

## A Meditation on Strangeness and Belonging

In 1948 a former United States Army flier, walked into the U.S. Embassy in Paris and relinquished one of the most concrete artifacts of belonging - his citizenship.

Garry Davis, who died last month in Burlington, Vermont at the age of 91, was dean of the One World movement, a self-declared stateless man whose self made passport dubbed him World Citizen Number 1. Expelled from and arrested in many countries, Davis told Newsweek magazine in 1978 "I am not a man without a country, merely a man without nationality."

Our community's value this year is welcoming the stranger. Webster's invokes nationality in its definition of "stranger": "relating to or characteristic of another country," it reads, and also, "not native to or naturally belonging in a place."

Strangeness and belonging can be seen as flip sides of the same construct. Without belonging, without an "inside," an "us," there is no "outside," no "them," no stranger.

We could say that it is belonging that makes the stranger.

Belonging feels so central, so innate, so natural, that although we yearn for it, go to great lengths for it (and strive to bequeath it to our children), we can scarcely define it or separate it from what makes us feel most like ourselves. It shapes the very contours of our lives, delineating our friendships, our professional choices, our houses of worship, our vacation spots, our interior decorating selections.

How strong is belonging? It made me feel like an awkward stranger in the predominantly Christian prep school I attended. I has Dave and I, despite serious political reservations, sending our children to a Labor Zionist summer camp where they can feel part of an irreverent and social justice oriented group of peers. It has my family, ridiculously, waving at other turquoise Honda Fit drivers as we pass each other. It has me, a modern agnostic, here today, intoning ancient prayers.

But belonging is neither natural nor neutral. A sense of who did and did not belong in his gated community inspired George Zimmerman to follow Trayvon Martin that tragic night in 2012. Belonging stirs people born and raised in the United States to feel entitled to move to a disputed and far away territory where they take part in pushing still further away the swiftly receding possibility of justice for those who live there. Belonging creates safety, or the illusion of safety, for those within, but at a cost, a cost felt by those on the outside, and, eventually, by us all.

Citizen Number 1, Garry Davis, saw belonging as a construct, the boundaries of which could, with his bold but simple declaration be shifted and redrawn, creating a giant, worldwide circle with all of humanity inside.

So this year, as we challenge ourselves to "welcome the stranger," I would like us to challenge the very notion of the stranger, to consider the facets of belonging that create strangeness itself, and to ponder, as Dr. Martin Luther King put it fifty years ago, that "their destiny is tied up with our destiny. ...their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom." We live together in our One World, dividing it at our peril. As King so simply put it, "We cannot walk alone."