesting of her species. I would like to wade along the edges with her, this great blue heron. She belongs to the mediation of water...Refuge is not a place outside myself. Like the lone heron who walks the shores of Great Salt Lake, I am adapting as the world is adapting. (Williams, T. p. 266)

Laura, Chris
December 28, 2001

It is one day in the early part of my relationship with my partner. We are walking around Stanley Park, with my partner's daughter Laura, then 11 years old. I am a newcomer to this family, and Laura and I are gingerly getting to know each other. It is a typical Vancouver winter day, overcast, with a little wind coming across the water. As we are walking, Laura reaches over and grabs my hand.

The first and primary group is the family, and early adolescents need and want love, understanding, guidance, warmth, and a sense of belonging in their primary group. (Newman & Newman, p. 532)

What a significant event for us. Such a tangible gesture of welcome from Laura to me. For a prepubescent girl to want me to hold her hand and want me to be included in her life was really wonderful. She wanted to belong to me as much as I wanted to belong to her. In an article about adolescent belonging in *Newsweek* (Begley, et al, 2000), the authors quote Patricia Hersch, author of "A Tribe Apart," who says that young people are not a tribe apart because they have pushed everyone away, as is often assumed.

"We left them. This generation of kids has spent more time on their own than any other in recent history." (p.53)

We continued our walk, all of us holding hands. We soon came across a magnificent great blue heron, sitting on a rock by the ocean, the wind ruffling her shaggy feathers. My partner took a photo of the heron, and later I painted her, just as we'd seen her during those moments of connecting as a newly constructed family.

No Locks

*in my mother's house
doors had no locks*

*or we forgot to use them
preferred, Can I come in?*

*the walls were thin like ice
on autumn morning puddles*

*no insulated world
the house never silent*

*the telephone rang
records tapes blared*

*a little house
no space to hide in*

*no attic no garage
no storage shed*

*no hallway no porch
no upstairs downstairs*

*always somebody
dropping in*

*framed in the doorway
with jackets and boots on*

*No, b'y, I can't stay, just
wanted to see how you were doin'*

*oil furnace cutting in and out
steady hum in the long winter*

*the wringer washer twisted
a boiler of oil for chips gurgled*

*the refrigerator murmured
the fluorescent lights whined*

*clocks clicked
plumbing sluiced*

*always somebody going
and coming like a train station*

*like Tip the dog and his lover Ringo
who thought she lived with us*

*Skipper said, What are we doing
heating up all Lynch's Lane?*

*everybody talked, all the time
at the same time*

*whether heard or not
performed soliloquies*

*a dramatic troupe
with kindled hearts*

*Skipper sang country and western
my brother impersonated TV stars*

*my sister was a feminist comedian
Nan improvised like Marlon Brando*

*I wanted to be Frank Capra
Carrie was the live audience*

*cars spun up Lynch's Lane fast
in order to keep traction*

*stones spinning
the mill stream whistle moaned*

*winter played the house
like a percussionist*

*the house always sweltering
summer night respite in the backyard*

*spring rain whistled
autumn wind teased*

*rhythms no poet could name
the house alive, breathed*

*people always calling to one another
always a sense of being watched*

*so close, smiling simultaneously
counterfeit and whole-souled*

*Carrie said, People lived close together
then, we'll never have that again*

*like she meant it,
like she missed something*

Carl Leggo

Sometimes I feel like I am a repository for story – students' stories, some overheard, some told directly. Every student, every one is/has a story. I need to remember that students have all sorts of experiences that colour their behaviours in my classroom. Some have watched their sisters been beaten by a boyfriend, others spent the night on the streets. Some were kicked out by a parent. Sometimes they walk in to class feeling suicidal. Some students catch your attention because they are wired from too much sugar at lunch, or they are excited about an upcoming party. Students. Kids. They all have stories.

Liz

Her name was Liz. She was slight of build, wrapped in layers of sweatshirt and jean. Sometimes she was too loud, often insecure and shy. She really wanted to connect.

Liz is in foster care. Has been in many, many homes. Once she got to the school, she begged her counselor not to read her file as she said it was just too horrible. I thought about that a lot after her counselor told me, passing on, adding onto my story, her story. A story so horrible, a story where family and home breaks down, breaks down trust, hope.

Liz didn't make it in the regular school system. She says "hello" to me in the hallways at the end of her classroom day in alternate school. When I respond and use her name, a smile of surprise and something I imagine as gladness comes to her face.

Partly as a consequence of the expanded mobility of populations, and partly as a consequence of shifting boundaries, the ideas and practices associated with belonging are under constant challenge. The home - with its attendant connotations of stability, constancy, and identity tied to the image of a locus of origination and habituated social ties - has become a contested and for some, a mobile terrain. (Ilcan, p.1)

Sandra

I first taught Sandra in Grade 9 and had the pleasure of her company in my class for the next three years. She was thin, with longish hair, occasional glasses. Oftentimes she looked forlorn and depressed. Sandra was not unusual. A child shunted between homes. Couldn't get along with Mom. Couldn't get along with Dad. Dad expected too much of her. Too much cleaning, too much cooking. Mom lived in White Rock which meant Sandra had to get up at six to get to school. She was always tired. Sandra tried living with Dad again, but he lost his job and....One day I remember Sandra sitting with her best girl friend and her friend was teasing her in front of me.

Obviously they wanted me to engage. "So why *are* you so smiley, Sandra?" To which her friend laughed and Sandra replied with a shy smile that she had just gotten her first kiss.

Sandra used to give me Valentine's cards. Sandra bought me a Christmas gift. Sandra called me her favorite teacher. I lent Sandra money to get home one day. In her Grade 12 year Sandra didn't show up in my classroom. Sandra had moved to Calgary to be with her mom. I hope Sandra is OK. I miss Sandra.

Home. I was never sure that I wanted to go home. I liked the streets of the city. I liked other people's houses, other people's lives. I would look into a yard and imagine there a life unlike mine. I did not imagine this because mine was unhappy; I only imagined it because it was possible to imagine. Home suggests order and routine, tradition, family. Someone else's order struck me as fascinating -- truthfully, suffocating. I would pass by those same houses at night and feel a sense of suffocation, enclosure, cloister. Houses with a single light, perhaps a bit of the radio playing, a child's voice; these houses, so secure, seemed stifling. It was as if they said that there was no more about the world to happen, no more to know.

Dionne Brand, A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging

The heron was an easy painting to paint. It came easily. This is unusual. Usually, there is a certain amount of struggle, scraping, smudging, dripping, twirling of brush, an occasional curse. The background was painted in first, and then I painted the heron on top of it. I don't usually paint this way, but that is what happened. It was as if I could feel the bird on the end of my brush.

I always think of birds as markers in my life, and this was a significant milestone. For me, this painting represents the wondrous parts about belonging to a family, my nonconventional family.

Seamon (1979, 1982, 1987) described similar dimensions of the person-place

relationships when analyzing day-to-day experiences of places, spaces, and environment. He outlines that an insideness-outsideness dichotomy marks the essential core of place experience. In this analysis the concept of 'at-homeness' captures the sense of possession and control, the renewal of self, the at-easiness and the freedom to be, and the atmosphere of friendliness and warmth generated by a successful home. Similarly, Norberg-Schultz (1979) captures the concept of dwelling in terms of a sense of belonging and feelings of orientation and identification. He suggests the essence of a place is its 'atmosphere' and describes the structure of place in terms of landscape, settlement, space and character. By

anchoring dimensions of the person-place relationships in concepts of meaning and structure Norberg-Schultz (1979) then outlines formal properties of a system of relationships which underlie the 'genius loci' or spirit of a place. (Fishwick & Vining, p.58)

While this painting is about belonging to a newly constructed family, it reminds me about the many different blended families that exist within our school communities. Families and the unique ways they take shape and change have a huge impact on everyone involved, especially the children, and their sense of belonging or isolation depending on their circumstances.

Being at home is metaphor for comfort, for security, for belonging, for meaning. Home is the geographical and ontological centre of the world; as the folk saying has it, home is where the heart is. "... In an ideal sense home lies at the center of one's life." Home is both house or dwelling place or region. It extends from a room to a house to a village or city, to a country, to a continent, ultimately to a planet and a universe. But it is also family, friends, social and intellectual milieu, profession, language, religion. "Home is the foundation of our identity as individuals and as members of a community, the dwelling-place of being... and irreplaceable centre of significance." (Erickson, p.237)

October 2, 2002

Families like ours are purposeful families. They don't happen by accident. There are difficulties around lesbian families. Sometimes children from gay families hide the fact that they have two moms or two dads. Laura sometimes calls me her "parent," a word she chose. I have also been her godmother, a friend of the family and an occasional slip in the gender pronoun has occurred as well. I know it has been hard for Laura. I know it has been hard for both of us. Only three people that I work with know about my relationship with Chris and Laura. Everyone else assumes I have no parenting responsibilities. No Laura. Heartbreaking.

The Truelove

*There is a faith in loving fiercely
the one who is rightfully yours,
especially if you have
waited years and especially
if part of you never believed
you could deserve this
loved and beckoning hand
held out to you this way.*

I am thinking of faith now

*and the testaments of loneliness
and what we feel we are worthy of in this world.*

*Years ago in the Hebrides
I remember an old man
who walked every morning
on the grey stones
to the shore of baying seals,*

*who would press his hat
to his chest in the blustering
salt wind and say his prayer
to the turbulent Jesus
hidden in the water,*

*and I think of the story
of the storm and everyone
waking and seeing
the distant
yet familiar figure
far across the water
calling to them,*

*and how we are all
preparing for that
abrupt waking,
and that calling,
and that moment
we have to say yes,
except it will
not come so grandly,
so Biblically,
but more subtly
and intimately in the face
of the one you know
you have to love,*

*so that when
we finally step out of the boat
toward them, we find
everything holds
us, and everything confirms
our courage, and if you wanted
to drown you could
but you don't*

*because finally
after all this struggle
and all these years,
you don't want to any more,
you've simply had enough
of drowning,
and you want to live and you
want to love and you
will walk across any territory*

*and any darkness,
however fluid and however
dangerous, to take the
one hand you know
belong in yours.*

David Whyte, House of Belonging

Bird Watcher at Dorchester Cape

*But occasionally, when he least expects it,
in the glass of a wave a painted fish
like a work of art across his sight
reminds him of something he doesn't know - Poor Bird/P.K. Page*

How could she miss them, pale tan on the mud flats
A myriad of peeps here somewhere, come from away to feed
she stands at the edge of a gravel road straining to see
The tide nibbling in and the bright bluebells
twitching with Queen Anne's lace in the wind, at first
fill up her eyes Then the land begins to lift
Again and again, all those birds, blurred air, composed profusion
the perfect music of a fugue, this synchronicity
in a winged field Something inside her shifts
But occasionally, when she least expects it

a lone sandpiper stays behind, too intrigued
with its small patch of tidal land to fly
off in the hope of finding what it already has
Dashing this way and that, it drills in familiar ground
each spot offering something
undiscovered, something the whole flock missed
The solitaire scatters prints along the shore
until suddenly, in the wash of the oncoming tide
it halts Stares at the water as if
in the glass of a wave a painted fish

appears, brilliant fins stiff in its liquid home
An exotic body rising from the depth of somewhere else
and with each breath of the bay, drifting closer
to the sandpiper's feet, a colourful puzzle
She observes the stillness of the bird
imagines it will soon take flight
half hoping it will find
its designated place in the flock, returning now
a curvature of movement, brown and white
like a work of art across her sight

a restless sketch, sunlit into diamonds and topaz
the radiance luring her gaze away
from the odd sandpiper enchanted, she thinks, by the tide
She blinks in disbelief at jewelled air
the like of which she's never seen before
The glitter flutters briefly, then the show
dissolves to camouflage Her heart beats wild as wings
when the solitaire breaks its trance to race
straight into the multitude, whose safe shadow
reminds her of something she doesn't know

Sandy Shreve, Belonging



Sandpiper
2002
18" x 18"
oil on board
Gailene Powell

EXTENDED FAMILY: THE IN-LAWS

Teensy's Aunt Louise met us at the station. She was wearing a big fur coat with a matching hat and muff, and she had Teensy's cousin James Junior alongside of her. She greeted us all very politely, but right off the bat I could tell she was a snob. She is a nicer snob than her son, but still a snob. That James Junior is a snob without even the decency to try and hide it. He said something ugly about my luggage before we even got out of the station, and when he saw Ginger he acted like it was illegal that she was not wearing a maid's uniform. Teensy told him that not all maids wore uniforms in Thornton. And he looked at her, his very own cousin, like she had head lice.

Rebecca Wells, *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*

Single Life

Head lice. Nice image. Sometimes I feel like my extended family has head lice. And, being the lesbian, black sheep of the family, I know that's how they feel about me. What makes us think that belonging to an extended family is like the old TV show, *The Walton's*? Who made up the idea that siblings were supposed to get along? Where did that myth come from? Perhaps the myth exists because even a hundred years ago families were necessary for our survival. The larger and more cohesive your clan was, the better your chances of economic and physical survival were. That must be it, I muse. Besides, survival seems to be genetically encoded within our bodies. Now however, food is available at the corner grocer's instead of from the homestead and I have a good job.

My extended family live

in a galaxy

far, far away.

They do not have my phone number.

I am not listed.

Partnered Up

Family rituals in particular are said to "give all family members a shared and necessary sense of belonging." (Wolin & Bennett, 1984, in Oswald, 2002, p.428)

Scolopacidae Woodcocks, Snipe, Sandpipers

90 species: Worldwide. Thirty-five, mostly in migratory, in North America, some visiting seasonally from Asia. These wading birds vary widely in size and in the length of bill, neck, and legs. but their plumage generally matches their background, often changing with the season. All nest in a ground scope, many of them on the Arctic tundra. The 2-4 eggs are tended by one or both parents, according to the species. Most are gregarious, at least after the breeding season, and all feed on the animal life of marshes, shores, or other open areas.

Miklos D. F. Udvardy, Audubon Field Guide to North American Birds

*The Montreal Family Visits
February 12, 2002*

I notice a sand piper when I am with my partner's extended family who are visiting from Montreal. (I love my partner and she loves her family, all of them.) There are family members of every size and age, all on an outing to the Vancouver Aquarium together where we see a sand piper in the Amazon jungle area. We are surrounded by my partner Chris's sisters, brothers, nieces, nephews, parents, and lots of youthful energy, on a ritual outing.

Only recently has much attention been paid to the possibility that because rituals do construct boundaries, they may also partially or totally exclude family members whose position in the family is ambiguous and/or whose identity or beliefs do not fit within the meaning structure of a given ritual or community. (Oswald p.428)

I am not a 'family' kind of person, but here I am embroiled in the middle of my partner's extended family. I am amazed at what we do for love. I think about how important it is for Chris that her clan all come together. For her, family gatherings are significant and meaningful. She participates in family functions with enthusiasm and joy while I often feel like an outsider in family situations. To my amazement and chagrin, I realize that for the first time in my life, I am truly accepted by a partner's family and her extended family.

... gay and lesbian people's experiences provide a window through which one may see the conditionality of inclusion and belonging..... This literature suggests that gay and lesbian people will feel a high degree of belonging to their families of origin when those families are supportive of them (and their partners). (Oswald, p.428)

Chris's family members enjoy sharing meals and celebrations. This little sand piper is poking through the pond, picking up food, and chewing. As it put its beak into the water, ripples spread throughout the pond. With this dynamic family around me, I become part of a ripple spreading through water.

Family Group, Late 1930s

*My grandmother, the family elder, stood
Here that day, her husband, recently buried
In the grass outside, not twenty yards from her.*

*Strange emotions, I'd guess, it must have stirred
In them, the body and the baby so close,
But they crowded round this font, watching the show,*

*As Christopher Stephen Wiseman was named and blessed,
Validated, readied to go forth.
I'm sure she prayed for me, that vicar's widow.*

*I'm sure they all did in their different ways.
I'm sure they smiled as I screeched at the cold water,
Was hurriedly passed back to my mother's arms.*

*Today I'm alone. Same church. Same font. And I think
All that crowded family's dead. All gone
But two, my grandmother's children in their nineties,*

*And they will never come to this place again.
All gone, and my life well along, my children
Married, thinking of children of their own.*

C. Wiseman, Crossing the Salt Flats

The Heart Softens

Now I have a connection to layers and layers of generational connections, rituals, and shared experiences. These are the ripples of nourishment in my life. Sometimes I ask myself, "How did this happen? I have no control over this!" Without my connection to this extended family through my partner, I would never have found myself at the Aquarium amidst so many people, and I would not have noticed the little sand piper and thought about new ways of belonging within a larger family context.

The climate among parents and siblings is key to whether or not respondents and partners are invited. This pattern suggests that parents and siblings function as gatekeepers; inclusion occurs when they are supportive. (Oswald; p.429)

I wonder about belonging to an extended family. Is it a good thing? And if so, how? How does this belonging change me, and do I want to be changed in this way? I have watched as one part of my life changed, and then the ripples spread out all around me, affecting every part of my life. I am now part of the cycle of family celebrations, birthdays, rituals, and significant milestones and events. I am part of a family in every way possible. My time is not my own in the way it once was. My choices affect more than just me now. If my life is a pond and I drop something new in the water, everything changes.

We were not from the place where we lived and we could not remember where we were from or who we were. My grandfather could not summon up a vision of a landscape or a people which would add up to a name. And it was profoundly disturbing. Having no name to call on was having no past; having no past pointed to the fissure between the past and the present. That fissure is represented in the Door of No Return: that place where our ancestors departed one world for another; the Old World for the New. The place where all names were forgotten and all beginnings recast. (Brand, p. 5)

Tan is a Chinese word for “red” and *cho* is “peak,” hence “redpeak” or “red crown,” a more suitable name than “Japanese crane” for a bird that is also found in mainland Asia. Through the centuries, this most beloved of oriental birds has been embroidered on robes and wedding kimonos and variously etched, painted, and depicted on screens, scrolls, woodcut prints, doors and walls, household ware, and sundry decorative crafts in every land. The city of Maizuru, or “Dancing Crane,” was named for a feudal castle with gleaming white walls and upturned dark roofs like wings. Hokusai and Hiroshige were among the artists of renown who resorted to *tancho* over and over, and Sotatsu’s famed 1611 scroll, portraying a thousand cranes in its forty-nine-foot length, is still commemorated in beloved origami in which all these cranes are cut out and folded in single piece of paper. “Fold a thousand paper cranes and the gods will fulfill your heart’s desire.” After World War II, a young girl named Sadako Sasaki folded 645 (more than a thousand, some say) before she died of cancer caused by radiation from the first atom bomb: the statue depicting her with her crane origami stands in Hiroshima’s Peace Memorial Park.

The snow falls in the far field where travelers spend the night.

I ask you, Crane, to warm my child in your wings.

Japanese, anonymous

Peter Matthiessen, The Birds of Heaven



The Gift Bearer
2002
18" x 18"
oil on board
Gailene Powell

YOU ARE MY FAVOURITE TEACHER

Most of us have recollections of our high school days. Sometimes we cover them in the dust of nostalgia, glazing them over with sepia. Other times we remember the angst of growing up. Fights with girlfriends, fights with boyfriends, the paper we got an A on, the test we failed. Our best teacher. Our worst teacher. Most of us can recall the clothes we wore. What was in *style*. Sometimes high school is covered in small injustices, sometimes large injustices. High school wasn't always safe... especially if you didn't fit in. Somehow You just didn't quite belong.

I was drawn to an image of a child clutching tulips because of the innocence of the child and the impish smile that he wore. The child had just pulled an armful of tulips out of the ground as the bulbs were still attached to the flowers. My romantic, idealized self says, "Oh he must have picked it for his mother." However, he may be a she. I was a tomboy as a child and was often mistaken for being a boy. Or, perhaps he picked them because a photographer thought it might make a good picture. Our conjectures are all fiction. All we have are the surface details. I based this painting on a picture which shows much more of the scene. I only used a portion of the whole picture. I purposefully took out information that might have singled out gender and you can no longer see the child's big smile. I wanted the painting to be ambiguous.

Ambiguity is not something that is readily accepted in high school. As a group, teenagers don't often seem to appreciate ambiguity, or difference. They want things to be homogeneous. This is what girls do, this is what boys do. Recent overheard conversations come to mind. "He's such a girl." (with a derisive lilt to her voice) Peels of laughter... he went to that movie... that's a chick flick. Socially inscribed behaviour is strongly monitored by high school students. Strongly monitored.

If students are visually different, whether it is through the clothes they wear, their hair cut, the color of their skin, the presence of an accent or behavior that marks them as other, high school can be a difficult place to belong. This lack of belonging can have disastrous consequences. Self esteem can be shattered. Students may not graduate. Antisocial behavior may be elicited. Many, many consequences can arise if students do not find a way to belong.

This generation is strongly peer-driven. "This is much more a team-playing generation," says William Strauss, coauthor of the 1997 book "The Fourth

Turning.” “Boomers may be bowling alone, but Millennials are playing soccer in teams.” That makes belonging so crucial that it can be a matter of life and death. In Littleton, Colorado., a year ago, the two teenage shooters stood apart, alienated from the jock culture that infused Columbine High School. (Begley, et al, p.54)

April 20, 1999

Radio Report: Two gun-toting students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo. went on a rampage, killing 12 students and a teacher before turning the weapons on themselves.

Young people crave a sense of belonging. They need to feel that they need to fit in, but this feeling is often illusive at best and impossible to acquire at worst. Culture. Sexuality. Gender. Poverty. Race. Religion. Eccentricity. Difference.

Difference.

Fitting In

Immigration. Perhaps students have come from another country, another culture, and speak another language. For many, it takes years to feel a sense of belonging in a new country.

Youth spoke of the many ways that they are haunted by this sense of exclusion in their daily lives, of never belonging. These stories move around what is now a common argument in cultural studies: legal citizenship is not equivalent to cultural citizenship and racialised immigrants are perpetually produced as cultural outsiders. (Pratt, p.7)

Fitting In

Clothing. Perhaps students don't have the funds or parental permission for the clothes deemed the "right" things to wear. Fitting in can be hard without the right labels.

A fourteen-year-old girl from the former Yugoslavia talks of how she completely changed her clothes style so that she would fit in at school, noting the importance of clothing as markers of group identity. (Dyck & McLaren, p.7)

Fitting In

Culture. Perhaps students are from families whose cultural differences and expectations preclude significant connections with their peers.

In Canada, they negotiate a body and identity different from that of their home country. For Asian girls and those like Sohila, their bodies are re-inscribed as 'raced,' reaffirmed by racist remarks and behaviour. The meanings attached to their gendered body are contested as their femininity is (re)sexualized and marked as 'other.' (Dyck & McLaren, p .11)

So much of high school is about conformity, about survival, about group thinking and dynamics. It isn't a celebration of the individual. It's about a whole lot of adolescents trying their best to get through.

For some students, despite every attempt possible to fit in and to belong, they remain apart. Canadian students whose parents are from other countries carry with them a sense of difference their whole lives. It seems impossible to shake free from a history of change and exclusion.

Why does this place and moment of departure loom so large within the imaginations of these second generation Filipino-Canadian youths? Is it because those moments of departure and struggle still reverberate throughout their lives, and they continue to feel displaced, not quite at home, within their country of birth? (Pratt, p.3)

As human beings, we need to connect. Adolescence brings with it the most significant and poignant attempts to be in relationship with one another, to belong.

At puberty, a young person's capacity to think about groups and the relationships among groups coincides with a strong motivational press to experience a sense of belonging and connection.... The ability to achieve a sense of comfort and belonging during adolescence has implications for micro and macro group commitments in later life including one's comfort as a participant in groups, desire to join groups, ability to invest in a group's agenda, and capacity to nurture and support the participation of others. (Newman & Newman, p.520, 531)

Fitting In

Sexuality. Perhaps students are isolated by their sexuality. Adolescence is a time when sexuality is caught in the beam of a very strong spotlight. The culture of high schools mimics the culture of families and situations represented through the media and television sitcoms. An obsession with fashion magazines, teen magazines, pop stars, musicians, actors and sports heroes, all contribute to the context in which a teen's life is played out. Yet, most of the time media neglects to represent the lives of girl meets girl or boy meets boy. Heterosexuality is the default mode to which society believes everyone should aspire. Therefore it is easy to understand that gay and lesbian teens can be excluded and isolated in the typical high school environment. The newspapers and research studies report that many of them never last until graduation:

Research has consistently documented that gay and lesbian students are more likely than straight students to drop out of high school. (Lee, p.18)

Students who are gay or lesbian may or may not look overtly different from their typical

adolescent peers. But they know they are and they question whether or not they can belong. The dances, the graduation parties, the dating, the boy/girl connections that permeate high school culture excludes the participation of same sex couples. There continues to be huge taboos related to same sex relationships. Only the very brave gay soul ventures to be included in the tumultuous world of teen dating and parties, or perhaps by taking a same sex date to a prom.

Many gay youth struggle to form relationships with their families and their peers.... "the most common problem homosexual adolescents face as a rejected minority is isolation (social, emotional, and cognitive)." Due to the invisibility of their lives, gay youth often fail to develop close relationships. (Lee, p. 21)

Fitting In

What Schools Can Do. Perhaps there are things which schools can do to provide safe and welcoming places for all students to fit in. Where school staffs support extra curricular gay/straight alliance groups, a positive difference is created the lives of gay teens. When students feel that there is a safe place to go, a place to fit in, a place where they can be accepted, they can relax. They begin to form connections, make friends, and develop that elusive feeling of belonging at last.

Being a member of this group motivates me to come to school because I no longer feel out of place. I think being a member of any club gives a teen a sense of belonging. (Lee, p.23)

So, we return to the painting of the child with the tulips, the student who hungers to find his/her place. The gift of tulips, roots and all, represents that humble gesture that can be found within each of us. Please see me. Please accept me. Please welcome me. I offer myself to you.

And always, in the back of my mind, there was an emotional escape hatch:
I don't belong here, so it doesn't matter what I do or say. (Cummings, p.16)

* * * * *
* * * * *

Speaking of dreaming,
I think you should note
That the Bumble-Tub Club is now dreaming afloat.
Every night they go dreaming down Bumble-Tub Creek
Except for one night, every third or fourth week,
When they stop for repairs. 'Cause their bumble-tubs leak.
But tonight they're afloat, full of dreams, full of bliss,
And that's why I'm bothering telling you this.

Theodor Seuss, Dr. Seuss's Sleep Book



Blue jays
2002
18" x 18"
oil on board
Gailene Powell

TO JOIN OR NOT TO JOIN

The sense of one's humanness is experienced profoundly when one joins with others in a commitment to and celebration of one's group. From this joy in connection emerges the ability to cooperate toward a common goal, to give and receive love, to sacrifice for others, to parent and grandparent. (Newman & Newman, p.531)

When I was creating the painting of blue jays, I was thinking of the whole notion of belonging to a group. The birds are tucked together in their nest, and they made me think of so many aspects of belonging within the school system. I wanted to explore belonging as a teacher. There are both positive things and challenging things about belonging to any group. When you teach, you teach in a larger arena called a school, which is part of a district, and in turn part of a province, and part of a nation. You are part of a multi-layered teaching profession. There are many levels of belonging. You may not agree with the ideology of the school or district or one of the many layers within the educational system. A tension may present itself when joining a group. Joining the teaching profession may seem a wonderful way to become part of a group of educators, but not all teachers feel a robust sense of belonging with their peers.

Marcus Foster, a hero of mine and former Oakland school superintendent, often spoke about the three basic needs of all human beings: a positive self-image, a sense of personal potency and a sense of belonging. So, we join. But joining is only an invitation to the dance: it doesn't even get you in the door. Belonging is the dance. Belonging takes work and commitment. You must passionately believe in the group's values and feel the joy and satisfaction of actively participating and belonging. (Korfhage, p. 2)

In the school space itself some teachers spend more time together and have a better sense of belonging than those who keep to themselves. I think there are a lot of different reasons why that happens. I have watched teachers sharing common curricular interests. English teachers exchange favourite books and teaching strategies. The drama and music departments pull together when a school play or a musical is created, rehearsed and performed. I've seen teachers connecting in their different departments and forming bonds. Many teachers share outside interests, and develop friendships. Colleagues have taken cooking classes together, have gone hiking or fishing together. Some form book clubs. Teachers whose own children are the same age seem to connect around the activities of their children, through sports and other recreational activities. Some teachers truly enjoy the camaraderie of working alongside one another, in that crowded, bustling, ever-changing, ever-demanding environment we call "school". Others do not.

What Do You Make?

We were all sitting around the dinner table discussing life and the man across from me decided to show his brilliance. He says the problem with teachers is, "What's a kid going to learn from someone who decided his best option in life was to become a teacher?" He reminds the other dinner guests that it's true what they say about teachers: Those who can, do; those who can't, teach.

I decide to bite my tongue and resist the temptation to remind the dinner guests that it's also true what they say about lawyers. Because we're eating, after all, and this is polite company.

*"I mean, you're a teacher, Taylor," he says. "Be honest. What do you make?" And I wish he hadn't done that (asked me to be honest) because, you see, I have a policy about honesty and ***-kicking: if you ask for it, I have to let you have it.*

"You want to know what I make? I make kids work harder than they ever thought they could. I can make a C+ feel like a Congressional Medal of Honor, and an A- feel like a slap in the face. How dare you waste my time with anything less than your very best? I make parents tremble in fear when I call home: I hope I haven't called at a bad time, I just wanted to talk to you about something Billy said today. Billy said, 'Leave the kid alone. I still cry sometimes, don't you?' And it was the noblest act of courage I have ever seen. I make parents see their children for who they are and what they can be. You want to know what I make? I make kids wonder, I make them question. I make them criticize. I make them apologize and mean it. I make them write. I make them read, read, read. I make them spell 'definitely beautiful', 'definitely beautiful', 'definitely beautiful' over and over and over again until they will never misspell either one of those words again. I make them show all their work in math. And hide it on their final drafts in English. I make them understand that if you have brains then you follow your heart and if someone ever tries to judge you by what you make, you pay them no attention. Let me break it down for you, so you know what I say is true: I make a difference in the lives of hundreds of children. Now what about you? What do you make?"

Author Unknown, Email Story Circulating on the Internet

Within my experience, being a gay or lesbian teacher can preclude a deep sense of belonging within the school system. *So much of one's life is spent hiding.* There are not the same interactions with colleagues, especially on a larger staff, as there is always a hesitation, an anxiety around not being accepted. It requires true acceptance and an inclusionary sense of welcome from open minded colleagues for gay and lesbian teachers to feel a greater sense of belonging amongst their peers.

Passionate belonging is the spirit of the dance... It's important to identify with one's roots, but it's essential that we are altruistic, unselfish and proud to be a member of the group called humanity. As my father once said in a sermon, "It should not be 'live and let live,' but 'live and help live.'" We must learn to be active and passionate members of our world. (Korfhage, p.2)

When we look at birds and their chicks in the wild, we always seem filled with a sense of hopefulness. But when we look at this painting of blue jays all tucked into a nest together, there is an idea of sameness. Yet we are not all the same. This painting also represents the difficulties inherent in belonging to a group or a tight knit family. A cloying aspect comes into play. The nest can get to feeling altogether too crowded.

Eastern Bluebird

Found in small groups in open country, often perched on wires or fence posts, the Eastern Bluebird was once in decline due to competition with other birds for suitable nesting sites. Specially-designed nesting boxes have reversed this trend and it will use these, or a natural cavity or woodpecker hole, lining the bottom with a loose cup-shape made of grass and plant stems. It lays 2-7 pale blue-white eggs, which are incubated by the female for around 2 weeks; the young are independent about 3 weeks after hatching. (Michael Vanner, *The Encyclopedia of North American Birds*, p. 289)

Being gay or lesbian means being invisibly different. We may look like just one more blue jay in the nest, but we are different in significant but invisible ways. How can teachers work together to find ways to support each other, and build respect for each other's unique qualities?

To build a sense of belonging, we need to build a feeling of esprit de corp and respect for each others' strengths and talents. (Blaydes, p.3)

Gay and lesbian teachers often experience significant harassment if the students figure out the teachers' sexual orientation. The first year I was at my school, one of my male students called

me a dyke, and some of the students painted "lesbian" on my cupboards. I felt horrible. Exposed. Vulnerable. I also remember being in the staff room when a female math teacher came in. She looked at me and said, "You know, I just don't know if I have what it takes to be a teacher, I'm just not thick skinned enough. I can't take all of the abuse." A huge shift in the culture of a school is required to create a greater sense of belonging for everyone.

Obstacles are not reasons to stagnate, but opportunities to do something different.
(Blaydes, p.2)

Western Bluebird

Voice: Soft calls like *phew* and *chuck*: Song is a short, subdued *cheer, cheer-lee, chur*. Miklos D. F. Udvardy, *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds*. (p. 629)

Belonging in terms of collegiality is crucial for an individual's well-being, but hard to create. An effective administration team focuses on efforts made around team building, building on commonalities. There are probably more differences than commonalities on a staff of eighty or more. With purposeful vision, skillful leadership and careful management, being part of a group can potentially have more positive implications than negative ones. Most educators agree that working toward common goals together brings about a greater sense of collegiality and an increased sense of group purpose and harmony.

We must collaborate with all stockholders in our school community and build consensus around a vision, then set goals. When teachers set goals, there is a good feeling that comes when they are achieved. Principals can work with teachers to write personal and professional growth goals. In a principal/teacher planning conference in the fall, teachers can set classroom goals that support the school's priority curriculum areas. (Blaydes, p.2)

When I ponder the negative implications of group membership, Charles Manson comes to mind. He was a brilliant psychopath who received phenomenal loyalty from his followers. It was said at the time that the followers were just brainwashed. But I think there was more to it than that. Manson knew that if he gave people a sense that they belonged to him and to each other, that they were chosen and special, then he could demand a fanatical sense of loyalty. And they gave it to

him. He took people who never felt that they belonged anywhere, who had weak attachments and gave them something and someone to believe in and belong to. It is such a deep, intensive need, to belong. To belong.

Mountain Bluebird

Voice: A quiet warbling dawn song. Calls, which vary with the species, include a soft *phew*, *ior*, and *terr*. This bluebird's notes are somewhat harsher and more nasal than those of other species. Miklos D. F. Udvardy, *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds*, p.734

Changing schools, communities, programs, locations can shift one's sense of comfort and belonging. It can bring about positive changes or it can be the catalyst for trouble.

Movement constrains and enables the formation of relationships. It brings with it a sense of loss of both the expectations and the possibilities that come from belonging with people and to places while opening up new possibilities as well as shaping new vulnerabilities, since one may no longer know what to expect or what is expected. (Ilcan, p.36)

One of my colleagues working in an alternative system watched students being recruited by white supremacist skinheads. The program housed a number of disenfranchised boys who couldn't fit into the regular school system, and many were very, very angry. The program was a good place from which to recruit kids; channel their rage and give them something, someone to hate. These young men were seduced into believing that they were "better than everybody else" and deserved more because they were "white."

Negative aspects to belonging can take on monumentally destructive proportions. Think about Hitler's youth. They certainly all belonged and it was the in group to belong to. It was exciting and fun, they all got a shiny new uniform, they were all terribly special. Especially terrible. In Germany, assigning individuals to homogeneous groups became a science.

During the Nazi period, administrators and politicians not only used marital and blood categories to determine Germanness, but also later employed scientific research on blood types to distinguish those who belonged-*Menschen* (humans)-from those who did not-*Untermenschen* (subhumans). These categories served to justify Nazi policies of internal purification and external expansion. (Ilcan, p.4)

Belonging to a group can be a profoundly moving experience, when everyone works together, going in one direction. The idea of "we" is very powerful. It takes individuals outside of that place of feeling alone and lonely. The blue jays in the painting appear content. They have one another. They fit in. They are each uniquely different and separate, but in the nest they feel the warmth and feathered touches of like creatures, a sense of comfort.

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“I was raised under an African sky.... Darkness was never something that I was afraid of. The clarity, definition, and profusion of stars became maps as to how one navigates at night. I always knew where I was simply by looking up.... I am Kikuy. My people believe if you are close to the Earth, you are close to people. What an African woman nurtures in the soil will eventually feed her family. Likewise, what she nurtures in her relations will ultimately nurture her community. It is a matter of living the circle. Because we have forgotten our kinship with the land, our kinship with each other has become pale. We shy away from accountability and involvement. We choose to be occupied, which is quite different from being engaged. In America, time is money. In Kenya, time is a relationship. We look at investments differently.”

Wangari Waigwa-Stone

in Terry Tempest Williams, Refuge



Scarlet Ibis
2002
18" x 18"
oil on board
Gailene Powell

WHERE DO YOU COME FROM?

The Door of No Return is of course no place at all but a metaphor for place. Ironically, or perhaps suitably, it is no one place but a collection of places. Landfalls in Africa, where a castle was built, a house for slaves, une maison des esclaves. Rude enough to disappear or elaborate and vain enough to survive after centuries. A place where a certain set of transactions occurred, perhaps the most important of them being the transference of selves. The Door of No Return - real and metaphoric as some places are, mythic to those of us scattered in the Americas today. To have one's belonging lodged in a metaphor is voluptuous intrigue; to inhabit a trope; to be a kind of fiction. To live in the Black Diaspora is I think to live as a fiction - a creation of empires, and also self-creation. It is to be a being living inside and outside of herself. It is to apprehend the sign one makes yet to be unable to escape it except in radiant moments of ordinariness made like art. To be a fiction in search of its most resonant metaphor then is even more intriguing. So I am scouring maps of all kinds, the way that some fictions do, discursively, elliptically, trying to locate their own transferred selves.

So far I've collected these fragments, like Ludolf - disparate and sometimes only related by sound or intuition, vision or aesthetic. I have not visited the Door of No Return, but by relying on random shards of history and unwritten memoir of descendants of those who passed through it, including me, I am constructing a map of the region, paying attention to faces, to the unknowable, to unintended acts of returning, to impressions of doorways. Any act of recollection is important, even looks of dismay and discomfort. Any wisp of a dream is evidence. (p.18,19)

Dionne Brand, A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging.

It is fascinating to think of a door of no return. Coming out is also a door of no return. Who would ever choose such a path? Few would, I am sure. But many have been forced through such a door. The world is full of refugees. People fleeing persecution. The descendants of slaves.

One can only imagine life before the door. When a person, a family, has had to pass through such a door then there is a fracture in belonging. Much is stripped away. That is when the longing in belonging takes hold. Longing can be so strong that to be(long) is almost an impossibility. Then, there is only an attachment to the door. To questions, unanswerable. To a past unattainable.

I am drawn to the image of the scarlet ibis, the exotic colouring. Our birds in Canada are

generally colored with cool colours, not like the screaming pinks and corals of the ibis. The ibis brings to mind many uncomfortable issues. To begin, she is captive. Captive. She cannot fly freely. She cannot experience the wildness of her species. She is displaced. As a symbol for diaspora she is excellent. She brings to mind visual difference and how that can help create a sense of not belonging.

This painting represents portions of negative aspects of belonging. When a bird has clipped wings, it loses part of itself. The scarlet ibis painting represents the loss of belonging, of leaving one's roots and beginnings, and never feeling that sense of belonging again, perhaps for generations. Perhaps forever.

If it was their parents who were forced to migrate from the Philippines, these experiences nonetheless resonate within their children's lives. Hirsch coins the term 'post memory' to describe the force of parents' memories of trauma on their children's lives. Post memories are "experiences that they 'remember' only as the stories and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right" (1999, 8). "Post memory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (Hirsch 1997, 22). Sugg (2003) extends this argument to the children of exiles from Cuba, conceiving post memories of the wounds of exile as a "generational legacy" that cause children to identify intensely with both these wounds and Cuba as a homeland.

G. Pratt

And so the scars
of the parents
are visited
onto the children.
A wounding.
Fascinating.
Provocative.
So much Despair.

Mark

I have a student who is originally from the Philippines. I have met his mother at parent teacher interviews. She is a single mom trying to raise a son who is visibly different. English is not his mother tongue. He gets into fights. Breaks his hand. He skips school. He misses the Philippines. The one art project he started for me involved drawing a picture of the world with an arrow pointing towards the Philippines. The art project was about dreams. Where would you like to travel?

Now that Mark's cast is off and the pins are taken out, you can see a raised pink scar on his brown hand. It reminds me of a river as it would be drawn on a map. I wonder if there is such a river in the Philippines?

And yet, studies of second generation youths in the United States suggest a more complex process that shows both a strong resistance to assimilation and to the costs of their parents' migration; in particular, high levels of educational success are matched by a rejection of an American identity, relatively low ratings of self esteem, high rates of depression, and persistent thoughts of suicide, particularly among Filipina youth. It would seem that the costs of not belonging, a kind of homelessness, are high. (Pratt, p. 4)

Homelessness is a persistent feeling that happens to people who have been moved, who have been displaced from family, culture, and society. Brand (2001) talks about the consequence of slavery. About the forced movement of people. Forced movement into confinement and subjugation. A history of children born into slavery and taken away from parents. This is the history of African Americans of lost heritage and a longing in belonging that aches eternal.

Belonging. A friend of mine told this story. It was emancipation day 1998 in Kingston, Jamaica. The prime minister of Ghana was on a state visit. He was making a speech to a great gathering for these celebrations when a delegation of Rastafarians requesting to speak to him pressed toward the stage. He continued speaking about the wonderful developments in Jamaica, the long way they had come from slavery, etc. The Rastafarians continued their urgings to have a word with him. Security tried to keep them back, but they pressed on toward the stage. Finally the prime minister addressed them again, declaiming his admiration for the country. They, cutting him off, said to him in exasperation, "But we want to go home!" Home meaning Africa. (Brand, p.63)

Photographs

There is a photograph of my great, great grandfather in Russia. He looks like a stereotypical Russian military officer decked out in his uniform with large mustache and long black boots. I

have wondered about this picture. It was very important for my grandmother, who speaks Russian, to have this picture. She went to great lengths to track down any written or pictorial history of her family. I wonder about his story. I heard he escaped from Russia because he had been part of some Czar's officers who had concerns about the mistreatment of the Russian people. These concerns reached the wrong ears and he had to flee. I wonder how he felt about the frozen Saskatchewan landscape. I wonder if he and his wife ever felt like they belonged.

Hirsch (1997) argues that photographs are a particularly potent source of post memory because they are "perched on the edge between memory and post memory" (22), they both bring back the past and are visual evidence of the irretrievability of the past, they teeter poignantly between memory and forgetting. (Paley, p.6)

The past is a mysterious thing. It appears fluid. More transparent, less solid than I once imagined. A collective past then is even more shaky, more prone to embellishment. Fiction. It could be argued that the past does not exist except as a form of fiction.

"Borrowed history" my friend suggested, and I, to my surprise burst into tears. Borrowing history. It's what I've been doing since my parents immigrated to the United States.

S. Anderson, I'm Not Borrowing History Anymore.

The question that remains then is how do we move into a sense of belonging if our story is one of immigration, forced or not? How do we come to a place of ease with our place in the world?

I have always felt like a foreigner in a place I should have been able to call my own. My weary acceptance of this reality is strangely comforting because it reminds me that the most valuable lesson I have learned is that my sense of belonging comes from within. It is a source of strength that recalls my grandmother, and it is a part of who I am. (Oh, p.52)

Perhaps our only way of moving into belonging after a rupture in our history is to rewrite history. To rewrite an internal history that makes peace with transience. Perhaps we need to rewrite boundaries. Perhaps we need to have a fascination with maps, as Brand does, so that we will know how to map an internal landscape that belongs to us.

To travel implies movement between fixed positions, a site of departure, a point of arrival, the knowledge of an itinerary. It also intimates an eventual return, a potential homecoming. Migrancy, on the contrary, involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation. Always in transit, the promise of a homecoming - completing the story, domesticating the detour - becomes an impossibility. (Chambers, p.6)

* * * * *

The Day I Stopped Taking My Heart For Granted

When I was a little girl, my grandmother taught me that the human heart was a clockworks for angels. She said a person is only given a certain number of heartbeats. The angels keep track and when your heartbeats are all gone, they will come for you. Like all my grandmother's stories, I knew this was true. The proof was everywhere, in the cemetery I passed when I walked to her house, in my grandfather's death, and finally in her own. For a long while I stopped believing in angels, but I never stopped believing that every life is finite, every heart a stopwatch.

Once, I worked out the math: 70 beats a minute - 4200 beats an hour - 100,800 beats a day = 36,792,000 beats a year. 36,792,000 beats a year is an incredible number. It is easy to see how you could take a heart for granted. But despite the equations, the peculiar fact remains that there was a moment when this life ignited like a sun and the heart began beating with the number one, and there will be a moment when the last beat will be counted. The heart will stop, tearing this whole world down with it. I cannot predict that final number, or that final moment, but my heart *will* stop. Forget angels or biology. How can you explain the power and fallibility of the human heart?

One day, when I believed my heart was broken, I decided to take this matter into my own hands. I had a stainless steel .357 magnum revolver called a speed six. I had bought it as a bear gun years before when I lived in Alaska. It has a hatch mark pattern carved into the grip and across the top of the hammer that made it rough to the touch. The gun was heavy and cold. It glowed with a dull silver sheen. Pulling the trigger with a .357 shell in the chamber created an electric explosion. The force would rock through the body and then a wisp of blue smoke would pour from the barrel. I've heard it said that smoke carries human prayers and thoughts straight to God, so I suppose that revolver was a prayer wheel of sorts.

On that particular day I pulled the gun from its hiding place in my closet and loaded it carefully, slowly. I rolled the bullets between my fingers before I slid them into place. I loaded all six chambers so I could feel the full weight of the thing. My hand felt hollow and empty by comparison.

I brought the barrel up and pressed my temple into the cool steel. My right thumb pulled the hammer back until I hear it cluck into place. As I ran my finger along the trigger, time began to slow. Traffic and sound on the street below began to freeze. The whole world wound down like movie screen images when a projector slowly stops turning and leaves a single frame suspended, burning away into the glare of a white void.

I turned my head across my shoulder, dragging the gun along my skull. I drew the barrel to a few inches in front of my right eye and stared hard down that black hole. It was the edge of a dark and windy cliff, the whole of eternity packed tight into that four inch by half inch chasm.

In the crushing emptiness of that moment there was nothing but one small sound. A faint but undeniable rhythm, a small pounding, barely heard across a vast distance. It was my heart, and if I was to go any further it would have to be silenced.

I took the gun from my eye and dragged it down across my throat. The hammer was still cocked, my finger still curled around the trigger. I pressed into the barrel just above the center of my left breast but the insistent pounding continued. It was like someone or something knocking hard at a locked door. The knocking grew louder, then something extraordinary happened. My heart, with a bullet packed and ready to explode it apart, gave itself to a perfect, solitary act of bravery - and opened.

The fever broke like shattering glass, an alarm bell roaring. I slowly clicked the hammer back down as time began to move again. The sounds of traffic and human voices poured back into the room. My lungs pulled at the sharp, sweet air as if bursting out from too long under water.

I opened the chamber and let bullets drop onto the wooden floor. They rolled and skittered like scorpions into the darkness behind the radiator and under the bed. (I never did find them all.) I lifted the empty gun up and let sunlight pour through the barrel. Then I put it down and stepped outside into a radiant, magnificent afternoon.

Claudia Mauro, Stealing Fire



Lily
2002
18" x 18"
oil on board
Gailene Powell

BELONGING / NOT BELONGING

For me, there is no feeling so persistently disabling as that of not belonging. I don't mean in relation to clubs or organizations, but to the *human community* - however we define it. Whether community is in the context, of home and family, neighborhood, school or country, it is nearly impossible to feel a sense of purpose or direction when we are without a sense of belonging. We drift along, like flotsam in a great tidal stream, unable to maneuver ourselves to a place in the current where we can influence the path of our progress. (Wilson, p.1)

At any particular time, I usually have between one hundred and ninety to two hundred and ten students. I see each one three times a week for a little over an hour each time. At three hours a week over ten months I can sometimes get a sense of what a student is like... other times I don't. They all have stories whether or not I get to hear them. Some of them are desperate for us to listen. Many have lost connections to their parents, and yet still need mothering. Most students at times experience the typical angst of being a teenager as they try to figure it all out - you know, this growing up part. Yet, every year I have a number of students who have serious mental health issues. Some suffer from depression, others experience post traumatic stress disorder, some are diagnosed as bipolar and always, some are suicidal.

"Researchers tend to focus much of their attention on social support, but we found that a low sense of belonging was a much stronger predictor of depression than social support," said Reg A. Williams, associate professor of nursing. (Reyes, p. 1)

Belonging. Again, and again belonging appears to be crucial to a person's well being. This year I know of at least four students, all young girls, who are highly depressed; three out of the four have stopped attending class and one attends only sporadically. I know that at least three of them have had suicidal tendencies. What caused their pain? How did they lose their anchors in life? Was there no one with whom they could bond? Sadly, I suspect that there are many more than just the handful of students in my classes that feel a sense of despair and isolation. Lack of belonging is often a significant contributing factor to those who choose to end their lives. Based on the reports by Singh, et al, adolescents in developed countries appear to have a higher rate of suicide compared to those young people in communities where there is a greater sense of connectedness between families, people, communities:

... recent reports indicate that suicide is the third ranking cause of death for young Americans from 15 to 24 years old (Singh et al., 1996 in Eshun, p .230)

The suicide rates in Guyana are far lower than elsewhere in the world, for instance, even though there is less material wealth. There is a bigger sense of belonging. Individuals belong to a tribe, a community, a huge extended family. They don't have a notion of suicide anywhere close to what we experience in the developed world.

.... levels of suicide tend to be low in cultures where there is a strong sense of belonging, group identity, and community support. (Eckersly, 1993 in Eshun, p. 231)

Social support is of tremendous importance in the prevention of suicide. In tribal communities, the sense of support from the immediate family and network of connections within the village contributes to a youngster's feeling of belonging. There is a kinship system. In Western cultures, feelings of hopelessness are pervasive among adolescent communities, which are often communities unto themselves, without significant ties to other members of the wider social structure. This lack of social support and absence of a true sense of safety, security and belonging contribute to the high suicide rates in developed nations. (Eshun, p. 232)

Liz

Other students struggle with circumstances beyond their control. I taught a high school kid named Liz who was in foster care. Her counsellor told me that she still played with Lego and dolls. She has an arrested development. Liz didn't want the counselor to read her file, claiming the file was so horrible. She continually felt isolated, different, troubled. For Liz to develop a sense of belonging, her whole life would have to be re-mapped and re-lived. Not only did she not have a sense of belonging at school, she had no sense of belonging to a home or a family.

This nicely states Grossberg's claim that, "belonging is a matter less of identity than of identification, of involvement and investment, of the line of connecting and binding different events together." (Pratt, p.11)

Liz is no different from many young people in our schools today, struggling on their own for the most part, to find their way in this world, to find a way to belong.

Alienation associated with issues of common bond occur when adolescents are unable to form interpersonal ties that provide feelings of acceptance and emotional support. This type of alienation may arise from several different sources. Under conditions of parental coldness, distancing, neglect, or rejection, children find that they cannot count on the family to serve as a source of emotional or instrumental support (Sishion *et al.*, 2000). They lack a template for experiencing the

foundational benefits of belonging that are associated with groups identity.
(Newman & Newman, p.526)

Not everyone grows up within families that love them. Not everyone grows up in families that don't love them. Yet, regardless of one's situation we must still learn to love the land called our body. We belong to a vehicle of flesh, and bone and blood. Of muscle and tendon and tissue. Living in a body is not always fun. It is through our bodies that we experience pain. But, it is also through our bodies that we experience love and joy and freedom. And hope.

The mortal body is a tree; it is holy in whatever condition; it is truth and myth because it has so many potential conditions; because of its possibilities, it is sacred and profane; most of all, it is your most precious talisman, your own connection to her. Healing the self means honoring and recognizing the body, accepting rather than denying all the turmoil its existence brings, welcoming the woes and anguish flesh is subject to, cherishing its multitudinous forms and seasons, its unfailing ability to know and be, to grow and wither, to live and die, to mutate, to change.

P. Gunn Allen, The Woman I Love is a Planet, The Planet I Love is a Tree

*If I am to survive,
I must let my secrets out like white doves
held captive too long.
I am a woman with wings.*

Terry Tempest Williams, Refuge

Savouring the Sensory World

Once there was a woman who was without sight or sound. In spite of this, she became a sensory genius. She explained pink as being "like a baby's cheek or a soft southern breeze." Gray was to her "like a soft shawl around the shoulder." Yellow was "like the sun: It means life and is rich with promise." She knew two kinds of brown. One was "warm and friendly like leaf mold." The other was "like the trunks of aged trees with wormholes, or like withered hands."

Houses were layers of life aromatic with their histories. She recognized an old-fashioned country house because "it has several layers of odors left by a succession of families, of plants, of perfumes, and draperies." Smell also told her about people she met. "In the odor of young men," she said, "there is something elemental, as of fire, storm, and salt sea. It pulsates with buoyancy and desire."

Asked what she knew about cities, she painted a vivid sensory portrait. "Long streets. Tramping feet, smells from windows, tobacco, pipes, gas, fruits, aromas, tiers upon tiers of odor. Automobiles. A whirl that makes me shiver, a rumble."

Who was this woman of multiple senses? Her name was Helen Keller, and when I was eight I had the rare privilege of talking to her while she read my lips with her hand. "Why are you so happy?" I blurted with a child's brutal honesty. My question amused her, and she replied in her odd and mysterious voice, "It is because I live each day as if it were my last. And life, in all its moments, is so filled with glory."

Jean Houston,, A Passion for the Possible



Houses on the Hill
2002, 18" x 18"
oil on board
Gailene Powell

A PLACE TO HANG YOUR HAT

Physical space becomes a place when we attach meaning to a particular geographic locale, be it a chair in the living room; one's home, neighbourhood, city, or nation; or a variety of spaces in between. Thus, "what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value."
(Williams et al, p. 31)

This painting of houses on the hill represents belonging to a particular place. How is it that we become attached to certain places? What are the underlying emotions or connections which help to form these attachments?

When I sit down and reminisce about my childhood, there are two places that consistently come to mind. These sites are imbued with smells and light and sound and emotion. I remember growing up in Edmonton and living in a large brick house that faced the Provincial museum. I remember the dash across the busy street, the dash down steep, steep government hill (back then I used to be part mountain goat, part dare devil) and the entry into the hallowed doors of the museum. I loved the museum. *I loved my museum.* No other kid knew it like I did.

Two primary conceptualizations have come to dominate literature in environmental psychology: place-dependence and place-identity. (Williams, et al, p.31)

Nowadays museums cost money for admission. Back then they were free. I used to roam the sites, peruse the well travelled spots and find my way into far away little known rooms. There were dimly lit row upon row of taxidermied animals displayed as if they were in their natural habitat. The furry bobcat comes to mind with his long whiskers. Or was my favorite the mountain lion perched above the mountain goat ready to pounce onto her unsuspecting prey below?

Williams (1995) noted how the term *place* has at least three common meanings in social science: (a) location: the spatial distribution of social and economic activities; (b) locale: the settling for everyday routine social interaction provided in a place; and (c) sense of place: the identification with a place emotionally or symbolically.
(Kaltenhorn, p.176)

I remember the dinosaurs, the old car exhibits. And, I deeply remember with some horror and some curiosity the photograph of a First Nations man performing the sun ritual. He had cord attached to a stick which was fastened underneath and through slits that had been made in his chest. I believe the sign said something like a young man would pull on the rope until he pulled himself

free. Horrible thought for a 12 year old. Fascinating, but horrible. I remember taking my allowance and spending it on rocks at the gift shop. They had fine rocks there, even asbestos. I remember owning one of those infamous rocks with its cloth-like layer of white strands embedded between average dark gray looking stone.

I spent a lot of time at the museum by myself and it was important to me. I loved going there. I belonged there. This place called the museum became important to me.

Place attachment is not attachment solely to landscape or to social conditions or past experiences. The sense of place or sets of meaning associated with ... homes and surrounding settings are intertwined with natural, social, historical, and cultural processes. Although there are some differences in the importance of these attributes, the central message is that they are all quite important and part of a complex meaning-making process. (Kaltenborn, p.186)

I valued the museum, my museum. As a youngster, independent of adult supervision and input, this place existed as a place wrought with the magic of discovery. No one else shared in this place with me. Therefore,

to some degree we create our own places, they do not exist independent of us.
(Williams, et al, p.31)

My memory and attachment, my feelings of belonging exist separate from others and yet they exist as a deeply etched image of a young tomboy embracing her adventure of wonder and discovery.

If I move away from my next childhood memory and instead head for the present, I am caught thinking about the students I teach and muse about their attachment to place. I think about the painting of the houses on the hill, and think of all the students and families in our school community. And what about the school building itself? Are there spaces in the school that become "place" for the kids? Does my art room become a place for certain students? Do they feel like they belong there? I have found that there are always a certain number of students who find themselves feeling more 'at home' with me in my art room, than in any other place in the school. How does that happen? What is it about either me or the room or what we do there that provides students with a sense of safety, of comfort, of belonging?

This basic structure of a place is intertwined with perceptions, traditions, meanings, and values to create a concept of the place that is fluid and often idiosyncratic in an intersubjective sense. (Kaltenborn, p.177)

I have spent lots of time ruminating about students and safety. How young people stay safe in the school hall jungle. At any moment, a large ape-like creature could fly out and give them a wedgie, throw garbage cans at them in the washroom or break bones as they are slammed into a locker. As my school's first aid attendant, I have been called in to take care of all of these examples, plus many more. I think some of the more vulnerable students take over the library as their safe place. Others congregate in more remote hallways.

The complexity and diversity of place attachment expressed here underscore the idea of places as dynamic social constructions. (Kaltenborn, p,186)

But what about the students who cannot find a single space or place within the school where they feel any sort of comfort? The students who come to school scared every day? The ones who are different and do not feel like they belong to any group within the school, or any place within the school? What do they long for, and how can we help to create it?

Belonging to a place is not an individual matter but an experience of being connected in and between sites of social relations. We may think here of the ways in which some groups "stick out" in a place and become involved in relations of social exclusion. They belong to a place but are not always accepted by others who live there. Their transitory tie to a place produces a longing in belonging. (Ilcan, p.3)

Teachers also need to find places within schools where they feel they belong. For some, it's hanging around the office. For many, it's the staff room. Some choose to stay in their own classrooms, or labs or workshops, and create a home away from home for themselves in a more protected and less public environment.

Stokols and Shumaker (1981) defined the concept of place-dependence as a form of attachment associated with the potential of a particular place to satisfy the needs and goals of an individual and the assessment of how the current place compares with other currently available settings that may satisfy the same set of needs (i.e., when the occupants of a setting perceive that it supports their behavioral goals better than any known alternative). (Williams, et al, p.31)

*My house is hard to find
But I'll give you directions,
you can visit sometime
Down where all I built surrounds me*

*and... there's steep holes, there's potholes
there's rocks...
it's tough and it's tiring when you go it alone
I learned about wiring
I learned about stone
the building is done,
but the work's never through
and I won't give up no how
It reminds me of who I am
and where I am now
I remember myself
that's the work that I do...*

*This is not the house that pain built...
this is where I let my pain go
this is where the footprints dance in the snow.*

*Dar Williams
Singer-Songwriter*

When I think back to my youth, and the places where I felt that I belonged, another memory comes back to me. I belonged at the Provincial museum. I also belonged at Pioneer Ranch Camp.

Pioneer, your green trails they beckon me.
O'r your hills, we're riding so far and free.
Where all nature sings, to the king of kings,
Everything with wings, grateful tribute brings.
Through the pine trees high.
Gently breezes sigh,
Here at Pioneer Ranch.
I also adore Pioneer
So I come year by year.
Once you've been here to Pioneer.
You will not ask why I return.

I learned this song the summer after Grade three at Pioneer Ranch camp in Alberta. There are two camps. One camp was set up for the younger children with indoor toilets and rooms that attach like a hotel. The other part was a rustic setting with outdoor cabins, biffys, and one central meeting space for eating. At Pioneer Ranch Camp, I sang, I ran, I swam, I hiked, I climbed hills, I felt connected to God, and was able to totally submerge myself in the outdoor experience, and the community experience with other kids.

Thus, in the case of wilderness areas it may be useful to identify two types of attachment: attachment to the specific area itself and attachment to the type of area it represents (e.g., wilderness). (Williams, et al, p.32)

I loved this place more than any other as a child and adolescent. I spent one month each year at this camp, and it became my annual sanctuary. It was the one place where I felt more at home, more safe, more alive, and more myself than any other place I remember from my childhood. Every year I could hardly wait to return to camp. I knew that no matter what challenges I faced throughout the school year, I could always escape from it all at camp each summer.

The literature on attachment to home and community clearly indicates that emotional bonds are associated with long-term relationships to places. Consequently, variables that quantify the history of association between the person and the place are expected to be good predictors of place attachment. (Williams, et al, p.32)

I have never replicated as an adult the feeling of belonging and safety that I felt at this place far up in the rocky mountains. I long for the confidence I gained at camp, the feeling that all was well in the world. *The feeling of unconditional love and acceptance.* Part of my stability was buying into the strict Christian doctrine upon which the camp was based. This camp was my safe harbour, where I could heal and grow and trust and be.

As humans, we imbue places of importance with significant meaning. For me, the emotional attachment to summer camp coupled with the physical attachment to nature and to my experience with God, helped to form the deep sense of belonging I felt in that rustic location in the wilderness.

Today, the only place which comes close in terms of the feelings I experienced as a child at camp is at Naramata Family Camp, where we now go as a family each summer. At this particular place, we feel totally accepted as a family, accepted as lesbians, accepted as parents, and accepted as people in search for the Great Mysterious, without having to be attached to any form of religious

dogma. The town of Naramata is not so different from the painting of the houses on the hill, except perhaps it's a little smaller. The town is quiet, safe, isolated. Everyone takes care of everyone else's children. It is a true old fashioned village in that sense. It feels sleepy, and I relax there more than any other place I have found as an adult. The first time I went there, I slept like a baby. The very air is calming, the waterfront areas are soothing, and the wind in the willows gentles even the most restless heart. I am reclaiming my attachment to nature, to a camp environment, to a place where I can listen to stories by First Nations elders and watch the birds in the hills, and know that I am at peace. I belong to this place, and it belongs to me.

THE HOUSE OF BELONGING

*This is the day
you realize
how easily the thread
is broken
between this world
and the next*

*and I found myself
sitting up
in the quiet pathway
of light,*

*the tawny
close grained cedar
burning round
me like fire
and all the angels of this housely
heaven ascending
through the first
roof of life
the sun has made*

*This is the bright home
in which I live,
this is where
I ask
my friends to come,
this is where I want
to love all the things
it has taken be so long
to learn to love.*

This is the temple

*of my adult aloneness
and I belong
to that aloneness
as I belong to my life.*

*There is no house
like the house of belonging.*

David Whyte, House of Belonging

* * * * *
* * * * *

I'm not sure I ever really understood the "lyric voice free of relationship." I don't think that's where my poetics came from, the Romantic voice alone in the landscape, talking to itself. Maybe that's what this book is about: the voice learning how to be by itself, alone, in the landscape, away from romantic and family relationships, and away from the resonance and weight of the Bible, and other old texts. But even then, every landscape poem established relationship connections *with* the trees, the river, the air. The trees become lovers to the speaker, the air is a goddess. I don't think this is "pathetic fallacy": I really believe that trees and rivers and the air itself are alive, and filled with consciousness and feeling, and that they care about us and can speak to us if we know how to listen.

Di Brant, Dancing Naked



Grandma Loves Roses
2002
18" x 18"
oil on board
Gailene Powell

HAVE YOU WATERED THE GARDEN YET?

Dawn

There are days when I walk into the garden and feel ravished by its beauty. Each garden has its own moment of perfection and my garden is most brilliant at first light. It begins as the sun moves over the trees, reaching into surrounding trees and shrubs.

No one else has seen the garden in this moment of perfection. It's become an intimate moment for me. The sun, diffused among the plants, seems to light them from within. The whole place is bathed in a luminosity so complete it makes me catch my breath.

I could never become too familiar, never take this sacred moment for granted.

Marjorie Harris, In the Garden

This painting of a rose represents belonging to a tradition, a tradition of women farmers and gardeners. I belong to a distinctive lineage. I am part of a long history of women gardeners, women who are close to the land.

Land is unto land alone, something that simply is itself. Land partakes of what we breathe into it, is touched by our moods and memories. (Erickson, p.248)

My grandma Mabel was a farmer, and my mother grew up on a farm in her early years. I was raised with farm visits and farm lore. My body is full of deeply embedded memories of the smell of hay in a barn, the sweet tang of just picked baby peas, home made bread and cinnamon buns. I love seeing the wide expanse of a crop, any crop, growing, growing.

Neither my mother or grandmother live on farms now, but they both still share an intense need to garden and to feel their hands in the soil. Being connected to the land is a part of their sense of belonging, of my sense of belonging.

Mabel and Gailene in Conversations

G: Why do you garden?

M: Well gee, I've never thought about it that way. Because I like to grow things; see things growing.

G: Right now you just grow flowers...?

M: If I had more room I'd grow vegetables. (pause) I like to have the contact with nature. I like to touch the soil.

G: What does it feel like to touch the soil?

M: Comforting, soothing- (said hesitantly) feels like you're in contact with your source.

G: Have you always gardened?

M: Sure! In the summer I'm outside and in the winter I have my indoor plants. (pause) Everybody I knew gardened.

G: Did they all love it?

M: Yes – well a lot of it was necessity. They couldn't wait for spring to get going. Then there was a big rush to harvest. If your garden produced well it was a great thing...everybody had flowers.

G: Was there rivalry?

M: Much so, but there was also sharing. If someone wanted some seeds, roots, and slips from plants...but not everyone did. Some were greedy. Like my neighbour now. She won't share. She even wants to destroy....

(I should interject. My grandmother has lived beside the same woman in a senior's complex for fifteen years. This woman, Helen, will pick the blooms off my grandma's flowers if they bloom first or if they look better than Helen's flowers. She has done damage. This year it was grandma's sweet peas.)

M: How can you harm a plant? It's still a plant. You should love all plants... it

would feel bad. I don't know how you could enjoy doing something like that. (pause)
My mom gardened until she was bed ridden. She liked to water her plants with rain
water. She thought it was better for them, that the temperature was better.

For my mother
and grandmother
and myself
spring time is exciting.

The soil is rich
and it feels like
the flowers are
talking to us.

Snowdrops

Do you know what I was, how I lived?
You know what despair is; then,
winter should have meaning for you.

I did not expect to survive,
earth suppressing me. I didn't expect
to waken again, to feel
in damp earth my body
able to respond again, remembering
after so long how to open again
in the cold light of earliest spring-

afraid, yes, but among you again
crying yes risk joy

in the raw wind of the new world.

Louise Gluck, The Wild Iris

The times my mother has been happiest in her life is when she gardens. During those

distinctive periods, she was happy, truly happy. In an essay by Margaret Kelleher, titled "The Spiritual Strain in Contemporary Women's Writings: The Witness of Women in Neglected Wells, Spirituality and the Arts," Kelleher writes about connections between women: mother, daughter, grandmother. She writes about Alice Walker's relationships to her female ancestors, as examined in Walker's "In Search of our Mothers' Gardens."

"The location of her mother's 'living creativity' is revealed finally, the end of the search movingly simple:

I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible - except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty.

And hence for her daughter, 'Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength - in search of my mother's garden, I found my own.'
(Kelleher, p.63)

The connection to the land, the connection to history of women whose gardens kept their families alive is very much present within my family. Historically, this connection to the land wasn't solely about gardening for pleasure, to produce flowers; the earth held a sustaining element as well, because it fed the family. Growing up within a family of gardeners meant that the first thing we did when we visited someone was to have a tour of the garden, to see what was growing and sometimes to sample some of the vegetables and fruits in season. As a youngster, going into my great grandma's garden, was always a treat.

Amazon Islands

*The new pastoralists first make
their pasture.*

*A tax incentive was invented
to save half the forest of Manaus:*

*every rancher put fifty percent
of the land in reserve.*

*Now there are thousands of
Amazon islands,*

*ten hectares here,
ten hectares there,*

*and every one surrounded by pasture,
and every one unravelling.*

*First the big predators were lost,
the jaguar lasting less than a year.*

*Then the tamarins ran away,
seeking lost feeding groves;*

*and two bearded sakis, confined
on one of the islands isolated*

*from their social group, pined
away and died.*

*The howler monkeys disappeared
from island after island,*

*bird density fell year after year
after year.*

*The few ant colonies ten hectares
sustains do not sustain*

*the antbirds. There are no island
antbirds now.*

*Then the islands began to shrink.
The trees along the edges*

*were scorched and died,
taking others with them*

*when they fell,
the gaps letting in more light,*

*more pastoral weeds,
more pasture.*

*Fifty percent diminished
to forty-five, forty, thirty,*

*And every island fled away
(Revelation, 16:20)*

Anna Jackson, The Pastoral Kitchen

Only now that I have had my own garden do I understand the amazing commitment of time and sweat that those rows of vegetables represented. My grandma's sister is eighty nine now, and she still farms an acre or two all on her own. The current generations in my family have become

urban and unfortunately are starting to lose the deep connection to land that my grandma's and great grandmother's generation experienced.

Energy

Why is it that crawling about on the earth can change the shape of a whole day? There are times when all the energy has gone out of my body, I feel flat and vaguely miserable. That's when I go out to the garden. Especially if I'm particularly downhearted. It's where I can remove myself from my Self....

We get this lift from the kind of energy that plants manifest. They radiate it from every inch of the garden - high and low. Just stand by a shrub for twenty minutes and feel what it emanates. Then multiply that by hundreds of plants and you understand why it is we need this little hit of the natural world for revival.

Marjorie Harris, In the Garden

My mother's side of the family came to Canada as Russian immigrants. Actually, they came over as Dukhobor refugees. In Russia, Dukhobors were persecuted and killed by the Cossacks because Dukhobors would not bare arms. They were pacifists. As well, the more orthodox Dukhobors didn't believe in individual ownership of land, rather they believed in collective farming. Once in Canada, my relations chose to break away from this radical Dukhobor sect and instead elected to take homesteads. These were given to them by the government in exchange for clearing and cultivating the land.

A Funny Story (From Mabel)

I have a funny story. There was a really beautiful watermelon that was growing. You know, it had the two colours and was like the size of my teapot. Well, my oldest sister Mary claimed it. She said it had to be hers because she was the oldest. Well, we went to our mom, (we meaning my other sister Polly and I) and asked her how you could tell it was ripe. She said you have to tap it and when it sounded sort of hollow then it was ready. Well, Polly and I went out every day and tapped on that watermelon. Finally, we were sure it was ripe and we picked it and hid in the bushes with two spoons and ate it all.

Later, she (Mary, the eldest) came flying into the kitchen and asked mom if she had picked the watermelon, but she hadn't, and we never admitted we did it. But, it was so ripe and delicious and beautiful. We often talk about it, still, and have a good laugh.

Somehow this love of the land has been passed on to me, and I too love to feel my hands in the soil and to watch things take root and grow. It gives me great pleasure. Although my grandma loves all of the plants that she grows, she truly adores roses best of all. Grandma's garden is always a stunning showcase of blooms. Yet, more than anything, she loves roses. I sold my house last year, and painfully had to give up my garden. I took one of my rose bushes to put in Grandma's garden. I'm pleased to say it has taken and is flourishing in her garden. It is a light salmon color, with a big blossom and heavenly fragrance.

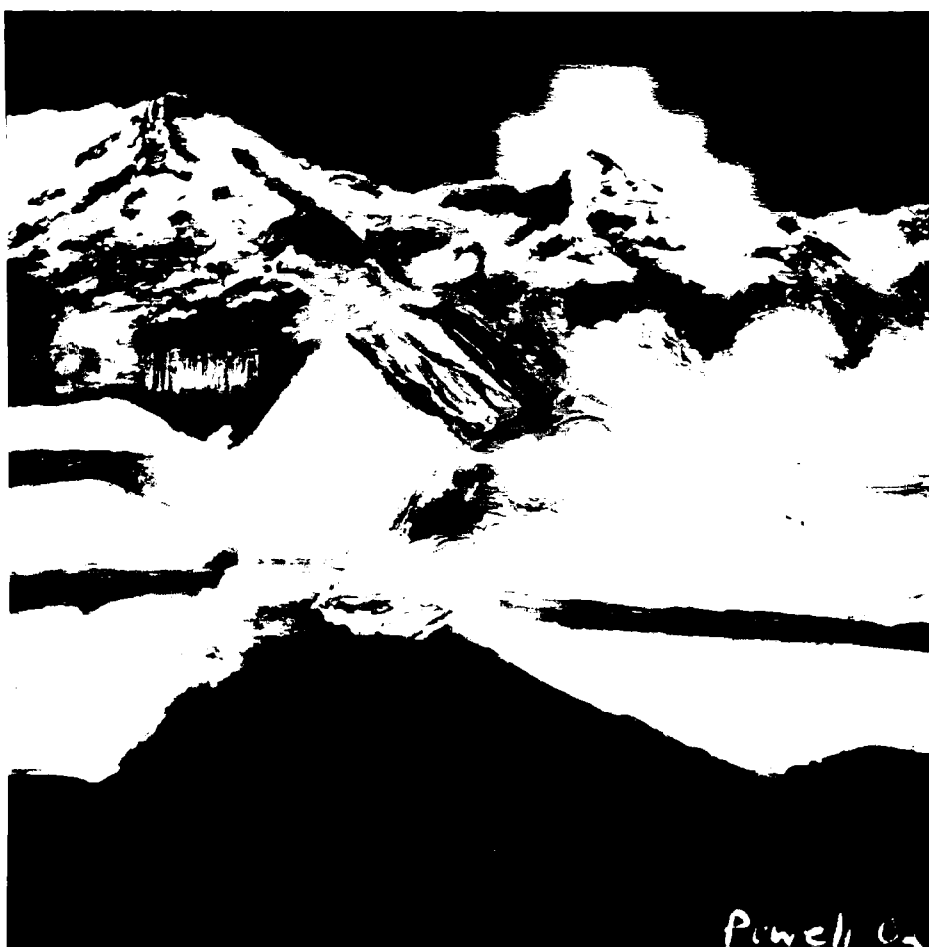
That is why I painted this particular painting of a rose. This painting is my representation of the way I share a history of belonging to the land, and being part of a lineage of female farmers and gardeners, as well as an acknowledgment of my grandmother's fondness for roses. I painted the rose large, so it would take on importance. As Georgia O'Keeffe said, if you paint a flower its actual size, no one will pay any attention to it. She painted two and three foot flowers, oversized dimensions, which nowadays we take for granted. In O'Keeffe's day it was unheard of, it wasn't done. Everything was painted to scale. When you enlarge something, people focus on it.

It was exciting for my grandmother to see this painting. "Oh!" she exclaimed, "You painted a ROSE!"

A recent study by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service reports that committed bird-watchers outshine other animal oriented groups-such as zoo enthusiasts, pet owners, trappers, and supporters of animal welfare causes- by consistently demonstrating a "sophisticated and well-balanced environmental protection attitude." The study also found that serious bird-watchers were the best informed group on a broad range of ecological and animal-life topics.

This research supports a widely held belief within the bird-watching community--that an interest in birds is often a first step toward building a sound conservation ethic. Because birds are sensitive indicators of the health of our environment, it is likely that a popular commitment to their well-being will lead to a more widespread concern for the quality of the environment on which we and the birds are mutually dependent. The conspicuous and appealing nature of birds makes them ideal candidates to carry the message that we and the birds depend on intact ecosystems where humans and wildlife can flourish. The presence of diverse bird populations, capable of sustained reproduction, is one of the best indicators of a healthy environment.

Stephen W. Kress, National Audubon Society Birders Handbook



Solitude
2002
18" x 18"
oil on board
Gailene Powell

THE CALL OF THE WILD

I know the solitude my mother speaks of. It is what sustains me and protects me from my mind. It renders me fully present. I am desert. I am mountains. I am Great Salt Lake. There are other languages being spoken by wind, water, and wings. There are other lives to consider: avocets, stilts, and stones. Peace is the perspective found in patterns. When I see ring-billed gulls picking on the flesh of decaying carp, I am less afraid of death. We are no more and no less than the life that surrounds us. My fears surface in my isolation. My serenity surfaces in my solitude.

Terry Tempest Williams, Refuge

*“SEAGULLS MEMORIZE YOUR FACE!”
the old man called out to me as he strode past on his daily walk.*

Brenda Peterson, Bread Upon the Water

This painting of glacier covered mountains represents belonging to a place, belonging to the land, belonging to nature. I wanted this painting to invoke the sensation of cold, of being out in the elements. Cold enough so that your breath is visible and the air seems to ring with the percussion of vibrating icicles. I wanted the glacier to seem separate and unto itself; that the presence of homo sapiens is not necessary for its completion.

In contrast to the primarily cold colours that I used to paint Solitude, it has an underpainting of hot, bright red underneath. Some of this red seeps through and the mountain seems just a little more inviting than at first glance.

When they believed that they would be totally surrounded by nature, their responses reflected Heidegger's (1971) notion that dwelling means to be at peace in a protected place...For experienced outdoor individuals an ability to be by oneself in a natural environment guided many of their decisions. They captured a sense of belonging and a sense of being-at-one with nature. (Fishwick & Vining, p.62)

I believe that we become connected to a place, attached to a certain location, and there is a lot of significance on multiple levels related to this attachment. In Kaltenhorn's (1997) study "Nature of Place Attachment", Proshansky, et al. comment on the literature about place attachment.

Place attachment generally acknowledges places as space imbued with meaning,

thus highlighting the personal and integrative relationship involved. (p.175)

Kaltenhorn's (1997) study addressed both the strength of attachment and the target of attachment:

What is valued about a place, and to what aspects of the place are people attached?
(p.176)

This painting also extends from a sense of belonging to nature, to a sense of belonging to the planet. The more we are able to feel like we are a part of nature, the better we are able to create a deepening connection to the whole planet. For myself, when I am in complete wilderness with little or no contact with other people, I feel closer to creation. I move into and feel a deep connection to all that is, and reconnect to a sense of wonder and awe. I most definitely belong to this planet. The family of humans might kill this planet, but we do all belong to it.

Death Star

*Outstare the stars. Infinite foretime and
Infinite aftertime: above your head
They close like giant wings, and you are dead.*

Nabokov, Pale Fire

*The extinction of the dinosaurs
was just the last*

*of the mass extinctions
of the past:*

*five we know of, tens of millions
of years apart.*

*It could be a 'Death Star' orbits
with our sun,*

*every few billion years
pulling down*

*a storm of asteroids like the one
that killed the dinosaurs,*

punctuating a history

with cataclysms

*of extinction, ecosystems
collapsing in disarray.*

*The most recent mass extinction
began a few thousand years ago,*

*when people took in great numbers
to the sea,*

*colonized, farmed,
industrialized*

*We are losing species at a hundred times
the natural rate, a thousand times,*

*and the rates of extinction
are increasing.*

*We have become
our own Death Star.*

Anna Jackson, The Pastoral Kitchen

On a Soapbox

Petterson & Hammitt (2000) also connect belonging with nature.

The concept of belonging can be defined as the sense of feeling at home and/or having a close relationship and affinity for a place (Seamon, 1979). In other words, belonging concerns the overall affective bond that is constructed through significant experiences that occur in landscapes. (p. 389)

And as we belong to this planet, the planet belongs to us. We should be stewards of the planet, taking care of everything living and breathing on earth. We haven't taken that responsibility very seriously. Our history is weighted with conquering and dividing instead of sharing a stewardship. We have become separate from the planet on which we live. It is my belief that we need to belong to a space, and need that deep connection to earth. When we are far removed from nature, living in a bustling city, something within us is lost. In the same way, when we take an animal out of its natural habitat, part of that animal dies. When we cage a cheetah who can run fifty miles an hour, and who loves running, and whose bones and muscles are meant for running, it's like clipping a bird's wings so it can't fly. So, there is a rightness about our attachment to the planet. We

belong to this bigger, living, extremely gorgeous, vibrant ball of earth. There's a rightness about this, and we have to feed and nurture this attachment.

As individuals began to question exactly what attracted them to specific places an overriding pattern was an attraction to water.... However, on further reflection participants suggest that there is more about the presence of water and the surrounding atmosphere. Often they realized the taken-for-grantedness of the calm and soothing effect of water as they chose to visit a water site even though they could not partake in some of the activities. (Fishwick & Vining, p.60)

I don't generally paint human beings or architecture. What interests me and calls to me is the natural world, such as birds or flowers. If I never painted anything but birds and flowers I would be happy. The man-made part of life, the human part of it, is not nearly so interesting for me as an artist. The natural world and the avian world are my real passions.

Somehow mixed up in my blood of Seminole, Swede, and French-Canadian Indian is my belief that I may never own land even if one day I might be able to afford it. Ownership implies possession; as much as I revere this inland sea, she will never belong to me. Why not, then, belong to her?

Belong. As a child the word mesmerized me. Because my father's forestry work moved us every other year - from southern piney woods to soaring Montana spruce to High Sierra fir - the landscape seemed in motion. To belong in one place was to take deep root like other settled folk, or like the trees themselves, the Standing People, as my father called them. There was also that elegiac and open-hearted longing in belonging that even today, after a decade settling on the shores of Puget Sound, hasn't been sated in me. After I have lived a long life on this beach, I hope that someone might someday say, "She belonged here," as much as the purple starfish that cling to rock crevices covered in algae fur.

A. Stine, *The Earth at our Doorstep*

If we examine belonging to the planet as it relates to schools and students, I feel that students need to feel a sense of belonging to the planet. Otherwise, they may become polluters and disinterested in the earth, without a connection to a broader view of the whole planet. Ecology is

important. Can students develop a sense of wonder about living on this planet? Can they recognize their part in the world? Do they know that the choices they make can affect a rain forest thousands of miles away?

Can we teach students so they know that pouring oil down a drain will eventually kill fish in the waterways? Can we teach our students to make a better choice to recycle that oil in a responsible way? How do we create a conscious effort to teach kids that they do belong to the planet, and they have a role in sustaining it?

For three years, two afternoons a week a green taxi pulled alongside the beach. From inside, an ancient woman, her back bent like the taut arch of a crossbow, would lean out of the car window and call in a clear, tremulous soprano. The seagulls recognized the sun-wrinkled, almost blind face she raised to them. She smiled and said to the taxi driver, "They know I'm here."

It was always the same driver, the same, ritual -- a shopping bag full of day-old bread donated by a local baker. "She told me she used to live by the sea," the driver explained to me once. "She don't remember much else about her life... not her children, not her husband." Carefully the driver would tear each bread slice into four squares the way the woman requested. "Now she can't hardly see these birds. But she hears them and she smells the sea. Calls this taking her medicine."

Strong medicine, the healing salt and mineral sea this old woman took into her body and soul twice a week. She lived in the nursing home at the top of our hill, and every time I saw the familiar ambulance go by I prayed it was not for Our Lady of the Gulls.

This fall, when wild hurricanes shook the South and drought seized the Northwest, the old woman stopped coming to our beach. I waited for her all autumn, but the green taxi with its delighted passenger never came again. I took to adding two weekly afternoon feedings to my own morning schedule. These beach meetings are more mournful, in memory of the old woman whose name I never knew, who didn't remember her own name, who remembered only the gulls.

A. Stine, *The Earth at Our Doorstep*

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living. I want to know what you ache for, and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me how old you are. I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love, for your dreams, for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring with your moon. I want to know if you have touched the center of your own sorrow, if you have been opened by life's betrayals or have become shriveled and closed from fear of further pain! I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own, without moving to hide it or fade it or fix it. I want to know if you can be with JOY, mine or your own; if you can dance with wildness and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your fingers and toes without cautioning us to be careful, be realistic, or to remember the limitations of being a human.

It doesn't interest me if the story you're telling me is true. I want to know if you can disappoint another to be true to yourself; if you can bear the accusation of betrayal and not betray your own soul. I want to know if you can be faithless and therefore be trustworthy. I want to know if you can see beauty even when it is not pretty every day, and if you can source your life from ITS presence. I want to know if you can live with failure, yours and mine, and still stand on the edge of a lake and shout to the silver of the full moon, "YES!"

It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have. I want to know if you can get up after a night of grief and despair, weary and bruised to the bone, and do what needs to be done to feed the children.

It doesn't interest me who you are, how you came to be here. I want to know if you will stand in the center of the fire with me and not shrink back.

It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom you have studied. I want to know what sustains you from the inside when all else falls away. I want to know if you can be alone with yourself, and if you truly like the company you keep in the empty moments.

Oriah Mountain Dreamer, The Invitation



Night Garden
2002
18" x 18"
oil on board
Gailene Powell

JEWELLED WINGS

*To look at any thing,
If you would know that thing,
You must look at it long:
To look at this green and say
'I have seen spring in these
Woods,' will not do -- you must
Be the thing you see;
You must be the dark snakes of
Stems and ferny plumes of leaves,
You must enter in
To the small silences between
The leaves,
You must take your time
And touch the very peace
They issue from.*

John Moffitt

The dragonfly and the iris painting is magical. The iris is one of my favourite flowers, I grow many varieties of them. The iris is highly evocative to me. It has a beauty that is an arresting and lovely erotic quality. It is lush, sensual and painterly. While I am entranced by the beauty and sensuality of the iris, I am spellbound by the dragonfly. The dragonfly with its jewelled wings seems to breathe the promise of the mysterious, belonging to that which is invisible. Through these two images this painting holds a promise of magic, the unexpected.

All too often, the colour has been washed out of life by an all too scientific approach. I feel that the enchantment of life has been reduced into what is measurable. And I want to protest! There are multiple layers to life that we can't necessarily see and can't easily explain.

Morning

*The old night reaching deep
to hold within its sweep
a land of dream and promise*

*This life, a blessing come
by turning to and from
the star that gives us morning*

*Were we to love as far
as shines this humble star
that kindles green in passing*

*Spirit of Earth and Wind
Spirit of Life within
may we be true in passing*

*We are the land we sing
We are the prayer we bring
to these wide miles of morning*

*A continent in song
A planet singing on
the wide wide miles of morning*

Carolyn McDade, singer, songwriter

What would happen if a Cambridge scientist met up with an aboriginal shaman and experienced the dreamtime? What would happen if the quantifiable met up with the ecstatic? I happen to be intuitive by nature, and am fascinated by the idea of belonging to the mystery of life, to embracing what is unseen. There is a tradition of shamanism and healing on the Russian side of my family. I remember being very young, two or three years old, visiting family members. My great grandmother was talking to my mother about me, and said, "That one feels things." There has been acknowledgment amongst my family since I was very young that I was intuitive, sensitive, that I could feel things that perhaps others could not.

Belonging to another way of thinking and knowing has always been part of who I am. Certainly part of that is through my Russian heritage, but it's more than that. I embrace the non-rational way of knowing. It's not scientific and it can't be measured. I appreciate the mystery of life. The dragonfly is symbolic of the magic and the mystery and the unexplainable in life. I embrace this way of being.

Not much is written about the connection between writing and spirituality. Even though New Age writing describes circumstances where writers receive ideas mysteriously, rarely does anyone talk about the sustained link between spiritual practice and writing. Writers are reluctant to speak about this subject because literary elitism engenders a fear that if we describe "unseen forces" shaping our visions and the structure of our writing we will not be taken seriously. Women

writers have been more willing than their male counterparts to speak of visions that serve as a catalyst for the imaginative process. When describing the process of writing The Color Purple, Alice Walker spoke of images appearing in her dreams, of voices, of spirits calling to her. (p.128)

When I sit down to write I do not imagine my pen will be guided by anything other than the strength of my will, imagination, and intellect. When the spirit moves into that writing, shaping its direction, that is for me a moment of pure mystery. It is a visitation of the sacred that I cannot call forth at will. I can only hope it will come. This hope is grounded in my own experience that in those moments when I feel my imagination and the words I put together to be touched by the presence of divine spirit my writing is transformed. At such moments I am touched by grace. I am moved both by the writing and by the presence of spirits that make that writing the very best that it can be. When I complete this work I feel intense jubilation and ecstasy. Not all writing I do is divinely inspired. The difference is tangible. Many writers who have felt guided by unseen spirits testify that the writing poured forth with ease. Much of the time we labour over words.

bell hooks

As a painter, I have moments when the spirit moves through me. These are ecstatic moments. I believe this has been the experience of many creative individuals. Instead of calling it "divinely inspired," however, the collective imagination has seen to witness artistic inspiration as heralded in by the muse. Unfortunately, the few experiences of ecstasy are contrasted by hours of slogging in the studio. Luckily those moments of pure magic help to balance the many hours and days of hard work. I belong to a tradition of artists that knows, believes and embraces the unseen force of the muse.

THIS LIFE

*At the center of this life
there is a man I want to know again.
He has a new house,
a clear view of the mountain
and hidden in the close grained wood
of his desk
a new book of poems.*

*He has left the life
he once tried to love
now it is only a shadow
calling for another shadow*

*and this shadow
wants to become real again*

*it falls against walls
and fences
and stairways*

the dark penumbra of my belonging

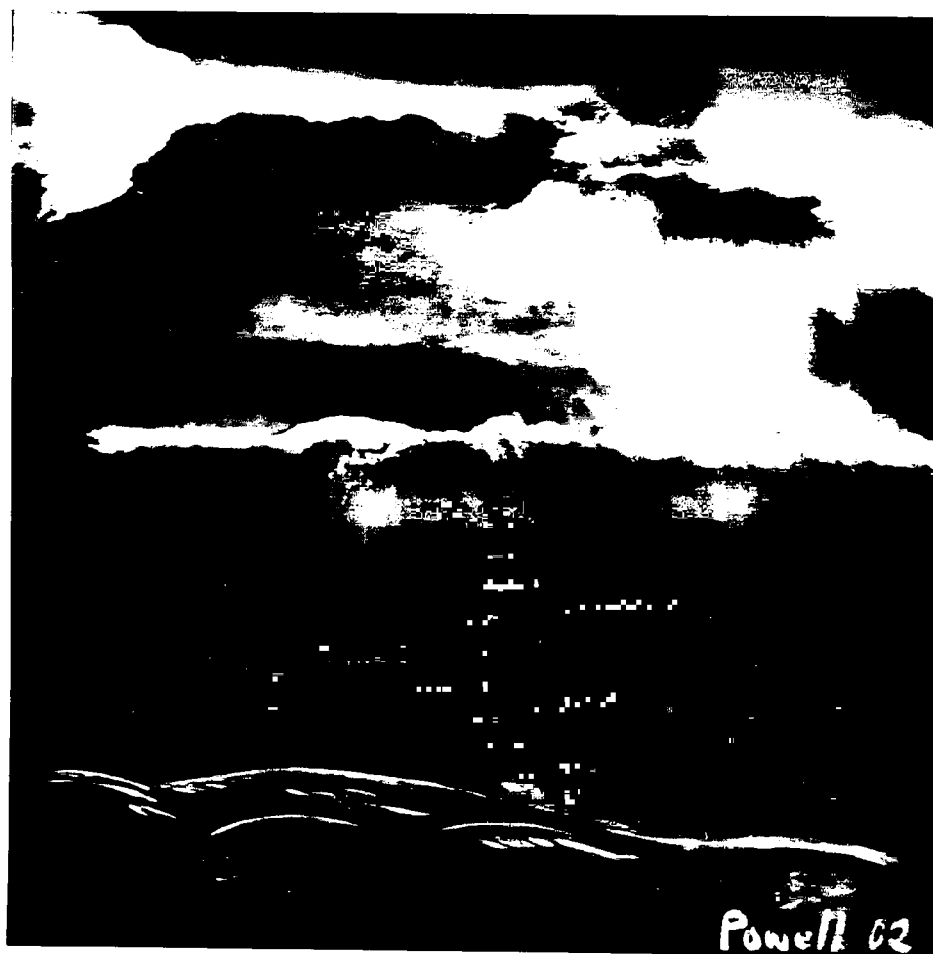
*now let me cast my shadow
against life*

*before the specter haunts me to my
grave (p.3)*

David Whyte, The House of Belonging

Now why do angels so often appear in sleep, or on the feathered edge of sleep? Silvered, iridescent, they might seem to be mere creatures of the dreaming brain, delicious disturbances of the electric aura, subtle emanations (rose, honeysuckle) or the erotic lobes. But no, oh no they are *real*: fireflies, ardent spirits pursuing us, weaving their luminous envelope around us. Angels stand glowing at the crossroads of life, beckoning to each of us: in our lesson, the angel draws the prophet inward, into the most intimate recesses of the soul; and so does the 'still small voice' of God whisper to us when, deep in the night, we reach Horeb, and surrender to the mighty wind, the earthquake, and the fire.

Hilary Clark, More Light



Reflection
2002
18" x 18"
oil on board
Gailene Powell

THE GREAT MYSTERIOUS

*I said to my soul, be still and wait....
So, the darkness shall be the light,
and the stillness the dancing.*

T. S. Eliot

This painting of sky, water, and light streaming through clouds represents a joy filled moment when I feel a connection to the greater Divine. When sun streams through clouds that have just parted; I am taken in by the awe and the beauty. Exceptional joy fills my being. Somehow I know that I am unconditionally loved, which comes from a sense of belonging to a greater Spirit, belonging to the Divine.

I took a course at Naramata from Dayton Edmonds, a First Nations elder and teacher. His grandparents always referred to God as the Great Mysterious. I love that. God is neither male nor female, Jesus or Buddha, but rather part of the wonder of all creation.

When I painted this painting I hoped to capture a sense of luminosity, and of serenity. At the same time, there is a dark and ominous cloud dispersing the rays of light. Against the contrast of dark cloud, and streaming light, we become aware of the streaming light because its opposite is present. And so I think about life. When things are going well, we often take our spiritual connection for granted. We bask along in all of our well being. Yet, in troubled times that is when we most often reach out to our picture of the Great Mysterious.

If I have inside me the stuff to make cocoons, maybe the stuff of butterflies is there too.

Trina Paulus

Historical romantics who have written about nature write about that glorious sense of beauty and how God and the Divine are experienced through nature. St. Francis of Assisi walked around in the forest praising God. What better place to feel connected to God, than alone in the forest,

surrounded by that sense of majesty and the exquisite pleasure found in the natural world. In these moments, we can just praise God from the depths of our being. In these moments, there is gratitude for that deep sense of spiritual belonging.

The Greek word for *soul* is *psyche*, and it often symbolized as a *butterfly*. Both the soul and the butterfly are metamorphosed. While it was tempting for me to think that the growth and emergence of my authentic self would happen with little time or effort on my part, that isn't so. The fullness of one's soul evolves slowly. We're asked to go within to gestate the newness God is trying to form; we're asked to collaborate with grace. (Kidd, p. 12)

Being a Bird

I have loved birds all of my life. Birds represent many things. Freedom. Grace. Love. Passion. Desire. Being true to your Path. Soul Mate. I am always scouring the skies for my winged friends. At times, my body aches for the want of being up in the sky flying, wind beneath my wings holding me aloft.

I pray to the birds.

I pray to the birds because I believe they will carry the messages of my heart upward. I pray to them because I believe in their existence, the way their songs begin and end each day - the invocations and benedictions of Earth. I pray to the birds because they remind me of what I love rather than what I fear. And at the end of my prayers, they teach me how to listen.

Terry Tempest Williams, Refuge

One of my most beloved instructors at art school was a confirmed atheist. He had even had an out of body experience when he was in a terrible car accident and almost died. Even though he remembered looking down on the proceedings and noticed a lot of light, he believed that it was all being manufactured by his brain. To him, ashes are just ashes, and our bodies are chemicals that eventually return to the soil. I always thought that was such a limited view. What a constriction of the soul. Whatever specific idea I have about the Divine, I think it provides me with a huge sense of belonging. I have found that my belief in the Great Mysterious helps my sense of order, and helps

me make sense of terrible events, even death.

You are rising now out of your body, your spirit lifts from the place between your breasts, out the top of your head, the fledgling on the edge of its nest, tentative, as if you are about to take flight, a moment you remember in your dreams, a fear of falling into an abyss, but you are rising, you are rising, you are being lifted up on strong familiar wings, of Methodist, Buddhist, Catholic, Mormon angels, our mother is there first and she cradles you until it falls away, the last of your fear, and our grandmothers and grandfathers carrying you as well, they are themselves a chariot, they have come for to carry you home, and down below in your bedroom is your soft-shuttered body, the people you love the most - your wife and sons - and the youngest weeping, and you see Daddy at Mama's grave with flowers, and here I am at my typewriter waiting for Barb and Annie, and Dallas in her kitchen with her Kirk and her children, and out your window the sunset, then the sunrise is blazing for you, spilling fire over clouds and sky and pasture, and you are rushing now upward, you remember all of your life in a single moment, it comes to you now, ahhhhhhh, a revelation, each of the particular, partial broken acts of love, yesssss, that is what we were trying for, and in this knowledge once again and finally you forgive and are forgiven; you are floating now on currents from the rush, beyond all divisions and all partial choices, the sinewy wings lifting you toward the Countenance, and everywhere the other hand is clapping, and oh, you understand fully what you had once seen through a glass darkly, for now, now, now you are face to Face, and there is no longer even language, but if there were, the words would come: Yes. Yes. Yes.

M. Segrest, Born to Belonging

I wonder about people who are atheists. Do they have much more difficulty attaching meaning to life? How do they fill their need to belong in a deep way? Victor Frankl endured and witnessed some of the worst atrocities inflicted on humankind. He lived through World War II and survived a concentration camp. His book, *Man's Search for Meaning* was all about the discoveries made trying to find meaning in life despite being in circumstances when all those around you are losing hope and dying. Frankl made it through the concentration camps filling himself up with thoughts of love for his wife. He used his interior life, his imagination to bring up thoughts about

her, where he would have conversations and would just bask in their mutual love. For Frankl, love was a means in itself, something to strive for and embrace.

I believe that in the spiritual sense, we belong to a benevolent force, a divine force, a nurturing spirit. This greater being doesn't want to squash us like bugs. There is a larger plan for all of us since in the grand scheme we all belong to the same source, the same divinity, the same spirit.

*They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.
They shall mount up with wings, as eagles.
Isaiah 40:31*

I feel that I have experienced belonging to the divine myself, in very deep, meaningful and significant ways. Miracles do happen both small and large but all of them profound. For me, there is no doubt there is a significant sense of the greater spirit in nature and in life. It is a major part of my sense of belonging. I don't look for God in a church. I don't necessarily find a sense of grace in a church. I don't often feel a sense of communion with other people who are praying. I feel God most closely in nature, in the flight of a bird and especially in the light and the way the light enters our world and illuminates so many things. I pay attention and all of a sudden there is a moment of grace, and I crack open.

WHAT I MUST TELL MYSELF

*Watching the geese
go south I find
that
even in silence
and even in stillness
and
even in my home
alone
without a thought
or a movement
I am part*

*of a great migration
that will take me to another place.*

*And though all the things I love
may pass away and
the great family of things and people
I have made around me
will see me go,
I feel them living in me
like a great gathering
ready to reach a greater home.*

*When one thing dies all things
die together and must live again
in a different way,
when one thing
is missing everything is missing,
and must be found again
in a new whole
and everything wants to be complete,
everything wants to go home
and the geese travelling south
are like the shadow of my breath
flying into the darkness
on great heart-beats
to an unknown land where I belong.*

*This morning they have
found me,
full of faith,
like a blind child,
nestled in their feathers,
following the great coast of the wind
to a home I cannot see. (p.18-19)*

David Whyte, House of Belonging

A PAINTER ALWAYS ASKS: IS IT FINISHED YET?

During the course of a year, I painted twelve paintings. Each one was unique. Each one unfolded and during this process added to my understanding and questioning about belonging. The process pushed me to expand my thinking and to push into any boundaries I may have created around the theme of belonging.

I started my journey solo, trying to explore my sense of self, my independence, my meandering mind, my life's journey so far. What were the experiences and milestones in my life which helped or hindered my own sense of belonging? I explored ways I could express the things I learned and the things I still wondered about. I decided I wanted to use a metonymic space and the bricolage method to embrace a polyphonous voice. I love poetry and am an avid reader. It was important for me to embed many wonderful poems and selected prose within my research on belonging. I have also become an avid bird watcher. It was important to have a theme of birds woven throughout this piece on belonging. Birds represent much of who I am, and it was important for my feathered friends to make regular appearances.

And so I reflected about my growing up years, my partnering up, my joining into a family and a profession and all the ways we all have of belonging to the people around us. I picture the pair of daffodils I painted, and think about the amazing dance we create with a partner. I distinctly remember the day in Stanley Park when Laura took my hand to welcome me into the family, as we silently watched the magnificent wind-ruffled blue heron looking out to sea. I savour memories of many students who felt they could connect with me, and I wonder where they belong now. Will someone reach out a hand of welcome to those who need that significant connection?

I wryly look back at the many adjustments I made, like the little sandpiper I painted, fitting into an extended family. I think about all of our differences and how they have been used to keep us apart from one another. Now, with my softened heart, I only struggle occasionally to be free from this sense of belonging to a larger family. I am finding my place within family. And, much to my surprise, I am hoping that everyone is able to find a place of comfort and belonging within a circle of loved ones.

Becoming a teacher gave me the gift of sharing my passion for creativity, but more than that, it has given so many students a chance to develop their sense of belonging, to find themselves, within the four walls of my art room. I have watched the dance of teenagers trying to fit in, and in

the dance, trying to shake off those things which keep them apart from one another: their culture, their race, their clothes, their language, their sexuality. My heart has opened to young people, and they have opened to me. The painting of the child with the tulips brings to mind the many students who have been able to relax with me, learn from me, and gradually grow into themselves within the safety of my classroom. They bring gifts of appreciation or kindness or little notes or presents. But it is who they are becoming which is the best gift of all.

An introspective person by nature, I never imagined I would become a teacher or that I would work with so many people. When I painted the blue jays I chuckled to myself about the tight fit in that nest. It seems almost too small for all those bodies. While I have found that each of my colleagues and each of my students is extremely different from each other despite outward appearances, I learned that there is a role for nesting together, working together, belonging, even in a school system. My heart still goes out to the many students I have known who have not found a place within the school system. Their stories and their faces will always be a part of me, and I will always wonder about them. Where are they now?

It is possible that the curator at the provincial museum in Edmonton wonders what became of me! What became of that gangly girl who spent so many hours by herself pouring over all the exhibits day after day? What became of that quiet, inquisitive girl? Luckily for me, I found Pioneer Camp. I found nature. I learned to love the land. I discovered that gardening was in my blood. I developed a spiritual path. And, eventually, I discovered that I am an artist, a painter. So many ways to belong in this world. I am blessed to have found so many.

A painter always asks: Is it finished yet? Should I add just one more thing? I wonder about the shading on the left. Am I ready to sign it, and stop adding just even one more little brush stroke? When is a painting really and truly done? And what about a paper on belonging? When is it time to add the last word, and be satisfied with the way the colours and shapes have been captured in this snapshot of time?

Belonging. Daily, I am reminded about what the absence of belonging creates in its destructive wake. It washes up bodies and souls. Belonging. Daily, I am reminded about about what belonging can do to the heart. I remember a Dr. Seuss character, the Grinch, whose heart grew five sizes in an instant. The power of belonging has the capacity to make us grow and be bigger and more than we ever believed we could be – for our families, for our students, for the land, for all things, and for every one that we have the privilege to belong to.

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