
We Belong – A Meditation on Inclusion

Hello everyone, it's wonderful to be here with you today. My name is Lois Miller, and my pronouns are she/her. I want to begin by acknowledging that I'm a white settler on Treaty 6 territory – the traditional homelands of Cree, Dene, Saulteaux, Nakota, Ojibwe, and Métis peoples. I am committed to reconciliation, and this acknowledgement affirms my relationship with the peoples of this land.

I want to start today's meditation with a beloved poem by Mary Oliver: Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

We've recently completed a survey about how OMC works and lives in our community. This past month was also Pride Month a time when LGBTQ2S people and our allies

commemorate the Stonewall riots that accelerated rights for my community. And as I thought of my survey responses and gay pride month, I longed for a conversation on inclusion and wondered who I might turn to at OMC to do this. Mirrors – mirrors are handy tools to have in these private moments. So today I'm here to continue the conversation that OMC began years ago on how we include people in our community.

Why does inclusion matter, and what does it mean? In my personal explorations, inclusion is about home – a place where we rest our hearts. Home and resting hearts change over time I've found, but belonging is critical to our well-being. For many of us, if we could have an honest conversation about belonging, if we could be vulnerable enough in a safe place, we would many of us discover that we've never felt like we quite belong – something in our childhood, our workplaces, our birth families has happened to make us wonder where and if we belong. It is our human condition. And in our need to create belonging we often do so by excluding those who do not look, act, or talk like we do.

Yet as Oliver so beautifully states, nature is constantly announcing our place in the family of things. So how do we find our home, our place of belonging and also ensure that others in the world can find their homes?

In today's meditation on inclusion, I will discuss two areas I've been studying:

- Gender
- Language

You will note that in the bulletin and in my intro I've included my pronouns. For many of us this may seem unusual. We can see that I'm wearing a skirt, makeup, and earrings, have a feminine sounding name so clearly I must be a woman. One of the places I've been doing lots of learning is from our transgender community – one that in many places of worship is either disregarded or in some cases openly discriminated against.

At my company I lead our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Team, and one of the first things we did is make it voluntary to include our pronouns in our email signatures. Why is this important? Because it's an indicator to transgender people that we are a supportive and safe place for trans people. It's important to note that gender and sex are two different things. Our sex refers to our physical characteristics at birth (our biology) – gender describes my understanding of myself (*transgender*: gender different from the one assigned at birth, *cisgender*: gender match assigned at birth, *non-binary*: neither strictly man nor woman). From pronouns our company moved to ensuring our health benefits cover medications and surgeries that trans people may require. Why does this matter? There is a privilege when my physical characteristics match my gender – a privilege rarely afforded transgender people.

When I was in my final interview with the CEO, I had to gather my courage and explain that I'm lesbian and married and needed to make sure this would not be an issue. Gratefully there was no concern. But I don't want anyone coming behind me to have to ask these questions. In our communities, we need to let one another know that we're a safe place to rest our hearts.

The other space I've been exploring for years is language, particularly in the areas of power, disability, and racism. In fact, OMC taught me the difference about rising rather than standing – what seems like a small thing is a flag for people with disabilities that we see us – all of us.

It's important to note that I'm not an expert – I'm learning along with all of you. Here's a quick example of how I'm a student. Another activity I led at our company recently was an unconscious bias training – a place to explore how we hold biases we haven't considered. Along with the training was an online test managed by Harvard University. Imagine my chagrin when my colleague who is quadriplegic called and asked if I was aware that the test could not be taken through voice activation; therefore, she couldn't participate fully in the training. This is a perfect example of how my unconscious bias

was in full force because I assumed that everyone could complete the form based on full body mobility.

You will note that in describing this talk today, I used the word ‘meditation’. I did so for a couple of reasons. One, I’m not a pastor or minister so it feels a little odd to use a word that feels one should have the technical training to do so. Second, the word ‘sermon’ carries for me all the hell and damnation messages I grew up with in the Beachy Amish church. For me, it is a word that signifies untouchability with the power to condemn me to fire. If you would have known the 30-year-old me, the last place you would imagine seeing me is behind a pulpit. The hurt and pain that I’ve carried from my historical place of worship meant that I couldn’t find ‘home’ in such a place. And, yet, here I am. I don’t understand it – it’s a mystery to me. But OMC has become one of the places that announces my place in the family of things. So I use the word ‘meditation’ because it allows me to be fully here.

We are of course full of contradictions – it’s one of the things that makes us beautiful and bewildering. I love the old-time hymns – I’ll sing them with gusto. They make me weep and joyful. But the words are so problematic.

I want to talk a little more on language, power, and abuse. The words I’ve selected today are common in communities of faith and are often used either intentionally to reinforce systems of power or unconsciously in ways that have unintended impacts on the listener.

I’ll start with a story that I’ll carry for the rest of my life. Several years ago, I was at a mining reclamation conference in the unceded territory of the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc Nation, also known as Kamloops. During the three-day conference, presenters used a common reference known as ‘waste rock’ – a technical term in mining that refers to rocks whose target minerals are too low in concentration to be worth mining. On the final day a woman from the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc Nation rose and addressed the audience, saying “You keep using the words ‘waste rock’. These are very hurtful words.

The rocks are our ancestors. They are our grandmothers and grandfathers. Every time you say ‘waste rock’ you are saying our ancestors are worthless.”

It is with this story in mind I share the following examples of how the words we use create barriers to inclusive space – denying us belonging.

- *Lord, master, slave* – these words in the KJV are holdovers from colonization and enslavement – these words are not about love and kindness but about abuse and misused power. I recently read the words ‘contentedly racist’ – referencing many of us white people sitting in places of worship today. As a white person, these words may seem benign to me – but this is only because neither I nor my ancestors grew up enslaved. We have never had our ancestors answer to a ‘master’ or feel the whip of a master. When I hear these words, I know that I cannot belong in this space because my sisters and brothers of colour cannot feel safe here.
- When we use the word ‘*father*’ to refer to a Creator without referencing our mother, what are we really saying. Patriarchal language precludes me from belonging. Does it mean our mothers are not equal to fathers? Does it mean that our mothers do not love or protect us? Of course, this is not the case. Further, for those of us who grew up with violent fathers, referencing the Creator in male language is not only jarring, but it can also feel unsafe. For me, I’ve found that often the words I use are because I grew up with them and there’s a familiarity, and so I need to stretch myself and see what other are doing. Other communities include multiple genders when referencing Creators – we see this in Indigenous communities across the planet.
- The last word I want to share is ‘*home*’. Today, I’ve used the word home 16 times because I’m using it for as a synonym for ‘belonging’. We need to be aware when using this word, that there are those among us for whom home was a place of violence – there was no comfort to be found. There are those of us who have family members who are unhoused because we have made economic decisions that some of us are more worthy than others. Around the world and here on Turtle Island, we white people have, through colonization, ripped asunder

Indigenous homes and families we deemed unworthy. When I use the word 'home' I remember all of us.

When considering language and how we create or deny belonging we must start with ourselves. As a white woman who is born into privilege simply by the colour of my skin, I can become overwhelmed because where do I start? Where do we start? The poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote these words to his student:

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

These words are but a few examples of how we exclude others when trying to build a space for us to belong. Home has feelings of being cozy and warm; it is also the place where we have difficult conversations. A loving home allows us to explore who we are, how we carry ourselves in this beautiful world, and helps us think deeply about the language we use to express ourselves. A safe home is a place where we learn to love the questions themselves while we hear the calling of the planet announcing again and again that we belong to the family of things.

I'm grateful that OMC provides space for me – even when I'm on the periphery of a faith community. So that I can hear the announcement over and over I too belong in the family of things at OMC.

I'll leave you with this poem from Alice Walker

love is not concerned
with whom you pray
or where you slept
the night you ran away

from home
love is concerned
that the beating of your heart
should kill no one

Resources for We Belong: A Meditation on Inclusion

Books

- [The Disordered Cosmos](#): A Journey into Dark Matter, Spacetime, & Dreams Deferred by [Dr. Chanda Prescod-Weinstein](#)
- [Thick](#) by Dr. Tressie McMillan Cottom
- [The Body in Pain](#): The Making and Unmaking of the World by Dr. Elaine Scarry
- [All About Love](#) by bell hooks
- [Braiding Sweetgrass](#): Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants by Robin Wall Kimmerer

Instagram

- [The Nap Ministry](#) – Rest is Resistance as a form of resistance and sleep deprivation as a racial and social justice issue started by [Tricia Hersey](#)
- [Chokecherry Studios](#) – Youth founded non-profit organization offering arts-based programming to young Indigenous artists in Saskatoon
- [Alokvmemon](#) - [ALOK](#) (they/them) is an internationally acclaimed gender non-conforming writer, performer, and public speaker. Alok provides deep dives into books and wonderful [book reports](#)

Classes

- [Night School Bar](#) – wonderful online (Zoom) classes on anti-racism, feminism, philosophy, and gender. The classes are pay what you can afford. No exams or papers! Reading material is provided.

Podcasts

- [On Being](#) with Krista Tippett Pursuing deep thinking and moral imagination, social courage and joy, to renew inner life, outer life, and life together
- [Code Switch](#) – Fearless conversation about race
- [Telling Our Twisted Histories](#) – stories about English words that have been used to colonize Indigenous Peoples
- [Queerology](#) - How might we live better as queer people of faith and allies? Matthias brings together theologians, psychologists, poets, thinkers, and change makers for conversations around belief and being.