

Teaching for **SOLIDARITY**

Belonging in contemporary Britain

"I shall tell you what made us what we were. We had this wonderful feeling that we were still part of the people." (Alan Ball, England squad World Cup, 1966)

Almost all human beings benefit from a sense of belonging. The source of belonging might be family, friends, community, sport, religion, school, politics, place, postcode, work or music. Reg Williams, professor of nursing and psychiatry, says people who feel connected to the world around them and bound to others, feel more healthy and valued, with a greater sense of worth. "You can have lots of social support, but unless you feel you fit in, it doesn't help."

Petra Bohnke, social scientist and researcher suggests:

"Having, Loving and Being are the three pillars that the individual's well-being relies upon: material living conditions, social relationships and support and being a part of society in terms of feeling recognized and belonging...The degree of trust citizens have in other people, in political and social institutions, as well as the perception of social divisions are important. ...The experience of poor living conditions and deprivation (i.e. access to heating, furniture, clothes, a washing machine and a meal with fish or meat) reduces satisfaction with life, happiness or a sense of belonging." *First European Quality of Life Survey: Life satisfaction, happiness and sense of belonging*, 2005 European Foundation for the impact of living and working conditions.

How do people develop a sense of membership and belonging? What is the relationship between identity, community and belonging? Some talk about belonging to a place where they feel rooted, 'It's part of my life – the river. It's one of the reasons I came back from my life in London. Because I found that by the time I reached my 30s, I realized there was something missing from my life and it was the River Towie and the Towie Valley. It's hard to explain. I belong to it and it belongs to me.' (*Open Country*, Radio 4, September 1st 2007). 'There is a sense of belonging where the docks is concerned', Abdi Sugulle a member of the Somali community who have been in Wales since the 19th century.

John Knowles' family have lived in the same North Yorkshire village for 500 years. He was born in 1912 in Horton-in-Ribblesdale and has been a farmer all his life, shepherding and droving sheep and bullocks. He remembers a time before cars, riding horses through the snow, including one winter when the drifts were so high he rode over a barn. Now living in Lowgill, Lancashire which has 16 houses where once there were only 8, he talks about his attachment to the place. "I was always glad to get back to the hills. There is clear air, independence and a sense of freedom when you get up to the hills...I've been in towns quite a lot, been twice to London - once for the coronation...What

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impressed me most was the taxi drivers going in and out of the cars. It was as busy then as it is today... I was 48 years as a church warden and got presented with a walking stick I still use...And I was 24 years a school governor and same for the parish council. In fact my father once said to me, 'Why do you do so much for other folk? You'll never get it back' ...I disagreed, you do get a lot of things back. My nickname was Lord Mayor of Lowgill. People looked up to me. I took it all in my stride I never got flustered at all.... I enjoyed that. I still go for plenty of walks but not so far now..."

It is significant how in a small country, radically different senses of belonging, priorities and lifestyles exist alongside each other.

Nick Barham spent a year travelling in the UK talking to young people in the UK aged 10 – 25, from all backgrounds and in different situations. After the murder of Charlene Ellis and Letisha Shakespeare in Birmingham on New Year's Eve 2002 and in response to that, he said 'I wanted to discover and describe a more rounded picture of what young people are up to...What they are thinking and where they think they are going...I visited festivals, clubs, skate parks, protests and shopping malls: the hub of young Britain. And of course their bedrooms, those crammed, messy centres of their personalities.' The conversations he had reveal the complicated ways of belonging and what's important, what makes them happy and angry.

'I'd originally travelled to Birmingham to speak to Beverly Thomas, mother of Charlene Ellis. On that trip I'd also sat in on a Social Services introduction to Youth Work session, and been struck by the sense of division – both between different races, and between different gangs - the young black, white and Asian trainees shared experiences... I wanted to talk to the kids here about living in such a fragmented and disconnected city, both with regard to other kids, but also with regard to Britain and the various contacts they have with its institutions – its schools, the government, and the police. One of the common criticisms of young people is their lack of respect for such organizations and the people who run them and I wanted to discover how deep-seated it is....'Birmingham is horrible,' Shayne tells me. 'Where I live it's all kind of crimey: drugs, alcoholics. It just ain't worth living here. It's all car crimes and stabbings.' With a similar matter of fact tone, Laurien tells him, 'That is natural man, I'm sorry.'...'In this day and age you can't go to the police' Laurine tells me. 'You would be called a conspirer. Once you are called a conspirer and informer, everyone is looking for you...You have to deal with it in your own way...' I ask her what she thinking of the systems and structures that are meant to be there to support and help if they have difficulties. 'They are rubbish man,' she tells me. 'You don't feel connection with them...in this society we are the government.'

(p. 12 – 17 *Disconnected – Why our kids are turning their backs on everything we thought we knew* by Nick Barham)

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While Nick Barham found disconnection, there are other young people who have found a deep sense of belonging.

Martha joined the army in 2007 when she was 23

"I used to feel I belonged anywhere in London. I never thought I could live anywhere else. Now I feel I belong to my army base and the people there. The second world war is the image of the army most people have, a man with a tash, spitfires, and all that, from war films...Other than that the army's not very visible unless something happens, like in Iraq. It gives you something to belong to if that's what you want. It's like University without the studentness. In the army you're up for longer than you want to be, shouted at more that you want to be and running faster than you want to run. But you're going through that with loads of other people. There is an instant connection. You make the best friends you'll ever make. It's partly the 'us' and 'them' thing, living, eating and working with a bunch of fairly similar people. It's a shared experience of relative hardships. Everyone has different abilities and you all rely on some people for some things and they rely on you. The class system is still strong in the army. The vast majority of officers are white middle class men from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales who've just left University. There are a few foreign students but they're just sent to do the training from other countries.

It's like these team building things they do in some businesses. It's like that but less cringeworthy and it's constant, it's professional and it actually works. It does give you quite quickly a sense of unity and belonging."

Sometimes that sense of belonging is more elusive.

Agnes

'When I'm reading things on gender I tend to feel more impassioned about it than I do when I read stuff on race and when I read about race it touches my heart much deeper and if I was to take those two key identities race and gender.. It's the race one that is constantly thrown to the forefront all the time because I live in a society where I just have to turn the news on and already within 5 minutes I belong to the 'ethnic minority' group, there's always something that reminds you that you belong to an 'ethnic minority' group. Or they might refer to people like me who were born here, as Afro-Caribbean and I'm reminded I'm part of an ethnic minority group and I think, 'At which point will you stop calling me that?'... Me and my sister always laugh about this. Once she was bed and breakfasting and she went into this tea room in the remote place where only white people live, and as soon as she went in, everyone moved their bags closer! I've had that... if I'm walking the streets and it's dusk and I'm walking

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behind an older white lady – what's the first thing she does? She grabs her bag and I feel like saying, 'Excuse me poppet I don't want your bag, not in my values, I wasn't raised that way.'

I find that amazing, so that's the most dominant one. Yet when I'm in Barbados it seems completely obvious and clear to me that I'm Barbadian because the bloodlines above me are both Barbadian yet when I'm in England I'm not, I'm English. It's a really strange thing, you kind of find yourself moving. I said to one of my closest friends here – she's a white British woman - for some reason, when I was in Barbados, she kept coming into my mind and I was aware that even though these people in Barbados are 'my people,' if something was to happen whereby she was in trouble against them I would defend her. Because even though she looks different to me...I have much more of an identity....it's really hard to explain. She's not 'from my people' (funny thing to say). I think because we've grown up together since the 1st year at University, we've really helped each other through lots of things and she knows me so much better than any of those people in Barbados ever could...She's been a consistent, close friend and very loyal and I think those qualities would override some sense of 'these are my people'. These are 'my people' but would they love me in the way she loves me?

When I'm in Barbados, even though I'm having a good time on the beach, there's a kind of, it's like someone put a knot around my heart and I think, 'I could have grown up here (in Barbados) and I wouldn't be an 'ethnic minority'. I wish I could go back and see what kind of Agnes would have come out of Barbados compared to the London Agnes. I just would have been Agnes. And I'm also very aware of the fact that I grew up in London and I was out of touch with my parents' past. My mum knows every Tom, Dick and Harry in her community in Barbados and I think I would have been a part of that. I would have been passed from pillar to post and...I wish I could have had that. It's the pain of something lost. Who else would I have been?

.....
Music and sport have always represented powerful ways of belonging and in the UK, football is many people's ultimate source of belonging:

"When I was very young I liked the colour red - it's passionate and powerful and I wanted to be a fire engine. Big, loud and it got your attention. I was also football mad; I chose Liverpool as my team, partly because of my mum's family's historical links with the city, but mainly because they play in red. A team traditionally associated with the working classes of that city, they represented the ideals of comradeship, togetherness and co-operation. Champions of ordinary people. Their motto, after the famous musical song; You'll Never Walk Alone.

I've enjoyed the highs and suffered to lows over 30 years of following Liverpool. For me, One particular highlight was the 2005 European Champions League Final against AC Milan. 0-3 down at half time, we came back to win on penalties in the game that has

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been described as 'the best final ever'. From agony to ecstasy, I shared in the sheer unadulterated joy with every other Liverpool fan on the planet. And that's what unites us all; the love for *our* team. Because that's what it is, and why it exists. For us. To feel a part of that is incredible. All differences are put aside to support the team on the pitch. There is a collective one-ness that transcends boundaries such as race, sex, religion and culture. Liverpool is a truly 'global' club.

There's something magical that happens when you wear that red shirt. You are a member of that tribe. You *belong*." (Aziz Rahman)

Discussion

The power of belonging to a sports team or a music set/gang can be overwhelming and unifying. Togetherness and often good natured rivalry of 'other' team or group can be based on shared understanding. But at what point does it lead to sectarianism and ethnocentrism? At what point do good natured rivalries become something deeper and more dangerous?

Martin Callanan was a punk and one of 12 brothers. He was a big fan of The Clash, The Jam, Siouxi and the Banshees. One day he and his friend Simon were on their way to a gig. Standing on the platform at South Harrow station, they were attacked by a group of 'rockers', for being punks. Martin was kicked in the head repeatedly, by two men in particular. Simon ran to get help and Martin was badly injured and hospitalised. His attacker was caught and jailed and Martin went on to have a fantastically success career in music production and as a DJ for fun. But the beating had triggered epilepsy and in 2007 he died of a heart attack brought on by the epilepsy.

Reg Williams and Petra Bohnke both talk about the need to belong. They argue that it is not just enjoyable, it's good for us, for our mental and emotional health. One can belong to a group or a place without *feeling* a sense of belonging. And one can feel a sense of belonging without being formally attached to a community. When you hear the word belonging, what do you think of? Who and what do you belong to?

Scholar Helen Fein has given the name "universe of obligation" to the circle of individuals and groups within a nation "towards whom obligations are owed, to whom rules apply, and whose injuries call for [amends]."¹ Who is in your universe of obligation? Who is outside of your universe of obligation? How is this idea related to belonging? Agnes, for example, refers to her white friend and how she was thinking about her when she was in Barbados. Even though Agnes feels she belongs to Barbados, she said she was aware that if her friend had problems in Barbados, she would protect her friend

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against “them.” Agnes refers to this and other examples of her sense of belonging as “moving.” Is your universe of obligation “moving” depending on your context? Do you carry a sense of belonging and responsibility to individuals or groups with you?

In Martha's reflection on her relationship to the army she says, “It gives you something to belong to if that's what you want. It's like University without the studentness. You're up for longer than you want to be, shouted at more than you want to be and running faster than you want to run. But you're going through that with loads of other people. There is an instant connection. You make the best friends you'll ever make. It's partly the 'us' and 'them' thing, living, eating and working with a bunch of fairly similar people. It's a shared experience of relative hardships. Everyone has different abilities and you all rely on some people for some things and they rely on you. The class system is still strong in the army. The vast majority of officers are white middle class men from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales who've just left University. There are a few foreign students. They're just sent to do the training from other countries.”

In this excerpt, she captures a lot about the various kinds of glue that holds her community together. Identify some of the elements here. Now reflect on one of your communities, what are some of the elements that holds your community together?