

# (belonging)

*Finding*

*the Way*

*Back to*

*One*

*Another*

Sharon A. Hersh

If you feel alone and stuck, read this book. Rediscover *our* rescue story and a love worth living for.

BOB GOFF, bestselling author

I know Sharon Hersh, and I am privileged to be a part of her story. I have witnessed some of the heartache she writes about and the war of desire that she names with raw, stunning, and life-giving truth. This book, like her life, is a song written in the minor key that makes me tremble with the hope that I, too, broken as I am, might be the delight of God. Sharon takes us to the deeper story that always intersects with our worst moments and most mundane days and transforms us as the truest storyteller rewrites what we fear can never be told. *Belonging* will change the trajectory of your story and help you join the stories around you with wisdom and joy.

DAN B. ALLENDER, PHD, professor of counseling psychology and founding president, The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology; author of *To Be Told*, *The Wounded Heart*, and *Healing the Wounded Heart*

Sharon's book is life-changing. She shares her struggles and brokenness with such daring vulnerability, it makes you feel safe to explore the pages of your own wounded history. I found myself highlighting line after line. So much wisdom and perspective in these pages. I truly believe this book will help so many on the search to understand the center of our "earthquakes" and the healing that is possible when we live our lives with open hands and honesty.

CINDY MORGAN, singer/songwriter; author

I couldn't stop reading this book. Sharon Hersh is a true sage, and wisdom seeps through each page of costly reflection and bloody experience. I could trust that she had gone before me, cleared the path, and was leading me into the arms of a wildly loving God who was aching for my return home. Buy this book, and be forever marked.

ANDREW J. BAUMAN, author of *Stumbling toward Wholeness*

*Belonging* is Sharon's most important book yet. We're invited into the ache of the "More" we all long for, not least through Sharon's vulnerable storytelling. In a culture hungry for what is illusive, grasping for what is just out of reach, her story invites us to rest in the Love which is already ours.

CHUCK DEGROAT, professor, therapist, author

*Belonging* . . . the very title made my heart lurch with longing. Sharon's luscious prose and heart-wrenching transparency freshly illuminated my journey within the narrative of the larger human story God is writing amid the ache and chaos of planet earth. If you, too, are looking to move beyond your secrets, to find transformation through pain, Sharon points us toward a God big enough to sweep us into the community of the beloved. The place where we are finally and ultimately Home.

JEROME DALEY, executive coach and spiritual mentor at Thrive 9 Solutions;  
author of *Gravitas*

Has the church become an "impostor factory"? Right now, our machine learning and cognitive technology has already surpassed

humanity in matters of self-awareness toward relevant, effective responses. For many, this is cause for great concern. But not for those who are brave enough to step out of the narcissism created by unresolved pain and into the realm of authenticity and true community. *Belonging* unravels the mystery of why it's impossible to get close to someone who is always trying to be in control. It reads like a guidebook toward rediscovering the wonder of a six-year-old and courageously invites us to consider what we can learn from Judas about ourselves. If you've ever felt shackled with a burden of pain or loved someone who is trapped in the worst parts of their story, this book—with simplicity and compassion throughout—offers a path toward healing for those who are willing to do the hard and humbling work of facing the inner giants that block our way to freedom.

JUNI FELIX, member of Stanford Behavior Design Lab teaching team; author



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A NavPress resource published in alliance  
with Tyndale House Publishers



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*Belonging: Finding the Way Back to One Another*

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(dedication)

*for all who  
are longing for  
Home*





*Belonging is a story  
that makes you feel at home just by hearing it.  
Belonging is like a family where  
everything's all right.  
Belonging turns a light on in the dark.  
It's a love that always cares  
and will never leave you.  
If you have a heart, it will break.  
Belonging heals the broken heart.*



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# Foreword

*BELONGING: FINDING THE WAY BACK TO ONE ANOTHER* was a hard book for me to read.

Sharon Hersh is my friend. One of the reasons I like her so much is that she, as much as anybody I know, confesses her sins, is clear about her failures, defines her fears, describes her pain, and reveals who she really is. It's an overused word, but *authentic* is the word that defines Sharon and her story. As I read her book, I found myself saying several times, "I don't believe I would have said that." By the way, that's a positive—rare and refreshing—but it's certainly not the reason this book was hard to read.

It wasn't hard to read because what she wrote isn't true. It's truth on steroids! Not only that. This wasn't a hard book to read because it was difficult to understand or because it was unbiblical or unorthodox. Sharon Hersh writes with a clear, profound, and powerful simplicity, and she always teaches the truth from a solid biblical foundation.

This book was hard to read because Sharon solicits from

her readers, clients, and students the response of “You too?” And that makes self-examination possible (almost mandatory). Frankly, I’m not big into self-examination. I’m doing fine. I’m an old, cynical preacher who just wants to be left alone.

Sharon and Jesus won’t leave me alone.

If you want to be left alone, put this book down right now. Don’t thank me. I was glad to help.

On the other hand . . .

- if you wince at the division, hatred, and anger within and without the family of God;
- if you grow tired of always trying to prove that you’re right, good, and pure;
- if you sometimes think that there has to be a better and more effective way to point others to Christ or even create friendships;
- if you grow tired of the lies you’ve told yourself and others; and
- if you would like to be free

. . . this book could change your life.

The late Jack Miller (a professor at Westminster Seminary and the founder of Surge, a major world-mission ministry) used to say that the Christian faith can be summed up in two sentences: 1. Cheer up—you’re a lot worse than you think you are; and 2. Cheer up—God’s grace is a lot bigger than you think it is.

## FOREWORD

There is a sense in which what is needful is very hard. It feels like dying. But it's also the easiest thing in the world. God really does it all. All it requires is that we take the first step. Then the real God will take the second step. And by the time we get to the third step, we'll know that it was God who took that first step. More important, insofar as we're willing to take the journey, we'll find an exhilarating freedom and an infectious joy. Best of all, God will enable us to love others—and to do it without an agenda.

A number of years ago, my wife and I had dinner with some friends, and Gigi Graham (Billy and Ruth Graham's daughter) was there. As I remember it, the conversation had taken a passionate and rather contentious turn. Gigi said, "I believe that all I'm called to do is to love people. I don't have to change them. That's God's business. I am called to love people no matter their politics, their sexual proclivities, or their belief systems." I said to Gigi that she needed to have some convictions. Gigi replied, "Okay, but I asked my father, and he said I was right." She didn't say it, but her expression shouted it: "So there!"

Just love! What an intriguing idea.

Sharon is going to tell you what she's learned from Jesus. You won't like it, but you'll end up rising and calling her blessed.

*Steve Brown, broadcaster, professor, and author of*  
Talk the Walk: How to Be Right without Being  
Insufferable





CHAPTER I

# The Way Back

*The tale of  
someone's life begins  
before they are born.*

MICHAEL WOOD, IN SEARCH OF SHAKESPEARE

I DON'T KNOW HOW MY LIFE became all about me, but it did. Maybe it started when I got straight As on my report card in the third grade. Believing I was enough haunted me later when I got a B in algebra. It energized me when I won "Best Camper" at Rocky Mountain Grace Camp (I'm sure you see the irony). It mocked me when my mom discovered I skipped school for a day in middle school and lied about it. It soothed me when my parents told me I was special. It paralyzed me when I smoked pot with Tommy Ismond during my freshman year of high school (my parents didn't see *that*

as so special). My mother's words reverberated in my heart, hot with shame, "*I don't even know if you're a Christian!*" I remember pulling out my dusty Bible for some confirmation, reading Romans 7 in the New Testament and knowing it was written about me: "Yes. I'm full of myself. . . . What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise" (Romans 7:15). My confused sense of self conspired to convince me I needed to become better at hiding my flaws, failures, and mistakes to prove I was good enough, I could make my life work, and I was worthy of love.

My newly resolved strategy of showing off my bright and shiny side while hiding my shadow side worked, but it felt a bit like trying to hold a beach ball underwater twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. I was exhausted from suppressing part of the truth, protecting my image, and proving I was good enough. And I was lonely. It's impossible to get close to someone who is always trying to be in control.

My story started to shift one Sunday afternoon years after my brief experimentation with marijuana. The secrets of my failed attempts to be enough accumulated faster than the interest on the credit cards I was overindulging on to make my exterior world look good. My marriage broke into a thousand pieces that all the best counselors in the world could not put back together. I started drinking again after being in recovery from alcoholism for years. I was writing a

book on relationships and speaking at women's retreats, but I didn't feel like I belonged anywhere. I was heartbroken and ashamed. The weight of me was crushing the life out of me, and I couldn't tell anyone.

At that time, the liquor stores in Colorado were closed on Sundays, and I was desperate for a drink—for an escape from the self that in public acted like I was enough to face the challenges of life and in private knew that I was not. I drove to a local restaurant and sat at the bar, ordering drinks until my mind and heart were numb. I stumbled to my car to make the short drive home, and the most terrible thing I could imagine happened. I glanced in my rearview mirror and saw the flashing lights of the law. It's a blur what happened next—questions I couldn't answer, humiliation stronger than all that booze, handcuffs. I was arrested for driving under the influence. I knew my world would never be the same. I would have to work even harder to erase this hideous blot from my carefully kept record.

I spent a few hours in detox before I was released to a taxicab driver, who took me home. I certainly couldn't call anyone I knew. I fell into my bed, pulled the blankets over my head, and prayed that I would die. How would I ever survive this? Whom could I trust with *this*? Was it possible to save me with the me that had gotten me into this mess in the first place? I remember waking up the next morning and looking at my wrists with a mixture of confusion and terror. Both wrists were marked perfectly in the center with a deep

wound. Initially, I wondered what happened . . . and then I remembered the handcuffs.

What kind of a person does such a selfish thing? How could I write and speak about God, his love, his desire for us to love one another—and be such an unlovable person?

We all have stories revealing these kinds of paradoxes, don't we? We are proud, and we hide. We serve, and we feel contempt for others and ourselves. We join, and we isolate. We want God, and we want to *be* god. We bless, and we wound. We are afraid, and we dare greatly. We fall down, and we rise. The paradox within me pushed me further into the dark corners of my life and fueled my determination to try harder, do better, and keep secret anything that might prove my utter inadequacy.

I didn't know then that we don't carry our secrets; they carry us.<sup>1</sup>

Thank God, this secret eventually carried me to a treatment center, where a wise counselor asked me if there was any part of my story I hadn't told anyone. I had already confessed to him about the DUI and couldn't think of any remaining secrets until a few hours later, when the secret I kept even from myself became clear: I hated myself. I felt monstrous and certain that anything beautiful in me had been crushed by the terrible in me. I didn't belong anywhere. All of the whispers I'd tried to silence were true. I wasn't enough. I didn't deserve to be called a Christian. I was unworthy of love. *It was devastatingly all about me.*

The fear of being “found out” in our inadequacies and failures sneaks up on us, much like the police car did in my rearview mirror on that terrible day. It sucker punches us and schools us to cover ourselves with effort, piety, accomplishments, and grandiosity—inevitably resulting in an aching emptiness and sickening shame as we find ourselves sitting in a pile of dust after chasing the wind. This experience of duality, which results in a shaky or false sense of self, is not about the culture, the church, politics, or social media. *It is about us.*

Our narratives—whether they are pinned on Pinterest or spoken as testimonies during small group at church—are filled with words meant to prove ourselves:

- *Everything I need is within me.*
- *I can be the change to make the world great again.*
- *God wants you to be a better you.*
- *Think better and live better.*
- *You can heal your life.*
- *Be your best self, only better.*
- *Visit on Sunday. It's time to soar!*
- *My rights are human rights.*
- *I am enough.*

All this positive self-talk results in stories filled with anxiety, shame, drivenness, pride, guilt, arrogance, entitlement . . . and self:



**Narcissism:** *self-love, self-admiration.*

*“Self-love is often rather arrogant than blind; it does not hide our faults from ourselves, but persuades us that they escape the notice of others.”—Samuel Johnson<sup>2</sup>*

But here is the good news. All of the stories we know and have lived—of success and failure, of *It's all about me* or *Never mind, I don't matter*, of unbelievable selfishness and inexplicable selflessness—mean far more than we know. They are about us and our deep hope to belong to something *More* than us. A confused, false, inflated, or deflated sense of self is not the story God intended for us—but it is the reason we ache for a sense of belonging. It's not that we don't want to belong. We don't know how—

—because we're living by the wrong story.

We need to return to an ancient story that is not tethered to us. This story invites us to know God and the belonging and worthiness he speaks into our lives, enabling us to create a more welcoming world for one another.

When we don't understand *our story*—God's first story about all of us—we waver between entitlement and emptiness, narcissism and nihilism, every man and woman for themselves and “we the people.” We become unstable, determined, guarded, grandiose, defensive, and resolve to turn off Twitter because we're afraid of what we might reveal about ourselves or be accused of revealing. Only when we understand *our story* and what it means for our individual stories can we unlearn this muddled sense of self.

In the beautiful book *Between the Dreaming and the Coming True: The Road Home to God*, the author tells the story of a four-year-old girl already longing to find her way back. She is overheard whispering in her newborn brother's ear, “*Baby, tell me what God sounds like. I am starting to*



*forget.*”<sup>3</sup> It is the same for us. We can remember what God sounds like only when we return to and recapture the meaning of his first story about us.

Our first story has been lost in translation in a world divided by fear, anger, and alienation. And because of that, we’ve gotten lost in the plots in our individual stories. When we rediscover the meaning of our first story, we can reorient our individual stories to cast out fear with love, slay anger with grace, and find our way back to one another.

As we bravely face ourselves, the twists and turns in our stories, and the cast of characters around us, we can discover something extraordinary: the innate truth of belonging and worthiness that God writes into our stories. And in discovery, we can start to imagine how to invite others into this greater sense of belonging.

The way back to finding ourselves and one another is not for the faint of heart. It’s messy. It’s hard work. And it’s worth it.

But how do we get there?

When my children were young, our family vehicle was a cherry-red Jeep Grand Cherokee. We referred to that slightly dangerous (no seat belts!) wide-open space in the rear of the vehicle as the “wayback.” My kids called dibs on the wayback every time we got in the car, even though they knew they would inevitably be relegated to their neat and tidy (sometimes!), evenly divided, seat-belted places in the second row of the car.

Except when we went on vacations! After a few hours of

sniping, “Mommy, he’s breathing on me,” or “She touched my elbow,” we started to question the wisdom of seat belts. When the sniping turned into all-out pinching and even spitting, we caved: “If you get along, you can ride in the wayback.” (I’m not worried that you will judge me, because I know you’ve been on a few road trips with kids or as a child yourself. Whether with our own children or from our childhood road trips, most of us have experienced some version of this story.) Something magical happened when the rules relaxed, the constraints lifted, and the dividing line disappeared. I actually have fond memories of road trips with my children in the wayback, whispering secrets to each other, putting Band-Aids on their imaginary injuries, becoming allies to survive the long ride home.

It’s not so different for us. If we can find the way to unbuckle a few rules we’ve held on to in relationships, to be released from the constraints of fear and shame, and to erase dividing lines with abandon, the road Home might not be so fraught with perilous potholes and painful skirmishes.

The way back is actually a front-row seat to a tectonic shift, not just on the surface of our lives but in places deep down inside, as we recognize common grace in the beautiful and terrible parts of our lives. In other words, every chapter in our stories, every conversation, and every character is part of the way back to belonging. Common grace becomes transforming grace when we are no longer willing to try to make ourselves with the selves that so often leave us unmade. When we are joined in a deeper story than our individual

stories, instead of bickering and squirming away from each other, we can be with one another in compassionate, curious, and creative interactions. We can explore the mystery of being thrown together, knowing we're stuck with one another, so we might as well enjoy the ride.

I invite you to the very edge of your seat to anticipate what could happen in you and others if you engage with the unexpected grace that passionately declares life is not all about our pain, our accomplishments, our rights, our abuse, our power, or our beliefs. *This is about us finding our way. Together.* It is about a supernatural interconnectedness to a deeper Story that infiltrates every nook and cranny of our lives with Light and Love. We can bravely walk into places we never thought we would go, tell the truths we never thought we'd voice, connect with people we never thought we'd spend time with—all while passionately living in a Story tethered to more than us.

My prayer is that somewhere in the process of investigating belonging, we “[raise] the white Gethsemane flag (I surrender, not my will, but yours) . . . anew each day”<sup>4</sup> and discover what God is trying to tell us about *him*. He wants to use every story about us to romance us to his love story and his longing to fill our emptiness with grace, forgiveness, and healing.

Someone once said, “If you want people to know the truth, tell them. If you want people to love the truth, tell them a story.” Grace eventually compels us to love the truth because it is telling God's story in us. And when we love the

truth, we can't keep from telling that truth to others, because we know—heart and soul—*we belong to each other*.

## (into action)

1. Choose a piece of glass with as many different patterns and colors as possible. Find a safe place to take a hammer to that piece of glass, and shatter it into hundreds of little pieces.
  - What did you feel when shattering the glass?
  - Did it feel like a waste?
  - Was it hard to strike the glass so it would break?
  - Did it feel good to break the glass?
2. This is a book about the truth of your story—starting with the ways that you have been harmed and the ways that you have harmed others. All of that brokenness can be difficult to confront or control. It can seem like a waste, a tragedy, or justified vengeance against a world that did not work for you. It can feel humiliating, dangerous, or overwhelming. While reading this book, you might get a chance to see how hard your heart has become, how you learned that you don't matter, why you avoid messy relationships, or why you cling to relationships like they are a savior. Breaking the glass is a way to acknowledge two things:

- **I am willing to tell the truth, no matter the cost.** Living a hidden life behind a plexiglass shield actually costs more than the price of living in the ruins of your brutally honest brokenness. There may be heartache in the ruins, but the reward of telling the truth is abiding in God, because God is truth. It is only living in the truth that breaks the destructive binds that keep us entangled in just ourselves instead of being interconnected to others. Maybe you've felt distant from yourself, others, and God because you have tried to escape the truth.
  - **I am willing to wait for God to do something with all those broken pieces.** Are you willing to live in a story that is still being told, accepting that you can't cover, control, or contain the brokenness?
3. Sweep up the dust and broken pieces of glass and put them in a jar. We will come back to this pile of dust and brokenness again and again. Consider this reflection in an Old Testament prophecy: "All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again" (Ecclesiastes 3:20, KJV).

No one ever told me about the power of these words:

*You are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

No one ever told me what a gift it would be to return to the ground of my being, to

## THE WAY BACK

relinquish the exhausting attempt to fly just a bit above everyone else, to relax my fatigued ego. . . .

On the ground and in the dust there is no façade. No more hiding. Only rest.

And it's where Jesus can find you. Jesus came down, you see. To the dust. In the flesh. And so, you no longer need to prove yourself or protect yourself. There is no ladder to climb, no stairway to the pearly gates, no performance strategy, no purity ritual.

Only surrender. Only rest.

“Come to me, all you who are weary,” Jesus says. “Not up there . . . down here!”

No more ladders. No more climbing. Into the dust, where God meets you and renews you.

CHUCK DEGROAT, *FALLING INTO GOODNESS*<sup>5</sup>