



## Belonging is sharing love, Ubuntu in action

*Juan Camilo Roman Estrada and Dasha Lavrinienko*

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*In this article we will share with you our reflections on Love and Belonging. Since we started to dream about this project, we have had an uncountable number of conversations, long reading days and nights and debates with friends, family and colleagues. By the end of each, everything always came down to Love. Love is not something commonly talked about in youth work. Neither is Belonging. We think though it is one of the unique keys towards wellbeing: of youth and our planet.*

In our understanding, *Belonging* is best described as the deep and comprehensive intuition of *being part of a bigger context, a with-nessing (connected with), a capacity for sharing love and life*. It is shared love that makes us belong, and we have the potential to share love with all that can exist in this beautiful terrestrial world.

It all begins as an experience of growing up within a caring community that is able to share love. Because our human children are perhaps the most vulnerable mammal in the known animal world. For a long period of time, we are defenseless and totally dependent on others during childhood. It appears that the reasons for this long vulnerability consist in the adaptive evolutionary capacity that complex learning implicates, requiring an enduring openness and receptivity that can allow a human being to unfold and integrate multiple modes of consciousness at once, and in original ways. Such integration of complexity has allowed humans to develop original languages, ways of communication and symbolic meanings, accessing and passing on the collective wisdom of their communities, unfolding the greater capacities of intellectual understanding, emotional self-regulation and integration, and socio natural conscience and ethos.

Our first impressions of belonging are naturally from our parents and other caring adults —if we are lucky to have them around— . Especially in the parents' nest during the first years of tending and nursing, a human baby is supposed to receive an overwhelming avalanche of love... it has to feel like god, like the greatest thing that has ever happened in the whole history of the cosmos... it has to be *the Beloved*.

The eternity of love that gets to be experienced by a desired child when cuddling with "mamma og pabbi" is the origin and foundation of the capacity to consciously belong, a capacity that can grow through loving relationships where love is shared with joy and gratitude. This practice of love that forms the minerality of true belonging gradually may include higher and higher levels of complexity and *response ability*... from the family, to the community, to the world, to the





ecosystems, to the Earth, the Solar system, the Milky Way and the Absolute. This capacity to belong becomes a virtue, a blossoming of the soul, a profound feeling of being always and everywhere a precious part and heir of invisible forces that nurture and provide every single moment with life, love, joy, gratitude and humbleness. It goes through the deeper layers of the psyche nurturing our perception and our capacity to relate with empathy and compassion in and within the greater Earth community, what David Abram calls the more-than-human world. Of course, we have to be aware that not everyone has been lucky enough to experience this joy of acceptance and unconditional love from their caregivers while growing up. It is actually a pandemic of our times, the abandonment and isolation that many children and young people are suffering from. This results in the way young people build (or not) their relationships with others, how they feel or don't feel an ability to share love, to live fully, to belong.

We believe that it is urgent to slow down and critically think about belonging in the way we are describing, and what it means to belong to nature and to the Earth... even though such a feeling/intuition/non-rational understanding is deeper and wider, crossing over areas of the psyche where language has nothing to say and becomes meaningfully silent. Reason cannot reach the meaning of belonging. It is primordial and foundational to our perception of the world and the unconscious and instinctive drives and motives that guide our endeavours in life.

It is always possible for those who experience this capacity for *sharing love* to open spaces where love and being loved can be practiced and learned, in creative and adaptive ways. Learning spaces where multiple languages and ways of expression unite to foster nature connection and collective wellbeing, practicing cultural regeneration and solidarity. We think it is very important to cultivate a conversation among young people and ask them what they think *love* is or can be. How do they define it? Is *love* a noun or a verb? What does it mean *to be able to love*? How do they think it is connected to an ability to belong?

By living in a consumerist society, where everything has a price, we have come to believe that we need to behave in certain ways in order to deserve love. Be good. Be worthy. To be someone. To be productive and sell our time and energy for a good price. We forget though, that what matters most is to be *able to love and receive love, to share it spontaneously and with generosity, this might change the world*. To have this capacity developed and nurtured, consciously worked on, can counterbalance in great measure the fear of scarcity and the myth of a separated self, helping us to impregnate resilience in our communities with a sense of kinship with all living things around us, making *Ubuntu* a daily practice.

Many of our relationships with the natural world help us learn this: it provides us with air to breathe, water to drink, food to nurture our bodies and infinite knowledge to learn how to live in harmony with all living creatures. Ask young people you work with, what do they think of globalised culture, advertisement and content of popular songs, movies, and series. Do they feel





pressure of how they should look like and what they should do in order to be liked or loved by someone? Do they critically reflect on what is being bombarded to them from mass and social media? What if we helped young people to realize that if they develop their own ability to love they would become more resilient and free from the manipulation of the weapons of mass distraction?

And what do we mean when we use the word "love"? It would be useful to have some reference to share, right? Bell Hooks, in her book "All About Love" (2018) refers to a definition by Scott Peck, who echoes Erich Fromm and defines love as "the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth. Love is as love does. Love is an act of will – namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We chose to love."<sup>1</sup>. From this definition we can see that love can be both a noun and a verb, it requires action and will. We want to go a bit further by saying that the ability to share love can be learned and cultivated. Furthermore, it can be reawakened through good will and nature connection practices. When we refer to love, we also don't limit it as an action among human individuals. It is also love for trees and birds, insects and mountains, a love that nourishes us. It is love from and to nature.

One of the great examples of the ability to love is the African understanding of the great family: *Ubuntu*.

What is Ubuntu? Many religions have at their core an idea "treat others as you would like to be treated", but Ubuntu goes a step beyond that. It recognizes the interconnectedness of all and the priceless worth of all that is alive. From Action it steps into Being as such that manifests in multiple ways and forms, as Who we are has an impact on all of us. "I understood from early on in my life that being known as a person *with Ubuntu* was one of the highest collades one could ever receive. ..The idea and practice of Ubuntu is one of Africa's greatest gifts to the world".<sup>2</sup>

"I am because You are".

"I am because We are".

And by We, we don't mean only people. We mean ecosystems, animals and plants, birds, rocks and soil, the sky and the sun, the whole concert of life, our Earth community to which we will ever belong, consciously or unconsciously.

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<sup>1</sup> Bell Hooks, All About Love p.4.

<sup>2</sup> Mungi Ngomane, Everyday Ubuntu p.8.





Living with Ubuntu, means practicing empathy and intentional love which the world needs so much, deeper connection from self to the whole, ready to love and to be loved, *belonging to nature and the whole world*.

This is, we strongly believe, the essence of collective wellbeing and a conscious participation in the evolution of life.

Ubuntu practices are something very interesting to share with young people and ask them how they would imagine the world that might follow such values? Do they think people who live with Ubuntu feel belonging and love? What would their ideas be on how they can implement Ubuntu in their daily lives and for example at their youth club/organisation or during a youth exchange they participate in?

Another beautiful example of interconnectedness from the natural world is the fungi network that lives in the soil, the mycelial web. Have you heard that the fungi network is the oldest living organism on Earth? It has trillions of connections and goes through thousands of kilometers beneath the soil, being a communication ally in the forests between the constellation of trees and an engine for all the organic transformation happening out there. <sup>3</sup> Fungi operates in constant connection, affirming their belonging to the soil - something to learn from. Remember that the word *human* comes from *humus*, Latin for *soil*. We are ecosystems, living soil, thinking soil, loving soil for the wellbeing of the interbeing<sup>4</sup>.

Nevertheless, the quality of belonging has been also understood in narrower ways, to the extent that it separates and discriminates. Recall the Nazis and how they used propaganda to support their idea of belonging to a superior race. Fascism thrived and created violence and suffering based on the idea that one race and type of human was superior to others. They might have also felt a sense of belonging: to an idea, to a group of people with a common purpose. But it definitely did not involve sharing love for the benefit of the world. Because sharing love has no limits, no discrimination and for sure it doesn't create suffering and violence.

It is important thus to remember to constantly ask ourselves: "does this action or feeling bring joy to all or only to me? Is my heart open to receive, give and learn from the differences I might encounter when sharing love with all kinds of people and creatures of this Earth? Can I act having in mind the impacts of my actions on seven generations ahead?"

We are conscious of the fact that such words as Love, Belonging and Ubuntu are complex and ambivalent. It's not because of this though that we shouldn't engage young people in reflecting on their meaning in their lives and the importance of cultivating them. And we truly believe that

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<sup>3</sup> [Fantastic Fungi](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Interbeing](#)





nature can teach us loads when it comes to the ability to love and feeling loved, nurturing within us a space for belonging: to ourselves, to the communities we love and to the awesome network of nature, our mother Earth, the source of all love.

Bibliography:

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