

john a. powell

With Rachelle Galloway-Popotas

book  
excerpt

The  
Power of  
Bridging



how to build a world  
where we all belong

“Wise and visionary, powell helps us find the courage to forge connections with others, the earth, and ourselves in order to transform the world from the inside out.”

**Valarie Kaur**, bestselling author of *See No Stranger* and *Sage Warrior*

# 1

## Bridging to the Future

This book is about four key concepts paired in tension with each other: *belonging* and *bridging* and *othering* and *breaking*. I'll go into much greater detail to define each of these and how they are interrelated, but let me offer some brief introductions now to what I mean by these four words.

I believe many of our most vexing social problems share a common structure that is not often revealed when we are just looking at single issues. I believe that the concept of *othering*, or seeing people not only as different but as less deserving and not of equal dignity as us, allows us to more clearly perceive the underlying structure of many of the problems we are facing, whether we call those problems racism, nationalism, homophobia, or cancel culture.

*Breaking* is othering in action. When we engage in breaking, we deny the full stories, complexities, and even sometimes the humanity of those we consider other. Their suffering does not count as much as ours. While othering is about one's status in relationship to different groups, breaking is the practice that undergirds othering.

The solutions that I want to offer to othering and breaking are belonging and bridging.

*Belonging* serves as an aspiration and orientation in the world. A world built on belonging means one must have what is necessary to

cocreate and participate in making the world one lives in. Belonging means agency for all members of society. It is closely associated with dignity and being seen. While in a sense we already belong, it is still important that we are acknowledged as belonging and that we acknowledge the belonging of others.

At a foundational, and I would say spiritual, level, belonging also means that *there is no other*. Whose life is unimportant? Who does not matter? Show me the person not made of stardust. Not only do we all count, but we are all connected. *We all belong*.

And yet that is not our daily experience. We are situated differently from others. We see the world differently from others. How am I to be my brother's and sister's keeper when they see the world so differently than I do? Maybe they even reject the idea that they are my brother or sister. There are many practices, like in my father's church, willing to embrace the notion that all the members belong but not the nonmembers—not the Chinese people, or the eleven-year-old who questioned the rules of belonging. Othering may seem natural and even inevitable. It is neither. But we must do something in a world where we practice not seeing the humanity in the other.

This is where bridging comes in.

*Bridging* is both a practice and a position. "Can I become a bridge?" I may ask myself. And this immediately calls up other questions—"Do I want to bridge?" Or "Why should I?"

By definition, if someone is other, there is apparently a distance between us. Why don't I just leave it at that? Maybe they are more than different—maybe they are a threat. Should I bridge or should I protect myself from this other?

We live in a world full of fractures and one where polarization, division from one another, and isolating ourselves are becoming increasingly normalized. We live in a world where fear is often more visible than love or hope.

But it does not have to be that way. In our effort to protect ourselves in what feels like a dystopian world, to close ourselves off from

one another, we are likely to inflict even more pain and add fuel to the fire of the very world we want to avoid.

This book suggests there is another way. This book hopes to acknowledge and reclaim our ability to see one another. And to live with one another.

Where there is an apparent other, there is the need to explore how to bridge. This book is about belonging *without* othering despite the claim that the world demands something else. This book is an invitation to reject a future organized around fear and death, and instead to organize and call into being a world where we recognize and live into our connection with one another, the earth, and ourselves. It is known that we share much DNA with apes. What is less discussed is that we also share DNA with all of life. To live into this reality of interbeing is the challenge.

This is not an easy task, and there will be many reasons to think and do otherwise. And yet, life demands life, and I believe bridging is one of our most important ways to see and celebrate one another and ourselves.

## **The Power of Stories**

A slightly different approach to the four concepts I have named would be to ask: “How do we move from a world built on breaking and othering to one built on bridging and belonging?”

One way is through stories.

What do stories have to do with bridging? Stories are vital to the human experience. Indeed, a more fundamental question may be “What do stories have to do with us?” Stories are what help us make sense of the world and ourselves. We are meaning-making animals, and stories are the tools we use to make meaning.

There is strong evidence that we do not have a coherent sense of ourselves until we develop a story about ourselves. When we remember the past or we anticipate the future, it is largely through stories.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz stated that all knowledge is local, made and held by communities who share experiences, understandings, and expectations with one another. That knowledge is carried in

our stories, which in turn shape our world and give it meaning. While some of our stories may appear individual, they are always embedded in a social community, bound up with the community's set of stories. Indigenous knowledge and history is irreducible from the stories that are told about the world that anchor community in past, present, and future. For more on this see the work of scholars Robin Wall Kimmerer (Potawatomi) and Patty Krawec (Anishnaabe).

Different societies and different eras have different stories. Some cultures think of time as circular; some think of it as linear. The point is not that one group or perspective is right and another one wrong; the point is that our lives and relationships are shaped by these different stories.

We all carry multiple stories, as well as multiple selves, something I'll return to later. When I first met the Buddhist teacher Joanna Macy, she said, "john, tell me your story." I responded, "Joanna, as you know, we have many stories, and none are completely true or accurate." Joanna replied, "Of course. Just pick one."

I sometimes hesitate to share my own personal stories for several reasons. One is not wanting to be overly identified with a single story. But another reason is because I know that we hear other people's stories against a backdrop of our *own* story, as well as of the larger story that society carries. When this happens, my own complex story often gets missed.

As a relatively successful Black man in America, I often experience an overweighted interest in a *single* story about my life. There is a tendency to make my Blackness my entire story—or, conversely, to assert it is not consequential at all. I remember being with a wonderful white friend in Minneapolis who asked me what it is like to be a Black man in Minneapolis, which at that time was one of the whitest cities in the United States. When I turned the question back to her and asked what it was like to be a white person in Minneapolis, she was puzzled. Her experience of whiteness in Minneapolis was so pervasive, she had no distance to allow her to look at it. Like me as a child in Detroit, surrounded by Blackness I didn't see, she was living



with whiteness all around, and therefore it was invisible. In a sense I can know Blackness only when I have some distance from it or it is in relationship to something else.

The other story is that my race does not matter at all. Some people will insist that being a “good” person means we don’t see one another’s race, gender, or other descriptive category, that our individuality and spirit cannot be reduced to any category. And while it is true we cannot be reduced, it is also a false hope that we are not touched by these categories or that we can remain unaware they exist. Being Black is not my whole story, but neither is the story of me being an individual “I.”

The first story has often come with an invitation for me to share stories of how I “overcame.” To me there is tacit in that request yet another story, one about the others who did *not* overcome. So an apparently positive story about me—that is, how I became successful—reflects a not-so-positive story about others who were not only less fortunate but maybe, in the mind of the person hearing my story, less deserving.

This story itself—how we are self-made, how we can individually overcome our family history, life circumstances, and the structures and contexts we live in—is part of a larger story in the United States. And I believe that larger story is not only distorting and incomplete but also at times harmful. I don’t know who I, John, am without my parents or my family, without the experiences that shaped how I see the world and who I am in and to the world. Even from my earliest story, there was no me without a larger we.

As I suggested in the preface, when I share the story of my parents, the listener often inserts their own story about how difficult my parents’ lives must have been, given the social and material status of Black Americans of their generation. This assumption distorts much of the larger meaning of what it was like growing up in my family. This simplistic story misses who I am and how I experience my life.

As I share more stories throughout the book, both about myself and about others, I will strive to make all of them as accurate as possible, especially the ones about myself. And yet I have no doubt that

when I describe my eleven-year-old self or my fifty-year-old self, what I experienced then and how I made meaning of it then are not the same as how I remember it today.

This is in part because when we remember, it is not simply a *recall* of what happened. We are constantly reinterpreting our past and the meaning behind its events. I am not talking about fabrication or deceit. But even in our clearest and most deliberate efforts, we cannot get to a story about ourselves, or the world, without being shaped by things that often lie largely beyond our cognitive grasp, such as metaphors and language. There are parts of our lives that are just not fully available to us without meanings assigned changing over time.

And yet too often we leave little room for doubt, uncertainty, and change about our stories. We have all witnessed people who are very close, people with long histories together, trying to agree on a small or large event in their life, yet agreement frequently eludes them. They remember the same event differently, with different implications.

This is even more pronounced when we are looking beyond facts to find *meaning*. When I think of my own life, I am aware there are many stories, and their meanings are still emerging. And I experience my memories and meaning making afresh as I myself grow and change. So this is not just about what something *did* mean but also about what *it will mean* in the future. This meaning making will be in part filtered through a language and culture that the “individual” is born into and can never completely control.

The world is not here solely to be observed. We are very much a part of this world and are constantly reinterpreting ourselves and our story in it. In a society like the United States, informed by Christian religion, for example, even those who are non-Christian or secular will find their lives and cultural cues to be deeply informed by Christian concepts. For example, the concepts of sin and redemption or of good and evil will have meaning for most people in the West in a way that would likely not register to someone from a society grounded in a different religious tradition or foundation.

We are not separate from each other or separate from the world. The claim of connectedness may seem counterintuitive and even strange to those of us raised on the myth of our separation from nature and each other and the need to dominate others and the earth.

But it is the claim of separation that is strange, not to say fear inducing. The other often represents a fear, the threat of what is unknown and uncertain. This fear creates the need to dominate or domesticate. We love the domesticated, manicured park but remain fearful of the uncontrollable nature of the forest.

But uncertainty and unknowing are not just lurking out there or in the other; they are part of our very being. Earlier, I wrote about not having a single story and having uncertainty about my story and experience. Some may find my claims of a multiplicity of selves or uncertainty around memory disturbing. They may also just flat out disagree. Rather than presenting an obstacle, though, I believe this space of uncertainty can be a space of hope for bridging and belonging.

It may also provide the space for the other. Significant research in the science of cognition indicates that much of life and how we perceive it is full of uncertainty and gaps.

While the hope for certainty may be understandable, the reality we are forced to live with is anything but.

This insight around the certainty of uncertainty is not a problem; indeed, the reality of our fluidity and multiplicity is one of the ways that we can support bridging. Bridging recognizes the need for a larger and unfolding story that holds our aspirations for a shared future based on belonging, not fear and separation. This story is one both of facts and of meaning. This is not only a never-ending story but a never-complete story.

Not having perfect clarity with others or ourselves about the past at a *personal* level takes on a much sharper relief at a *societal* level, and often with much higher and more material stakes. Institutions and the state also have stories and histories but hold greater power than individuals to enforce or ignore stories, a subject I'll get into more deeply throughout this book.



The world of stories does not always line up with the real world, and yet the imagined world of our stories—not only about our past but also about what we tell ourselves about the future—has importance in the real world. Historian and philosopher Yuval Noah Harari finds the *ability to imagine* to be one of the unique gifts bestowed on humans that allows us to create new things and, equally important, allows us to build a bridge to a future where we can make a larger *us*. Bridging helps us build *practices* to imagine a shared story for the future rooted in belonging for all humans and the earth, too.

Bridging is about the emerging story of moving toward *us and us*, not *us versus them*. In *bridging stories*, the lines and boundaries are constantly being renegotiated. In *breaking stories*, some voices are muted or distorted for the benefit of one group and not the other. While bridging stories embrace the nuance of the truth, breaking stories are more likely to embrace the simplicity of a lie.

Bridging and breaking are not simply a binary. Many breaks are not complete breaks, and many bridges are not complete bridges. Bridging is more of an orientation and compass than a destination.

That's why in this book I will be calling on both stories and our imagination to talk about the power of bridging. And while understanding bridging and belonging helps us make sense of the moment we are in, they are also about creating possibility and a story for the future.

I hope that my sharing some versions of stories, both my own and those of our larger society, helps to convey my journey of becoming a *bridger* and may provide some guidance to you on yours.

## **The Urgency of Bridging**

Why do I believe (and I do believe) this work of bridging is urgent? Because we are living right now in a world where there is a great deal of fragmentation. This is often framed as *polarization* and sometimes as *isolation*, or both. While these three dynamics are related, I believe *fragmentation* is a better way of understanding and addressing our current state.

Polarization is usually defined by two sides diverging in roughly symmetrical ways, with the implication being that to solve polarization everyone can moderate their positions and meet in a perceived middle. That may sound appealing, but often it is not the correct solution. What about a case where one side embraces steps to avert impending disaster while the other is not only entrenched in inaction but denies there is even an issue? Not all instances of groups diverging should or even *can* be resolved by negotiating a middle position.

I prefer the term *fragmentation* to describe the widespread dynamic of retreat into groups that are mutually averse to and distrustful of each other. To address fragmentation, we must also understand and address power and contexts of different groups, while at the same time anchoring our efforts in values that include *all* people.

Social division, fragmentation, and isolation are all global issues and are a threat to the health of democracy and the planet. We should be careful in both analysis and language about them. (I write more about fragmentation in the book *Racing to Justice*.)

Fragmentation and distrust are on the rise. In the US, the gap between how positively individuals feel toward others of their own political party versus members of the opposing political party has grown steadily since the early 1990s. By 2020, animosity toward the opposing political party was at its highest point in decades, as measured by a public opinion survey tool called the “feeling thermometer,” which asks Americans to rate how warm or cold they feel toward different groups, including those in different political parties.

In 2022, an NBC News survey showed that 80 percent of people with political affiliations believed the other party “poses a threat that if not stopped will destroy America as we know it.” This was shown to be in part because Americans exaggerate how different they are from supporters of the other party, and therefore they carry in their heads distorted and flattened stories of one another. The less we meaningfully interact across differences—the less we stay open to *bridging*—the more likely that such stories become a reality.

There is distrust not just of the apparent *other* but of each other, even those we may think of as members of our group. This is sometimes expressed in terms of social isolation and loneliness. The British government noted loneliness as a national problem and appointed a minister of loneliness to help address it. The US Surgeon General has issued warnings that we are in an epidemic of loneliness.

People are experiencing not just increased loneliness but also anger, hopelessness, and little faith in institutions. A 2023 survey from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) found that more than three-quarters of Americans believe that our democracy is at risk in the 2024 US presidential election. And 38 percent agreed with the statement that “because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country,” the highest rate of support for political violence in the eight surveys PRRI has conducted since 2021.

All over the world, an increasing number of people are facing the future with a mix of anxiety, fear, and trepidation. These feelings are a breeding ground for authoritarianism and worse. Peace-building organizations globally are being challenged to reconsider their values and their approach as wars in Ukraine, Sudan, and Gaza rage on. Even those who may conceptually support building bridges between different groups worry it may be a luxury we cannot afford in this environment.

So why are war and othering increasing now, and why all over the world?

One reason is because the world is changing rapidly, and rapid change puts us under enormous pressure, straining our ability to adapt. Today’s accelerated changes are happening across critical areas that have enormous impact on all of us—climate crisis, technological advances, economic shifts, the COVID pandemic, and altering demographics all portend a different world. The speed of these changes will not likely slow down.

These dynamics are raising Darwinian narratives, such as *who will survive* and *who will fit in this emerging new world*. While the

reference to Darwin might seem abstract, the experience is anything but. We frequently respond to the challenge of change by finding a target to assuage our anxiety. And too often that target becomes the other. It can be the racial other, the immigrant other, the trans other. As Darwin discussed survival of the fittest, he appeared to be discussing traits and species. The application and use in social discourse may not align completely with Darwinian theory of the survival of the fittest, but that will not likely have much impact on either the discussion or the underlying anxiety.

There are indeed changes coming. The future, somewhat like the past, is complex, only more so. The changes may be scary, or they may be something we believe we want. But they all point to a world where we will all be called upon to change. What is most fearful is the possibility that my group, and I, will not belong in this new world.

Even if we don't want to change, change is inevitable. It might be good, bad, both, and neither. But life does not exist without change. The change could be slow enough that we don't notice it, but when change is too fast, it may appear to threaten our current way of being. Our sense of threat may feel even more troubling when we begin to allow the belief that the unwelcome change is being caused by an other.

People are navigating these changes without much help from leaders and without stories that can support them in meeting the moment with something other than fear. Changing US immigration policies or leaving the European Union is not likely to address the issue of climate or demographic changes. And people are not likely to invest in serious solutions for any number of causes unless such solutions speak to some real concerns that impact their daily lives. The energy we see around book bans in schools suggests that it might be easier to get people excited about what their children are reading or not reading than about issues like climate change or artificial intelligence, which might feel more removed and abstract.

The collective anxiety that we are experiencing due to the pace of change in the world today can be met with fear and more anxiety, or

it can be met by creating opportunities to turn toward one another and build a larger *we* that can face the future together.

I believe bridging is one such opportunity.

Bridging is a powerful way to address fragmentation and create a shared story for our future. I believe understanding the threats of othering and the orientation of belonging will help us meet the future with the urgency we need.

## **The Role of Stories in Our Changing World**

The role of stories is vital in all these dynamics. And I believe right now there are three stories, or some combination of them, that can be told.

The first story is that there is no real change happening and everything will continue to be just like it is. It is offered to address fears by insisting that there will not be any significant change. This is the least credible story, even if it is often employed.

The second story is that we are heading for a future where things could get much worse. Who we are, our very way of life, are up for grabs. If we do not do something quick—and possibly something extreme—it will be too late. You may read this as a warning about climate change. It could be, but in this story it's not climate change that accelerates the anxiety for many. The central factor that shapes our anxiety is about the *other*. The dreaded other is put forth as the most immediate and profound threat to our way of life and our very existence. As our anxiety searches for a target, the demagogue is more than willing to point to a marginal other as the source.

In this story, we hear *they* are threatening *us*—they are taking our jobs, they are bringing crime to our communities, they are importing strange religious practices to our neighborhood. In this story they threaten who we are. This threat at some level may even portend extinction: we may die, or we may be replaced, or we may be changed so much as to be unrecognizable. Sometimes this reads as the possibility that our collective group purity will be polluted. We will become strangers in our own land. Unless we act now, we are really f\*cked.



The zombies and the vampires are at the gates, and the elites are with them. There is no room in this story for the possibility that we might live together. Attacks and other forms of violence can be recast as self-defense and the protection our group.

Then there is the third story. The third story is also one of change. But the change is good or at least it is potentially good. In this story there is a future where all of us belong. In this story we will be a more diverse and more connected people. We will learn to listen to each other and contribute our unique histories and realities. We will turn toward each other, instead of on each other, and we will work together to create structures and societies where we can all participate, celebrating our differences instead of pretending we are all the same.

I believe the second and third stories are likely to be the dominant stories of the rest of the century.

The second story is what I call a breaking story. It tells of a smaller and smaller we in constant struggle with the threatening other. This story is deeply motivated by fear and limited imagination. This story has currency all over the globe and is growing in circulation and scale. Adherents to any version of the second story are, even if unconsciously, afraid of the future and may wish to retreat to a mythical past. Some common themes in this story are ethnic purity, domination, and the building of boundaries and structures to keep us apart.

The third story is a bridging story. It tells the story of a larger and larger we, with an aspiration that there is no other and an intention to work to build practices and relationships that support that aspiration. This larger we need not become an undifferentiated we. There is still the need for expressions of multiple groups. Belonging is not treating everyone as the same.

Bridging is a story rooted in belonging, where the we is reconstituted, where everyone has the agency to shape the world we live in. Yes, the world will be different. Yes, we will be different. But we will find new ways to connect. Even though we may appear different to one another, we will recognize and live the fact that we have more in common than we do differences and can create new commonalities.

And if we embrace this recognition, the we of the future will be not only larger but better. We will still have differences, but the boundaries between us will be more porous.

The bridging story is one of a cocreated future where bridges instead of walls are the norm. It is a story of shared faith—in each other and in our future.

In some sense, the groups from the second and third stories want the same things: a world where they are safe, their fears are quieted, and their concerns are considered. A world where they belong. But they believe different things and practices will deliver this future or move them closer to it.

Both the breaking story and the bridging story are about belonging. The breaking story is focused on only one group's belonging and this belonging being threatened by the other. (It is the ethnic cleansing that is discussed in Michael Mann's book *The Dark Side of Democracy*.) It is making the nascent US "safe" for Europeans by cleansing it of Native Americans. The breaking group believes this safe world is in the past, where if there is an other, they are dominated and controlled for the benefit of the legitimate we. The bridging group, on the other hand, leans toward a future where we are safe only when the world and our stories support our interconnection and mutuality.

For those of you ready to engage in the future, I have good news. It is coming. For those of you who would prefer to stay in the past, the news is not as good.

Much of what happens in the emerging future—not all, but much—depends on us. I believe that future is worth living and the road to that future is one of bridging and belonging. We cannot imagine a future where we all belong unless we can learn to bridge.

While I will go into some depth about the challenges we are facing, this is not a book about despair. I am not a person who is prone to that emotion. But neither am I a person who organizes solely around hope. It has been said that hope alone is not a strategy. But when we do things together, possibilities indeed become countless. Bridging is one of those possibilities.

I believe we in the United States have been on a journey from the time of our formation as a nation, when our practices started with a very small *we* living in an exclusionary society, moved toward a partially integrated society, progressed further to an inclusive society, and now, I posit, are growing toward a belonging society.

The original “We the People” clause in the US Constitution conceived of a very small *we*. Enslaved people were not included in that *we*, women were not included in that *we*, men without property were not included, Indigenous people were not included, nonwhite immigrants were excluded, and so on. By some accounts, fewer than one-sixth of adults were included in the *we* at the founding of the United States.

Other nations and regions have had similar arcs. A few hundred years ago, most of Europe—indeed much of the world—did not consider most people to fully count or belong as members of the *we*. Belonging was reserved for royalty and the aristocratic classes.

Many of the debates we’re having today are about *who belongs*. As demands for the *we* to grow have generated expansion, there has also been contraction. Genocide and ethnic cleansing are explicit assertions and practices around the notion that some people, including former members and current inhabitants, are now not part of the *we* and do not belong. Narratives about groups assigned to the nonbelonging space are then widely circulated—that they are to be feared, controlled, and maybe even destroyed. In 2022, Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary, asserted that Hungary is a country for white Europeans only, where people of color do not belong.

So can we imagine a future where *all* belong? I believe we not only can, we must. But only together.

This book is meant to help us cultivate the practices that can guide us toward that future and toward a new story where no person is left out of our circle of concern.

While this could be read as an optimistic view of the future, I am not optimistic nor pessimistic. I refer to myself as a *possibilist*. I believe life and the world are full of contingencies, and what we do and do not

do matter. We cannot know how life will treat us, but the best chance of having an impact is not to control the unknown, but to engage the possibilities. We are not helpless, especially if we can act and cocreate together. That is how I try to live this life.

I introduced the concepts of bridging and breaking in the sharing of my stories as a boy growing up in Detroit and my break with my parents. I will continue to return to some of these lessons throughout this book.

I think a deeper dive into the meanings of the terms I'm offering here—*othering*, *breaking*, *belonging*, and *bridging*—is necessary, as these are deceptively simple terms with many layers. I will try to peel off some of the layers. The purpose of the book is not just to define these terms but to demonstrate why belonging and bridging are necessary in our increasingly broken world, as well as to point us in the direction of how we might begin to orient ourselves toward them in our own lives.

At the core of bridging is the willingness to stay open and to recognize the inherent humanity of all people. The attitude we bring to bridging is more crucial than any specific steps we might learn on how to bridge. Indeed, how we bridge will look different in different situations, and it will continue to change.

As you read through this book and contemplate your own relationship with bridging, I offer some questions for reflection at the end of each chapter. I encourage you to sit with those—even more, perhaps to write them down and talk about them with others. Engage in conversations about these questions and about bridging. From experience, I have seen much of the most robust bridging work being done today in dialogue with other people. It is useful to grapple with the questions and feelings that arise as we practice bridging as part of our aspiration to move toward a world where all belong and none are othered.

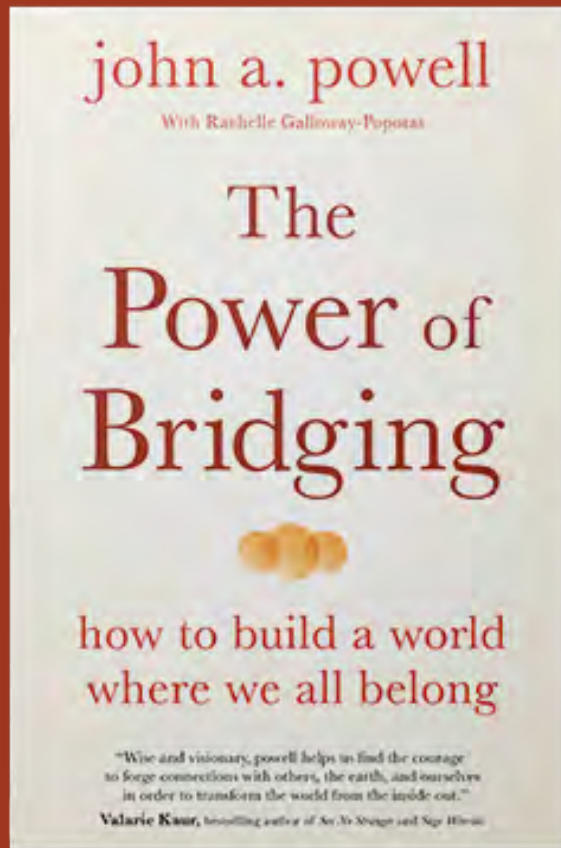
This is the charge of belonging, and this is my charge in life. I hope it is or may become yours.

So let's get on with it.

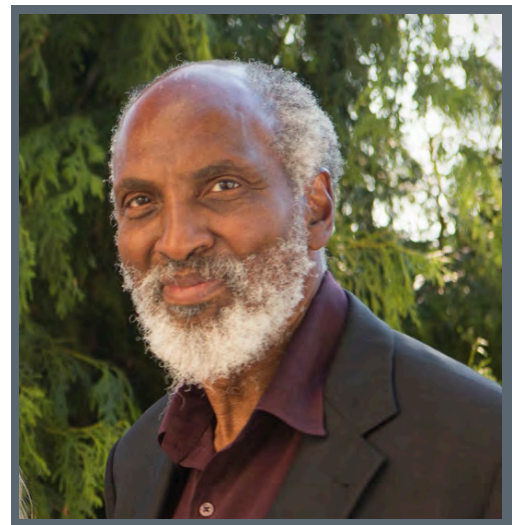
## **Reflect**

- What story do you tell yourself about the inevitable change in the world? Is it good? Bad? Something more complex?
- Where in your life do you feel you belong?
- Where do you feel you don't belong? Where do you feel like you are *other*?
- Who to you is *other* and why?
- Do you *other* some parts of your self?
- Can you imagine a world where everyone belongs? What might it look like?





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