HEATHER TOSTESON

LISTENING FOR BELONGING
I

For to get rid of the habit of thinking of democracy as something institutional and external and to acquire the habit of treating it as a way of personal life is to realize that democracy is a moral ideal and so far as it becomes a fact is a moral fact. It is to realize that democracy is a reality only as it is indeed a commonplace of living. John Dewey

Citizenship is hard. It takes a commitment to listen, watch, read, and think in ways that allow the imagination to put one person in the shoes of another. James Leach

Narrative, I believe, is designed to contain uncanniness rather than to resolve it. It does not have to come out on the 'right side.' . . . the 'consolation of narrative' is not the comfort of a happy ending, but the comprehension of plight that, by being made understandable, becomes bearable. Jerome Bruner

Our nervous systems are constructed to be captured by the nervous systems of others, so that we can experience others as if from within their skin, as well as from within our own. A sort of direct feeling route into another person is potentially open and we resonate with and participate in their experience, and they in ours. Daniel Stern

This collection was inspired by several questions that grew in importance to us as we listened to the stories and meditations on the immigration experience included in our first citizenship anthology, *Shifting Balance Sheets: Women's Stories of Naturalized Citizenship & Cultural Attachment*. The word *We* is central to all of them. The phrase *Finding the We in Them, the Us in You*, is one we use to describe our approach to pluralism. *We* means to us both a pronoun and a posture of communal, consciously shared direct experience. We, in general, use *We* to refer to a group that we feel part of. Here are some of the questions that concern us:

Where do we, wherever we were born, whatever our citizenship status is, now place our 'We'?

What are we giving back to the place—and society—in which we now live?

What effect does being welcomed, or denigrated, in a new country have on where we place our 'We'?

What is the rate of change that is possible for a community, local or national, to sustain and still experience itself as a community, a group that feels ties of social reciprocity, of affection, respect, obligation, and unity of purpose and feels those not as a promise for the distant future, but as a reality now? Here.

These are all, finally, questions about belonging. The question of immigration, however complexly organized it is, remains for me a doorway into that even more powerful and pervasive question of belonging.

When I ask myself why I am so intensely interested in this question of belonging, what comes to mind is a morning on the beach in Chiapas, Mexico in the fall of 2004. We were spending several months in San Cristóbal and had decided to exchange the mountains for the sea for a weekend so had taken a bus down to a rather deserted beach town. We found a hotel some distance from town. The second morning there I decided to go for a walk alone on the beach, something I love to do. However, there are many stray dogs in Mexico and, especially in the morning, they can band in packs. One large pack was milling on the beach, so instead of walking away from town I decided to walk toward it thinking the dogs would be less likely to follow me. If they did it might be better to be near other people. The dogs eagerly trailed me. As long as they kept their distance, I decided, I was relatively secure. I did pick up my pace. However, just as I began to pass a few houses and restaurants, still closed at this fairly early hour, another pack of dogs appeared from the other direction. The two packs eyed each other warily, tails alert, a few growls rumbling, then they all turned toward me. Their interest was daunting. I decided it might be wise for me to step into the water.

The surf was stronger than I expected, sucking the sand loudly out from under my feet. I swiveled around to check where the dogs were. Suddenly a large wave washed up and slammed against my leg at knee height. Without warning, my leg gave and I found myself flat on my back in the waves. I tried to get up, but my leg collapsed again. Down the beach I could see an old man

and a younger woman. I yelled in Spanish for help. *¡Socorro!* They did not respond, indeed turned away. I yelled again, louder. I varied my cry, *¡Ayudame!* I tried to get up again, fell again. I saw someone else coming along the beach and yelled louder. The dogs were all edging closer, fascinated. I had this moment of amazing clarity and realized that I was going to yell until someone helped me. All social inhibition disappeared. I was both desperate and eerily objective. Curious. How long would it take? Finally, many yells, falls, and several passers-by later, a young man paused beside me. His girlfriend walked determinedly on. I explained to him in Spanish that I needed help to get back to my hotel. I had hurt my leg.

"Just walk very slowly," he said.

I explained that I couldn't, that my leg wouldn't hold. He looked interested now.

"I had something like that playing soccer. It is probably a muscle. Are you sure you can't walk on it?"

I crawled to standing, then tumbled back down again when I tried to walk. "If you can help me get to the street, I will take a taxi."

So, to his girlfriend's obvious disapproval, he gave me his arm and helped me hobble, my leg erratically collapsing on us, the block to the main road. But the three taxi drivers he hailed looked at me and shook their heads. They would not take me back to my hotel. I was too wet. Sandy. Unkempt.

"I think I will have to take you myself," the young man said at last. He told his girlfriend, who responded angrily, but went into their hotel and brought out a towel to save the front seat of their truck. She stood, arms crossed, scowling, as we drove off. As we drove, the young man asked me, "Do you like Chiapas?" "Oh yes," I said immediately. This was a well-practiced interchange that I had had numerous times in our months there. So, we had a surreally normal chat about the beauties of Mexico and Chiapas, the kindness of the Mexican people. I had this vocabulary down pat. "*Una gente muy amable, muy inteligente, muy trabajadora, muy simpática,*" I said. As we approached my hotel, he suddenly lit up and said, "Oh, is that where you are staying?" And then he looked at me more closely. "You were at the restaurant last night having dinner with your husband. I saw you there." With this new context, some switch was flipped and, at that moment, I could see that I had suddenly, mysteriously, become fully human to him. So the smile and thanks I gave him when he left me precariously standing in the hotel courtyard were genuine from several different levels.