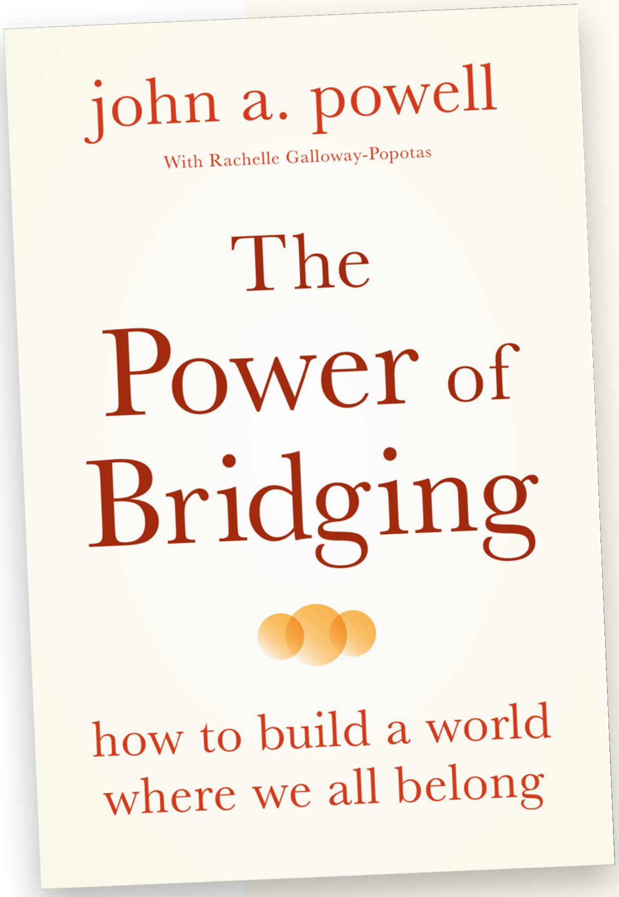
The *Power of Bridging* Workbook

This workbook has been developed for use by the **Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies** for their staff read of *The Power of Bridging: How to build a world where all belong,* authored by john a. powell and Rachelle Galloway-Popotas.

The worksheets are designed to serve as a guide to key ideas covered in the book, providing an overview and resource about bridging for learners in order to spark interest and dialogue, strengthen shared practice, and deepen engagement with colleagues.

Arranged by each chapter of the book, each worksheet contains **Critical Insights** from each chapter as well as **Core Concepts** that help guide understanding and learning. At the end of each worksheet, there are a set of suggested **Reflection Questions** for individuals, groups, and larger institutions. These are just a guiding point–feel free to create your own!

To find out more about *The Power of Bridging*, including book reviews, events, and a book club discussion guide, visit belonging.berkeley.edu/power-bridging.



john a. powell

With Rachelle Galloway-Popotas

The Power of Bridging

how to build a world where we all belong

Othering & Belonging Institute

Margaret A. Cargill PHILANTHROPIES

This workbook was researched, compiled, and developed for the Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies by Ashley Gallegos of the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley, with editorial and design support from Rachelle Galloway-Popotas and Marc Abizeid.

Chapter 1: Bridging to the Future

Chapter Insights

We all belong.

Belonging is an inherent right we are born with. Belonging is a universal condition.

But belonging is not reflected in people's daily lived experiences. Many social, political, and economic arrangements deny individuals and groups the agency, dignity, and recognition that belonging requires. That's where the need for bridging comes in. Bridging is a potential response to a world where othering occurs. It requires curiosity, openness, and a willingness to listen. It recognizes not only our shared humanity, but our inherent interconnection. More than a set of techniques, bridging is an anchor that can ground us in staying open to complexity, a willingness to listen, and does not break because of tension or disagreement.

Bridging work and attempting to be someone willing to be a bridger helps us to reject a present and future organized around fear, scarcity, and death, and instead reorients us toward life, connection, and interdependence—with one another, the earth, and even within ourselves. This shift is not merely theoretical; it engages with how societies organize power, resources, and meaning.

Stories play a central role in how we make sense of and engage with the world. Each person carries multiple stories shaped by identity, experience, and context. Storytelling can open pathways to connection, but holding a single story about another person limits understanding. All stories are filtered through our own situatedness, requiring careful attention to nuance, difference, and deep listening.

Institutions also carry stories, histories, and narratives—often with far greater power than individuals to shape reality. Institutional stories can enforce exclusion, ignore harm, or legitimize inequality. They can also, when reimagined and co-created, shape the conditions for belonging.

Stories are not only about the past; they are tools for imagining and building collective futures. The stories societies tell determine whether they remain organized around breaking and othering or move toward bridging and belonging.

Bridging stories reconstitute the "we." These stories move us away from rigid "us versus them" boundaries and toward an evolving

Core Concepts

Belonging is both a vision and a practice. It orients us toward a world in which people are not only included, but have the power, resources, and recognition necessary to shape the social, political, and cultural conditions of their lives. Belonging is connected to dignity, being seen, and agency.

Bridging is a way of being in relationship. It is a practice and a position, one rooted in openness, care, and recognition of shared humanity. How we approach bridging matters more than following a prescribed set of actions.

Othering is seeing people as less deserving and not of equal dignity, reducing people to categories and hierarchies of worth. Othering frames difference as a threat.

Breaking is othering in action; it happens through policies, narratives, and behaviors that erase complexity and even deny humanity.

Situatedness: Each of us is shaped by where we stand in relation to power, history, culture, and systems. Situatedness reminds us of our own unique positionality and that no one is just one identity or experience.

Fragmentation names the growing pattern of separation, fear, and mistrust between groups, often reinforced by social, political, and institutional forces.

Chapter Insights (cont.)

sense of shared fate. In bridging stories, identities are continually in flux and evolving, rather than fixed and static. By contrast, breaking stories mute or distort certain voices to preserve advantage for some at the expense of others.

The urgency of bridging is heightened by widespread fragmentation. Social groups are increasingly retreating into distrustful and mutually averse positions. Addressing fragmentation requires engaging power and context while remaining anchored in values that affirm the dignity and belonging of all people.

Rapid global change—social, political, technological, and environmental—places immense pressure on individuals and societies. In response, narratives often emerge that deny change, catastrophize it, or seek scapegoats.

Bridging aligns with a different story: one that recognizes the possibility of intervention, repair, and collective building.

Bridging is rooted in belonging, where everyone has agency to shape the world they inhabit. A world of belonging is only built through relationships. Inclusive futures require knowing, listening to, and learning together, for it is only together that we share a future.▪

Reflection Questions

Individual

- Where in your life do you practice bridging?
- What assumptions or single stories do you hold that might limit your ability to stay open?
- How do you respond to change or uncertainty?

Group / Community

- What “we” does your group currently imagine—and who falls outside of it?
- How are stories used to strengthen connections or reinforce divisions?
- Where could curiosity replace certainty in your collective work?

Institutional

- How does your institution respond to fragmentation or conflict?
- What future is your institution organizing toward—explicitly or implicitly?
- What would it look like for your institution to anchor its work more clearly in belonging?

Notes

Chapter 2: The Problem is Othering

Chapter Insights

Othering is an underlying phenomenon that shapes inequality, exclusion, and fragmentation across societies. Bridging and belonging are powerful responses to othering, but they must be understood in relation to the processes that produce and sustain othering.

The concept of "the other" has long been used to analyze racialization, colonialism, gender, sexuality, and patriarchy. Othering expands this analysis by naming a generalized process through which groups are denied full dignity, recognition, and access to rights. It is not limited to any one identity or context, even as it manifests in specific, historical, and present ways.

While race is not a biological fact, racism is real and deeply consequential. In the United States, race organizes many aspects of social life, including housing, education, healthcare, and whose stories are centered or erased.

There is no natural or scientific "other." Difference does not inherently produce hierarchy. Others are constituted through social processes, narratives, and institutional arrangements. The fact that a category is socially constructed does not diminish its impact; socially constructed realities shape material conditions and lived experience.

Historical examples such as the Kerner Commission report in the 1960s reveal how state institutions participate in producing and sustaining othering. The state does not merely distribute resources—it defines identities, constructs group boundaries, and determines who belongs. Categories such as race, sexuality, and citizenship have been shaped through law, policy, and governance.

Whiteness in the United States was actively constructed by the state and linked to status, rights, and belonging. It has functioned not only as a descriptor of appearance but as a marker of legitimacy, citizenship, and inclusion. These categorizations were not created by individuals alone, but through institutional power.

Focusing on othering does not diminish the importance of addressing racism, which, properly understood, continues to be the dominant expression of othering in the US context. Rather, an othering framework deepens the analysis by revealing shared structural patterns across different forms of marginalization,

Core Concepts

Othering is the problem; bridging and belonging are powerful responses to combat it. Othering is an overarching yet also precise concept that points to the mechanics of exclusion. Not limited to any one group, othering describes a process through which individuals or groups are denied full dignity, recognition, and access to rights enjoyed by others. Those who are targets of othering are often treated as less worthy, less valuable, and even less grievable.

Othering is not inevitable nor necessarily innate to human nature. It is a process whose content is shaped by social meaning, stories, and structures. Categories of othering must be created, reinforced, and maintained through institutional practices and narratives in order to endure.

Belonging without Othering offers a fundamentally different approach to building for belonging. It rejects the idea that belonging can be expanded for some only by proscribing exclusion for others. Instead, it emphasizes building social, political, and institutional arrangements that support belonging for all.

Bridging is a powerful response to othering. While othering fractures and separates, bridging works to reconnect across difference while remaining attentive to power, context, and harm.

Racism is a specific and historically dominant expression of othering, but it is not the only form of othering. Othering provides a broader framework that includes racism while also illuminating other processes of marginalization.

Structures and Stories: Othering at a group level requires durable social structures and dominant stories. These narratives give meaning to difference and sustain inequality over time.

Chapter Insights (cont.)

both domestically and globally.

An exclusive focus on race can sometimes obscure other expressions of exclusion and belonging, such as religious, national, or political othering. Understanding how othering operates across contexts allows for more expansive and adaptable strategies for change.

At a moment marked by backlash against racial justice, attacks on diversity and equity efforts, and attempts to rewrite historical narratives, othering provides a lens for holding complexity. It helps name both hypersensitivity to race and efforts to erase or minimize its history.

We need to know how othering is showing up all over the world, including how it works in concert with racism. If we move beyond the exclusive focus on race in thinking about othering, we can open up possibilities for addressing othering and racism in different contexts and times.

While each expression of marginalization is distinct, the processes that produce exclusion follow recognizable patterns. Understanding these patterns is essential to moving from breaking toward bridging, and from exclusion toward belonging. ▪

Reflection Questions

Individual

- What about the concept of othering feels new or clarifying for you?
- Where have you noticed yourself being shaped by dominant "us versus them" stories?

Group / Community

- What groups in your society or community have legal recognition and protection—and which do not?
- What narratives currently define who belongs and who does not?
- How does your group talk about difference, conflict, or threat?

Institutional

- How does your institution participate in defining groups or identities?
- How might a belonging-without-othering lens change how your institution approaches equity, history, or inclusion?

Notes

Chapter 3: Is Othering Natural?

Chapter Insights

Is othering natural? A persistent assumption underlying othering is the belief that people "naturally" favor their own group and that separation between people or groups based on identity is inevitable.

Yet this belief is itself a story, one shaped by social arrangements that have been normalized over time. Unger's concept of false necessities helps reveal how these arrangements come to feel unavoidable, even though they are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. These stories do not remain abstract; they become material realities embedded in everyday life and institutional arrangements.

The most enduring and far-reaching impacts of othering occur at the structural level. While interpersonal bias matters, the state and its institutions hold far greater power to codify exclusion and even to define social groups through policy and law. The state has the ability to enforce boundaries between those groups as well. This is why understanding the scale and force of institutional power is critical to bridging—we should be clear about being hard on systems, and softer on individuals.

State-based othering and interpersonal othering often reinforce one another. When governments frame another nation or group as a threat, interpersonal hostility frequently follows. This dynamic underscores the importance of distinguishing individuals from government actions and policies, even as those distinctions are often blurred in practice.

Some narratives reject the idea of human mutuality altogether, framing hierarchy and domination as natural or even necessary. When superiority is assumed, exclusion and violence can be justified as appropriate or protective actions. In this way, domination becomes not only descriptive of the world but morally sanctioned within it.

At the same time, growing evidence challenges the notion that humans are hardwired solely for competition or "us versus them" thinking. Research increasingly shows that cooperation and mutual aid are deeply rooted human capacities often emerging more quickly and instinctively than hoarding or competition. How these capacities are expressed depends heavily on context, environment, and social cues.

Situatedness shapes not only how people act, but how they interpret threat, difference, and belonging. Our contexts are full of constraints, contingencies, and possibilities all at once. Recognizing this complexity is essential to resisting simplistic or deterministic stories about othering.

Advancing belonging requires challenging the idea that othering is natural or inevitable. Humans are meaning-making

Core Concepts

Levels of Othering Othering operates at the interpersonal, group, and structural levels. While interpersonal bias and exclusion are real, those expressions do not carry the same power or impact as group-based or state forms of othering. Laws, policies, and institutional practices have an unparalleled capacity to impose, normalize, and sustain exclusion across groups. Because of the weight of institutional othering, it cannot be addressed solely in the individual or interpersonal realm.

False necessities is a term coined by Brazilian philosopher Roberto M. Unger, false necessities refer to social arrangements that come to be seen as natural, inevitable, or unchangeable. These stories limit both our understanding of the present and our imagination of what could be otherwise. When false necessities take hold, they reduce possibility and make harmful systems appear permanent.

Naturalness describes the tendency to assume that current social arrangements—how groups are formed, valued, or separated—are simply "essential to human nature." This assumption is often extended from individuals to groups, leading to the belief that people naturally prefer separation or hierarchy, without attention to how those group boundaries were socially constructed and maintained.

Existential and ontological: Existential relates to questions of survival, whether I or a group will continue to exist. Ontological concerns meaning and identity, what it means to be part of a group. When fear is expressed at these levels, both often underlie processes of othering and breaking.

Institutional vs. interpersonal othering: Both institutional and interpersonal othering reinforce exclusion, but institutionalized othering is more durable and consequential. When laws and policies define groups differently or are enforced unevenly, othering can produce devastating and at times deadly outcomes.

Chapter Insights (cont.)

creatures who rely on categories to navigate the world, but the meanings attached to differences are socially produced. Difference itself does not create hierarchy; meaning does.

Belonging has long been recognized as a fundamental human need. While Maslow originally placed belonging after food and safety, later scholars have argued that belonging is the most primal need, because survival itself depends on connection. This helps explain why fear of exclusion is so powerful and why dominant groups often police boundaries of membership, sometimes even excluding their own members to maintain cohesion.

Othering is frequently driven by existential and ontological fear—concerns about whether a group will endure and what it represents. These fears, particularly within dominant groups, must be understood if fragmentation and othering are to be meaningfully addressed.

Structural othering becomes embedded in national narratives, shaping who is seen as fully human, worthy of care, or grievable. Movements such as Black Lives Matter highlight how multiple systems—policing, courts, media, public opinion, and legislation—interact to sustain structural othering. The concern extends beyond individual acts of violence to the repeated infliction of harm across institutions.

Othering is not a static condition but a dynamic process, constantly interacting with changing environments and evolving stories. Moving toward belonging requires resisting simplistic explanations and cultivating more complex, relational understandings of ourselves and those we are encouraged to see as "other." ▪

Reflection Questions

Individual

- What difference does difference make?
- If belonging is a basic human need, why do you think people so readily engage in othering and breaking?
- Do people "other" in order to belong? If so, what might that mean for bridging?

Group / Community

- How do the groups you are a part of discuss or practice inclusion?
- What unspoken rules or norms regulate membership?
- Where do fears of exclusion or loss shape group behavior?

Institutional

- Who or what group is represented as "the other" in the stories institutions tell?
- How do policies, practices, or narratives reinforce assumptions of naturalness or inevitability?
- Where might your institution challenge false necessities and open space for bridging?

Notes

Chapter 4: Breaking and Othering

Chapter Insights

Breaking is a central process through which an “other” is created. While othering establishes categories of belonging and exclusion, breaking enacts those distinctions through everyday practices, institutional decisions, and cultural narratives. Breaking does not simply reflect difference; it actively produces separation.

Othering and breaking operate at multiple levels and intensities. Some forms of breaking are overt and explicit, while others are subtle, normalized, and difficult to name. Together, they sustain group boundaries and reinforce unequal distributions of dignity and belonging.

The “Stereotype Content Model” developed by Susan Fiske offers insight into how groups are perceived. Fiske’s model maps perceptions along two dimensions: warmth and competence. Depending on where a group is located on these axes, it may be admired, envied, pitied, or despised. These responses shape how groups are treated and justify different forms of exclusion or harm, or inclusion and belonging.

Group identities are not formed in isolation. They are constituted relationally and often draw from broader cultural stories about gender, race, work, family, and worth. Narratives about what men or women “should” do, who is capable or deserving, and who poses a threat all contribute to breaking.

Stories about the naturalness of group formation, particularly the idea that humans are destined to form small “tribes” with large excluded others, reinforce separation. When domination is framed as natural or inevitable, hope for a shared future diminishes. Yet there is no definitive evidence that othering is an unavoidable feature of human nature.

The need to belong is at least as fundamental as the tendency to exclude. Othering and breaking are not inevitable; they are shaped by context, meaning, and social arrangements. In times of rapid change, anxiety increases as familiar environments and expectations become unstable. Multiple overlapping crises can overwhelm individuals and communities, intensifying fear and uncertainty.

Meaning-making becomes essential under these conditions. Stories help people adapt, interpret change, and sustain purpose. Anxiety is not only about the past or present; it is also oriented toward the future. Questions of survival, trust, and belonging, “Will there be space for me and my group?” take on heightened urgency.

Across the world, leaders have harnessed fear by framing explicit others as threats, whether or not they personally believe these narratives. By directing anxiety toward an external group, power can be consolidated and fragmentation intensified.

Core Concepts

Expectation and perception: How we see the world is deeply shaped by what we expect to see. These expectations filter and influence how we interpret behavior, intent, and threat. Our loyalties often shape our judgment—think of a referee’s call in a game where our team is playing. However in more consequential contexts, expectations can produce harmful, even deadly outcomes, such as when it comes to expectations around criminality and race.

Expectation effects: Expectations do not merely shape perception; they influence outcomes. When teachers expect students to succeed, students are more likely to do so. When teachers anticipate disruption, they are more likely to notice and reinforce it. Expectations help create the realities they anticipate.

Breaking is one of the primary ways othering is enacted and maintained. It is the mechanism that does the “heavy lifting” of othering. Breaking frames the other not only as different and less deserving, but often as a threat. While othering establishes in-groups and out-groups, breaking operates through methods, practices, and behaviors that sustain those divisions.

Othering and breaking are closely related but distinct. Othering concerns the constitution of group boundaries, who is inside and who is outside. Breaking refers to the actions and narratives that enforce and reproduce those boundaries. Breaking moves societies toward othering; bridging moves them toward belonging.

Stereotypes and social meaning: Stereotypes are rarely factually accurate, yet they cannot be dismantled by facts alone. They are embedded in social stories that assign meaning to groups and shape emotional responses, often outside of conscious awareness.

The role of leaders is powerful in shaping social meaning. When fear and anxiety are activated, effective leaders tell stories that can speak to these deeper layers, offering clarity and meaning, or blame and targeting. The “other” becomes a convenient repository for collective anxiety.

Chapter Insights (cont.)

Status further amplifies breaking. Groups often seek to elevate their own standing by degrading others or asserting superiority. Status is competitive and symbolic; it is not enough for one group to succeed—another must be seen as failing. High-status groups frequently enforce exclusionary forms of belonging, as seen in elite neighborhoods, schools, and institutions where assumptions about who belongs are deeply embedded.

At the same time, new stories are emerging. Claims of natural racial superiority and gender domination are increasingly contested. Societies are beginning—unevenly and incompletely—to listen to those historically excluded from the dominant "we."

Because much human behavior is shaped by environment, focusing solely on individual attitudes is insufficient. Structural arrangements, including economic systems, are often presented as natural and inevitable when they are not. Change itself is neutral; it does not determine direction. Direction emerges from the stories societies choose and the public spaces they build together.

Belonging requires intentional world-building. It calls for creating shared spaces where people are not merely observed, but fully seen. Belonging must be understood as a birthright for all and as a global norm toward which societies can orient their collective future. ▪

Reflection Questions

Individual

- What stories of breaking are you most familiar with?
- How have expectations shaped the way you interpret difference or threat?

Group / Community

- Where do you see status operating within your community or organization?
- How are certain groups framed as competent, threatening, or deserving?
- What shared stories help your group make sense of uncertainty or change?

Institutional

- What systems and institutions most strongly shape who belongs and who does not?
- How might changing environments—rather than individual behavior—shift outcomes?
- How could widespread belonging reduce collective anxiety or fragmentation?

Notes

Chapter 5:
Hard and Soft Breaking

Chapter Insights

Bridging and breaking do not exist as simple opposites. They operate along a continuum, with varying degrees of harm, intent, and consequence. Understanding these distinctions is essential for recognizing how exclusion persists even within efforts aimed at inclusion.

Soft breaking occurs when people are diminished while still nominally included. Belonging remains present, but only conditionally. Individuals may be invited into a group without having the power to shape its norms, priorities, or future. In these cases, participation is permitted, but agency is constrained. Soft breaking reminds us that recognition without power is insufficient. When people are acknowledged as part of the group but denied the ability to co-create shared conditions, belonging remains incomplete.

Inclusion can function as a form of soft breaking when the terms of belonging are set entirely by the dominant group. When people are invited in but expected to assimilate without influence, inclusion reproduces hierarchy rather than dismantling it.

The concept of "allyship" can also reflect soft breaking. Allies are often positioned as external supporters rather than full participants, junior partners whose concerns are secondary and whose role is limited by conditions set by others. While solidarity and support are important, relationships framed this way can unintentionally reinforce distance and hierarchy.

There is a genuine need for marginalized groups to have space, resources, and authority to speak for themselves. However, amplifying marginalized voices does not require silencing others. The goal is not to reverse domination, but to eliminate it altogether.

Breaking takes many forms and carries different consequences. Some breaks are motivated by hatred; others are shaped by misplaced care or protection. Some are characterized by absence or invisibility, while others are overt and enduring. Breaks may be temporary or last for generations.

Hard breaking represents a categorical rejection of mutuality. It frames the other as dangerous, contaminating, or existentially threatening. Hard breaking is closely associated with authoritarianism and ethnic populism and often relies on narratives of fear, disgust, and moral panic. In hard breaking, the story itself becomes a weapon. The other is reduced to symbols: invaders, insects, criminals, while being spoken about rather than allowed to speak. Examples include walls and borders designed to exclude, apartheid systems, mass incarceration, dehumanizing language, and violence carried out with impunity.

Hard breaking frequently arises from fears of group annihilation, the belief that the

Core Concepts

Soft breaking can appear in interpersonal and organizational contexts. This type of breaking occurs when individuals are nominally included in the "we," but are not allowed to fully participate, influence decisions, or shape shared conditions. Soft breaking undermines belonging by limiting agency. While it is less overt than exclusion, it still produces an "other" within the group and destabilizes genuine connection.

Hard breaking represents a more extreme rupture. It rejects mutual relationships altogether. In hard breaking, the other is framed as a problem or threat rather than as a participant in shared life. This form of breaking is rarely tempered by care and is often reinforced through law, policy, and violence.

Intention: The orientation toward belonging matters. The intention guiding bridging work is the creation of a world in which no one is othered, and everyone has a role in shaping shared futures. Intention helps distinguish between practices that reproduce domination and those that seek to dismantle it.

Flattening: Breaking reduces people to flat, fixed identities. When we flatten, multi-dimensional, complex, and evolving humans are reduced to simple traits or stereotypes. These often justify exclusion.

Sameness: Attempting to overcome difference by insisting "we are all the same" erases meaningful distinctions. Differences are not problems to be solved, but realities to be honored.

Othering and breaking are addressed through belonging and bridging—not by erasing difference, but by transforming how difference is held within shared life.

Chapter Insights (cont.)

dominant group will be replaced, erased, or lose control. These fears make it easier to pass discriminatory policies and normalize harm toward targeted groups. Anxiety about a rapidly changing world often becomes redirected toward a constructed other. Groups invested in hard-breaking fear futures in which those they have excluded make legitimate claims to belonging.

Breaking, in all its forms, distances people from one another. Hard breaking deepens fear and distrust, making false "us versus them" stories more believable and more dangerous. These dynamics take a toll on social life, fracturing families, shortening relationships, and hardening boundaries even in intimate spaces. Bridging is not about false equivalence or meeting in the middle at all costs. Some issues do not call for compromise, especially when compromise would reinforce harm or deny dignity.

Humans rely on categories to navigate the world. Identity itself depends on some form of classification. The problem arises when identity is reduced to something singular, static, or essential. When people are fixed into one defining trait, exclusion can appear to be justified, as in historical prohibitions against women practicing law or other professions.

Those who defend breaking often argue that safety for the legitimate "we" requires controlling, containing, or eliminating the other. Even when the other is allowed to remain, their membership is conditional and perpetually in question. Breaking reinforces the belief that a small "we" must dominate in order to survive. Bridging, by contrast, rests on the understanding that flourishing emerges from mutuality, that shared life, not domination, sustains human futures. ▪

Reflection Questions

Individual

- Where have you experienced or participated in soft breaking, even unintentionally?
- How do you respond when inclusion comes with conditions?

Group / Community

- How does your group define full participation versus conditional inclusion?
- Who has influence over decisions, norms, and priorities?
- Where might allyship unintentionally reproduce hierarchy?

Institutional

- What forms of soft or hard breaking are embedded in institutional policies or practices?
- How does your institution respond to anxiety about change or loss of control?
- What would it look like to move from conditional belonging toward shared agency?

Notes

Chapter 6: On Belonging

Chapter Insights

Belonging offers a transformative alternative to othering and breaking. While the harms of breaking are widespread and deeply rooted, they are not inevitable. Belonging affirms that all people are full members of society, not guests or conditional participants. It is not something to be earned. It is self-evident. This principle is embedded in democratic ideals and human rights traditions, even when societies fail to fully realize it in practice. Belonging names a foundational norm that continues to guide struggles for justice and inclusion.

Belonging is not only a feeling or interpersonal experience; it is also structural and cultural. It requires conditions that allow people to participate meaningfully in shaping the shared world.

Equality is central to belonging but should be understood beyond sameness. Treating everyone the same is insufficient when people are differently situated. Healthy societies require both equal dignity and context-sensitive responses to structural differences. Belonging makes visible the gap between declared values of equality and lived realities of exclusion.

Movements for justice highlight this gap by naming whose lives are not being treated as if they matter equally. These claims do not deny universal human value; they insist that universal value must be made real. Belonging clarifies that equality, dignity, and membership are not negotiable.

Structures and institutions are shaped by the values and assumptions of those who design them. Resistance to change is often less about tradition and more about fear; fear of loss, displacement, or no longer belonging. Othering frequently emerges from a desire to protect one's own sense of belonging by excluding others.

Belonging without othering moves us beyond zero-sum thinking. No group should be required to be minimized or erased for others to belong. Change will affect all groups, and all should have a voice in shaping the direction of the change. Bridging work reduces fear of replacement while insisting that belonging cannot depend on domination.

Belonging cannot be produced by law alone. It has a lived dimension shaped by environment, culture, and relationships. Many people have never experienced spaces where they are fully known and supported, making the work of belonging urgent and ongoing.

Core Concepts

Belonging means having the right to fully participate in and co-create the world you live in. It means your story is seen, valued, and respected, and that you have the right to make demands on the systems and structures that shape your life. Belonging affirms the full human dignity and equality of every person.

Belonging is reciprocal —it is not something one group grants another, but a condition we hold together. Belonging is complex, multifaceted, and dynamic, shifting across contexts, relationships, and structures.

Othering and belonging shape everyday interactions, institutions, and narratives about who matters and who does not. While the terms may feel new, their dynamics are deeply familiar.

Belonging as inclusion 2.0: Inclusion has become a popular equity framework, but may at times be unintentionally limiting. Inviting someone into an existing culture, institution, or system means the terms are largely by those already inside. For example, immigration frameworks often hinge on whether newcomers can follow the rules, policy and cultural, of the receiving society, with too little consideration of how their presence might transform that society. Belonging asks not only who is allowed in, but who gets to shape what "in" means.

Co-Creation: Belonging is distinct from inclusion because it carries the right to co-create and co-constitute the systems, structures, and cultures we inhabit. Co-creation means shaping a shared future together, not simply adjusting to an inherited past. Co-creation requires agency without domination, curiosity without certainty, and deep listening across difference. It also calls for a different relationship with one another and with the earth itself.

Transformative action: Belonging requires transformative action, creating something new that hasn't yet existed. When excluded groups enter institutions built on dominating or hostile norms, the burden should not fall on those groups to assimilate seamlessly. The institution itself must change.

Chapter Insights (cont.)

Co-creation is the path toward belonging. Shared life is built through participation, not control. This requires distinguishing between inevitable human suffering and suffering produced by systems of exclusion. Building belonging demands openness to being changed and a commitment to shared flourishing without erasure or domination.

A world where all belong and none are othered may remain unfinished, but it is a necessary aspiration. It orients action toward dignity, justice, and collective well-being, even amid tension and uncertainty. ▪

Reflection Questions

Individual

- In what ways have you experienced belonging or othering, and how has that shaped how you engage with the systems and communities you are part of?
- How might you actively contribute to co-creating spaces where others feel fully seen, valued, and respected without requiring them to assimilate to existing norms?

Group / Community

- How does your team or group currently define "who belongs" and "who shapes the space," and what changes could make participation more reciprocal and co-creative?
- What dynamics within your group might unintentionally reinforce othering, and how could you collectively address these to foster belonging for all members?

Institutional

- Which structures, policies, or cultural norms in your organization unintentionally limit belonging, and how could they be transformed so that participation and co-creation are equitable?
- How can your institution balance the need for stability with openness to transformation, ensuring that no group is subordinated or erased while expanding belonging for all?

Notes

Chapter 7: Understanding Bridging

Chapter Insights

Bridging affirms relationship rather than separation. It is a practice of connection not only with other people, but also with the earth and, for some, the divine. Bridging resists isolation and insists that connection remains possible even amid difference. A bridge can be offered without immediate reciprocity. Misalignment does not have to be permanent. Bridging often depends on timing, clarity of intention, and sustained invitation rather than agreement.

Bridging begins where one is, grounded in intention and clarity about why connection matters. This intention may be named aloud, but it must always be held internally. Bridging does not require abandoning one's story, denying one's humanity, or agreeing with another. Listening in a bridging posture is not analytical or strategic; it is a practice of presence that attends to fear, pain, and lived experience.

There are moments when bridging is not possible. Trauma, real threats, or extreme asymmetries can undermine the conditions for connection. Scale also matters: bridging between individuals differs from bridging between groups or institutions, each carrying distinct risks and responsibilities.

Power shapes bridging. More powerful groups often feel less urgency to bridge, while less powerful groups may have a greater need but face greater vulnerability. Power is situational and context-dependent. While the responsibility to initiate bridging often falls on those with greater power, no group is entirely exempt. Power imbalance should not be used as a blanket justification for refusing to bridge. Most real-world contexts are complex rather than absolute. Groups that experience sustained breaking may reproduce breaking themselves. While breaking can feel justified or satisfying in the short term, it rarely produces durable or constructive outcomes.

Bridging carries risk. It can increase vulnerability and provoke pressure from one's in-group, where loyalty is often policed. Bridging does not require surrendering commitments to justice, equality, or core values; it requires resisting the false choice between moral clarity and human connection.

Breaking relies on fear, anxiety, and flattened stories. Bridging engages complexity. People are not singular or static; they hold multiple identities and change over time. Recognizing one's own multiplicity and remaining open to the multiplicity of others expands the possibilities for connection and meaning-making.

Bridging does not only uncover existing common ground; it can create new common ground. This distinction is critical in deeply divided contexts.

Breaking enacted by individuals does not carry the same consequences as

Core Concepts

Bridging is a set of practices and values that move us toward the aspiration of belonging. Bridging invites us to listen for another person's full story, not only their suffering, but also their hopes, aspirations, and dreams. Bridging recognizes that whatever appears to be the central tension between "us" and "them" is never the whole story. We are always more than our worst fears or our worst acts.

Breaking vs. bridging stories: A breaking story frames the other as having a single story, often as a threat, a competitor, or a problem. A bridging story allows space for multiple truths to coexist. Even as I name my suffering, there is room to listen to yours.

Complexity: Bridging depends on engaging complexity rather than flattening or reducing. It resists simplified narratives and invites us to remain open to multiplicity, change, and contradiction.

Sacred symbols carry deep meaning and emotional power. They connect individuals and groups to something larger than themselves, often religious or spiritual, but not always. Because they touch identity and belonging at a deep level, sacred symbols and how we engage with them can either bridge or break.

Situatedness refers to how our social, cultural, historical, and material positions shape our interests, values, and perceptions. Our situatedness can become a source of bridging or a source of othering, depending on how it is understood and engaged.

Essentialism is a major threat to bridging: the belief that groups possess fixed, inherent traits that are universal and unchanging. Essentialism flattens both self and other, erasing complexity and foreclosing curiosity.

Chapter Insights (cont.)

breaking enacted by institutions or the state. This difference matters when assessing harm, responsibility, and pathways to repair.

Simplistic political framings obscure complexity. Change itself is neutral; it can lead to flourishing or harm. Understanding another's position requires attention to how they are situated and how they interpret change. Rapid change can overwhelm even those with relative security, making bridging practices essential during periods of disruption.

Sacred symbols hold significant power in both bridging and breaking. Attacking another group's sacred symbols is an assault on dignity and belonging. Recognizing and respecting sacred symbols, personal or collective, can be a profound act of bridging, even when meanings conflict or cannot be reconciled.

Situatedness reminds us that identity is relational, dynamic, and shaped by culture and structure. Segregation may feel protective, particularly for those who have been harmed, but it also restricts access to opportunity and public life. Public space is where shared norms and meaning are formed; withdrawing from it allows others to shape those norms unchecked.

Belonging requires engagement with shared space, even when that engagement is difficult.

Anxiety about rapid change often transforms others into perceived threats to continuity or survival. Bridging toward a future where all belong requires holding the past, present, and future together. Because groups face unequal capacities to adapt, differentiated support is necessary.

Ultimately, bridging calls for openness not only toward others, but toward oneself. This vulnerability is demanding and unavoidable. Bridging is not instinctive; it is a learned practice that requires commitment, reflection, and sustained effort. ▪

Reflection Questions

Individual

- Can I stay open and curious about not only the other's position, but their story and humanity?
- Can I tell my own story as a bridging story rather than a breaking story? What changes when I try?
- What fears or vulnerabilities arise for me when I consider bridging?

Group / Community

- What pressures within my group discourage bridging with others?
- How does our group talk about those we disagree with or fear?
- Where might complexity and multiplicity be flattened in our shared narratives?

Institutional

- What conditions within our institutions make bridging easier or harder?
- How do power dynamics shape who is expected to bridge and who is not?
- How might public spaces be reclaimed or redesigned to support belonging rather than breaking?

Future-Oriented Questions

- What future are we implicitly preparing for through our current practices of bridging or breaking?
- How can we consciously bridge toward a larger "we" without erasing difference or enabling domination?
- What supports are needed so differently-situated groups can move into the future with dignity and belonging?

Chapter 8: Short and Long Bridges

Chapter Insights

Breaking can occur even where common ground is strong. Groups may share identity, values, or long-term goals and still experience deep conflict. In these contexts, relatively small differences often about strategy, pace, or method can escalate into prolonged breaking and disproportionate harm.

Short bridges are often more fragile than long bridges. Conflict frequently arises among people who believe they are on the same side. Because these relationships are close, disagreement can feel like betrayal rather than difference. Proximity increases vulnerability, making breaks with family, friends, or close community members especially painful. At the same time, short bridges often contain resources for repair, including shared history, trust, care, and community infrastructure. Even after rupture, there may be a desire to heal and rebuild.

Long bridges present different and often greater challenges. In these contexts, the other is frequently imagined as dangerous, immoral, or inhuman. Bridging is framed not merely as difficult, but as impossible or unethical. At the group level, breaking often serves an internal function, producing cohesion, identity, and meaning for the in-group. Stories of threat or evil help define who “we” are, making bridging feel destabilizing.

The costs of long-bridge work are often high. Bridging toward a feared or resented group can threaten safety, social standing, or one’s own sense of belonging. Many people are unwilling or unable to absorb these risks, even when bridging could reduce harm. Leadership and social context matter. When trusted leaders signal that bridging is legitimate and supported, perceived risk decreases. Likewise, people who experience belonging in other stable contexts are more able to take bridging risks.

Safety is a central condition shaping whether bridging feels possible. Decisions to bridge are often driven less by moral alignment than by perceived danger. Reducing threat and increasing support can expand the range of what people are willing to attempt.

Competition intensifies breaking in both short- and long-bridge contexts. When groups see one another as competitors, zero-sum narratives take hold: one group’s gain is assumed to require another’s loss. Scarcity stories about jobs, resources, care, or recognition fuel fear and resentment, framing others’ well-being as a threat.

Groups compete not only for material resources, but also for status and dominance. Resistance to bridging often reflects fear of losing social standing or identity, even when cooperation could benefit all. Dominance is frequently treated as natural or inevitable, particularly in national and global narratives. What is often missing is a challenge to dominance itself and an imagina-

Core Concepts

Long bridges typically operate at the group, institutional, national, or international level rather than the individual level. Unlike short bridges, long bridges are often assumed to lack shared values, language, or symbols. Both parties may believe little or no common ground exists, making the prospect of bridging feel implausible or unsafe.

Common ground: The presence of common ground does not guarantee bridging, but it does create the possibility for it. Bridging is not automatic; it is a practice that must be chosen and cultivated.

Belonging as a value: Belonging is not merely a feeling or outcome; it is a value. It affirms the inherent worth, dignity, and equality of human life. Bridging is one of the practices through which this value is enacted.

Transactional bridging is oriented toward producing a specific outcome in the other person or group. It is often driven by persuasion, negotiation, or exchange through talking and listening in order to win support, secure agreement, or influence behavior (such as a vote or policy position).

Transformational bridging is relational rather than outcome-driven. It opens up possibilities beyond existing arrangements and assumptions. Rather than aiming for a predetermined result, it allows for change in relationships, understanding, and the range of future possibilities.

Chapter Insights (cont.)

tion of shared flourishing without subordination.

Including others in our circle of human concern does not mean excusing harm. Bridging does not preclude naming wrongdoing, accountability, or abuses of power, especially by institutions or states. Naming harm and othering is not the same as denying humanity.

Deep breaking has become normalized. In the United States, fragmentation has intensified to the point where denying others' dignity or even their right to exist can feel justified. Bridging challenges this normalization by insisting that disagreement does not negate belonging.

Guardrails matter. Care and attention to safety are essential for bridging conversations. At the same time, placing too many preconditions on engagement can become a way of avoiding it. While extreme inequality undermines bridging, absolute equality is not required before engagement begins.

Bridging always involves risk. Complete safety is neither possible nor always desirable. Engaging across difference carries risk, but so does refusal to engage.

Bridging exists along a continuum. Transactional approaches rely on exchange, compromise, and cost–benefit calculation, assuming relatively fixed interests. Transformational bridging expands what is possible, allowing identities, relationships, and structures to shift. In practice, these approaches often overlap and can reinforce one another.

Presence creates movement. The more deeply and authentically people show up with one another, the greater the possibility for change for others and for themselves.

Bridging and belonging must become the norm rather than the exception. By elevating everyday examples of cooperation and care, it becomes possible to challenge the assumption that breaking is inevitable and to orient collective life toward shared dignity and belonging across difference. ▪

Reflection Questions

Individual

- When you encounter someone you strongly disagree with, what conditions make it possible—or impossible—for you to still recognize their belonging?
- Can you recall a moment when you offered or received cooperation or care across difference? What made that possible?

Group / Community

- How does your group respond to disagreement: as a threat to unity or as a site for learning and repair?
- What stories does your group tell about those outside it, and how might those stories reinforce breaking or open possibilities for bridging?

Institutional

- How do your institution's policies, narratives, or leadership signals increase or reduce the perceived risk of bridging?
- What guardrails are necessary to support safe engagement across difference without making engagement itself impossible?

Notes

Chapter 9: Bridging and Spirituality

Chapter Insights

The dominant assumption in much of modern life is that a separate self acts upon the world. A different orientation recognizes that the self is constituted through relationship. Action is never one-directional; when we engage the world, the world acts upon us. This mutual shaping reflects interbeing.

Bridging responds to the illusion of separation. Moments of fear, pain, or conflict often intensify a sense of distance between "us" and "them." Bridging seeks to heal this tear by affirming shared humanity, even amid harm and disagreement.

Bridging is always a choice. Individuals and groups decide whether and how to engage, what conditions they require, and what risks they are willing to take. Some choose not to bridge, others bridge selectively, and still others bridge without assurance of benefit.

Spiritual bridging is not conditional. It does not require purity, shared values, or mutual recognition. It involves sitting with the full humanity of others, including contradiction and messiness, while refusing to deny dignity.

The connectedness of the world is not dependent on recognition. Even when others deny our humanity, we retain the choice to recognize theirs. This stance does not require indifference to harm, nor does it excuse abuse. It resists allowing animosity to define who we are or who others become.

At this depth, bridging is not about winning or losing. It calls for imagination and responsibility without guarantees. Co-creation asks us to act not only for ourselves or our group, but for life itself, grounded in mutuality rather than domination.

Belonging and bridging rest on a different understanding of the self. Western traditions often emphasize the autonomous individual, while many spiritual, scientific, and non-Western traditions point to a relational self—one that comes alive through connection.

Fear of not belonging is often fear of impermanence and loss of identity. The idea of a fixed, permanent self is deeply embedded but increasingly challenged by spirituality, neuroscience, and lived experience. Breaking and othering do not reflect our deepest nature, but learned responses to this fear.

Interdependence is not dependency. Myths of radical independence, such as the self-made individual, shape culture and policy, often producing fear of care and mutual

Core Concepts

Bridging as a spiritual orientation: Bridging can be understood as a spiritual practice rooted in how we choose to show up in the world. Spirit names an orientation of openness to life as it is, not only to what we prefer or understand. This openness reflects a commitment to connection grounded in dignity rather than agreement or outcome.

Interbeing and co-creation: Interbeing, a term popularized by the late Buddhist leader Thích Nhất Hạnh, describes the fundamental interconnectedness of all life. We do not act in a separate world; we are continually shaped by it and also shape it. Human action is always co-creative, occurring within a web of mutual influence and relationships.

Belonging beyond transaction: Spiritual bridging differs from transactional bridging. It is not based on exchange, compromise, or expected benefit. It rests on recognizing the inherent humanity of others, regardless of their actions, beliefs, or willingness to reciprocate.

Chapter Insights (cont.)

responsibility. Belonging offers an alternative that affirms dignity without domination.

Safety matters, but absolute safety is neither possible nor life-giving. Bridging requires being “safe enough,” allowing for vulnerability while reducing unnecessary harm. Refusal to engage also carries risk and cost.

Healing cannot occur without bridging. Separation is an ongoing wound, not a single event. Refusing relationships in a broken world limits the possibility of repair and shared flourishing.

Bridging embraces the fullness of life. Joy and suffering coexist. Compassion, literally to suffer with, is a form of bridging. Meaning arises not from eliminating pain, but from remaining open to connection amid it.

Spirituality makes space rather than pushing away. Emotions and feelings move and change; trauma often freezes them. Bridging supports life by allowing feeling, meaning, and relationship to flow.▪

Reflection Questions

Individual

- How do I understand the self: primarily separate, or fundamentally relational?
- When someone denies my dignity, what helps me decide whether to recognize theirs?
- What risks do I take when I choose to bridge—and what risks do I take when I do not?

Group / Community

- How does fear of loss or displacement shape how our group responds to difference?
- What stories about independence, safety, or deservingness guide our collective behavior?
- Where might “safe enough” engagement open new possibilities for relationships?

Institutional

- How do institutional designs reflect assumptions about separation versus interdependence?
- Where do policies prioritize control or dominance over mutuality and care?
- What would institutions look like if dignity and belonging were treated as birthrights rather than rewards?

Notes

Conclusion: Becoming a Bridger

Chapter Insights

“Being a bridger is as much about who we are as it is about what we do. I am a bridger, or at least that is my orientation, and that was not always true, and it is not always true now. Sometimes I am an advocate. Sometimes I am a parent. Sometimes I am simply curious about which part of me will surface.”— john a. powell

Bridging is not a technique to master or a checklist to complete. It is an orientation toward people, an honoring of both our fundamental uniqueness as well as what we share, and an embrace toward life itself. While tools and practices can support bridging, they lose meaning when separated from values and care.

Bridging invites a deeper way of relating—one that helps us understand ourselves and others more fully and create conditions for shared flourishing.

Bridging does not erase suffering. It creates space to face harm, fear, and uncertainty without collapsing into breaking. It allows us to stay present with one another while imagining something better together.

The good news is this: if you have decided to become a bridger, you are already on the way. You are not alone.

Bridging is a place of possibility, connection, and life. This work invites us not only to meet the other, but to meet the other in ourselves. It invites us to co-create a world where everyone belongs and no one is othered. We look forward to meeting you there—and meeting ourselves there, together.▪

Key Practices for Becoming a Bridger

Begin with being. Ask not only *what should I do*, but *who do I want to be*. Bridging starts with orientation, not action.

Stay open to more complex stories. We create stories about others almost instantly. Becoming a bridger means noticing that impulse and choosing curiosity instead. Presence matters—listening carefully to the stories we hear and the ones we tell ourselves.

Help others feel seen. Belonging requires being fully seen. One of the most powerful acts of bridging is letting someone know they matter and that their experience has been acknowledged.

Practice regularly. Bridging is a muscle. The more we use it, the stronger it becomes. Avoiding engagement does not protect us; it weakens our capacity for relationships.

Attend to power and group dynamics. Bridging between individuals is different from bridging between groups. The risks, responsibilities, and impacts are not the same. Power matters, and ignoring it undermines belonging.

Recognize different forms of bridging. Family bridging can feel especially vulnerable. Transactional bridging, transformational bridging, and spiritual bridging each have a place. No single approach fits every situation.

Reduce threats that lead to breaking. Start by lowering the temperature. Look for common ground that feels less threatening before engaging more difficult differences. Move away from narratives that frame others as fundamentally bad or irredeemable.

Breathe. Be kind—to yourself and to life. Breaking has become a default response for many of us, and it takes a real toll—mentally, physically, and spiritually. When things feel overwhelming, pause. Ask whether you are able to bridge, or at least refrain from breaking.

Notes