

6 November 2018

We Belong Together

The Selwyn Institute's 2018 Ageing and Spirituality Conference examined the issue of loneliness from a different perspective – namely, that people have a natural desire and vital need to belong. The event completed the 'circle' in terms of understanding the issue of loneliness in older adults (explored in the Institute's Gerontology Nursing Conference in October) and demonstrated how 'true belonging' is a spiritual practice and antidote to loneliness.

In an era when opportunities to 'connect and belong' have never been greater with the advent of the 'information age' and digital technology, the irony is that nothing can replace genuine and authentic human interaction.

The conference posed the question: Are we longing for Belonging? The answer from the different speakers who each approached the question from different spiritual or cultural perspectives and backgrounds was unequivocal – Yes, we long to 'truly' belong.

Authentically belonging

A *Mihi* and *Waiata* from Selwyn Village resident Kahu Pou, and *Karakia* from The Selwyn Foundation's Reverend Lucy Nguyen, opened proceedings and set the tone of engagement for the day. Director of the Selwyn Institute, Hilda Johnson-Bogaerts, then painted a picture of the voyage of understanding that would define this year's conference.

Echoing the words of Dr Brene Brown, an expert in the subject, who says belonging is at the heart and soul of what it means to be human, a number of key questions were posed that demanded answering.

- What are the ramifications and issues around not belonging?
- How do we lose the ability to belong?
- What does it mean to authentically belong?
- How does belonging look like within a diverse population?

End of belonging

The ultimate evidence of not belonging, irrespective of age, is suicide which is a major public health concern in many parts of the world. This includes increased suicide rates within the demographic group of older men. In New Zealand, men aged 85 and above have one of the highest suicide rates among all age groups.

The University of Auckland's Dr Gary Cheung elaborated on 'The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide' which proposes that a lack of social connectedness and perceived burdensomeness can lead to suicidal thoughts.

Over and above being a contributing factor to premature mortality, poor psychological and negative contributors to physical wellbeing are factors that are clearly exacerbating the problem. Having a spiritual practice seemed to be a protecting factor.

Despite suicide in older men being, in some quarters, something of a 'taboo' subject, delegates applauded the opportunity to have an open, honest and revealing approach to finding meaningful solutions.

Many paths, common destination

A key part of the conference focused on belonging from different spiritual and cultural perspectives. These included a cross-section of religions: Zen Buddhism (Hanya Gallagher), Islam (Imam Mohammad Saleh Almodarresi), Anglican Church (Chaplain Lucy Nguyen), and a NOLA (Non Label Spiritual) focus (Dwight Whitney).

A Tangata Whenua orientation (The Venerable Lloyd Nau Popata) was also included, along with responses from an interactive session with the delegates on insights and elements related to belonging.

Consensus from this session of the conference was that, despite there being differences in faith, the common 'human' factors relating to belonging were remarkably similar. In fact, delegates concurred that everyone was essentially on the 'same page' when it came to finding the core elements, and contributors to, this fundamental human need.

We agreed that 'true belonging' is a spiritual practice. That it has the two core elements of believing in yourself and who you are, and being able to share your most authentic self with the world. It is different from fitting in, or being part of an ideology.

It is about enabling people to show up as their true selves, and interacting with each other at that level. We are wired to be social. We are deeply motivated to stay connected with our true selves, with friends and family, with nature, with the land, with the transcendental.

Now that we know what true belonging looks and feels like, we can recognise when people we care for have that 'lonely feeling' of disconnect. Having established this in the interactive session, delegates also discussed strategies they could add to their tool-belt as spiritual care providers to facilitate 'true belonging'.

Built on belonging

When it comes to city planning and creating environments that are inclusive and encourage community, a number of cities internationally are developing city planning strategies.

Auckland is one of them, and conference delegates had the opportunity to contribute their own recommendations as to what the 'look and feel' of an engaged city might be like.

The Auckland Plan is the main document being developed, looking at long-term strategies to steer growth in a suitable direction. A fundamental part of this document is to inform, support and provide background material for the 'Belonging and Participation' outcome in the Auckland Plan 2050. Part of this involves focusing on specialist knowledge and evidence related to the themes in the Belonging and Participation outcomes.

The art of belonging

Selwyn Centre guests contributed to the conference through their 'The Art of Belonging' exhibition. This featured their authentic and creative expressions of what it means and how it feels to 'belong' when they visit Selwyn Centres (The Selwyn Foundation's network of community drop-in centres for older people, hosted in partnership with Anglican parishes). *The Art of Belonging initiative* was a collaborative project between the Selwyn Centres and Whitecliffe College of Art and Design art therapy students.

Households of faith and the final wrap-up

Bishop Ross Bay explored the basis of Christian community from the perspectives of Scripture, the Christian tradition and his own experience. His proposal is that a healthy spirituality is an essential component of creating a healthy community.

Dr Peter Huggard, the Deputy Chair of The Selwyn Foundation and Chair of the Selwyn Institute Advisory Board, then provided a final summary of the key themes of belonging and how it is part of a healthy spirituality.

The final say goes to delegates, whose feedback to date has been hugely positive:

"The sharing through interactive sessions, and all presentations were interesting, and thought provoking that Belonging is important to each and every one to be a whole happy person"

"An amazing and insightful conference"

"Highly recommend- I attend most years and find it cup filling so I can continue to give"

"Loved hearing about other faiths and cultures"

"Thoroughly enjoyable – had many 'ah ha' moments' for the area of work I'm involved in the care of older people."

"An outstanding line up of diverse perspectives, well done!!!" (Yes – three exclamation marks!)

"Keep doing as you are!"

"I really appreciate your clear messages of spirituality being a part of everyone regardless of religious faith & how we must care for all regardless."