

Belonging

© Margaret Emerson 2008

One of my T'ai Chi students told me this story. He took a solo hike on his favorite trail, which led through a redwood forest to a bluff overlooking the ocean. He stopped there and practiced the sequence of T'ai Chi. As his hands drifted downward to conclude, tears fell onto his T-shirt in big, heavy drops—"like rain," he said. Then he heard a voice: "It's okay, you belong here." Did it come from inside or outside his head? He couldn't tell. While he related this story, he kept interrupting himself to impress on me what a practical man he was—as a physician he saw human disease and suffering every day and did not consider himself a spiritual person. Yet at that moment he felt not only embraced by the universe, but "blessed." The sensation was unique—he was used to being liked and respected by grateful patients, but this went beyond that. The impulse to say thank you welled up in him.

Why did he need to be reassured that he belonged? He has a loving family, is well rooted in the small and close-knit community where he has lived for decades. Why would he be so relieved to be given this message? Maybe he had become too focused on too small a world and that world was, at the time, prickly and worrisome and alienating. T'ai Chi on the bluff opened the door and ushered him into something much bigger, more welcoming and nourishing. He was given a glimpse of a transcendent universe—just when he needed to know it was there and he was part of it.

I used to think in terms of humans when I thought about belonging. But as I've grown, I've come to see that my own species is just a part of what I belong with and only one of many resources that feed me and keep me alive.

I recognized T'ai Chi as one of those resources as soon as I took my first class in 1979. At the time, I wanted to find a way to meditate as part of a healing program. Because I'd always been so physically active, I thought I'd need to combine movement with it. It turned out that I took to sitting meditation equally well—both practices welcomed me unreservedly. They are and always have been fun—effortless effort—while I pursue them with the utmost respect and diligence. When I'm practicing T'ai Chi or meditating, I'm in my element; they're homes where I know I belong.

I've wanted to be a writer since I was a little girl. Words and the challenge of using them for authentic expression of the deepest, most complex impulses have always intrigued me. I love to write—the way a jigsaw puzzle fanatic loves to solve jigsaw puzzles. I know that gradually, piece by piece, the words and sentences will fall into place and I'll find a way to say what I'm experiencing, thinking, and feeling.

Clay was my three-dimensional medium for the twenty-four years that I made my living as a potter. Now it's big bottles of vivid tempera that I smear around on kids' finger painting paper. (I can still get my hands dirty!) I belong with these mediums—words, clay, and liquid color. They're the means, chosen by instinct, that connect my inner world with the world outside me. They make possible the absolutely necessary release and expression of a very busy interior.

I've discovered that I also belong with certain landscapes and climates, with particular animals and trees, with water, with one of the four seasons, with a few people, and with myself.

I live on the coast of northern California for good reasons. I like cool, wet, and green. The population is relatively sparse and the vibrational level commensurately low. It's fertile ground for artists and eccentrics, allowing plenty of latitude in being and doing. From here I found my sacred place, Crater Lake in southern Oregon.

I go there every year—three times if I'm lucky. Each time it reveals more of itself. Even while driving to Crater Lake I feel a euphoric relief—I can think whatever I want to think, be whatever I want to be, spread out infinitely. From the caldera wall and from the shore, I spend hours staring at the mystifying, never-seen-anywhere-else blue, taking it into my body, expanding with its expansiveness. Despite the water's 55-degree temperature, I'm compelled to submerge myself and open my eyes to see the blue while inside it. Last year's souvenir was a piece of buff-colored pumice I swam out to and plucked from the surface.

The shallow edges of the lake glow with a translucent turquoise. A deepening blue veil gradually conceals cooled volcanic contours. Walking up or down the trail to the shore, I stop frequently to let my heart be pierced again and again by the sharp contrast of green whitebark pines against ultrablue water. This great bowl of yin is a salve, a balancing, a match for the heat and fury that formed the jagged cliffs, cindery slopes, and grey and black boulders that surround it. Time has softened some of the landscape, adding intermittent forests, green meadows, and delicate wildflowers.

I am stunned, I am besotted by Crater Lake. Year after year, it never ceases to thrill me. There is no "alone" there. After one of my visits, I had this dream: I was standing on the trail that switchbacks to the top of Mt. Scott, a peak

overlooking the lake. I was dressed in a full-length white wedding gown, facing the lake, arms hanging at my sides. My palms turned outward to better receive the blue. That was all—that vision. Evidently I'm the Bride of Crater Lake.

This is not my native environment. It's nothing like the rounded, jungly mountains of western Pennsylvania where I was born and raised. Yet it feels utterly familiar. It's my metaphysical counterpart in physical form. I seem to be growing each year to meet it, gradually becoming big enough for it, reaching upward to be its peer, as I evolve toward my own balance and wholeness.

I resonate with water in many forms. I'm a swimmer, a bath taker, a former sailor, and now a kayaker. Water heals me, it's my therapy. I feel *safe* on and in water.

And there are trees. During the three years that I lived in Portland, my closest relationship was with the hundred-foot fir tree that I faced so many mornings to do T'ai Chi. Over and over again I admired its easy straightness, its luxurious green branches, the light on its surface, the darkening shade of its mysterious and oddly magnetic interior. I visited it just before I left—sat about twenty feet away and looked at it. The words "Will you miss me? Will you miss me?" repeated like a round in my head. They seemed to be coming from the tree.

There's a group of three fir trees in a corner of Portland's Rose Garden. I'd stand under them, place my palms on them one by one, and look up into their blue-green boughs. I felt a running pulse inside each, but one hummed stronger than the others. Morning after morning, I'd wrap my arms around it, press my heart against it, and rest my temple on its feathery bark. I learned from the trees that they are just as glad to have me there as I am to be there. They draw on me as I draw on them.

I feel compelled to be in the redwood forest at night. Daytime is nice, but not nearly as fulfilling. I camp by myself. I have the same feeling that I've had with a lover—I want time to stop and the night to last forever. I look up to see trees silhouetted against a dark sky and fat stars moving in and out of their limbs.

The two animal partners in my life thus far came to me as strays. Friends and I were riding bikes on a rural road. When we stopped at the top of a hill to rest, two tiny kittens pranced up to us meowing importunately. They were both brown tabbies; the insides of their ears lightly covered with fine hairs. One was round with a truncated corkscrew tail that amounted to a bushy plume. The other was long and thin with concentric stripes and a squirrel tail. Everyone else already had cats, so I was informed that these were mine. I balked. I love cats, but I'm also allergic to them. I suggested taking just one. That embarrassingly stingy idea was immediately shot down. I put the round one—eventually named Piglet—into my bike bag. Someone else put the long one—Tigger—into hers.

When I got home, I discovered they were so small that I could hold them both in one hand and pet them with the other. They slept with me, kneading my scalp with their needle claws and sucking on my head. I threw them down to the foot of the bed; they marched back. We did this over and over again until I gave up. I woke with a sore, wet head. For almost two months my eyes and palate itched and my nose ran—and then I got over it.

The night before we went on that bike trip, I dreamt that I had a baby, but the baby was a cat. She was wearing a flouncy yellow dress. As I lifted her joyfully in my arms I could feel her little spiral tail—Piglet’s distinctive tail—in the palm of my left hand.

The fact is I may have loved those cats more profoundly, more enduringly than I have ever loved any living being. They delighted, amused, angered, and entertained me. They reciprocated the attention and affection I lavished on them. At the end of every day when I walked up the driveway to my home, I waved to Tigger who was perched in the windowsill looking out. One day she raised her paw—a little hesitatingly, as if she weren’t quite sure what she was doing. She was waving back.

When I left the area for five years—two in South Korea and three in Portland—friends took in both cats. I retrieved Piglet when I returned to Humboldt County. They had given Tigger to an elderly woman in a nursing home because the cat was so depressed when their new baby arrived that she retreated under the bed and stayed there. Tigger’s new owner doted on her and named her Lacy Belle. I left my phone number with the woman and the staff at the nursing home in case Tigger ever needed a home.

It made perfect sense that Piglet and I would be together again. It was her pig tail that I felt in the dream when I held her in my arms as if she were my child. She remembered me and we quickly fell into our old routines. I combed her daily, played with her, petted her, and talked to her. She talked back with various voices; bossed me around with her chirpy greetings, inflected questions, and irritable, impatient complaints and demands. Piglet acted like she owned the place. Her idea of entertainment was to see me jump, hear my startled mutterings when she pounced onto my chest from the windowsill at night. After standing watch at the cool window or on the corner of the bed for a while, she brushed her whiskers against my face to wake me. I dutifully opened the covers so she could burrow in against my chest where she purred, kneaded my arm, and warmed up. She was small and round and kittenish, even at the age of nineteen. Her wide-open golden eyes and delicate pointy ears made her look like an owl. Her medium-length, mottled brown fur was soft as a bunny’s. She cried when I cried.

After four years of just Piglet and me together, I was chatting with one of my long-time T’ai Chi students before a class in the park. I thought of asking Bob

again about his son who had just come back from fighting in Iraq, but chose a more general question instead—“What’s new?” He told me he and his wife, Ann, who are in the business of rescuing animals, had taken in an exotic chicken from a zoo that was downsizing its collection of fowl. Also, Ann had dropped by the animal shelter and seen a cat that had just arrived the day before. She was alluringly beautiful but looked very depressed and dangerously thin. Ann couldn’t resist; she took her home. Bob said the cat was seventeen and its elderly owner, who had been living in a nursing home, had died. The family didn’t want to have the animal euthanized, so they dropped her off at the shelter. Her name was Lacy Belle. That sealed it—the description and age alone had me vibrating. The next day I drove to Bob and Ann’s home in the small Victorian town of Ferndale (where I was living when I first acquired Tigger and Piglet) and reclaimed her. I may have imagined it, but Tigger seemed to recognize me. She came out from behind the bathtub to greet me and let me pick her up. It seemed right that Bob would be the means of my reuniting with Tigger. He often expresses gratitude for my teaching and lets me know the many ways in which T’ai Chi contributes to his life. Returning Tigger to me was a wonderful way to thank me, although Bob’s presence in the class is thanks enough.

Tigger was fur and bones and too weak to jump up onto my lap at first. But she quickly gained weight and strength and her familiar feistiness. I couldn’t tell if Tigger and Piglet recognized each other. But Piglet made it clear that she resented the interloper. She growled when Tigger approached and took to sleeping in the meditation room. Tigger had commandeered the bed—first by hiding under it, then by spending most of the day on it. She became my nighttime companion. Piglet was on me at every opportunity during the day. Gradually, Piglet became more tolerant, but she never returned to my bed—a huge deprivation for both of us.

I suspect my taking in Tigger hastened Piglet’s death. Tigger had always bullied her littermate and Piglet blossomed as an only cat. Her idyllic world was shattered and she was mad at both of us. Yet I knew Tigger belonged with me and I had to give her a home. I couldn’t imagine shutting her out of my bedroom and isolating her at night when she was so weak and ill—I wasn’t even sure she was going to survive. About six months after Tigger’s arrival, Piglet died of acute renal failure. She was nineteen.

Tigger’s reappearance in my life seemed auspicious. While I was living in Portland and before I was reunited with either of my cats, I contracted type-1 diabetes. At the time I questioned whether I should still be alive. An essential function of my body had stopped and if not for the existence of injectable insulin, I would have died. Tigger was like a pass I had thrown to myself—over time. I saw her as physical evidence that I was supposed to be here postdiabetes. I had to be here to catch Tigger, and she had to be here to catch me, post-Piglet.

Tigger died last year at the age of twenty-one. I mourn both of them, but—just as in the dream and on a deeply intuitive level—Piglet was my child, my true love. On a camping trip in the redwoods, I dreamt that Piglet was purring inside the sleeping bag with me while Abe, a friend's Labrador-golden retriever that I had an uncanny closeness with back in Illinois, was lying outside the tent. The animals that I belong with and that belong with me were providing comfort and protection.

It's curious that, although I've had very little actual experience with horses and am easily intimidated by them, they figure so prominently in my inner life. A vision during meditation provided a dramatic first glimpse of the being that was simultaneously horse, woman, and ancestor. The head of a woman hurtled toward me, light brown hair rippling behind. She was sheer power—overwhelming and irresistible. I was flooded with a sense of familiarity: *I know this woman*. Then she vanished and in her place these words were typed out in capital letters as if by my old Smith-Corona: IPONA • IPECHTA.

I researched the words. Ipona (or Epona) was a Celtic goddess who was worshipped wherever the Celts lived—from the British Isles to Eastern Europe. She could appear as a white horse or as a woman riding a white horse: she could appear as a black horse or as a woman riding a black horse. If she came to you in her white incarnation, she rewarded you for your good deeds. If she came in her black incarnation, she punished you for your mistakes. I saw both her names—both sides of her, yin and yang. For centuries British kings were crowned while standing beside a white horse. The ceremony was a symbolic marriage between the two. The white horse—Ipona—brought plentiful harvests and prosperity to the realm. Seeing her, feeling this archetype inhabit me, made me feel that I have a place in the ancient continuum.

I often dream of horses. In one I'm searching for a place to swim, looking for water that's clear enough and deep enough. A stream that lies beneath my feet and even the ocean just beyond are shallow and clogged with algae. But out of a tide pool among the rocks emerges an enormous translucent horse made of the purest water. Its powerful body and well-defined muscles glisten. In a slow spiraling motion, it turns first its head, then its whole body to face me. Smoothly, gracefully, the horse morphs into a woman. I'm struck by the fact that this magnificent double being came from such a meager source. I feel a sense of power and intimacy.

Weeks before the autumn equinox, I begin to feel the rising energy, the sense of shimmering anticipation that inhabits me well into winter. Fall is my time of year. I like it for precisely the reason that so many people I know don't like it—it's a turning inward time, a cooling of the sun, a quieting, a slowing. As a naturally contemplative person, this season most closely parallels my personality. The oblique light heightens all the colors; there is a unique clarity to the air. Fall is a stimulant, a mood elevator, a harmonious companion, and a cozy haven.

As for human companions, some of my best friends are scattered across the country and across time; some are around me now. Looking back on my life, it's interesting how a few people maintain a presence within me—growing larger and more vivid over time—whether I have contact with them or not. Many others (including two husbands) have evaporated except for the thinnest intellectual memory.

I resonate with some people as I do with some trees, some animals, some places. Even when outer layers—personalities and lifestyles—are ill-suited, even repellant, there can exist an undeniable, enduring inner connection. It's confusing. The friendship may fail but the connection remains. (People who believe in past lives like to jump in here.)

Good friends are rare and I value them. They're stimulating and calming at the same time. They offer a chance to express, vent, be heard, and listen to myself. They bring balance into my life by helping me to step back from the vortex of my strivings and the heat of my conflicts. They help me laugh at myself. I feel very lucky when I have even one person in my daily life who generally shares my perceptions, someone I don't have to explain everything to. I don't always have to discuss my life with them—I'm nourished by hearing about their lives and insights. It's enough that they're real people, genuine and willing to be candid, striving to know themselves just as I'm striving to know myself. Energy flows both ways between us.

As I mature, I'm less needy—more self-possessed and less other-possessed. Yet I still need friends. There's a difference between need and needy. I gain from the presence of good friends and I feel the hollow when they're not there, but I don't feel bereft. Because so many relationships are glued together by reciprocal neediness, this reduces the number of people who will be comfortable as my friends—there are fewer places for them to get a foothold in me. Plenty of friendships are just interlocking neuroses—different but complementary interlocking neuroses. As long as both people stay equally neurotic, the relationship can hold.

One of the most important things I can do for myself is to seek the company of people who mean well toward me and avoid those who need to undermine me. No matter how well I understand why destructive people act the way they do, the fact remains that they have a destructive effect. Twice I've entered into serious relationships with men, thinking I was responsible for them and strong enough to withstand their chipping away at me. I thought that being in a loving relationship with someone they could trust would gradually make them more secure and thus more loving. And I'd reap the benefit. Of course they didn't change and I was damaged. The second time I made that mistake, I made it much faster—the whole process took less than a year. I'm hoping I'm whole enough to be done with that one.

Marriage can be an attempt at belonging insurance. Plenty of couples stay together without love, respect, or harmony between them. Sometimes the outward structure, the *fact* of the marriage is what really matters. How they're seen by others (not single and unwanted) trumps the reality of their lives. Maybe more than anything else, the often warranted conviction that they can't survive alone holds them in place. Later in life, as stronger, more developed people, some will have the possibility of building genuine, substantive lives—together or apart.

People also grasp at technology to make them feel connected. I see the ubiquitousness of the cell phone as a symptom of loneliness. Who are they talking to on their walk, in the store, in the car? Don't people ever *want* to be alone and unreachable? I do. And my friends aren't interested in my every thought or movement on a minute-to-minute basis; they have their own lives. Are people trying to demonstrate to themselves and others that even though they are at this moment alone, they do indeed have friends elsewhere? I'm guessing that again, the appearance to outsiders is paramount. In this American culture, being alone (and in a state of quiet) is embarrassing, an indictment of our personalities, a suggestion that we're unattractive and unpopular. Anything rather than be seen as not belonging.

The frenzy of E-mail, text messaging, and call waiting are similar phenomena. Call waiting says we can't bear to take the chance of missing or even just postponing contact. It tells one person that another is vying for our time—we are in demand—and we may choose to talk with that other person. I confess to feeling a bit smug when I'm the chosen one, but that's dampened by the uneasy feeling that the choice may have hurt someone else. And when I'm discarded, I feel just that. Despite all the new technology to make communication easier, a recent Duke University study reports that the number of Americans who say they have no one to talk to about deeply personal subjects has nearly tripled since 1985.

I worry that people who are always plugged into something outside themselves will never learn to connect with what's inside. They will never build inner resources. And in their weakness and fear, the lure of shallow, demeaning human connections will be irresistible—to the exclusion of the wealth of other natural resources that surround them. They will be so undernourished that their bodies, minds, and spirits will be feeble and prey to every kind of illness.

Only strong people can be kind. So not only will we be unable to take care of ourselves, we also won't be able to care for others. Weak people are like the crabs in the bucket—stretching their claws upward to pull an escaping crab back down into captivity with them. That old adage that you find out who your friends are when you're down isn't always true. It can be easy to act solicitous toward someone who's in trouble—it puts me into a one-up position. An equally important test of friendship is supporting someone who is striving toward

something worthwhile and making progress. I have to be a big, secure person to do that—confident that I belong inside myself and on the planet.

Friends come and go. I move; they move; we fight; we reconcile. I've lived in states of both feast and famine. But there's an overall trend and it's a paradox: I find myself growing more loving toward people at the same time that I'm wanting to spend more time alone. As I grow to understand myself better, I understand others better too, and feel more akin to them. So I'm more interested, more patient, more motivated to contribute something positive to the people I encounter. But most of my pursuits are solitary. By now it's evident that following my own path leads me away from most people, at least on an intimate level. I'm becoming more formed and convoluted and I'm unwilling to override my own characteristics in order to conform to someone else's shape. The chances that a person will conform to mine are naturally decreasing. I know that not everyone is made the way I am; some are naturally more people-oriented and more social, but for me, my chosen singleness is a means to unfettered growth.

Now and then, while practicing T'ai Chi, I get a taste of what I think of as the ultimate belonging. The movement slows down so much that I wonder if it will stop altogether. That's when I become full of some unexpected charge and a silent, suspended stillness overtakes me. Simultaneously there's a sense of incredible speed. I've come up with two ways of putting this into words—and they seem to be exact opposites. One is that I feel as if I'm being suctioned out of my ordinary place and time and flung into something else—an existence too big for the constraints of place and time. Another is that a gate opens and a fantastic raw energy gushes in and overwhelms me, blotting out everything else. I vanish. I'm rubbery moving in and out of these two versions of the same thing. The swinging door may open and close repeatedly during the sequence. Not only is all this beyond words, it's beyond normal sensation as well. The thrilling feeling comes afterward, when I return and realize I've been away. I watch for and welcome this, but I can't tell it when to come. I'm curious to see where it might take me. It lets me know that there is no difference between me and all that's not me.

The man who did T'ai Chi overlooking the ocean needed blunt reassurance that he belonged here because he wasn't sure that he did. Despite all his connections to the human community, he must have felt (temporarily at least, and on a subconscious level) like an outsider. My own gut response to the world of humans can too often be summed up as sadness and confusion. I can explain the greed, the selfishness, and the envy that make us cruel. I see them in myself. But I'm still blindsided again and again by their prevalence and ferocity. I'm not always sure I have the capacity to cope.

Now it's a real possibility that our flaws may indeed be fatal—to ourselves and to the environment as we know it and depend on it. The question is will we grow up in time to be credible partners for each other and for nature so that we

can live in mutually assured survival. Maybe the catastrophe of global warming will be the catalyst for a leap forward in human evolution. If we're to be strong enough to achieve this transformation, each of us will have to find our own physical and spiritual homes and root ourselves in that fertile ground. If we can nurture ourselves into health, we will naturally do the same for the planet. We will have to recognize and draw on all the things that we belong with—not just other human beings but meaningful work, art, animals, and nature as well. We must be fed by them and feed them in turn.