

Making the Case for Belonging



Photo by Katherine Loflin.

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Friday, October 9, 2015 -- Katherine Loflin

Curator's Note: *This blog is Part 2 in a five-part series by Dr. Katherine Loflin in anticipation of the release of her book, **Place Match: The City Doctor's Guide to Finding Where You Belong**, later this year. Through both research and her own personal experiences, Katherine has made some important and exciting discoveries about the essence and possibilities in placemaking. We're excited to partner with her in sharing some of those discoveries through this blog series.*

“Place Match: The City Doctor’s Guide to Finding...

“Where You Should Be”?

“Where You Want to Live”?

“Where You’ll Love”?

I considered many options when I was coming up with ending part of my book title. But when I hit upon: “Where You Belong,” I knew the search was over. Since then, I have spent a lot of time thinking about and working in that space of “belonging” and have come to an important conclusion:

Belonging is the ultimate goal for our work in places.

All of us as humans are on a lifelong quest to feel a sense of belonging and fit with our environment. We seek that in our families, in our schools, in our workplaces, in our relationships, and now more than ever, in our places. As a result, we are constantly in a process of self-monitoring and are acutely aware of places and environments where we feel “at home” and others where we feel “out of place.” We recognize pretty quickly places where we could thrive and places where we know we would struggle to just survive.

I have just returned from leading an innovative summit in Iowa focused on growing inclusion in communities that are rapidly changing demographically: both in numbers and in diversity. My goal with the summit was to challenge participants to think more comprehensively about these issues. To take the conversation from just talking about individuals to talking about the place, to build the topic from inclusion to belonging.

Here’s why. First of all, individual behaviors always aggregate up to creating the culture of the place. Whether it’s civility, welcomeness, or strangers acknowledging each other when they pass in the grocery store aisle, everything residents do within their space creates the culture of the place. It’s a reminder that though we are very expectant of our leadership to create the place we want, we have significant responsibility in the outcome as well.

And secondly, creating belonging in places will take us (and our place) further than tolerance, inclusiveness or even openness. If you think about these concepts, you notice something inherent in them: they are one-way interactions. I will tolerate you.

I will include you. I will be open to you. I am doing these things for you and isn't that nice of me?

Instead what should be striving for is the desire for you to feel that you belong here as much as I do. That our feelings of shared fit to the place is what bonds us to this place and to each other. I have an important role to play through my behaviors that I should recognize, but I alone do not have the power to decree to you whether you are in your Place Match. You deserve to feel not that you are tolerated, but that you belong.

Seeking belonging also levels the playing field. It is a conversation that applies to all of us. None of us are immune. We all have had the experience of feeling we don't belong for some reason or another. And that relatability should stop us from seeing each other as just primarily one thing or one demographic element. We are not only a racial or ethnic minority. We also may be the parent of a young child. Or a new resident. Or divorced. We are many things in one. Inevitably, there is some aspect of ourselves that could divide us from each other and push us to the outside. And the universality of that potential should help to bond us together as we search for the place we belong.

Though our search for belonging is universal to us as humans, our paths to belonging are as different as we are. And even if our shared feeling of belonging to our place is one of the few things that connect us, it's a powerful place to start.

Related Blogs:

[Finding Belonging and Relationship with Place](#)

[The Path to Belonging: Date Your Place](#)

[Changes: Understanding the Place Relationship Over Time](#)

[Shared Narratives: Our Places, Ourselves](#)

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