

The Space Between Us: An Inquiry into Belonging

by

Kim Pamela Boutwell Lyster  
B.Ed, Simon Fraser University, 1981

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Studies in Policy and Practice Program

© Kim Lyster, 2015  
University of Victoria

All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy or other means, without the permission of the author.

# **Supervisory Committee**

The Space Between Us: An Inquiry into Belonging

by

Kim Pamela Boutwell Lyster  
B.Ed, Simon Fraser University, 1981

## **Supervisory Committee**

Dr. Susan Boyd (Human and Social Development)  
**Supervisor**

Dr. Michael J. Prince (Human and Social Development)  
**Departmental Member**

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the topic of belonging: both the sense and experience of it as well as the relationship to individual and collective well-being. Through in-depth interviews with five leaders and advocates in the social justice community, I explore their perspectives on the topic, significant influences, the power of the experience, and the relationship between inclusion and belonging. Further, the capacity for belonging to influence and impact social issues such as marginalization, discrimination, and poverty are explored. Methods for fostering belonging are also considered with a view to suggesting recommendations for promoting a lens of belonging as a means for renewing a commitment to the beloved community.

### **Supervisory Committee**

Dr. Susan Boyd (Human and Social Development)  
**Supervisor**

Dr. Michael J. Prince (Human and Social Development)  
**Departmental Member**

## Table of Contents

Supervisory Committee.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Dedication.....	vii
Chapter One: Introduction.....	1
Situating my Research: The importance of belonging.....	1
The Central Research Question(s) and Sub-Questions.....	5
Purpose.....	6
Methodology and Method.....	7
The Structure of this Thesis.....	9
Chapter 2: Exploring the Literature on Belonging.....	11
We are social beings.....	11
Relational dimensions – individual and community.....	15
The threats to belonging.....	18
Social justice, love and transformation.....	21
Chapter 3: Methodology and Method.....	25
Methodological Framework and Influences.....	25
The Research Questions.....	30
Method of the Inquiry: In-Depth Interviews.....	31
The Participants.....	33
Analytical Process.....	36
Ethical Considerations.....	37
Chapter 4: The Nuances of the Experience.....	40
Introducing the participants and their stories.....	40
Vickie Cammack.....	41
Jennifer Charlesworth.....	42
Ric Matthews.....	43
David Pitonyak.....	45
Sara.....	47
A sense of belonging.....	49
The heart knows, the body feels.....	49
In the space between us.....	53
Belonging: our place in community.....	55
Reflecting on their experience of belonging.....	58
A commitment to belonging.....	63
Influences that have shaped their perspective on belonging.....	63
Aha moments.....	69
Chapter 5: Inclusion and Belonging: Making the Connection.....	75
The relationship between inclusion and belonging.....	75
Inclusion is where we started.....	76
Making the connection: belonging and well-being.....	83

Coming full circle: belonging as a catalyst for achieving social justice and social change .....	88
Chapter Six: Reflections and Further Considerations .....	97
The origins of the inquiry on belonging .....	97
The first question: the importance of belonging .....	98
The second question: the power of belonging .....	100
The way forward: renewing the call for beloved community.....	100
Final thoughts .....	103
Bibliography .....	105
Appendix 1: Letter of Invitation.....	111
Appendix 2: Consent.....	113
Appendix 3: Interview Questions.....	114
Appendix 4: Ethics Approval .....	115

## **Acknowledgments**

I wish to thank the faculty members of the Studies in Policy and Practice and in particular, my Thesis Committee: Dr. Susan Boyd and Dr. Michael J. Prince, for their support and encouragement of my graduate studies and this research project. I would also like to thank the participants of my research inquiry: Vickie, Jennifer, Ric, David, and Sara for so generously sharing their thoughts and experience.

## **Dedication**

I extend my gratitude and thanks to my friends and family for your steadfast support and belief in this work and this journey. You have sustained me through this process.

This thesis is dedicated to my son Teyen – I carry you in my heart where the deepest belonging is known.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

This thesis explores the concept of belonging and the ramifications for individual and collective well-being. I conducted qualitative research through in-depth interviews with social justice leaders and advocates about their conceptualizations of belonging, their personal and professional experiences which have influenced their perspective, and the interwoven dimensions of the topic. My research participants provided me with their perspectives on the potency of a focus on belonging and their reflections on the social justice implications. My interviews provided the opportunity to explore deeper dimensions of the topic of belonging and, as such, I offer preliminary recommendations regarding methods of fostering the conditions that will help satisfy what I believe is an essential human need.

### **Situating my Research: The importance of belonging**

I have had the privilege of working in and for community throughout my professional career; it remains my passion and my purpose. Although the word community can be interpreted many ways, my sense of and reference is intrinsically linked to the topic of belonging and influenced by the work of McMillan and Chavis (1986). Blending the clinical psychology background of McMillan with the community development and complex systems analysis work of Chavis, they offer a theoretical framework for a sense of community which



emphasizes relationships, contribution, a sense of belonging, and fulfillment of needs.

Community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together. (p. 9)

Opportunities to participate in community building initiatives have honed and confirmed my belief that relationships between people are at the heart of what must be examined and promoted to support individual and community resiliency and to promote social justice. I am particularly interested in how to support a sense of belonging on the part of all citizens. It is my belief that deeper explorations of the topic may yield discoveries that can ameliorate the experiences of marginalization, discrimination, poverty, and isolation which inhibit the fullest expression of social justice commitments which incorporate assuring the protection of equal access to human rights, societal opportunities, and responsibility for the welfare the least advantaged members of society.

The community living movement, a rights based coalition of family members, individuals with disabilities, organizations, and community members, has been the catalyst for profound changes in the way people with intellectual disabilities are both perceived and treated. The activism which mobilized these changes was nurtured by the work of disability advocates Gunnar Dywar and Wolf Wolfensberger who promoted the concept of normalization as a guiding principle for cultivating a shift in the treatment of people. Normalization theory was widely popularized throughout North America by Wolfensberger (1972) and disseminated through training programs and professional development based on

his seminal text *The Principle of Normalization in Human Services*. Similar to other social justice and human rights causes, the guiding visions and social change promoted by advocates for and with people with disabilities has evolved from these early and catalytic influences. Each attitudinal and societal shift has charted a new frontier for the next advocacy initiatives. In the past twenty years, inclusion is a word that has become part of the lexicon of the community living movement, and particularly within this movement has symbolized hope for a world that includes everyone, regardless of ability or disability. The vision of an inclusive society has acted as a north star, guiding our work over the years, and galvanizing our commitment to bring people to full citizenship and participation from lives led in institutionalized, segregated, and isolating environments.

As an advocate within the community living movement in British Columbia, I initially felt that inclusion and belonging were synonymous. However, I have begun to rethink and redefine the distinctions between the two concepts and identify the limitations of a focus for social change and enhanced quality of life based solely on the achievement of inclusion. Human rights gains for people with intellectual disabilities have been achieved through changes in policy, legislation, and improvements in professional practice; hallmarks of a progressive vision of an inclusive society. However, these gains, while noteworthy, have not led to an end to isolation, loneliness, or vulnerability for people with disabilities. I began to question whether inclusion was only insertion into community and if so, what else beyond policy and legislative shifts might be required to fulfill what I believe is the crucial need to belong.

Although the community living movement has provided me with some of my most profound experiences, I apply a critical lens to the topic of belonging. It is my premise that my research is not solely applicable to only that realm and the experience and social justice issues facing people with disabilities. The experience of marginalization occurs and is evident with so many considered “other” from ourselves; new immigrants, seniors, people with life threatening health conditions, and those who have been more intentionally othered through the societal inequities that lead to poverty.

As well, in my own life, I began to consider the difference between feeling merely included versus when I felt I truly belonged. I discerned the difference to be sometimes subtle but nevertheless critical to my being, compelling me to explore my topic further through conversation with others about the significance of belonging, deeper dimensions of the concept, and the ramifications both individually and collectively in addressing the need for valued connections.

hooks (2006) provides me with powerful inspiration that supports my interest in how communities can nurture and sustain belonging for all their members. I am interested in defining what these organizing principles need to be and feel deeply drawn to the vision of a love ethic and hooks’ articulation of the political force which can be created by adopting love as our transformative energy.

Because of the awareness that love and domination cannot coexist, there is a collective call for everyone to place learning how to love on their emotional and/or spiritual agenda. We have witnessed the way in which movements for justice that denounce dominator culture, yet have an underlying commitment to corrupt uses of power, do not really create fundamental changes in our societal structure. When radical activists have

not made a core break with dominator thinking (imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy), there is no union of theory and practice, and real change is not sustained. That's why cultivating the mind of love is so crucial. When love is the ground of our being, a love ethic shapes our participation in politics. (p. 3)

I am more fervently convinced that the scope of the challenges facing our communities and our world require ways of organizing and thinking that build unity and facilitate belonging. As such, my research interest lies in exploring how we can promote social change and social justice by adopting a lens of belonging as galvanizing vision. This research project fulfills a desire on my part to expand my thinking about these issues beyond definitions of the problem that offer only simplistic analysis of why we find ourselves separated and continually struggling to surmount isolation, loneliness, and marginalization.

### **The Central Research Question(s) and Sub-Questions**

My research inquiry was designed to investigate two central questions. The first question focused on how my research participants, (as social justice leaders and advocates) broadly defined and understood the concept of *a sense of belonging*. (See Appendix 3) This first question was further explored through several sub-questions. The second question of my inquiry focused on the participant's viewpoints about how belonging is linked to activism in support of individual and collective well-being as a means of addressing seemingly intractable social issues. Again, this central question was explored further through a series of sub-questions. (See Appendix 3) These central questions, while in an emergent state at the outset of my thesis planning, were refined

through the course of my reading of the literature, conversations with colleagues, and with the benefit of consultation with members of my Thesis Committee. The interviews were conducted using the questions which are further outlined in Chapter 3.

## **Purpose**

My experience as a graduate student has enhanced my belief that my role as researcher provides both the responsibility and opportunity to act as a catalyst for the generation of knowledge on my topic. I see research as a transformative act which offers me hope for the future and a personal antidote to fear and paralysis of action in the face of how overwhelming the size of the problems we face as a world community seem. In a sense I am also honouring a very personal yearning for meaning, to understand how I belong. A quote of Foucault's, from Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre's (2001) essay *Coming to Theory: Finding Foucault and Deleuze*, resonates deeply.

Each time I have attempted to do theoretical work, it has been on the basis of elements from my experience-always in relation to processes that I saw taking place around me. It is in fact because I thought I recognized something cracked, dully jarring, or disfunctioning [sic] in things I saw, in the institutions with which I dealt, in my relations with others, that I undertook a particular piece of work, several fragments of an autobiography. (p. 142)

The exploration of a sense of belonging is thus ultimately part of my own story; informing how I live, how I act, and who I am, providing me with more content for my autobiography, and helping to define to whom and how I belong.

This inquiry has had an alchemic or transformative quality for me as a graduate researcher. I define alchemy as about becoming: the emergence of something new from combinations of that which already exist in other forms. I hope that my research serves to deepen the conversation and knowledge about a topic which is keenly important to me and which I believe can contribute to new ways of thinking about how we treat one another as humans on this planet. In doing so, I honour my personal values and lifelong commitments to actively and personally engage as a social change agent and confirming Esterberg's (2002) assertion that "social research is, itself, a moral and political activity" (p. 18).

### **Methodology and Method**

I chose a qualitative research approach for my inquiry, guided by a critical, feminist, and anti-oppressive framework which is described in more detail in Chapter 3. I chose to conduct in-depth, individual interviews with my research participants. Like Esterberg (2002) and Oakley (1990), I believe in-depth interviews provide the appropriate means by which to co-create meaning, validate relationship, and honour my commitments to reciprocity, egalitarianism, and respect for the knowledge emerging from social interactions. Conducting in-depth interviews allowed me to explore my research topic in an interactive exchange and provided me with the ability to investigate my respondents' interpretations of their experiences and beliefs, as well as my own, thereby rendering a richer analysis of what belonging means.

I invited a selected sample of five individuals who I felt were conversant and engaged in the topic of belonging, both in the communities in which they reside and in the wider world through their national and international affiliations. I was interested in the broadest range of responses to my interview questions and invited participants with a view to representing diversity in experience, realm of practice, education, gender, and age. All of the participants chosen are well regarded in their respective fields of endeavour which include disability activism, social innovation, social service leadership, and community building. Each participant has developed a public profile for their work and hold positions of influence in their respective field. Two of the participants had already gained recognition for their work on the topic of belonging, and all continue to be involved in advocacy and social change initiatives. In summary, my five research participants represent a purposeful sample I selected on the basis of their reputational pertinence to my topic of interest.

Each of the five people approached agreed to participate in the research. All but one live in British Columbia; the fifth is a resident of Virginia, U.S.A. whose consulting practice frequently brings him to our province. One to one-and-one-half hour interviews were scheduled with each person at a location of their choice; interviews were completed over a thirteen month period in order to accommodate schedules and travel. Participants were sent the interview questions in advance and the interviews provided an opportunity for each of them to offer their conceptualization of belonging and to engage in conversation about the meaning and manifestation in their own lives, practice, as well as comment

on social change and community needs. The interviews, while structured around the research questions, had a conversational style; thus while I was deliberate in my intent to not impose my own views on the content, the resulting experience was emblematic of my hope and desire to co-create meaning about my topic.

### **The Structure of this Thesis**

My research inquiry is presented in six chapters. Chapter one provides an introduction for the reader to the purposes, motivations, and methodological framework that guide and inform the study. A review of the literature I considered relevant to my inquiry is offered in Chapter two beginning with research on the intrinsic human need for belonging and relational aspects. Considerations regarding the threats to belonging are discussed as well as the concept of loving-kindness. Chapter three presents the methodological framework for this qualitative study, describing the choice of in-depth interviews, the methods used to gather, interpret and generate themes from my research participants, and ethics. The responses from my research participants are presented in Chapters four and five. Chapter four captures their personal reflections with respect to defining a sense of belonging, experiences and influences which have contributed to their perspectives and particular “aha” moments which have impressed themselves and impacted them. Their perspectives regarding the relationship between inclusion and belonging, the links between belonging and individual and collective well-being, and the potential for addressing pernicious social issues by fostering belonging are described in Chapter five. Participant



narratives provide the foundation from which I discerned themes and patterns. Similarities and differences in their responses are interpreted and emerge in both chapters. Chapter six provides my concluding discussion of the key lessons learned through the research process with suggestions for future inquiries into the research topic.

## **Chapter 2: Exploring the Literature on Belonging**

This chapter will provide an exploration of research I considered relevant to my investigation on the topic of belonging. First, research regarding the need to belong will be presented, followed by considerations of the individual in relation to community, and threats to belonging. Finally, I explore the relational dimensions of this topic and the concepts of loving kindness, personal and social transformation, and interconnectedness. The literature I reviewed reinforces the importance of and necessity for meaningful and authentic participation in community as a means to experiencing a sense of belonging. The concept of the beloved community emerges as a potential antidote to alienation and marginalization.

### **We are social beings...**

Research across a variety of academic disciplines all assert that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation and identify human beings as intrinsically social beings. The premise that belonging is a fundamental need is featured in the early work of Maslow (1970) who postulated a hierarchy of human needs with food and shelter as foundational and elemental requirements.

If both the physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, there will emerge the love and affection and belongingness needs.... [S]he will hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in [her]his group or family, and [s]he will strive with great intensity to achieve this goal .... [s]he will feel sharply the pangs of loneliness, of ostracism, of rejection of friendlessness, of rootlessness. (Maslow as cited in Kunc, 1992)

Baumeister and Leary (1995) conducted an extensive review of empirical literature with a view to expanding and testing their “belongingness hypothesis” (p.497), concluding that “belongingness [was] almost as compelling a need as food” (p. 498) and that “human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (p. 497). They argue that this innate human need has an evolutionary basis, serving to provide both a greater chance at survival as well as reproductive benefits. Belonging to a group, at the most basic level, assisted with gathering and sharing food, caring for group members, and survival tasks such as hunting or defending against predators, animal or human. It is their premise that “the need to belong” (p. 499) began with circumstantial benefits that favoured coping with the environment and simple survival, eventually transforming from meeting these vital needs to the development of a set of “internal mechanisms that guide individual human beings into social groups and lasting relationships” (p. 499).

Further, Baumeister and Leary (1995), determined that these internal mechanisms mean that “the need to belong is something other than a need for mere affiliation” (p. 500). They propose two main features that define belonging: “frequent, personal contacts or interactions with the other person” which help them “perceive that there is an interpersonal bond or relationship marked by stability, affective concern, and a continuation into the foreseeable future” (p.500).

This aspect provides a relational context to one's interactions with the other person, and so the perception of the bond is essential for satisfying the need to belong.... to satisfy the need to belong, the person must believe that the other cares about his or her welfare and likes (or loves) him or her. (p. 500)

The authors also examine the impact of belonging on general well-being and happiness in life and establish that "deficits in belongingness apparently lead to a variety of ill effects, consistent with the view that belongingness is a need (as opposed to merely a want)." (p. 520). They identify the potential for increased problems in physical, cognitive, psychological, and interpersonal areas as a result of a deprivation of belongingness and conclude that that the importance of researching and understanding the importance of belonging has been underappreciated. As such, they arrive at a confirmation of their "belongingness hypothesis...(that) the need to belong can be considered a fundamental human motivation." (p. 521)

Hawkey and Cacioppo (2010) lend additional support from their research to confirming the debilitating consequences of loneliness and the attendant complexities for individual's well-being when their social needs for belonging are unmet. Their findings identify dramatic impacts on cognitive performance and decline, increases in depressive symptoms, cardio vascular health issues, immune system depletion, and mortality. They state that "loneliness is the social equivalent of physical pain, hunger, and thirst; the pain of social disconnection and the hunger and thirst for social connection motivate the maintenance and formation of social connections necessary for the survival of our genes." (p. 218)

Ernst and Cacioppo (1999) affirm these conclusions in their research and also

address the experience of groups of people already at risk for social alienation, isolation, and exclusion including persons experiencing bereavement, people with various types of disabilities, and other marginalizing identities. They found a heightened potential for loneliness and more limited attachments associated with these additional societal stigmas which further threatened their sense of belonging. They trumpet the importance of continuing research on loneliness which “unveils the secrets of the lonely hearts” and recommend that prevention and intervention initiatives to counteract loneliness be more intentionally promoted.

Levitt-Jones et al. (2007) have conducted extensive research on the topic in the area of nursing education examining the academic outcomes for students with respect to their experience of belonging. Through their various inquiries, not only do they validate the importance of belonging and human beings as social creatures, but also make the case for considerations of the topic’s relevance for communities and society proposing the topic be considered and better understood through a “lens of belongingness” (p. 210). They conclude that “not only is the experience of belonging personally fulfilling, there are also wider societal and community benefits that result” (p. 213). The authors advocate for promoting the concept of social capital theory for having benefits both individually and collectively, including “the connections among individuals and their social networks, as well as the reciprocity and mutuality that are a consequence of these connections” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992 as cited in Levitt-Jones, p. 213).

## **Relational dimensions – individual and community**

Vanier (2008) is the founder of L'Arche communities and a proponent of the belief that each human being “needs to belong, not just to one person but to a family, friends, a group, and a culture” (p.35). His passionate advocacy for the promotion of belonging also considers the consequence of alienation and loneliness, particularly with respect to marginalized and vulnerable individuals.

A society based on the Darwinian “survival of the fittest,” where we all fend for ourselves, has serious disadvantages. It promotes a strong, aggressive attitude and the need to win. It can paralyze the development of the heart, prevent healthy cooperation among people, and promote rivalry and enmity. (p. 51)

Likewise, Lord and Hutchison (2007) call for new pathways to support change and belonging as an antidote to vulnerability, social isolation, and a lack of community presence. They believe “vulnerability is socially constructed” (p.7) and that “community, hospitality, and relationships are crucial to social inclusion” providing the “essence of citizenship”. (p.11) Quoting Frazee, a disability activist, they identify community as a critical location to activate belonging.

“Citizenship means having rights, but it also means belonging...belonging in schools and universities, in places of work and places of worship, in politics, art and commerce; belonging in family, community, and nation.” Relationships are central to the inclusion process because they are the primary vehicle by which people gain access to other people and setting in their communities, and in turn, have opportunities to belong. (p.13)

Lord and Hutchison have written extensively on the social justice implications of exclusion and marginalization, particularly for people with disabilities. Their “new story” (2007) thesis expands the conversation beyond their historic advocacy for

this specific population to an elegant weaving of the interconnection of rights, belonging, and citizenship as they apply more generally to all citizens.

Indigenous scholars and their research encompass a diverse range of interests, geographical locations, cultures, and topics. While my research topic and methodology would not presume to take up an aboriginal world view, the work of indigenous academics has included explorations of the concept of belonging and influenced my thoughts. Hill (2006) explores a sense of belonging as connectedness specifically in relation to the worldview of the American Indian population. Drawing on the work of Lowe and Struthers (2001), Hill conceptualizes connection as foundational to “building, healing, taking risks, creating togetherness, cohesiveness, unfolding, interrelating with all, weaving, and transforming” (Lowe & Struthers as cited in Hill, 2001, p. 212). In particular, Hill identifies a “sense of belonging (as) a dynamic phenomenon of social significance that warrants further study” (p. 214).

Tuhiwai Smith (1999) identifies and examines indigenous research projects. One of these projects, of particular note to the theme of belonging, is “connectedness [which] positions individuals in sets of relationships with other people” (p. 148). While Tuhiwai Smith is specifically concerned with the value of connecting research projects to indigenous peoples, she notes that “connecting is related to issues of identity and place, to spiritual relationships and community wellbeing”; topics that transcend the indigenous world to offer the potential for “good relations” (p. 149) with others who may interact with them.

Ricks et al. (1999), emphasize that what is “more important than the designated space or location of the community is the relational nature of community members” (p. 32). The work of Block (2008) builds on this relational theme by defining community as being “about the experience of belonging” (p. xii). Block expands the meaning of belonging in three ways that are helpful to my thinking:

First and foremost, to belong is to be related to and part of something. It is membership, the experience of being at home in the broadest sense of the phrase...The opposite of belonging is to feel isolated and always (all ways) on the margin, an outsider...the second meaning of the word belong has to do with being an owner; something belongs to me. To belong to a community is to act as a creator and co-owner of that community. (p. xii)

Extending his thesis, Block (2008) states:

Belonging can also be thought of as a longing to be. Being is our capacity to find our deeper purpose in all that we do. It is the capacity to be present, and to discover our authenticity and whole selves. (p.xii)

Paul Born (2014) is a long time community activist. Like others, it is his belief that a sense of belonging is a deeply felt human need intrinsically tied to the health and vitality of our communities. He challenges us to “deepen community”, as a means of enhancing our sense of responsibility to the planet and to one another. Born advocates strengthening our relationships with one another, to invest in mutual acts of caring, which in turn cultivate a stronger sense of belonging.

....deepening community is to reach out and build the relationships that will help realize our longing for belonging and true safety; not just relationships but networks of relationships that we invest in, surrounding ourselves with people we care about and who care for us. This



investment pays great dividends; it helps us combat loneliness and fear, and it helps us see a clear difference between true community and false community. (p. 29)

Exploring the relational aspects of community is thus linked to an examination of how individual members come to feel what I describe as *a sense of belonging* so that they can act as creators and co-owners of the respective communities in which they seek membership and fulfill their longing to be.

### **The threats to belonging...**

My interest in this area of research, as mentioned earlier, has been informed by my experience in the community living movement in BC. As a part of that experience, I was privileged to be a part of the advocacy initiatives that spearheaded the successful closure of the major institutions in the province of British Columbia. This experience compelled my desire to further understand the threats to belonging; how marginalization and separation occurs. Institutions are a stark representation of what Foucault calls a “dividing practice” (Foucault as quoted in Rabinow, 1984, p.8). Separated from community, both literally and figuratively by highly stigmatizing architectural design, locked doors, and walled acreages, institutional settings proved highly successful mechanisms with which to build a narrative about difference, elevate fear, and create identities that justified exclusion.

In different fashions, using diverse procedures, and with a highly variable efficiency in each case, “the subject is objectified by a process of division either within himself or from others.” In this process of social objectification and categorization, human beings are given both a social and personal identify. Essentially “dividing practices” are modes of manipulation that

combine the mediation of a science (or a pseudo-science) and the practice of exclusion – usually in a spatial sense but always in a social one. (p. 8)

The early motivations for some of the custodial care provided to people with intellectual disabilities sprang from charitable intents, however over time, this dividing practice became a way of reinforcing a government sanctioned enterprise of exclusion of enormous numbers of citizens with disabilities all across Canada and throughout the world. Disability was not the only reason for institutionalization either; poverty, truancy, epilepsy, and being orphaned could all be reasons for admission. Separated and objectified, people's humanity was further eroded. As a result, individuals within institutions were often the victims of physical and sexual abuse, neglect, aversive therapies including restraint and isolation, and other violations of their human rights including involuntary sterilization procedures. These experiences were examined and confirmed by McCallum (2001) in *The Need to Know*, an administrative review of individual and systemic abuse at Woodlands School in New Westminster, British Columbia.

Inherent in a decision to systematically exclude, are decisions about “boundary maintenance”. As Yuval-Davis (2006) writes, there are “politics of belonging concerned with the boundaries of the political community of belonging, the boundaries that separate the world population into ‘us’ and ‘them’” (p. 204).

The politics of belonging includes also struggles around the determination of what is involved in belonging, in being a member of a community, and of what roles specific social locations and specific narratives of identity play in this. As such, it encompasses contestations both in relation to the participatory dimension of citizenship as well as in relation to issues of the status and entitlements such membership entails. (p. 205)

Although Yuval-Davis is discussing boundary maintenance primarily at the level of the nation, her analysis is helpful to my thinking.

Belonging is eroded further through the intriguing way in which policy conversations are constructed with respect to social problems such as poverty, addiction, and disability which are then used as ammunition to justify inaction or worse, regressive policies and practices that further disenfranchise already marginalized people. Stone (1997) describes the use of stories, and in particular the “blame-the-victim” (p. 143) narrative which erroneously locates control for the problem, and the solution, in the hands of those who are experiencing oppression and marginalization. This blame-the-victim frame is applied to homelessness, poverty, and other social issues.

There are many versions of the blame-the-victim story. The poor are poor because they seek instant pleasures instead of investing in their own futures, or because they choose to live off the dole rather than work. Third World countries are poor because they borrow too eagerly and allow their citizens to live too extravagantly. The sick are sick because they overeat, consume unhealthy foods, smoke, and don't exercise. Women are raped because they “ask for it.”...the blame-the-victim story always ends with an exhortation to the few (the victims) to reform their own behaviour in order to avoid the problem. (p. 144)

By creating narratives that blame the victim through criticism of their circumstances, there is an assertion that there is choice on the part of the “other”, thereby allowing an observer to conclude that either nothing can be done, or nothing should be to ameliorate the issue. The person or persons have exercised their choice, in essence, made their bed and so can now lie in it. A form of societal absolution is granted that suggests that separation from one

another and an absence of belonging are perfectly natural outcomes of individual choice instead of structural problems with access to the resources people need.

### **Social justice, love and transformation**

My exploration of the literature on belonging included the work of bell hooks and considerations of the Buddhist tenet of loving kindness as an expression of relational aspects of community life. hooks' explorations of a feminist defined love ethic bring her incisive intellect to bear on inspiring political action through love as an organizing principle to build community and address broader social justice issues which, for my purposes, include belonging. In reviewing the writing and thinking of hooks, my research interests have been extended to include the influences of Martin Luther King and Thich Nhat Hanh, and the ideals expressed in a renewed vision of the Beloved Community. In *All About Love*, hooks (2000) affirms that "spiritual life is first and foremost about commitment to a way of thinking and behaving that honours principles of inter-being and interconnectedness." (hooks, p. 77) In this regard, hooks echoes one of the most profound influences on her thinking and spirituality, Martin Luther King Jr., and his vision of the 'Beloved Community'.

King adopted the term *Beloved Community* to describe his vision and abiding commitment to build an inclusive human community defined by "genuine intergroup and interpersonal living – integration" (Smith & Zepp, 1974, p. 120). King privileged integration over desegregation, believing that while the latter could be legislated therefore enabling access to education, housing or

employment, achieving integration reflected a deeper, more sustained social commitment to full participation of black citizens and involved “personal and social relationships that are created by love...and therefore cannot be legislated” (Smith, Zepp, p. 120). King’s leadership of the civil rights movement was galvanized by his conviction that human beings are “tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality” (Smith & Zepp, p.121). It followed therefore that gains achieved on behalf of the black community could not fail to have benefit for the white community. King’s leadership was characterized by non-violence, a valuing of peace, justice and optimism; his actions a testimony to his belief “that the “I” cannot attain fulfillment without the “Thou” (Smith & Zepp, p. 121). The influence of Martin Luther King Jr. and his vision of the *Beloved Community*, the term he used to describe his vision of an inclusive human community defined by “genuine intergroup and interpersonal living” (Smith & Zepp, 1974, p. 120), also offers my research area a metaphor that sings of justice, co-creation and belonging.

Although hooks does not believe she has the requisite credentials to declare herself a “real” (hooks, 2006, p. 1) Buddhist, it is clear from her writing that she is working directly from the tenets of Buddhist spirituality and is articulating her ever evolving, transformation agenda through this lens. hooks is specifically interested in the Buddhist practice of loving-kindness, a practice which encourages inquisitiveness about life’s questions, aware that the answers may be both bitter and sweet. In her analysis of the causes of domination, injustice and conflict, hooks believes that “many of us carry a “wound of the

heart” that emerged in childhood conditioning, creating a disconnection from the loving openness that is our nature” (hooks, 2006, p. 3). This wound produces behaviour that leads to a world struggling with stress, distress, and despair and human interactions which reflect distrust, disrespect and misunderstanding. For hooks, being loving and exercising a love ethic, offers an antidote to pain and when committed to in our daily lives, shatters dominator actions and thinking. For hooks, social justice movements must be built on love.

Domination cannot exist in any social situation where a love ethic prevails...When love is present the desire to dominate and exercise power cannot rule the day. All the great social movements for freedom and justice in our society have promoted a love ethic. Concern for the collective good of our nation, city, or neighbour rooted in the values of love makes us all seek to nurture and protect that good. If all public policy was created in the spirit of love, we would not have to worry about unemployment, homelessness, schools failing to teach children, or addiction. (hooks, 2000a, p. 98)

Darder & Miron (2006) assert that “love and understanding” must imbue our scholarship noting that “love ... means to comprehend that the moral and the material are inextricably linked” (p.18). Although specifically advocating for love in the context of critical pedagogical responsibilities, the authors’ considerations of the moral/material relationship are wholly relevant to my research.

... this concept of love as a political principle through which we struggle to create mutually life-enhancing opportunities for all people. It is grounded in the mutuality and interdependence of our human existence—that which we share, as much as that which we do not. This is a love nurtured by the act of relationship itself. (Eagleton as cited in Darder & Miron, p. 18)

The literature on the topics of the human need for belonging, the nature of exclusion, the impact of deprivation in belongingness, and social justice implications all served to validate and inform my interest in this area of inquiry.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology and Method**

This chapter includes information regarding the philosophical and theoretical influences which have guided my methodological choices. In addition, my choice of method, research questions, participants, theme analysis, and my attendance to the ethical considerations associated with my inquiry are described.

### **Methodological Framework and Influences**

This qualitative research inquiry was guided by a critical, feminist, and anti-oppressive framework. The perspectives of Indigenous scholars also provided helpful interpretations of ideas I was exploring from their worldview and emerging research methodologies. My interest in this area of research has been personally informed by both feminist theory, as encapsulated by the phrase the 'personal is political', and social change activism via my experience first in the women's movement, and then later in the community living movement in British Columbia. As noted earlier, for over thirty years I have had the privilege of working with individuals with intellectual disabilities in support of self advocacy and rights based projects, or have led organizations that provided an array of supports as part of their community based service delivery. My experience supporting people with intellectual disabilities who have historically been victims of abuse, isolation, and marginalization, has shaped my liberatory values base and served to deepen my awareness and analysis of the issues of oppression and 'othering'. I embarked on my inquiry in part to honour my longstanding



commitments to promoting social change and to fulfill my desire to continue to play an active role in that change through advancing the conversation on belonging.

After a review of the literature, I intuitively felt that an inquiry into belonging, and the nuances of the concept, was best suited to a qualitative research approach. Kirby & McKenna (1989) provide legitimacy for qualitative research and assert that “doing research is a human activity...when we engage in research we include ourselves in a process in which we construct meaning” (p. 25). Further, their tenet that “knowledge is socially constructed and social interactions form the bases of social knowledge” (p. 26) reflect my own values and beliefs. In addition to these attributes of qualitative inquiries, my intent was to delve deeply into the subject of belonging with a purposefully selected group of interviewees, engaging with them in a dialogue that would fall more “within the context of discovery rather than verification” (Ambert et al, 1995, p. 880). As such, I activated a research process that placed an emphasis on how my research participants constructed their meaning of the concept, explicitly focusing on neither imposing my own understanding or definition of belonging on them.

Esterberg (2002) offers the perspective that “qualitative researchers try to understand social processes in context...paying attention to the subjective nature of human life—not only the subjective experiences of those they are studying but also the subjectivity of the researcher themselves” (p. 2). My experiences and commitment to social justice from involvement in advocacy within both the community living and broader social service community have provided me with a

perspective and values about the importance of belonging and an interest in the relationship between a strong sense of belonging and positive individual and community outcomes.

I regard myself as a critical feminist, an identity which has helped inform my beliefs and values about how knowledge is created and what knowledge is valued, and also serves to frame my interpretation of social relations, oppression, and power. Ramazanoglu & Holland (2002) advise feminists to critique what we consider “counts as authoritative knowledge” (p. 152) in order to “give voice to personal, experiential and emotional aspects of existence” (p. 155), thereby legitimizing “what we have to say about our own lives and the lives of others, and how the conditions of those lives might be transformed” (Strega & Brown, 2005, p. 7). Likewise, Moss (1993) asserts that “a feminist conception of social science contends that that which is experienced can be known; and that which can be known, can be changed” (p. 48). Applying feminist research principles has specifically honoured my commitments to advancing social change by examining how the participants I interviewed experience belonging, and give voice to the personal, experiential and emotional aspects of their existence. Through this examination, I am now better able to draw conclusions about how to continue my commitment to transform the experience of marginalization and exclusion to one of membership and belonging.

Feminism provides me with a worldview, if not necessarily a method. Natural scientist Cindy Cowden defines feminist research as stemming from two “personal beliefs: that reductionist science is inadequate to understand

organisms, whether they are spiders, starfish or women; [and] that we can only understand organisms by seeing with a loving eye” (Cowden as cited in Reinharz, 1992, p. 3). The need for a “loving eye” is intrinsically bound to my topic; for me belonging is linked to relationships, and feeling strongly and intimately connected to others.

Reinharz (1992) emphasizes that themes that characterize feminist research include the aim of creating social change, intentionality in the relationship between the researcher and the topic, and a desire to represent the fullness of human diversity (p. 240). Ramazanoglu & Holland (2002) characterize feminist knowledge as “dependent on judgements about the justice of social relationships, on theories of power and the morality of social investigation.” (p. 3) I am keenly aware of what I have come to regard as the immorality of exclusion and alienation and seek, through my inquiry, to discern the means by which to ameliorate what I perceive to be the injustices associated with these actions.

Kovach (2005), writing as an Indigenous woman academic, describes her worldview as rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing that “encompass the spirit of collectivity, reciprocity and respect” (Wilson, as cited in Kovach, p. 28) and which honour the Elders’ belief that “if you have important things to say, speak from the heart” (p. 28). Kovach also identifies two themes of Indigenous methodology that I feel are relevant and cross the borders of our respective cultures, specifically *the relational* and *the collective*. Relational themes concern the inclusivity of all life forms and a “deep respect for other living beings” (p. 30) while the collective

is “woven within the philosophical premise of relationship” (p. 30). Further, “inherent in this understanding of life is reciprocity and accountability to each other, the community, clans and nations. It is a way of life that creates a sense of belonging, place, and home...” (p. 30)

Tuhiwai Smith (1999) identifies a complex and intertwined array of Indigenous research projects she believes will assist with self-determination, control of destinies, and the survival of peoples and their cultures and languages. One of these critical, Indigenous research projects concerns “connecting” which “positions individuals in sets of relationships with other people and with the environment.” (p. 148). Connecting is also “related to issues of identity and place, to spiritual relationships and community well-being” (p. 149). Tuhiwai Smith’s research project on connecting, while particularly significant for colonized and oppressed Indigenous peoples, is not solely applicable to their circumstance. It is my premise that an absence of belonging impacts on survival, self-determination, issues of identity, and relationships which have resonance both individually and collectively. My research is intended to confirm what I believe is the potent link between the sense of belonging an individual feels, with others and with his or her community, and how that sense of belonging contributes to the well-being of the collective.

My research methodology is also influenced by critical social science purposes wherein research is conducted with an intent to “critique and transform social relations” (Neuman, 1997, p. 74) and fuelled by a desire to change the world, thereby asserting the researcher’s responsibility and role as a

“transformative intellectual” (Guba & Lincoln in Neuman, p. 79). I am deeply interested in the subject of belonging, the inequities I perceive that are associated with isolation and separation, and wish my inquiry to be supportive of social change.

Critical research can be best understood in the context of the empowerment of individuals. Inquiry that aspires to the name critical must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or sphere within the society. Research thus becomes a transformative endeavour unembarrassed by the label “political” and unafraid to consummate a relationship with an emancipatory consciousness. (Kincheloe & McLaren in Neuman, 1997, p. 74)

### **The Research Questions**

My research inquiry was designed to investigate two central questions. The first question focused on **how do social justice leaders and advocates broadly define and understand the concept of “a sense of belonging”**. This first question was further explored through dialogue which included several sub-questions.

- ✦ When and how have you experienced a sense of belonging in your life?
- ✦ How has your professional work and experience influenced your perspectives on the topic of belonging?
- ✦ Has there been an “aha” moment with respect to the importance of belonging as a commitment in your work? If so, what precipitated that moment?
- ✦ In your opinion, are there commonalities or similarities between the concepts of inclusion and belonging? Please describe them.

- ✦ Do you see a distinction between the concept of inclusion and belonging? If yes, what is that distinction?

The second, central question of my inquiry focused on the participant's viewpoints regarding the link between belonging and individual and collective well-being, and **how might promoting belonging serve to address pernicious social justice issues**. This question was further explored through the following sub-questions:

- ✦ In your experience is there a link between a sense of belonging and individual well-being? If so, how?
- ✦ From your experience, is there a link between a sense of belonging and collective well-being? Again, if so, what is that link?
- ✦ In your experience, can social justice issues such as marginalization, discrimination, poverty, and isolation be ameliorated by promoting a sense of belonging? How?
- ✦ How can a sense of belonging be fostered?

### **Method of the Inquiry: In-Depth Interviews**

In order to authentically pursue my inquiry into belonging, I was careful to select a method which would emphasize process as well as outcome. To that end, I chose to conduct in-depth, individual interviews with a selection of five individuals whose work and advocacy indicated to me that they have thought deeply about the topic. Miller and Crabtree (2004) describe the "interview as a partnership on a conversational research journey" (p. 185) that is "personal and

intimate, with an emphasis on ‘depth, detail, vividness and nuance.’” (p. 188) Esterberg (2002) and Oakley (1990), recommend in-depth interviews as the appropriate method for research meant to elicit stories and personal narratives that can facilitate the co-creation of meaning on a topic through the active partnership cultivated in a respectful interview experience. In-depth interviews provided the interactive crucible to explore, in critical and loving ways, my respondents’ comprehensions of their experiences and beliefs, as well as my own, and build a richer analysis of what belonging means.

The choice of in-depth interviews was also particularly suitable for my inquiry as my participants, all being public figures, were familiar and comfortable with interviews as a means of communication, thus facilitating their successful engagement with this method. Further, my own familiarity and experience with interviewing is extensive and has been honed through practice in a variety of work settings and with a variety of individuals. As a result, my confidence and competency with interviewing contributed to my decision to choose this method for my research. It was vital to me that the interview experience would serve to create a sense of confidence in both the process and myself as the person conducting the inquiry. I placed an emphasis on building a respectful connection with each participant to emphasize my regard for their opinions and contribution to my research. I believe these measures helped to facilitate their trust in the authenticity and value of my inquiry.

Interviews were designed to engage participants on the subject of belonging and, as is characteristic of in-depth, qualitative research, utilized open-

ended questions to meet my goal of gathering rich, thick accounts. Interviews varied in length from one to one-and-one-half hours in length. Each participant consented to the interview being tape recorded. Interviews were conducted in person at a location in either Victoria or Vancouver, British Columbia convenient for the participant; either their office or a borrowed office space, in order to ensure privacy and an uninterrupted conversation. One participant, a resident of the United States, was able to be interviewed while on a lecture tour in British Columbia. I transcribed each of the interviews to ensure an accurate and complete record of our conversation. Participants were sent their transcribed interview and invited to provide feedback if desired. Only one person provided any further commentary which was received and recorded via a follow-up telephone conversation.

### **The Participants**

My own professional sphere has provided me with connections to a diverse community of writers, activists, community workers, and social innovators whom I drew from for the interview selection. I initially generated a 'wish' list of possible participants which was ultimately shortened to five candidates to be manageable for the purposes of this inquiry. In selecting potential participants, I was interested in people who could provide a broad range of responses to my interview questions and therefore aimed for diversity in gender, age, experience, and practice. I also felt that the diversity of their experience and perspectives regarding the theme of belonging would expand and illustrate the relevance of



the topic beyond the boundaries of specific professions, advocacy issues, or particular locations.

My list of participants was ultimately drawn from among leaders in Canada and the United States. I recruited participants from within the community of writers and social change leaders who have identified belonging as a priority area of personal interest and professional activity. All five are considered to have comprehensive and authoritative knowledge within their respective fields of endeavour which include disability activism, social innovation, social justice, and community building. Each participant has developed a public profile for their work. Additionally, they have become identified with social change, advocacy, and community led responses to marginalization and belonging. In considering potential participants, I also deliberately considered individuals whose work and values would honour my desire to employ critical, feminist, and anti-oppressive theories and concepts. Their professional resumes reflect diversity and maturity of experience; each participant appeared to have arrived at the topic of belonging as a critical question and commitment. Each brought a thoughtful, mature, and nuanced perspective to the topic confirming my belief that the subject and relevance of belonging extended beyond the world of disability and boundaries of specific professions, perspectives, or particular cultural practices.

The participant group included both men and women, 50+ years of age, university educated, and in positions of leadership within their professional sectors. The participants I recruited for my study were:

Ms. Vickie Cammack, CEO Tyze and Founding Director of PLAN Institute for Caring Citizenship;

Sara, a senior provincial government staff person working in British Columbia who chose to remain anonymous;

Ms. Jennifer Charlesworth, author, consultant, Director: Core BC-the Centre for Dialogue and Learning on Community Practice, and principal: Options Consulting;

Mr. David Pitonyak, author, consultant and trainer: Imagine; and,

Mr. Ric Matthews, Director of Regional Operations, Community Living BC and, former Executive Director of First United Church Mission.

More detailed biographical information on each participant will be presented in the next chapter.

I deeply respect the privilege I have been given in having had access to the individuals I interviewed and the trust they have placed in me in pursuing this work and reflecting our conversations in my analysis. As Ramazanoglu & Holland (2002) assert, “no social researcher starts from scratch in a state of social, intellectual or political isolation” (p. 148). For many of those I interviewed, my status was that of an “insider” with some level of pre-existing connection to them. Further, herising (2005) describes a tension I was mindful of in considering,

...the notion that there is a fixed point or moment when one is a researcher or when one does research. I want to envision each and every process of researching as thresholds, where we critically attend to the complexities, tension, and possibilities of arrival and exits, and where we are accountable to our different research relationships within various passageways. (p. 129)

Attention to self-reflexivity was paramount as my understandings and sense of my own belonging inevitably shifted throughout the process. herising further challenged me to consider that “self-reflexivity is, moreover, not an individual activity, but an interactive process which relies upon a social network of

exchanges” (Braidotti, as cited in herising, p. 133). I chose to honour this responsibility through several means: by maintaining a journal of reflections; accessing support from my thesis supervisor and committee; and through my continuing affiliations with my peers, many of whom were and are keen to discuss the topic of belonging and have provided support to me throughout this process.

### **Analytical Process**

As mentioned, I personally completed the transcription of each interview. Observing Esterberg (2002) and Cresswell’s (2009) advice regarding open coding, I first worked through each transcript, question by question, highlighting and beginning to identify emerging themes, and organizing them into categories per question and interviewee. This process was iterative and layered; I was looking for connecting threads among the experiences and responses and for emerging ideas and resonant phrases from our conversations. The open coding process eventually identified recurring themes which then initiated a more focused coding process. I chose to create word documents for these themes which incorporated the key words and phrases as well as quotes I felt were most illustrative of them. This focused coding process was reflective of the process suggested by Esterberg regarding analysis in qualitative inquiries which involves working with the data, through an iterative process to “bring it down to size and make it more manageable.” (p. 166) This process facilitated my ability to begin to discern a flow for the presentation of my conversations with the participants.

In pursuing my analysis, I was repeatedly struck by the passion and sincerity of each of the participants and how deeply they thought about belonging. I have thus chosen to use their quotes verbatim both to honour the substance of their contributions and to highlight the often poetic ways in which they described experiences, ideas, and beliefs. It is my sincere hope that the resulting analysis does justice to the privilege I felt in interviewing these five individuals and to the exchange which occurred between us.

### **Ethical Considerations**

My personal values and commitments to equality, respect for diversity, and ethical practice have always been important hallmarks of my work in community and on behalf of others. I brought that personal philosophy and belief system to the process of designing this research project and the ethical responsibilities associated with my inquiry. As such, every effort was made to anticipate and avoid any possible violations of the standards of ethical practice as I proceeded. As my research involved human participants, I was bound by the responsibilities and ethics of the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board and their Guidelines for Applications for Ethical Review of Human Research (2008). With the support of my thesis Supervisor, I drafted my ethics application and submitted it for review. My proposal for this inquiry was examined, as were sample letters requesting participant involvement (see Appendix 1), sample letter of consent (see Appendix 2), and sample interview

questions (Appendix 3). Upon receipt of approval for my study, I proceeded with contacting the participants.

Informed consent was sought and received from each of the five participants (see consent form in Appendix 2). A written invitation was sent to each person which included detailed information about the purpose and objectives of my research and described the interview process and time commitment they would be asked for (see Appendix 1). The benefits and possible risks of participation were outlined, as were the means by which I would protect both their confidentiality (if requested) and the data gathered from the interviews I conducted. The participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the research project or decline to answer any of the questions in the interview at any time without explanation. One participant requested anonymity and their identifying information has been protected in accordance with that request. A pseudonym has been employed in citing any of their responses in this thesis.

Another document, containing similar information, was provided to each participant both as part of the initial correspondence and then again at the beginning of the interview sessions. The information contained therein was reviewed with each participant prior to beginning the interview and then each individual was asked to sign and date this document to formally acknowledge their informed consent. A copy was provided to each person for their records. This process provided another opportunity to ask questions and/or seek

clarification regarding any aspects of the study, the interview process, and their participation.

All participants contributed to this research on a voluntary basis; neither they nor I stood to gain any benefit from our interaction or their involvement in my inquiry. Further, given the familiarity each participant had with the interview process, their ability to preview the questions before hand, and their knowledge of the subject matter, I felt confident that none would experience any risk from their participation. I also undertook responsibility for protecting the audiotapes, transcripts and my computer data; each was stored in a secure location and my computer was password protected. My thesis supervisor was the only other person, other than me, who had access to the raw data.

The ethical considerations and actions described above detail my attention to the responsibilities of informed consent, confidentiality, relationships with my research participants and my personal commitments to ethical practice and respect for the inquiry's method.

## **Chapter 4: The Nuances of the Experience**

This chapter will provide the first part of my analysis of the conversations with my research participants where we explored what a sense of belonging means to them, when and how they have experienced belonging, how their professional work and experiences have influenced their perspectives on the topic, and a particular “aha” moment that has galvanized their commitment to belonging in their lives.

### **Introducing the participants and their stories**

Thomas King is of Cherokee and Greek descent and a renowned novelist, broadcaster, playwright, and teacher. In his book *The Truth About Stories* (2003) he explores how stories shape who we are and how we understand and interact with other people. He offers, “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (p. 2). Similarly, Brene Brown, in a widely distributed Ted Talk, says that “maybe stories are just data with a soul” (2010). I chose to conduct interviews with five individuals who were reflective about their personal experiences and often offered vignettes to enhance their responses to my questions. I have provided these profiles of each of them both as a means of honouring their stories as well as to help set the context with respect to our conversations and how each of them understand belonging.

## **Vickie Cammack**

Vickie describes herself as “blessed in the multitude of experiences that have helped her experience a sense of belonging” which she believes have led to “all kinds of reflections and refinements about what belonging is.” As testament to this, her career, particularly in the past twenty-five years, has been devoted to thinking about and enabling relationships in whatever way possible. Vickie is the founder and CEO of TYZE Personal Networks, a web-based platform that helps connect people, and is internationally recognized for her leadership and innovations related to social networks, social innovation, citizenship, and disability. Vickie is also the Founding Director of PLAN Institute and co-founder of Planner Lifetime Advocacy Network (PLAN), a pioneering social enterprise supporting families to plan for the future of their family member with a disability. She created PLAN’s Personal Network initiative and has mentored the development of groups in 40 locations throughout the world.

For her work, Vickie has been awarded the 2012 BC Community Achievement Award, the 2012 Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal, the Meritorious Service Medal of Canada, the Community Living Institute’s Leadership Award, the Canadian Psychological Association’s Humanitarian Award, and Simon Fraser University President’s Club Distinguished Community Leadership Award. She is a Fellow with Social Innovation Generation, a partnership between the University of Waterloo, MaRS, and J.W. McConnell



Family Foundation. In 2008, the Women's Executive Network defined her as one of Canada's Top 100 Most Powerful Women.

Earlier in her career, Vickie was the founding Director of the Family Support Institute, a family led advocacy organization in B.C. She has taught and designed curriculum for colleges and universities and currently writes, consults, and lectures on social networks, organizational transformation, and social innovation. She is also the co-author of "Safe and Secure – Six Steps to Creating a Personal Future Plan for People with Disabilities." Vickie lives in the lower mainland of British Columbia.

### **Jennifer Charlesworth**

Jennifer Charlesworth has had an accomplished and diverse career providing leadership in the health and human service sectors for over 34 years. She has alternated between community, government, academic and private 'worlds' of practice, fulfilling a variety of roles including frontline practitioner, manager, executive leader, teacher, consultant, founder, board member, and volunteer. These experiences have served to deepen her commitments to building strong communities that welcome and nurture all citizens. In her words, "maybe our finest work as practitioners is not about teaching curriculums or programs but about how to create the space for people to build their own relationships and community."

Jennifer was the Executive Director of the Federation of Community Social Services of BC, an advocacy organization of contracted service providers, and

the first Director of CoreBC – an applied research and learning development arm of that organization. At CoreBC, she developed the *Leadership 2020 Program* to bridge the talents and skills of emergent and legacy leaders in the social sector. She continues to provide leadership for this initiative. Jennifer returned to her private practice as the principal of Options Consulting, through which she trains and provides her consulting expertise on a wide variety of issues including community engagement practices, leadership development, strategic planning, action learning, and child and family practice. She is the author of several books addressing social capital creation in communities and dealing with complex situations in human service practice.

Jennifer also applies her extensive professional experience as a member of a variety of advisory committees and non-profit boards including several performing arts groups in her community as well as BC Partners for Social Impact and CoLab. Jennifer is the recipient of the Graduate Teaching Award and the Distinguished Alumni Award at the University of Victoria and the Women of Distinction Award for Community Service. Jennifer has a PhD in Child and Youth Care from the University of Victoria and is also an Art of Hosting practitioner. Jennifer lives in Victoria and is the very proud mother of two equally accomplished young women.

### **Ric Matthews**

Ric Matthews was appointed the Director of Regional Operations for Community Living BC in March 2013. Community Living BC is the provincial

crown agency mandated under the Community Living Authority Act to deliver supports and services to adults with developmental disabilities and their families in British Columbia. Ric is responsible for both the Vancouver Coastal and Vancouver Island regions in this capacity.

Prior to this appointment Ric worked for several years in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside as the Executive Director at First United Church Mission and later as the Executive Director of New Way Community. Ric has served as an ordained minister in the United Church of Canada and in the Methodist Church of South Africa. It was during his tenure at First United, that we met to conduct the interview for my thesis. Shortly thereafter, Ric resigned from his role there. His departure was due to irreconcilable differences between his vision of sanctuary, where the city's most marginalized citizens could find shelter and welcome, escalating demands on the part of external regulatory bodies regarding safety and occupancy numbers, as well as his own church's growing anxiety about the legal ramifications of transforming their building into a shelter.

In Johannesburg, his ministry included four inner-city churches where he witnessed the harsh realities of extreme poverty, injustice, violence, and apartheid. He has had the privilege of working with Desmond Tutu on a number of joint Anglican-Methodist inner city projects, including the Methodist Church of South Africa Committees for Justice and Reconciliation, and Christian Education and Youth. During the first democratic election in South Africa, Ric chaired the local Peace Committee and the Reconstruction & Development Committee for the Johannesburg East region. He describes his experience of the "evil of

apartheid” as fundamental to galvanizing his commitment to social justice particularly in the ways that apartheid served to not only “dehumanize the black South African” but also “those who embraced” its tenets.

Ric has also contributed his considerable expertise within the corporate world in the area of change leadership as a private consultant with Radical Momentum Consulting. He has supported World Vision International in implementing organizational change across their offices in 105 countries around the world. Ric’s experience spans over 25 years in leading organizational development and change management projects in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Canada, the USA and Thailand.

Ric is a husband, father, and delighted and doting grandfather. He lives in Vancouver, British Columbia.

### **David Pitonyak**

David believes we have “social brains that are most comforted when we have a sense that we are connected to the pack...it is for our benefit that we are attached or connected”. For over thirty-five years, David’s career has focused on building new stories with and for people who are labelled disabled. In particular, he provides his expertise in supporting positive approaches to difficult behaviours, believing that behaviours are messages which can teach us important things about a person and his or her surroundings, needs, and interpretation of the world. David is passionate in his conviction that “we are driven to be in relationship, it’s necessary for us to survive” – his passionate

belief that “loneliness is often the greatest disability” is frequently woven into his teaching and consulting work.

David works to enhance the ability of those who support people with diverse abilities to operate with curiosity and compassionate hearts in how they interpret and understand the meaning of behaviours. He believes that reinterpreting behaviours from the perspective of what the individual needs, wants, and is endeavouring to communicate, is the path to enhancing the quality of life of those who receive supports and to promoting dignity and capacity in the provision of human services. He often uses stories as a way of promoting values and ethical actions. His stories are designed to reframe assumptions about who people are; thereby helping rebuild broken connections for individuals who have been marginalized by their disabilities and separated from authentic belonging.

David has worked on the front lines of service delivery as a direct support worker at the Vermont State Hospital supporting children who experience autism. His experience at this institution led to a variety of different roles: as a house parent, as a behavioural consultant in a community mental health program, as the director of a sheltered workshop, and eventually mentoring job coaches throughout the state of Vermont. After completing his doctorate, he established his private consulting practice which is called Imagine.

David also provides his consulting expertise on the topic of workplace culture. He is particularly interested in promoting healthy organizations which he believes are characterized by active participation in decision-making, the provision of person centred supports, and the sincere willingness to engage in

regular evaluation of their success by scrutinizing the degree to which they live up to their promises to those they serve.

David provides his consultation supports to individuals, families, and professionals throughout North America, England, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and the Netherlands. He holds an undergraduate degree in political science, a Masters in Special Education and a Doctorate in Urban Services Program from the Developmental Disabilities Track at Virginia Commonwealth University. David lives in Blacksburg, Virginia with his family and is the author of several resources, many of which include stories.

## **Sara**

Only one of my research participants requested anonymity due to her current position within her organization, thus a pseudonym has been used for her comments. For over thirty years, Sara has held a variety of positions in the disability sector, including senior administrative roles in both the non-profit sector and in government in two, western Canadian provinces. Sara holds a Masters in Educational Psychology from the University of Calgary and was one of five senior leaders awarded a one-year sabbatical from the Muttart Foundation to develop training curricula for individuals working in the human services sector supporting people with developmental disabilities. In addition, Sara has provided her expertise as a presenter on topics including program innovation and development, service delivery, social marketing, and social enterprise at conferences in British Columbia, Alberta, and the United States.

Like others of my research cohort, Sara's career in support of people with developmental disabilities has provided her with a unique window with which to scrutinize the isolation and marginalization so many of them experienced. As such, Sara became deeply committed to being an advocate for change, in her words, "supporting others to see the possibilities for success". Her self-declared motto is "everyone belongs". Throughout her career, Sara has always worked to effect societal change for people with disabilities through facilitating collaborative, community based initiatives which focus on harnessing the influence of relationships with and between a variety of community stakeholders in order to advocate and network to improve quality of life, and enhance community capacity to welcome and include persons with disabilities. In particular, Sara has been a strong voice for community services to be available, accessible, and appropriate. She is active in promoting employment for people with disabilities, which in her estimation is an essential ingredient in supporting their full participation in society. Sara lives in a Western Canadian province.

Without exception, the five individuals who participated in my interviews were extremely generous in sharing their time, their accumulated wisdom, and their curiosity about the thoughts and ideas we were discussing in support of my research project. Each engaged in the conversations in a wholehearted and candid manner. A breadth of professional, educational, and personal experiences have informed their perspectives on the subject of belonging and as I learned, the topic has grown in meaning and importance for them, ultimately emerging as an area that occupies their critical analysis and pondering and helping to thereby

further validate and explicate my area of inquiry. In the following sections of this chapter, I will provide the flavour of my conversations with each of the individuals I interviewed as they address the first central question regarding belonging.

### **A sense of belonging**

My interviews began with asking how each person defined and understood a sense of belonging; their descriptions offered me evocative descriptions creating a layered and interwoven interpretation of the concept which helped to establish a foundation for the questions that followed. From their responses, I learned that a sense of belonging is known by the heart and felt in the body, witnessed in the reciprocity of interdependent relationships, and reaffirmed in terms of our place in the social order of our communities.

### **The heart knows, the body feels...**

In their descriptions of belonging, the five participants offered similar imagery to express what they perceived as a sensation of belonging; known and felt in a body-based and experiential manner. Describing belonging as an “amazing word”, Vickie contextualized her response by offering that most of us have had had the unpleasant experience of knowing what “it means not to belong” but attempts to describe the alternative tend toward the “more amorphous” and are therefore difficult to quantify. For her a sense of belonging is two-fold: “...part of feeling a part of something...a set of connections, a shared activity, an initiative, a family, a definable something, and it’s also feeling a



shared responsibility for that something". Further, for Vickie a sense of belonging can and potentially will have an experiential quality which she described as "an actual, visceral, lived experience" captured in moments that are "luminescent...we cast our eyes around the room and recognize that we are part of this whole".

In a similar vein, Ric offered that a sense of belonging is a "deeply felt experience" rather than an "intellectual description of a state". Two significant life experiences have informed his thinking on the topic: his involvement in the Christian church and exploration of faith, and growing up in South Africa under apartheid. As a member of a Christian community, Ric described his earliest interpretation of sin as "essentially alienation from God and from other human beings... the crudest sense of my early Sunday school was sin separates". By extension, he extrapolated that death comes from separation, and not connecting, so that "life comes therefore from belonging and from being incorporated" into the world. Faith combined with studies in pastoral psychology, including influences from the work of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, extended his earliest notions about the consequences of separation and affirmed his belief in the value of relationships, belonging, and the necessity of promoting "authentic interactions between human beings". Witnessing the injustices of apartheid, from his place of relative societal privilege, further reinforced his thinking about the polarity of belonging and alienation. He came to understand the relational sanctuary that some church communities offered; a place where black and white people were able to know each other as colleagues and equals.

He saw another world, and other possibilities for how people could be with one another, possibilities which he felt could only be achieved through adopting a different philosophy and by pursuing active engagement in social justice work.

David believes we yearn to belong, and that this yearning arises from a biological imperative which compels us to satisfy our innate desire to connect. In particular, David believes that our “social brains enjoy it when we are connected to the pack...the tribe...it’s for our benefit that we are attached and connected for survival”. While the evolutionary conditions that created the imperative for this survival strategy may have changed and diminished for many of us, the ancient emotional, muscle memory is retained. David offered that:

...lots of what our work is, lots of what we construct around us, are conditions that help us feel more of that...we are hungry for that in a way. We have to get fresh air. We have to put good food into our bodies that gives us sustenance. In the same way, we are driven to be in relationship, it’s necessary for us to survive.

David added that he believes our biological motivations are enhanced by another human “evolutionary add-on” that lets us think about things, in essence to be “conscious of our consciousness”. This consciousness provides us with both the capacity and desire to make meaning of our need to belong by creating “stories that we tell ourselves about what belonging is” in order to assist with interpreting our place and connections in the world. The stories help us examine and further reinforce the positive and negative aspects of how we interpret our interactions – in David’s words, “a response to this incredible biology of ours.”

Similarly, Jennifer described belonging as both a yearning and a basic need, and challenging Maslow’s (1970) hierarchical model, “not something that

only manifests itself when everything else is taken care of.” For her, a sense of belonging is also visceral – “I know it when I feel it personally and when I see it.” Utilizing the metaphor of a journey, Jennifer reflected that she has become aware that her sense of belonging is an “unfolding understanding”. While initially cultivated by being connected to others through friendships and shared activities, her sense of belonging has been further nuanced by her political activism and professional experiences from which issues of citizenship, rights, participation, and voice emerged as elements of an expanded understanding. For Jennifer, the sense of belonging is “a core feeling” which must be buttressed by demonstrated integrity and authenticity in order to truly trust the experience.

Sara also described a sense of belonging as an experience she feels and which has emerged through the various roles she plays: wife, mother, friend, daughter, and the social activities she engages in. Likening these connections to “a tapestry that I’ve been part of weaving and other people have woven themselves into to create”, she reiterated a theme similar to the other participants, that belonging is “very intuitive” for her. Sara went on to say that,

I think a sense of belonging is having a place...feeling comfortable, feeling that you are loved and valued...my sense of belonging is all of the people, the networks that I have, the relationships...that help me create a world where I feel I belong and that I can connect with people.

These relationships provide her with reassurance that she belongs. Sara works to sustain them by actively seeking out activities that can provide and nurture this feeling such as kayaking or hiking with a group of friends.

## **In the space between us...**

In their descriptions, each of the participants also emphasized the relational qualities of interdependence and reciprocity that they believe are characteristic of authentic belonging. Vickie alluded to these aspects in her responses when she initially described her sense of belonging as “not only feeling a part of something but also a shared responsibility for that something.” It is this mutuality which she believes can support building an affinity with people who we may perceive to be different from ourselves, through cultivating shared experiences that promote belonging and provide opportunities for the differences to be less of a barrier. For Vickie, “...belonging involves contribution of some kind,...when we’re seen as contributors we’re valued and become a part of, which leads to citizenship and so on...belonging and meaning, the meaning comes from contribution.” The challenge for those who are labelled, often negatively, in society, by virtue of disability, poverty, language, culture, or other distinctions, is to be valued for the contribution that is uniquely theirs. As a particular illustration of this, Vickie offered that “for many of our family and friends who live with differing abilities, often it is by virtue of the fact that they don’t speak that they make a profound contribution to us because suddenly we find ourselves listening differently.”

Similarly, Jennifer identified how her initial sense of belonging emerged from learning about the critical interdependence inherent in being part of a sailboat crew where she knew and felt the intensity of a shared responsibility for

each other's survival on the ocean. Each person's contribution was essential; their success in the shared endeavour relied on the interdependence. Her adult roles and experiences, particularly her work in the community living movement and with vulnerable children and youth, have led her to examine how having a voice and the choice to participate were critical to her sense of how belonging and reciprocity were intertwined. More recently, as a result of her volunteer work in Africa, Jennifer has begun to explore reciprocity through two concepts which resonate and entwine at both a personal and spiritual level for her.

It's like that notion of ubuntu or Namaste...the divine in me honours the divine in you. And there is that kind of 'I'm happy you're here, you're happy I'm here' and so in the states between us a lot of things are possible....that's how we belong in relationship.

Despite obvious need, and other deprivations present in the country she was volunteering in, along with the scourge of a dictatorship at the political level, Jennifer frequently witnessed authentic experiences of belonging between people. She found them in the intimacy of relationships and expressed in the "little stuff like touches and ruffles on the head, and laughter...the older men passing along the drum to the younger boys and letting them make mistakes and teaching...the girls working together on something..." These experiences offered her a new perspective regarding belonging; how the space between people must invite and honour the possibility of relationship in order to cultivate the conditions for belonging.

My conversation with Ric also highlighted the concept of ubuntu with respect to belonging. Through his relationship with Desmond Tutu, he came to

adopt the concept which he heard articulated as “I am only fully human, when others are fully human. I am a person through other people. We are interdependent”. For Ric the moments where he is in the presence of this spirit of being fully human are “touched by the sacred” and represent his best description of true belonging. He offered, “you can feel it in your heart. There are certain things that you just see and experience and encounter ...it takes your breath away” in the intimacy and profundity of the awareness of our interdependence and vulnerability as human beings. Ric’s exploration of the commitments associated with the concept of ubuntu translated into what he describes as “part of my philosophy of life”. They have fuelled his activism and involvement in social justice activities based on building a world that celebrates our common humanity and privileges authentic interactions between people; the space between us.

### **Belonging: our place in community...**

Descriptions of a sense of belonging from the five participants in my inquiry also emphasized how the experience fit within a larger community context. For David, belonging is in part, connected to our attempts to create meaning of our biological yearnings. He described the tension created by the bombardment of our emotional brains with millions of pieces of information which are “being read and interpreted by our brains at any given moment...our thinking brains are just trying to keep up. The logical brain has to make some sense of it

so, it creates a kind of story, a kind of narration....”. David believes this

“narration” is about how we fit in community in relation to others:

...so the stories go something like ‘people know me’, ‘I am known and understood’, and ‘I know others and understand them’...I can make predictions about them that come true and they can make predictions about me that come true.

These stories can validate us in our efforts to feel like we belong. Further, they can also contribute to sustaining oppressive societal organizational structures by defining the “other” who doesn’t fit into the narrative.

Ric’s work with homeless people in his community has impacted on his sense of belonging. His former church, located in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver (Canada’s poorest urban neighbourhood), offered sanctuary for two hundred and fifty people each night and a place Ric believes these individuals regarded as home in a city where safe, affordable, permanent housing remains unavailable for many marginalized people.

And the naysayers will say, that’s disgusting, ‘How can you call it home?’ ...they call it home because this where they feel they belong. This is where their name is known, where their story is shared.

In Ric’s analysis, the importance of a person’s story, including their past, present, and future hopes, helps to locate them in community and supports a sense of belonging and identity. An equally critical aspect of supporting an identity was the emphasis the church placed on giving each person who sought sanctuary, the right to use the address of the church to receive their mail, access to facilities to shower and maintain their personal hygiene, and a secure area to keep their belongings. These aspects of the environment not only provided

shelter but more importantly the experience of belonging via regular confirmations for each individual that they are recognized and known. This was an intentional feature of the interactions between the staff at the church and the individuals who sought sanctuary – they were greeted by name. According to Ric, being known implies a past, present and a future, a relationship that signals “worth...when you say they are known, it’s not just that I know about you, it’s...I know the deeper you.” An authentic sense of belonging must include meaningful ways that people who have been marginalized are able to experience worth and dignity; a place in community where their stories are known and valued.

Vickie’s comments echo similar sentiments in her identification of the fragility of experiences of belonging for individuals with differing abilities in our society. While Vickie referenced the importance of contribution as a means of being valued and enhancing belonging, she also emphasized the limitations and marginalization associated with considering contribution solely on the basis of ‘doing’. In order to ensure belonging for everyone, a priority must also be placed on the contributions of ‘being’, contributions that don’t necessarily correspond to typical capitalist society’s yardsticks of economic value.

...contribution is a theme...I think it is very significant....even in those one-on-one experiences where someone makes a surprising, unexpected contribution, because of their, what Judith Snow sometimes calls their gift of absent abilities...when we recognize that gift, there is the experience of belonging together, we are here together. We are each contributing.

Reframing contribution so that being is enough to ensure belonging, would assist with safeguarding those who require supports from becoming more



vulnerable due to the spurious argument that they place an excessive and unmanageable financial burden on society.

Jennifer's considerations of belonging also extended to how individuals experience their connection to society. Her analysis of experiences with grassroots, social justice movements which purport to prioritize voice and self empowerment have challenged her to question how we ensure that people are truly heard and valued – elements of belonging in the larger community context.

...later in life I began to think of belonging as that sort of a civil society and a social capacity and having voice...belonging became something bigger than an interpersonal interaction, it became connected more to societal connections, the connection that we as individuals have back into the way our society is, what kind of choice, what kind of influence, or opportunity we have to participate...so voice became a big thing ~ Do you belong, do you have voice, if no one hears?

The questions of choice, influence, and voice now occupy a different priority in Jennifer's work, particularly when she is hosting community change processes. She is much more conscious and conscientious in her efforts to test the authenticity of the engagement process, asking instead "what is the felt experience of this...how is this felt by the person who is living it?"

### **Reflecting on their experience of belonging**

As with the question about how they defined a sense of belonging, each of the participants were deeply reflective about where and how they had experienced belonging in their lives. Their responses added more texture to their definitions and descriptions of the concept.

Sara described how the roles and activities she intentionally pursues, provide a “concrete focus for me to create that experience....it’s locations in my life but it’s also activity specific too...there’s a real sense of community or belonging from the activities that we do...It’s location, people, activities, and the feelings that I get when I’m there and creating that for myself.” The tapestry metaphor re-emerged in her reference to the intricate weaving of these elements to produce the experience of belonging.

For David, his relationship with his wife was offered as an essential and deeply profound experience of belonging; the fulfillment of a yearning for completion and connection.

It’s all at once kind of soothing and comfortable and I feel a really strong sense of purpose – it matters to me, my connection to her. I want to be better at things because of my connection to her, I want to survive because of my connection to her....

David elaborated on how he felt that this exemplary experience of belonging also reflected his intuitive sense that our bodies’ biochemical and psychomotor systems might in fact attune at a vibrational level when we feel an authentic and resonate connection with others. Despite his admission that he was unable to fully explain or prove this notion, David also returned to his idea of how common personal and societal narratives have contributed to the strength of he and his wife’s connection with one another and the deep sense of belonging which he feels with her.

We felt so connected because we have a similar narrative about the world in terms of family, music, citizenship, etc. It is a powerful feeling when you find someone along the way that you can reference so quickly...it enhances our bond.

Vickie identified myriad attributes and privileges she believes have helped contribute to her sense of belonging including being white, middle class, and educated noting the advantages afforded to her as a result. While acknowledging these as attributes that benefit her and may be factors in her belonging, they weren't central to the experience she recalled in response to my question. Instead she recalled participating in a very large gathering of about 300 people. One of the exercises involved participants accessing stations throughout the room to engage in the activity set by the facilitator. One of the women in attendance was older, had some mobility challenges, and other complicating factors which were inhibiting her ability to participate. Each time the woman attempted to complete the task the group was assigned, her pace and lack of flexibility thwarted her success. Others in the group, noticing her continuing exclusion, silently created a place for her and facilitated her participation by acting as her proxy, bending down in her stead, and thereby assisting her to successfully offer her contribution. Vickie was deeply moved by the experience, her observation was that "this was a profound moment, this is how we create belonging, this is what belonging is. This is how people participate...and it was done in such an honouring, respectful way."

Thus, a sense of belonging for Vickie is about pure, authentic welcome; where difference does not disqualify or exclude, and no one is left behind because other people join in to help create an environment that is welcoming.

Jennifer's experiences of belonging have charted a developmental arc in her life. As she describes it, her first "out-of-family" experience was as a member of a sailing team where she felt her initial hint of belonging. "I was with these people, we were in difficult circumstances where we needed to depend upon each other and I knew that they valued and trusted me, and I valued and trusted them." As she reflected on her experiences of belonging since then, she offered that "it's actually not that often that I've had a true sense of belonging." She referenced her family as a place where she feels she belongs and how that sense has deepened as her daughters have matured into young women and they have moved beyond the "transactional relationships that you get into."

Like Vickie, Jennifer told a story of an experience that exemplifies her belief that we yearn to belong. While volunteering in Africa, Jennifer and her daughters met a young woman whose physical disabilities had excluded her from the usual cultural trajectory of marriage and children. Despite this notable distinction within her community, Jennifer observed that she was embraced by the other members, meaningfully involved, and able to play a significant and valued role in the life of her village. Jennifer's daughter and this young woman taught each other dances and formed a deep connection, even referring to one another as being "sisters." On the last day they were there, the young woman produced a photo of Jennifer's family they had sent many years earlier when they first began their connection and support for the community. She had kept the photo. As Jennifer observed, "she had kept it...they had nothing, but somehow

she had got the photograph and she had been hanging on to that waiting for our arrival. She pulled it out and she said, 'we've been waiting for you'."

This experience reinforced Jennifer's sense of the importance of attentiveness to the myriad opportunities to nurture belonging and the importance of reciprocity in our relations with others.

We're in this in some sort of cosmic way together. She'd been waiting for us, and in some way we'd been waiting to meet her. That was a really interesting experience because prior to that my sense of belonging was that it took time...so that lesson, was it doesn't need to. It's the eye-to-eye, the heart-to-heart, the who are you, who am I and what's between us. And that can happen in an instant.

Similar to Jennifer's observations that her life experiences of true belonging have been scant, Ric offered the reflection that,

I have been very lonely in my life, so I think belonging for me, some of it comes out of a very personal experience...I think belonging came for me in the faith piece...from a belief in a very personal God, who knew my name, who cared for me, so I think I felt the belonging that came from the wonderful, super friendship that a personal God gives you...

Ric found an initial sense of belonging via his individual faith experience and as a member of the community of the Methodist church. His journey from those early, compelling experiences changed as a result of struggles to reconcile a monotheistic God's choices with his real world observations of children dying and the inequity and illogic of that. His search became a desire to integrate the dimensions of himself, his Christian beliefs and his human actions, to "work with the God-shaped vacuum – the spirituality deep within us that guides us." Ric believes that "a part of our being is the need for the sacred and a recognition of the sacred....but equally identified in our being is a need for belonging, a need

for connectedness and I don't know that they're even different." Similar to Jennifer's descriptions, his experience of belonging is intrinsically linked to his sense of the sacred in the space within us and between us. He remains compelled to search for and create sacred spaces that nurture belonging.

### **A commitment to belonging**

In considering my topic and the participants for my inquiry, I was hopeful that the concept of belonging would hold potency and resonate for them. In every instance, those I approached to interview all remarked on how important they felt the subject of belonging was, how much it mattered in their professional and personal lives, and of the importance of discussing it. As such, I was intrigued to learn more about the ways that their professional work and experiences had influenced their perspectives on the topic and if there had been an "aha" moment that had galvanized their commitment to continuing to promote the value and necessity of belonging. I learned that personal experience with people who have been marginalized has often proven pivotal in developing their commitment.

### **Influences that have shaped their perspective on belonging...**

Jennifer's professional roles and experiences, while varied, have always involved working to advance voice, participation and inclusion, particularly advocating for the voices of women and girls. Noting that she has been more aware of when belonging doesn't occur, she offered her observations about the

poignant vulnerability of disenfranchised youth as one example of how her perspective has been shaped by her experiences.

I think I've been affected by how frequently in the work that we do there is no sense of belonging. People have a yearning for belonging so sometimes the choices that are made are ones that can actually be quite damaging to them. You've got to belong somewhere; you want to believe someone is out there for you. It's kind of a perverse belonging or inclusion...when we see a young person kill themselves for example and you get behind what's going on for them...it's just heartbreaking for me...absolutely heartbreaking. I will never get used to that – seeing a young person choosing to end their life because they feel so disconnected in the world. So that's affected me profoundly in the work experience I've had.

It has been Jennifer's observation that, while many experiences can contribute to a sense of alienation, the yearning to belong is so potent that when it remains unfulfilled, the pain of that can be manifested in self harm or harm to others. Arguing that this yearning is a need, as basic as food or shelter, she offered that,

It's not a developed world, place of privilege, hierarchy of needs (phenomenon)...yes of course we have to have some of the basics for survival but that basic need to belong...not to belabour Africa, but for the most part all the kinds of survival things are not taken care of there and there is, in many of the places we experienced, a powerful sense of belonging and caring. And in those places that didn't have it, it was unbelievable....it was in the air! How sad it was, how it just sucked you dry. So, I don't think that belonging is something you get to pay attention to after you get everything else figured out...it's right in us.

The last twenty-five years of Vickie's career have been "devoted to thinking about and enabling relationships in whatever way is possible." This intentionality has led to reflections and refinements about what belonging is and why it is such a vital aspect of a good life. Like many who have supported and

worked in the community living movement, the dominant paradigm which defined both the cause and her advocacy efforts, was the goal of inclusion. While this goal was a powerful motivator for the movement, it fell short of attending to what Vickie came to believe were the limitations of a focus on inclusion versus the need to support true belonging.

I really believe that over the course of these years that I have been enormously privileged to see people literally loved into existence. By that I mean people who have presence as a result of belonging. There is a tangible physical presence, energetic presence, the eye contact, the radiance...I've come to appreciate that really only comes from genuine relationships and from having a sense of connectedness in community.

For Vickie, the experience of individuals, whose differences had made them vulnerable to marginalization and limited their presence in community, having being "loved into existence" has confirmed her commitment to the necessity of advancing belonging.

David, like others in my participant group, noted that he often felt very alone as a young person despite living in a loving family. His empathy for others who he perceived to be lonely as well grew from his own feelings of loneliness and heightened his attunement to the issues of alienation and connection. David's work with people with intellectual disabilities, in particular a man who he developed a close friendship with named Rollin, was particularly noteworthy in helping to extend his considerations of the experience from the deeply personal to the larger, community level. He recounted a story about Rollin leaving the institution where he lived, during a fierce snow storm, to find David because the relationship meant so much to him. Alerted to Rollin's absence, David



subsequently searched for Rollin and found him; that evening's events created an indelible memory which informs his work to this day.

I can remember right then, on the spot, thinking this is really important. That is something I need here, to be needed by Rollin, for him to be looking for me and wanting to spend time with me at my house meant a lot to me. I think from there I just started noticing more and more of it in the lives of people who experienced disabilities...this isolation. I couldn't get it out of my mind – it became more and more a part of my work....I have had many ideas as a professional over the years that I thought were important at one time, but got less important, or didn't seem as important. But this is one of the rare things that, even early on, didn't get less true with time, it just got more and more true. And that's sort of the belief I have with it, that it's almost the tip of the iceberg.

Sara's path to prioritizing belonging also emerged from her experience supporting individuals with intellectual disabilities. Through her work and friendships with people who are differently able, she became aware that the skills and circumstances she successfully employed to build belonging for herself were not replicated in their life situations.

What comes intuitively or naturally to me...what I have to give very little thought to is not the same for other people. So that's been my learning over the years...people with disabilities are often not welcome and may not intuitively know how to feel their way...my professional work has challenged me to help people create a sense of belonging in different ways rather than the way I create it....belonging is very personal and I don't think there is a formula for it....what is common though is you need to have people that you can form relationships with. That's sort of the basis for creating that sense of belonging – otherwise you are isolated and alone...

Sara also described how the lack of experience that many people with disabilities have had in exploring relationships, outside of with staff who are paid to be in their lives, has further limited their confidence and capacity. As a result, Sara has made it her commitment, both personally and professionally, to be an

agent of change and to actively promote belonging with and for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

My conversation with Ric wove in and around the various influences that had impacted his commitment to belonging. Earlier in his career, his work in psychotherapy and counselling with individuals and family groups, helped heighten his awareness of the impact of belonging and connectedness at individual and associational levels. Simultaneously he was also active in community work on peace committees in South Africa engaging with what he described as “fractured communities and a fractured society” painfully divided along racial lines. Those experiences helped build an awareness that belonging is actively cultivated when people are able to discover a new truth that challenges their previously held notions which have kept them apart and antagonistic to one another. He learned that different conversations had to be held if change was to occur: “...there was an evolution there of beginning to see what happens when you greet each other across the table with purpose, those times when we see each other as trying to find a way forward together.”

His work at First United Church in Vancouver provided further opportunities to learn about belonging as his focus shifted to “working at the margins of society” with the residents of the Downtown Eastside community. He found his early assumptions about the needs and circumstances of those he met were inaccurate and limited. Instead of holding to his assumptions that addiction, poverty, and alienation were the result of bad choices on the part of individuals, Ric found that as a result of spending time with people he became aware of the

“deep humanity present in these folks, and the trauma that’s led to where they are, the stuff that’s happened to them.” His perspective shifted from one of benevolent compassion and charity to advocacy and activism. Further, he began to explore how poverty, mental illness, and addiction were linked to a profound loss of identity, a disconnect from self, family, society, and a personal spiritual centre. When combined with a chronic inability to access the resources necessary for life, the quest for belonging acquired a whole new dimension:

...because of all we’ve seen, it just seems so self-evident that behind homelessness, behind poverty, behind addiction, behind mental illness, behind each of those is this issue of alienation, losses...and so while we need a detox centre for addiction, while we need treatment support services for the mentally ill, and while we need housing for the homeless as the first step, the real need is for community and for belonging...and that means...that it wasn’t just about a community of the marginalized, because in fact that was already here in the Downtown Eastside. People say they’re surprised at the high level of community that is here. And I began to realize, it’s not a surprise...they are here because there is community. It isn’t that they create community despite who they are, community exists because that’s what their deepest longing is and that’s why they can’t leave the place because to go back to mainstream society is to go back to a place of death, a place of loneliness. And there is an authentic nature to the community that is here that just contradicts so strongly the pretentious, cynical nature of belonging that you see in mainstream society. So, it’s not about us trying to create community that’s already here, that what’s missing is the inclusive community,...the community in which there are no margins.

Each of the participants I interviewed have been profoundly influenced by their association with people who are marginalized and disaffected; the labels they have assigned them, the degradation of chronic poverty, racism, and vulnerabilities associated with disability also serve to reinforce a structural inequality. These marginalizing conditions serve to ‘other’ them, creating alienation and exclusion from the larger society by virtue of the devaluing that

occurs as a result. Each of the participants has had their commitment to belonging actively, and sometimes accidentally, nurtured through relationships with people who initially seemed different from themselves. Through these relationships, a deep sense of social responsibility has led to a sustained commitment to social justice and social change. Through these relationships they have come to believe in and act on the common yearning for belonging they believe all of us need satisfied.

### **Aha moments...**

In addition to wanting to know more about how my interview subject's work and experience had influenced their perspective on belonging, I was also intrigued by whether or not there had been an "aha" moment that had galvanized their commitment to the importance of belonging in their work. Each of the five participants easily identified moments of exceptional profundity that they felt had had lasting impact.

David described an array of moments that built a steady hum of awareness that belonging was important. When asked about a particular 'aha' moment, he reiterated that the most distinct experience was when he discovered his friend Rollin trying to walk to his house in the snow storm. As David puts it,

I remember standing outside my car feeling like I was living this sort of awake moment. Rollin looked so different to me that night than he had ever looked to me before. Before that I honestly thought he's this kind of crazy kid who I liked but I thought was hard to understand, hard to predict what he's going to do next.....But when he was out on that road saying that he wanted to come to my house, and I realized that it was because he wanted to be with me that I thought we are one in the same. He is like me more than he is different from me and maybe in lots more ways than I

could appreciate at the time. I remember thinking, this is it. There is something really powerful about this, right here, right now. I've got to keep track of this.

The “awake moment” David describes corresponded with his realization that there was authentic reciprocity in their relationship – they mattered to each other more than either of them had been able to articulate or discover in the constraints of the formalized interactions that occurred within the institutional environment.

David continued,

I realized that I mattered to him a lot more than I knew and he mattered more to me than I realized....I was moved by it; humbled by it. I remember I could never see Rollin the same way again; it changed everything about our relationship because I realized I mattered to him.

A prerequisite for belonging includes opportunities for reciprocity and the space to celebrate this, especially if we are to welcome those who have been ‘othered’ by societal institutions and mythologies regarding their needs, personhood, entitlement, or capacity. Rollin’s behaviour ~ his search for David ~ were in service to his effort to find the person he felt belonging with. David’s ‘aha’ moment affirms this; his encounter with Rollin is a galvanizing memory that continues to influence and shape his beliefs about belonging and his work on behalf of people with intellectual disabilities.

Like David and others of my interview group, Sara’s commitment to belonging also came about through her relationships with people with intellectual disabilities. She observed in others both fear and an unwillingness to engage with individuals with disabilities. “Earlier in my career when seeing how people with disabilities were so ostracized and marginalized and left out,...it just became

a commitment. I was really quite amazed at their fear and unwillingness...so I made it my mission to try and increase the capacity of other people to support (them).” Without necessarily describing it as a cause, her mission became one of social justice, and as Sara puts it, essential because “it was just the right thing to do.”

Jennifer recalled several ‘aha’ moments linked to her sailing experiences. In the intensity of a particularly treacherous incident at the backend of a hurricane, she felt interdependence first and then later understood a keen sense of belonging she had known with her three companions. Aware that she didn’t describe it as belonging then, but rather interdependence and connection, over time she has come to appreciate feeling “like I belonged in this precious place where they had my back”. Another “big aha” for Jennifer was in relation to her dissertation project. After completing the research work with the individual women who she interviewed, they came together as a group to discuss the themes that had emerged among the participants. Jennifer heard the women describe:

...the difference for them between having no voice and beginning to become acquainted with their voice only happened in the context of relationship. As long as they were isolated there was no sense, no possibility of them becoming acquainted with their voice...it always happened in the context of relationship with somebody caring and them feeling like they belonged a little bit in the world.

Jennifer also learned surprising things about the nature of these relationships; sometimes they were long standing, sometimes not. Sometimes they were with a beloved animal because that was the only sentient presence

available to them when all other supports and attachments had been removed. The relationships, however they were constituted, offered “total presence and validation and a sense of connection that was powerful and tipped the balance for her to be on the journey.” Moreover, the most potent relationships were never professional; never defined as transactions bought and paid for. This revelation challenged Jennifer to reconsider the role of helping professionals in supporting personal change.

...what it does is raise questions for me about how effective is our practice and what about authenticity. It evolved from learning that maybe our finest work as practitioners is not about teaching curriculums or programs but is about how to create the space for people to build their own relationships and community.

Ric was quick to describe having had many moments which have collectively inspired his passion and commitment to belonging. While growing up in South Africa, his experience of apartheid provided challenges to his beliefs and shifted his behaviour. Even as a teenager, he was aware of the privilege and power that being white provided him. He recounted a story of intervening in the rape of a black woman in a white’s only park and how, despite his youth, he was able to effectively intercede.

...hearing a woman screaming because she’s being raped, and going into the park over the road from us which was reserved for whites only...and going across and standing with a guy brandishing a knife and using the fact that I’m white, and a teenager, that he wouldn’t dare push the knife into me...the scariness of that, but then straight after that, the sense...gee, I think I made a difference and this was right. And then having my parents say ‘you shouldn’t be involved in that kind of stuff...they do that to each other’.

Ric offered another transformative story from South Africa where he observed a young, white Afrikaner offering help to an older black man who had been run down by a car.

I went to him and said, "I just want to say thank you that you cared enough" and his comments were, with his heavy Afrikaans accent, "well you know, I belonged to the right wing Afrikaner resistance movement who hated black people and didn't think they had a right to be in the country, but you know he's a human like I am."...and you are more human tonight because of what you've just done that you were two hours ago. And realizing I was more human because I had just seen something that transcended my narrow definition of what was happening in our country.

Ric also referenced the sense of belonging and community within the church and how moment by moment he continued to be transformed by the connections he witnessed, the greetings exchanged, and the emotional reciprocity of the interactions which provide him with confirmation and assurance that "of course this is right, why can't everybody see it. It's that obvious."

Vickie also recalled a pivotal experience which helped build her commitment to belonging. She had been contracted to develop a curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities which was intended to help build assertiveness skills and confidence, considered prerequisites for community inclusion activities. She learned however that the concepts were only alive and intact, and truly meaningful, when they were buttressed by authentic relationships.

That led me to really understand the limitations of what we can teach people. It doesn't mean that we cannot teach assertive communication, of course we can. It means that there is a dimension of our being that we bring into our actions in the world, and our learning, that can only be given this level of confidence, this presence I talked about, it only can come from relationships, loving relationships.



The variety of 'aha' moments offered by my research participants reinforces several key themes related to belonging, including: the need for reciprocity, the power of relationships to safeguard voice and choice, and how the structure of society including poverty, racism, and labelling serves to marginalize people and threaten their sense of belonging, and the potency of intentionality in cultivating a lens of belonging.

## **Chapter 5: Inclusion and Belonging: Making the Connection**

This chapter continues my examination of the conversations with my research participants. In this chapter, I focus on their opinions regarding the similarities and differences between the concepts of inclusion and belonging and their perceptions regarding whether a link exists between feeling a sense of belonging and both individual and collective well-being. Further, I summarize their responses to the question of whether promoting a sense of belonging can assist with ameliorating pernicious social problems and the ideas which were offered regarding ways and means of fostering belonging.

### **The relationship between inclusion and belonging**

Much of my own career has been rooted in the community living movement, advancing advocacy initiatives which focus on quality of life and well-being on behalf of citizens with intellectual disabilities. These experiences have proven to be life changing for me, deepening my commitments to social change, social justice, and supporting diversity - taking me beyond a strictly professional perspective on the topic of both inclusion and belonging. The importance of belonging is now intrinsically woven into my volunteer roles and my community activism and activities. My experience has provided me with insights into the ways that policy changes and social attitudes have contributed to the inclusion of people who are differently able in the workplace, educational settings, and in our neighbourhoods. Similarly, I am aware of how human rights legislation has

endeavoured to promote diversity and enshrine the rights of all citizens to equal access in our communities and protection from exploitation and abuse. In my mind, while these advances have advanced the goals of inclusion, they have not necessarily led to belonging. As such, I was intrigued by my research participant's thoughts regarding the relationship between the concepts of inclusion and belonging in order to deepen my thinking about these topics.

### **Inclusion is where we started...**

Vickie's professional experiences have provided her with tangible experiences of what she describes as "people literally loved into existence"; made visible because they belong. As a result of witnessing these profound transformations, Vickie offered her analysis of the limitations of inclusion.

I just don't think inclusion is about that (a sense of connectedness in community). I think inclusion is not completely separate but that it has become co-opted as a legal term, it has this sense of in-sertion, putting in, as opposed to being a part of. That is the profound difference as we explore what belonging is, being a part of.

Considerations of belonging also resonate at a very personal level for Vickie as her blended, immediate family circle includes a young woman named Liz who has a developmental disability. While Vickie's professional commitments to supporting people with disabilities now extend over thirty years, there is an intimate understanding of belonging that has been cultivated through her relationship and witnessing of Liz's life and experiences that she reflected on in our conversation.

...belonging is beyond rights. We often talk that it's about rights and responsibilities, so we used to think that citizenship was just about rights. You've got the right to do this, therefore you are, but what we realize even thinking about Liz, was that people never saw her as a citizen, they just saw her as her needs. When she is seen as a contributor, then actually she is a citizen. I think we might compare inclusion to belonging as we might compare rights to citizenship; it's a little bit of the equation, an important part of our learning, and the rights revolution is a profound issue for our planet. All really important but it's clear that citizenship as we need it on the planet is more than rights or more than inclusion. And clearly if people are in places simply because they are legislated that they can be there, I don't think anyone can equate that with belonging.

Jennifer's considerations about the characteristics that distinguish inclusion from belonging have evolved over the years, enriched by the benefit of both experience and observation. In her estimation, "inclusion is not as deep as belonging". Similar to Vickie's analysis of inclusion as insertion, Jennifer identified a transactional aspect to the process of 'including' others which she feels has the potential to reinforce inequity instead of cultivating reciprocity.

Where I am today, and it's still evolving, is that inclusion we've got better and better at it in some ways, over the years, and with certain populations. ...Inclusion can be more transactional; I can include you in the conversation, I can include you in the community, I can include you in my home – it's something where I can invite you in. But I don't think the element of reciprocity is as strong and I don't think the felt experience is as strong as with belonging. It's (inclusion) important – we cannot even create the space for belonging to evolve if we haven't even begun to get into the same room, metaphorically. So including is one of the acts we do to be more inclusive, more mutual in our understanding of each other, and maybe that's a precursor to having a sense of belonging, but for me, belonging is a pretty deep thing.

Jennifer also offered that a process of merely including others is similar to the kinds of efforts she has seen to "engage" citizens in decision-making in their communities, helpful but limited in scope and sometimes authenticity. "We've

come a long way with inclusion. Engagement would be another word. We've engaged so you have a voice at the table in decision-making and planning around our lives. That's good – it's included but that's not belonging." And, from the perspective of reciprocity and shared power over our futures, Jennifer identified that token engagement provides only a superficial influence and impact. Those who determine who is invited to come to the table and contribute can be guilty of retaining power by ultimately managing whose voice, whose choice, and whose authority is represented in the outcome of the 'engagement' process.

Sara's lengthy experience as an advocate for inclusive communities for people with developmental disabilities has provided her with a historical retrospective she applied to how she thinks about inclusion and belonging. She referenced this experience in our conversation and in particular, how an emphasis on meaningful participation is essential for cultivating belonging.

You know there are so many buzzwords...inclusion is a buzzword, community capacity, community development, belonging...and they mean different things to different people but I guess that from my perspective, I always thought that if you're included, meaningfully included, you will have a sense of belonging. So, my experience with people living in group homes...well, they are not really included. Six of them living in a group home, they don't know their neighbours, they don't know their community. They are tourists right in their own neighbourhood so, that is not inclusion and that's not a sense of belonging. So inclusion is helping people actually be woven into the tapestry, that fabric, and then you have your sense of belonging.

Sara emphasized that the quality of the inclusion experience was paramount to the outcomes with respect to belonging. It is her perception that "costly mistakes" that have been made in the community living sector by not

focusing on the quality or intentionality of the outcomes that were being sought after. While a strong proponent of closing institutions, Sara was clear that failures had occurred in the deinstitutionalization process and the assumptions that were made about how belonging would develop. These failures are most manifest in the realm of individuals' emotional well-being and their impoverished sense of belonging. By installing people into a neighbourhood in congregated settings, as most community residential services were originally designed, the institutional world was effectively transplanted, albeit in smaller versions, into communities. As Sara put it, we created "tourists" with only glancing connections instead of real relationships and thus maintained people's isolation instead of promoting their belonging. Like others in my research cohort, Sara was echoing the idea of inclusion as akin to insertion.

...we have made costly mistakes to people's emotional well-being. We yank them out of an institution,...we closed them and we didn't really give a lot of thought to driving from the institution to the group home – we thought through osmosis they would understand what was going on and they would be happier...because now they are included in community! Over time many people who did leave institutions fully are much happier, and have much more of a sense of being included or a sense of belonging, but I think the next step is that meaningful piece...I don't think that you can have six people living together that are fully included in a way that will lead to a real sense of belonging...

It is Sara's opinion that a further barrier remains the continuing dependence on paid services for people with developmental disabilities, a reliance that can act as a barrier to both community participation and the potential for unpaid relationships which offer connections and provide for a sense of belonging. While not disqualifying either the value or necessity of certain

supports required to meet specific individual needs, Sara reflected that, “I think that we have done a disservice sometimes to people by creating this dependency on paid services rather than really trying hard to help them have a life...outside of paid services.” In essence, even the most competent and caring service systems cannot fulfill the yearning for the authentic experience of belonging. This is echoed by the research of Cambiazo (2014) which explored the tension between the role of community support workers and the outcomes for those they serve, concluding that the “role cannot be extracted from the institutional legacy that followed her into the community through practices, reporting and governance.” (p. 12)

David’s professional and personal commitments have been focused on changing perceptions of who people with developmental disabilities are, destigmatizing their individual methods of communicating wishes and needs, and promoting the importance of belonging. His reflections on the distinctions between belonging and inclusion also focused on the pivotal role that reciprocity plays and how imperative and fundamental the drive to achieve belonging is for human beings. In his estimation, a fully nuanced sense of belonging cannot be achieved by only being included. He also offered that in his observation, even the most alienating and divisive behaviours - those that build walls instead of bridges are, ironically, attempts to confirm a sense of belonging by distinguishing who is in the circle and who is not.

It’s so huge, so programmed into us that we are not conscious of how it drives us all the time. Now when I’m watching people in groups or at meetings, or people having disagreements, I’m running it all through that. I’m wondering how this works for people, how does this serve to help them

feel connected, to give them membership to the pack. Some people believe that everything is in service to that goal. There's nothing, some people argue, that isn't in service to that goal.

Early in our conversation Ric emphasized that belonging was not an “intellectual description of a state” but rather, “a deeply visceral sense of personal validation and interdependence - ubuntu.” Rather than using the term inclusion, his preferred point of reference was distinguishing between membership and belonging. Although identifying that there is “some form of attachment which is recognized by both...some connection in both cases”, Ric defines membership as “meaning I can be identified by others and by myself as part of a group so when you draw the circle around it, I'm in that circle.” He was quick to add though that “membership may well mean that I am formally recognized as part of a group, but I can be a member without feeling belonging.” Exploring the distinction between membership and belonging, he continued:

There was a book some time ago called *The Outsiders*<sup>1</sup>, and I think that when you're in that space, when you feel like you're an outsider, the worst place to be is when you're outside, you're neither a member nor do you belong. But I think that you can have that same existential angst of emptiness as a member, which was what I guess I was trying to get to, a member of a family and not feel like you belong. I'm just using those words to capture it. So it's not the words as much as the fact that we somehow needed to distinguish between the categories of connectedness and the categories of belonging.

Ric's preference to focus on the categories of membership and belonging proved salient to my explorations of the distinctions between inclusion and belonging. It is his perspective that membership tends to be “more legalistic, or

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Outsiders*. A coming of age novel by S.E. Hinton (1967) that provides a critique of class and being an outsider.



ritualistic, or policy driven as opposed to the other (belonging) which is more ethically driven and more relationally driven. Obligation is different; the one is an obligation because what you do is contractual, either an explicitly or implicitly stated contract.” By extension then, the nature of membership is more fragile and subject to the determinations of others and the stipulations associated with maintaining favour sufficient enough to stay within the circle as it is drawn. Both securing and retaining membership can be fragile for many, requiring their conformance and compliance with social conventions, behaviours, and societal norms in order to retain their access and invitation to the table. In his work with the community of the Downtown Eastside, Ric became aware of how much conformance and compliance was both implicitly and explicitly required of those who sought access to the life sustaining shelter and services provided by First United and other social serving organizations.

...I would say membership tends to require conforming; you need to conform to the social convention in order to continue your membership. So when we say that what we're trying to do with folk in the Downtown Eastside is to allow them to become fully functioning members of society, what we mean is conforming to society standards and norms, so it is about fixing, it's about you should have a job,...we need to come to grips with the fact that there really will always be a need for a place of refuge which like the park that's out there, now being indoors....Why do we say it will always exist?...because there will always be some, and some people will be there for all of their life, but there will always be others for whom this will be a period of their life who are right at the edges of society and don't trust society.

Ric continues,

Government and others are saying...we want within five years to have no more shelters, we just want social housing. The assumption is that by caring for these people now, and giving them the support services they need, they will be like us and have their little housing unit and they will be comfortable to do that. Whereas many of these folk are the prophetic

voice that challenges our own pretence. Are you truly happy in your little mainstream, middle class survival, in your little house where you don't know your neighbour next door...maybe sharing your apartment building and four inches of wall between you...and you're telling me you're more alive than I am just because you have a house, and a job, and a car, and a microwave? That is our assumption, so there is a conformance piece that ties in with the fixing and a restoration to mainstream society that people associate with that kind of belonging to human society, to the human race.

If our inclusion activities have only served to insert people, then the task of cultivating an authentic sense of belonging requires a different focus and level of intentionality. The ideas offered by each of my research subjects suggested that belonging is a highly nuanced experience – it is about connections, it is relational, and it cannot be achieved solely by enacting legislation, changing policy, or relocating and inserting people into community. As many of my participants discussed, inclusion may have been a bold concept with which to begin conversations about welcoming, but it is insufficient to achieve belonging.

### **Making the connection: belonging and well-being**

My research topic emerged, in part, from my curiosity about the impact of a sense of belonging and the ramifications with respect to our sense of responsibility when we believe we belong: to one another, to our communities, and to our planet. As such, I was keen to explore what my research participant's opinions were with respect to any connection between a sense of belonging and individual and collective well-being. Without exception, each of my participants reaffirmed their belief in our essential need for a sense of belonging and offered their perspectives on the ramifications at a larger, societal level when it is absent.

Vickie's reflections on the relationship between inclusion and belonging referenced the need to create societal conditions that provide "more than rights and more than inclusion". She expanded on this as she offered her thoughts about the link between belonging and individual and collective well-being.

...it's a fundamental human trait and when we don't feel we belong our potential to be destructive, not just in terms of individual health implications but take a bigger view...if we feel we belong to the planet, or we belong to the arid land in Penticton, we take care of it. It belongs to us and so our collective well-being rests in this appreciation I think. We've been severed from a sense of...our sense of ownership has been severely diminished to material things as opposed to this collective sense of I belong to something that belongs to me and I steward it, I can care for it.

It is Vickie's perception that there isn't "any aspect of our life that isn't enhanced by belonging: our academic outcomes, our health outcomes, our employment outcomes..." and also that the importance of the experience is steadily continuing to acquire more legitimacy and recognition across different milieus. She identified the challenge of measuring belonging as well as the caution, when scaling up the conversation and/or the scope of the work associated with belonging, that a "kind of co-optation, or a dilution" may occur as the concept becomes part of a common lexicon, and potentially appropriated and reinterpreted through a variety of lenses.

I guess I've come to, and this is not a cynical comment, but I've just come to accept that that could be something (that happens) and we have to assume that we still benefit and then we move on to the next refinement. In a way we can take inclusion like that...okay, that was the start. Or, you could take normalization...normalization is not a particularly, at least for me, a particularly useful paradigm today. Exceptionally important paradigm, but we're in the post normalization world now....so I guess what I'm projecting is that this is how belonging may evolve in some way too. So right now it is a resonate term, and it's still on the fresh side, and it's

strength is that everybody, everybody actually has an experience of some kind of it.

In considering the impact of belonging to collective well-being, and reflecting on her long history of social justice work and advocacy, Vickie offered that rather than describing the need for belonging as a human rights issue, for her it is a “a human being issue”, critical to our collective future.

I would say that it is an issue that is fundamental to our survival...one of the great tasks that is laying at our feet is to truly understand our interdependence; our interdependence with each other and our interdependence with our environment. When we belong, we are. Belonging is a shared experience by its nature. Belonging is, I think I can say, a feeling of connection and I think it's understanding our connections that is so critical.

When asked about the connection between belonging and well-being, Ric “borrowed” from his understanding of the concept of ubuntu: “I think I’m only a person, and I’m only fully human, when others are fully human so my well-being is fundamentally based upon the well-being of others. And I see that at a deeply spiritual level and I see it at a very practical level”. Scaling the relational aspect of belonging and well-being to the global arena, he referred to the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001.

I think 9-11 is an example of how you kid yourself that you can embrace a form of economic imperialism and materialistic values arrogantly and not expect that there is some physical backlash in the world, so I think it's very unfortunate that we quickly ran away from any suggestion that there is always some shared participation in every moment like 9-11. We wanted to say, ‘we in North America have nothing to do with this really, we’re absolutely innocent recipients of the aggression of the other part of the world; and I think that’s blind....9-11 didn’t just happen because some bad guys decided to do something they thought was fun. It was based upon an anger, it was based upon a reaction...which we might not have to

apologize for, but we need to understand we were part of it, so my well-being is dependent upon other people's well-being.

Ric emphasized that for him, regardless of whether or not he agrees with another's perception, "reality is what you experience reality to be", if another person or a whole country of other people perceives their circumstance to be less than whole and well, then there is potential for their choices and actions to "impact my life". His firm belief in our interdependence is the cornerstone of his work in the world and informs the strategies he employs to foster belonging.

When asked about whether or not she feels there is a link between a sense of belonging and individual and collective well-being, Jennifer was quick to respond with "absolutely". Her reflections echo those of Ric and Vickie.

I guess what I'm playing with now is that sense of social cohesion and they are intertwined. Socially cohesive communities create more space for inclusion and belonging and well-being, and belonging creates space for well-being and therefore enhanced capacity to participate with others in their relationships. I don't know where you pull the thread...they are intertwined.

It is Jennifer's opinion that this intertwined nature – the continuous thread, is an important recognition required to fully value and nurture belonging. In her estimation, if a sense of belonging is present for the individual, this experience then impacts on the overall health and well-being of our communities – they are inherently connected.

Sara was also certain of the link between belonging and individual and collective well-being. "I think overall health, mental health, longevity of life, happiness – I think it's all absolutely connected. All those things and probably

more...the amount of laughter in your life, joy..." She believes that our individual sense of belonging is influenced by our earliest connections with others, resonating even as babies depending upon if and how we experience acceptance and if we feel loved. Even in circumstances where a child has experienced very impoverished or even abusive environments, it is Sara's feeling that their sense of belonging can be nurtured and restored through the support of mentors or teachers whose intentional interventions rebuild trust and the capacity for healthy relationships. In Sara's estimation, cultivating a focus on belonging has powerful ramifications for our communities and society especially for people who have experienced chronic exclusion. For her part, in her life and through her work in support of people with intellectual disabilities, that has meant a commitment to "trying to change, influence, and create environments or global environments where they are welcome and create that sense of belonging...like every pot has a lid."

Like the other members of my research inquiry, David also believes that a sense of belonging is intrinsically linked to individual and collective well-being and to our survival on our planet. It is his assertion that our ability to survive has historically been related to our capacity for cooperation, an evolutionary asset which motivates us to sustain our "membership in the pack".

Belonging is a huge motivational force; it's a huge force in our lives, more than we ever understood before. It's critical to our well-being in ways that we are just beginning to figure out. It will have profound impacts on how we think about medicine, how we think about social engineering if such a thing exists, it is affecting how we think about those things and it's going to be more the case rather than less the case.

My conversations with each of the five research participants provided further validation for me regarding the importance of belonging both individually and collectively and thus easily extended to an examination of the social justice impact.

### **Coming full circle: belonging as a catalyst for achieving social justice and social change**

This research project has proven to be a revealing opportunity to test my belief in the power of belonging with five individuals whose personal advocacy work and professional careers have been committed to tackling social justice issues through a variety of community based social change projects and roles. As such, I chose to conclude each interview by exploring their thoughts and ideas about how to foster a sense of belonging and if an intentional focus on belonging has the potential for ameliorating pernicious social issues such as poverty, marginalization, and discrimination. For each individual, the importance of an intentional lens on belonging was a consistent theme.

Jennifer's response extended her metaphor of "pulling the thread". She elaborated on the intertwined nature of belonging, well-being, and the importance of relationships with more observations from her time in Africa.

In this group I worked with in Africa, they use education and shared education and workshops. They actually have an interesting organizing framework in that there is a lot of self-organizing into community clusters, and area associations and regional groups so it is a rather elaborate structure created and formed around how people might work together...what they've done is use education and workshops to give people some more tools and methodologies to allow them to do things together, to marshal solutions together....they describe that sense of being a part of something bigger than themselves, that sense of belonging and that pride having created something together. They've got each other's

back. So somebody's dying of AIDS...what they say there is they are not well, so the rest of the people in the collective till that field so that that family does not starve. Parents die, there are children who have no family and no means...they pick up and bring them in. That sense of belonging has addressed the marginalization – those kids could have been tossed out, or the person who is dying of AIDS, their field could lie fallow and they would have no food, so it's been a way of them finding solutions and enables them to having a sense of being in relationship and a sense of belonging to one another.

In recounting this experience, Jennifer reflected that within their culture and as demonstrated in the different villages she visited, the people did not experience the same potential for isolation that the western world actively cultivates with its focus on privacy and individualism. She observed a sense of reciprocity and interdependence that she sensed was actively prioritized at a societal level, serving to provide an essential safety net for community members.

In considering ways to foster belonging and combat what she described as an “ethic of isolation”, Jennifer focused on potential opportunities within existing community settings, such as schools, child care programs, and parent groups.

It's very easy to get by and not belong – we don't know what we don't know. If we've never experienced that sense of it, of belonging, then you don't know what you're missing so it is the way it is. If you've experienced it, then you are more interested in trying to recreate it because it does satisfy the yearning. So where that takes me, is sometimes we have to be social engineers to some extent to create the time and space for connection between people where interdependence can be cultivated....That is one of the reasons I like family resource programs for example – what brings people together is a child of a similar age and stage of parenting and where they come into a non-judgemental environment, they watch, they learn, there is a little bit of guidance, a bit of encouragement here and that sense of ok, we're not alone which is the first place to start. So I think those kinds of engineered opportunities for normative, developmental experiences where people have a taste of possibility and then those teachable moments, where you know 'do you



want to exchange some childcare?’ – those little, tiny ways of saying to people you could be connected here and here’s an idea of where to start. I think schools need to be doing a lot of that....creating those sites where you begin to be connected to others – bumping places.

In Jennifer’s estimation fostering belonging requires intentionality. Shared and successful experiences of working together that help build curiosity about others, along with creating spaces and places that provide opportunities to “bump” into one another to experience the potential of interdependence, are essential ingredients for belonging.

Sara believes that a sense of belonging can assist with addressing complex social justice issues, but in conjunction with also challenging the formal bureaucratic structures to reform their strategies and responses.

I think creating a sense of belonging is one thing but I think that the structures...I’ll call them informal and formal, the informal being community and friendships and relationships – people helping each other out versus the structures whether its government, service providers, formal kinds of things. It almost seems that those formal and informal (structures) need to do things differently to create or facilitate or influence people getting a sense of belonging...we have to do it differently. Look at homelessness – what we’re doing is not working. We have to figure out how to do it differently.

For Sara, “figuring out how to do it differently” involves a focus on relationships and intentionally supporting capacity for connections between people based on their mutual interests. This intentionality, a similar emphasis to Jennifer’s comments, is a particular passion for Sara with respect to her thoughts about promoting welcome and fostering belonging for people with disabilities.

I think it’s relationships. Relationships and connecting people together who connect. If I think of how I create a sense of belonging, then how can I help other people create that sense of belonging – it’s through

relationships and activities....I get involved in things because they interest me, the actual activity itself, and then the sense of belonging comes. I feel my way through it. So for people with disabilities, it's what they are interested in, what do they like, that a person could tap into to help create that connection and begin relationships that create that sense of belonging.

Sara also offered that success in fostering belonging requires another sort of intentionality that begins with working to shift perceptions about capacity and the right to belonging, particularly for people who have been stigmatized and marginalized. For Sara, this first requires a presumption of capacity and a belief that everyone can belong. In her estimation, achieving this shift requires holding different "expectations" about the ability for everyone to make a contribution, the belief that everyone has value, and deciding that no one can be left behind.

Working inside government systems, as she does, Sara is of the opinion that:

Government can't create a sense of belonging, but I think that government can play a role to enable and to look at some of the stubborn social issues that we have – whether it's poverty, homelessness – to look at how we can do things differently....we're all in this together, so how can we make it different and how can government become more of a partner versus being accountable for everything that goes wrong.

She offered that fulfilling a desire for change and doing things differently may benefit from actively applying a lens on belonging through which government sponsored initiatives and supports are assessed to ensure they actively contribute to building stronger communities that welcome everyone.

Vickie's comments regarding fostering belonging reiterated the impact of intentionality. In particular, she described the importance of shared endeavours that allow for co-creating with diverse people, and the necessity of cultivating the

conditions and environments within which natural relationships can emerge.

Vickie made reference to a book called *Common Fire* (1997), which documents a research project initiated by a group of developmental psychologists who were interested in investigating what makes a person an “exceptional citizen.”

...they identify 100 people who are exemplary contributors to their community...they are looking to see what are the milestones, the markers, the commonalities. They had a few predictions...that these people would have a stable home life, that they would have an adult that was dependable, they had a bunch of things and a number of those were accurate but there was one thing that came up that none of them had predicted and it was the only trait that showed up in all of the 100, is that all of them, at some point in their life, had had a relationship of some significance with someone they perceived of as different from themselves. So it might have been going to Mexico and living with people who were living in poverty, could have been a person with a disability, it could be a person much, much older than themselves, but in those experiences of coming into relationship with difference what of course emerged was sameness. This recognition of our common humanity. And that is so pivotal to this idea of stewardship, of our collective responsibility for one another, about how we interpret what that responsibility is, because as long as you can keep people ‘other’ to you, it’s just so much easier not to take responsibility or to recognize your actions that may be contributing to their misfortunes.

From Vickie’s perspective, demonstrating exceptional citizenship is a means to developing a desire to be part of promoting social change; exposure to difference on the part of these individuals elevates their sense of our common humanity. In her estimation, a sense of responsibility for finding solutions for social issues is cultivated when we experience a sense of belonging to one another. In her own life, the privilege of having relationships with people who are different from her has galvanized her commitment to belonging. As well, shared endeavours with diverse groups of people hold potency as transcendent and

deeply spiritual moments, whereas Vickie describes it, “everybody is part of the joy...”.

...shared endeavours are very important particularly things that involve art, singing, music, dancing and as a larger set of that, I think co-creating with diverse people. I think another piece is the role of creating opportunities for people to come into relationship – literally the relationship is the transformative part and another part is recognition of the gifts that everybody brings to the table, brings to a class, to a process, to a co-creation, or a relationship. That is very important because one of the great dangers is that a lot of those things I just described, whether it’s a dancing group or a friendship, is that there is an overwhelming tendency for it to be one-sided....you’ll come and dance and I’ll help you. Or I’ll be your friend and I’ll help you, as opposed to shining a light on the exchange and the contribution.

Like other members of my research cohort, David holds to the potential of belonging as a means of addressing challenging social issues. Describing belonging as “a solution and a powerful one”, David went on to describe the impact of intentional communities, reiterating his belief that we are biologically predisposed to seek the reassurance and comfort of membership in the pack.

In poorer neighbourhoods there are efforts to get grants to start businesses, and work being done for example with women to get them economically started on things and then connect them with women in all parts of the world who are doing similar things. It has huge power. I don’t think any people who are doing that kind of work would suggest for a minute, oh just hand people money and teach them about budgeting and they’ll be ok. The thing that keeps getting emphasized in all those efforts is we’re connecting people together – we’re creating a kind of intentional community that has huge power and sustains people. I don’t think it’s accidental that that works. I don’t think it’s just about information sharing. I think it actually resonates with people’s biology.

David offered that fostering belonging, because of the emphasis on the relationship, can be a powerful antidote to a variety of experiences of alienation and woundedness. Citing the experience of children who have been abandoned,

neglected, or who feel rootless, he said, “surround them with people who care about them and have a deep sense of commitment to them and hope about their future and they’ll get well 99% of the time. And the reason is because we need it, we’re programmed for it in the first place.”

It is Ric’s opinion that cultivating a sense of belonging is both “a pre-requisite as well as the starting point” for ameliorating complex social issues. As he put it, “I think without the engagement, we cannot move forward”. He provided an example from his own engagement with the people living in the Downtown Eastside community who struggled with long term addictions, homelessness, poverty, and loneliness. He observed that some of the social service interventions began from a belief that the solution to individual’s personal crises was to remove them from the area, to “send you back where you came from”. Ric offered another perspective which guided the supports provided by First United Church.

I’m saying, no they’re here because what was there didn’t meet their needs. So if there they didn’t find belonging, we have to create a space where they find belonging before they’ll be willing to entertain an alternative. So it is the first step and we’re working at First United with that category of people who are called in official terms, ‘pre-contemplative’, for the lay person I guess I’d just say they’re in the , ‘No way, I don’t want help’ phase. They haven’t got to the point where they trust enough...all you can do with that is build engagement. All you can do is create the space in which you can have the conversation that allows them to embrace the ambivalence that is inside them – ‘I don’t want this and I do want this’. That is always part of the human condition but I cannot have that conversation without a relationship.

He continued with a caution that creating the conditions for belonging cannot become a “stepping stone”, a means to demanding conformity from

people as a response to assistance. For Ric, nurturing belonging is not about having people fit into a prescribed social norm – there cannot be conditions imposed. Rather, belonging has to be fostered from a place of commitment that honours the person’s right to be and belong just as they are.

When asked about how a sense of belonging can be fostered, Ric referenced many of the intentional strategies which he and his team were employing at First United as examples.

I think there are a few basic things that are important so what we’ve focused on here is that we will always see the individual, which means that we will see you as a person; not as a category, not as a client, but more as a First Nations person, or as a woman, we will want to know your name and your story. Our dream is that no individual will enter this building on any one day and leave it without having heard their name spoken and their story shared. Now, we’re far from that but that’s the vision....I think the second piece to that is mutuality – I think it is having them speak my name, our names and having them hear our stories. It is a mutuality, this is what’s bugging me, this is what I’m wrestling with, this is what I’m excited about. It’s helping me be human to them too so that I don’t function as a listening ear, or the professional therapist, or the church director...they need to see me as Ric....the more human I am, the more human they can be.

Other decisions that were taken also reflect the desire to reduce separation between the individuals using the supports of the church and the team there. These included ending the use of the word mission as part of the work of the church because of the belief that it implied a unidirectional energy; activity that reaches out to and does things to or with. They also challenged the intentions behind the role of volunteers stressing the expectation that instead of signing up for a task, those who offered their energy, were expected to sign up for a relationship. Ric stressed that mutuality has to be authentic; stories and

sharing have to be of real significance and not superficial, or worse, a demonstration of benevolence or manipulation. “I’ve trusted them with myself and they’re more likely to trust me with themselves. So it’s as simple as that in terms of building belonging. I’m sure there’s more to it but if I can just get that right, then I’ll be fine – then I’ll have achieved something.”

Throughout my conversation with Ric, I felt he was alluding to love, even when he didn’t specifically reference it. Thus, even though it wasn’t a planned question in the interview process, I felt compelled to ask him as we concluded our conversation, if love factored into his understanding and fostering of belonging, if love was somewhere in all of this for him.

Yes...it is and I suppose it’s because it’s become trivialized, the word love, and so has the word caring and compassion....I don’t like compassion, it’s one of the conversations I’m having. ...the whole ‘compassionate city’ thing because I think we don’t know what we mean by that ...I think love is like that; it’s an aching thing, it aches with joy and it aches with pain. I like the Jewish word shalom – that’s wholeness for you, it’s peace, it’s the real joy. It’s the real love.

Ric’s preference for shalom provided a fitting coda as the meaning of the word encompasses so many of the ideas my interviews had incorporated. The definition of shalom from The Refiners Fire website (2014), embodies “feeling, intent and emotion...it is a complete peace....a feeling of contentment, completeness, wholeness, wellbeing and harmony.” These images capture some of what a sense of belonging meant to these activists and advocates – the fulfillment of a yearning for connection, completion, and wholeness.

## **Chapter Six: Reflections and Further Considerations**

This chapter provides a brief overview of my research project and highlights the learning from this inquiry process. Further, I offer some preliminary considerations for further research on the topic of belonging.

### **The origins of the inquiry on belonging**

Much in the same way that bell hooks describes “coming to theory because I was hurting” (hooks, as cited in Brown, 1999, p. 359), my research inquiry was inspired by an ache – an ache born out of the desire to understand and explore the impact of belonging and the distress that a lack of belonging produces. I have had experiences, both personally and professionally, that compelled me to explore this topic and my conversations with colleagues and fellow students reinforced the intuitive appeal that the concept of belonging held. My review of the literature indicates significant evidence supporting the premise that human beings are social creatures and that we crave a sense of belonging. The ramifications to individual health and well-being, academic, and employment success have been sufficiently validated to confirm Baumeister & Leary’s (1995) “hypothesis that the need to belong is a powerful, fundamental, and extremely pervasive motivation”. (p. 497). Thus, I chose to pursue a qualitative research inquiry conducting in-depth interviews (Esterberg (2002), Miller & Crabtree (2004) with five individuals whose professional commitments and history of



activism gave me confidence that the topic of belonging would be of interest and meaning to them.

My research was designed to explore two central questions. The first question concerned how my participants broadly define and understand the concept of a sense of belonging and the factors which have contributed to their interest in the subject. The second central question focused on their perspectives regarding the relationship between belonging and individual and collective well-being as well as their views on the potential for a focus on belonging to assist in addressing social issues such as poverty, marginalization, and discrimination. I will offer some highlights relevant to these two central questions.

### **The first question: the importance of belonging**

My conversations with each of the participants revealed common conceptions of a sense of belonging: “feeling a part of something” (Vickie); a “deeply felt experience” (Ric); and as a “yearning” (Jennifer and David). Each emphasized the relational nature of belonging and remarked on the visceral quality of the experience. For all of them, a sense of belonging was both felt in the body and understood by their hearts before considerations of it as an intellectual construct. The process of understanding the importance of belonging in their lives, and in relation to the health and well-being of our communities, proved to have been incremental and cultivated over time, all involving experiences which offered them opportunity for profoundly impactful

relationships, often with others who are perceived as different or outsiders.

These relationships have and continue to include: people with disabilities, people marginalized by poverty and homelessness, or members of other cultures to cite but a few.

The difficulty of quantifying the experience of belonging was noted; more often belonging is understood by its absence than its presence. For Ric, belonging is related to the concept of ubuntu which he understands as “I am only fully human when others are fully human...I am a person through other people”. Similarly Jennifer used the word Namaste to describe the intimacy of the experience, the quality of interdependence, and to highlight the need to attend to the “space between us” where relationship and belonging emerge. The theme of connection was echoed by all the participants: connection to others, connection to the community, and to having witnessed moments where this experience was “luminescent” (Vickie) or as a “tapestry” (Sara) of interwoven locations, identities, people and activities. In David’s case, his long relationship with a man named Rollin provided him with a profound “awake moment” where he understood that despite seemingly enormous and alienating differences in locations, experiences, and identities, his friend was “more like him than different.”

For each of the five participants, their experiences and understanding of belonging have developed into galvanizing commitments with respect to their personal and professional identities and activities in the world.

## **The second question: the power of belonging**

The second central area of inquiry focused on the participant's thoughts regarding inclusion and belonging, the link to individual and collective well-being, and the power a focus on belonging might have with respect to addressing pernicious social problems. While all my interviewees were laudatory of the progressive frame that the concept of inclusion has provided for thinking about community, they observed that it had not provided true belonging; merely "insertion" (Vickie & Jennifer). Ric challenged the authenticity of efforts aimed at including and in particular, the requirement of conformity in order to sustain membership. The fragility of only being included, subject to other's determinations and whims, was highlighted by all of the participants. Each of the five were firm in their conviction that a sense of belonging had powerful consequences for both individual and collective well-being going so far as to declare that it has ramifications for our survival on the planet (Vickie, Jennifer, David, and Ric). I concluded each of the interviews by asking my participants to offer their suggestions as to how best to foster a sense of belonging. In every instance, the focus was on intentionality with respect to belonging by cultivating the conditions for relationships in community.

## **The way forward: renewing the call for beloved community**

Born (2014) is in solidarity with my research participants and their focus on relationship and community. He calls for a focus on "investing in relationship to deepen community" as an alternative to "shallow community, based on selfish

or even just lazy or bewildered individualism; and fear-based community, in which people derive their sense of belonging from anxiety or hatred” (p. xvii). While not proposing we embrace a romanticized version of community, Born instead appeals for “a broader definition of community as belonging” (p. 57) and advocates, as my research participants have, for acts of intentionality such as sharing our stories and opportunities for collective action based on common commitments to our health and well-being as fellow citizens. This optimism does not deny how difficult it is to promote the value of relationships and community in the face of the kinds of structural violence that both Martin Luther King (1974) and hooks (2000) have examined and contested. The systematic ways in which social structures have obstructed the capacity for relationships cannot be denied and a simplistic analysis will not address the need for sophisticated strategies for promoting the importance of a focus on community. However, to quote Kendrick, community “is rightfully idealized when it is emphasized as the communal reality that human beings both need and create if left to themselves.” (Kendrick as quoted in Schwartz, 1992, p. 180)

Wheatley (2002) is also a proponent of what she describes as the “yearning for community” (p.4). This yearning can only be fulfilled through actively cultivating relationships which she believes are best facilitated through focused attention on conversation as a bridge to span differences and separation. Wheatley believes that “when we begin listening to each other, and when we talk about things that matter to us, the world begins to change” (p. 9). She is a fervent advocate of the potency of relationships.

Relationships are all there is. Everything in the universe only exists because it is in relationship to everything else. Nothing exists in isolation. We have to stop pretending we are individuals who can go it alone. We humans want to be together. We only isolate ourselves when we're hurt by others, but alone is not our natural state. Today, we live in an unnatural state – separating ourselves rather than being together. (p. 19)

Similarly, Lord (2013) asserts that “community is the place where relationships flourish” and has generated a “belonging lens” which proposes three intersecting domains for focus: presence, participation, and relationships. In order for belonging to be achieved, he believes that individuals must have an authentic presence, the capacity for participation, and the opportunity to develop and sustain meaningful relationships. Key initiatives which must be instituted in order to buttress these domains include the broad concepts of: connecting, intentionality, invitation, hospitality, gifts, creating judgement free spaces, and belonging as a guide to policy making. Lord & Hutchison (2007) promote the view that when this belonging lens is applied, “cultural norms of vulnerability, disability, or aging” which can lead to separation, marginalization, and discrimination can be ameliorated. The potential of a variety of relationships is allowed to flourish; relationships which value diversity and celebrate difference.

My research inquiry has confirmed for me the importance and validity of the topic of belonging. The in-depth interviews served to deepen my understanding of the concept and inspired me to reflect on areas where further research could be considered. Based on the degree of agreement regarding the need for human beings to feel a sense of belonging, it is my suggestion that further inquiry be conducted into Lord's (2013) belonging lens as an application that can impact social policy across a spectrum of contexts. The lens he

proposes could be applied to thinking about community planning and design, housing, social programs and supports, and academic environments for example. Considerations of curriculum development in early childhood care settings, after school programs, and family support programs could all benefit from a belonging lens by focusing on relationships, opportunities for contribution, and promoting welcome for everyone.

### **Final thoughts**

In *The Butterfly Effect*, Robin Teske (2000) writes that “love in action” and personal responsibility are at the core of much feminist thinking about the practice of nonviolence” (p. 114). Distinguishing that love is often misused and misinterpreted, Teske explores agape, defined as “understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all people...agape is an overflowing love that seeks nothing in return. It is to will good for someone, to care deeply for someone even when a basis for mutual affection does not exist” (p. 114). In Teske’s description, I am offered a way to define a personal love ethic that I can extend into an organizing principle and use to redefine power and power relations, particularly with respect to cultivating belonging. Considerations of love as an organizing principle for supporting belonging and reinvigorating community might be dismissed as sentimental and simplistic starting points, yet the self-reflection required to act from a place of love, is precisely that which bell hooks believes provides us with the authenticity to move forward. In her essay *The Look of Love*,

Kelly Oliver (2001) beautifully articulates the force of hooks' inspiration and motivation.

“hooks insists that an ethic of love must be part of any political movement....without an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspiration, we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination – imperialism, sexism, racism, classism”. Love is the ethical agency that motivates a move toward others, across differences. Love motivates a move beyond self-interested political action, which is necessary to move beyond domination.” (p. 72)

I began this inquiry wanting to better understand belonging and how to promote this concept as a means to enhancing my commitment to make a difference in the world. My resolve in the power of belonging has been strengthened – I move forward from this experience employing the ethical agency of love to continue the conversations with others.

## Bibliography

- Ambert, A., Adler, P., Adler, P. & Detzner, D. (1995). Understanding and evaluating qualitative research. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 57 (4), pp. 879 – 893.
- Baumeister, R. F. & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117 (3), 497-529.
- Becker, H. S. (1967). Whose side are we on? *Social Problems*, 14 (3), 239 - 247.
- Block, P. (2008). *Community: The structure of belonging*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Born, P. (2014). *Deepening Community: Finding joy together in chaotic times*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc.
- Brown, B. (2010). The power of vulnerability. Retrieved 22 October 2013 from [www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability).
- Brown, B. (1999). Searching for a theory: The journey from explanation to revolution. *Families in Society: The Contemporary Human Services*, 80(4), 359-366.
- Brown, L. & Strega, S. (Eds.) (2005). *Research as resistance: Critical, indigenous, and anti-oppressive approaches*. Toronto, Ontario: Canadian Scholars Press.



- Cambiazo, P. (2014). *The community support worker of the 1980s, as she was imagined: A genealogy*. Masters Thesis. Retrieved 19 January 2015 from <http://hdl.handle.net/1828/5598>
- Creswell, J.W. (2009) *Research design; Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Darder, A. & Miron, L. F. (2006). Critical pedagogy in a time of uncertainty: A call to action *Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies*, 6 (5), 5-20.
- Esterberg, K. (2002). *Qualitative methods in social research*. McGraw-Hill Higher Education.
- Ernst, J.M. & Cacioppo, J.T. (1999). Lonely hearts: Psychological perspectives on loneliness. *Applied and Preventative Psychology*, 8: 1 – 22.
- Hagerty, B.M., Williams, R. A., Coyne, J.C. & Early, M.R. (1996). Sense of belonging and indicators of social and psychological functioning. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, X:4, 235-244.
- Hawkey, L.C. & Cacioppo, J.T. (2010). Loneliness matters: A theoretical and empirical review of consequences and mechanisms. *Annals of Behavioural Medicine*: 40:2, 218 – 227.
- herising, F. (2005). Interrupting positions: Critical thresholds and queer propositions. In L. Brown & S. Strega (Eds.), *Research as resistance: Critical, indigenous, and anti-oppressive approaches* (pp. 127-152). Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Canadian Scholars Press.

- Hill, D. L. (2006). Sense of belonging as connectedness, American Indian worldview, and mental health. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing, 20(5)*, 210-216.
- hooks, b. (2000). *All about love: New visions*. New York: HarperCollins.
- hooks, b. (2006, July). Toward a worldwide culture of love. *Shambhala Sun*. Retrieved November 16, 2008 from <http://www.shambhalasun.com/index>
- Kirby, S. & McKenna, K. (1989). *Experience, research, social change: Methods from the margins*. Aurora, Ontario: Garamond Press.
- King, T. (2003). *The truth about stories: A native narrative*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press.
- Kovach, M. (2005). Emerging from the margins: Indigenous methodologies. In L. Brown & S. Strega (Eds.), *Research as resistance: Critical, indigenous, and anti-oppressive approaches* (pp. 127-152). Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Canadian Scholars Press.
- Kunc, N. (1992). The need to belong: Rediscovering Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In R. Villa, J. Thousand, W. Stainbeack & S. Stainback (Eds.). *Restructuring for caring and effective education*. (pp. 25-39). Baltimore: Paul Brookes.
- Levitt-Jones, T, Lathlean, J, Maguire, J, & McMillan, M. (2007). Belongingness: A critique of the concept and implications for nursing education. *Nurse Education Today, #27*, 210-218.

- Levitt-Jones, T., Lathlean, J. (2008). The ascent to competence conceptual framework: an outcome of a study of belongingness. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 18, 2870-2879.
- Lord, J & Hutchison, P. (2007). *Pathways to inclusion: Building a new story with people and communities*. Concord, Ontario: Captus Press.
- Lord, J. (2013). The power of relationships and community. Retrieved 22 December 2013 from [www.johnlord.net](http://www.johnlord.net)
- McCallum, D. (2001). *The need to know*. Published by the Office of the Ombudsman, British Columbia.
- McMillan, D.W. & Chavis, D.M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of community psychology*, 14 (1), pp. 6 – 23.
- Moss, P. (1993). Focus: Feminism as method. *The Canadian geographer*, 37(1), pp. 48-49.
- Miller, W. & Crabtree, B.F. (2004). Depth Interviewing. In Hesse-Beber, S.N. & Leavy, P. (Eds.) *Approaches to qualitative research: A reader on theory and practice*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Neuman, W. L. (1997) *Social Research Methods*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Oakley, A. (1990). Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms. In H. Roberts (Ed.), *Doing feminist research* (pp. 30-61). London: Routledge.
- Oliver, K. (2001). The look of love. *Hypatia*, 16(3), pp. 56-78. Retrieved November 17, 2008, from the Project Muse database.
- Rabinow, P. (1984) (Ed.). *The Foucault reader*. New York: Pantheon Books.

- Ramazanoglu, C. & Holland, J. (2002). *Feminist methodology: Challenges and choices*. London: Sage Press.
- Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Reitsma-Street, M. (2002). Processes of Community Action Research: Putting poverty on the policy agenda of a rich region. *Canadian Review of Social Policy*, 49-50, 69-91.
- Ricks, F., Charlesworth, J., Bellefeuille, G. & Field, A. (1999). *All together now: Creating a social capital mosaic*. Victoria, British Columbia & Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: Ricks & Vanier Institute for the Family.
- Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Shalom. Retrieved 4 December 2014 from [www.therefinersfire.org/meaning\\_of\\_shalom.htm](http://www.therefinersfire.org/meaning_of_shalom.htm).
- Smith, K.L. & Zepp, I.G. (1974). *Search for the beloved community: The thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press.
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2001). Coming to theory: Finding Foucault and Deleuze. In K. Tuhiwai Smith, L. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. London, England: Zed Books.
- Stone, D. (1997). *Policy paradox: The art of political decision making*. New York: W. W. Norton.

- Schwartz, D. B. (1992) *Crossing the river: Creating a conceptual revolution in community & disability*. Northampton, MA: Brookline Books.
- Teske, R.L. (2000). The butterfly effect. In R.L. Teske & M.A. Tetreault (Eds.). *Feminist approaches to social movements, Vol. 1, Conscious acts and the politics of social change* (pp. 107-123). Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Weiler (Ed.). *Feminist Engagements; Reading, resisting, and revisioning male theorists in education and cultural studies*. (pp. 141-163). New York: Routledge.
- University of Victoria: Human Research Ethics Board Application for Ethics Approval for Human Participant Research. (2008). Retrieved from <http://www.research.uvic.ca/forms/>.
- Vanier, J. (2008). *Becoming Human*. Toronto, Canada: Anansi Press.
- Wheatley, M. J. (2002). *Turning to one another: Simple conversations to restore hope to the future*. San Francisco: CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- Wolfensberger, W. (1972). *The principle of normalization in human services*. Toronto: National Institute on Mental Retardation.
- Yuval-Davis. N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40:3, 197-214.

## Appendix 1: Letter of Invitation



University of Victoria | Studies in Policy and Practice Program

(Date)

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study entitled "*I and Thou: Exploring a Sense of Belonging*" that I am conducting as partial fulfillment of the requirements associated with completing my Master's program as a graduate student in the Studies in Policy and Practice Program at the University of Victoria.

I am particularly interested in how to support a sense of belonging on the part of all citizens, and that deeper explorations of the topic may yield discoveries that can ameliorate the experiences of marginalization, discrimination, poverty, and isolation which inhibit the fullest expression of social justice.

In order to explore these questions, I am conducting field research in which I will be engaging in open-ended interviews with a small, diverse, and intentional sample of social activists and innovators who have considered the topic of belonging in their own work. I am curious about how each of these individuals defines belonging, why they have prioritized the topic in their work, and how they view the relevance of the topic to their social change leadership activities. My research seeks to expand the possibilities for social justice, community building, and societal transformation that emerge from our discussions and will contribute to the knowledge about this subject as a result.

I am inviting you to participate in this study because your work and your leadership position in your field have inspired and informed my research on this topic. If you agree to participate, I will arrange the opportunity, at a time and manner convenient to you, for a one and a half to two hour, loosely structured interview. For the purposes of accurate transcription, I am requesting your permission to audiotape the interviews as well as take notes during our conversation. My hope is to complete the interviews by the end of September 2010, depending upon schedules and availability of my research participants. Additionally, you will be invited to review the transcript of our interview and will receive a copy of my completed thesis.

While there are no known or anticipated risks to you from participating in this research, participation could cause some inconvenience to you, including the time required for the interview, a possible follow up half-hour interview, and any

time you choose to commit to reviewing transcripts. Your participation at each of these stages is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from the research at any time. Further, because we have had the opportunity to associate with one another through our professional affiliations, I want to confirm that there is no obligation on your part to participate in my research because of any existing relationship we may have.

My field notes, audiotapes & transcripts from interviews, data analysis, and other documents associated with my project will be held in a secured filing cabinet in my office. My supervisor will be monitoring my project progress and may have to review the sources of information in order to provide support. Should you choose to withdraw from the study any information already collected from you will be destroyed and will not be used in the data analysis or final thesis.

Personal information about you will not be collected; however, because of your public profile on this subject, I am seeking to identify you as a participant in the research. If, however, you would prefer to use an alias to protect your identity, I will most certainly accommodate your request.

I believe the topic of belonging is of vital importance and interest to a diverse array of individuals, organizations, and academics. Therefore I will make efforts to broadly disseminate the results of my study through scholarly presentations, journal articles, conference presentations, and my thesis defence. It is possible that the results of my project may yield future research opportunities, therefore, I will retain the information collected from interviews and data analysis for a period of up to 5 years subsequent to the successful completion and acceptance of my thesis.

Should you have any further questions regarding this invitation you may contact me at (*redacted for privacy reasons*) or by email at (*redacted for privacy reasons*). My research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Susan Boyd who can be contacted at 250-721-8203 or by email at [sboyd@uvic.ca](mailto:sboyd@uvic.ca). Further information regarding the Studies in Policy and Practice program at the University of Victoria can be obtained via their website at <http://web.uvic.ca/spp>.

I sincerely appreciate your consideration of my request and hope that we may work together on this exciting project. Your consent is required to confirm your participation; please refer to the attached consent declaration.

Sincerely,

Kim Lyster  
Masters Candidate  
Studies in Policy and Practice  
University of Victoria

## Appendix 2: Consent



University of Victoria | Studies in Policy and Practice Program

Your signature below indicates that you understand the conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

\_\_\_\_\_

*Name of Participant*                      *Signature*                      *Date*

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be held by the researcher.***

I agree to be identified by name / credited in the results of the study.  
I agree to have my responses attributed to me by name in the results.

\_\_\_\_\_ (Participant to provide initials)

I do not agree to be identified by name / credited in the results of the study and further, wish to remain anonymous.

\_\_\_\_\_ (Participant to provide initials)



### **Appendix 3: Interview Questions**

1. How do you understand a sense of belonging?
  - (a) When and how have you experienced a sense of belonging in your life?
  - (b) How has your professional work and experience influenced your perspectives on the topic of belonging?
  - (c) Has there been an “aha” moment with respect to the importance of belonging as a commitment in your work? If so, what precipitated that moment?
  - (d) In your opinion, are there commonalities or similarities between the concepts of inclusion and belonging? Please describe them.
  - (e) Do you see a distinction between the concept of inclusion and belonging? If yes, what is that distinction?
  
2. In your experience, is there a link between a sense of belonging and individual well-being? If so, how?
  - (a) From your experience, is there a link between a sense of belonging and collective well-being? Again, if so, what is that link?
  - (b) In your experience, can social justice issues such as marginalization, discrimination, poverty, and isolation be ameliorated by promoting a sense of belonging? How?
  - (c) How can a sense of belonging be fostered?

## Appendix 4: Ethics Approval



**Human Research Ethics Board**  
 Office of Research Services  
 Administrative Services Building  
 PO Box 1700 STN CSC  
 Victoria, British Columbia V8W 2Y2, Canada  
 Tel: 250-472-4545, Fax: 250-721-8960  
 Email: ethics@uvic.ca Web: www.research.uvic.ca

### Certificate of Renewed Approval

<b>PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:</b> Kim Lyster <b>UVic STATUS:</b> Master's Student <b>UVic DEPARTMENT:</b> SPP/HSD <b>SUPERVISOR:</b> Dr. Susan Boyd	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px;"><b>ETHICS PROTOCOL NUMBER</b></td> <td style="padding: 2px;"><b>10-212</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2" style="padding: 2px; font-size: small;">Minimal Risk - Delegated</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px;"><b>ORIGINAL APPROVAL DATE:</b></td> <td style="padding: 2px;">26-May-10</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px;"><b>RENEWED ON:</b></td> <td style="padding: 2px;">22-Apr-13</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px;"><b>APPROVAL EXPIRY DATE:</b></td> <td style="padding: 2px;">25-May-14</td> </tr> </table>	<b>ETHICS PROTOCOL NUMBER</b>	<b>10-212</b>	Minimal Risk - Delegated		<b>ORIGINAL APPROVAL DATE:</b>	26-May-10	<b>RENEWED ON:</b>	22-Apr-13	<b>APPROVAL EXPIRY DATE:</b>	25-May-14
<b>ETHICS PROTOCOL NUMBER</b>	<b>10-212</b>										
Minimal Risk - Delegated											
<b>ORIGINAL APPROVAL DATE:</b>	26-May-10										
<b>RENEWED ON:</b>	22-Apr-13										
<b>APPROVAL EXPIRY DATE:</b>	25-May-14										
<b>PROJECT TITLE:</b> I and Thou: Exploring a Sense of Belonging  <b>RESEARCH TEAM MEMBERS:</b> None  <b>DECLARED PROJECT FUNDING:</b> None											
<b>CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL</b>											
<p>This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the protocol.</p> <p><b>Modifications</b>                  To make any changes to the approved research procedures in your study, please submit a "Request for Modification" form. You must receive ethics approval before proceeding with your modified protocol.</p> <p><b>Renewals</b>                  Your ethics approval must be current for the period during which you are recruiting participants or collecting data. To renew your protocol, please submit a "Request for Renewal" form before the expiry date on your certificate. You will be sent an emailed reminder prompting you to renew your protocol about six weeks before your expiry date.</p> <p><b>Project Closures</b>                  When you have completed all data collection activities and will have no further contact with participants, please notify the Human Research Ethics Board by submitting a "Notice of Project Completion" form.</p>											
<b>Certification</b>											
<p style="text-align: center;">This certifies that the UVic Human Research Ethics Board has examined this research protocol and concluded that, in all respects, the proposed research meets the appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Participants.</p> <div style="text-align: center; margin: 10px 0;"> </div> <p style="text-align: center;">Dr. Rachael Scarth Associate Vice-President, Research</p>											

10-212 Lyster, Kim

Certificate Issued On: 22-Apr-13