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Belonging: The Body of Community

Growing up in a predominantly white area, I remember feelings of difference with great familiarity. When my mother would take me and my younger brother to the playground, I remember the other children there being surprised when they saw the whiteness of my mother's skin. I could sense their confusion— it was subtle, and it certainly wasn't malicious, but even as a child I could feel it. And now, as a young adult, there are still times where my mother and I are in public spaces together and people are surprised to hear that we are mother and son. I am always surprised by their surprise. When I look at the two of us, I cannot help but see the lineage we share. I see the brightness of our eyes and the rosy, heart-shaped lips we both have. And when I look at my father's face, I see our shared features too: our heavy eyebrows and cleft chins. Yet, when I go places with my father (whether as a child or now as an adult), I don't experience the same reactions of confusion toward our shared lineage. Although my skin is not the exact same shade as his, our apparent brownness is enough for us to share a category. When people see my brown skin, there appears to be an automatic severance from whiteness that takes place in their minds.

American culture's understanding of identity categories tends to be very individualistic. Identity tends to be thought of in a vacuum rather than within the context of the environment in which it exists. However, identity is more than what meets the eye: it is the accumulation of stories, languages, cultures, and history. Humans are creatures of multiplicity and we all hold many realities within us. The realities we hold aren't just expressions of us as individuals, but also of who we are collectively. Looking at identity with an individualistic framework is like

looking at a tree with only its trunk and ignoring the many reaching branches or deeply earthed roots.

Witnessing peoples' surprise (or lack thereof) towards my ancestry has taught me just how much skin color is seen first and how much it is essentialized. When I look at myself in relation to my parents, I of course see our shared lineage in phenotype, but I also see us beyond our surfaces. I look at us in fullness, seeing the vitality we share and all that cannot be distinctly reduced. I see the creativity and discernment of my mother and the tenacity and focus of my father, and the estuary that creates within me. I see our differences too—the personality and traits I have forged for myself as an autonomous individual. Seeing what my father and I share in phenotype appearance doesn't make me feel any less connected to the appearances my mother and I share, nor does seeing the phenotype appearance my mother and I share make me feel less connected to my father. Our differences and similarities don't feel like opposites to me. Rather, I experience them as coalescing constituents of the mosaic that is our individual and shared diversity. There is nothing wrong with seeing difference. Difference is diversity, and diversity is beautiful. Diversity is the strength of our cultural and environmental ecosystem.

When I reflect upon what factors have influenced my political vision, I am brought back to the foundational experiences I've had in navigating this world as my authentic self. Living in the body I live in, I have never had the privilege to regard the political and the personal as separate. My existence is composed of many intersecting factors. I am the amalgamation of so much: of stories, songs, nations, landscapes. I am the child of my ancestors and an ancestor in the making. My mother is white American and from Upstate New York. My father is Indian and from Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. This makes me biracial. And as I was assigned a gender with which I did not identify, I've made the choice to live authentically as myself, making me transgender. The lived experience of being biracial and transgender, that is, of existing in multiple spaces simultaneously, has taught me a lot about the political. To be biracial and

transgender is to hold alchemized multiplicity in a world that would sooner see my multiplicity as contradictory. Whiteness is seen as being in direct opposition to Brownness or Blackness, and being transgender is seen as a deviation to gender. And yet, I exist in totality. I do not see my unique collections of intersections as contradictions.

This framework of wholeness is not just how I view myself and my family—it is how I regard all the people around me. I seek to understand people and relate to them in a way that allows them to fully belong. I look at them beyond their surface appearance or presentation. I see their identity categories and the situational aspects of their lives, but I also look at the details and context of their positionalities on a personal level. I do this to create space for their intersections to exist in unity. I try to approach each setting, situation, and person with a fresh perspective. I ask people their story before I write it for them. I want to see people for who they really are rather than how I think they should be. I understand that I cannot learn if I've already made up my mind. I don't want my vision of people to fragment them—I want it to make them feel like they belong. This way of interaction, this framework of wholeness, is my political vision and how I interact with the world. It is a political vision led by open-hearted curiosity, a deep appreciation of diversity, and a commitment to creating belonging. These political views haven't been developed by just one specific instance; rather, the everyday, tangible realities of my life have been my political teachers, showing me the nuances of being a human in this world. The composition of my identity and the experiences I've had in life have taught me how separating the personal and the political fragments human complexity and separates the individual from the greater population, thus preventing us from experiencing the belonging connection of community.

It is crucial to the well-being of humanity to experience being a part of something bigger than our individual lives. When we don't feel a part of something larger than ourselves, it creates rifts in our ability to interact with one another. The feeling of connection that comes from belonging to a community is stabilizing. When we feel we are a part of something, that we truly

belong to it, we become increasingly aware of our actions. Cause and effect become more apparent. Not feeling a part of a collective is what enables us to behave harmfully, as we are far more likely to inflict harm when we don't experience the grounding of community belonging. Involvement, which is a core component of democracy, is borne from a feeling of belonging. Belonging is the body of community, and thus of democracy on a national scale. It is our foundation, and it keeps us anchored and accountable. In the body of belonging, there is an awareness of cause and effect and the interconnectivity of actions.

It's when we forget the interconnection of our shared existence as creatures of the earth that we are able to do harmful things. When oil companies drill into the ground and politicians pass legislations that strip the rights of others, there is inevitably some reasoning they fabricate in order to reassure themselves. For example, they may believe that their negative actions will only affect specific countries or regions of the earth, or that only certain groups of people that they don't identify with will be impacted. Even on a smaller scale, when we as individuals treat the people around us poorly, it is because we forget we exist in community together. But the earth is a body of permeation, and so is the human population, as we too are of this earth. Think of the water cycle: our lakes and oceans turn to vapor and rise into our atmosphere, cooling into droplets. And then, the water returns to us through rain, falling back into the reservoirs and being absorbed into the ground. It's all just cycling through. Do some raindrops decide to fall only in the boundaries of one state? Does air decide to be clean only for the privileged? By hurting another, whether it be human, land, or animal, we are hurting ourselves. This is my political understanding, and it is reflected in the very dynamic of the earth: everything is interconnected and every action has a consequence. This fundamental understanding makes me walk more lightly upon this planet because I recognize that this world exists far beyond my respective existence. All that is here, whether it presents as new or old, is just the circulation and redistribution of what already exists.

Separating the personal from the political has disconnected us from our own hearts and minds. It has led us to believe that there can be an objective right and wrong in matters of lived experience. It makes us think there is some sort of rulebook with guidelines for each of us to follow, when in reality we live in an organic, deeply complex, and at times contradictory world. Separating the personal from the political gives us a false sense of stability and enables us to regard the lives of others with a righteous distance, numbing us to actually feeling and processing a situation from the rootedness of our own perception. For example, in the political climate that our newly appointed administration is creating, policies are often discussed as news topics rather than as impactful reality shifts that affect regular people. When immigration policies are discussed, I do not see foreign faceless figures. Rather, I see my cousins in India waiting for their chance to be welcomed into America. When proposals to decrease food stamp benefits are discussed, I see the loss of food in my family fridge. When the executive order preventing young people access to gender affirming healthcare is discussed, I see the safety and wellbeing of myself and friends compromised. When proposals to restrict social security funding are discussed, I see my disabled brother losing the support he needs to thrive. It is dehumanizing to regard policy as theoretical simply because we aren't able to actually vividly understand the tangibility of it.

One of the most reliable things we can do in embodying our political views and democratic citizenship is to establish the fortitude of our moral compass in such a way that it can guide us through all the unforeseen situations we will encounter in life. A moral compass is not a dogmatic set of rules or guidelines. In actuality, it is a deeply cultivated internal device of gravitation and guidance that we can always turn to regardless of the situation we may find ourselves in. The political and the personal are ever changing and rich with complexity. To approach the personal and the political circumstances of life justly requires us to nurture our abilities to witness and perceive these complexities. Our moral compass is not programmed through the inherited and unliving ideas of others; rather, it is naturally developed through the

course of our own lives and through our lived experiences, as well as through the lived experiences of others, since everything that seemingly happens in just “our lives” inevitably contains the life of our community, too.

As we develop our moral compass, we become more awake to the lives of others. Living as my true self in a political environment that struggles to accept me has given me the opportunity to develop my own moral compass, which I regard also as my political vision, and it has instilled in me a curiosity and investment in what is happening in the world around me. I listen to the conversations that take place in my midst, to what is spoken and unspoken. I have experienced what it is like to be in tense situations where I felt unable to speak up and would have greatly appreciated someone else using their voice on my behalf. I’ve also been in situations where I should have spoken up but didn’t. Those missed opportunities, whether mine or someone else’s, have taught me the importance of speaking up. Silence is not a lack of stance: it is a stance in itself, and it is not a stance I want to align myself with. Uncomfortable discussions are a part of life, and avoiding them doesn’t ever help matters—it only buries what is aching to be addressed. Our vulnerability is bravery, and it is our strength. It is up to us as mature and democratic citizens to use our voices in a diplomatic and conscientious way. Moments of discomfort, when approached with grace and respect, have the greatest capacity to teach and better us as human beings. In situations where we feel out of our comfort zone, we have the opportunity to turn to our moral compass. We can ask ourselves: is there a perspective that is being left out of this discussion? Why might that perspective be getting excluded? We can use our moral compass to detect social discrepancies and then use our voice to shed light and bring advocacy to those places of underrepresentation.

We each have a moral compass, and we each have a voice; how we use them is up to us. One of the ways in which I use both my moral compass and my voice on a national scale is through voting. Democracy rests in the hands of individuals. This is why I made sure I registered to vote as soon as I turned eighteen this past year. The policies we vote for make up the reality

of our lives. By voting, I am using my voice and committing to my democratic citizenship. I am speaking up for my own rights and the rights of others. I'm voting for the children and the future generations; for the health and safety of the planet I'm a part of; for the hard work and sacrifices of the people who came before me; and for all the people alive right now who don't have the freedom to vote or speak up.

I grew up in a community that I feel I belong to, which I am truly grateful for. Being a small, close-knit city, Oneonta is the kind of place where everyone knows everyone else and each person is linked to other community members in some way or another. There is a real sense of interconnection in the experience of living in such a well-connected community. For some people this experience is stifling, while for others (such as myself) it is expansive. The intimacy of my community grounds me, creating the spaciousness I need to grow and to simply be me. I find the close-knit dynamic of my local culture to be warm, inviting, and reassuring on a deep level. Living here allows me to unshakably feel a part of something. No matter what happens in my life, I know I have my community. I feel supported by the streets of my town and the people who line them. To me, that is freedom.

Because I live in the central part of Oneonta, one of my favorite delights is going on walks in my neighborhood and the park near my home. When I go on walks, I see each and every house as a whole universe of life. I see the stories that exist there: the laughter, the sadness, the longing, the hope, the regret... I don't see the world around me as a dead thing, a passive setting that I am simply walking through. I see the world as living and dynamic, as composed of other sentient beings just like myself. We are all the main characters of our own lives—none of us is any more real than another. We are all citizens of democracy. This is why I love walking in my neighborhood so much. It's humanizing: it makes me feel a part of something in the most simple yet delightful way. It creates an awareness of the layers of belonging that ultimately compose my being an American citizen. More specifically, my connection to my

immediate community is nestled in my greater connection to my country. I find this practice to be an integral part of my political involvement and community engagement.

Although I have expressed my gratitude for the belonging I feel in my community, multiple realities can and do exist simultaneously. I know what it feels like to not belong, as I've experienced discrimination in the community I've grown up in and in the world at large. There have been many times where I have felt the lack of belonging. But the feelings of non-belonging I've faced have only fostered my understanding of what belonging is. Our greatest teachers in life aren't just the things that feel good—in fact, it's often the uncomfortable experiences that help us learn the most. A lack of something teaches us about the substance that could be there, inviting us to embody the change we want to see.

Life is what we make it. Belonging wakes us up to what is already all around us. The sweetness of my bustling little neighborhood is already there without my choosing to go on a walk and witness it. But because I choose to walk and choose to embrace the body of belonging, the richness of my community is activated. I continue to live in Oneonta, as I am now attending college here at Hartwick. Choosing to go to college (and thus continuing to build roots) in the community which I am from has been a very intentional choice for me. Many well-meaning people tell me that I should leave Oneonta to pursue my future. What people fail to realize when they suggest this is that my political and personal vision for my life is about giving back to the community to which I belong and which raised me. In the anchoring of belonging to something larger than myself exists a great sense of social responsibility. This sense of responsibility is my driving force, helping to facilitate my creativity and forge my future. It is regenerative. I could be anywhere in the world, but I choose to be here because this is my community. I choose Oneonta, and I choose Hartwick. I see the vibrancy and potential of the community, and I want to contribute what I have to offer. In the body of belonging we start with what we know and where we are and let it expand us. I am creating the change I want to see by simply living it in the life I live. This city, this land, these people and their stories, they have been and continue to

be my nourishment and inspiration. Who I am cannot be separated from who they are. My belonging is my sustenance and guiding star.

As I continue to age in the midst of this ever-changing world, I know I will stay involved. It is essential for the people of a strong democracy to be involved in their communities and countries. We are always better together. I don't know exactly what my role in my community will look like as I get older. There are realities we as individuals and a broader culture are currently dealing with that we wouldn't have even begun to have imagined just ten years ago. There will always be things we can anticipate and themes we can recognize, but no matter how much we plan, there will always be new challenges and situations that we must rise to the occasion of only as they occur. And even as we fulfill our national-scale political responsibilities as citizens—for example, through voting—there are still so many day-to-day factors that affect our lives in a socio-political and cultural way. As we know from America's recent election and inauguration, we can vote for the representatives we desire and still have our voices be drowned out. This is where the tangibility of the community around us comes into play.

The people in our public offices are not the only deciding factors for what happens in our lives. The way we support each other and engage in mutual aid impacts us, too. When we are feeling the confines of restrictive orders or legislature, we must look to the faces of community already around us. A democracy is only as strong as the individual relationships that comprise it. Humans thrive through interdependence—none of us was ever meant to navigate this life on our own. Our mutuality rests on our ability to give and receive help. One of the things we reliably have control over is how we choose to engage with the people around us. In our day to day lives, we have countless opportunities to help one another and build community connections. Community building happens at the grocery store, in the waiting room at the doctor's office, on the street outside the coffee shop, at birthday parties... everywhere. It resides in the ordinary interactions we have each day. When we offer our help to the people of our community, we are creating something that anchors us to each other amidst the state of our constantly changing

nation. Our helping hands are a salve to the individualism that divides us. The relationships we forge are a support system of mutuality that exists beyond the control of our nation's elected officials. The depth of connection we have with our community is our security.

Change is characterized not solely by additions or reductions in life, but also through the shifting of perception towards what is already there. We must start with what we know. In the fabric of our day-to-day life, we can ask ourselves: How can I cultivate spaciousness? How can I create levity? Essentially, how can I use my presence to help and create connections? When we are at school or work, we can talk to the people sharing that space with us with curiosity. We can talk to the people we wouldn't typically talk to and find something about them that we appreciate and reflect it back to them. We can inquire. Ask what is moving them today? How did they sleep? What have they been hoping for recently? How has the season been affecting them? What brought them joy today? Whatever it is you converse about, just listen with an earnest desire to hear what they have to say. Listen to actually hear and understand, not just to respond or speak. It is our earnestness and presence in the moment that matters. Just offering the olive branch of our help and the warmth of our presence and words (in whatever way we are able to) is an active enactment of community building.

Just like air is the medium through which sound travels, so too is interpersonal connection the medium of political change. Our political participation starts with our communities. Consequently, my involvement in U.S democracy is rooted in a commitment to engaging in and building relationships with my community. We do not have to be everywhere all at once. All we have to do is be truly there for wherever it is we happen to be. We aren't doing this alone, either. We are doing this together, wherever we may be. By tending to our communities, we are creating change that ripples outwards, far beyond our respective lives. There is enough room for all of us in the body of belonging.