

THE

Will van der Hart & Rob Waller

POWER

— of —

BELONGING

DISCOVERING THE CONFIDENCE  
TO LEAD WITH VULNERABILITY

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*“Od ut et et es nim vende voluptas idebis repercidite volorum fugitas sitempo  
rerferferum facest volorep erfereria di ulparchilla veliquas mo esequi ut amusandem  
untem et est exero cus.”* MR SMITH

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*Chapter 1*

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# LONGING FOR HOME

‘The ache for home lives in all of us; the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.’<sup>1</sup>

**Maya Angelou**

(Will): I woke up from a fitful night’s sleep in the Appalachian Mountains, not sure whether it was the altitude or the jet lag that saw me getting out of bed at 5:00 a.m. I had already planned the teaching I would deliver to the church, whose weekend retreat I was leading. Yet, rising in my mind was an odd question: *How do you pick up a snake?* I got dressed and groggily tramped out into the cold forest that surrounded my lodge, prayerfully wondering what, if any, significance this question had for my life.

It didn't take me long to recall the story of Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush. Far away from his home, Moses was hiding in the desert, living as a Midian shepherd. Then God appeared to him on Mount Horeb and called him into a leadership role that he felt desperately unqualified for.

Standing on top of my own mountain, far from my home in the UK, I sensed God was speaking to me. I often struggled with feelings of inadequacy for the calling on my life—I knew that fear was stopping me from addressing the snake-like shame issues in my life. I could hide behind the veneer of slick communication skills, but did God want my ministry to be about hiding or leading? Could I ever experience true belonging?

For the last two years, alongside my dear friend Rob, I have been studying the life of Moses and finding answers to questions that I never knew I needed to ask. This book is our journey to a sense of belonging in leadership that can best be described as 'feeling at home'. This can be your journey ...

## **STARTING FROM HOME**

The best place to begin a journey to belonging is from the concept of 'home'. Defined as a place 'where one lives', home gives us the strongest impression of a place of authenticity, confidence, and freedom. It is a concept that we can all relate to even when our experiences of

## LONGING FOR HOME

its reality are vastly different. To say, 'I feel at home here', is to express the greatest sense of security to lead. But what is 'home' to you—and how can you experience it within your leadership?

Psychotherapist and theologian Kent Hoffman describes a Circle of Security,<sup>2</sup> where 'home' has two functions, depending upon our needs. Firstly, it is a 'secure base' from which we can adventure into life. Secondly, it is a 'safe haven' to which we can return from the challenges of life. Without an image of home that can provide this sending and receiving, our leadership must stem from what we are currently doing. We place ourselves on our own pedestal and carve out a place in the world through our competence (or lack thereof). And we long for home.

(Rob): I'm about as English as they come, with ancestors dating back to Saxon times. But twelve years ago, I moved to Edinburgh to marry my Scottish wife, and then two years ago, we moved as a family to New Zealand.

My wife and I both have fond childhood memories of overseas homes (Jamaica and Mauritius, respectively) and wanted our two boys to experience something of the same. There was also an element of the 'travel bug'—perhaps making up for the adventures we never had, or because of the realisation that if we didn't go soon, it wasn't going to happen till the boys left home.

Whilst we weren't consciously searching for home, the question of 'Whether and where have we felt at home?' is one that every traveller asks. We came to the strong realisation that home is a place in our hearts rather

than a place on the globe, and in the end, we made the decision to return to Scotland. Over the last couple of years, I have become more aware that my sense of belonging travels with me. It is found most clearly within my relationships with God, family, church, colleagues, and friends. This book is, in some ways, my journey.

## IN THE ABSENCE OF HOME ... FAKE IT

The ‘fake it to make it’ cultural motto has grown up over recent years. It suggests that if you can pretend that you *feel* validated in what you are doing for long enough, you will eventually *be* validated and feel secure. But far more than a statement of strategy, this is often an exercise in confession. Our world is full of people who are faking their sense of belonging in the vain hope that when (or if) they ‘make it’, they will find validation. We feel anything but ‘at home’ but believe that if we pretend we do for long enough, the feeling will somehow suddenly show up.

(Will): ‘I have got no idea. Somewhere over there.’ I pointed around the hillside as cold Welsh rain pelted down on our freezing bodies. I had a map and compass but had missed out on attending the orienteering training session and had no idea how to navigate to our destination.

My group had passed the stage when it all feels ‘a bit exciting’ to be lost on the moors. Now they were in

the wet-and-cold incrimination stage. I had left their patience on a ridge ten miles back, and it was all grumbling and muttered threats at this point.

A call to Welsh Mountain Rescue was probably about an hour off when we finally fell through the door of the farmhouse that had been designated 'home'. My only comfort was the fact that the team were so exhausted and hungry they could barely voice their disdain for me publicly. I tried to make the best of it with comments like, 'Well we got there in the end!' But to be honest, there was no upside to this whole experience.

I was operating on the 'fake it to make it' principle in my orienteering adventure. What was I thinking? That I could fake reading a map long enough to finally get the hang of it and claim my new identity as a 'survivalist'? Even the most competent individuals can still feel insecure and fraudulent. No amount of skill, success, or wealth acquisition can generate a sense of authenticity, the security of home. This can only come from an understanding of your belonging.

Central to this book is the principle that authentic belonging makes for successful leadership. One example is found in outstanding sportspeople. Even in disciplines that appear to depend entirely on the skills of one individual, such as snooker or motor racing, winners will often point to their team as the reason for their success. In a post-race interview, Formula 1 world champion Lewis Hamilton said, 'I couldn't have done it without my team ... This team is just remarkable and what we have achieved together is so special ... These



guys *also* did a great job.<sup>33</sup> Whether a tennis player or a pastor, business leader or a parent, a leader who truly believes that they belong finds a way to reach their fullest potential.

Many of the leaders who struggle with insecurity today started out by faking it. Initially their faux confidence seemed to work, but finding success in the eyes of those around them didn't make them feel more qualified; it just made them feel more fake! Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, said, 'What was a normal goal for the young ... becomes a neurotic hindrance to the old.'<sup>34</sup> In other words, people do whatever they can to climb up the career ladder in their younger years; the real struggle comes when they reach the top and realise that it's leaning against the wrong wall!



Figure 2: When you get to the top and realise you have been climbing the 'wrong wall'.

## BROKEN HOMES

It is increasingly difficult to talk about ‘home’ in a manner that resonates positively with most people. It’s not just that traditional nuclear families are becoming less common as much as the fact that the digital age has convoluted our experience of core relationships. We both grew up in small families, long before the Internet, mobile phones, and social media were easily accessible. Home was relatively defined by a fixed membership and a set of distinct values. Our parents both still live in their family ‘homes’. Though such families are not guaranteed to have a sense of belonging, they do help to offer a vision of what home could be.

Your experience of ‘home’ may be wildly different. You may come from a broken home, have step-parents as well as parents, or have moved house often, maybe at critical times in your development. You may have even come from a ‘home’ in which love and security seemed entirely dependent upon your performance, behaviour, or achievements. If this is your experience, it can be harder to find a secure base and it is more tempting to hide your vulnerabilities.

The three books written by Veronica Roth in the Divergent series (made into films in 2014–16) tell of a dystopian future where people leave their families and enter ‘factions’ based on their personality and skills. The factions are meant to be home; ‘stronger than blood and where you belong’, but something in the system is not right. It takes one ‘divergent’ person who doesn’t fit into a faction to bring the whole idea tumbling down and to show it for the oppression it is.

For many people, especially those in leadership, success appears to offer a form of ‘home’. People around us, and on the Internet, react with approval to the achievements we present to them. Unfortunately, this model relies on our ability to replicate these success stories. It is called a news ‘feed’ because it gives rise to suppliers and consumers. We ‘feed in’ our news, and our reward is that our hunger for belonging is satiated for a while.

Yet when the news runs dry and there is no more genuine success to share, news gets replaced by fake news or people end up liking pictures of our evening meals.<sup>5</sup>

The Internet isn’t the only place that encourages conditional belonging. Work and social environments can do this too; even supposedly accepting places like the church can feel conditional at times. In leadership, the standards for your belonging can feel even more rigorous and your vision of home can become hostile and dependent upon your latest performance.

It is for this reason that capturing a better vision of ‘home’ and a sense of belonging is so fundamental to establishing authentic leadership. If you don’t know where you are coming from (sending) and what you are going to (receiving), there isn’t much of a chance that you are going to get there or feel secure along the way.

## **THE YOUNG MOSES**

Like many shame-bound leaders, Moses (from the early chapters of the Bible) was devoid of a secure model of home. Moses was born an exile slave during a period of particularly intense Egyptian

oppression, only to be adopted into the house of Pharaoh following his rescue from the Nile.<sup>6</sup> These confused foundations had a significant impact on Moses' personal and leadership development, and yet they were also experiences that made him uniquely equipped for the mission to which God was to call him. Our work on belonging is assisted, not by denying our fragile foundations, but by acknowledging their impact on our lives: revelation always precedes restoration.

I imagine how a counsellor might have struggled to help Moses come to terms with his early home life:

...‘Yes, Moses, I understand that it must have been hard being born into slavery whilst the Egyptians were seeking to kill your peers.’

...‘I know, your mother did pop you in a basket when you were a baby and put you into a crocodile-infested river, but she had good intentions.’

...‘Indeed, you were found by an Egyptian Princess, but I am sure she wasn't like her father at all. She was probably very kind.’

...‘Yes, your mother pretended to be a midwife rather than admitting that she was your mother, but at least she got to spend time with you, Moses.’

...‘I know, she ultimately handed you back to Pharaoh's daughter, but there really wasn't much more she could do.’

...‘I think that's probably enough for this week, Moses ...’

## LEADERSHIP LONELINESS

Being without a home and feeling adrift is more than just an unpleasant emotion. It's dangerous, and we ignore it at our own peril. The fact is that in the absence of a positive vision of 'home', where we belong in healthy collaborative relationships, leaders naturally isolate themselves. They default into seeking the respect and admiration of others rather than looking to connect and collaborate. They dress this up with bullish statements like 'It's tough at the top!' and 'Leadership isn't for wimps', but isolation isn't a strength, or a sign of good leadership.



*Figure 3: Leaders are good at hiding their loneliness.*

Tough decisions sometimes have to be made in leadership, but they don't mean that a leader has to be devoid of real friendships, real collaboration, or a real sense of belonging. Indeed, the leaders who inspire us the most typically are those who have a reputation for good relationships as much as they do for great achievements. One example is Archbishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa. It is

not just that Tutu is full of virtue in the task; he is overflowing with joy in its outworking, and this joy infects others. I (Will) was once privileged to be part of an interview with him, and I would guess that at least half of the interview was spent listening to him laughing! In his book *No Future without Forgiveness*, he writes about a term called *ubuntu*:

A person with *ubuntu*<sup>7</sup> is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.<sup>8</sup>

Some recent American research pooled many different studies on loneliness and found that being in healthy social relationships decreased mortality by around 50 percent—the same as giving up cigarettes. Being thin as opposed to obese gave you a 30 percent edge, and treating hypertension gave you 10 percent. To put it another way, loneliness is as bad for you as smoking and five times as bad as not taking your blood-pressure pills.<sup>9</sup>

Loneliness is not the same as being alone. Indeed, being alone and learning to be comfortable with solitude is a key marker of maturity and having a sense of home.<sup>10</sup> The loneliness we experience in leadership is often felt most keenly in the company of crowds of people; it's that we feel completely unknown by those around us and unable to allow ourselves to be known lest we are judged and found wanting.

## HOMESICKNESS

One of the greatest challenges of leadership is working (or living) in an environment that does not feel supportive. Leadership is often exciting and pioneering, but it can leave us sick for something more familiar and encouraging. Leaders can survive in these environments for a season, but at a point it begins to make them sick for something that feels more like home. It's a bit like climbing Mount Everest: failure to become 'at home' on the mountain puts you at significant risk. If you cannot acclimatise, you cannot climb, let alone lead.

When we enter a new leadership environment, particularly one that is isolating, it can equally seem like the clock is ticking on our survival. It can feel like a 'make it a home or die' type experience where death is a slow and emotional one rather than anything more dramatic! Many leaders have been working without a 'sense of home' for years. Without belonging-based relationships they have become more vulnerable to shame and ironically more likely to isolate themselves. This puts them at risk of emotional suffering, but it also makes them devoid of the power that comes from knowing that they belong. One article on impostor syndrome by NBC comments, 'This cycle can quickly become an exhausting one, and has plenty of negative implications on not only your career, but your health, well-being and personal relationships.'<sup>11</sup> It's not that working in these environments is wrong—it's often a result of God's calling that we find ourselves there—but what we need to do is to find our home on these mountains and in these deserts of leadership.

(Will): After I left school at age eighteen, I spent a year working in a remote boarding school. I was really nervous

about living away from home for the first time and wasn't sure how I would cope.

When I arrived, I was sent to my living quarters which were in an isolated building that stood in a field a mile away from the main school. I was told that I had a room to myself on the ground floor but later found that the supposed 'preparations' for my arrival had been overlooked. I stood on the threshold of my 'new home'. Furniture was piled up in the centre of the room, dust and cobwebs lay everywhere, and curtains hung limply by one or two remaining hooks. Thirty seconds after opening the door, tears were streaming down my face and I just wanted to get back into my car and begin the seven-hour return drive home.

I prayed through the sobs and then imagined what my mum would do, which would have been to separate the furniture she wanted from the junk and then begin washing everything! For an eighteen-year-old boy, this was a very new experience, but it was also strangely familiar. Establishing my vision of 'home' wasn't so much about how the room looked but about having the courage to establish the threads of my belonging in a new space.

The journey to belonging requires the courage to recapture a vision for our leadership where we 'feel at home', where we can be real and experience the support, acceptance, and compassion of those around us. The greatest mistake we can make on this journey is to assume that belonging is a passive or coincidental reality.



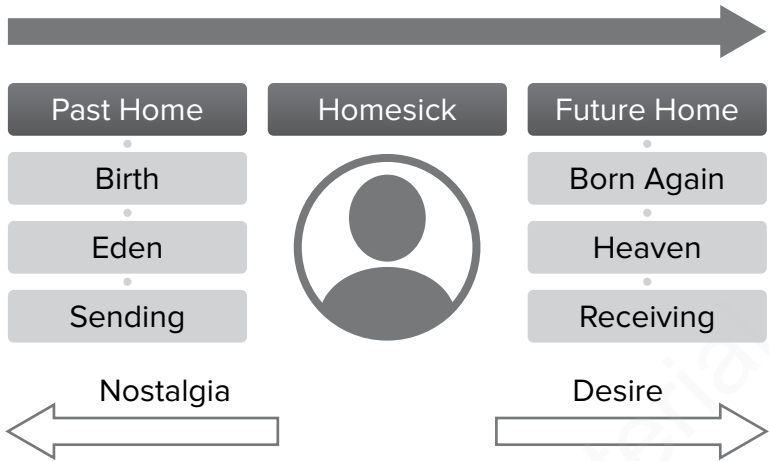
Neither is this about a failure to grow up. We can recreate aspects of the home we once knew, and there is nothing wrong with having familiar things around us. But if that is all it is, it becomes nostalgia—a wistful longing for what once was and we wish was the case again. Belonging is about establishing a vision of ‘home’ that is more than just historic.



*Figure 4: Carrying a vision of home with us.*

As Christians, we are called ‘on’ to a new home with a new birth (which some call being born again).<sup>12</sup> We are ‘homesick’ in the sense that we are currently between these two homes, but not in the sense that we want to turn back the clock. It is a longing for our home in Christ that pulls us forward, desiring this as a bridegroom desires his bride. From Alpha to Omega, from First to Last, from the Beginning to the End (Revelation 22:13), we are held and known.

## LONGING FOR HOME



*Figure 5: We are on a journey between two homes.*

In John 20:21, the resurrected Jesus appeared to His disciples and said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you [out into the world].’ The peace of God is present in sending as much as it is in arriving. It was the security of God that sent Jesus into the most hostile place, and now the security of Jesus was going with the disciples. They carried the foundations of ‘home’ with them into hostile and unknown environments, into places they often faced alone. The peace of God enabled them to do this because it was both their sending ‘secure base’ and their receiving ‘safe haven’.

## BELONGING AND UN-BELONGING

You may have heard of the Christian idea that we are ‘in the world but not of it’. It’s good to remember our Christian identity when we see destructive and unhelpful things around us, but this kind of

thinking can leave us just as adrift as a leader with no real relationships. After all, what is the point of putting down roots here if we cannot call this ‘home,’ at least for now? Some Christian groups have taken this to an extreme level by never getting any insurance and not investing in a pension—and sadly, they have suffered the expected consequences.

This theology of ‘radical un-belonging’ can lead to one of three responses: separatism (go and find a cave), living in dualism (Sunday doesn’t talk to Monday), or abandoning your Christian principles altogether (because this tension is intolerable). But the ‘good news’ is not of radical un-belonging; it’s quite the reverse.

The courage required to belong is a spiritual discipline. It is good *now*, and not just in the future. We may be homesick, but this is a positive force that keeps us in that tension of knowing both where we have come from and where we are heading. We are both sent and received. We have both a secure base and a safe haven to which we are being drawn.

John 1:14 says, ‘The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.’ *The Message* version is phrased, ‘The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood.’ It wasn’t that the Word didn’t belong; He belonged more than infinitely anything that He had created. It was His right to move in. God is not calling Christians to sit alone on the benches of life but to belong radically in the world that He made—to really ‘dwell’, not just to say, ‘I am just passing through, so don’t look to me for anything. I don’t really live here; I am just waiting for heaven.’

Powerful leadership is rooted in belonging now, having a kingdom vision of home that is both present and future focussed.

We will refer to a ‘belonging-based relationship’ throughout this book. This is a relationship which is substantial beyond our ‘usefulness to others’. It is a relationship within which we can describe ourselves as ‘at home’, secure in the knowledge that it will withstand our own shortcomings. Belonging-based relationships are ones that allow us the ability to be authentic and lead with vision and courage: to be who we really are, without fear.

Belonging-based relationships are not necessarily ‘loving’ or highly emotive. They can be experienced in the workplace, church, local community, or professional environment. They are as much a product of our own decision as they are something to be ‘found’ outside of ourselves. Our ambition is that you will have two tracks of belonging-based relationships from which to exercise your leadership: one that is held within authentic interpersonal relationships, and the other that is rooted in your relationship with God.

## ALMOST BELONGING

You may have got this far in the book and thought ‘this doesn’t apply to me.’ You are trying to be authentic; you don’t feel lonely and aren’t faking it—you’ve made some real sacrifices. However, you suspect we may be on to something as you don’t feel sent from a secure base, nor do you feel that you have a safe haven to return to.

Leaders who ‘almost belong’ are usually doing great things, but they still carry a sense that this is an incomplete or inferior version of their ‘real’ calling. They have enough good things going on that they don’t want to ‘rock the boat’ and they feel that they should be satisfied, and yet there is this longing for something greater.

Before Moses spent forty years shepherding the Israelite nation through the wilderness to the Promised Land, he shepherded the sheep of Midian in the desert for forty years. It was here that God met him in the burning bush and called him to change direction, returning to his original home in Egypt. It wasn’t that he was apparently unhappy as a shepherd; it was that he was tending the wrong flock.

Moses’ journey from shepherd of sheep to shepherd of people was the journey from un-belonging to belonging. It was the realisation of a true vision of ‘home’ in which all of his insecurities and doubts were recalibrated. God hasn’t called us to ‘almost belong’. He has called us to ‘radically belong’; to lead in the confidence of knowing that we are His sons and daughters.

## **RADICAL BELONGERS**

The theology of radical *belonging* is the discipline of knowing that you belong to God and therefore you belong in His world. The calling to love your neighbour is second only to loving God Himself. The only

good neighbours are the ones who know that they belong—they belong despite all of the difference they see between those whom they live alongside.

It seems no coincidence that Jesus identified a Samaritan (loathed by his Jewish audience) to be the example of a good neighbour in Luke 10. His belonging wasn't limited by his ethnicity, geography, or social perception. It was the kingdom threads of home (of compassion, tenderness, courage, and godliness) that made his belonging authentic, even in a hostile place.

In a film about Jean Vanier (the founder of the L'Arch Communities), Vanier speaks tenderly to a young man with severe disabilities. 'You are so beautiful, Sebastian,' Vanier repeats as he holds the man's hand. There is not an ounce of insincerity in Vanier's words. He speaks with the conviction of a person who knows that he 'radically belongs' and is therefore able to offer a radical welcome to someone whom others may easily overlook.<sup>13</sup>

Vanier has spent his life establishing environments of 'home' for people who have been rejected by traditional society. He writes that 'community is not an ideal; it is people. It is you and me. In community, we are called to love people just as they are with their wounds and their gifts, not as we want them to be.'<sup>14</sup>

Vanier is a radical believer, part of a group of extraordinary people who carry such a deep sense of 'home' that they have been able to radically love others. This radical belonging enables the individual to step beyond the petty competition that so often inhabits our relationships. People who 'radically belong' have no need for self-promotion because their insecurities about belonging are resolved. Their energy and intention are focused on their true mission.

## **JESUS THE RADICAL BELONGER**

We see the ultimate radical believer in Jesus Christ. Isaiah 53:3 gives us the context into which Jesus was called: ‘He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.’ Despite being born into the setting of rejection, Jesus carried the perfect state of belonging within Him.

We can read the New Testament with complete amazement. Amazement not just at the miracles of Jesus, but at the security and confidence He sustained at the points of highest pressure.

Often when Jesus performed a miracle, He asked those involved to remain silent.<sup>15</sup> Consider that for a moment; you have just raised a child from the dead and you ask for secrecy! The unbelonging in most of us would scream out, ‘This is perfect. Now people are going to like me, welcome me, respect me, listen to me. Which social media channel would be best to utilise for this story to have the maximum reach?’

It is one thing to persistently refuse to seek the popularity of the crowd, but Jesus was also silent in His own defence. When He was tried before Pilate, the Bible says, ‘Jesus remained silent.’<sup>16</sup> Silent! Put us in the same scenario, and our fear of rejection (let alone the impending pain and execution) would have had us flowing with expert testimony, denials, miracles ... anything to stop the outcome.

Jesus is the ultimate radical believer because He has the ultimate relationship of belonging within Him. He knows that He is God's Son and that God is 'well pleased' with Him; He knows that He has 'everything under his feet'; and He knows that He will be there at the end.<sup>17</sup>

## A VISION OF BELONGING

For many Christian leaders, the theology of 'radical un-belonging' often takes such a hold that no progress can really be made until they have a vision of something better. Reflections on radical believers like Vanier give us a vision of the power and virtue of belonging. To know that we are capable of a profound depth of love when we are secure in our belonging to Christ can be a great motivation to us. Instead of seeing radical believers as a saintly breed of individual who we can admire from a lowly distance, we can be released to the joy of loving without exchange—to lead securely and love unconditionally.

In our insecure states, however, we have very little time for Jesus' instruction in Matthew 5:44, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.' It's not that we want revenge on our enemies. Far from it. We just don't have the security in our own belonging to know what it would even look like to love them. Uncovering the limitations of un-belonging in our lives and knowing the belonging that Jesus offers can radically transform our capacity to lead others well.



## **STUDY GUIDE: CHAPTER 1**

Can you think of times when you have felt lonely or homesick? List these below.

Are you aware of the two 'homes' we live between? Which threads of your historic home and spiritual home would you want to live in today?

## LONGING FOR HOME

How do stories of radical belongers like Vanier or even Jesus make you feel? Are you in awe of them, seeing them as ‘distant saints’, or do they give you a vision of what is possible?

To what extent do you identify with ‘almost belonging’? Which aspects of your current leadership practice do you think could be ‘shadow mission’ rather than ‘true mission’?