

**T**ake the word, separate the first syllable from the second and allow the awkward third to remain attached to its fellow 'ng', and watch now how it gives birth to two words within it.

Belonging becomes Be longing, and even here the little lonely space between the two words attests that 'be' longs to be back together with 'longing' in the same way that 'longing' longs to be reunited with 'be'. You can perform the same syllabic surgery with Nowhere. Granted, the splitting of these syllables is much more unnatural and even traumatic, but by now you know that the physics of existence usually require you to first be nowhere in order to find yourself now here.

We all long to belong to something. Whether you love to be surrounded by people or revel in solitude, the twists and turns of our DNA direct us towards connection, towards the recognition of ourselves in someone else or within the universe, which can sometimes be one and the same. This connection and recognition are sought in almost every mode of our being, from the obvious to the seemingly mundane. For as inherently lonely as we are - who can truly know all our inner workings except ourselves? - there lie, everywhere, symbols and means of union that can swiftly make us feel less so, and which resolve our longing with the simple addition of a 'be'.

Whether it be through work, sport, or being part of a club - we're drawn to these social acts and settings to be reminded that the things we do matter, not merely to us but to other people. And when you recognise that other people think it matters because you think it matters, the loop of longing closes and nourishes itself with meaning at every revolution. This self-feeding collective identity then has the capacity to nurture an individual's with a sense of place and purpose that is simultaneously their own but also one that is shared as fragments of the group's. It's a marvel-

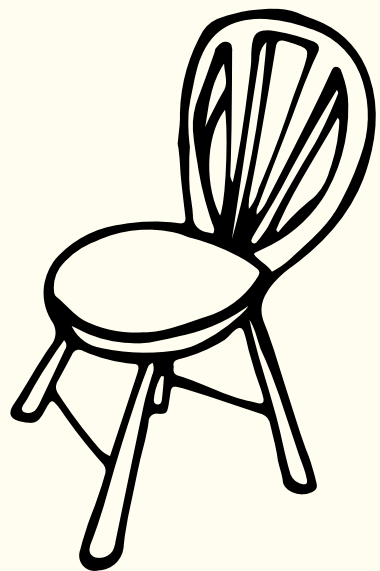
lous perpetual motion machine of meaning where personal significance sustains communal value - and vice versa - thus ensuring that the loop of connection is never broken, even in separation.

Of course, technology has forever redefined how we experience belonging. Social media promises us light-speed connection with almost anyone in the world, and also gives us the ability - for better or worse - to project our idealised identity into an ether of billions, all desirous to do the same. Yet it has become increasingly apparent that these virtual associations not only lack the substance and authenticity of face-to-face interactions; the aftermath of blue ticks, misinterpreted emojis and succinct, well-thought-out messages often leaves us feeling even lonelier and more disjointed. After all, digital communication - no matter how affectionate and profound - will always be mere data, a cold flood of zeroes and ones that are eternally unable to replicate the mysterious and intangible 'thingness' that makes raw human contact and longing - whether verbal, physical or cognitive - so significant.

To separate us, to pull us apart and scrutinise our intricacies - just as we did to Belonging at the start - is to reveal that our longing to be is what makes us the be-ings we are.

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