

The Ecology of Belonging: Remembering Our Place in a Living World

WENDY ELLYATT

Wendy Ellyatt suggests that true ecological renewal begins with remembering how to belong—through body, land, lineage and love.

The Great Forgetting

I stand barefoot in my back garden in the early evening. The sunlight is soft, low, and golden, pouring through the trees at the side in a way that feels both intimate and ancient. I can hear the chatter of the magpie family that have a nest in the tree behind our garden, the song of a blackbird and the whisper of the wind in the leaves. As I close my eyes and touch the leaves of the fig tree that I planted earlier this year, I am suddenly not separate from any of it. I am not watching the world—I am in it.

Trying to explain to people the intimacy of relationship that I have with trees and plants has always been difficult. I remember when I first read David Abram's 1997 book *'The Spell of the Sensuous'*, it was the first time that someone had captured this in words. For me the experience is more than simple admiring beauty and form. There is, instead, an enchantment to it. And with centuries of my own family lineage being closely linked to a deep connection with the land, the experience for us has been not only the act of loving, but of being deeply and profoundly loved back.

These moments hold a deeper truth: we belong. Not metaphorically, not sentimentally, but biologically, ecologically, and spiritually. We are not alien visitors on the Earth. We are Earth—sensing, breathing, becoming. Yet we have forgotten this. As our systems unravel—from ecological collapse to social atomisation and spiritual alienation—it becomes clear that these are not merely crises of resources or policy. They are crises of relationship. A loss of kinship.

We are a culture of forgetting, and what we have forgotten most profoundly is how to belong.

To belong is to know ourselves not as separate beings navigating a lifeless world, but as living expressions of a larger wholeness. This knowing once lived in us as breath. It still does, quietly, underneath the noise.

"Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth — our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with other eyes, as our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the honking of geese. To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence. We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human." — David Abrams

Belonging as an Ecological Reality

In the dominant Western imagination, belonging is often reduced to identity—something cultural, emotional, even political. But at root, belonging is not something we *have*. It is something we *are*.

All living systems are based on reciprocal relationship. In forests, fungi thread through roots in vast mycorrhizal networks, allowing trees to share nutrients, wisdom, and warning. Coral reefs bloom through mutual cooperation. Migratory birds follow ancestral lines not drawn on any human map. No being lives alone. Life, in its essence, is patterned by communion.

Biologist and philosopher Alan Rayner calls this *inclusional*: a worldview that sees living organisms not as



bounded, isolated objects, but as flow-forms participating in and shaping the space they inhabit. Identity is not fixed—it is co-created, relational, emergent. This vision echoes the Indigenous wisdom held across continents and generations. For the Kogi of Colombia, the mountains are not scenery—they are alive, speaking beings. In the Māori worldview, every human is genealogically connected to the land, the rivers, the winds. The Lakota word *mitakuye oyasin* means “all my relations”—a reminder that to live is to live among kin.

These ways of seeing are not romantic idealisations. They are embodied, practical ontologies—rooted in observation, humility, and reciprocity. They teach that the health of the whole depends on the quality of relationships between its parts. And that true flourishing arises not from domination, but from right relationship.

The Human Journey Away from Wholeness

So how did we lose this sense of relational belonging?

The disconnection did not begin with fossil fuels or deforestation. It began in the mind, in the shift of consciousness that came with the rise of reductionism, individualism, and mechanistic thought. Descartes’ famous dictum—“*I think, therefore I am*”—sliced the self away from the world, setting in motion a cascade of dualisms: mind vs body, human vs nature, subject vs object.

The Enlightenment, for all its gifts of science and civil liberty, also encoded an extractive, objectifying stance toward the world. Nature became a thing to be observed, measured, exploited. The Earth became property, and people became parts in a machine. Language reflects this rupture. Indigenous languages tend to be verb-rich and relational, describing the world as process, movement, interbeing. In Potawatomi, a river is not a thing but an action: *to be a rivering*. English, by contrast, emphasises nouns and ownership: *my land, the environment, natural resources*. We speak of nature in the third person, as if we are not part of her.

Even our educational systems mirror this split. Students are trained to compete, to analyse, to consume knowledge. Rarely are they invited to listen to the land, to attune to the rhythms of life. Wonder is replaced by performance. Presence is replaced by abstraction. This fragmentation has consequences—not only ecological, but psychological and spiritual. Loneliness, alienation, burnout, ecological despair—all are symptoms of a deeper wound: the severing of self from world.

Reweaving the Threads of Kinship

Yet the wound is not the end of the story. Around the world, new and ancient stories are converging to remind us that healing is possible. And that healing begins with remembering.

Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh coined the term ‘*interbeing*’ to describe the nature of reality. Nothing exists independently. A sheet of paper contains the tree, the rain, the logger, the sun. We are made of each other. In the scientific realm, this insight is echoed in systems theory, quantum physics, and ecology. The cosmos is no longer seen as a clockwork mechanism, but as a web of relations, a dance of fields and flows. Reality is participatory.

A unitive worldview reveals that flourishing is not the accumulation of personal success, but a state of coherence—between self and other, inner and outer, past and t is developmental, systemic, embodied. It invites us to stop asking “What do I own?” and start asking “What am I part of?”

This reweaving is not abstract. It is being lived out in community gardens, in firelit story circles, in bioregional festivals, in citizen assemblies, in the rise of place-based education and regenerative design. Elders and children, farmers and artists, teachers and healers are stepping into new roles—not as saviours, but as stewards of relationship.

We are not returning to the past. We are composting it into something wiser.

The Ecology of Becoming: Belonging Across the Lifespan

Belonging is not a fixed state. It is a dynamic, lifelong process. We are born into it, we lose it, we seek it, we deepen it. It changes shape with age and context. But it always involves relationship—being seen, being needed, being held in something larger.

One of the most tender and formative sites of belonging is early life. From the moment of conception, we are shaped by the environments we inhabit: the womb, the room, the culture, the land. Neuroscience now confirms what Indigenous and ancestral traditions have always known: a child’s brain, heart and body grow in response to the relational field. When that field is attuned, loving, rhythmic and connected—to caregivers, to nature, to community—belonging takes root at a cellular level.

A young child’s way of being is inherently ecological: sensory, intuitive, embodied, curious. Children seek contact and coherence. They bond with people, yes—but also with trees, textures, animals, patterns of light. The Earth is not abstract to them. It is alive. And when that aliveness is met with safety and responsiveness, children grow into the world with a deep sense of trust and participation.

My own work has been dedicated to exploring how we might create approaches and frameworks that better reflect this truth. When systems honour and reflect natural principles, children flourish. When systems neglect or override them—through stress, separation, environmental degradation, or disconnection—developmental trauma can arise. But the point is not to fix children. It is to design societies that nurture and support wholeness in all of us.

Belonging must also be continually nurtured across adolescence, adulthood, and elderhood. Especially in a world of increasing mobility, digitalisation, and ecological disruption, we must develop cultural practices that re-anchor us—ceremonies, festivals, foodways, pilgrimages, storytelling. Belonging is not something we outgrow. It is something we deepen.

Practices of Reconnection

So - what does the ecology of belonging look like in practice?

It looks like children in Denmark starting each school day outside, rain or shine, learning the names and needs of local plants and animals.

It looks like the citizens of Todmorden, UK, transforming their town into an edible landscape, planting vegetables in public spaces and sharing food freely.

It looks like Indigenous fire stewardship returning to forests in California, restoring ecological balance through ancestral knowledge and relational care.

It looks like the Global Ecovillage Network, linking communities that live regenerative values—balancing autonomy and interdependence, tending land and lineage.

It looks like Inner Development Goals being taught alongside climate literacy in schools, helping young people cultivate empathy, resilience, and purpose.

It looks like the small acts that ripple outward: a neighbour planting wildflowers for pollinators, a family marking the solstice with song, a teacher pausing class to let children watch the migration of geese.

These are not peripheral or idealistic gestures. They are seeds of transformation. They are how we remember the grammar of relationship—through touch, attention, rhythm, and shared care.

A World Worth Belonging To

To seek belonging is not to indulge nostalgia. It is to take up the most essential spiritual, ecological, and political task of our time. We cannot build a sustainable world on a foundation of disconnection. Technological solutions are insufficient if the human heart remains estranged. Policies will fall short if the soul does not feel at home.

What we need is not only renewable energy, but renewable kinship. Not only net-zero carbon, but net-positive community.

This requires a cultural renaissance—one that honours science and spirit, soil and song. One that replaces extraction with regeneration, competition with cooperation, speed with sacredness.

It begins wherever we are—with how we speak to the land, how we listen to our neighbours, how we raise our children, how we greet the morning.

The Earth is not asking for perfection. She is asking for presence. For attention. For kinship. And she is offering it back—every day, in birdsong, in the breeze, in the quiet resilience of moss and mycelium.

To belong is not to arrive. It is to participate.

Closing Blessing

May your body remember its origin in the soil.

May your breath attune to the rhythm of the wind.

May your mind soften into kinship.

May your spirit know it is already home.



WENDY ELLYATT is a futurist, educator, and thought leader in the global movement for ecological and spiritual renewal. Founder of the Flourish Project and the Ecosystemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework, she works at the intersection of human development, regenerative culture, and worldview transformation. Wendy advocates for a shift from fragmented systems toward values-based models that honour the relational nature of life. Her work integrates science, Indigenous wisdom, spirituality, and systems thinking to support a more compassionate, coherent, and life-affirming future. Read more at www.wendyellyatt.com.

