

UnitingWomen Sept 2018

My name is Jane Kennedy and I live on Kuringai land.

I acknowledge the Turrbal and Jagera people whose elders have told stories of community and the sacred connection to this land for millennia.

I am one of the Associate Directors of UnitingWorld and have worked in the Pacific and Asia for 14 years.

Many of my thoughts today come from what I have learnt from the people of these island nations.

If I were to ask you what you thought the greatest predictor of longevity is, what would you say? Lifestyle, diet? Whether or not you smoke, how often you exercise?

Turns out the number one predictor for how long you will live, is social connection.

Recent study into longevity shows us that a higher degree of social connection is associated with lower risk of physical imbalances that lead to illness.

Conversely, lack of social connection was associated with vastly elevated risks for disease *

A defining characteristic of human society is that individual lives are intertwined through social relationships. Full social participation is a fundamental human need.

You belong on the mat, you have a place there. If I were to say this to Pacific and Indigenous women here, it would be an immediately accessible metaphor – the gathering place, the mango tree, the group of women weaving, sharing their wisdom, teaching younger generations.

Village culture is rich with this sort of imagery, it denotes a place of belonging and identity.

This is an idyllic and romantic picture for those of us from western cultures that have become highly individualised and isolated.

We long for this connection point and gravitate to churches and sports clubs to forge community and find a place to call home.

Unlike our Indigenous friends, many of us don't have a strong sense of place, of rich earth that has belonged to our family, people or tribe for generations.

I recall driving through rural Fiji some years ago and noticing a teenage girl running from her village to catch a bus.

With a sharp rolling of her eyes in the way of her generation, she whipped off her sulu, or sarong, which had covered her jeans and Miley Cyrus t shirt.

Women need to cover themselves with a sulu if they are wearing pants in the village and her disdain for this practice was obvious.

But as I chuckled from my car, I couldn't help but wonder about how she felt about her place there. She belonged to that land, to those people.

I lived and worked for a time in Fiji. I have witnessed both the celebration of belonging to the tribe and the acute pain of being excluded.

I have attended community weddings and harvest feasts but have also seen families driven away from the village, shunned and living on the outskirts of tribal land, for reasons such as bearing children with severe disability.

Sometimes the tribe can turn toxic. Sometimes our place of belonging can feel unsafe and our place on the mat conditional and unwelcoming.

How do we find the courage to stay? Or perhaps the courage to leave?

Along my own path, there was a time I had to leave. The tribe had turned toxic and I could no longer stay.

The church I walked away from had been the only close community I had ever known, the wisdom there had framed my world, my friends, my thinking, my life choices.

Standing up from the mat and leaving felt like leaving myself, leaving home.

How do we, as vulnerability researcher Brene Brown writes, belong to ourselves first? Know ourselves well, find our true identity hidden in God, and brave the wilderness of others' disapproval or expectations?

I needed to learn how to belong to myself, to find my true identity in the wilderness so that I could return to another tribe, another mat, and bring my truest self there.

I found that there were others out there in the wilderness, there was contemplation and open-hearted conversations where no topic was off limits. It was tempting to set up camp there around those fires, but the wilderness is not a place you stay, I knew I was just passing through.

Healing – processing - turning inward so I could face outward again.

Leaving the tribe took all the strength I had and was the forerunner to my next great heartache – the unravelling of my marriage. I listened to the still small voice whispering, (and had tattooed on my arm), *Courage, Dear Heart* – My reminder that tenderness must be found alongside resilience.

At the recent Uniting Church Assembly, I was so moved to hear lesbian and gay church members share their stories of pain and desire for belonging. Their courage and authenticity was breathtaking.

I have walked with my daughter in recent years as she bravely spoke up against the very strong opinions of our extended family and left a law degree to pursue her passion for performing arts. Her great love since age 4.

I have watched many, many women from UnitingWorld's partner churches all over the world, take their place on the mat of leadership despite the tight patriarchal squeeze.

They have all learned to belong to themselves first.

Some of them, like me, have had to learn how to weave in the next season from the wisdom offered at another mat. Some have been able to return to their place of belonging with greater understanding of their true selves.

Jesus told a story about the Kingdom of God and compared it to a treasure hidden in a field. He said there was a man who sold everything he had to buy that field, so he could search for that treasure.

Hispanic theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz writes about the kingdom of God and uses the metaphor of “kin-dom,” grounding the concept in family and relationship as a sustaining foundation for all social and spiritual experience.

Drawing on thoughts from Latin American Liberation theology, “kin-dom” is based on the idea that the shared experience of life forms the basis for how people survive and flourish. This framework is a multi-generational chorus of voices that says there is room for all.

This “kin-dom” of God - this deeply rooted connection to people and place sounds like something worth searching for as if for hidden treasure.

While for many “kin-dom” is a beautiful image that offers belonging and hope, for others, myself included, there are deep divides within family relationships.

So when we do not have kin in our “kin-dom”, when we have broken places within ourselves and our family, how does this view of the kingdom of God offer hope where there has been much harm?

Isasi-Diaz writes that family means we do not face the world alone - But perhaps we need to give family a more expansive definition that includes the places we seek to belong – friendships, neighbourhoods, book clubs, church congregations and even the work place. This week, my team knew that Wednesday was a tough day for me and brought me coffee and emailed memes and jokes on the hour.

We need each other and are built for this. Human beings are the most communal species in the animal and plant kingdoms. We do not thrive in isolation, no matter how introverted we may be.

Psalm 68 says that God places the lonely in families, either families of origin or perhaps families that look like this – a UnitingWomen gathering.

We will likely glean wisdom from a number of mats throughout our journey from young woman to elder.

The diversity of each one adds to the tapestry of our personalities and life experience.

After times in the wilderness we can freely bring our genuine, perhaps limping-from-the-journey selves to the tribe and offer some wisdom of our own.

Social connection is literally life giving. Be brave today if you can be and offer yourself to this tribe.

The invitation to belonging, the invitation to being seen and known; is participation. Be part of what the Spirit is doing – Take your place on the mat.

I'd like to end with a poem by Morgan Harper Nichols

On belonging // I cannot tell you who will let you into their group or what will make you feel like you have a place to belong to // but I can tell you that you belong in this very day

I can tell you that as sure as the sun was meant to rise in the morning sky // so were you

As sure as the trees were meant to spring up from the earth // So were you

No matter the unrequited love or the times you have felt you could never be enough // and no matter the depths of your deepest unknowns // this place is your home and you are free to be alive here.

You are free to give, to laugh, to love and to dream //

You are free to be all you have been called to be.

*<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26729882> Social relationships and the physical determinants of longevity, Yang et al 2016

https://www.ted.com/talks/susan_pinker_the_secret_to_living_longer_may_be_your_social_life?language=en&utm_campaign=tedsread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare