WHO(SE) ARE WE?

Quidquid est in territorio, est etiam de territorio. [“Whatever is in the territory is indeed of the territory.”]

Remove not the ancient landmark, which your fathers set up.
—Proverbs 22:28

INDIANA IS CALLED THE HOOSIER state. There are many legends about the origins of that term. One says it derives from the practice of hailing unknown persons as they approached a settlement by saying “Who is there?” slurred into “Who’sh ‘ere?” I prefer a slightly different folk etymology, rendering the question as “Whose are you?” Whom do you belong to or with? Are you of us in this place, or of another group and another place? On the American frontier in the 1820s—no less than at border crossings and checkpoints of all kinds today—the fundamental question of identity was tied to the fundamental question of belonging.

Naming-affiliation was of first importance, and it remains so across a broad spectrum of social and natural activities, from volunteer groups culling non-native vines, to parties where people meet each other for the first time and the conversation turns to place-based life stories; from ecological field research to being “carded” when you want to buy alcoholic beverages or to vote. Rationally, I think a standardized identity card would help in the efficient management of social welfare and health systems; viscerally, I resist the idea because it takes the identity question out of the civic life world and puts it into the virtual reality of a database. So I rather like the fact that the nickname of my home state originated in spoken language, in dialogic exchange, in a hermeneutic of question and answer. Today, mere words in the absence of documents, official seals, and state certifications are of little effect. Belonging is now highly bureaucratically bordered.

Who and whose are we? To whom does each person belong, and where? This question does not pertain just to each human person, but, if we take the concept of belonging seriously, it pertains to each form of life, each creature—where do we all belong, where will we be permitted to dwell, develop, flourish, and enact the behavioral repertoire and the symbiotic, ecological possibilities inherent in our kind? Is there a connection between cultural and political belonging (in linguistically mediated ways that are more or less uniquely human) and natural belonging (in creaturely ways that are more or less common to all forms of life)? Might something called “just belonging” or ”moral membership” be the connection and hold the answer to these questions?

In places all over the world—in watersheds, at polluted brownfield sites, on rooftop gardens in cities—conscientious and successful environmental conservation, preservation, and restoration efforts are taking place on regional, local, and neighborhood levels. If we look at actions being taken locally, there are many stories of hope to tell about the trusteeship of places of belonging. If we think about the global picture, however, a quite different face of the relationship between humans and nature is revealed.

As a species, we don’t share well with natural others. It is
Europe since 2008, 100,000 arrived in 2015. Roughly half of these children are coming from Afghanistan. By American standards, European countries have not had that much of an ongoing experience with immigration on a large scale, but the repositioning of large numbers of human beings is being felt there now. Over 1 million people have applied for legal immigration in the last year. And in 2015 an estimated 1.8 million people entered European Union countries illegally, up from 100,000 in 2013. Many die on their journey toward an uncertain destination. More than 3,770 migrants were reported to have perished trying to cross the Mediterranean in 2015, most while attempting to cross from North Africa to Italy, but 800 have died in the Aegean en route from Turkey to Greece.

These displaced persons are fleeing political turmoil and violence, or economic turmoil and disasters such as drought and famine. To be sure, some are seeking new opportunities or a new life. But many are having a new life thrust upon them. If that weren’t enough, for a growing number displacement is not followed by re-placement but rather turns into an unending political and legal limbo of non-belonging. Those in this limbo are not being incorporated in a stable way into a new country, culture, or
way of life that will offer security and sustenance or rights and meaningful roles. On the other hand, they cannot be repatriated to their country of origin, either, for reasons of safety, circumstance, and humanity. Those they left offer little but harm if they return; those toward whom they are traveling, initially welcoming, now increasingly are doling out their hospitality very selectively and begrudgingly.

Once welcoming countries are becoming more closed to refugees as the human queue swells and lengthens, and as natives, virtually all of whose ancestors were once newcomers to their place if one looks back far enough, resist the migrants. I believe that they do so at least in part for reasons having little to do with those displaced as concrete persons, but because they fear the migration itself. They may even be internally displaced themselves—a life they had imagined for themselves and their children having failed to materialize, they are unemployed or underemployed economic refugees in the churning of neoliberal political economies.

Animating these observations is my sense of a profound solidarity deficit in contemporary Western societies and legal systems. This deficit cuts across environmental policy and human rights and economic policy. The deficit is kept in place by forces of wealth and power, but it stems from the ethical discourse and the social imaginaries that legitimize the forces that keep us at odds and make us strangers to one another in both humans-and-nature and humans-to-humans relationships. A countervailing discourse with a relational imagination is necessary to counteract this solidarity deficit. We must develop conceptual resources and capabilities that will enable human beings to think and act like members of a community of reciprocal recognition and mutual empowerment in their dealings with their own and other kinds.

In these pages I have written before about two basic notions that I now propose to consider from a new angle. The first is the just recognition of membership—by which I mean being able to recognize the inherent moral status and moral considerability of oneself and others, including non-human species and ecosystems. The second is the notion of a just relationship of mutuality—by which I understand solidaristic and caring practices flowing from the natural condition of creaturely (including human) being—developmental, fragile, interdependent, and symbiotic being. Membership and mutuality contain a moral calling: an invitation and a challenge to live lives of communal concern and support. Membership recognition confers a parity of voice and an equality of civic respect to persons as they engage in the active life of a community. Mutuality is exemplified by a number of features and practices such as care, empathy, reciprocity, and solidarity—standing up for, with, and as another.

Just recognition of membership and just relationship of mutuality are equally important; while they are conceptually distinguishable, they are not distinct and must be pursued together in practice. And when we think about them in relation to the notions of belonging, community, and place, membership and mutuality become even richer notions.

When thinking about this, a good place to begin is the
remarkable discussion of belonging and human rights by the political philosopher Hannah Arendt in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* Doing so soberly reminds us that our current crisis of human displacement is not the first, and maybe not even the worst, such catastrophe in the long century that has stretched from World War I until the present day. In Europe during the interwar years there were large-scale population migrations and ethnic and nationalistic turmoil. Arendt studied the legal and political response that the European countries made to this situation and argued that the traditional responses of the nation-state system—naturalization and repatriation—broke down at that crucial moment. There were no orderly legal or moral resources ready to step in and fill the vacuum that was created by the failure of these familiar and traditional solutions to massive population dislocation.

As a result, a new kind of statelessness—legal non-belonging—emerged. One of the philosophical and political traditions not up to the task, Arendt argued, was the discourse of Enlightenment constitutionalism and humanitarianism centering on the notion of universal rights grounded in humanity as such. Writing of this period in ways that have a striking resonance to events taking place in migrations from the Middle East and North Africa into Europe today, she was struck by the inability of the nation-state to protect human individuals whose only identity was that of a human being. “The conception of human rights, based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such,” Arendt observed, “broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships—except that they were still human.”

An abstract conception of belonging cannot bear the moral and political weight that the contemporary global world places on it. I believe that this pertains to both human social-political belonging and natural ecosystemic belonging. Arendt argues that human rights should be understood to protect embodied selves—in other words, somebodies somewhere. We should not try to apply rights to everybodies everywhere—the transcendental egos of Kant’s moral philosophy and the liberal Enlightenment tradition—who stand outside time and place, embodying only their humanness. Regarding the middle decades of the twentieth century, she dryly notes, “The world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human.”

If belonging is to convey recognition of moral membership and considerability effectively, then it must be more than a designated status or category. Rather, it must be belonging as a form of social practice in place—in an institutional structure of norms promoting and protecting right relationships and in a shared lifeworld of cultural meanings and identities. Note that these meanings and identities can be pluralistic and diverse; they need not ipso facto be homogeneous or hegemonic.

However, this notion of belonging as a practice (or as a network of symbiotic practices) poses a conundrum at the practical level because it presupposes the functioning of a kind of political community that the contemporary nation-state and global political economy no longer provide and that seems to have no al-
ternative supporting venue.

In the face of this, Arendt turns to the traditional resources and support structures of private life, which can offer support and acceptance even in the absence of legal membership and belonging:

The human being who has lost his place in a community, his political status in the struggle of his time, and the legal personality which makes his actions part of his destiny a consistent whole, is left with those qualities which usually can become articulate only in the sphere of private life and must remain unqualified, mere existence in all matters of public concern. This mere existence, that is, all that which is mysteriously given us by birth and which includes the shape of our bodies and the talents of our minds, can be adequately dealt with only by the unpredictable hazards of friendship and sympathy, or by the great and incalculable grace of love, which says with Augustine, “Volo ut sis [I want you to be],” without being able to give any particular reason for such supreme and unsurpassable affirmation.12

But must we look for moral identity and relationality only in the private realm of goodness, care, and love? Can we not find the affirmation of human rights both in the interdependent lifeworld, on the one hand, and the highly structured legal and institutional artifice of the nation-state, on the other? And must we in the conservation community continue to pursue the rights of nature through separate silos of environmental law, policy, and economics, on the one hand, and personal moral commitment and aesthetic contentment (the fulfillment of private duty and the personal experience of beauty, awe, and wonder) on the other? In my attempt to explicate the practices of membership and mutuality, I seek to understand the meaning of belonging from a perspective of just ecological place. What is needed is neither a cosmopolitan conception of a belonging without any borders, nor a statist conception of a belonging wholly defined by political-legal territoriality, but rather an ethical understanding of a belonging with many fluid and dynamic communal borders and natural landscapes, many webs of particular living within a planetary web of life. Volo ut sis.

From a moral point of view, belonging embraces just membership recognition and just mutuality in relationship. Coming to belong—being recognized as rightfully belonging—is the gateway to just practices or forms of relational living, namely, equal dignity, concern, and respect. As Aldo Leopold once observed, we abuse non-human beings because we think we own them rather than recognizing that we belong with them and they with us.13 There is an arc of human moral development here. I think this arc bends toward belonging in the following way.

To belong is to belong to something. “Belonging to” is an identity-conferring type of membership involving status and self-esteem that is fundamental for personhood, psychological and moral development, and motivation. But this form of recognition and this mode of belonging are normatively open-ended or underspecified from a substantive human rights, social justice, or environmental justice point of view. Belonging to is compat-
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The two essays from Center Scholars Jonathan Haidt and Melvin Konner are concerned with moral beliefs and sensibilities that can be seen as more universal and cosmopolitan, on the one hand, and as more localized, place-based, and communal, on the other. These essays elegantly engage many of the quandaries that I have attempted to address above.

Two other Center scholars, Jeanne Gang and Sylvia Earle, discuss the changing practices of zoos and aquariums in their civic and educational roles and in their treatment of animals. Here, too, belonging is a key notion insofar as these institutions are today thinking in new ways about how creatures belong to these institutions and how the institutions belong to them. What lessons about natural belonging do they teach, what scientific understanding of ecologically emplaced living for all species do they embrace? In his essay, Jason Michael Lukasik also provides a thoughtful historical and critical perspective on many of the misguided ways we have thought about confined and inegalitarian and discriminatory modes of relationality in particular communities and traditions. Chattel slaves, after all, experienced a mode of belonging to, albeit not often an ethically defensible one, that involved more than merely the fact that they were legally owned by someone else. As Arendt notes, slaves often have a more secure existence than the new kind of stateless person who has no mode of belonging at all.14

To belong is to *belong with* something. “Belonging with” is not so morally open ended as belonging to. It points toward substantive demands for participatory voice (direct for human members, indirect and represented for non-human members) and claims of considerability and care for all—equity of concern and respect. This is a symbiotic network of values fit for an ecological web of life. This provides an important criterion for evaluating which types of transactions and interactions are to be nurtured, facilitated, and promoted by common rules and public policy, and which are to be discouraged or prohibited.

To belong is to *belong for* some purpose. “Belonging for” entails an acceptance of interdependence as the condition of membership, and it carries with it responsibilities of solidarity and community that inform the many practices of belonging—how we belong, what belongs to us, how it should be shared, and to what ends. Belonging is conferred but it is also lived, earned, constructed, and reconstructed by actions over time. Belonging is wasted unless it allows one to develop an imaginative capability to see the linkages between the condition of the flourishing of others and the flourishing of oneself.

“The land was ours before we were the land’s,” Robert Frost reminded Americans on the day of John F. Kennedy’s inauguration:

> Possessing what we still were unpossessed by, Possessed by what we now no more possessed. Something we were withholding made us weak Until we found out that it was ourselves We were withholding from our land of living, And forthwith found salvation in surrender.15

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In his striking meditation on the fires around Fort McMurray, Alberta, Timothy Leduc relates our ecological malaise to the experience of addiction and to spiritual ways various cultures have found to confront it. At the core of addiction is an emptiness that has been likened to a “hungry ghost.” In his discussion of this Leduc aims to “clarify the continuing difficulties in our climate change responses as human and ecological communities suffer from intensifying impacts.”

The last word belongs to Brian Doyle, who explains how he learned a lesson about belonging from a Goshawk. No ID cards needed to be displayed.

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NOTES

10. Ibid., 380.
11. Ibid., 380.
12. Ibid., 382.