

RIGHT-SIZED BELONGING

Six Practices for Organizers

Launch Event Audio Transcript | By Sammie Ablaza Wills

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BelongingPractices.org | [Link to Video](#)

SPEAKERS

Sammie Ablaza Wills, NTanya Lee, Gopal Dayaneni, Elliott Fukui, Michael Strom

Introduction

Sammie Ablaza Wills 00:02

All right everyone, welcome to the launch of Right-Sized Belonging: Six Practices for Organizers! My name is Sammie and I'm going to be your host today. I want to go ahead and start by acknowledging and giving respects to the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung, the traditional owners and stewards of Naarm, the land that I present to you from today, also known as Melbourne, Australia. I'd like to pay my respects to elders, past and present, of the Eastern Kulin Nations, and extend that respect to any indigenous people present here today. Sovereignty was never ceded, and this was and always will be Aboriginal land. I also want to extend my respect and my love to Ohlone Land, also known as the Bay Area, my home that has helped me through many of the lessons and the life that has taken me to this point. We really can't talk about belonging without acknowledging the colonization that strips indigenous people from their land and cultures. I have learned so much from indigenous folks about what it means to belong to the earth and act in right relationship to my homes. I want to encourage other non-indigenous folks to support local indigenous projects. Two ways to do so that I have for you today include, for folks in Australia, Pay the Rent, which supports a sovereign body of First Nations people to make decisions about their own needs. And on Ohlone land, the Shuumi Land tax, which supports the Sogorea Te Land Trust, and their work of repatriation and returning indigenous land to indigenous people. On the screen you can scan the QR codes, or, in the chat we're gonna paste some direct links to these different organizations. So you can click, follow through, donate. While you're here, please let us know in the chat: Who are you and where are you calling in from? We've also included a resource to Native-Land, which helps you understand the indigenous or First Nations name of the land that you may be on. So, take a second everyone, and let me know! Introduce yourself if you haven't already, with your name, your gender pronoun, and where are you calling in from. Let's hear it. I'll put this slide up for a little longer so people can scan QR codes.

Host Introduction

Sammie Ablaza Wills 02:50

[Sammie waits while participants type in the chat] Hi, Cynthia. Wow. Hi, Gemma and Jacinta thank you for coming. Everyone is so busy paying the rent that they can't type. I totally get it. I would be, too. Irma, hi. Hi, everyone. Hey KP! Wow, hi, Ella. Hi, Eri. I'm so glad that you all have joined us. As people continue putting stuff in the chat, I just want to really give a warm, warm welcome to everyone for joining today. As I mentioned, my name is Sammie and I'm gonna be your host. I'm really fortunate to have come to this work after a decade organizing with transgender and queer Asian and Pacific Islander folks in movements for immigrant rights, for racial justice, and for community safety. For about five and a half years, I was the Executive Director at Lavender Phoenix. Following that, I've been really fortunate to have spent so much time over these past two years zooming out to one of the biggest questions that has come up in our work: "What is the role of belonging in social movements?" And today we're going to dig into this question and look at some of the practices that can help our movements thrive.

Dedication

Sammie Ablaza Wills 04:44

Before we get there, I want to quickly dedicate this event to two powerhouses. Two elders, who I think are young for being elders, who are now ancestors. So Cecilia Gentili was a powerful trans woman, and an advocate for sex workers, for migrants, for disabled people, for queer weirdos. According to her children, she was the mother of all whores. She radiated joy, brought people from all backgrounds together, supported thousands of trans folks to get health care, and talked to every single person like she was incredibly joyful to have them there. Merle Ratner was a lifelong anti-war organizer and activist, fighting against the Vietnam War. Her activism started when she was 13 years old, and from that point on, she was always there to remind us of what was possible on the other side of our work, constantly pushing us into stronger definitions of solidarity, and supporting the next generation of freedom fighters. Each of these two people I knew briefly, but have felt a lasting legacy of what it has meant to be in relationship with them. They have shown me belonging, and I hope that this event and this offering and what we're able to do together, is in their memory, is in their wisdom, and is in their legacy. So shout out to these two, and thank you for helping me honor them to this event today.

Purpose, Agenda, Requests

Sammie Ablaza Wills 06:29

What are we going to get up to in this next hour and 15 minutes? We're of course here to launch the Right-Sized Belonging workbook and website. But more than that, I was hoping that this would be a start of many, many conversations to help us understand the current culture of belonging scarcity, of individualism, alienation; a discussion to help us dig into a more nuanced belonging that speaks to power, to trauma, to materialism, and a mobilization opportunity to get all of us organizers, community builders, social changemakers, to integrate practices that

build belonging in our spaces, and in our work. Wow, that's ambitious. How are we gonna get that done Sammie? You are so right, me in third person. Let me show you my agenda. It's a simple agenda, and we're already in the middle of it. We're in our introduction. I'm going to give a brief presentation about cultivating belonging. Then, the moment we've been waiting for, a panel discussion! Which is not something people often say, but this time is genuine. And then lastly, we're gonna take action. Wow, that is going to be so juicy. What's your role in all of this you may ask? Well, I'm so glad you asked. Because you do have a role, despite this being a webinar. I have some requests of you. For the next hour and 15, for our short time together, please try to be here. Try to minimize time on your phone or on other tabs as much as possible to stay with the folks who are sharing, who are president, who are with us in that way. And, right in the same vein, please take care of your needs, whether that means eating, going to the bathroom, taking a step away for a moment, writing, drawing, whatever you may need to be here. Lastly, I've been in the Zoom land now for four hot years. And, in terms of zoom, there's a few things more painful than speaking into a void. So please, use reactions and type in the chat to let us know what you're feeling. Whether that's stuff you're vibing with, there's a quote that you're like, 'gotta write that down.' Share it with us! Or if there's something you're really feeling, something you're like, 'say that again,' type it in the chat. Let us know what you appreciate, what you want more of. Does that sound good? [People respond in the chat] It's a test for the chat! And y'all did it. Thank you so much. I'm going to try to keep my eyes on the chat as much as possible, but our wonderful, wonderful volunteer Jenica will also be helping to monitor the chat. Let's give love to Jenica! Thank you, Jenica, we love you. All right, thank you all so so much. As we get into this presentation... [Sammie reads something in the chat] oh my god, that is so cute, shout out to your partner for your 11 year anniversary. That's very sweet.

Grounding

Sammie Ablaza Wills 10:12

...So as we get into this presentation, I just want to invite everyone here, all 99 attendees, gorgeous number, to ground for a moment, in whatever way feels right for you. I know that we're coming to this moment from a world of near unimaginable and somehow deeply predictable violence. So I'm not going to ask people to be here in a way that feels disingenuous to them. Some people really want to ground in their bodies, and for others that might be very difficult in this moment. Whatever grounding means to you, I invite you to just take a minute and do that. Whether that means taking some deep breaths, inhaling, to really fill up your lungs, and exhaling to dispel any things you don't believe to be true. Whether that means inhaling to feel your width, your length, your depth, exhaling to remember that you fill up the whole room that you occupy, your limits are beyond your physical body. Inhaling to remember why you came here, and exhaling to let go of the things that tell you you shouldn't be present, you shouldn't be with people that matter to you. Whatever you need to do to ground, I'll give you another few seconds to do so.

Cultivating Belonging Presentation

Defining Belonging

Sammie Ablaza Wills 12:03

Thank you, everyone. To really get us grounded and situated for the panel, I'm going to start with some foundational understandings that can help situate our work towards belonging. First, what is belonging itself? In our context, belonging can be defined as people feeling that they are seen, valued, and recognized as part of a larger system or organization. It's when people feel like they fit in a space, like their involvement matters. It's when you're part of something. And it would have an impact if you weren't there, like you're supposed to be there. You know why you're there and you feel you want to be. In our context, that's what belonging means. The way that I understand it, belonging exist at multiple levels. You belong to yourself, to different relationships, to communities, to neighborhoods, to watersheds, to commons, and to ideas. And despite my own internal desires, and maybe yours, there is no 'ultimate, universal belonging.' It changes over time and in different contexts. One thing I've really learned over the past two years is that we're responsible for our own sense of belonging in ourselves. There is no one that can bestow that on to us or grant us something. That is actually inherent. That we already have. But we sometimes struggle to find, seek, or feel. Just as that is true, there has been so much violence that has disconnected us from our inherent belonging. From the violence of colonization, genocide, enslavement, displacement, and the subsequent othering, exclusion, disavowal--many of us have learned that we do not belong in our families, on our land, and in our communities. This learned belonging scarcity has created a crisis. Individualism and isolation limits how we connect with one another and see our role as stewards of the land or of shared resources, how we see ourselves as responsible for a future that comes after us. What I found is, we cannot build the foundation of a new, just world without addressing these cracks in our belonging.

Storytime

Sammie Ablaza Wills 15.03

I want to take a brief moment to share a story about the recently departed Cecilia. When I was planning this event, in the midst of sending emails or something, I learned that Cecilia had passed. When I learned that I sobbed. I first met Cecilia in 2019 at a retreat for trans and non binary leaders, and Cecilia was our facilitator. Hard job. We gathered on the first day of this retreat in a hotel conference room in Florida, the air-con in the space on full blast while the heat permeated through the windows coming in from outside. By the time we got to community agreements, maybe 15 minutes into a multi day retreat, the space had... energetically lost it. It was, how you say, bad vibes, just the worst vibes imaginable. Little did I know, people came into that space with every type of escalation, you could have imagined. There were multi-year beefs, conflicts that half of the conflict didn't know they were in, people who were so deeply struggling in their own communities, taking two seconds to come to this thing. And many

people who felt like they were the 'only one' in the spaces they were coming from, now coming here to do this thing. For myself, I felt like I was in a room of icons and as the youngest by far, I did not know why I even had a right to be there. When we were trying to set community agreements, people outright refused to trust each other. Someone would propose a community agreement, and someone else would go, "I'm not gonna say yes to that, why would I trust you." And I was like, 'Whoa, this is Bananagrams.' People were giving real cutting comments, holding their cards close to their chest. As our facilitator, Cecilia did not shy away from any of this. She also did not let it happen. When she facilitated, she would go around as we were doing community agreements and talk to every single person like they were having their own one-on-one. She gave people permission to feel however they were feeling, but never let the group lose sight of what we were there to do. As a group she reminded us of the opportunity we had to exchange lessons and build deeper relationships. Through her humor and her groundedness, she de-escalated people enough to help us each find a sense of belonging in that space, even temporarily. She helped us establish how we could work together, what we could realistically do, and what the group could hold for the three days that we managed to be in that retreat. I share this story because I know that in the coming year, and in the times ahead, people are going to come to us just as escalated. Maybe we are the people escalated. It doesn't matter if folks have been decades in the movement, or days in the movement. We are grappling with live horrors and contending with our place in a world that can seem irreparable in it's violence. Of course people are going to be escalated, right? How many people here feel dysregulated in this moment in time? Maybe hopeless or alone? If we, as the people who self selected to be on a call like this, can feel like this, imagine what the masses, imagine what people even wider, may be feeling.

Our Role

Sammie Ablaza Wills 19:19

I tell that story with all the love and admiration for Cecilia, because she showed me the potential of what it meant to cultivate belonging. Even if it was just for a moment, we had a reason to be there. A reason to be in our purpose and a reason to believe in the future. That brings me to our role, to what we can do to cultivate that practice of belonging. Social movement organizations truly have a critical role in embodying the possibility of belonging. People come to engage in social movements to win concrete changes, to improve their lives, to build the foundation of a more just society. While people cannot get all of their belonging needs met in one space, or one community, or one friendship, if each of us commits to practice, we can build the muscle memory of what it feels, looks, and sounds like to belong. It'll create a culture, a culture of right-sized belonging, that encourages a balance between our deep agency and a resilient commitment to a collective purpose. It's about balancing who we are, and what we are meant to do together. As organizers, we are responsible for co-creating this sense of right-sized belong.

Preview of Practices

Sammie Ablaza Wills 21:03

That leads me to the practices themselves. I am going to spend a brief moment going over each practice one by one. I want us to get into the panel, so I'm not going to go into detail. I am going to leave it up to you to dig into the workbook or the website to understand the different risks, opportunities, challenges that come with each of these.

Just to go into each of them briefly, the first practice we have is about 'anchoring your purpose.' People need something to belong to. This is about grounding people in an organizational purpose that is clear, motivating, and aligned with the material needs of your membership. We need to help people understand how the labor they're applying every day, often voluntarily, relates to this purpose.

Our second practice is to 'approach problems with collective governance'. Rather than placing all decision making power or solution creating responsibility on one person, or on a body of people that's disconnected from the issue itself, support people to solve organizational challenges together, just as we do in our organizing from the grassroots. Cynthia said it in the chat, "mass protagonism, am I right?" You are right! Just to be clear, this is not about every organization being horizontal, which is a great thing as well. But I'm not saying every organization needs to do that necessarily. It is about building relationships and skills in service of meeting our own needs. It's about creating the conditions for us to take responsibility of our lives, understand governance, and get familiar with a just relationship to power.

The third practice we have is 'set boundaries and expectations.' This is about evaluating and communicating organizational boundaries that define what you work on, how you operate, who you are accountable to, and what you will and you will not do. Sometimes belonging can truly feel all encompassing. And in late stage capitalism, people have fewer spaces and less time to meet their nested belonging needs. I know that I have definitely wanted certain spaces to take on work that was personal to me, even when it doesn't fit the purview of the group. I've wanted a group to be my everything, like, 'you got to champion all my issues because I'm in this group.' And that doesn't work, really. By defining and redefining our boundaries over time, by communicating about them effectively setting them together, we set expectations that are less about creating a fictitious total alignment, and more about doing what we can do really well. We won't create a sense of false expectation. Yes, and shout out to these beautiful illustrations done by my friend Shreya. We will shout them out also at the end, and we'll link to their portfolio.

Our fourth practice, we have is about 'understanding trauma and building emotional skill.' As I discussed previously, we're in a moment of emotional upheaval. I am not asking every organization to become a healing group, or to ask every single person to become a healer,

that's definitely not what I'm saying. But I am asserting that we must meet this emotional moment by understanding the ways that trauma impacts the folks we're working with and ourselves, and clarify how the organization addresses and holds that trauma. Doing this type of thing can only improve our ability to meet each other and the current conditions, and support one another to grow in alignment with who we want to be, not just who we've been forced to be. That is a cultivation of belonging.

Our fifth practice, I'm going to go over briefly because I'm going to use this as an example. It's about 'increasing conflict resilience.' This is about creating the conditions that enable people to practice disagreement and generative conflict. It's about increasing our fortitude to be in discomfort, and build something stronger from the result. It's about how powerful it is to move past perfection and into something real.

Our last practice is 'connecting to a broader movement ecosystem.' We've said it a few times, but belonging is a nested system that happens at different levels. I hope that we can build strong organizational connections with other groups, healers and resources to strengthen our movement ecosystem and widen belonging, we should be actively encouraging one another to seek out resilient belonging in different organizations, and relationships, and spaces. I know that was a lot. I'm gonna take a pause so we can soak in these six practices. Phew, yummy. And yes, [Sammie reads the chat] "why are these practices so relevant for interpersonal relationships?" True, though, true, though.

Example Practice - Increase Conflict Resilience

Sammie Ablaza Wills 27:16

In that vein, let's dig a little bit deeper into one of them. Let's dig a little bit deeper into 'increased conflict resilience,' and what I mean by practice. Belonging is not about feeling good or feeling comfortable all the time. When people know it is possible to disagree, to mess up, to make mistakes, to get hurt, and still come together. It is a practice of resilient belonging. [Sammie reads the chat] I will say it again. Belonging is not about feeling good or comfortable all of the time. I know that is so hard on our nervous systems, but belonging is not always about feeling good. If our organizations are not equipped to scaffold conflict or disagreement, people can fall back on learned patterns of conflict. Think about what you have learned in the world. What is your conflict tendency? Is it conflict avoidance? Is it blowing up at people? Is it just cutting folks off? Are certain people in your families or communities of origin treated with impunity, and other people are just expected to fall in line whenever a conflict happens? These are the things that we've learned that sometimes we replicate because we haven't learned anything else. Conflict, when done generatively, can lead to our sharpest strategy--when people are supported to engage in conflict past their reaction, past the way their nervous system is trying to save them from a threat that may not be here anymore. A generative conflict can lead to transformation. Conflict resilience is not about having conflict all of the time. It doesn't mean

you're fighting every day. But it does mean building skills to exist in the tension that conflict can create, without running away, or falling into learned patterns. In order to do this practice, there are different tools we can try. I'm gonna give a few examples. Whether these are consensus building tools: Sasha from CAAAV taught me about how their member meetings, they hold up different colored pieces of paper. They facilitate meetings across a few different languages, so to show agreement, that's a green, you'll put up a green. To show disagreement, it's a red. And then you'll have further conversation based on what the room has said. There's different strategy debates that we can practice with one another. If you're deciding, 'is this the right person to target for our campaign?' rather than making people, on the fly, who may not be comfortable or ready to outwardly say, "no," or "I don't know," setting up space in your organization to present the sides of your argument, to have members practice what it would be like to advocate for one side or another, to engage and build the skills of principled struggle, so that that muscle grows stronger and sharper. There's also general skill building you can do, whether those are the skills of embodiment, the skills of regular feedback for one another, or accountability as a group, and what we do when we do mess up, what we do when we do hurt each other, when we don't do the things we say we're going to do. This is just one of the practices, you can imagine that there are countless implementation opportunities that add texture to your existing work.

That's another thing that I want to make so clear. The work of belonging doesn't need to be an additive, an extra committee, a side project that doesn't get looked at for six months. The work of belonging can take shape in the existing relationships, structures, and plans of your organization. As much as I love and encourage organizational transformation, personal reflection, like, let's redo this thing. Ultimately, belonging is not separate to what we do. It should exist within it. If we think of belonging as separate, we have, we have siloed, something that is inherent to every single person that is showing up.

Participant Poll

Sammie Ablaza Wills 32:10

In preparation for the panel, I am going to launch a poll. Famously another thing people love in zoom webinars. [Sammie works the poll out] I would like to hear from you all, which practice you are most excited or curious about. Let me take a second to get this pole up here. Again, the poll question is, "Which practice are you most excited or curious about?" I've gone ahead and launched that poll. As I have launched that poll, panelists, this is your cue that we're gonna get started real soon. We've got responses coming in quick. Everyone is so quick with it, that is gorgeous and beautiful. People are juiced about increasing conflict resilience. I do wonder if it's because I've talked about it more. But I won't read into it too much. Yes, we also have a lot of excitement for approaching problems with collective governance. Some good excitement for setting boundaries and expectations. Wow, but half of us are feeling into conflict resilience. That's so yummy. I'm gonna go ahead and stop sharing my screen. I might be making the poll

a bit biased, what can I say? All right, with nearly half the votes, increasing conflict resilience is something we are all very curious about. Thank you all so much for participating. I'm gonna go ahead and end that poll and share the results so you all can also see what we got going on. Yum. A lot of love as well for approaching problems with collective governance and setting boundaries and expectations.

Panel Discussion

Panel Introduction

Sammie Ablaza Wills 34:37

With that context, I'm going to bring us in to the panel of folks that can get our minds and hearts thinking about some of these questions. They have no idea what I'm going to say about them. As I introduce them, please give a little wave. Give a little wave if you're on camera, give a little wave with your voice if you'd like. [Sammie reads the chat] Yeah, curious that a bunch of organizers are concerned with conflict [laughs]. All right, let's go ahead and get into this panel. The first person I would like to introduce is my dear friend Elliott Fukui. I know Elliott through his extensive community safety organizing, learned through years of work with the Audre Lorde Project, with the Fireweed Collective, and other trans of color organizations. I personally have learned so much about what it means to show up and community from Elliott. And I am extremely honored that you're here. Let's give love to Elliot, thank you for being here! Hi, love you. Our second panelist is Gopal, Gopal Dayaneni. Gopal I know through his soul-growing work with Movement Generation Justice and Ecology Project. Gopal's analysis of relational organizing and ecological principles has so deeply informed my own political development in every which way. And I am stoked to have him. Let's give it up for Gopal.

Gopal Dayaneni 36:26

Oh, thank you Sammie. Super excited to be here. Thank you.

Sammie Ablaza Wills 36:32

Our third is NTanya Lee! NTanya I know through her rigorous work with LeftRoots, and I have long admired her legacy of organizing with working class communities of color and San Francisco. I have greatly benefited from the ways that NTanya has prioritized emotional intelligence as a key facet of a revolutionary organization. Thank you NTanya for being here, yay. And then our fourth panelist is the wonderful Michael Strom. I know Michael through their transformative facilitation. If you know Michael, you know that Michael's ability to create a container for vulnerability transforms a space; transforms what I thought was possible in my organizing. I am so grateful to have them. Let's give it up for Michael.

Michael Strom 37:37

Hi, everybody.

What is the state of belonging in our communities?

Sammie Ablaza Wills 37:39

Wow, yeah. An amazing panel. Selfishly stoked. If you could see the reaction popping off right now, this is like a Twitch stream-level of reactions. I don't know if that means anything to anybody. But, let's get into these questions. First, I want to just set the scene from your perspective. And we have Jenica, who's also going to paste the questions in the chat so people know. I want to set the scene from your perspective. What is the state of belonging in our communities? How are people relating to it? Where are they getting it? What is the texture of that belonging? For this question, let's start with NTanya.

NTanya Lee 38:34

Thanks, Sammie, thanks for bringing us all together. I want to share a couple pieces of my assessment about the state of belonging and how it looks from my perspective. It's a particularly national view, as someone who's been doing national work for quite a long, long time. I also just want to name that I'm 55. I'm in a season of moving through some really deep heartbreak and life transition. I am really reckoning with the state, the failures of the political practice of the left, and trying to make real meaning of the errors that I've seen in the last few decades so that we can actually chart a path to liberation that is real. I want to start with just saying, I think belonging needs are particularly acute in this historical moment because capitalist alienation is rising.

I've actually been calling it hyper-alienation. I think this is a historically unique period. The belonging needs are acute in ways that we haven't actually seen previously in our movements, and it's because of decades of neoliberal destruction, at every level of society, the rise of the right, a global pandemic, and, I wanna name, the decimation of what I call 'the social infrastructure of working class resilience,' through neoliberalism, has created a moment in racial capitalism, where hyper-alienation is just a main feature of daily life and social relations that then impacts our whole mind-body systems, every organization, every collective space, every movement, the entire culture of our movement. And, we've been, in this period, really systematically underdeveloped and disconnected from our many lineages on the planet. More so now, I believe, then, and especially working class, oppressed, colonized people, are actually more disconnected from the lineages that made us resilient, than we have been. I would say some of the most resilient people in our movement today are people who have the least distance from their homelands, and the least distance from the places where there's a long trajectory of resilience, including some indigenous communities.

But also to name that our belonging need is acute, that we don't yet have a left that has intentionally built the social infrastructure and culture to combat this intense level of alienation amongst our people. We haven't had the tools. Too many people in our movements have been

struggling to deal with belonging needs in alienated conditions. It's work that many of us are doing, and I'm so grateful for the belonging project. I think trying to meet belonging needs is taking up way too much energy in our organizations. The ways that people are trying to meet it don't have the nuance that Sammie is offering, that there's ways of actually trying to meet the belonging needs of our people and organizations that actually can strengthen the political project, that can strengthen our unity, strengthen our political work, but mostly, I see that not happening. It's in part because of our own under development. It isn't just the lack of tools. When you are raised and shaped in a deeply alienated, individualistic society, as we have been under neoliberalism for the last few decades, it really impacts even the most radical amongst us. Our ideas may be radical, but our whole bodies and systems are shaped and really deeply alienated in individualistic ways. That gets in the way of how we then respond to the alienation amongst our people.

I think there's a particular challenge amongst young people raised in this period who are being radicalized by the incredibly fucked up conditions of the times, but don't have the infrastructure that the left has built in the past, and that oppressed people and working class people had in the Black Freedom Struggle. Working class Black institutions and organizations [that] provided much of the social infrastructure of the Black Power movement and Black Freedom Struggle, have been really decimated over the decades. And we have some rebuilding to do of our own self-governed mass institutions. And we can't move forward in our organizational work and building our movements unless we're dealing with the alienation amongst our people. For me, belonging is directly tied to that.

For later conversation, I just want to say, I think we are going to be more able to meet these acute belonging needs that are showing up in all these dysfunctional, conflictual, unnecessarily conflictual ways in our organizations and our movement if we actually have a different understanding of what human development is, and a different understanding of transformation. I'd love to talk about that more, but I think it's a way for us to be both more firm with one another, but also more compassionate with one another, if we have a different way of understanding what it means to be human on the road to liberation. I'll just end there.

Sammie Ablaza Wills 44:09

Yummy. That was great, NTanya, thank you so much. Elliott, can I ask you to go next? Do you feel prepared?

Elliott Fukui 44:19

Oui, oui, mon ami. Thank you. I'm super low spoons and I look like Casper the Friendly Ghost after 72 hours. So, I'm gonna stay off camera, but really grateful to see everyone's faces and names. God, what is the state of belonging? I really want to echo and clap clap for what NTanya brought, because I think that's a lot of what I'm also seeing. I've also been thinking

about the flip side of this, in terms of how the right is using the lack of belonging as a tool to pull in people into groupthink. And with the way social media is functioning now, they use our vulnerability as a means of manipulating people to join their side. There's that edge with belonging. I think this is also something that I'm seeing. We also have a tendency to groupthink, we also have a tendency to want to follow someone, we also have the tendency to... we've seen how that's played out on the left as well over the past 300 years or so, you know, Bolshys, Mensheys, Mao, right? Like, we can see how that also shifts our ability to be effective in our campaign work and actually do the type of radical change work that we need to do.

There's also something, I was thinking about this, I'm going to be a nerd right now I was thinking about this Baudrillard quote from the power of agony, or the Agony of Power, I'm sorry, and he says, "power itself must be abolished, and not solely because of a refusal to be dominated, which is at the heart of all traditional struggles, but also just as violently in the refusal to dominate." And I think that in a lot of the framing on the left, because it has it been, a lot of our work is necessarily reactionary--this thing happened in the community, we have to go and do this protest, this vigil, or they're trying to pass this law, so we're moving from these reactionary places, and maybe not also thinking about, what does it mean to actually let go of power? What does it mean? Instead of encouraging queer and trans people to find ways to belong within capitalist systems, to be like, how do we find ways to belong to each other? And to move away from influencer culture and move away from groupthink, but really into, how are we all asking the question of what it means to give up power? Knowing that that actually is necessary.

Like, Cecilia, rest in power, who I got... I'm gonna cry. But you know, she did that. She didn't come at us like, 'you're the client, and I'm here to give you something.' You would go to the appointment and she would take you to lunch afterwards. And she'd say, "I know you have a hard time, boo, with the hospital. How are you feeling being here? What do you need today? Have you eaten today?" It wasn't professionalized. It was someone seeing you. Breaking down that power dynamic, of provider and client, while still respecting what her role was. Her role was to get me to keep coming back to my appointments. She did that beautifully, I think, for a lot of us in New York City. And that had not existed for many of us before that. So when I think about the state of belonging, I think I really am trying to figure out how to dance on that edge of, how are we making sure we're not promoting groupthink and influencer culture and us trying to become the people in power, or having power over, but instead, how are we creating the types of belonging that, like you're saying, make people feel seen and whole and heard and in a way where they also feel powerful enough to say no, even to a comrade, when their comrade is asking them to do something that doesn't align with their principles and values? Those are the types of leaders and members that we need to be developing in this current moment. I'm done. Thank you all. Y'all are so brilliant. I'm so excited already.

Sammie Ablaza Wills 48:59

Thank you, Elliott. That was gorgeous. I think we have time for one more go at this question. If either Gopal or Michael won't want to chime in? If not, that's also okay.

Gopal Dayaneni 49:17

I'm happy to defer to you Michael. Okay.

Michael Strom 49:22

You go.

Gopal Dayaneni 49:23

Okay. There's a lot we could go down. It's like, what we mean by belonging in the first place. I think the definition you gave is really helpful. One thing I'll just say about the state of belonging in our communities is, I think we are consistently under estimating the profound alienation of having all aspects of our lives mediated through technologies that we don't design, we don't control, and can never service by the very nature of what they are. We think of technologies as tools. And we think we can use the tools however we want. But that's not what a technology is. A technology is the embodiment of relationships, of resources, and power over time. They are built on and have built in relationships of power that are not of our design or choosing. For me, I think there is something really important about what NTanya is saying about where we are with neoliberalism, but also with techno fetishism, techno dependence, or even for people like me, tech resignation, who just resign to it. That's just one thing I would add. There's a lot of ways we could go.

I also want to just name that there's a kind of sense of belonging that's sort of an enclosure, and then there's a sense of belonging that's really about the commons. Both require us to have a sense of what community we're talking about. There are ways in which we mistake access to enclosure as belonging. I think this is related to what Elliott was saying, like, just getting access to things that we've been excluded from through enclosure does not mean we then belong, it simply means we are part of the enclosure. We're just a resource to be extracted from like everything else in the enclosure. But a sense of belonging, that's actually like... For me, what I've been learning and growing into is the way in which queerness is a politic of radical complexity and radical inclusion. These kinds of politics are politics of creating belonging through a kind of commoning, through a way in which we actually do practice shared governance and meeting our needs collectively together as an expression of belonging. So I'll shut up. But I think we should be able to notice when belonging is becoming, or leaning into an enclosure of identity, and when our access to belonging is curated and mediated by whoever has the keys to the enclosure. Yeah, sorry.

What does belonging make possible in our organizations and social movements?

Sammie Ablaza Wills 52:49

Oh, my god, don't say sorry [laughs]. No, that was great! Everyone, juicy! Am I right? I actually want to ask a question that's a bit of a follow up to that. I want to make sure Michael, I'm going to ask you to go up next after I asked Gopal to elaborate a bit more. But when I spoke to a bunch of people for this project, I honestly reached out to a few people who I thought wouldn't think belonging was that important. I just wanted a wide range of opinions. But, to my surprise, across sectors and disciplines, identities, backgrounds, each person, every single person, really valued belonging as crucial to our work. So, on the other end of what you're saying, Gopal, on the other end of false belonging, or belonging that is about access to the enclosure, on the other side of that, what does belonging actually make possible when it's done in a liberatory way? When belonging is queered, when belonging is radical, what does it make possible in our organizations and social movements?

Gopal Dayaneni 54:06

I'll start by just saying... everything. What's useful about belonging for me as a frame is the same thing that's useful about 'love' for me as a frame. Both of them are fundamentally centering relationship as the basis of inquiry. That's really the most important thing. That is resistance to alienation, is to center relationships in everything. I always say this all the time. The idea that people have ideas is bullshit. Ideas are an expression of symbiosis. They only exist in the company of others. You only have ideas because you are not alone, in the same way that you only have a name because you're not alone. The notion that it's my name is absurd. The name exists so that I can belong with others. Relationship is the point of organizing. And relationship should be the thing we center and how we move. I don't think we need to abolish power, power is a dimension of every relationship. The question is, what is the relationship of power you want? And if we do not structure and culture and create the relationships of power we want, we will always default to the relationships of power in the dominant society. And so, let's cultivate the relationships of power we want: care, cooperation, consent, right? Equality, radical inclusion, those are expressions of power, right? In that way, belonging is really important. And there's other frames that we can use to hold it.

What worries me, I'll say, and then I'll pass it on, is, we don't want belonging to become this story that belonging will save us from the responsibility to do all the organizing that needs to happen, and the struggle, and the transformation. I'll just say one thing that I've noticed is, there was an explosion of interest in narrative and narrative strategy. It got to a point where people were starting to... organizers, as organizers were starting to think that it's all just about changing the story. And it's like, as if stories are told? Stories are actually lived. Narrative means 'to know,' narratives are lived. If we don't change the lived experience, we can tell all the stories we want, we can get all the memes we want, we can do all the internets we want, all

that stuff. It has to actually involve fundamentally changing how we live in the world. Those changes are the expression of different relationships of power. Belonging is a practice. Belonging isn't a... you wrote this. Belonging isn't a thing or a destination, it's a practice. And in that practice, is where our liberation can live. It can't live in just pining for belonging or somebody creates belonging. That's not it. It's the daily practice of being in right relationship with each other and that struggle.

Sammie Ablaza Wills 58:11

That is so true. Michael, do you want to add on to that? Do you want to complicate it? Move it forward?

Michael Strom 58:20

[Laughs]. I'll give it a try! I'm excited there's a recording, I'm going to need to watch some of this again, already. This is so juicy. Thank you, everyone. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm just really vibing with what people are saying. When we rightly understand belonging in the way that NTanya is putting in the chat of, it is a fundamental human need, it becomes not that belonging will save us, but that it's our work to save belonging. It is our work, when we understand the horizon we're reaching toward, to build a world where we belong to each other, where we belong to the land again, where the fruits of our labor belong to all of us, where the resources belong to all of us, right? That is ultimately what we are fighting for. We can feel that in our deepest places. Our deepest places know that we are striving for this belonging. Part of our task is to marshal that in the right direction. To say, instead of looking right at the immediate, who's right in front of you, to lift up and look to the horizon of, where are we headed? What is our role in that? How does our drive toward belonging become a drive into our own agency? As opposed to, that hurt, or pain, or drive indicating where we need others to 'fix it,' or where we need to be met by someone else, lifted up by someone else. That is a primary thing that a right understanding of belonging offers our movements. A right understanding of belonging also allows us to show up whole. If we recognize that anytime we are convening a group, in any way, everyone is arriving asking, "do I matter here? and how do I matter here?" And understanding that that is at play, regardless of our assessment of the way it's at play, that that is at play, if that becomes fundamental to how we gather each other, then I think the way we move together shifts.

Sammie Ablaza Wills 1:00:34

Hmm. All right, we got time for one more person on this question. NTanya or Elliott, if you want to go for it. If not, we could go into our next juicy question. [Sammie waits for a response].

Elliott Fukui 1:00:53

Y'all are so brilliant, just thanks for having me with you. I'm learning so much.

How would you start strengthening right-sized belonging in your work?

Sammie Ablaza Wills 1:01:01

Everyone here is brilliant! The chat is truly alight with appreciations and shout outs. I noticed this in the chat a bit, so I want to take us in this direction. Understanding the depth of what belonging means, understanding the way that we do need to lift up, that we need to look into the horizon, we need to understand this as a key facet of how we do the organizing that we do... How would you start to strengthen right-size belonging in your work? Are there specific skills you would build or questions you would ask your group? Questions you'd talked about with groups of folks? I want to start with Michael on this one. I know you just went but I've learned so much of this from you, so I am going to ask you to start

Michael Strom 1:01:59

Yeah, for sure. As a framing before this, I just want to underline everything that's been said about how structural our broken belonging is. How centuries old, how we are on chains of belonging injuries, built on top of each other, and that's how we're arriving here. In light of that, there's a real... my belly says, be soft about it. Be gentle about it. Be compassionate about it. There isn't a right way. We don't know yet. This is an act of faith in many ways. We are trying to figure out how to do a thing we have not yet done. We're all in an experiment, I'm in an experiment. I facilitate shit like this, and I'm also dealing with very recent belonging failures in the way that I have led people. I just want to invite that energy, that approach of loving experimentation, as we move into these questions.

Then, honestly, Sammie, you just wrote a whole workbook. I was thinking about my response to this question of, 'where do we start?' And I was like, 'hmm, I might know six practices.' And so, I actually just wanted to say a couple things I love about this workbook as a starting point. That's part of how I want to answer this question, and highlight the things in there that feel like really juicy starting points to me. One is the basic building block of talking about it. In Generative Somatics we say choice follows awareness. There's something powerful in even just beginning to be like, this is a thing we're looking at together. We're asking questions of, is this right sized? Or is this wrong sized? We're looking through this list of practices and beginning to ask where are we skilled? Where are we excited? Where do we think we got it? And then, where are we nervous? Where are we turning away from? Where might we need to build? Just beginning to even understand how deeply belonging is woven into our work, opens us to, 'now I'm aware of it, I can make a different choice.' That in and of itself shouldn't be underestimated as a starting point.

I really vibed with the one about collective governance, in particular, because it's where I've been failing, or some of my most recent failures have been. I talk a lot about culture. I do a lot of work around culture, around our collective practice. Culture and structure are two sides of the same coin. They're the inhale/exhale, right? And so, it actually doesn't matter if you are good at giving hard feedback, if there's not a structure for that feedback, if there's not a place

that it goes. It actually doesn't matter if you can debate about, should we pause, should we rest, if you're not paying people in a way that meets your values. There's lots of different ways where we should really make sure that any cultural practice, any relational practice we're building, is really deeply met by a structural commitment to like, how are people actually set up to engage in this?

The last thing I'll say, just one more quick little bit, is that, I think somewhere in the workbook you talk about the purpose-belonging framework. I find that super, super useful. As I said before, everyone arrives at a group asking, "do I matter here?" But they also arrive, if it's a justice-oriented group, asking, "does what I do matter here?" People both wanna have an impact, and feel a part of something. Understanding those as fundamentally woven together, that the more clear and on purpose we feel, the more we're able to access our belonging to the work we do in service of that purpose. And the more we belong, the more we can take meaningful action in service of that purpose. Starting inside of that framework and inviting ourselves to assess where our organizations are at. To really ask people the questions of, "do you feel like you matter here? Do you feel like the work you do matters here?" And if that is hard, then maybe we shouldn't move on to the other steps yet. Maybe that's where we should be starting. And maybe, we should be having those conversations and doing that assessment with our hearts and our bodies as much as we're doing it with our minds. So, that's what I think of Sammie's workbook. Everyone go use it [laughs].

Sammie Ablaza Wills 1:07:26

Thanks, Michael. Wow, it's like I asked you to say that. NTanya, can I ask you to go next and continue into this question of where should folks start? Or what are the skills that we can begin to develop?

NTanya Lee 1:07:41

Yeah, I just resonate with everything Michael was just sharing. I wanted to offer a couple of things, that are primarily from my experience in LeftRoots in the last five years. Hopefully folks have seen the organizational culture document that we created that summed up some of the lessons from our efforts to create internal cohesion, sense of belonging, anchored in shared clarity about the political purpose of the organization, so that our belonging helped us meet our purpose. Anyway, one of them is... you know, people want to be seen, all the things that we're saying, and one of the practices inside the, we called them Cadre Circles inside LeftRoots, was a practice where individuals had to share vulnerably their assessment of their actual conditions: their external conditions, what pressures were on them, but also their internal conditions, their own health, their stress level, their mental health, share them vulnerably with comrades, and make commitments about how they were going to address those conditions. Part of what then happened when we as an organization had more of a culture of people vulnerably sharing their actual individual conditions... Well, obviously, it makes possible for there to be more support,

and when you feel supported about your conditions... we're humans, we want to help each other, but also then we could make assessments about the membership conditions that named the whole range of conditions and people could feel seen not as an individual, but as part [of a whole]. So you could see, like, many people in this period are feeling deep pain about x issue and are really needing to take action toward that issue. Whereas, other people are feeling more anxiety about this other thing. Or, some people are feeling unheard, or the leadership layer of the organization is actually feeling overworked. Being able to name the range of conditions inside the organization, and name where there were contradictions, actually helped people feel seen, even if it wasn't literally naming them.

Often our organizations, in an attempt to have unity, we overgeneralize about what's actually happening inside our organization. And we don't name the real differences in the conditions. And we don't name the contradictions in the organization. And I mean contradiction in the way of, there's two things that are part of the whole of the organization, that are both true, that are in tension with each other. When we do that, it depersonalizes conflict, it depersonalizes tensions and differences in the organization. So that's one thing, that practice of sharing more vulnerably conditions.

The other thing was, Steve was saying in the chat about feminists, and yeah, as a Marxist and as a feminist, I think some basic feminist practices around having it be valued in some concrete way in the organization, people who are both doing the work of, 'how are you doing,' asking the questions that Michael was saying, 'how do you feel here?' who are who do that work, and, ensuring that those people are being pushed to also develop other skills that are not only about the care work. Because that work is so gendered in our patriarchal society. When you have people who are both doing some of the lead intellectual labor, or lead strategist, or things that are traditionally masculine gendered, getting those people to take up the care work, and to take up the responsibility for asking those questions of, 'how are we feeling in our mind in our bodies,' but then you also challenge the people who are drawn to that work to take up new capacities. I think when that is intentionally done in the organization, it has a really powerful impact on the overall culture.

Sammie Ablaza Wills 1:12:12

Delicious. Elliott, I want to ask you to go next. And as you answer this, in terms of where we can go with organizations, I also want to ask you, because I think I've learned this so much from you in our interpersonal relationship and how I see this in the world... How we also cultivate belonging, not just in our organizations or in our spaces, but also in ourselves and beyond any one organization, what are those practices, those nested practices, that we can start to cultivate or strengthen?

How can folks cultivate their own internal sense of belonging? How can we broaden our belonging beyond any one organization?

Elliott Fukui 1:12:52

Ooh, yeah. Also again, just really appreciating what everyone's bringing to the table. When I started organizing, I started at places like Clean Water Action and Jewish Community Action and like, I am not Jewish, you know. Places that were around. Planned Parenthood was down the street from me. For me, organizing first started very spatially. It was what was happening in my neighborhood, the issues that I saw in my community as a young person, and also a desire to learn. Like, what are these issues? How can I show up in this community in this way? What does it mean for, as a queer and trans person, to be supporting feminist organizations? What does it mean for me to be in environmental justice spaces? In order to do that, and this was back in ye olden days, in the early 2000s, nobody knew what a trans was. I would show up and they would be like, who the hell is this tiny person who just popped up here? A part of belonging for me was also understanding that people are not going to know who I am. And even if you understand trans issues, or you understand what it means to be hafu, or Buddhist, that doesn't mean you understand me. And I can't assume that of the other people that I'm interacting with, just because someone is embodied in a particular way or identifies in a particular way, I can't come into that space with an assumption. It really is about, how do we maintain our curiosity about ourselves and each other, together.

I would also say, if you can, getting de-escalation training. I also started in a lot of community security and cop watch spaces. It shows up in my day-to-day meetings and organizing work. Obviously, it's very different to deescalate a Nazi or whatever, than your coworker, hopefully... otherwise, your org needs some work. But, you can apply de-escalation strategies. Everyone was talking about self awareness leading to choice. My friend Che described safety as agency. When I think about the ways that we also need to be responsible for our own safety, and that we need to be thinking about, how am I keeping everyone safe, is also a part of how we create belonging.

Disability Justice is also another great framework that really supported me in thinking about... Well, firstly, feeling okay bringing my full self into a space as a disabled person means other disabled people can do that. Being able to be honest and cry, and not try to be the tough guy, means other trans men can call me and cry, and maybe they're not going to do something unaccountable or harmful. So it's also about how we are modeling to each other this safety and care even when it's very scary and vulnerable. And that when you have tools like de-escalation strategies that are verbal... I really love giving and receiving feedback. I love doing scenarios and skits with people, because it's also about getting some of that embodied practice. I think Michael was talking about that too.

When you're thinking about what skills you want to develop to feel belonging in yourself, you have to, like Gopal said, nobody can make you belong, you have to belong to yourself. For me, that was about getting very clear about my principles and values, and where my hard lines and no's and boundaries are. I won't do something if I can't bring my people with me. I won't do something if it compromises my membership, or who I'm working with, their trust in me. Without that, we don't have a movement, we don't have an organization, we don't have a community. We have reactivity. So, I'll stop there. Think about, what are the ways that I deescalate myself? What are the ways I know how to deescalate other people? Because you do, if you've ever lived in a family or been outside in your life, you have de-escalated at some point. It's just getting really confident and comfortable, so that you can apply that in any situation and that encourages belonging, but it also encourages us all to be like, 'what is safety,' and that we are all responsible when we are in space together for each other's safety.

Sammie Ablaza Wills 1:18:14

Thank you so much. We are so close to the end of this event, but quickly, I'm gonna ask Gopal if you'd like to add anything.

Gopal Dayaneni 1:18:22

I would actually, surprise! I wanted to bring the self sense of belonging from a different perspective as a middle aged, cis hetero, married man from a patriarchal culture and a patriarchal upbringing, I actually have to learn that I am not entitled to belong everywhere all the time. I had been raised and cultured and empowered to belong wherever I want. And, obviously, there are spaces I'm excluded from against my will. But, most places, especially in the left, I get to decide if I want to belong.

Learning that I don't belong everywhere is important. Belonging has boundaries. It shouldn't have borders. But it does have to have boundaries in the same way that all commons have boundaries. The lie about commons is that it's a free for all, that everybody gets to take and do whatever they want. That's not what it is. It is a practice of self-governance. Belonging has to involve that. For me, just on the personal part of it, it's understanding the limits of my own empowered sense of belonging, and how dangerous that can be for others. Or how, if not dangerous, how it can become a barrier for other people's participation and their own sense of belonging. That's part of my own journey, just on that question.

Closing

Sammie Ablaza Wills 1:18:28

Wow, that was such a helpful framing, such a helpful way to end that offering. I would like this to continue for the rest of my life. But that's not how time works, unfortunately. I want to give

just the utmost love, there has been so much love in the chat, but let's do a little love surge, if you will, in the chat, to all of the panelists for their incredible wisdom, their brilliance, all of the smart, sharp, loving things that they have said, thank you so, so very, very much. I am incredibly honored that you four have joined for this conversation. I know not everyone is into panels, or into online, or into talking out loud in front of a lot of people. So from the deep, deep depths of my heart, I am just so grateful. This is all recorded, and we will be listening to it for days to come. I am so, so sure.

Appreciations

Sammie Ablaza Wills 1:21:21

We are almost to an incredible moment where I'm going to show you the workbook live! In order to do that, I'm going to take a second to give some appreciations. Because, of course, I simply must. Here on the screen I would just like to thank all of the people who I had conversations with to make this happen. This is also in the workbook. So please check it out. I've been so lucky to talk to the most amazing people as part of this project. I also want to thank all of the people who have looked over drafts, who have helped with this event. Shout out to Connie for helping with tech, shout out to Jenica for volunteering at this event. Again, the incredible art throughout the website and the workbook is done by Shreya. Shout out to Mioi for helping put the website together so beautifully. Shout out to the lovely Hannah, for helping do the audio recording and editing all of it. Hannah is in the room right now. [Hannah cheers in the background]. She cried through the whole thing. And again, shout out to our panelists.

Website & Workbook Launch

Sammie Ablaza Wills 1:22:47

And now, the moment you have probably been waiting for. Right-Sized Belonging is live! Let's take a look at it. [Sammie opens the website on screen share]. If you go to belongingpractices.org, you can see the website which is chock full of content, background information, all of this stuff about why we should think about belonging, you can see each of the practices in length. Again, shout out to Mioi for taking what I had in my brain as a website and putting it into action. The website's probably a bit slow because now we're all looking at it. But, on the website, you can also download the full workbook, which looks like this. [Sammie shares the workbook on screen share]. Wow, check that out. If you prefer a PDF, you can get your PDF on. It's clickable, featuring this beautiful art by Shreya once again. And, if reading isn't your jam, don't you worry. Because you can listen to an audio recording in the tool section of the website [Sammie shows the link to the audio on the website]. An audio recording of me reading it in my best podcast voice, with some special guests. You're gonna have to listen to find out. I'm very, very grateful to say, and Jenica already put it in the chat, but Jenica if you could paste it one more time, belongingpractices.org.

Call to Action for Palestine

Sammie Ablaza Wills 1:24:42

I would just like to say that now this work lives with all of us. Like I said at the start, it is all of our role to cultivate belonging in ourselves and in our organizations. In this moment, with this ongoing genocide and with the hectic year to come, we are going to need to get good at doing this for our movements to thrive. If you want to talk to me further about it, you can contact me using the contact form on the website, it sends an email right to me. But in this moment, I also want to amplify a call to action, put out recently by Palestinian-led organizations in the U.S. I know that this is President's Day, so please continue to turn out and put pressure on the White House and Congress to stop arming and fueling the genocide in Gaza. Big Boo for Presidents's Day, can I get a boo in the chat? Boo! So true. Jenica is going to paste a link to a toolkit so you can continue to take action. I want to make this so clear. Our belonging in this world is near meaningless if we turn away from violence in order to receive it. I belong to the idea of liberation against all colonizers. And I implore you with every cell in my body to continue to do anything you can to embody that belonging in action. Thank you all so much, again, for being here. Thank you to our incredible panelists. Thank you to all of the participants in the chat. All of the people who have shouted this out, the people who have made this project possible. You are who I belong to. Thank you so so much. Really grateful to be here. Thanks, everyone.