

Chapter 3.

BELONGING: A PLACE WHERE I AM ACCEPTED AS I AM

At a deep psychological level, convincing young people that they will get the respect, admiration, love that they are looking for through consumerism is a manipulation of a deep human instinct to want to belong.¹

—HELENA NORBERG-HODGE

Years ago, when I attended church conferences, I would feel a pit in my stomach. There was an unspoken prevailing attitude that women were allowed to attend, but not necessarily invited to contribute. We knew our place as women, needed to stay in our lane, and needed to keep our mouths shut. Needless to say, that is not a good feeling. It's better today, but there are still issues that need to be addressed. Many church denominations and even parachurch organizations state that they are for women in ministry. In theory and even in theology that may be true, but their practice often lags far behind. This attitude affects true fellowship and withholds one part of the body from operating at full capacity. There is an obvious ceiling and such attitudes cause women to die a little bit inside, refusing to seek to attain their full potential. Growing and developing appears

ambitious and somehow takes away from a man leading. How does one person becoming all that God created her to be impinge on someone else's growth or leadership? It doesn't. Sons *and daughters* belong together in the kingdom to live and work side by side. I love the line from the worship song that says, "In my Father's house, there's a place for me." There is room for everyone in the kingdom of God to walk in the fullness of their gifts and calling.

Belonging is more felt than stated. Telling people they belong is one thing, but making room for them speaks much louder than words. An invitation to a party, conversation, committee, or neighborhood doesn't mean acceptance. True belonging means love and acceptance *as you are* to

experience community, accountability, fellowship, and healing.

STRONG BODY

The apostle Paul used an example of belonging in I Corinthians 12:15–20 when he wrote about having one body with many parts. It is impossible for the body to be considered as separate parts, because no part can exist on its own. An eye, ear, or head by itself will not live. Each needs the connection with the whole to function. Individual parts of the body may not be able to operate at full capacity, causing a deficiency or disability, but the sum of all parts makes up the whole. The Corinthians passage continues with verses 21–26.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head saying to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor... But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

The emphasis is on the fact that God is the One who has put the body together. Every part is needed for the body to be healthy and function properly. Belonging deepens the connection and

sends the message that each individual part matters and contributes to the whole.

FOUR SPACES OF BELONGING

Have you ever felt like you didn’t belong? Belonging is a basic human need, intended to first be experienced in the relationship of family. Community is a place where a person is deeply loved, wanted, needed, and appreciated. There is no need to pretend or seek to earn approval in community, because acceptance is a given. Several levels of belonging within community deepen relationships and create intimacy.

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall studied spatial distances to see how people communicate within cultures. These four spaces of belonging

include public, social, personal, and intimate. The commonalities of all four spaces include connection, participation, commitment, and significance.²

In public belonging spaces, people connect through an outside influence, such as a professional sports team. People wear official garb, buy special broadcast viewing privileges, and stay up too late or get up extra early just to see the results of the game. Another example of public belonging is a political party. People from various regions of the country who are very different in every area of their lives are united in supporting the same candidate. The political party is the outside influence that joins these people.

Social belonging occurs when people share snapshots of what it would be like to be in personal

space together. The phrases “first impression” and “put your best foot forward” refer to this spatial belonging. Social belonging is important because it provides the space for “neighbor” relationships. A neighbor is someone you know well enough to ask for small favors. Such a relationship provides a space for those who would like to develop a deeper relationship. In social space, information is provided that helps others decide if connection is possible.

Personal belonging relationships share private experiences, feelings, and thoughts. These relationships are deeper than casual acquaintances, and yet knowing the information doesn't cause discomfort. People who connect in these spaces are close friends.

Intimate belonging relationships go even deeper, and people know the naked truth about each other and are not ashamed. There is deep vulnerability in such relationships, with very few people sharing in this capacity. Belonging is very important for people to be healthy members of society. Healthy community is achieved when we hold harmonious connections within all four spaces.

Mirror Moment

Take a moment and reflect on the close relationships in your life.

List the people who share your personal belonging relationships.

List the people who share your intimate belonging relationships. To what depth do you share with these people? Do they know everything about you, or are you still guarded in some areas of your heart? Is there anyone in your life with whom you are emotionally and spiritually intimate?

OBSTACLE: SHAME

If you have ever done something you weren't proud of, then you know that shame is the accomplice of a bad choice. It is an obstacle to belonging because it categorically separates and isolates like nothing else. Why do we allow shame to define us? Shame is an overwhelming sense of exclusive defectiveness that is accompanied by the

belief that it is impossible to change. It carries both the feeling and belief that something is innately wrong with me; therefore, I will never quite belong. I am in attendance, part of the group, and even well liked, but always present is the underlying sense of being different. Difference of this kind is not the unique, special, one of a kind, or no one else in the world like you wonderful different.

This difference means there is something about me that is deficient, lacking, or unacceptable. In short, *I am bad*. Not what I did is bad, rather I am bad. Shame becomes the barrier to self-acceptance. It blocks the needed engagement with others that would help us feel love and belonging.

Shame leads to self-rejection and is often accompanied by a feeling of invisibility, as if living

in a dream, with no one able to see or hear you. Present, but disconnected. The evil intention behind shame is to dismantle your God-given identity and destroy you as an individual. If self is rejected, community connections will be fleeting and superficial, because love cannot be given or received. Shame breeds self-rejection.

[Figure 1](#) shows the Shame Cycle. Shame starts with a trigger. It can take place as early as fifteen to eighteen months by the response to something as small as a look, a sigh, a frown, or a gesture. Toddlers cannot even speak at this age, yet these nonverbal cues carry the undeniable felt message of disapproval.³ Similar triggers throughout our lives activate the shame cycle, causing feelings of inferiority. The emotion then moves to judgment, both from others and self. Statements like, “There

you go again, idiot,” “You’re so stupid.” “You never get it right, do you?” can start the cycle. Comments of correction, redirection, and even affirmation can equally initiate the cycle: “Don’t worry about it. I’ll finish up here.” “You go to the party. I’ll stay home with the kids.” “Didn’t so and so do a great job on her report?” Shame is an equal opportunity destroyer that sneaks up at any place at any time to upset a person’s emotional equilibrium. Self-judgment may be more brutal than other people’s words as familiar self-talk tapes play a continuous loop of reproach, beratement, and self-hatred.

The third part of the cycle consists of hiding. The person immediately withdraws to seek cover from the disapproval of others. Emotional withdrawal is certain and is often accompanied by physical withdrawal if possible. Examples of

physical hiding caused by shame include avoiding social gatherings, excusing oneself to go to the bathroom in the middle of a conversation, asking for a minute to regroup, changing the subject, or abruptly disengaging in a discussion. Hiding of this sort only lasts long enough to pull it together emotionally before being physically able to leave the room.

Hiding moves into the fourth phase of the cycle called disconnection. In this phase, a person disconnects from self and others by participating in distractive behaviors that dull the pain of shame. Whether or not the engagement is periodic or frequent, the purpose of the behavior is to escape from the pervasive feelings of disapproval, worthlessness, and inferiority. Such disconnection leads to the final phase of the cycle, called

reinforced isolation, whereby a person chooses to be alone rather than pursue relationship. The disparaging emotional drain that shame inflicts on a person's mind and heart crushes the hope of change.

Shame is subtle and secretive in its search for entrance into our lives.

Have you let shame be your guide? Shame is subtle and secretive in its search for entrance into our lives. It silently lives in the shadows of our soul, waiting for the opportune time to expose and humiliate us. In the blink of an eye, we are in the middle of a shame cycle, reeling from its sudden and impactful pounce. Movement through

this cycle can happen in a matter of seconds, concurrently persisting with guilt over wasted time, wasted money, or bingeing on pointless activities. Perpetuation of the cycle continues until broken by new thought patterns.

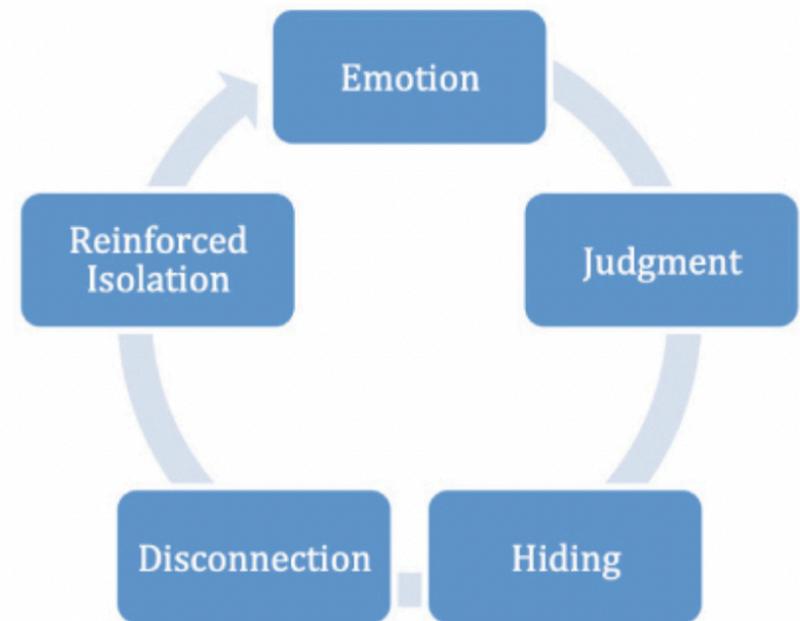


Figure 1: Shame Cycle

[Figure 2](#) shows the Grace Cycle and the needed elements of change for healthy thinking. The first phase of this cycle, like the Shame Cycle, also starts with emotion, but is followed by acceptance rather than judgment. Other people's jeering remarks or hurtful comments continue as always, but now are not received unfavorably. The grid or filter of shame through which a person has viewed the world has been removed and with that removal comes the ability to love others in all their flawed glory. Grace is extended to others for their carelessness. Negative self-talk is replaced with truthful statements like, "I am a beloved child of the King" and "My security is established by receiving the love of the Father." Grace breeds self-acceptance.

This level of acceptance leads to the third phase of the grace cycle, called living in the light. In this phase, the person is transparent and has no need to hide. Mistakes are seen as a normal part of life in which lessons can be learned. There is no fear of taking risks because even failure is seen as opportunity for growth.

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While in the fourth phase of the grace cycle, an individual keeps a mental and physical connection with others. The choice to stay in the present

moment allows the individual to feel the pain and grieve the losses that accompany the pain. Connection with one's own thoughts and feelings then allows the individual to move to the final stage of a supportive community to work through the losses in order to release them, receive healing, and live in truth.

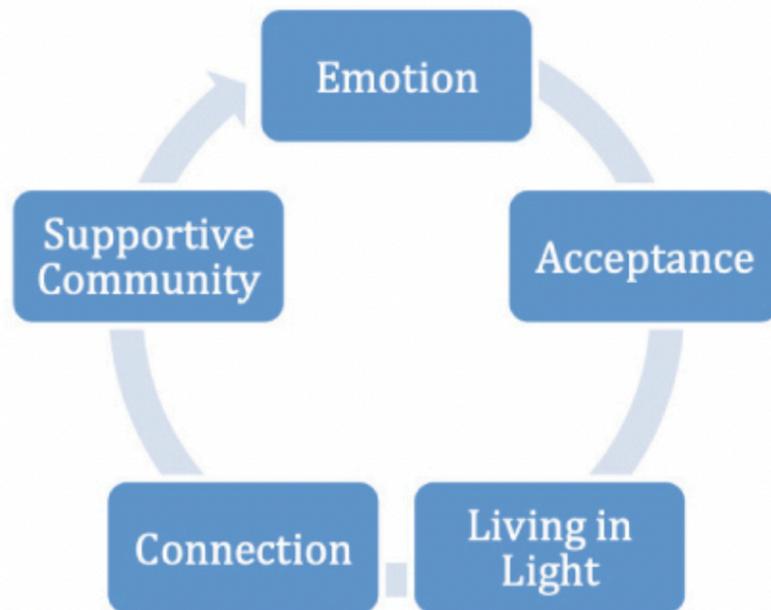


Figure 2: Grace Cycle

One of the beautiful things about a supportive community is the presence of others to hold us accountable for our actions. Rather than running wild, doing our own thing, and not considering anyone else, accountability provides a voice of reason. It is a safety feature to keep us from running amuck. Motivations are kept in check, ambition is acknowledged, and reasons for certain mindsets, behaviors, and actions are explained to another person to reveal blind spots we would not see otherwise.

SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

We need community. The book of Hebrews

exhorts the reader, “Let us draw near to God, let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, let us spur one another on toward love and good deeds, encourage one another and let us not give up meeting together” (10:22–25). It appears from this passage that meeting together in community is where we can gain strength to be able to do these things. Daily interactions with others who know us and love us challenge us to face inconsistencies in our lives and change our thinking patterns, attitudes, and behaviors. *The Message* version of Ephesians 4:4 states, “You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly.” Such togetherness provides the necessary connection and accountability in actions and thoughts to keep us emotionally and spiritually healthy.

It can work the other way as well. A community that does not know God encourages each other, spurs each other, and holds onto hope, but it is a self-centered attempt to feel better with other people who do not want to draw near to God. There is not really any standard to live by other than the one in your own head. It is an attitude whereby you will live as you want and do as you please, with no accountability. A community that draws near to God does not live by its own standard; rather, it lives by the standard of God according to the Word of God. There is a surrendering to someone outside of self and greater than self. Surrender is not a popular concept. It is considered weakness to voluntarily give up one’s will to the will of another. What is not realized is that in the surrendering comes a security established by love. There is deep connection that occurs between the two parties

because a new way has opened opportunity for intimacy. In Christianity, this new way is through faith in Jesus Christ. His sacrifice of love opened the way for people to be able to draw near to God.

Fellowship is definitely a church word coming from passages in the New Testament that describe strong community. People need deep connection that goes beyond shallow pleasantries and small talk and moves to deep connection and understanding. True fellowship welcomes the depth of relationship and the accountability that accompanies it. Supportive community provides the possibility of healing. It is in community where wounding occurs, but it is also in community where healing occurs—not in isolation. It takes courage to continue to enter into relationships because there is always the potential for pain,

misunderstanding, and loss. Perseverance is needed to continue to seek healing and trust others.

THE WAY THROUGH: DISCIPLINE OF COMMUNITY

Conflict is not an excuse to avoid community. As we live together in community and our lives touch each other, sooner or later, differences arise and cause conflict. It is during these times that what we are truly like inside spills out and our character is revealed. In the midst of daily living, our character is developed as problems are worked through in order to keep the relationship. It is very easy in a cyber world to simply cut off relationship by refusing to text someone, refusing to make

phone calls, blocking that person on all social media, and removing a person from your instant message contacts. True community chooses to keep communicating, no matter how awkward the situation, in order to resolve misunderstandings and preserve the relationship.

SAFE PLACE

Community provides a safe place for others to reveal what is going on inside them. Henri Nouwen wrote, “The man who can articulate the movements of his inner life need no longer be a victim of himself, but is able slowly and consistently to remove the obstacles that prevent the Spirit from entering.”⁴ Community provides opportunity for a person to identify and remove

obstacles that are impeding personal relationship with Jesus. Community is honest and doesn't just tell us what we want to hear. Community can be as small or as large as we are comfortable, and it involves giving other people permission to speak into our lives.

Living life together in community means intentionality. It involves fun and laughter as well as dealing with inner heart and soul issues that are dark and painful. Love and acceptance provide a place for us to be honest with ourselves and others as to what is really going on under the surface. Only by openly exposing those areas to another does true community occur. It is a safe place to be able to share hopes, dreams, failures, problems, and fears and welcome others to speak into that area of our life to offer hope and healing.

Other perspectives are important to identify blind spots and areas of strength that we cannot see on our own. A community speaks truth to us to help us see what God sees. At times, self-awareness is painful and cannot be accomplished without others to hold the mirror. Oftentimes what is seen is better than what a person internally believes, but would have never been identified without the help of others. Community is a gift from God to speak His words of love, affirmation, significance, and acceptance as well as instruction, correction, rebuke, and reprimand. First John 3:16 reads, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.”

TRUE FRIENDSHIP IN COMMUNITY

Who is in your community that you trust? I have three close friends who are part of my community. We try to meet weekly to talk about everything and anything that is bothering us and needs to be processed. Talking to the point of self-discovery is all part of what we call processing. Sometimes the consistency of our meeting times wanes due to work schedules and family needs, but there is deep connection, love, and trust among us that is very dear to each of us. It is safe to tell it like it is and not have to filter anything. Attentive friends with us in our pain, frustration, indecision, anger, restlessness, joy, passion, and dreaming are a precious gift. Being together means offering time

and space for the one talking to put into words all that is felt. Moments of silence are shared together as the talker searches for words to articulate what is causing her dissonance. The silence enables the talker to keep going as more vulnerable thoughts surface. A timely clarifying or reflective question often helps cut through the emotion to help her pinpoint the real issue.

Once she is able to identify exactly what is bothering her, she can then honestly evaluate her part in it. Oftentimes the underlying issue is fear—more specifically a fear of the unknown or fear of the future. “What if” scenarios bombard her mind, and she realizes she has been managing her fear through control. As she looks back, she sees that she has been nitpicking at her husband and children because they are not cooperating with

this tactic. Control doesn't build relationships, nor does it foster trust. Instead, forcing control causes others' resistance and tension, which only escalates her efforts. An angry blowup usually occurs and hopefully causes her to withdraw and look within instead of blaming everyone else for their lack of cooperation.

Tears are common during these times as unmet expectations arise to accompany her fear. There is no pressure from the listeners to fix anything. Advice or opinions are not given unless requested by the talker. This enables the listener to have a deeper level of attentiveness. Space enables the talker to keep talking without concern for interruption or losing her train of thought. Being together becomes a safe place for her to express

what is really going on with support, honesty, and love in return.

TELL IT LIKE IT IS

Bringing our secrets into the light

disarms their hold on our lives.

The church is called to be the community of truth who brings things into the light and lives transparently. In the Greek, the word for truth is *aletheia*, meaning “not concealed.” No hiding. No cover-up. There is something very powerful about bringing to light the dark secrets of your life where no one has been allowed to enter. Psalm

32:3 reads, “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long... Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgression to the Lord.’ And you forgave the guilt of my sin.” Bringing our secrets into the light disarms their hold on our lives. Left in our minds, secrets grow as we add assumptions and paranoia to the mix. We are determined that everyone knows what we are trying to hide and we drive ourselves crazy with our inner self-talk. When we bring our secrets into the light, we see them for what they really are. We face them directly and can solve them piece by piece. Our willingness to come into the light also invites the perspective of our safe community to speak into our lives and help us.

Gathering together in groups for spiritual development is becoming more popular in many churches today, but has been happening throughout church history. The Pietist movement was a movement of spiritual renewal that reacted against the immoral character of clergy who had a job as clergy with no evident life of Christ. Philipp Jakob Spener started this movement after his book in 1675, *Pia Desideria* (Pious Wishes), popularized his ideas. This movement was for people in the church who were concerned about their own salvation and wanted a place to gather in groups for encouragement. His aim was not to separate the church, but to gather it together for personal conversion with holiness of life, close fellowship in small groups, and the responsibility for missionary outreach.

The Moravians and the early Methodists formed their followers into small groups and used accountability questions to draw out honesty by asking, “How are things with your soul?” In 1722, some of the Moravian Hussites came under persecution and sought freedom in Saxony, Germany, where Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf took them in and established a community devoted to prayer, praise, and Bible study. The summer of 1727 was considered the golden summer when revival came to twenty-four men and women who made a covenant to spend one hour a day in prayer, and for the next one hundred years, there was never a stoppage in prayer. Much spiritual growth can happen in community.

In order for us to be free, we must intentionally live in the light. Our community doesn't allow us

to hide and withdraw. They encourage, support, and challenge us to stay in the present moment to face the difficult things in our lives and are right there with us in the process.

PRACTICE: ASKING FOR HELP

One of the best ways to fight shame is to ask others for help. By reaching out to others, we come out of hiding, and isolation is broken by connecting with others. The more we do it, the more comfortable it becomes to ask. Make a conscious effort to ask for help at least once a day for a week. By doing so, we will find that people are genuinely agreeable to help in any way they can, and we may meet a new person who fits our safe place community.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Describe your safe place community. On a scale of one to ten, with one being superficial and ten being deep, what is the level of depth in this community?*
- 2. Do you view vulnerability as a strength or weakness? Why?*
- 3. Explain which of Edward Hall's four spaces is the most difficult for you to make connection with others.*
- 4. How does shame hold you back from relationships?*
- 5. How has your community provided both wounding and healing?*

6. *Describe the degree of ease you have in asking for help.*

¹ Helena Norberg-Hodge, interviewed by Jemima Roberts, a columnist from *The Ecologist* on March 2, 2011, http://www.theecologist.org/green_green_living/Q_and_A/794238/qa_helena_norberghodge.html.

² Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1966).

³ For an extensive study of shame, see Michael Lewis, *Shame: The Exposed Self* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

⁴ Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (Dobbs Ferry: Doubleday, 1972), 38.