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Finding Home: Belonging During a Pandemic

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MATRICULATION CONVOCATION

By: President Mark Burstein

Lawrence University

September 24, 2020

Allison, thank you for that unusual and warm introduction and for your leadership of the Public Events Committee this year. I look forward to seeing how you and the Committee reinvent our community gatherings.

Thank you Professors Gomez, Oh Zabrowski, Sieck, Spears and Swan for that beautiful prelude. You made an excellent selection this year with “Show Us How to Love” by Mark Miller. No year calls more strongly for love than this one. Thank you Jessica Hopkins’22 for reading our Land Acknowledgement this morning. And thank you, Linda Morgan Clement, the Julie Esch Hurvis Dean of Spiritual and Religious Life, for providing closing words for today’s Convocation. Our postlude today will also be a treat, a piece played by Hung Phi Nguyen’21.

I also want to thank the many members of the Lawrence community who helped me with research for this talk. Each year matriculation convocation has provided an opportunity for me to consider a topic with colleagues across the campus. This year, as in years past, I leave the conversation impressed by the breadth, depth, and generosity of our intellectual campus discourse.

Welcome to the academic year. I want to specifically welcome our new first year, transfer and visiting students, and the many faculty and staff who recently joined us. Since we will continue for the foreseeable future to be a community both on campus and dispersed to over 30 countries and close to 50 states, I ask that we all make an extra effort to extend a warm Lawrence welcome to our new members. I look forward to working with all of you in finding new ways to sustain our vibrant learning community during this pandemic.

I began to think about the theme of belonging and home for this matriculation convocation last spring in response to the societal convulsion created by both the pandemic and the deepening recognition of systemic racism in our culture. At that moment, I had no idea how personal this topic would become for me. This summer has been a time for me to reassess my priorities and decide to prioritize family, specifically my mother and my in-laws, over a position I love. Serving as your president has been the central privilege and pleasure of my professional career. David and I want to thank all of you who have allowed us to join, to belong, and to call this university and Appleton our home. Lawrence will always be in our hearts and we will always be proud to call Appleton our home no matter where we reside.

What a year. I expect many of you feel, as I do, the pain, the conflict, and the dislocation in our society. The new presidential election cycle has unleashed overwhelming forces to divide us. Our country’s attempt to reckon with systemic racism brings both hope and conflicting views of an aspirational future. Environmental degradation continues to march on around the globe. And, the pandemic has curtailed ways to process all of this stress, has upended family life, and has created severe economic burdens on many of us and the institutions we serve.

This chaotic environment filled with conflict, inequity, anxiety and anger has forced me to raise basic questions about where I feel safe and accepted. Where are my roots? Where do I belong? Where is home?

Can I truly feel at home in a purple state in a time when political discourse has morphed into verbal hand to hand combat and the middle ground has become suspect? When we moved to Wisconsin eight years ago, I saw the state's political tradition as a strength, a place to fully explore all sides. Now it feels like an invitation to a daily political war. Many theorists who have explored the concept of belonging find that one of its central aspects is the need to feel that your whole identity is recognized and affirmed. This recognition is seen as an invitation to create a deep connection. If this is true, how can belonging be created in a society in which racism and bias against minority identities continue to exist?

The pandemic has also made it harder to return to places where we once felt at home. The virus threatens every travel plan and has led countries and regions of the world to limit visitation. How can those of us who have deep human connection in multiple locations sustain ties that are integral to our sense of belonging?

These questions and many others consumed me this summer. As Ann Belford Ulanov recognized in an address entitled "Root, Uprooting, and Rootedness" at the CG Jung Institute in Chicago last year, our world has reinforced "internal flux rather than integrating themes." Privileged to join a sustained dialogue group on race and racism at Lawrence and in the Fox Cities, I realized that these questions are on many of our minds. Countless researchers have studied the human desire for belonging. Some posit belonging as the opposite of isolation: it ensures that we do not feel alone. Others suggest that finding meaning in one's life is anchored in the sense of belonging. Research has found that the smallest social belonging interventions can yield lasting positive effect on individuals. Many believe that belonging is critical to creating successful learning environments.

In "The Need to Belong," Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary suggest that "a need to belong is a fundamental human motivation." They explain that two criteria must be present to create a sense of belonging: frequent and pleasant interactions with a few other people which take place in a stable context, and an enduring framework of affective concern for each other's welfare.

In "Searching for belonging – an analytical framework," Marco Antonsich takes this idea one step further. He suggests that "belonging is a personal, intimate, feeling of being 'at home' in a place." For Antonsich 'home' "here stands for a symbolic space of familiarity, comfort, security and emotional attachment." But where does one find such a place? Is home where we spend our childhood? Where we find resonance and safety as adults? Or as Robert Frost said, is home just "the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in"?

In a book entitled "The Politics of Belonging," Nira Yuval-Davis analyzes the sense of belonging from the perspective of identity, politics, and intersectionality. She understands that "people can 'belong' in many different ways and to many different objects of attachment. These can vary from a particular person to the whole of humanity, in a concrete or abstract way, by self

or other identification, in a stable, contested, or transient way.” For Yuval-Davis, “Even in its most stable ‘primordial’ forms, however, belonging is always a dynamic process. . .”

Ulanov also emphasizes process. She describes belonging as the “searching for an environment safe enough to become our own most selves.” By ‘our most selves’ she means an environment where we find, explore and create ourselves. She believes we discover or uncover this root of belonging rather than create it. Archbishop Desmond Tutu calls this Ubuntu, the assertion of being human.

Brene Brown, in her book, “The Gifts of Imperfection,” also acknowledges the common human need to belong. But she emphasizes the complexity of achieving what we long for: “Belonging,” she writes “is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Because this yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which are not only hollow substitutes for belonging, but often barriers to it. Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.”

Natasha Trethewey captures beautifully in her poem “Theories of Time and Space” this challenge that faces us as we seek to belong. She writes:

“You can get there from here, though there’s no going home. Everywhere you go will be somewhere you’ve never been.”

It sounds so simple to create for oneself, right?

Like many of you, I think, my own sense of belonging springs partially from my upbringing. In the Jewish tradition, the biological family provides the core for belonging and those of us who have family are obligated to create it for others. For example, on the central Jewish holiday, Passover, the Bible instructs us to gather in family units to feast and celebrate. Family is so central there are special rules requesting every existing family unit to invite the stranger who is without familial connection. This has been translated into our current tradition of an elaborate ceremony over dinner called a seder which involves roles for each family member and encourages families to invite those without a home to join the celebration.

Kwame Anthony Appiah takes the power of biological family one step further to establish belonging. In the preface to his book “In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture” he describes his sense of belonging as living, “in two extended families divided by several thousand miles and allegedly insuperable cultural distance that never, so far as I can recall, puzzled or perplexed us much. As I grew older . . . I learned that not everybody had family in Africa and in Europe; not everyone had a Lebanese uncle, American and French and Kenyan, and Thai cousins. And . . . now that my sisters have married a Norwegian and a Nigerian and a Ghanaian, now that I live in America, I am used to seeing the world as a network of points of affinity.” Now that is what I call a home!

For many of us, the people we choose make a family and create belonging. In, “Families we Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship,” Kath Weston explores this phenomenon. She points out that

the sign on the stage at the 1987 Gay and Lesbian March on Washington read: “Love makes a family – nothing more, nothing less.” Members of the LGBTQ community and many of the rest of us create family, roots, belonging through connections to spouses and friends.

As Reginald Shepherd, an African American poet wrote in a poem dedicated to his husband entitled “You, Therefore,”

“home is nowhere, therefore you,
a kind of dwell and welcome, song after all,
and free of any eden we can name.”

Clearly, for some of us, confidence persists in the power to create the place where we truly belong.

Antonsich suggests that other “modes of belonging” exist outside of family, both biological and created. bell hooks in her book, “Belonging: A Culture of Place” offers a compelling meditation on how location itself can create this sense of rootedness. hooks’ view of her native Kentucky is not sentimentalized. She chronicles the racism and the culture of white supremacy of her childhood in complicated and painful ways. But still her heart returns to the landscape and people of her early years. At the end of a chapter entitled “Kentucky Is My Fate,” she writes: “During my time away, I would return to Kentucky and feel again a sense of belonging that I never felt elsewhere, experiencing unbroken ties to the land, to homefolk, to our vernacular speech.”

Place, as well as people, becomes the sustainer of belonging.

Many other traditions also connect belonging to a place or location. From the Native American perspective, for example, Paula Gunn Allen, a well-known poet from Laguna Pueblo, made this connection very clear: “We are the land. To the best of my understanding that is the fundamental idea that permeates American Indian life.” This view of belonging certainly makes sense here in the land of Neenah, Menasha, and Winnebago, all names that originate in Native American language and tradition. But the idea exists as well in Victorian England. As George Eliot stated in *Daniel Deronda*, “A human life, I think, should be well rooted in some spot of native land, where it may get the love and tender kinship for the face of the earth.”

A strong link to an ancestral home is not central to or at the core of everyone’s sense of belonging. Pico Iyer, a British born essayist of Indian descent who splits his life between Japan and California put it this way in a Ted Talk entitled “What is home?” “Home . . . is really a work in progress. It’s like a project on which they’re constantly adding upgrades and improvements and corrections. And for more and more of us, home has really less to do with a piece of soil than you could say, with a piece of soul.”

Later in the talk he mentions something that speaks directly to our mission here: “home, we know, is not just the place where you happen to be born, it’s the place where you become yourself.”

Not all of us have had the privilege of finding a sense of belonging during our lifetime. Prejudice, racism, and bias have prevented many of us from finding spaces safe and supportive

enough for us to develop a sense of belonging. Candice Pipes chronicles the lives of Black service men returning to the United States in an article called “The Impossibility of Home.” She offers many examples of young men and women who enlisted, thrived in the military, and fought for our country. But when they returned they encountered the same prejudice and racism that marked their lives before their military service.

From a different perspective, Steve Striffler, in “Neither Here nor There: Mexican Immigrant Workers and the Search for Home,” provides insight into the lives of people who have become an essential workforce in the United States as farm laborers, meat packers, and menial factory staff. As the title suggests, their work here may lead to higher income but also to a persistent sense of dislocation and alienation. Tragically, these experiences are repeated in many situations. Others point to societal alienation and dislocation as forces working against our sense of belonging. In “Home” Toni Morrison states, “What do we mean when we say ‘home’ is a vital question because the destiny of the twenty-first century will be shaped by the possibility or the collapse of a shareable world?” Antonsich also believes that increasing cultural and ethnic diversification of contemporary societies could inhibit the formation of communities of belonging.

Given what these sources tell us of the complexity, the challenge belonging presents now, here, can we possibly believe in our own capacity to create “home” for ourselves and others? Popular culture, especially recent television programs, try to point a way forward. Multiple programs by Shonda Rhimes like “Grey’s Anatomy,” “Station 19” and “Scandal” use work settings to create diverse, inclusive ‘families’ where straight and gay, black, brown and white characters all belong to each other and to a place. Ryan Murphy’s many programs like “Glee,” “911,” and “Pose” follow the same path by creating connectedness and belonging among diverse groups of people who support each other like traditional families. These become families in which we can all see ourselves. Of course, I have recently wanted to be Travis Montgomery on “Station 19.” As a gay fireman with a black firewoman best friend he is beyond cool. Yes, his husband, a fellow fireman, died in the first season, but I digress. Although Rhimes stated once “I am not changing the world, I am pretending to change the world on TV” the sense of belonging she creates illustrates for all of us the potential of redefining what “belonging” and “home” mean in this new century.

The stories Rhimes, Murphy and many others tell help us imagine the sense of home that Congressman John Lewis described in his Lawrence commencement speech in 2015. He said, “So it doesn’t matter if we are black or white, Latino, Asian-American or Native American. It doesn’t matter whether we are straight or gay. We are one people, one family. We are one house. We are brothers and sisters.” His voice, his words, can still give us the courage to believe.

It is now critical for us as a community to revisit these themes and to make sure that all members of the university feel that they belong here. This beloved learning community can and should become “home” for us all. I look forward to hearing your ideas, reactions, and disagreements as we make Lawrence the “home” we all need it to be: one that spans geography, race and all identities. One that helps us all to become ourselves.

Whether you join us from afar or on campus, good luck in this new academic year. Thank you for recreating this learning community we call Lawrence, especially within the constraints of the pandemic. It is a pleasure to have you all back and engaged **in fall term.**