

# Belonging From the Inside Out with Meg McKelvie

**Meg McKelvie:** [00:00:00]When you find this sense of your natural goodness, when you, when you connect with pure awareness, when you connect with.

Something larger than yourself. When you connect with your natural, your birthright to belong, right? You actually don't have to determine whether you're good enough or not. You actually can step over that dilemma and recognize that actually you are both, you are both good enough and not good enough. You are both beautiful and unattractive.

You are both, you are all of those things, right?

**Debbie Sorensen:** That was Dr. Meg McKelvie on psychologists off the clock.

**Diana Hill:** We are four clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work and health.

[00:01:00] **Debbie Sorensen:** I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in mile high Denver, Colorado, and coauthor of ACT Daily Journal

**Diana Hill:** I'm Dr. Diana Hill coauthor with Debbie on ACT Daily Journal, and practicing in seaside Santa Barbara, California.

**Yael Schonbrun:** From coast to coast, I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist and assistant professor at Brown University.

**Jill Stoddard:** And from sunny San Diego, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard author of Be Mighty and The Big Book of ACT Metaphors.

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**Debbie Sorensen:** Hi, this is Debbie and I'm here with Diana today to introduce an episode with our mutual dear friend, Dr. Meg McKelvie, who is talking to us today about belonging from both the outside in and the inside out. Um, Diana, I wonder what are your thoughts about the episode today?

**Diana Hill:** well, I'm completely biased, but I am in [00:03:00] love with this episode, Debbie. And I feel like. So of this airplane that we've been, you know, this is our hundred and 99th episode for almost five years of doing the podcast and the seeds of this podcast really began with, with Meg and having her come on, feels really auspicious and perfect.

And it's like, we've been circling around this concept of belonging, like an airplane circling. And I feel like Meg just landed it. Like she landed the plane with her wisdom and the integration of, uh, embodiment and. Uh, contemplative wisdom, her own life experience. And, uh, and then also just the sweetness of the two of you as friends talking about belonging.

And this topic for me is a really sore spot is one of the places that I struggle with. And I think many of our listeners that will listen, and many of our clients that we work with also find it as a sore spot. So there's [00:04:00] often for many of us, this universal feeling of not belonging. And I really appreciated what Meg.

Had to say about that.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I agree. We've been talking about having Meg on for forever. We both have, and so it's really delightful to have her here and I think. That this is such a human universal thing that I think we can all, if we really dig deep enough contact times in our life, when we felt a lack of belonging or we've struggled with belonging and just how very painful that is.

And so I love that she's naming it and putting it out there in this way, because it helps. I think it really just helps people to be aware of it.

**Diana Hill:** And I think what's interesting is that from my own self study and also working with clients, what I've noticed is that when we don't feel like we belong, we can often engage in behaviors that. Lead us to feel less like we belong, which is really, you know, it's really interesting whether it's, um, as Meg talked about sort of with [00:05:00] competition, like how she withdraws or how people can withdraw from competition, but also it can be, at least for me, it can be going into striving mode or doing more to try and belong.

And sometimes that can be really off-putting for people. It's almost like an experiential avoidance that when that belonging, as Meg describes that hunger, that. We'll show up across our lifespan over and over again, that hunger to belong shows up. Sometimes we engage in patterns of avoidance that exacerbate it and make it a lot worse.

**Debbie Sorensen:** right. They backfire, we're really attempting to either seek belonging or to fill that void. But the things that we do make it worse, I just made a quick list of a few of the things that I see. I think, especially in my clinical work, you know, sometimes people. They get, they seek reassurance, they get a little needy, they might get defensive or blaming, or really people pleasing.

They might even just [00:06:00] isolate or start arguing or using sarcasm. I mean, there's so many different versions of this. And I think those are just a few that came to mind, but, you know, listeners, we could probably all think about, you know, when I'm feeling that yearning to belong, when I'm feeling like I'm.

Disconnected, you know, do I ever get into some patterns that are less helpful because certainly I'm sure we all do from time to time.

you know, was it, I just, it reminds me actually of something Diana that you've wrote in our book about a sea urchin who can be a little prickly on the outside, but then there's some tender spot on the inside.

**Diana Hill:** And the sea anemones that when they get their tender on the outside and when they get poked, they. Close up to protect their tenderness. And I think those are the ways in which we often respond. We either get prickly or we close up because there is something there's something tender and vulnerable inside of all of us.

And um, ultimately belonging as is wearing that tenderness [00:07:00] on the outside

**Debbie Sorensen:** right. Wearing that tenderness on the outside, acknowledging that tenderness and, and also letting other people get past the prickles a little bit.

**Diana Hill:** One of the things that I really appreciated Meg talking about is sort of this sometimes factor that sometimes we aren't so easy to love, or sometimes we aren't so likable and that, that actually isn't what belonging is about. That belonging is a bigger stance of making space for all of you and accepting.

Really in an embodied way, just who you are at a core level and how she traces that back to even just when we are, when we're babies and when we're born, that's there. My partner will often say that. Every puppy is cute, but not every newborn is cute, but to the mother, I think every newborn is divine and being able to turn towards ourselves with those same eyes that even when we're not being so cute or our [00:08:00] lives don't look so cute that that we can turn towards ourselves with the feeling of, of you belong.

For both Debbie and I, this episode is a personal one because Meg has had such a big influence on our lives on this podcast, the sort of behind the scenes of a lot of the ideas that we percolate. And we're just really excited to share it with all of you and share her teachings.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. And I'd like to just add really quickly that Megan, I will be doing an experiential workshop together on belonging from the inside, out at the ACBS conference.

June 24 through 27th, it's virtual. It's a big act conference for mental health professionals. So if you're planning to be at the conference, we'd love to see you at our workshop.

And also anyone who's listening can find some resources, including a meditation by Meg and some information about her writing groups at her website, which is [drmegmckelvie.com](http://drmegmckelvie.com). [00:09:00]

Dr. Meg McKelvie is a therapist, consultant and trainer specializing in acceptance and commitment therapy and a co-founder of impact psychology, Colorado. She earned her PhD in clinical psychology from the university of Colorado at Boulder, prior to her work in private practice.

She was a psychologist in the family program at the Rocky mountain VA medical center, and she served as a nationally recognized trainer and consultant in cognitive processing therapy for trauma in the VA VA healthcare system, she's currently a trainer and consultant for MEND and a founding member of MEND allies.

She's committed to increasing social justice in the field of mental health and passionate about using writing as a tool to evoke act processes. Meg is also my colleague and a very, very dear friend of mine. And I have to say to start the conversation that , some of the conversations I've had with Meg over the years have really changed my life.

And I'm so happy to have Meg come on the podcast. Finally, Meg, we've been talking about doing this for a long [00:10:00] time. Welcome.

**Meg McKelvie:** Yeah, so we have, thank you for having me. I really glad to be here.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Well, I'm glad you're here because I think what we wanted to do was share some of these conversations and ideas with others, I just wanted to say that for me, the challenge as we were preparing for today was to think, how do I distill, you know, some of these words of wisdom from Meg and some of these really powerful nuggets of ideas that we've had together and that we've shared into something that's coherent for other people to listen to.

**Meg McKelvie:** Yes, it's the, truly the psychologist off the clock. We are truly the psychologist off the clock. These are our conversations.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yes. And they, you know, you're the common link between me and Diana Hill and Rae Littlewood who got this off the ground in the first place. And I think that, you know, this true in many ways, this podcast was truly inspired by some of the conversations we've had.

So deep gratitude to you, Meg, I'm really happy to have you here to share [00:11:00] some of your ideas,

**Meg McKelvie:** Thank you. Thank you.

well I'll just also say that these conversations have been life-changing for me too. And that there's, that are that some of what is so beautiful about our relationship and our conversations is that there's so much similarity, but there's also a real yin and yang between the two of us that is really juicy.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Well, and I think we wanted to make it clear that we are. Both a work in progress and that we bring some of our words of wisdom here with some humility.

**Meg McKelvie:** so, yeah, so yeah, I mean, we're going to be talking about belonging and, um, I just really liked to make it clear that, that, that this is all in process. This is all sort of this stuff that I have learned, and I am humbly bringing it. Um, and with the hope that [00:12:00] other people can benefit and it's, you know, it's, it's so many things that I've learned from so many different teachers and, um, I have so much gratitude for the teachers in my life.

, Dr. Robert Unger and, um, and Annette Knopp, two of my most dear teachers and many, many others. Um, and so this is really a, um, humble process of just sharing some of this stuff that I'm excited about.

**Debbie Sorensen:** . we're framing the conversation around belonging, and this is something that I think is. Essential to us as humans. In fact, Steve Hayes, who is one of the co-founders of the act in his book, a liberated mind.

He uses the phrase that belonging is a birthright and Meg. I was just wondering, could you start us off by telling us what is belonging and why is it so crucial to us humans?

**Meg McKelvie:** Um, so after I read Steve Hayes's book, I became sort of obsessed [00:13:00] with belonging. There's a chapter in his book about it and the yearning to belong. And, um, so belonging is really to be seen, known, and loved. And the part that I. Want to add to that is also that it's often a wordless experience. It's not necessarily, um, just a cognitive experience.

Um, so the way that I think about belonging, um, is that it's that moment when a child is born and it's held to the breast to the mother's breast, um, that's sort of how I think about as there's no greater belonging than that when we, when we come into the world and when we come out of the womb, um, because we're born and we don't yet know our separateness, we don't yet have the cognitive capacity to know that we are actually separate from our mother or our parent.

Um, and in [00:14:00] that moment, we are loved and we belong and it doesn't matter. Um, if we're smart or beautiful, Or special in any way. Um, we belong. And my hope is that we help people to find, find their way back to this experience, this experience of belonging, again, as adults, um, sort of helping people find their way home because belonging is already here.

Um, and actually there's a, there's a quote, um, that I love by John O'Donohue, who's, uh, who was a, um, beautiful Irish poet. And he says, uh, perhaps your hunger to belong is always active and intense because you belonged so totally before you came here, this hunger to belong is the echo and reverberation of your invisible heritage.

You are from somewhere else. You were where you were known, embraced and [00:15:00] sheltered. So. We all deserve love and belonging. It doesn't matter, uh, sort of our achievements or our characteristics. And that's what I w I want to help people turn back towards. And, um, and it actually, you know, it, it really relates to this social justice piece.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Do you want to tell us more about that Meg? What's the relationship there?

**Meg McKelvie:** yeah, so, um, one of the first barriers to belonging, and we'll talk more about some of the barriers to belonging, but one of the first barriers to belonging is outside of ourselves. Um, you know, this issue that has become so deeply. Exposed in this last year is this pandemic of racism in addition to the pandemic of COVID and, um, [00:16:00] things like racism and really othering, you know, which is like a prejudice where, um, based on somebody's group, um, um, there's this oppression, how do people who are experiencing direct oppression?

How are people who are people of color who are witnessing the neck on the knee of George Floyd? How are they experiencing belonging in this culture? And I think that that was really the inspiration of, you know, this, this sort of obsession I have with this new, that you're learning about this yearning to belong, you know, seeing that and just like having this moment of just true horror around yeah.

How that impacts people's belonging sense of belonging. So, um, and when you know, it, it's this, you know, I think that when George Floyd called out to his mother, it, it sort of called [00:17:00] upon all the mothers of the world. And I think that, that, it really brings to this question of like, how can people of color feel their belonging in this profoundly racist, racist culture.

Um, and so I, I really think that, that this is where I started to understand that my. Calling to do this. Belonging work also has a social justice element to it. It's not just in the therapy room. It's not just what's in my friends is not just, you know, it's, it's all of that together. And because if other people can't feel belonging, then we, you know, we're so interconnected.

We've, we've seen that in the pandemic, right. We are really getting clear how interconnected we are with this pandemic. And so if others can't feel belonging, then none of us can. And so there's just this sense of urgency in this [00:18:00] work that, you know, as a longtime meditator and, you know, there's this sort of dialogue in that community of.

You know, you do this work on your, on yourself and then the, the effects will ripple out. And, and I think that there's many people, um, you know, I've been inspired by many teachers around this, about how to integrate social justice with, um, with our own, with our own work, our own, journey.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I think there's a real, there's something really powerful in what you said about how interconnected we are, that we are truly an ultra social species. This is a thing. And you know, biology where certain species of animals like bees depend on each other in really complex ways.

And I think humans are like this and this yearning to belong is more, is more than just about ourselves, right? It's not just about our own [00:19:00] problems. And I think sometimes in Western psychology, we focus so much on our own selves.

**Meg McKelvie:** exactly right. Like that sort of the, like our evolutionary history, we were designed to live in groups and tribes. And you know, that these, the, the yearning to belong that is, is, is so. Much a part of our evolution and that we don't, we don't want to stifle that or push that away. Like that is actually part of our evolution because we are going to survive better when we are in groups.

And, um, so how do we, how do we work with our, this yearning? How do we understand this yearning to belong? How do we work with it? How do we channel it? How do we work with some of the ways that it shows up as we sort of mismanage our yearning to belong?

**Debbie Sorensen:** I think Steve Hayes calls it the yearning to belong. And John O'Donohue that you quoted earlier calls it the hunger to belong. And to me that implies that sometimes [00:20:00] people really want that sense of belonging, but there. There's something missing. There's something, uh, there's something that gets in the way.

What, what are your thoughts about what can get in the way of feeling a sense of belonging?

**Meg McKelvie:** so I think like the, at the most, the most basic thing for all of us is getting caught in our self stories. Um, so getting caught in stories, like I'm not good enough, I don't matter. I'm not smart enough. Um, you know, I think that that's sort of a place that I like to start in in thinking about where we get stuck.

Um, and then I think at a most basic level, We get really disconnected with our own natural goodness. And the way that we get disconnected is we, we get sort of seduced by [00:21:00] our doing mind. We just, we live or we are sort of living like, you know, I think John Kabat-Zinn says we're human doings rather than human beings.

And we, you know, we all know the feeling of just that sense of living life and a checklist of like checking off things that we need to do. And we can lose sight of slowing down, contacting our bodies and connecting with, you know, really the sense of our natural goodness and, um, in ACT terms, self as context.

Yeah.

**Debbie Sorensen:** let me read a quote from A Liberated Mind if that's okay. That I think really captures this. This is part of that chapter. You said that you got obsessed with because it's so good. oh, Steve Hayes, who, by the way, has been on the podcast to talk about the book about A Liberated Mind.

Steve [00:22:00] Hayes writes human beings, yearn to be seen, cared for and included as members of the group. We are social primates. We evolved in small bands and groups where belonging was literally a matter of life or death. While this yearning is healthy. Many of the ways our minds try to satisfy it cause us psychic pain.

We lie about ourselves to defend our ego. We play the victim. We berate ourselves for failing to meet inflated standards that might please others. And we become consumed by worries about rejection and perceived slights, you know, dots that have been connecting for me lately is just the sense that this is part of act.

And it's like also tied to, you know, Eastern traditions and that kind of thing. And it's, it's not new in psychology either. Cause I think it's really similar to some other constructs, like the idea of ego. From more psychodynamic traditions. Like it's, it's in a lot of places. I think if you look for it, but the sense that we trip ourselves up in our own minds in this way,

**Meg McKelvie:** Yes, [00:23:00] exactly. And I think that's such an important part of this is that I'm not. You know that there's so many wisdom traditions, there's so many, um, people that have pointed to this. And, um, and so what we're talking about is not new. And I think that what happens is, is that this, that the doing mind turns on us, you know, the doing mind is like constantly scanning the environment and looking for danger, right?

Looking for danger, looking for problems to be solved, right. We looking for things to put on our checklist and, um, the doing mind then can turn on itself. It can turn, you know, we can become the problem to be solved. Right. And that, that takes us away from our deep natural goodness. And, [00:24:00] um, You know, as Pema Chodron says, she's has some quote like something like, uh, the subtle aggression of self-improvement, right? That we're sort of in this, we're on this wheel of trying to improve ourselves and we're just moving and moving and moving and we're not slowing down and connecting with something larger than ourselves. We're not slowing down and connecting with our word less experience.

And so like an example of that is if I were, if we were to sit with the question, what is here, when there is no problem to be solved, And so, you know, just that, what happens when we drop the struggle when we drop and trust, I think that we have lost some of that [00:25:00] when we sort of, when we stay hooked into the, the busy-ness, we lose some of that.

**Debbie Sorensen:** it's hard to imagine. It's such a foreign concept because I think we typically spend, at least I'll speak for myself here. Right. I spend like 95% of my time in that doing busy problem-solving place and it takes actual effort sometimes to slow down and drop out of that a little bit.

**Meg McKelvie:** Absolutely. I mean, I think that's true for all of us, right. And that's why, you know, that's why I think that belonging and connection with something larger than ourselves is all the more important right now. Right. It's for all of us.

**Debbie Sorensen:** To be clear. I think what you're not talking about when you're talking about belonging is being liked or like ability or, you know, it's not a popularity contest contest.

How is belonging different from being liked in your view?

**Meg McKelvie:** So [00:26:00] then this is where we get into sort of that. I think that the belonging, and this is why I sort of talk about belonging from the inside out, right? Like the belonging is an experience that we have internally and it is, and sometimes it's actually not

you know, sometimes our out external world is actually not changing when we do belonging work.

So for example, I have a client that has given me permission to talk about this and I'll disguise as well. But, um, you know, I have a client who, who was dealing with cancer and so she was quarantined before COVID right. And so there was just a lot of isolation, a lot of, um, you know, just isolation and, and, you know, once we have done some belonging work, which I can talk more about, , her experience of her [00:27:00] own belonging has changed despite the fact that she is still continues to be isolated, sort of with COVID.

And so, I think being liked, you know, whether we're liked is like, Is passing experiences. It's co it's a weather system that moves in and out, but our sense of belonging, our connection with our own with our own goodness, that is, that is always here, is always available to us. um, and so being liked is, is really just a weather system that comes in and out.

And that if, if you are fully, if you fully moved in to your true expression of, of who you are, you're not going to be liked by certain people, right? Like that, that's part of what we can work to accept because it's, it's [00:28:00] painful.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. And I mean, on the other side of that, I think that you can be surrounded by people, right? You can have tons of social interaction and still not feel a sense of belonging if you're not truly authentically open and yourself in relationships, which we'll talk about more

**Meg McKelvie:** Yeah, exactly.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. So Meg, one of the things that we've talked about in some of our recent conversations is kind of this desire to be special and sort of the, the gifts of dropping that and being ordinary. Um, what do you think happens when people really have a strong drive to be special?

**Meg McKelvie:** Well, I think that this is sort of a mismanaged. You know, when, when our yearning to belong is really strong, it can become really a mismanaged with, with trying to be special. You know, I think we can all fall into that in, in, at times and moments. And [00:29:00] I think that being special and feeling special just does not get us where we, I mean, bottom line is, it just doesn't get us where we want to go.

And so lately, one of the things that I will do when I am sort of working with my own,

**Debbie Sorensen:** Hm

**Meg McKelvie:** um, when I'm working to sort of see if something is what I want to do, or am I called to do something or what matters to me, or, um, I'll really tune into my body and I'll ask myself, am I doing this because I want to be special?

Or am I doing this because. It matters to me. And it really, it really helps me kind of get clear about these, to get clear about, um, what, what, what I'm called to do and what I, what [00:30:00] I need to be doing and how I want my life to be.

**Debbie Sorensen:** this is one of the key things I've learned from you, Meg, that I apply in my life. I mean, imperfectly, but it's just the sense of slowing down. I think my natural tendency is to get excited about everything and also to get a little bit people pleasing and get in my own, you know, desire to be special and achieve things.

And I've, I think at my best I've borrowed this skill from you, which is to just sit with things and to, to ask myself hard questions like that. Like, is this a should, is this something I'm doing for the wrong reasons versus is this something truly meaningful that I care about?

**Meg McKelvie:** Yeah. And I think, I think that, um, we underestimate sort of the wisdom of the body. And I think that, um, that so much of when we tune into the body, we can tune into this natural intelligence that, that isn't, that is [00:31:00] wordless and that can help guide us towards a life that is sort of most vital, most alive for us. And that when we get caught up in sort of the cognitive, you know, I, uh, one of the things that I. Do well that I'll say to my clients, um, is that I actually do not believe in pros and cons lists.

Um, not, I mean, you know, of course there's always a place for them. And actually I did one like recently, but I sort of have this irreverence stance that I don't, I don't do pros and cons lists. You know, if you come to me and you asked me, you know, should I have a second child, right. It's like that pros and cons list.

I mean, it is like the most irrational decision to have a child, right? Like it's not, uh, it's not a rational decision, um, to have a first child to have a second child, um, millions of dollars later, you know, and lots of love and heartache labor. Um, [00:32:00] so, you know, it's really a question of tuning into our body using that as like this, uh, sort of tuning fork to help guide our, our lives.

**Debbie Sorensen:** you know, I think that's right, like a pros and cons list that happens very much like up here in your head and it's this back and forth and back and forth. And it's really hard to resolve something in that way. And sometimes even it's like, like you said, there's men, there's a hundred rational reasons why to do or not do something and it's still may not be right for you.

**Meg McKelvie:** And actually that's exactly it. It's like the pros and cons list. When you do it, it comes out one way that more often than not, I find is an opposite way of what people's intuition is calling them to do. Right. It does like their intuition wants them to do their, their body wants them to do something that is like irrational maybe, but is really like, is really do deeply rooted in their own wisdom.

There is wisdom there. And so, um, so [00:33:00] yeah, so pulling people out of that cognitive process that, that cognitive, like sort of arguing that we do with ourselves,

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. What are the hidden gifts of being ordinary?

**Meg McKelvie:** Uh, there, there are many, but the biggest one, I mean, isn't it, I don't know, Debbie, like, isn't it just love, isn't it just like, isn't that the gift of the ordinary is that we drop into moments of love with the people that are most dear to us. And that in that that's all

that, that matters. And that we have a moment to sit with other people who are suffering and, and give them love and care and, and receive that ourselves.

I mean, it just feels so basic.

**Debbie Sorensen:** yeah, kind of is when you boil it down, it's as simple as that [00:34:00] it's having the room for what really matters. Yeah. Okay. So we have this yearning, this yearning for belonging, this deep need and desire for it. And we can trip ourselves up and get our own way with it. And Meg, you talk about belonging from the inside, out and belonging from the outside in as ways to kind of, you know, foster belonging. So let's start with belonging from the inside out.

Can you explain what you mean by this and how people can move toward

**Meg McKelvie:** Yes. So one of my favorite quotes by Rumi is, um, your task is not to seek for love, , but to break to find and break all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it. Um, and so that's one of the ways that I think about belonging from the inside out. belonging is truly already here.

And so we are just returning to it, you know, it's [00:35:00] that it, that going back to the, to the baby and the baby is born, you know, the parent doesn't love the child more or less because the child is high achieving or good at sports. The baby, the child just is. And so, you know, that that is the relationship that we are building with ourself, that we are that baby, we are that, that beautiful untouched, perfect newness.

And we are, we are rediscovering that for ourselves and that there are some practices that we can use to help us re remember to help us come home to that. ,

**Debbie Sorensen:** I think one thing that's really important to acknowledge about that is that. You don't have to wait for the conditions in your life to change, to practice what you're about to share. Because I think sometimes it's almost like [00:36:00] this external focus, like, well, once I have this, once I've accomplished that once I am with this right group of people, once I have this in my life, then I can get there.

But it's not like that with what you're talking about.

**Meg McKelvie:** Exactly. And actually, um, that makes me think a lot about that. One of the, one of the roads to belonging, believe it or not is actually suffering. It's suffering and joy. It's it's beauty and pain. And I, you know, this is, that's what act is all about. Right? But that our, the threads of our suffering. Connect with the threads of all people's suffering, right.

And without suffering, we don't have those threads of belonging to, uh, to, uh, a group that has pain. And the suffering actually brings us deep [00:37:00] humility. I mean, I can speak about that very, very personally, you know, like that, that, that when we are going through long periods of time where we don't suffer, you know, the first thing I noticed when I, when I have a period like that, and then I have something really painful happen, or I experienced something painful, is that it, it is so humbling.

And, and in that we connect to, you know, our, our deep humanity and the humanity of others. And so that is part of belonging. Um, and go ahead.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Oh, sorry with so much to say this is us, right. Um, well, I just think about that with the past year plus with the pandemic and how, you know, I, again, I, I don't believe in sugar coating what we've been through. It's been awful and tremor traumatic in so many ways. I do think though, there's a certain like realness that has come out of it that is [00:38:00] tied to common humanity, that we're all going through something hard together.

And I've seen a level of openness, whether it's your, you know, child strolling, half naked through your zoom call or whether it's just acknowledging how hard it's been. I think it has the common suffering that people have experienced has created the sense of we're not alone, which I think sometimes we deny.

**Meg McKelvie:** Yeah, I think that's such a huge and beautiful thing about this pandemic. Um, in, in, in the midst of all that suffering is, is that, um, That, that it's almost like that are, you know, we all suffer separately in different ways. Right. And there's still that in the pandemic, not everyone's in the same boat, all of that, but then there was something that happened where there's like this, this, the collective suffering, like at the same time, like the, you know, with the rhythm of our challenges and pain, right?

Like we all have different [00:39:00] rhythms with that, but then sort of like this coalescing of like the rhythm of our suffering being, there's some togetherness in that, you know, we sort of the ups and downs of, um, you know, the, the incredible challenges with racial injustices, uh, the incredible challenges with the election and the, um, gaslighting of, of our country, you know, that there is, there's just these.

Ways that we're sort of riding some of these waves together and some of our waves are separate. Some of, you know, some of our suffering is separate, but I kind of wonder how that will impact are the people that have been through this as we move forward Pema Chodron says, pain is not punishment.

Pleasure is not reward. And it's like, We often have this sort of distorted relationship with pain. That there's something that we've done to deserve it. And so then therefore we feel bad about ourselves and like having this altogether [00:40:00] has sort of normalized in some ways, some of our pain, yeah.

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**Debbie Sorensen:** So there's a number of ways that people can shift into that, that sense of belonging from the inside out. Let's talk about some, some examples of how we've experienced

**Meg McKelvie:** Yes. Um, so I mean the biggest first piece is just to really recognize that. The hunger to belong is always active. Like it's always, uh, it's always there. It's not an issue that is resolved. This [00:41:00] is not something that I have, you know, checked off a box and have, have resolved. Like it's, uh, yeah,

**Debbie Sorensen:** it doesn't work

**Meg McKelvie:** no, like it's just, it's a process that that I'm always tuning into.

I'm always working with, I'm always working on and attending to, and, and that it's like a form of self care is like, where is my belonging? Where, you know, how has that feeling? And I think, you know, the, the most profound piece about this for me has been just that it is, it, it is an inside job. It is a experience.

It is something that I can work on by myself. And that there's also belonging from the outside in, but that. But belonging from the inside out is something that I can really attuned to for myself.

**Debbie Sorensen:** So can you share for us like your own, some of your own personal story, about [00:42:00] your process of stepping out of story and, and finding a greater sense of belonging from the inside out.

**Meg McKelvie:** Yes. Um, so I think the way that I think about it is that. I have some self stories, like the rest of everybody, right. Like not good enough or, or whatever. And I think so for so long, it was a cognitive debate, right. It was like, does this thing make me not good enough? Or does that thing make me now good enough?

and, um, I think one of the things with the belonging work that I've been doing is that the work is really that you actually don't even have to engage in that conversation that when you find this sense of your natural goodness, when you, [00:43:00] when you connect with pure awareness, when you connect with.

Something larger than yourself. When you connect with your natural, your birthright to belong, right? You actually don't have to determine whether you're good enough or not. You actually can step over that dilemma and recognize that actually you are both, you are both good enough and not good enough. You are both beautiful and unattractive.

You are both, you are all of those things, right? You are smart. And then you have these moments of just total dull dumbness or whatever, you know, like that. We are in fact, all of those things, and we don't have to argue about that anymore. We can step over it.

**Debbie Sorensen:** you know, I th I see this, I think, as a therapist, a lot, right. People are seeking an answer to that question. Am I good enough? And they can go back and forth all day in therapy [00:44:00] and in their lives and can look for reassurance, can look for feeling good compliments. And it doesn't the truth is that it doesn't really typically get people anywhere.

It just keeps them stuck in that debate. And you're talking about just putting that debate aside and not getting stuck there.

**Meg McKelvie:** Yeah, and yeah, exactly. And I think that this like, you know, and, and I love Jill Stoddard's work on, uh, imposter syndrome. Like you, we can feel that imposter syndrome and we can keep moving. And, I think that that is one of the things that I have learned most from you, Debbie, is, is this sense of that you can just keep moving, you know, like, and, and we don't have to you know, am I perfect?

Or am I imperfect? Well, you're both. Right. And we just keep moving, like, is it's really just becomes almost like a non-issue it's like, I, you know, [00:45:00] or like parenting, right? Like, am I a good parent? Or am I a bad parent? Well, actually you truly are both. Right? Like, there are moments where you're not a great parent, I'm speaking of myself, you know, and you're a moments where, yeah, where are you?

Are you? And always like, you're just like this deeply wonderful being as a parent. Right. And, but it's, so it's like dropping the struggle that, that. That that that could possibly be true that I could possibly be like a, not so great parent. It's like you just dropping the struggle of that.

**Debbie Sorensen:** You know, I'll just share about our friendship because you've mentioned earlier, we sort of counterbalance each other that, you know, you have provided me that gift of learning to slow down and tune in more. And I've provided you with sometimes a little nudge to not overthink it and to do right. I mean, I think that's what you're talking about.

**Meg McKelvie:** Yes. And I think that, that this is where [00:46:00] relationships, where we find people that really get us and really see us and really accept us. And that there's something really beautiful that comes out of that, that there's this yin and yang between the two of us, this, these differences that, that, that are so that we so appreciate about each other.

And we sort of push each other in different ways and yeah.

**Debbie Sorensen:** So I think when we're talking about law about belonging, it's important to note that there's, it's not the same thing as self-acceptance, which is another.

Term you hear a lot, right? Um, what's the difference, Meg?

**Meg McKelvie:** So the difference between self acceptance and belonging is, is that, uh, self acceptance is really a cognitive bargaining strategy, uh, where we're. Saying to ourselves, something like, you know, I may be, um, a little disorganized, but, but you know, I'm really [00:47:00] compassionate or something like that where we're sort of like weighing out the pros and cons of our personality or whatever.

And, um, belonging is just that I am, and that I am part of bigger than me, something bigger than myself and that I belong because I'm alive. I am alive and I am breathing and I belong. And it's a different kind of compassion that is not cognitive it's embodied. It's just, it's like, it doesn't matter whether I'm this or that.

It doesn't none of that matters in this space of belonging.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Meg, I've loved hearing your thoughts about jealousy and con in competition. Tell us about that.

**Meg McKelvie:** So jealousy and competition, I think just so much get a bad rap in our culture. And, um, in, you know, in particular [00:48:00] we really push away jealousy and competition. We really are averse to it. We have a lot of aversion when jealousy shows up for us. Um, we have a lot of aversion when competition shows up in relationships and, um, jealousy is such a beautiful guide for us, right.

That, you know, if we see something that someone is doing and we find ourselves feeling. Jealous what a beautiful moment for us to stop and look at what it is that gets evoked for us. Are we, um, is there something that really matters to us that this other person is doing? Are we wanting to move towards something?

You know, how can it help us clarify our values? Um, and so it's really this true welcoming stance, like, you know, using this as data, as information as something that helps guide our, like jealousy [00:49:00] is actually something that guides my life. Um, and then, and competition is actually like, particularly important for belonging, because I think that they're both particularly important for belonging, because I, I think that when we're willing to accept and acknowledge that these things exist and that they are in our relationships. There's so much we can learn from it. And I think one of the, one of the things that happened for me was in, um, learning more about competition and relationships. It has helped me, understand some of my own, you know, struggles with competition that, that I can remember early on in my life, sort of not wanting to compete, not wanting to compete with other people and how and how that, that really took me away from, uh, some of the things that really mattered to me.

And it really took me away [00:50:00] from playing bigger in a way. Um, so as not to sort of evoke something that is just a natural part of life,

**Debbie Sorensen:** yeah, it can sort of go either way, right? You can hide or step out of competition in that way by not stepping forward. And you can also step the other way. Right. Jealousy shows up or competition shows up and you bend over backwards trying to

**Meg McKelvie:** Exactly right. And so there it's like, those are examples of really sort of mismanaged yearning to belong, right? Like that we can, you know, win with competition. It can become that we, when others sort of do something, then we, that, that we admire or think is great. Then we can like a sense of shame. , Can be arise for us.

And then in order to manage that shame, we may feel like we have to do that thing ourselves, even though it's not in our body, truly what we're [00:51:00] longing to do, but we're just really trying to manage the shame that comes up when other people are achieving things.

So, you know, I think belonging, I just want to be clear is, is um, you know, the hunger to belong is always active. It's always here. It's never something that is resolved. It's a process that continues to unfold, right? Because we're always sort of in that process of needing to be in wanting to be connected to others and of connecting to our own natural goodness.

So belonging is always here. It's already here and, and there are so many pointers to help us remember our belonging. And a lot of the work is, is as you know, we've talked about is really from the inside out. And so a lot of these pointers are things that many of our folks already are really familiar with.

Um, so slowing down, um, connecting in nature, meditation and mindfulness, [00:52:00] um, therapy and self-reflection and body-centered practices, um, Unplugging in for periods of time for a day-long retreat or week-long retreat, if that's possible. And then, um, one of the things that I've found most useful that I've been doing in my practice, um, is, is free writing.

And that's maybe something, um, that we could talk about that is not necessarily as, as well-known, uh, in terms of belonging work.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I'd love to hear Meg, about your experience using expressive writing and how that's helpful. I think expressive writing is really fascinating to me because this is a, it's been around for a while. Like James Pennebaker did the, some of the initial research on one type of expressive writing way back, like I think in the eighties and it is.

Robust. I mean, there is evidence-based behind using expressive writing to [00:53:00] process emotions. Um, but I think Meg, you use expressive writing in a very particular way.

**Meg McKelvie:** Okay. So, um, writing in groups, doing expressive writing in groups is, can be a really powerful way to do belonging work. It's such a great way to connect with our observer self and our natural intelligence and, like a diff different way into perspective taking, um, you know, we do a lot of perspective taking an act and, and what can show up when we really put pen to paper and just write whatever is here can be so much with regard to shifting and perspective and so much with regard to tapping into our own natural goodness and, um, you know, poetry also just, um, for many folks is just such a wonderful way.

To connect the threads of our humanity, [00:54:00] right? Like when we read a Rumi poem and we read, we deeply connect with the experience of a 13th century, Persian poet like that, right there is belonging. Um, so we start there and use poetry to evoke belonging and we get to connect the threads of our shared humanity and, and really see what is here for us and engage some of the act processes through that process.

**Debbie Sorensen:** So give us, give us an example, Meg of how it does connect to those actual processes.

**Meg McKelvie:** So I think one of the, the, my most favorite pieces of doing the writing work is how we can really connect to this sense that we are bigger than our mind or experiences and connect with. Really connect in a different way with our observer self as we write. You know, I think that one of the things that I've found is that in [00:55:00] doing so much act

work, it's such a great way to have sort of a different route, a different door towards some of the same things that we've been doing in therapy and with ourselves for, for a long time.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I love that it's like a lot of the same processes, but they're coming to life through writing and particularly writing in groups.

**Meg McKelvie:** Yes. And actually one of the really interesting things about the groups it's like, this is, what's so beautiful about this writing group is like, it's like, you're in your own process and you're being witnessed. You're not sort of your worthiness and your writing is not being evaluated.

It's just, you're being witnessed. And that is where the belonging is. You don't need someone to like relate with you in the perfect way to feel belonging. You have it here.

**Debbie Sorensen:** this is the best segue, because I think that let's, let's turn it now to look at the other [00:56:00] piece of this, which is belonging from the outside in right. And belonging, happy and Nene. In relationship with other people. And, you know, again, we're these social creatures and meaningful connection really being seen by other people is another key piece of this.

And, you know, we've talked about our friendship and how we have, have experienced this with each other and with other friends that we have in common. And can I read another quote, Meg from Steve Hayes from a liberated mind? So he has, um, one example of a way to, to move toward that. Yearning for belonging is any calls at one truthful conversation at a time.

Okay. Another good way to begin to let go of self story is to practice being yourself more fully and openly with another person. The point is not that we must strive to always be absolutely honest. The point is to open the door to places that are hard insecurity, inadequacy, fear of [00:57:00] rejection and so on.

And to learn what is fearsome about them carving out more space for you to be you with those feelings. We're genuinely connected to others. One truthful conversation at a time.

**Meg McKelvie:** Hmm. Yes. I think one of the things that in terms of belonging from the outside in, I think one of the things that I have that I feel is like one of the biggest gifts of our relationship is that, um, I think that belonging is it's, there's a little bit of belonging from the inside, out and the outside in, at the same time.

But I think part of what we can do is we, we carry the people that love us with us. And so we are not alone and that I just, you know, it sounds. Maybe like cliché or something like that, but it's really like this process of holding other people in mind and like savoring the love that we [00:58:00] have with other people.

And I'm just thinking of this experience recently that with you, of being on a patio to our dear friend, Alexis has patio together and we sat down and the first thing that you said was something like, okay, tell me all the deep thoughts you all have been having like, well, tell me what's going on.

Like, let's really get into it. And I just have this moment of like total bliss of like, these are my people. And, and so to be able to like, carry that with you.

**Debbie Sorensen:** yeah. That's where these, I was trying to cut to the chase. I said that. Cause I do think, you know, when you, when you find your people, when you find people that, where you're willing to have the courage to just open up and go to those hard places, I think something really powerful happens.

**Meg McKelvie:** And we didn't want to delay. We [00:59:00] were just going to have those conversations, like the hard stuff. The, this is really who I am. This is what I'm struggling with. This is it. This is where my joy is. Like, it was like, we were not going to delay.

**Debbie Sorensen:** You know, I'm just thinking for, for people listening, you know, we have a foundation, right? It's not like we did this as perfect strangers. Like we've known each other for years and we've over the years opened up in ways that got us there. But I think this is important because what it took to get us there beyond regular kind of superficial conversations was just that willingness to be vulnerable, to open, to, to let ourselves be seen.

And then that's received in a particular way, I think, in a compassionate, open reciprocal nonjudgmental kind of way. And that's over time, the process of that happening.

**Meg McKelvie:** Yeah. And actually what's really interesting is that I think one of the most priceless things about our [01:00:00] relationship is that we actually are able to talk openly about jealousy and competition between us and

**Debbie Sorensen:** have recently. Yeah.

**Meg McKelvie:** and like that, like, What an incredible gift that is. But I think what I would say just to, to, you know, I have this memory of having a really hard conversation, um, where I had said, you know, I was, I was bombed out that I didn't get invited to do something.

And it was a really hard conversation to bring up. And the way that you held that, I mean, this is gosh, 12 years ago, or, you know, whatever. And like, I'll never forget that, like, and the, that the, the, the, the struggle that the challenges like that's where relationships are born and, um, and talking about the hard stuff, right?

Talking about jealousy and competition, talking about the things that [01:01:00] give us challenges.

**Debbie Sorensen:** You know, I think I remember that too. I actually hadn't thought about that in years, but you know, I think that you actually held my feet to the fire a little bit with that. And it was uncomfortable because I think that, you know, you want your friends, you want it to be easy and likable and all that kind of stuff.

And I think that it did having conversations like that. Not just that one, but over the years helped us move to that deeper place to know that our friendship can hold that.

**Meg McKelvie:** Yes.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I think it's important to clarify here that when we're talking about this, um, you know, yearning to belong through groups and social interactions, we're not, it's different from loneliness, but it's related.

So how are, how do you think about loneliness related to belonging?

**Meg McKelvie:** so, um, loneliness is something that is important to really assess in ourselves and others. Like the question is. You know, with a client or ourselves, is it, are we [01:02:00] dealing with objective isolation or are we feeling alone or lonely in the midst of other people? Right. And so, you know, both are really important to address and I think both would lend itself beautifully to belonging work, but really knowing what we're dealing with, you know, that experience of feeling lonely, even when we're in groups is such a common experience of suffering among many people and, um, you know, doing, um, Looking at helpful unhelpful self stories and doing pure awareness work, um, would be really helpful for someone who is experiencing sort of more loneliness in the, in the presence of other people.

And you know, more behavioral work, more behavioral interventions might be really helpful with someone who is experiencing objective isolation. But I think, you know, you and I were talking [01:03:00] about the other day, a client where you were saying, you know, maybe I should have done it in reverse order. And I, and I think, I think that, um, that we, we tend to want to fix things in the world and fix things behaviourally but what I would suggest is that we, that starting with the belonging work, whether or not. There is isolation or there is loneliness is really, um, can be really, really helpful because once you do some of that work, some of the interpersonal concerns can fall away.

Some of the inner peace, you know, we all have behaviors that we engage in when we're not feeling our best selves when we're not feeling our connection to others, right. We all have that experience. And when we really do that deep belonging work, a lot of those behaviors can fall away.

**Debbie Sorensen:** You know, I think it's really there. [01:04:00] Therapists always say that therapy is like this sort of microcosm. Like there's a relationship happening and it's a chance to evoke things and try things out. And I think for me, sometimes I've noticed, I think I do jump the gun. Sometimes as a therapist, like I can see maybe say an interpersonal issue, that's getting in the way or a behavior pattern.

And there is that like, Oh, I see it. Let's kind of get in there and fix it. But I think if you do that, I've had it backfire. If I do it too soon, where the belonging context isn't established first, we're just comes across as like a criticism or like it's actually the, the anti belonging, right? It's like, Oh, do this, you know, why don't you try this behavior?

Get out there socially, you know, try a new thing with a relationship, but it's like the context matters. And I think what you're saying is like, maybe the belonging is most important and that can actually be something that can help with some of these other processes as

**Meg McKelvie:** Right, exactly like that we can become caught as therapists [01:05:00] or with ourselves. We can get caught up in the self as content, right. We're like inside of the self, as content with the person, you know, we're, we're not connected to something larger and we, and you know, it's like that, you know, the client becomes a problem to be solved a math problem rather than a sunset

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. Well, let's end on this question for today, Meg. Um, I, one of the many gifts of Meg and having Meg as a friend in your life is that I feel like you're really good at building those deeper, closer relationships. You know, like I said, you kinda pushed me in some new ways in our relationship. And I've seen you also create some really meaningful gatherings of people for people who are out there who are looking for these kinds of connections and who want to foster belonging from the outside.

In what suggestions do you have?

**Meg McKelvie:** Well, I think that the, um, one of the most immediate suggestions is the book, the art of gathering. I think you've had, um, you did a podcast on that. I would recommend listening [01:06:00] to that. Yeah. I think that that is really powerful stuff is really creating, gatherings for people sort of centered around some kind of, um, connected activity or, Something that matters to people together.

And, um, but most of all, you know what I really come back to as I, you know, think about this is working with self stories that get in the way of even reaching out to create those gatherings. Right. If that is what you are longing for, if you are longing to be connected to others and be in groups, like what is getting in the way of you joining Toastmasters?

What is getting in the way of you having that writing, gathering of you, um, you know, creating that dinner club or, or, um, you know, that wine tasting club, like what, what are the barriers to. [01:07:00] You know, is there belonging work that you can do for yourself that will help you then tune into your body, get a sense as to what you're really longing for, and then be more able to step around those stories so that you can create what it is that you're longing for.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Well, and I think too, what's getting in the way of sharing yourself fully, you know, one truthful conversation at a time what's holding you up from, from. Moving into those more vulnerable places with people, maybe even the people you already have in your life. And is there a way to dig deeper?

**Meg McKelvie:** Yes. Like it's like, I, you know, said to someone recently like, Oh, I just want like, the world needs you out. There you are. You know, it's like the world needs each of us. We have so much to offer. And can we, except that there's a lot that we bring to the table.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Well, that's a, I think that's a lovely note to wrap up on. And can I can, let me ask you, if you could [01:08:00] share a poem that you brought to as our final, our final moment

**Meg McKelvie:** Yes. This is a poem that gives that, that I, every time I read it, I feel belonging. When I am among the trees by Mary Oliver, when I am among the trees, especially the willows and the honey locust equally the beach, the Oaks and the Pines. They give off such hints of gladness. I would almost say they saved me and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself, in which I have goodness and discernment and never hurry through the world, but walk slowly and bow often around me, the trees stir in their leaves and call out, stay awhile. The light flows from their branches and they call again, it's simple. They say, and you two have come into this world to go easy, to be filled with light and to shine.

**Debbie Sorensen:** that's beautiful. [01:09:00] Thank you, Meg. Thank you so much for joining me

**Meg McKelvie:** Thank you so much for having me, Debbie.

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