

even the homes I saw on TV shows like *The Brady Bunch*. Comparing my family to those around me, it was clear we were different. In my attempt to fit in I sported pastel Izod shirts and Gloria Vanderbilt jeans and struggled to understand all the cultural norms.

Most of us are trapped in cycles of not belonging, in the anxiety that we are not *normal*. Even the blondest, bluest-eyed, straightest kid can feel that he doesn't belong (he likely lost belonging to his ancestral cultures—the cost of whiteness). He compares his clothes, his grades, his dance moves, his whatever-it-is to the expectations he feels weighing on him. He, too, struggles to find belonging. Being *extremely* not normal (not something I wanted to excel at, but I did), I assumed from the media and culture around me that my neighbors were getting it right—and we were not. I was caught in the dynamics of domination. Even when we place ourselves at the bottom (or at the same level), we are buying into separation and domination. Whenever we compare and compete, whenever we think “I don't belong,” we are fueling separation. However, that is actually not *your* thought.

The Culture's Thoughts Are F*cked Up!

I love this quote by the great, late Indian spiritual teacher, Krishnamurti. He said (paraphrased by Jane Fonda, because it's the sixties): “You think you're thinking your thoughts. You are not. You are thinking the culture's thoughts.” It's such a simple statement, and in those final six words, it removes self-blame. Yes, you compare and compete with those around you. Yes, you think your differences mean you don't belong. All of this was constructed *for* you over

many years. Many years of family rivalries and school bullying, years of standardized testing and beauty pageants, years of sports tournaments and fashion trends, years of racial segregation and sexual harassment. Years of boys being called on more than girls in class, of Black kids sent to detention, of women in hijab being judged, of all-white-male corporate offices, of having to choose a binary bathroom (at risk of violence), of feeling you don't belong.

Think about it: I didn't construct the comparisons in my mind. I learned them from what was around me. From the time we are in the womb, we are absorbing all the messages of our culture. From conversations, from the way people look at us, from advertising, from the kids in the schoolyard—word by word, moment by moment. Yes, comparing mind is just a natural part of our human condition and something with which we have to contend. But in our society, comparing mind is on the steroids of our education system, consumerism, the beauty industry, racism (and racial categories themselves), misogyny, homophobia, ableism, fat phobia, and more. These thoughts are not our fault, and we are still responsible for them—for knowing them, understanding them, and eventually letting them go. But we should not blame ourselves for thinking these thoughts. The programming is deep, it's systemic, and it's been going on for a long while.

Letting go of self-blame can take time. Our culture is steeped in oppressive forces. And those forces are powerful. Once we begin to see this, we slowly stop blaming ourselves for the way we continually buy into separation and domination, and for feelings of internalized oppression that we know are there but can't seem to drop. We have to keep reminding ourselves: *These are the culture's thoughts and the culture is really shitty. I adopted these patterns*

of comparison and competition, of hierarchy and oppression. They are not mine. I absorbed separation and domination the same way I absorbed language. Only then can we look even more closely at these patterns and how they are playing out today, often unconsciously.

There has been a lot written in recent years about what is called “unconscious” or “implicit bias.” Researchers have found ways (some more accurate than others) to measure how we filter our experiences of other people according to the dominant forces of our culture. Studies show that even if we have conscious egalitarian goals, these can be undermined (often tragically) by our deeply rooted implicit tendencies (i.e., the culture’s thoughts). The unconscious mind has incredible control over our thoughts, speech, and actions (including almost unnoticeable microresponses we have to other people). And the unconscious mind is shaped by our surroundings. And our “surroundings” is society. And society is deeply separated.

It’s pretty easy (if you are breathing) to see from the distribution of power and resources in our country what and who is valued: whiteness, maleness, wealth, formal education, heterosexuality, ableness, thinness. These are the categories that unconscious bias explores. Race has been one of the areas that is most examined. Unconscious bias toward Black people has been thoroughly proven through research, unrelenting police violence, as well as experiences of discrimination that people face on a daily basis in housing, employment, or just barbecuing or birdwatching in the park.

The delusion of separation is at the heart of not belonging. Whether we are sensing the bias of others or whether we become aware of our own implicit bias, it is the separateness inherent in implicit bias that contributes to feelings of not belonging. When we perpetrate implicit bias, we are *othering* people and are in the

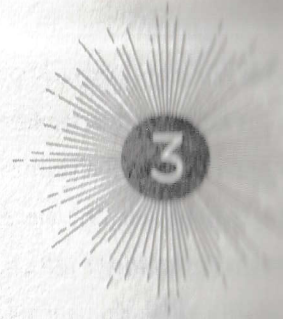
delusion of separation. When we are the object of implicit bias, we feel othered and are in the delusion of separation. Either way, the delusion wins.

We all witness, experience, and perpetrate unconscious bias in micro and macro ways: Our felt discomfort around someone who does not fall into either side of a constricted gender binary. The silent judgements toward a fat person navigating a space designed for the thin and able-bodied. The extra security check I received in the airport security line.

I was fuming for at least twenty minutes at the Naples airport after I was “randomly” chosen for a pat down. Actually, I was not the only one. The young West African guy, the only other Black person in our line of approximately fifty people, was also patted down. Not that my anger was not valid or not useful (I used it to confront the agent who, not surprisingly, denied any discrimination)—yet, the resulting tension it produced in me outlasted the experience itself and flung me into a spiral of not belonging. After walking away from the agent, I was engulfed in feelings of sadness and rage. The experience made me feel singled out, suspect, and criminal. The message was I did not belong. Rather than rest back into the deep knowing that I have always belonged, the implicit message of the culture (expressed through security personnel) dominated my experience.

I could barely speak to my husband and sister. I went to the airport restroom alone. Hot tears streamed down my face while I sat in the stall waiting for the sensations to dissipate. They did not. The tension and upset only perpetuated the feeling of not belonging. Anxiety and tension persisted in me for another five minutes. But I meditated with it, meaning I simply observed and allowed all my feelings

and sensations. Eventually, I was able to reconnect to the felt sense that I do belong. Everywhere. Even to the agent. I returned to belonging. That agent probably continues to single out Black people (and maybe Muslims) for extra security protocols. She probably doesn't even realize that she's thinking the culture's thoughts. She is also caught in the delusion of separation and the dynamic of dominance. She probably has not made her map (let alone have a map key). I cannot make her a map and she may never make her own. We, each of us, need our own ways back to our belonging.



Ground You

Gratitude for the Body

If the only prayer you ever said was "Thank you,"

—MEISTER ECKHART

Belonging only happens through the body. How do we make it happen?

When I make space to pause from the busy, I stand or sit or lie down, even for a few minutes, to become still and quiet. When I feel the ground under the floor, chair, or bed and pay attention to it, I connect deeply. This is when I feel the appreciation that needs to be expressed. Even when I am sad or sick or in business, if I connect to awareness, I am thankful.

Belonging starts here. In gratitude for the body.