



## Belonging at Work Begins with You

*“The place in which I’ll fit will not exist until I make it”<sup>1</sup>*

James Baldwin

Harry Hutson

**Executive Summary:** In this paper, citing both research and personal experience, the author explains why “Belonging” at work is important, and suggests that self-understanding is the foundation for belonging. The author’s purpose is to encourage readers to be mindful and open-hearted in situations where others might be overlooked, ignored or left out.

In fourth grade I transferred to a new elementary school. Tommy, a classmate who had been there since kindergarten, did not accept me at first. At recess one day, I was surrounded and belittled by several boys.

“Who do you think you are, Hank?”

“You’re not so great.”

“Why did you come here?”

My fears were primal: *I’m an outsider. No one likes me. I’m all alone in a new school.*

Then another boy in the group named Robin spoke up and said, “Leave him alone. He’s OK”. The bell rang. Recess was over. Just like that, the crisis passed. I had been rescued by someone I barely knew, and now I could return to my default state as a nine-year-old-kid-not-being-bullied. This is what I now know to be true: Exclusion can cause pain; Inclusion can bring joy; and a Bystander can make a difference. I will always be grateful to Robin.

Soon afterward, I made a bet with Tommy (for a nickel)

about some geographical fact or other where he thought he was right, and I absolutely knew I was right. I barely had a nickel in spare change, but I told him he could keep his nickel even if I won the bet. What was my intention? Was I signaling “no hard feelings” so we could become friends? I do not know, but the bet changed our relationship. No money was exchanged (I won the bet), and I began to feel differently about my ‘place’. My bet was worth a lot more than five cents. I began to feel I belonged in my new school.

Childhood stories like these can shed light on the role ‘Belonging’ plays in our lives, and so can similar stories in adulthood. I think that when moments of belonging and not belonging remain alive as significant emotional events in our lives, they can inspire agency. For me, belonging has power and meaning from being either a beneficiary or benefactor — it seeds my curiosity and guides my behavior. I tend to notice newcomers and outsiders, make it safe for people to participate in groups, and thank under-appreciated people.



The central idea of this paper, based on the precepts of Adlerian psychology<sup>2</sup>, is that belonging (and not belonging) is a wellspring of personal motivation and, pointedly, a powerful force at work. I would ask you to consider the meaning of your stories and then challenge yourself with this question: *How then can I go about benefiting my colleagues?*

## The Lessons of Belonging

I draw two lessons from my experiences in belonging and not belonging, and one overarching conclusion.

1. The first lesson for me is that **belonging may not come easily**. You may do all you can to join a team or community yet not succeed. Being agentic on your own behalf is essential, and yet sometimes you need an ally like Robin.
2. The second lesson I have learned is that **belonging creates a responsibility to help others belong**. When I receive a gift of recognition or acceptance, I am grateful. Although it may not be possible to reciprocate in the moment, I can pay it forward and thank someone else. My need to belong is *part of me*, after all, and so is my need to look out for others.

### At work, belonging begins with me — and you.

There is a growing body of scientific evidence showing that selfless concern for others and serving their wellbeing — as in helping others belong — is good for you. Stephen Trzeciak and Anthony Mazzarelli, physicians, scientists and healthcare leaders, write that caring for others is the “wonder drug” for living longer and better lives. They say, “Everything you want out of life can be had by focusing your energy and intention on other people”<sup>3</sup>. I once asked a physician friend how he self-soothed when he was having a bad day. He said he would sit with a patient and hold their hand. My surmise is that he delivered healthcare on both sides of the bed. Doctor and patient belonged in each other’s care.

### When you help others belong, you help yourself belong, too.

## Why Does Belonging Matter?

Belonging is more than an important element in a life of meaning and happiness. It is critical to human health and society.<sup>4</sup> The ‘Need to Belong’ theory was catalyzed in 1995 by a scientific paper that has been cited more than 30,000 times.<sup>5</sup> The authors suggest that belonging is more than a ‘desire’, it is a ‘need’ so deeply rooted in human motivation that, when it is not satisfied, it causes physical and psychological pain. And recognition of the significance of belonging in organizational life continues to spread:

- In 2020, 93% of respondents to Deloitte’s Human Capital Trends survey agreed that “a sense of belonging drives organizational performance” — one of the highest rates of consensus in a decade.<sup>6</sup>

Surely, COVID-19 was a factor in these results, and yet the conclusion that ‘belonging matters’ seems unassailable.

- Microsoft’s employee survey arm, Viva Glint, reported in 2023 that their research, based on a vast number of data points, showed that “those employees who feel a strong sense of belonging at work are over six times as likely to be engaged as those who don’t”.<sup>7</sup>
- Better Up, the coaching company, has created experiments involving thousands of employees to measure the bottom-line benefits of belonging. Their widely referenced findings show that a high sense of belonging is linked to a 56% increase in job performance, a 50% drop in turnover risk, and a 75% reduction in sick days, resulting in substantial and quantifiable savings. And, negatively, ‘micro-exclusion’ causes an immediate loss of productivity.<sup>8</sup>

## What is ‘Belonging at Work’?

‘Diversity’ describes who we are. ‘Equity’ defines fairness. ‘Inclusion’ is the invitation to belong. ‘Belonging’ is our aspiration. Peter Block, a long-time advocate of business stewardship and community-building, writes that our capacity for hope and our desire for a new day and a better world are woven into our need to belong; we strive to fulfill our longings in communities-at-work.<sup>9</sup> Belonging represents our true home.

### Belonging (at work) can be understood as a question of ‘Fit’.<sup>10</sup>

There are three aspects to ‘fit’:

1. **Your job** (your role, the people you work with, and the situation in which you work).
2. **You** (everything you bring to your role).
3. **The match** (how you and your job come together).

The actor in this three-act play is you.

We make choices about belonging at work according to our specific motivations and requirements. You may be in a job that matches your skills and lifestyle, for example, but if you feel forced into a mold that is ‘not you’, you may go somewhere else to preserve your self-respect and mental health. If you must keep your job, you may cherish belongingness outside work: in your family, among friends or in voluntary affiliations. Or if you feel you fit in all-too-well at work and are restless or bored, belonging there may not be your priority at all. These choices are yours to make.

As a cautionary note, overemphasizing ‘fit’ can be counter-productive and make it more difficult for people who may already feel ‘othered’ or diminished to find their voice and place. Extreme belongingness, as a value, borders on being exclusionary. Al Pacifico-France, a coach who is an expert in inclusion and a champion of neurodiversity, explains that there may also be a danger



in over-emphasizing *beginning with you* where there is little institutional interest in diversity: “It can reinforce the idea that I am not trying hard enough to belong because, surely, I should be empowered to belong?” Inclusive organizations replace ‘fit’ as a mainstay of their hiring, she says, with ‘add’: add different people with different profiles to evolve into something new and better. Belonging in *these places* is, itself, an ‘add’.

### The ‘fit’ dimension in belonging implies a relationship — not a puzzle.

It is important that institutional efforts aimed at belonging get it right: it is likely that some well-intentioned efforts will have unintended consequences. It is vital that you have a perspective on belonging that activates your critical wisdom — and your resilience. I believe that meeting your needs for meaning and human interaction at work is principally *your* responsibility.

### Do You Suffer from a Sense of Not Belonging at Work?

Lee Walter, a professor of occupational psychology at Hult International Business School in London, has mapped the contours and implications of *not belonging* for individuals, leaders and organizations.<sup>11</sup> Walter observes that a self-concept is what is at stake. Not belonging at work can threaten an employee’s self-concept in three ways: lowering self-efficacy (“I feel like a fraud”), reducing self-esteem (“I blame myself”), and, more problematic, causing conflict and confusion about oneself (“I am not able to be who I really am”).

What, then, are the most important measures of belonging at work? The Belonging Barometer, a survey created by the American Immigration Council and Over Zero, an activist group founded to counteract identity-based violence, names these:<sup>12</sup>

1. Being valued for oneself and one’s contributions
2. Being welcomed and included
3. Being comfortable expressing one’s opinion

These three indicators of organizational belongingness can serve as powerful and universal goals,<sup>13</sup> but the bad news from the Barometer is that only a third of the American workforce reports positive belonging. How do you feel when you are not considered to be part of the team? Or when no one pays any attention to you except as a cost or a number? Or your contributions are not considered important? What if you are reluctant to speak up? This is the situation faced by too many employees and is a root cause of individual and collective malaise.

Belonging at work includes individual purpose and the collective purpose of an organization.<sup>14</sup> When your values and mission are aligned with those of your organization (or team), you feel respected, noticed, included. You freely volunteer your talents to accomplish tasks with others. You feel safe. You know you add value. Your mood is elevated. You look out for other people, and you entertain

opposing ideas without feeling threatened. You work hard and put in discretionary effort. The result is individual and collective success.

To some degree, and at one time or another, feeling alienated in your work environment is a common experience. As a leadership coach, I hear this all the time. My counsel is that you have choices about how you think or feel, and you have choices about what you do. If you care greatly about something over which you have little influence or control, this is a positive testament about you, your values and your sense of agency — as long as you remain clear that the locus of responsibility to improve your situation resides within you.

### Beginning with You

“True belonging doesn’t require you to change who you are. It requires you to be who you are,” according to Brené Brown, researcher and admired public figure known for her explorations into shame and vulnerability. “Belonging is belonging to yourself first: speaking your truth, telling your story, and never betraying yourself.”<sup>15</sup>

### Being who you are requires knowing who you are. “Know Thyself,” my college motto borrowed from an inscription on the Temple of Delphi, seems eternal advice.

Recently, I became a Life Member of the Genealogical Society of Allegany County, Maryland to learn about my ancestors and the worlds they inhabited. Not so long before, I had moved to Maryland, having lived in a dozen states and traveled around the world. It is a privilege to be able to make such a choice, and now I am discovering real value in learning about one’s lineage. For instance, some of my ancestors worked in coal mines owned by some of my other ancestors. Could this scenario be an influence on my career in employee relations? My hobby driving steam trains? And my appreciation of art that depicts factories and mines? I want to understand myself better by honoring the past — like the Ghanian Sankofa bird, looking backward as it moves forward, with an egg in its mouth that represents the future. Deceased family members continue to influence me in important ways, refining my sense of place and helping me make better choices.





Situations provide choices — although not everyone can see or make them. My stance when coaching people (assuming they have an internal locus of control, where they believe their actions have an impact) is to say, “You can decide how you want to be impacted by events and what you want to do, even if you choose to do nothing”. And you can be an agent of workplace belonging whenever you choose, but it may be more lasting if it comes from being curious about yourself. What are your values and motivations? How do you come across to others? What stories do you tell (if only to yourself) to make your life meaningful?<sup>16</sup>

For me, an important question is, ***what stands in the way of your being an ally or agent for the belonging of others?***

Belonging does not mean you must surrender to the lowest common denominator in thinking, nor do you have to be contrary or confrontational to defend your originality. According to the psychological theory of optimal distinctiveness,<sup>17</sup> **belonging is a balance between a sense of difference and a sense of similarity.** We are unique, and we are alike. Stated paradoxically, we are alone together, and we belong apart. What can join us as discrete human beings is our stories.

My three-step practice of storytelling is designed to open doors to the topic of belonging. Employ this technique as you will — try it on your own, in relationships, in coaching, in classrooms or in teams.

1. Tell a story or two about *when you were invited to belong* and how you felt.
2. Reflect on what belonging means to you.
3. Think of opportunities to act and be an agent of belonging for others. Commit to doing at least one thing. (And ask for help when you need it — that may draw people close to you.)

Over a lifetime, everyone experiences rejection, exclusion, being counted out and being othered, from inadvertent slights to life-altering episodes. Painful experiences shape us. We also experience times when we are included, accepted, embraced and loved. Physical and psychological ‘hugs’ mold us, too. It is in your power to remember those moments when you felt you belonged, and it is within you to reconstruct your feelings of belonging with just as much vividness as when you felt excluded.

## Actions Build Belonging

My examples of actions on behalf of belonging:

- *An everyday habit:* When someone I know pops into mind, I resolve to find out why. Every day, I call or contact someone about whom I am thinking. There is no agenda beyond checking in. Maybe I will conclude with a “missed you” or “love you”. But I make sure that my meta-message is received: you belong in my life.

- *Personal work in progress:* I wear hearing aids, but sometimes my listening is distracted. When I catch myself drifting off in a conversation, I try to refocus - and I do not take offence if I am called to attention. If belonging is my espoused value, it applies to every interaction, and it is up to me to enact belonging by being a better listener.
- *A complex dynamic:* Inclusiveness is valuable in team settings, but not when it is haphazard. Some teams are ‘under-bounded’; they are too informal or too open and affirming for their own good. There can be no belonging without boundaries; if a purposed group is open to all comers, then no one really feels welcome. My consultation in such situations is to help *tighten up* what it means to belong here. Though paradoxical, boundary management is essential to belonging. And sometimes my job may mean affirming someone’s choice to opt out.

## Making Your Place

“Always Choose Belonging”, concludes Susie Wise of Stanford’s Design School. Make belonging a habit. Commit to small actions, pay attention as you go, and choose to craft change in a way that promotes belonging, reduces othering, and builds bridges in a complex world. “Belonging matters”, she writes. “It matters every day”.<sup>18</sup>

In 1990, the company in Boston where I was working was bought by another firm. The officers of the acquired company exited, and there were no senior managers who could vouch for me. I was excited by new possibilities, and I also felt abandoned. I had moved my family from the Midwest to take this job just as the successful run of tech firms located on Route 128 around Boston, the ‘Massachusetts Miracle’, reached its zenith, and everything seemed to be in turmoil.

My field is organization development, and I was in a corporate role for the acquired firm. But the president of the new ‘decentralized’ company told me, in his Pasadena office, “We don’t have a job like that”. It looked doubtful that I would survive the next round of cuts.

Fortunately, I had once received good advice from a mentor: When times are confusing, do what needs to be done without asking for permission. “Careers are made in such situations”, he said. I focused on making the merger successful. Trained to ask questions and create dialogue in groups, I strove to build bridges across entities, factories and offices. The merger proceeded rapidly, and then, in a meeting I will never forget, the head of Human Resources, seated on a couch in my former boss’s office outside Boston, said, “We have a place for you”. I was in tears before my new boss.

I now see that I acted as if I belonged, and it paid off. As Dr. Frances Baldwin, a Gestalt practitioner and former corporate executive (and the person who introduced me to the Sankofa Bird) observed when she heard this story, “Maybe you got in the mode to get in the mood. If, as



with music, you can let the melody take you to the magic, perhaps you caught the rhythm of the place and became your own conductor". In the heat of the moment, I *thought* I was hearing footsteps, but it may have been a drumbeat, instead. Instead of being chased, I was being called! Hers is a gracious account of my running scared.

James Baldwin, whose words introduce this essay, was an American who emigrated to Paris in 1948 when he was 24 to escape the racism and homophobia that threatened him in the US. He believed that moving to Paris saved his life while allowing him to write. Eventually he returned to New York and joined the Civil Rights Movement, but he continued to travel and live in many places, never settling down or feeling he belonged in just one place.

His voice, however, is a clarion-call for belonging. In fiction, plays and essays, Baldwin encouraged people to be authentic, to accept their true identities and live accordingly, no matter what societal norms stood in the way. And, while he wrote with direct experience of discrimination and injustice, he held out hope for the redemptive power of understanding and compassion.<sup>19</sup> In a letter to his teenage nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation, Baldwin wrote a coda for self-directed belonging: "Know from whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go."<sup>20</sup> Belonging in the world and at work, for you and for people in your orbit, begins with you.

### **Do you know from whence you came, and are you making your place?**

### Postscript

Belonging is a social construct and a social commitment. I encourage you to engage others, invite disagreement,<sup>21</sup> tell stories, laugh and love. In my work and writing, I notice how conversations *about* belonging *yield* belonging. In these uncertain days of dialogue deficiency, embrace the notion that people want to participate in deliberations concerning big ideas. Consider, for example, the impact on your group of inquiring into the meaning and relevance of 'Courage', or 'Joy' or, more than ever, 'Hope'....

### BIOGRAPHY

Harry Hutson, Ph.D., is an organizational consultant and executive coach. His books include *Navigating an Organizational Crisis: When Leadership Matters Most* (with Martha Johnson; Praeger: 2016); *Putting Hope to Work: Five Principles to Activate Your Organization's Most Powerful Resource* (with Barbara Perry; Praeger: 2006), and *Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations* (with Barry Dym; Sage: 2005). He can be found at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/harry-hutson-53349/>, [www.harryhutson.com](http://www.harryhutson.com) and reached at [harryhutson@att.net](mailto:harryhutson@att.net).

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## NOTES

1. The James Baldwin quotation appears in the header of Chapter 3, “Building an Inclusive Organization” in Alida Miranda-Wolff, *Cultures of Belonging: Building Inclusive Organizations That Last* (New York: HarperCollins Leadership, 2022). James Baldwin and Sol Stein, *Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1957), 96-7.
2. Alfred Adler (1870-1937), an Austria physician and psychotherapist broke with Freud, his early mentor, and founded what he called individual psychology, a positive and holistic approach effective in treating loneliness and low self-esteem. An Adlerian perspective is that caring for others and developing a deeper appreciation for oneself, in pursuit of a common good, can mediate feelings of inferiority and build belongingness. Adlerian therapy typically explores formative memories to build resilience and understand the purposes of behavior.
3. Stephen Trzeciak and Anthony Mazzaelli, *Wonder Drug: 7 Scientifically Proven Ways That Serving Others is the Best Medicine for Yourself* (New York: St. Martins, 2022), 13.
4. Geoffrey L. Cohen, *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2022); Vivek H. Murthy, MD, *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World* (New York: HarperWave, 2020).
5. 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. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>
6. Jeff Schwartz, Brad Denny and David Mallon, “Belonging: From comfort to connection to contribution,” Deloitte Insights. May 15, 2020.
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9. Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2018), xviii.
10. Gregory M. Walton and Shannon T. Brady, “The Many Questions of Belonging,” Chapter 15, *Handbook of Competence and Motivation: Theory and Application, Second Edition*, edited by Andrew J. Elliot, Carol S. Dweck, and David S. Yeager (New York: The Guilford Press, 2018).
11. Lee Walter, “Sense of Not Belonging at Work,” Hult International Business School Ashridge House, Berkhamsted Hertfordshire, HP4 1NS, UK ISBN: 978-1-910025-33-8.
12. The American Immigration Council and Over Zero, “Belonging Barometer.” [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f7f1da1ea15cd5bef32169f/t/641b16f74a75495c305d2625/167\\_9496953766/The+Belonging+Barometer.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f7f1da1ea15cd5bef32169f/t/641b16f74a75495c305d2625/167_9496953766/The+Belonging+Barometer.pdf).
13. See also the General Belongingness Scale (GBS), the Sense of Belonging Instrument (SOBI), the Need to Belong Scale (NTBS), and Geoffrey Cohen’s two scales, social belonging and belonging uncertainty ([www.geoffreylcohen.com](http://www.geoffreylcohen.com)).
14. Waller, L. (2021), “Fostering a Sense of Belonging in the Workplace: Enhancing Well-Being and a Positive and Coherent Sense of Self,” In: Dhiman, S.K. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Workplace Well-Being* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30025-8\\_83](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30025-8_83)
15. <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjxaCh8rGAAxVdg4kEHRlA9cQwqsBegQIDhAG&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv=dWZa3wm1Nns&usq=AOvVaw3g87wpfYOzzlqMlysEZ6zv&opi=89978449>. Also see Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness and the Courage to Stand Alone* (New York: Random House, 2019).
16. See Jerry Colonna, *Leadership and the Longing to Belong* (New York: Harper Business, 2023).
17. Brewer M (1991) The social self: on being the same and different at the same time. *Personal Soc Psychol Bull* 17:475–482.
18. Susie Wise, *Design for Belonging: How to Build Inclusion and Collaboration in Your Communities* (California and New York: Ten Speed Press, 2022), 138.
19. Dr. Kate Cowie, author and builder of international networks of social-change practitioners, suggests that Baldwin created a physical “place from space” (the cafes in Paris)—that was integral to his understanding of belonging. For more, see bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009).
20. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 8.
21. Thanks to Dr. Paul Taylor-Pitt, whose motto is “Be More You,” for this insight.