

The Path to Belonging
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
September 28, 2025

This service included three reflections written by UUCV Members. The first reflection was by Art Carter but we do not have that content to share here.

Reflection on the Theme – Michael deLeon

On Belonging as a Geek

There is excitement with sharing something that excites you. Especially with someone else who "gets it". But finding those people and feeling safe to share is a skill and confidence that I think I have been learning my whole life.

My mind loves exploring and learning. At an early age I was obsessed with Star Wars and all things space, real and imagined. This grew and was fed by the discovery of video games. First the arcade games found in stores and fun parks ... Pac Man, Dig Dug, Centipede ... and then the home console and computer games that didn't require quarters, and offered hours and hours of puzzles to solve and techniques to perfect.

Loving to learn at school and filling my head with science and game-specific content made things a little socially awkward in my grade school years. I was friendly and approachable but probably a little to earnest for some, and in my imagination a bit too much for the social conventions of grade school. I remember being judged or laughed at by others, perhaps when I was humming a tune from a favorite show or game, or recreating epic scenes of action in space in my head. I can remember one day being called out by a sporty, handsome student for being a "space cadet". I just grew quiet and started thinking about what that meant, why it hurt. Of course, feeling judged by others for being different and "geeky" gave me the same insecurities and doubts that almost every kid will experience as a part of growing up.

As my school years progressed, I didn't win any popularity contests, but eventually I was on academic teams, and in band ... And while that may have made me an outsider for many, It also helped me find pride in myself and my abilities, and groups to really belong to and share in my passions. I made a few friends who cared enough about their fellow geek to give me advice on how to dress a bit less geeky: Don't tuck that shirt in so tight. And found friends who appreciated what made me odd or unique, even if they teased me a little about it. I found things about them that were weird and unique. Music they obsessed over, and games they played that while weird added to my pool of weird.

At some point in my college years, among a rich group of other potential academics and people seeking understanding, my personality coalesced into a deeper confidence in my geekier sides. If I over shared knowledge on a topic, and I still often did, I started to do it if not with a confidence that it would be appreciated, at least with a self assurance that I could take pride in knowing things, being good at things, and in finding others who shared my passions. And I had that pride whether or not it was reflected in appreciation by others. But when it WAS, and I found others that shared that passion, and had wonderful related things to share with me ...

Well, that started a new time of belonging for me. It build on an acceptance of who I was, and grew by me loving to share with others and learn what they had to share with me.

Many think it's more fun to be a nerd or a geek in today's world than it used to be. But why is that? It certainly doesn't hurt that smart people who have brains that love exploring the unusual and fantastic can often find well paying jobs. As the geeks have grown in power, they have shared their passions and help greenlight enough wild fantasy to where the superheroes and spaceships that used to be my obsessive knowledge are now on the big and small screens for all to see. And there are thousands of places to explore online to find obscure content AND those who obsess over it.

As a geek, I've also benefited from hundreds of shows and stories about underdogs and outsiders that I've read and celebrated. Whether that was a team of tiny men in a land of magical wonders and dangers, a cadre of space fighter jockeys who were judgemental of the new kid, or a school full of wizards with strange appearances and special powers. These stories had people like me who felt judged and like an outsider, and the struggle and eventual success to find group a people who appreciated them. And they taught me not just the courage to try to be a part of a group, but the power of welcoming others into a group, of forming a team, and cooperative, or a family.

It feels good to be able to be yourself around others. But it also feels great to make people feel welcome, and to learn and appreciate what makes them excited, and also perhaps what makes them insecure. My favorites teams are the outcasts whose diverse abilities and ways of thinking help them do amazing things.

That's been true of my fellow band geeks, my engineering friend geeks, my roleplaying group geeks, my workplace geeks, and of course, my religious left spiritual philosophy mystery geeks.

Reflection on the Theme – Sue Peabody

On Belonging

Hello, some of you may know me best as "Helen Hewitt's daughter-in-law."

But you can call me "Sue P" (to distinguish from the extraordinary Sue O")!

I've been coming to UUCV on and off over twenty years, but you don't often see me here on Sundays. For quite a few years, I volunteered in the RE program, and, more recently, I've been involved in the Beloved Community Working Group, which brought you the Intercultural Skills class discussions last spring, and will facilitate the Transforming Hearts Collective's programming in December and January. We work to make the congregation feel welcoming to everyone, which sometimes means learning to identify unconscious habits and mindsets that are exclusive or marginalizing.

Some of the reasons you don't see me regularly on Sunday mornings are typical: I'm immersed in a busy life as a history professor, and Sundays are either filled with lesson prep, research, or just plain resting.

But another, secret, reason that I don't come every Sunday is that I often have a particular visceral reaction every time I come. Things will be going along fine – I'm enjoying the program, appreciative of the joys and sorrows, grateful for the chance to slow down – but at some point during the service, I begin to choke back tears.

I'm trying to be mindful of when and why these tears come up. Sometimes, it's when someone shares a painful experience, or randomly during the quiet reflection, but most often it happens when we are singing a song. The lyrics or just the fact of singing triggers an unexpected, overwhelming, and not

particularly pleasant feeling, like deep sadness. I can't quite explain what is happening, only that I feel deeply. It reminds me of the depression that can lie beneath the surface of all my day-to-day busy-ness.

So, I don't always come on Sundays. But, as I move closer to retirement, I'm looking for a new way to belong, to be part of a community. And UUCV seems like a very good fit.

I've struggled all my life with belonging. As a kid in Washington DC public schools, I was smart (which didn't always bring me friends) and I grew very tall way too quickly – I hit six feet in sixth grade! – so I was awkward on the playground, picked last for teams, and saved by the athletic girls for an “easy out” in dodgeball. I wasn't fully excluded, but I wasn't part of the “cool crowd” either.

My earliest sense of belonging came from Girl Scouts: I was elected patrol leader and guided my team to victory in the fire-starting competition. Later, it was a series of church groups – Methodists, Episcopalians, and eventually Unitarians, where the activities were less about competition and more about supporting young people in discovering themselves and feeling comfortable in their own skin. I loved my small alternative high school, (our graduating class had only eleven people!), which celebrated each quirky individual. That was the first place I felt fully seen, and like I truly, wholly belonged.

After my cozy and intense high school, it was hard to figure out how I fit into the rest of the world. In college and later, as a teacher, I felt torn between two distinct camps: I was drawn to the hippies for their passion and creativity – even to the point of spending my first year at Evergreen – but my mind was too critical to feel fully at home there. I ended up back on the East Coast, majoring in interdisciplinary Humanities, where I could really revel in my “thinky brain,” but I've never felt fully at home either with the East Coast intellectual crowd, which can be judgmental and exclusive.

What makes us feel like we belong? A sociological study from the 1970s, by Rosabeth Moss Kanter, made a big impression on me in college. Kanter analyzed thirty utopian communities from the nineteenth century and the 1960s, to identify six processes that build a sense of belonging in a group. I highly recommend her book, *Commitment and Community*, which still offers fascinating insights into the practices that bind groups together.

In the interest of time, I'm going to skip over her first four categories – sacrifice, investment, renunciation, and mortification – because they mostly apply to groups that require giving something up to join them, whether it is worldly goods, outside social relationships, or a sense of individual identity outside the group. UU doesn't ask this from us, except perhaps, in the form of annual pledges!

Rather, I think the last two categories, communion and transcendence, are familiar and deep practices here:

- Communion: consists of practices that instill a sense of group “connectedness, belonging, participation in a whole, with equal opportunity to contribute and to benefit.” Kanter offers many examples, from shared religious or ethnic backgrounds of participants to practices like communal labor, regularized group contact, ritual, and even shared experiences of persecution.
 - There's a lot to unpack here, but for the moment, let's notice the ritual of Sunday worship, and voluntary shared projects, like the community garden, supporting the unhoused, and a shared sense of fear about our current social and political climate.

- I also notice that many of the old-timers of UUCV share a common background as white, middle-class Americans, some of whom have deliberately chosen to live outside of their natal faith communities which practice some of the more painful commitment mechanisms of renunciation and mortification.
- Kantner defines the other category, Transcendence, as a universal need to feel at home in an all-embracing structure or higher power. For most religious communities this involves a common theology or sense of spiritual oneness, although for humanists it might be a commitment to universal values, or a sense of one in nature.

What do you think is the single most common practice in successful, long-lived communities? [pause]

It is singing together! All of the long-lived groups that Kanter studied regularly sang together. (Even three-quarters of her “unsuccessful” groups involved group singing.) This seems to be something that humans are wired to do, arising from deep within our evolutionary development. I think there is something in the singing that taps into that transcendence, and makes me feel deeply.

A few weeks ago, when I attended a Sunday service, I looked around, and I suddenly realized that I felt like I belonged! This place is full of quirky, smart, compassionate people who want to do good in the world. I am one of you! You are my tribe!

Together, we can give each other that sense of belonging and, from that strength, work in community to make the world a better place.