

## **"Belonging Beyond Borders"**

A talk by Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister  
First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis  
Sunday, October 13, 2019

<https://firstunitarian.org/assembly-october-13-belonging-beyond-borders/>

The reading was "[Complaint of El Río Grande](#)," by Richard Blanco, from his book "How to Love a Country," Beacon Press, 2019.

When I was in elementary school, I was the only kid I knew who had a globe of the moon. My lunar globe was not nearly as colorful as the more traditional earth globes, but it had craters and mountain ranges, and the sites of the first lunar landings were marked with bold black letters. I thought you might want to see it, so I brought it here today.

[The far side of the moon](#), which no human being had ever laid eyes on until the year I was born, is covered with craters from billions of years of meteorites. The side of the moon that constantly, reliably faces the earth is much smoother, with expansive plains formed by ancient lava. Astronomers using the first telescopes in the 1600s thought that these plains were vast bodies of water, and a Jesuit priest named [Giambattista Riccioli](#) gave them evocative names – the Sea of Nectar, the Ocean of Storms, the Bay of Rainbows, the Lake of Dreams. Human beings eventually figured out that there were no oceans on the moon, but the names remained and are still in use.

Except for a few new craters and a couple of landforms named for recent astronauts, my globe of the moon is as accurate as it was forty years ago. In fact, the exact same globe, made by the exact same company, [is still being sold](#).

Our family also had a globe of the earth, and I loved that one, too. It wasn't the kind where every country is a different color – there was no hot-pink Paraguay or yellow Brazil. Rather, the land was presented in natural hues – the sand of the Sahara, the bright white of Antarctica, the verdancy of the Amazon and of the American Midwest. Its oceans were blue, the currents marked with arrows, so you could see the cold water flowing off California, and the warm Gulf Stream racing toward Europe. The mountain ranges were raised, so you could run your finger along the backbone of the Andes or to the top of Mount Everest.

The world's countries and major cities were labeled, so the globe was useful when the nightly news talked about Beirut or Berlin. The lines and borders were shown together with the natural world, which had been around a whole lot longer than humanity.

The earth globe didn't age nearly as well as my globe of the moon. On the earth, the words "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics" were spread out across Eurasia; that label went out of date when the Soviet Union broke up into 15 different countries. The old earth globe had two Germanies and two Vietnams, as well as obsolete place names like Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Namibia was governed by South Africa, and Hong Kong was still British. Even some of the landforms have changed, with more water in some places, [like Louisiana](#), and less in others, like the nearly evaporated [Aral Sea](#). We live in a world very different from the one of 40 years ago. The whirling sphere that we occupy is constantly changed by the humans inhabiting it.

What's not different is that it's mostly a small group of people with power who decide the lines on the maps. "Jigsawing the world," [as the poet Richard Blanco says](#), "to say you're here, not there, you're this, not that." Some religions contend that the division of people into nations and categories was ordained long ago by a far-off god. But there is no record of God handing down a stone globe from on high. The borders, boxes, and lines we have today are human creations, and they are ours to move, redraw, ignore, or erase.

Our theme this month here at FUS is Belonging. And what a time it is to be talking about who belongs where, and who gets to decide. In the week that just went by, our country heard a debate about [whether LGBTQ people can belong in any workplace they choose](#). We were reminded how [the Kurdish people](#) never seem to have a safe place on any map of the Middle East. And many of us were aghast as anti-immigration rhetoric reached [disgusting new lows](#).

It's a human right to be able to determine where you belong, either within or outside the country you were born in. So, many people find themselves on a journey toward the right place to be, and there is always more for us to learn.

I want to talk a little bit about a couple of the ways I've learned about belonging. One of the people from whom I learned the most was a guy I did volunteer work with back when I was a young adult. [His name was David](#), and the places where society allowed him to fully belong were much more limited than mine – he was African-American, developmentally disabled, HIV-positive, and very low income. Despite the challenges he lived with, he was an upbeat and energetic guy. And my role as a volunteer with the local AIDS organization was to be his buddy and hang out with him once a week, a role I thoroughly enjoyed.

Early on, I decided that David and I belonged wherever we felt like going, even if that meant being followed around in stores, or receiving a triple-whammy of stares at

restaurants because of his race, his disability, and our interracial friendship in a highly segregated city. A sense of entitlement is not always a bad thing; he was entitled to go anywhere I was, and I leveraged my privilege.

Because he normally walked or took the bus everywhere, David enjoyed simply going for a ride in my car. One day, we were driving through some upscale neighborhoods north of the Milwaukee lakefront, and David spoke up: "Black folks can't live around here," he announced, looking at the mansions. "They'll burn your house down. Throw a brick through your window." This was not the sort of commentary he usually offered, but it was coming from a very real place. In my head, I felt myself wanting to disagree – I had some very nice co-workers who lived in that neighborhood, and legally, in theory, black people *could* live there.

But I also knew that a black woman in a nearby city had recently had a brick come through her window, and I knew that the suburb we were driving through had a track record of pulling over black motorists. David had been raised in the South, but the North was not nearly different enough for him to feel that he belonged in an all-white neighborhood. People with lived experience are the real experts on how belonging works. At last week's FUS forum, [which is available online](#), Duchesene Drew of the Bush Foundation talked about how he and his wife were greeted when they were the first African-Americans on their block in St. Paul. The neighbors on one side immediately brought over hot food to welcome them. The neighbors on the other side went so far as to avoid being outdoors at the same time so they never had to say hello. This wasn't 1950; this was 1999, and could still happen today.

One more story from my young adulthood: My first job out of college was working on a newspaper copy desk. I remember editing a story for the international page. It was about an apartment building in a city with longstanding ethnic and religious divisions. The wire-service reporter who visited these apartments found a mosaic of people of different backgrounds living side by side, in relative harmony. Their kids were growing up together and even falling in love across those ethnic and religious lines. It was an encouraging portrait of a more tolerant, pluralistic, forward-looking world.

A year or so later, I thought of that article when the war in Bosnia broke out. That diverse apartment building was in Sarajevo, and I found myself wondering what happened to the people inside as the region erupted into war, genocide, and ethnic purging. The same ordinary people can live in harmony, or they can literally go for each other's throats. What happens at the top matters, the messages matter. Rhetoric can be very dangerous, even deadly. Leadership can lift up, or it can destroy. And the leaders who start wars are very rarely among those who die.

As I said earlier, belonging is actually a human right. [The Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) has sections specifically addressing these kinds of issues. Signed by dozens of countries in 1948, the Declaration includes statements that all people have the right to freely associate, and to not be part of associations if they prefer. And the declaration addresses immigration. “Everyone has the right to leave any country.” “Everyone has the right to a nationality, and to change [their] nationality.” Right now, with soaring migration and record-high numbers of refugees – [some 70 million people are currently displaced around the world](#) – we are reminded daily that the Declaration remains aspirational. Like any document, it’s only as powerful as the people who believe in it.

[The United States Constitution](#) is also a document about who belongs, and it also is only as powerful as the people who believe in it. So, because I think it’s important to name reality, especially reality that seems unreal – I want to take a minute to say that our country is in a constitutional crisis. There was some debate about this online these past several days, but it’s happening. The rule of law is being disregarded at the highest level of government.

As a congregation, we are free to talk about this kind of thing. We can’t get involved in partisan political races, but we are free to critique leaders and branches of government. Starting more than 100 years ago, the minister [John Dietrich](#) regularly addressed current events from the FUS pulpit, and I would argue that we have a moral imperative to do so at this time.

Just a few days ago right here in Minneapolis, we heard staggering racism directed at our Somali neighbors. We heard name calling so crass that it insults children to call it childish. And we heard lies, lies, and more lies from a flailing but still very dangerous authoritarian. These things are antithetical to Unitarian Universalist and humanist values; they are in fact antithetical to the foundations of most religions. And they illustrate how the idea of belonging is being perverted, weaponized, and monetized in the current political environment.

This is, of course, not a new strategy. [From the earliest days of the colonies on this continent](#), people with money and power worked to divide poor blacks from poor whites. This was to keep the poor whites focused on hating other poor people instead of overthrowing the rich. Such moves play into the very human need for belonging, which can express itself positively as cooperation or negatively as tribalism.

Cooperation is “I belong to this group and it’s great to have community.” Tribalism is “My group is the best, and I belong so we can fight other groups.” There are evolutionary advantages to both – it’s good to be part of a helpful group, and in times

of scarcity, it can be beneficial to survival to dominate another group. Which way things go depends on which behaviors individuals and their leaders cultivate, and what the underlying values are. At one extreme of belonging, a person might live in a harmonious apartment building and intermarry with those who are different; at the other extreme, one might commit genocide to eliminate those who don't belong.

I want to point out that proximity, that getting to know one another, is no guarantee of harmony or belonging. I think we have all heard stories – and in fact I have lived the story – of the homophobic person who came around once they got to know a gay friend or relative.

That is a true and real thing that happens, and I'm grateful for it. But it is far from universal in the LGBTQ world, and there are plenty of examples of proximity and familiarity not working at all when it comes to oppression and who belongs. If proximity and familiarity were all it took to fully recognize another person's rights and full humanity, every woman in Saudi Arabia would be treated as equal and free. Every woman in the United States would be treated as equal and free. And there are white people all over this country who employ people of color and undocumented immigrants in their homes, and then support policies that are harmful and even life-threatening to those same employees.

I think there's something of a simplistic and romantic notion still alive in the world that if we all just got to know each other, hearts and minds would change. There are great benefits to knowing each other, and some hearts and minds would change, but we should know by now that we can't count on that alone to move the world forward into a beloved community where everyone belongs.

What we're seeing now in our national leadership is an appeal to the tribal side of our evolutionary nature, mainly the tribal side of white people. And like those early white landowners who divided the poor along racial lines, there are other motivations beyond simply promoting the idea that whites are better. In-groups and out-groups are fostered to promote economic and political agendas. The manufactured crisis at our southern border, keeping out and locking up those who "don't belong," created big headlines that took the spotlight away from tax giveaways to wealthy Americans and the dismantling of governmental agencies that [protect our environment and our health](#). The unhinged raging the other day against Somalis served two purposes – to distract from the impeachment proceedings, and to trigger tribalism in whites, also known as racism and white supremacy.

Creating a common enemy so that your supporters have a fear-based sense of belonging is one of the oldest tricks in the [authoritarian playbook](#). And it can work,

because [40 percent or more of the population may have tendencies to embrace authoritarianism](#). That's a pretty big chunk of people – enough, historians say, to flip a democracy.

I know [I've talked about authoritarianism a fair amount](#) the past few years, but we're at the point where we can't overdo it right now; we should be talking about it more. It's pretty scary to live in a time when we face the possibility of one branch of government sending armed law enforcement to another branch to get it to comply with the law. The political chaos we have seen in other countries around the globe is perilously close to happening here.

The good news is that there's still 60 to 70 percent of the population who prefer imperfect democracy to autocratic rule. So over the next year or so will be a good time, if you aren't already, to speak up and get involved – with voter registration and voter rights, supporting anti-authoritarian institutions, supporting those on the margins most harmed by what's going on, and taking part in organizations that create joy and build community across lines that normally separate.

I want to leave you with an image you may have seen in the local news, or maybe you were there firsthand. It's an image of thousands of different kinds of people – different religions, different races and ethnicities, different body types and genders and sexual orientations – all coming together peacefully in a light autumn rain. They're chanting clever chants and carrying signs with messages of equality and liberation, messages of hope, some containing justifiable anger or biting humor, all reflecting different aspects of the human spirit. These thousands of "people of belonging" are armed only with signs, costumes, musical instruments, and a few very famous balloons. The only people who don't belong at this gathering are people who don't believe that all belong.

There were some latenight skirmishes that grabbed much of the attention in the news, but for most of Thursday evening, the dominant scene on the streets of downtown Minneapolis was an earthly Bay of Rainbows, our own Lake of Dreams.

The times we are living in are likely to ask us, over and over, and under increasingly difficult circumstances, to create and to show up for demonstrations of belonging, of liberation, and of justice. My sense is that we know we have to be ready, and that we are ready.

May it be so.