

Don't forget your belongings

We ascend, or descend, inextricably linked with all others.

While I rode in a crowded subway car, full of the screech of train sounds and the murmur of people, a voice came over the sound system making a prerecorded announcement that played periodically along the route. I had heard it many times before; today, it resounded differently. “Don't forget your belongings.”

I paused to look up at the loudspeaker. For some reason I thought of belonging not in terms of possessions, but in its other sense, that of belonging as a state of being that we look for. And I thought, too, about what it would mean not to “forget” it.

Much of the world runs on concerns about the kinds of belongings the subway announcement was really talking about. We often have great concern for the things we possess. Intrinsicly, this is about separation. It is about what is “ours” (and hence not someone else's). Often the added societal message is that our belongings—our stuff—are the measure of who we are.

The other kind of belonging is about whose we are.

This belonging is as much about connection and relationship as the other is about separateness and individuality. Indeed, to say that we have found where we belong is to name one of the most powerful kinds of relationships it is possible to have as a human being. It is to point to a sacred quality within community.

Belonging makes a claim upon your whole person. It both asks and promises a quality of relationship: a sense of deeply and truly being with others, together, through thick and thin. Its great blessing is, as the poet Mary Oliver says, a sense of “your place in the family of things.”

The search for belonging leads many of us to seek a religious community. I have to imagine that when we're born, we already have an intimate knowledge of belonging to the world, to other people, and to the sacred mystery that connects us all. How could we not? We are born very much “at the mercy” of that world and of the people in it.

Yet sure enough, we often forget this sense of belonging—sometimes before very long at all, sometimes bit by bit as we grow older and hear society's encouragement to separateness. Sometimes we think we simply can't bear the vulnerability that non-separateness demands. We turn to our possessions, to our individual paths, and forge ahead, because we feel we must.

But by grace, at some point along the road, most of us begin to long for another option. We begin to wonder what else is possible. We start hoping that we might, after all, find that sense of our place with others, and make our journey in togetherness rather than alone.

Now and then the awareness that our journey is shared wells up, surprising us with its joy. It strikes me that airports, like subways, are places where our two opposing understandings of “belongings” are on display. Picture the hustle and bustle of the airport: the headlong rush of people, each pulling a carefully supervised piece of baggage behind themselves, apparently on a very separate journey from the many other people similarly racing through the terminal.

And yet, when we reach the gate, and there is nothing to do but settle in and contemplate the upcoming flight, I bet a great many of us find ourselves thinking of the view from 30,000 feet—a view that will give us a real experience of the vastness of the world. Something about those awe-inspiring moments when the vastness of the earth or the sky is visible before us causes us to pause, causes a voice within us to sing out above the noise of our inner distractions. That voice proclaims that across all differences and divides, beyond all fears, we are companions on the same journey. We ascend, or descend, inextricably linked with all others.

Countercultural as it is, this idea is in our very bones.

And that idea is also a very Universalist intuition. The great insight of that side of our spiritual tradition ran deeper than any notions about heaven or hell. Universalism's greatest promise was about relationships: the kinship of all people. Its central truth was that wherever we may be going, we are going there together. Whatever our purpose, it is a collective purpose.

This tradition within our faith reminds us of the ancient truth that no matter how plentiful our possessions, we do not, in the end, really possess a thing—for life is a gift, and what we have brings us full joy only when we offer it outward to others. We are called to lives of service by a great Love in which we live and move and have our being. And however we might name it, it is a Love that holds us all, covers us all like a sweet dust.

We might also understand the Universalist insight this way: that however forgetful we might become, however separate or rushed or frightened we might feel, we cannot ultimately lose the understanding with which we were born—the sense of belonging we once knew, and to which our longing ever calls us back. Though we may not be able to guess how it will happen, we can take hope from the promise that we shall all be reconciled to ourselves, to one another, and to what is holy, before all is said and done.

Belonging is both our true purpose, and our destiny. To paraphrase Universalist minister the Rev. Gordon McKeeman, if we believe that one way or another “all of us are going to end up together in [the end], we might as well [practice getting along] with each other now.”

More than simply getting along, I hope we might be heartened as we practice belonging together, and as we strive to be churches that embody the spiritual realities we profess.

--June 2015 The Rev. Celie Katovitch, minister of First Universalist Church of Rochester, New York