

COUNT ME



How I stepped off the sidelines,
created connection, and
built a fuller, richer, more lived-in life

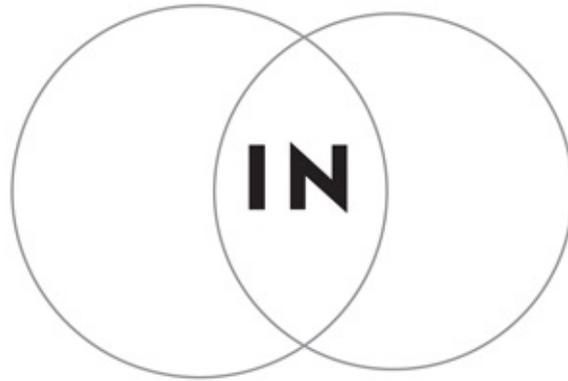
EMILY WHITE

Author of the nationally bestselling **LONELY**

ALSO BY EMILY WHITE

Lonely: Learning to Live with Solitude

COUNT ME



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McCLELLAND & STEWART

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*For my family,
with thanks*

We find ourselves not independently of other people and institutions but through them. We never get to the bottom of ourselves on our own.

— ROBERT BELLAH,
Habits of the Heart

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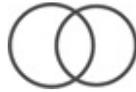
SCALES AND QUIZZES

SELECTED SOURCES

INTRODUCTION

The Challenge of Belonging

Snakes, Stones, and a Recovery Plan



THE SUMMER OF 2012 wasn't a particularly great season for me. The previous year had been stressful: a long-term relationship had ended, and after some difficult weighing of my options, I'd left the coastal town I'd come to love and returned to the big inland city where I'd grown up and lived for much of my life. In the course of this big life change, I lost several friends, three pets, my house, and the plot of the book I'd been working on.

I wasn't very happy, but that didn't bother me too much, mostly because happiness has never been a primary interest of mine. In my first year of college, I scrawled out a quote from George Bernard Shaw that read, "Happiness and beauty are by-products." The statement felt true at the time, even if, at eighteen, I couldn't quite say why. Now, at forty-four, I understand it quite well. For me, happiness is and always has been a by-product of connection. I love feeling like there's a current running between me and the people around me, like I'm on the same wavelength as the places I'm in.

The line leading from connection to happiness was switched on early. From the age of four, I shared a bedroom with one of the happiest people on earth: the younger of my two older sisters, Terri. Terri seemed to have been born happy. It wasn't just that she was optimistic and had loads of energy for cheering others up. She *looked* happy: she had magical white-gold hair that caught the light and made it seem like she was moving within her own private sunbeam. And just as butterflies love sunshine, people flocked to Terri. My mother had a special phone line installed for all the calls coming in from friends and would-be boyfriends. As a little girl, I'd lie in bed and pretend to sleep while Terri talked non-stop. It was like listening to water breaking and falling over rocks.

That's what I came to value: not happiness itself – which I saw as something that people like Terri were naturally good at all on their own – but the sense of connection that came from lying in the dark and listening to the voice of someone I deeply loved. As I got older, I came to see that finding happiness through connection was really a better fit for my personality. It tied in with my natural desire to tinker, to break my moods down to their component

parts and shuffle and reshape them until they were more to my liking. There was something hands-on about connection that appealed to me. If the feeling was a current, I could try to figure out what was blocking it, or assess why the flow felt just right.

Which was what I'd been doing in the small town I'd been living in. The book I lost when my life hit a bump had been about community. Something about the town had made community feel easy, and I'd been trying to zero in on what this was when I was told to pack my bags. The book became impossible – I couldn't write about small-town life in a city of five million people – but the research I'd done was still in my head, and I was puzzling over some of it that summer.

I knew, for instance, that the link I felt between connection and happiness held true for a lot of people. The Harvard University political scientist Robert Putnam argues that the single biggest predictor of happiness is the depth and breadth of your connections; that is, the more people you know, both socially and intimately, the happier you'll be.

That's what I couldn't sort out about my life in Toronto. My usual connection-to-happiness pathway didn't feel charged, and I couldn't spot the problem with the wiring, since I actually had more social ties in Toronto than in the small town I'd left. In fact, statistically, I had more ties than most people. The number of people we can count on has fallen in the past thirty years, even with the improvements we've seen in communication technology. On average, the most highly connected person now, complete with a smartphone and a Facebook page, has one-third fewer friends than her analogue counterpart did in 1985. No one can properly explain why this has happened. Some researchers say it's due to the isolating effects of technology; others say technology has saved us from the isolating effects of unstable jobs, lower incomes, and higher divorce rates. I wasn't sure which camp I was in, but it didn't really matter, because whichever way I looked at it, I was beating the average when it came to what researchers call *confidants*. I had four close friends whom I'd known for decades, as well as family members – my sisters Terri and Chris, my mother, my stepmother, and a bevy of nephews and nieces – who had mostly been in place my whole life. Furthermore, with the exception of one friend who'd moved from Toronto to rural Quebec, all my close ties lived in the same city as me.

Which meant that my sense of not being connected enough didn't really make sense. I'm fond of lists – they're essential if you're trying to analyze your own emotions – and that summer I started drawing up lists of people I knew, rating them as either “very close,” “close,” or “somewhat close.” I spent some time deciding whether to shift Simon, the friend now in rural Quebec, from very close to close, but regardless, I wound up with eight names in the first two columns. I didn't have a “not close at all” column, because – although I had lots of former classmates in Toronto – acquaintances have really never occupied much space with me. I like seeing familiar faces on the subway and having catch-up conversations on sidewalks, but I rarely feel the need to rein

someone from grade school back into my life. Which led me back to the problem that was nagging me: if acquaintances weren't the issue, and if I had loads of close ties, then why did I feel like some part of my emotional life was missing?

I was seeing a therapist that summer. As a recently separated, fortysomething female, doing so felt almost obligatory. And I didn't mind going, because I liked Genevieve. She was a grey-haired woman who filled her office with colourful cushions and bright, wall-sized tapestries. She seldom wore anything but black or beige, and I sometimes felt like all the colour was camouflage, meant to hide her as I focused on myself. It worked. The minute I stepped into her consulting room, I started on about the things that were bothering me – the separation, of course, which I hadn't chosen, but also the odd emptiness that had entered my life, the way I belonged to certain people in certain ways but had no *overall* sense of belonging.

"Can you remember a time when you did belong?" Genevieve asked, in her unobtrusive way.

I was about to describe life in my coastal town, but that sense of belonging was complicated by the fact that it had been taken away. Also, I was suddenly remembering something else.

"The Arctic," I said, and right away I could see it. I'd lived in the remote northern town of Iqaluit for six months in 2000 and had totally grooved on the place. It was insanely beautiful. Iqaluit sits north of the treeline, so if you're out on the land you can see for miles, and the remarkably colourful tundra is all heather and moss – gorgeous gold- and ruby-coloured surfaces so springy they make walking feel like bouncing on air.

"What made the Arctic special?" Genevieve asked. "Was it the people you knew?"

"Not really." My situation was a bit hard to explain. I'd been on contract with a law firm, but the contract was time-limited. This meant I hadn't formed strong friendships up north. I had met people and spent time with them, but since I'd known I wasn't staying, I hadn't tried to create close ties. Instead, I'd focused on the place itself. My roommate had a high-energy dog – half terrier, half husky – and after work Dakota and I would go for epic walks. It was summer, so the sun never set, and we'd hike hill after hill. Small herds of caribou would sometimes surround us. This was alarming at first, but I took my cues from Dakota and quickly learned the drill. The trick was to stand breathless and utterly still as the massive animals wound past, their eyes looking velvety in the white evening light. The caribou were so strange: I knew they could see me, but they glided by – sometimes only a half-foot away – as if I didn't exist. I was curious about them, and fascinated as well by the great stone statues that dotted the hills: the big inukshuks created by nomadic peoples to let others know they were not alone. I'd sometimes pose Dakota for photos at the base of these statues, telling her to "look northern." Often we'd just sit on boulders near the Labrador Sea and let the tide roll in around us.

In many ways, it was a difficult place: dirt roads that led nowhere, snippy

arguments in cabs you had to share, and social lives that revolved around competitive games of crazy eights. The combination of boredom and lack of sleep did a lot of people in. I once arrived at work to find a colleague sitting at his desk and eating a procession of tiny doughnuts with the mechanical, blanked-out stare of someone officially gone.

But I was in my element. I had a black-lined sleeping bag that let me catch enough sleep; I had Dakota; and I had my lovely roommate, Rhonda, who placed the crazy eights trophy on top of our TV each time she won. (It was a Super Mario Pez dispenser.) The fact that I wasn't particularly close to anyone didn't matter, because I felt part of the place itself. My long walks were tying me to the land, to the animals, to the sea. I felt connected not to someone but to something, and that sense of connection grounded me and made me feel calmer and more secure than I usually had in my adult life.

"The funny thing," I told Genevieve, "is that sometimes I was probably in a whole lot of real danger. It was just me and Dakota out there on the hills. We could have gotten lost, or I could have turned an ankle." There had been one particularly bad moment when Dakota refused to climb a hill and I began to panic – alone in the middle of nowhere – that there was a polar bear on the other side. When Dakota turned and headed straight home, I followed. I never did learn what she was leading me away from, but the memory always left me with the throat-tightening sense of having been saved. However, I decided to gloss this over and emphasize what was mostly true. "I never felt unsafe there," I said.

"Do you feel unsafe here?" *Here* was Toronto, of course: the city I'd been raised in and knew as well as the inside of my palm.

I wasn't sure what to say. I felt physically safer in Toronto – it's a busy place, with lots of eyes and ears on the ground – but something was missing psychologically. It was as if gravity wasn't working properly. I wasn't rooted enough; sometimes my life just felt too light.

"There's none of those statues I used to see on the hills," I said, trying to explain. "I loved the message in them. People put all this work into creating symbols of togetherness. Like, even if they weren't together right then, they were together in spirit. They were thinking of each other."

"And is that how you feel? Like no one's thinking of you?"

"Well, maybe not enough people. Not people I don't know." This sounded strange even to me, but Genevieve seemed to get it.

"Your life's too small," she suggested.

"That's it." She'd come up with the phrase that had been eluding me. "Up north, everything felt big. I mean, it *was* big. The Arctic's a big place. But I felt bigger too. There was just more to me. And I feel like I don't have that anymore."

"Could you recreate it?"

"The Arctic?"

"The feeling you had up there."

"Well, Toronto is a pretty different place," I said. "And Dakota must be

gone by now. It was a long time ago, and she was a big dog. She wouldn't be alive anymore."

I didn't like thinking of Dakota disappearing. It felt unfair. Much in the same way, I had to admit, that my own life was feeling mildly unfair, as if I were being shortchanged on something I couldn't fully name.

"The Arctic," I said, groping for a better explanation. "It wasn't just *people*."

"It was ... what do you call it: 'the land'?"

It sounded funny coming from Genevieve, but she had it right. No one up north said "outside" or "nature." It was just the land – all around you and right up close. And the land had a mystical quality that made me feel as though I was never quite seeing all of it. The sky at midnight was a hazy, glossy white that made doors and walls look less like hard surfaces and more like objects you might reach through. It was as if other worlds were present, and very close by, and sometimes I'd lie in the yard with Dakota's head on my belly and think about how there was more on offer than I could ever take in.

I shook the memory off. Genevieve's office was on a main street, and traffic was thundering by. She had the air conditioning on, so the room was cool, but she couldn't do anything about the August sun. It was bouncing off the roads and buildings in a way that made me want to squint indoors.

"I can't recreate that here," I said.

"It seems to me you're talking about a feeling, not a place," she replied quietly. "You're talking about belonging to something bigger than you. Does that have to be the Arctic?"

I shook my head. No. Even I could see that setting the Arctic as the standard for belonging was setting the bar way too high. I knew there had to be other ways to recreate the feeling, ways that were accessible to me in my ordinary city and over the course of my day-to-day life. But I immediately ran into a problem that Genevieve didn't seem aware of.

"Other things are gone, you know." It was a point I'd taken from my community research: the ways in which we had previously connected were vanishing. Gone were the lifelong club memberships, the smoky union halls, the neighbourhood coffee klatches, the boisterous campaign meetings, the friendly bowling leagues. The word that came up in the research was *public* – we'd lost a good deal of public life and had been left with lives that were strictly private. But we were never designed for strictly private lives. For one thing, a life composed of just friends and family members is a vulnerable one: if anyone walks out, or gets relocated for work, your social world shrinks. More importantly, private ties can't turn us into all we need to be. Friends and family reinforce parts of who we are – usually the parts we share with them – but we need bigger and less personal worlds to reveal everything we *might* be.

When Putnam wrote about the links between connection and happiness, he stressed both breadth and depth in relationships. By this, he meant that we need close, intimate ties as well as steady ties that are broader and more casual, that don't depend on deep conversation or intense sharing. But he

went on to say that these broader ties are disappearing: today, there's less for us to belong to, less for us to be part of as we try to shore up a thicker, less personal, more lively sense of inclusion.

Reading this made me uneasy, since I had a lot of experience with things disappearing. I used to be a lawyer, and until the mid-aughts I practised environmental protection law. This meant I protected things under threat, and the threatened things that interested me the most were animals. I was an expert on creatures leaving this world. I could rattle off the top ten mammals on the international Red List of endangered species and picture the creepy diagram that always accompanies such lists – the one that runs with a thick dotted line from “vulnerable” to “threatened” to actually gone. It's a perverse mental tic of mine to fixate on what's on its way out. The future doesn't seem to interest me nearly as much as the past, especially a past with losses in it that promise to be irreversible. Whenever I look at species lists, the “extinct” category always fills me with dread. I'll read about passenger pigeons and try to understand how something so gorgeous could be allowed to slip by, how we could just eliminate something – those amazing, sky-filling flocks of birds – that gave us something we essentially need.

I wondered if a sense of belonging was nudging toward the “extinct” category. Research from the University of Oregon has shown that the number of Americans who feel a sense of belonging has fallen by half from 1976 to today, and this applies to both genders as well as all ages and education levels. However, the numbers haven't hit bottom, which made me think that if I had to peg belonging to a column, I'd list it as threatened, not gone. So although it may be harder to find, it's still around if you know where to look.

The thought of looking for belonging appealed to me. It aligned with my tendency to fiddle, to fix an emotional hole by twisting my life upside down and sideways until I could spot where the air was leaking out. But I wasn't sure how this search would make me feel. If we were losing belonging, would looking for it feel like reading the endangered species lists for months on end? Would it leave me gasping for air in the same way the lists did, with each additional species feeling like another hand around my neck?

Other people probably don't need such reminders, but as I walked home from Genevieve's office that day, I had to tell myself that thinking and doing were two different things. Thinking about disappearing species was draining, but the one time I'd done something about it, I hadn't felt drained at all.

A lot of my work as a lawyer involved writing memos about things like species habitat. It was an office job; no one ever asked me to park myself in front of a bulldozer. But then I was hired by a magazine to write about a highly endangered snake. The snake was called the blue racer, and my task was to spend a week with a research crew searching for them on an island in Lake Erie.

I was a hopeless fieldworker. Everyone else seemed born for this sort of thing, or at least perfectly equipped: they had air mattresses, patched tents, and pocket knives; they knew how to create large meals out of canned goods

and listen to hockey games at night without showing signs of boredom. They were patient with me – they understood they had to put up with me if they wanted the snake’s photo in the magazine. This meant they didn’t groan too loudly when I fell off logs, watched my boots sink in mud, or announced we all had to stop because I’d somehow lost my scarf.

In many ways, I was more curious about the fieldworkers than I was about the snakes. The snakes weren’t around. That’s what “highly endangered” meant: that you could walk for days without seeing one. The fieldworkers, on the other hand, were always close by, since they wouldn’t let me walk the snake lines alone. I had plenty of time to wonder about their psychology. They were all grad students, and they knew all the facts: there were only three hundred blue racers left in the world, all of which were on that island, and every one of them was under threat from an expanding quarry. But this dismal scenario didn’t seem to affect their mood. The fieldworkers were an energetic bunch, brewing coffee on their windmill-powered stove and drinking water from old Nalgene bottles they never bothered to wash. To me, it was a mystery: how could they maintain high spirits in the midst of what might be a futile effort?

The question was answered for me one afternoon when the lead biologist, Ben, came out of the woods with a blue racer wrapped around his arm.

“Do you want to hold it?” he asked. Ben was tall and spectacled and looked exactly like an embattled conservationist from a movie: hair unbrushed and eyes intense, with an unnerving way of freezing mid-stride the instant he spotted a snake.

“I’d love to hold it,” I replied. I held my hands out like someone expecting a Christmas present. Ben grabbed my hands in a way people don’t usually do at Christmas – he shoved them closer together – and then, after assuring himself I wasn’t going to drop it, he let the snake slither from his hand to mine.

I was transported. The snake’s skin felt cool and surprisingly dry as it wound its way up my arm, and it was so beautiful, with shimmering streaks of blue down its silvery sides. Its eyes, when it turned to look at me, were a soft brown, and its expression was uncanny: all-knowing and almost forgiving.

Then I got it. That was what kept the biologists going. The creature they were trying to save was marvellous, and throwing themselves into saving it – even if it meant finishing every day covered with cuts and torn clothing – felt better than doing nothing. There was actually less pain, and a lot more fun, in tackling something head-on instead of letting it go.

About halfway home from Genevieve’s office, I stopped near a dog park to relive that moment in the woods – the way the world had cracked open and I’d felt let in on the secret of just how wonderful a simple creature could be. I knew that this was the memory that would have to guide me if I was going to look for belonging. And I suddenly realized I *was* going to look for belonging. It was the ultimate emotional fix-it project, something I could throw myself into and up against until my life felt as full as it had in the Arctic, until I was once again rooted and connected in ways that went beyond my own private

ties. I even knew how to frame what I was looking for. The more highly endangered an animal is, the more likely there is to be a “recovery plan” in place for it – some strategy meant to revive it or keep it from slipping any further toward the ranks of “gone.” That’s what I needed for belonging. I wanted a specific and practical plan that would help me restore a larger, more public sense of connection and make it a reality in the here and now.

The question was where to start. Most recovery plans begin by asking what’s essential to the species’ survival, and the only word that was coming to me when I thought of belonging was *dog*. I missed Dakota, and right then I was staring at a couple of dogs queuing in very human fashion for a ground-level fountain that owners operated with their feet.

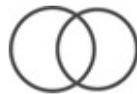
I wondered if I should be aiming a bit higher. Maybe inclusion in some great club would be a good starting point. Then I realized that all the clubs I could think of were men-only – the Shriners, the Knights of Columbus – and when I struggled to recall their female equivalents, my mind went blank. I couldn’t quite picture this sort of belonging. The last time I’d seen a Shriners’ parade was in 1989; the men had been wearing fez hats and driving tiny cars. I doubted the Shriners still did this, but then I realized I didn’t know what it was they *did* do. Thinking about belonging in this way doesn’t come naturally anymore – not just to me, but probably not to anyone born after 1960 or even earlier. It was clear that I had to belong in modern ways, ways that weren’t likely going to involve meeting halls, pledges, or the wearing of boxy caps.

Which brought me back to *dog*. I wasn’t sure what I meant by this, but I decided not to question it. It was answer enough to the question Genevieve had posed: when had I found a sense of belonging in the past? The question struck me as important at the time, and I’ve come to realize that it’s absolutely critical. Even with belongingness rates in free fall, most of us still know what we need to feel glued in. We’ve all had experiences with feeling right at the centre of things, and even if those experiences have ended, they can serve as a guide to where we might find belonging in the future.

I sat on a bench to think. For me, *dog* was a clue to what I needed; it was some reference to the past that was pointing me forward. I looked at the small park in front of me – a baseball diamond, picnic tables, grass, and the shade cast by old maples – and thought *nature*. It certainly wasn’t the Arctic, but it was a space that felt meaningful to me – vastly more meaningful than the busy street I’d just come from. The natural world seemed like a blessing, and I remembered a time in my life when people talked about blessing in a literal way, as an aspect of belief. I liked the way these memories made me feel – I remembered the scratchy feel of the kilt I used to wear to convent school – and decided to add *faith* to the list. Then there was Terri, and the cramped bedroom we used to share, with clothes all over the floor and her under the covers with the phone to her ear, and I thought of *home* and *neighbourhood*. Those words came with some underpinning of alarm, of something having gone wrong, but I didn’t want to think about that right then, so I just kept the words on my mental list and pushed the feelings aside.

I understood that my list might grow, but at least I had some starting points, and they all came from a deeply personal place. Later, once I'd begun the challenge, I was surprised at how quickly I lost sight of my list and let others tell me what I needed for belonging, but I found that thinking back to that very first list steered me back on course. Having real, almost spontaneous, starting points is crucial, because one thing I've learned over the course of this challenge is that if you're not honest with yourself about what you need for belonging, you likely will not find it. Certain activities might be interesting – like volunteering at a food bank – but if that activity isn't meaningful to you, it won't lead to the sense of inclusion you're looking for.

Dog, nature, faith, home, neighbourhood. The list felt a bit garbled, like clues to a mystery I'd have to tease out. But at least I had the clues. They were like the tracts of land or specific food sources that get listed in recovery plans. They didn't fit together as neatly as I might have liked, but I recognized them as the essentials of what I would come to define as my belongingness challenge. They were where I had to start.



Looking back to that moment in the park, I'm surprised at how right I was about one thing. At no point in my year and a half of looking for belonging did I even stumble upon an opportunity to join the sorts of large groups that seem to have been ubiquitous in the past. I did manage to join, or rejoin, the Catholic Church, and the Vatican certainly counts as a large organization, but the specific group I joined had fewer than thirty members. Aside from faith organizations, large groups simply didn't surface. It's not that I was avoiding them. They weren't there.

Without setting out to do so, I wound up confirming a major point in the research on belonging: the groups you'll find will probably be small and informally structured. The connection that these groups offer is sometimes described as "loose," meaning it doesn't flow from organizations with hierarchies or long histories. Loose connections are often held up as inferior to the sorts of lifelong ties that people used to bring to clubs like the Woodmen of the World, but – having never been a Woodman – I can't make that judgment.

I can say that many of the ties I found didn't feel all that loose. It's true that there was more flexibility to the groups, and more coming and going of members, but this informality might have made my search for belonging easier. In fact, over the course of this challenge, I hit on a sort of sub-rule: the more formality there is attaching to a group – application forms, orientation sessions, training guides – the less belonging that group will probably offer. This isn't because there's anything wrong with formality itself, but rather because the formality is often a sign that the group is looking for a certain type of person. If you're not that person – if you are not, say, eager to walk

alone at dawn collecting injured songbirds (and I did this) – you’re less likely to find a sense of fit there.

I also learned that the emphasis on the size or structure of groups themselves is a bit misplaced. It’s true that some groups just get belonging wrong from the start. A lot depends, for instance, on the skills of the group leader. In the course of one project – which involved standing nose-to-snout with hogs – I felt a sense of belonging right away. This wasn’t because of anything I was doing, but because the woman leading the group was a connection genius: she knew how to weave people together, how to welcome newbies, and how to make people feel, even if they’d only shown up two or three times, like they’d been around for ages. Beth wasn’t trying to make anyone feel like they belonged. She was just a deeply kind person who extended kindness to everyone she met, meaning the group was filled with relaxed, reassured people who were generally pretty nice to each other. In other situations, I’ve watched group leaders box belonging out. When I tried to become an evangelical Christian, for instance, the group leader was so nervous and apprehensive that she made everyone in the group feel nervous and apprehensive as well.

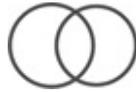
For a while, I thought that group leadership skills were the key to belonging – that it was the leaders who were creating the sense of connection. In a sense, they were, but what they were really doing was modelling certain behaviours and attitudes I had to learn myself. I’ve come to think that the number one block to belonging today might not be busy schedules, long commutes, or even overt acts of rejection, but just not *knowing* enough about how to belong. I’m not sure that belonging is in the same league as riding a bike. If you’ve been cut off for a while, or overworked for too long, or just not paying attention, you can lose some of the skills it requires. These aren’t hard skills, like knowing how to operate a circular saw, but they’re skills nonetheless: how to trust, how to cooperate, how to expect certain outcomes and not expect others. I know that the main thing I had to do, right at the start of this challenge, was identify why I felt a bit *cagey* around belonging. The answer I hit on surprised me – and involved me standing in the middle of a massive condo development – but it made me realize that I was bringing the wrong ideas to belonging, and that I’d have to change these in order to successfully connect to others.

I don’t want to make belonging sound like some solo project that’s entirely about you. It’s not. In fact, the very best thing about belonging is that, as soon as you start looking for it, you realize there are a lot of other people looking too. You do have to take the first few steps alone. You have to get to the meeting, to the garden, to the neighbourhood cleanup. And you might feel alone heading out the door, but once you arrive, you lose your sense of aloneness. In fact, in arriving you end up doing double duty, because you help someone else lose *their* sense of aloneness. After all, we never connect in isolation. We always connect to others. Which means that when we go looking for togetherness, we conjure it up.

ONE

Hagerty's Rule

What You Need for Belonging



EVEN THOUGH I HAD my starting points, I was surprised at how ready others were to tell me where to start – and how ready I was to listen. A few weeks after my dog park revelation, while having dinner with two friends who'd made the “very close” column in my relationship list, I mentioned that I was going to look for more connection. I didn't describe it as an overall challenge or fundamental goal. I just said that, being back in Toronto, I wanted to “flesh things out a bit.”

There's nothing unusual about saying this. Belonging's quite fashionable. We have no trouble with sites like LinkedIn or Meetup that claim to facilitate a greater sense of connection. The technology is new, of course, but so is the promise of easy access to connection. I tend to be overly nostalgic about the past – mostly because there were more animals in it – and my dad often tried to warn me away from this, saying that his past had been pretty heavy on things like poverty and pretty light on things like food. Still, despite the deprivation he confronted in other areas, his past was full of *people*. He was born in a small Kentucky town in 1928, and he spent his first eighteen years surrounded by kin, neighbours, and fellow faith members. In the letter that he wrote to my sisters and me the year before he died, the pages are just crammed with people who were a daily part of each other's lives: my fiddle-playing great-uncles, my father's doting grandparents, the parish priest who would host festivals that saw chickens appearing in cages and disappearing as meals. My dad didn't live to see the era of Meetup or Facebook, but I think he would have found the notion of people searching for connection online a bit futuristic.

It didn't strike my friends Juliette and Andrew as futuristic. We *were* the future. More specifically, we were part of what's been called the “post-civic” generation – that is, the generation that's grown up without much in the way of a larger, more public social life. The two of them took no offence, as we sat in their back garden, to me saying that I needed more than they could offer. They understood. We'd all known each other for decades: Juliette and I had gone to high school together, and Andrew and I had been college roommates.

When they married in 2010, it was like having my private life sharpened. Two people I knew extremely well were now together, meaning that conversations sometimes felt like flipping through my own diaries – we knew the same people, had gone to the same schools, and spoke with the same sad nostalgia about the death of Kurt Cobain. They'd been stalwarts after my separation: we were having dinner that night because Juliette, during my first week back, had taken one look at my haggard face and said she'd like to cook for me. That first dinner had been ritualized, with no discussion and no fanfare, into a meal every week. When I tried, a few months in, to thank her for this, she waved a dishtowel at me and said, "Shut up. We love you."

Part of loving me was steering me toward the bigger life they agreed that I needed. As soon as I said "connection," Andrew hit on a plan. In college, he'd been skinny and underfed, lost in layers of T-shirts and hair that fell halfway down his back. At forty-one, he was toned, focused, and crew-cut, and he attributed some of this change to yoga. He was a devotee – the kind of guy who could hold a plank pose for ages – and he was amazed I hadn't already tried the studio a few blocks from my apartment.

"You have one of the best studios in town near you," he said. "Possibly the best in the country. And it's so *close* to you."

He travelled forty-five minutes each morning to get there. The fact that I lived within walking distance but hadn't yet put in an appearance struck him as borderline criminal.

"You *really* need to try it," he said. It was still warm enough for us to be eating outside, and I tossed my napkin onto the wicker table and tipped my head back. Their yard was one of my favourite spots in town: mysteriously silent, with the branches of an oak tree overhanging the garden, and pots of basil and mint lining the steps to the door. It was a mystery to me why anyone would want to leave such a place, but Andrew was adamant that the benefits of the practice outweighed the hassles of the commute.

"There's something very grounding about yoga. I think you could really use that now. It's peaceful, and it helps with your breathing, and—"

"I'll go!" I said, trying to appease him.

I didn't mention that yoga was already on my list of alternate connection possibilities. When I listened to what women my age were doing for togetherness, there was a lot of talk about Pilates, meditation retreats, distance running, and strange new crossbreeds like Tough Mudder contests. There seemed to be an awful lot of emphasis on endurance – going for days without talking, immersing yourself in a full-body ice bath. I wasn't sure what all the endurance training was actually leading to, but as someone high in stamina and moderately skilled in contemplation, I decided a yoga class was doable.

I sought out the studio's schedule online and presented myself for a beginners' class. The woman who took my money looked angelic – with a soft halo of blonde hair around a supremely calm face – and when I admitted to being a bit nervous, she replied that it wasn't unusual.

“I’ll take you into the room myself,” she said. The studio was divided in two. The front room, where we were talking, had low padded benches, a large desk, and two unobtrusive racks of clothing for sale. The light in this room was stark, streaming in through high-set windows and bouncing off the walls in a way that made the space almost uncomfortably bright. Beyond the front area, I could see the edge of a slightly darker room: here, someone must have pulled the blinds, because the light was muted and honey coloured. The floors were buffed and gleaming, and they seemed to be absorbing light instead of reflecting it. *If I lie down on that*, I thought, staring at the floor with a certain degree of longing, *it will be like lying on a tanning bed*.

I was thinking happy thoughts about heated floors when my guide blocked the door.

“It’s a shoe-free zone,” she said, pointing to my runners. Then she gestured toward a tall shelving unit. “You can put them there,” she added. There was a chair beside the shelves. This was clearly where people stopped to strip off their footwear, but I froze.

I have what might be called issues with my feet. “You get those from your father,” my mother once said, glancing at my feet and making it sound like my dad had come along and sewn them on after I was born. They’re heavily callused, and the calluses are so thick they split open at the sides and heels. The skin is dry, and no matter how much moisturizer I slather on, it has a creepy tendency to flake. Worst of all, my baby toes slide under each foot instead of extending straight out. When we were young, Terri used to try to twist these toes back into position, a bit of chiropractic that always left me squirming as she explained, “I’m just trying to make you *normal*.”

Terri never hurt me all that much, but I carry some mild psychic scars. It’s almost impossible for me to show my feet to anyone – especially not a stranger whose own feet looked so dewy and unblemished that they were almost baby-like.

“Can I do it in my socks?” I asked.

The clerk looked puzzled. “No. You won’t get the grip you need, and that can be dangerous. You have to be able to anchor yourself to the mat.”

There was no escaping the situation. With all the enthusiasm of a suspect settling in for a cross-examination, I sat down and removed my footwear. I was expecting a startled “Gross!” but the clerk looked away from my feet, an act of avoidance that made me feel more, not less, self-conscious.

“You can just stretch out,” she said, perhaps a bit more coolly than before, as we entered the studio. I was right: the floors were toasty. People were lying flat on their backs, not talking to each other, in various spots around the room. Most had their eyes closed.

I spread out my mat and lay down like everyone else. This was immediately soothing. One thing we’re a bit short on, culturally, is time spent with others for no reason. If we’re together, we increasingly need to make something of that time, by talking, shopping, or going to the movies. Sociologists describe this sort of behaviour as “active socializing” – meaning that we’re out and