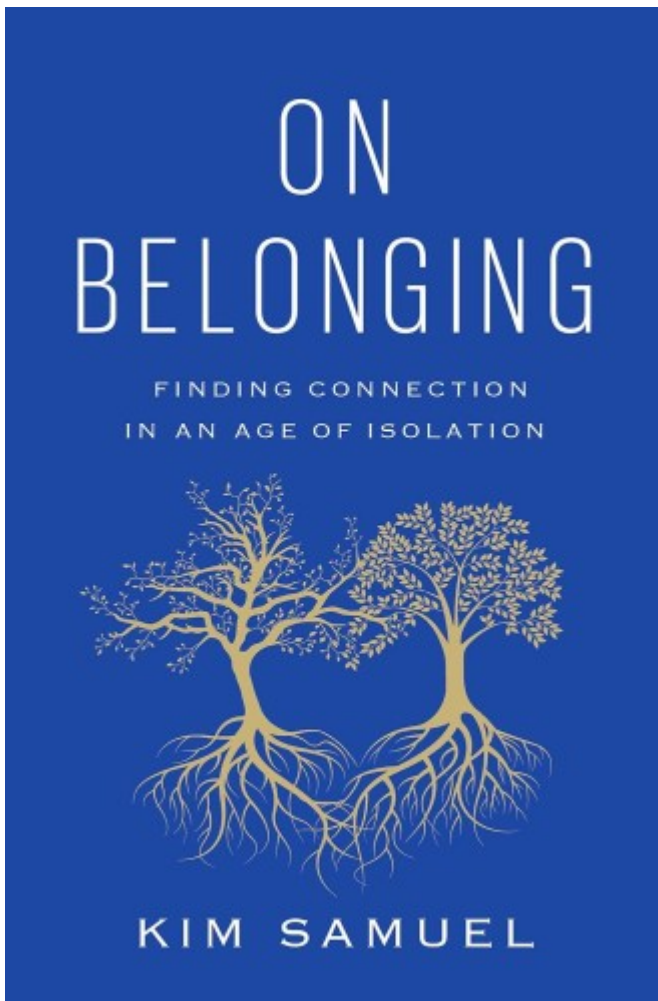


In an age of isolation, what does it mean to belong?

Educator and activist Kim Samuel calls readers to recognize the gift (and necessity) of one another.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [August 2024](#) issue  
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## In Review



### **On Belonging**

Finding Connection in an Age of Isolation

By Kim Samuel

Abrams

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Kim Samuel passionately advances two linked convictions, convictions I share: that as the world continues its quest to overcome limitation, it meanwhile only exacerbates its real predicament, which is isolation; and that in cherishing the gift of one another, for which her term is belonging, lies the secret of human salvation. Her book is a compelling exploration of this argument and an urgent call to change the priorities of the human project, lest isolation engulf us all.

She articulates her thesis elegantly:

In a time of unprecedented connectivity, people are increasingly alienated from meaningful work, a sense of community, connection to land and nature, a sense of *mattering* with respect to political and economic institutions, and—ultimately—a sense of being part of a greater whole. The result of all this isolation is anxiety, depression, violence, othering and environmental degradation on a global scale.

Aside from occasional diversions into statistical findings and social analysis, the work is largely a concatenation of narratives of those who have faced the sharp end of these challenges, as well as a parade of those who have made a life's project out of addressing them through initiatives dedicated to belonging.

The range of illustrious mentors, friends, and exemplars reads like a global awards ceremony for the forces for good. The runway of nonprofit glitterati gets a little distracting (Nelson Mandela, Wendell Berry, Paul Farmer, Graça Machel—they're all here), but the dozens of diverse narratives are nonetheless winsome, energizing, and compelling. One leader after another emerges from daunting childhood adversity or violent social exclusion and uses their own experience and wisdom to motivate, facilitate, and organize others into better futures. The chapters function less like a cumulative argument and more like a broad survey, encompassing so many contexts and understandings that the notion of belonging is stretched far and wide.

The author is alert to the apt quotation. She paraphrases an observation from Rabindranath Tagore in this way: "Take us away from our natural surroundings, from the fullness of our communal life, with all its living associations of beauty and love and social obligations, and you will be able to turn us into so many fragments of a machine." *On Belonging* is a plea to stop seeking technological fixes that bypass relationships and instead to recognize the gift (and necessity) of one another. Samuel reveals the motivating heart of her quest: the failure of the Canadian health insurance system to offer options to her father when in later life he emerged from a three-month coma. This brought to her mind the image of "a person sitting all alone at the bottom of a well," which represents for her the deprivation of connectedness, the loss of dignity and agency, and the loneliness of growing old "in a world that gives up on you while you're still here."

Samuel is furious that a vast swathe of people are excluded from belonging through no agency of their own: those whose birth was never registered; who do not have shelter, clean water, or food; who are not allowed to go to school; who are forced migrants or asylum seekers; or who are persecuted because of their faith, ethnicity, gender, disability, or age. Intriguingly, the words *justice* and *inclusion* are almost absent from the book. Eschewing these ubiquitous terms gives the volume a welcome freshness and vitality.

The most telling chapter, entitled "The Shadow Side of Belonging," explains what leads people into gangs and how someone can become a child soldier or political extremist. When appreciation, worthiness, love, and compassion are missing, Samuel argues, iron discipline can turn us into monsters. I found myself recalling how Nazism gave so many Germans a profound sense of belonging that was nonetheless malign.

This rich and fertile study raises several questions. Some are philosophical. Is belonging in inherent tension with individual identity? Samuel generally goes along with the contemporary conviction that the journey to self-discovery through exploring and naming identity is an unqualified good, but several times I wondered whether belonging entails precisely the setting aside of such a quest in order to give oneself to a collective sense of story and purpose. Can there truly be a belonging that embraces all universally, or is belonging intrinsically about locating oneself or being claimed by one location, group, or ideal to the exclusion of others?

Other questions are more practical. Is belonging incompatible with economic growth, or is Samuel's emphasis on belonging an indication that economic growth is no longer a helpful indicator of human flourishing? Can belonging be measured? The author is clearly influenced by the thinking of Amartya Sen and the groundbreaking work of the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative in its project of evaluating up to 33 indicators of poverty. Can a comparable index be helpfully applied to belonging? Or is there something inherently subjective about belonging that resists any attempt to establish objective criteria? As I considered Samuel's proposals alongside her extensive and illuminating examples, I found myself struck more by the diversity of people's circumstances and the idiosyncratic nature of the belonging they found than by common characteristics.

My final question regards Samuel's argument for what she calls "the right to belong." She understands rights in general as naming a social compact in which the strong shield the weak and the able protect the vulnerable. While she somewhat qualifies her case by noting that belonging is already embedded in existing rights to assembly or to avoid discrimination, I was not convinced by this part of her argument.

To me, the language of belonging dwells in the subjective world of covenant rather than the objective world of contract. Belonging is not something one can confer on another. All one can do is create healthy circumstances in which another can find their own sense of belonging and foster habits by which that belonging can become a blessing to others rather than a collective form of isolation. To establish belonging as a right empties it of all that makes it a good.

Setting the notion of rights aside, Samuel offers us a searing lament, a dynamic festival, and an inspiring paean of what it means to belong, particularly in the face of adversity. While it wears its faith commitments lightly, it seems clear to me that what the author describes as belonging is more or less what Christians with a socially formed theological imagination call salvation.