What does it mean to belong?

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Some personal reflections

PERHAPS A SABBATICAL IS a privileged time and place to think about belonging. The job which I have done for the previous twelve years is being done by someone else. A few months ago my mother died. I am in a country where I do not speak the language of the majority of the inhabitants, and where I look distinctively different. I am 9,771 kilometres away from where I was born and grew up. But it seems to me that it is possible to be a foreigner, to be deprived of easy language, to be bereaved, to be between jobs, and yet to feel at home, to belong.

I have been asked to take on some responsibility in my Jesuit community. I have a small teaching job, and time to read and write. I am within easy distance (at least by local standards) of close friends. Thanks to the various modern communications media, I am in touch with family, colleagues, acquaintances and friends across the world in a way that eliminates time-to-communicate, if not distance itself. But it seems to me that it is possible to have a place in community, to have work, to be in contact with those who are loved and with those others who are also important in life, and yet to feel a stranger, not to belong.

Belonging seems to be bound up in everyone of these aspects of life, and yet not to be contained or encompassed by any one of them, nor even by all of them taken together.

Belonging is central in our lives, so central that I suspect our words can never fully get to grips with the utter necessity of belonging. Belonging can be rooted in all sorts of modalities of experience: a place, a person, a role, a relationship, an accomplishment, an art, a vocation, a duty, a community, God. Belonging is necessary for our freedom. To be at home somewhere (with a place, a person, a role, or wherever, but somewhere) enables us to journey (to other places, other people, other roles, other relationships, other accomplishments, other encounters with God).

Belonging and development

That seeming paradox points us towards two images of belonging that can help us begin to appreciate its importance. The first image is that of the small child held

securely by its mother, whether in her arms or, as I encounter it here, snug in a blanket against her back. Either way, I see calm eyes looking out at a wide world: a gaze that can enchant in its reflected wonder, or disconcert in its steadiness of regard, an engagement with that which is utterly foreign from a vantage-point which is utterly secure. The second image is that of the slightly older child, setting off on determined if unsteady feet to explore something of that wide and foreign world, and returning at intervals to mother before venturing out again (and usually slightly further).

My fellow-psychologists who have examined this stage of life speak of the importance of two complementary gifts which parents can give their children: a secure base, and the encouragement to explore from it. And because most of our parents were good, but not perfect, most of us received those gifts in adequate but not quite sufficient measure. In consequence, as adults most of us live immersed in that mixture of belonging and alienation which is a human characteristic: good-enough parenting provides us with the resources to get on with our life, while leaving us the task of gradually coming to live our life more fully.

Just what that task entails will be unique to each of us. For one person it may involve a breaking free of over-protective parents, long since left behind in the external world, but from within still directing how I see and hear and feel and live in that world. For another person the task of living more fully may involve recognizing that my intense adult attachments to others (or equally intense attachments to causes) can in part reflect and compensate for insecurities in those early years. 'Security' can have its own distortions of scarcity and of excess.

Where is home?

Most of us know what it is to belong, and what it is not to belong. Often our sense of belonging is expressed in our sense of where is 'home' to us: it can be instructive to note how the use of that word changes as we grow. For the child (I speak of the fortunate majority), 'home' can hardly be defined, because it is the base from which I explore and define everything else, the set of 'givens' that provides me with such firm guidelines that most of us can recall the shock of first discovering that other people's homes have different 'givens', provide different guidelines.

For the young person, perhaps beginning to live independently, 'home' remains 'home': not equivalent to this place where I happen to live (hall of residence, shared apartment or house, or wherever), but where I come back to, as surely as when I toddled back to mother after my first ventures into that wider world. (Mothers may observe that young adults frequently return with large amounts of clothes for washing - perhaps 'home' is where you can always bring your washing?)

At some point my sense of belonging shifts: in marriage, in life-partnership, in religious community, in my own solo living, I discover that I now belong here, where I live my life, and no longer there, where my parents live their lives.

Living with younger Jesuits who are often in their initial stages of formation, I find it fascinating to observe this moment when an unreflected switch of vocabulary signals an important transition in living. The young Jesuit (young as a Jesuit, at least) may have lived in community for some time, even for some years, before 'home' stops being somewhere else, somewhere different from the community in which he lives. After this transition it is the parents' home which is seen as different, as I become able to distinguish between my home in my community, and their home. I know of one Jesuit, concussed and dazed after a tumble from a motorcycle as a novice, whose initial (internal) cry of 'I want to go home!' was met by the slightly startled realization 'I am at home!' I know others of my confreres who have come to realize only after a long time of living as Jesuits that 'home' for them is somewhere other than in Jesuit community. (And I know others again who, it seems, resist this recognition.)

Belonging, being at home: these are tied up with my deepest sense of who I am, and of who I am called to be. Like the small child able to venture out and explore only because of the security that they know is there, I am able to venture to grow, to move out beyond the safe confines of where I am, who I am, at this moment, if I have a security, a sense of belonging, somewhere where I am at home. Like the even smaller child, I am only able to see that wider and foreign world to the extent to which I am secure, I belong, I am at home.

Friendship, charism, place and partner

I am blessed with the friendship of a monk whose community I visit frequently. Each visit reinforces lessons I began to learn when I first got to know him and the community of the abbey. I am welcome; I am included; that I am there when the community buries its abbot or ordains its young men is unremarkable because expected. But I do not belong; I am not 'at home' there in the way that I am 'at home' in even a newly met community of Jesuits on the other side of the world. I come away from each visit refreshed by living in contact with the charism of St Benedict - and renewed in my felt appreciation that my own charism is other. But I am also struck, again and again, by how my own Jesuit sense of belonging does not include that passionate attachment to this particular place, these particular people who make up this particular community, which seems to me to be an aspect of monastic belonging (echoed and/or rooted, perhaps, in the vow of stability, but who is a Jesuit to venture that thought?).

Belonging, this friendship teaches me, goes deeper than friendship and welcome and the richest expressions of monastic hospitality. And belonging can be rooted in 'place' - or on the open sea. The legends of my own patron saint (along with the lessons of history) remind me that too simple a dichotomy here obscures the reality of monastic and mendicant belonging, both in the complexity of each as lived, and in the deeper questions of belonging that these patterns of living can serve (or can conceal).

My married friends, too, teach me about belonging and being 'at home', and about the variety of ways in which these can be experienced and lived in married life. Crucially, I have learnt from them that much of what I experience as the limits of belonging, the limits of being 'at home' in religious community, is simply the human condition as encountered in this particular setting. Belonging, it seems, needs deeper sources than (even) the lived committed intimacy of marriage can provide.

Ultimate belonging

For my married friends to root their sense of belonging ultimately in each other; for my monk friend to root his sense of belonging ultimately in one place, one community; for myself to root my sense of belonging ultimately in my (complex, here-and-dispersed) Jesuit community and my friends: all of this is to fail to recognize (perhaps to refuse to recognize) that our belonging is ultimately in God, beyond all calculation or adequate reflection.

The contemporary novelist Doris Lessing, who has spent much of her life away from her native Southern Africa, notes: 'I seldom meet someone who isn't in exile one way or another'.

A character in one of Ursula le Guin's stories (which use fantasy to disclose truth), observes: 'If you evade suffering you also evade the chance of joy. Pleasure you may get, or pleasures, but you will not be fulfilled. You will not know what it is to come home.'

Dame Julian tells us: 'Our faith is nothing else but a right understanding and true belief and sure trust that with regard to our essential being we are in God and God in us, though we do not see him'.

Exile, not being at home, not belonging: in some form or another this is part of the experience of us all. The psychoanalytic thinker Erich Fromm wrote about the alienation we all experience, and re- interpreted the oedipal wishes pointed out by Freud as being oriented fundamentally not towards incestuous union, but towards the obliteration of the separateness which seems to us to be the source of this alienation. Such longings, says Fromm, we have to transcend in finding that which will give us an object of devotion and a framework of reference: in finding, I would suggest, where we truly belong.

Fromm is very clear that only that which genuinely transcends our individual lives can provide what we require here: only devotion to something genuinely greater than ourselves can supply an adequate framework of reference for a human life. The devotion may be religious, in the generally accepted sense of the word, but Fromm warns that religions can limit as well as liberate, hamper or block growth as well as foster it.

Security and exploration

Ursula le Guin, another of whose wise novels has the title *Always coming home*, points us to a critical feature of human living: in so many aspects of life, the wish to avoid suffering can imprison, can stultify, and as the extract quoted above notes, deprive us of the chance of joy, to 'know what it is to come home'. But that which deprives or even imprisons can appear more attractive than any alternative, especially if the alternative challenges us beyond what we think are our resources. So we are willing to settle for forms of belonging that in the last analysis are pathological, that diminish, that imprison. Children in abusive families, spouses in abusive marriages, will remain where they are because any belonging is better than no belonging. Finding that my sense of belonging is rooted in this group of people, I can refuse to permit myself to grow or develop, I can refuse to recognize aspects of myself that have always been there, unrecognized, when to do so might lead me beyond the group, away from where I feel I belong.

Belonging gives security, and security is necessary if I am to grow. But belonging can also give the sort of (pseudo-) security that dissuades from growth or prohibits growth: to be more precise, either I or the 'place' where I belong can so shape my belonging that I feel unable to grow, to move. Parents, we noted, have two gifts to give their children: a secure base and the encouragement to explore from it. We come back to what might appear a paradox: healthy belonging sets me free to explore.

Healthy belonging, I would suggest, always involves the recognition of its provisionality: I am safe with mother, but to be me I have to move on. 'Always keep tight hold of nurse/for fear of finding something worse' is no formula for living, even (or especially) when 'nurse' wears ecclesiastical dress. 'Mother Church', to ensure healthy growth, has to foster exploration as well as offer security.

Belonging in God

Because while it is true that we can only be (and feel) fully at home when we discover ourselves to be at home in God, there are smaller homecomings that anticipate that great homecoming, in which we can each recognize and celebrate the experience of knowing thathere -in this place, with this person, in this community -I belong. But we can only experience this to the extent that we are willing to venture outside where we belong: to remain locked into our small world is to ensure not security but frustration. It is perhaps no acci- dent that so many of the spiritual writers resort to images of journey. Some of them spell out the element of homecoming involved in human growth. I think of the taut paradoxes of John of the Cross ('to get to where you are, to get from where you are not ...'). I think also of the imagery used by C. S. Lewis in the apocalyptic scenes that bring the Narnia books to their close in *The last battle*: the children recognize that the land to which Asian brings them, beyond death, is the land and the landscape they have always known,

but only now, after the struggles and the journeys and the battles, see in its fullness (and 'see the place for the first time').

Dame Julian inhabited a world where the sense of belonging had been disrupted by social turmoil and the destruction of certainties and structures. Perhaps that is part of her appeal to our world, where many of the factors which might appear to provide us with a sense of belonging, a sense of being at home, no longer do so. Certainly, the time and the place in which she lived forced her to reach beyond any superficial belonging to the heart of it all: 'a right understanding and true belief and sure trust that with regard to our essential being we are in God and God in us, though we do not see him'.

In order to belong where I am (in this place, at this time), I have to know that I can only fully belong in God. In order to be at home, wherever I find myself, I have to know that *sub specie aeternitatis* I have only one home. To the extent that I live according to that faith-knowledge, to that extent, it seems to me, I can be at home, I can belong, in places that are uncongenial, uncomfortable, even (that dreaded thought for an Englishman) foreign. To the extent that I do not expect any one place or time or person fully to satisfy the need I have to belong, to that extent no place nor time nor person need be utterly foreign to me.

But my continuing inability to come to this lived recognition leaves me grasping for a belonging, searching for a home, that cannot be found in the only places I am prepared to focus my life. I risk overloading places, times and people: I risk putting too much weight on a role, a duty, an accomplishment, a community, a vocation.

Belonging here and now

Coming to recognize, at a lived level, my essential belonging in God sets me free from the need to locate that belonging utterly in the here and now, and in so doing sets me free to recognize and celebrate the degree to which, here and now, I do belong, I am at home.

Places, times, people, roles, duties, accomplishments, communities, vocations: all or any of these can give me an experience of belonging which empowers me to grow; all or any of these can permit me to feel at home in a way that sets me free to explore. We need these incarnations of belonging, these foretastes of coming home. As the title of Ursula le Guin's novel implies, we are (or should be) 'always coming home'.

Maybe we need particular places, times, people, less as we grow. But to find out if this is true, as a particularly hoary Jesuit shaggy-dog story has it, 'you will have to ask someone much older than me'. Certainly, those among us who do need them less are able to celebrate them more, and to recognize and celebrate the different places, times, people etc. that give a sense of belonging, an experi- ence of being at home, to those who are 'not like us'.

It seems to be the case that these inevitably limited belongings, these small homecomings, if I let them be limited and small, allow me to grow into that greater sense of belonging, that more total awareness of my true home, which in turn enrich the limited and the small with the touch of the limitless, the great beyond measure.

Belonging and autonomy

Certainly, too, it is to the extent that I have been gifted with a healthy belonging within God's creation, a liberating experience of being at home in God's world, that I can exercise a proper autonomy. Like the tiny child snug against its mother, I can look at the world with clear eyes and see it as it is, rather than as I need to see it in my anxieties. Like the older child taking its first steps away from mother, I can venture out on my own and explore, rather than stay confined by my insecurities.

It is only necessary to watch parents with small children to realize the tensions that are inevitable in this complex process of coming to 'belong'. Those first steps away from mother can be intoxicating for the child and a moment of wonder for the mother: later ventures can be more fraught than wonderful for those who feel some sort of responsibility. It is also instructive that, still later, most children go through a phase where, at least in fantasy, they explore the possibility that they do not belong with their family, but have a 'real' family (a real belonging, a place where they could really feel at home) somewhere else. But to embark on these fraught ventures, to raise these possibilities of being a changeling (or nowadays more likely an alien, science-fiction having displaced some aspects of fairy stories), the child has to have a 'good-enough' sense of belonging, of being at home. The 'terrible twos', like the imaginary stories-of-origin of later childhood, are signs of health and growth rather than the contrary. It is undue docility and conformity which should raise the question of whether this small individual does have an adequate sense of belonging, does feel at home.

What is true for the child is here true for the adult. The process of coming to a mature sense of belonging, an experience of being at home that does justice to the realities of life, is not going to be totally smooth, even if we limit our thinking to the 'psychological' in a simple sense. Once the total claims of God are taken into consideration, relativizing all human belonging, all earth-bound being 'at home', it should not surprise us that there are tensions and fractures, misunderstandings and ruptured relationships.

And just as there is the risk that parents will stifle physical explorings by over-protection, and imaginative ones by excessive doses of 'realism', so what the French language calls *les responsables* in the Christian community are always at risk of prizing security over growth, safety over exploration. The irony -sometimes genuinely a tragic irony -is that the same truth holds in both contexts: by limiting the individual's attempts to grow and explore I prevent them developing the only security and safety which are sufficient - that 'right understanding and true belief and sure trust that with regard to our essential being we are in God and God in us'.

Belonging as Jesus did

Jesus belonged, was 'at home', to a degree that none of us can match. Because, to a depth we cannot begin to estimate, he knew where he belonged, where he was at home, he was uniquely a person 'at home in his skin', at home with others, whether rich or poor, respectable or outcasts, belonging among his people, belonging in the villages and farms of Galilee. And being so 'at home', belonging in such a way, he enabled others to know that they belonged, that they were at home.

Flawed followers of Jesus that we are, our attempts to live as he lived fall short in this respect also. Uncertain of where we belong, unsure of ever feeling truly at home, we can too easily be unwilling, feel ourselves powerless, to enable others to feel at home, to allow others to know that they belong. So the Christian community, in all its lived embodiments, has constantly to be struggling to let the Spirit bless it with the knowledge that with Jesus we all belong, that in God we will find, at the end, that we have all been at home from the beginning.