

A personal point of view...

Perspectives on Family

What Does It Mean to Belong?

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Belonging can mean different things to different people. For some, belonging is about feeling part of a peer group, being a member of a community or club, or identifying as a member of a certain culture or ethnicity while coupled with a sense of pride and devotion. But what does it mean to *belong to a family*?

As a young teen, like many adolescents, I questioned my place within my family, among my peers at school, within my community and as a member of society. I thought about how I fit in, what role I played and what role I should play. I questioned my identity and ultimately wondered, "Where do I belong?"

For many years, I consciously (and perhaps subconsciously) questioned my sense of belonging. Following the death of my mother when I was 15, my sense of belonging and my sense of family became distorted as I tried to deal with my mother's absence and navigate this new reality in my life. The image I had of what it meant to be part of *this* particular family had changed. It never occurred to me that I would have to celebrate holidays, attend my high school graduation, buy my first house or have a child of my own without my mom being there.

Adolescence felt like the right time to explore whether I belonged somewhere else. While trying to answer that million-dollar question, I grabbed a backpack and ventured out in search of a new belonging. I stayed at friends' houses, moved in with a new boyfriend and slept on the basement couch at my part-time job. I knew none of these temporary solutions would become permanent, but they allowed me to explore whether I really belonged with friends, with a partner or surrounded by colleagues at work as an alternative to being with my own family. I

wondered whether I had reached a point in my life where it was time to find a new family and create a new belonging.

According to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, "Humans need to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance, whether it comes from a large social group, such as clubs, office culture, religious groups, professional organizations, sports teams, gangs, or [from] small social connections (family members, intimate partners, mentors, close colleagues, confidants)." Interestingly, Maslow's hierarchy pairs the need for belonging with the need for love – to love and to be loved.¹

So perhaps the question isn't what does it mean to belong, but what does it mean to love and be loved? As a teen, when I was in search of a sense of belonging, was I also in search of love? Perhaps I was trying to fill a void following my mother's passing, but without a doubt I set out on a journey of self-discovery. While on that journey, I found out many things about myself. I reflected upon what and who was important to me and wondered how I would go about becoming the person I wanted to be while also mending some strained relationships. I learned the true meaning of love, both romantic and unconditional, and also what it meant to reciprocate those feelings of love.

Years have passed and I can say with confidence now that I understand the meaning of belonging and family, that is, *my* meaning of belonging and family, which at its core includes to love and be loved – as a mother, a daughter, a partner, a sister, a colleague and a friend. ◀

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¹ College of the Redwoods (date unknown), *Maslow's Hierarchy*, accessed January 27, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1gJAN8g>.