

Building *Belonging*

What we've
discovered
through our
work with



A WonderPaper by:
Naomi Clare Crellin
Megan Henshall
Maya Mancigli
Katy Mull

Building *Belonging*

The Road to *Belonging*

In the spring and summer of 2022 Storycraft Lab and Google Xi partnered to investigate evolving techno social norms. Our work began with an investigation into preferences and personalization using Storycraft Lab's Experience Profiles™ tool. We wanted to know how inclusive experiences might be intentionally designed to accommodate a diverse array of audience needs. This journey of discovery led to a domino effect of revelations: first, it revealed a gap in how the industry considered (or rather didn't consider) neuro-inclusion. Second, it revealed the importance of belonging to both our audiences and the organizations we serve. Third, it demonstrated the role of choice in fostering belonging. Finally, it established that an act of personalization is an act of inclusion, one that will generate a result of beneficial belonging.

Not all of these revelations were consecutive. There was a lot of tangential discovery and intersectionality. The more we investigated, the more we kept coming back to belonging. We were primarily concerned with what belonging meant to different people. Where was there universality? Where were there differences?

Asking people what belonging means to them is a big question. We learned to get comfortable with some moments of silence as folks grappled with the idea. What we heard in those early, organic conversations, was that people 'arrived' at what belonging meant through one of three avenues. The first was **feeling** or **emotion**. They would complete the sentence - "When I Belong I Feel.....". The second was **meaning** or **relevance**: "I Belong here because these people think like me I'm learning something that will help me be better/do better". The final interpretation of belonging reflected a moment of **transformation** that was an indelible and cherished memory. Once someone had experienced that moment of **magic**, they were actively seeking to return to it in some way, to recreate it.

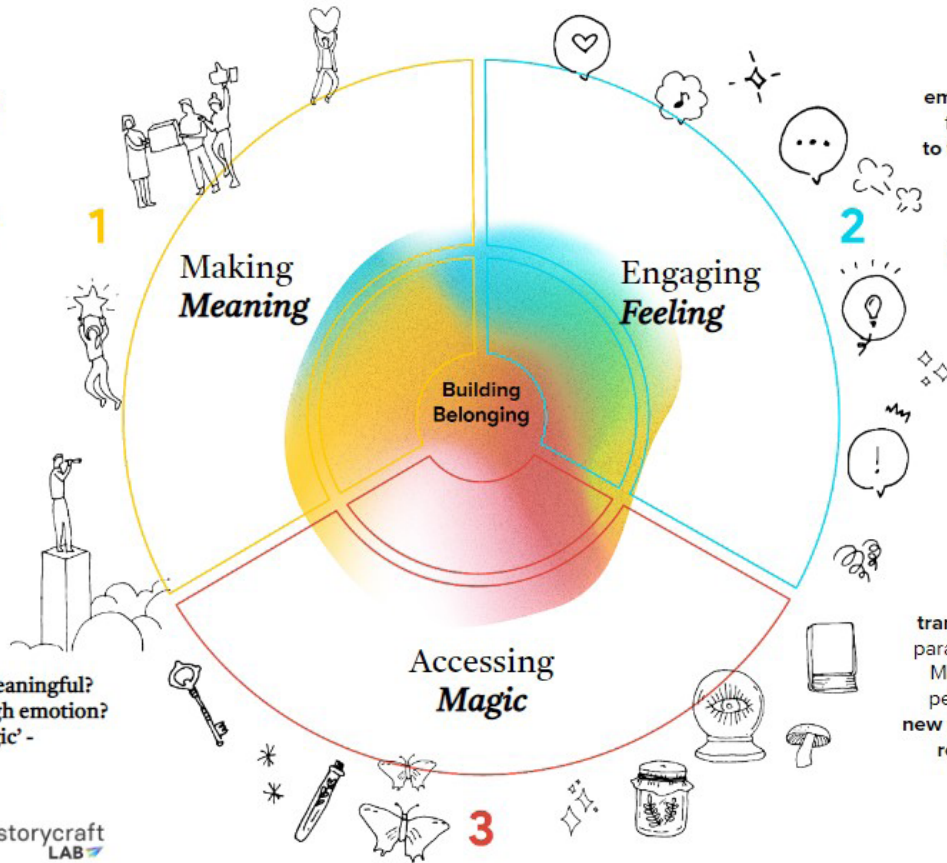
An act of personalization is an act of inclusion, one that will generate a result of beneficial belonging.



Meaningful experiences are **resonant**. They leave a lasting impression and **prompt us to reflect** and consider possibilities. Meaningful experiences are applicable, actionable, empowering us to **innovate within existing practices**, processes and frames of reference.

Wheel of Belonging

Join us at Xi Office Hours to talk about building belonging! We want to hear from you - What makes an experience Meaningful? Captures and connects through emotion? When you think of 'event Magic' - what comes to mind?



Immersive experiences are **emotional and visceral**. They are felt, expressed and **connect us to the moment, to others, and to ourselves**. They can be a frequency of feeling that is experienced individually, but when **shared with others** they become transcendent in their power to create belonging.

Magical experiences are **transformational**. They produce a paradigm leap, a great **re-framing**. Magical experiences change our perspectives, **open our minds to new worlds** and ways of being, and **result in changes of behaviour, action or trajectory**.



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The Wheel of Belonging

We were fascinated. It struck us that the individual conversations would be more illuminating if we could develop them in a shared setting. To help facilitate an expansion of the discussions, we generated The Wheel of Belonging. This was a visual tool to help us approach and record a collective conversation, and it utilized the three segments of the Wheel as a provocation of sorts. This helped give our conversation partners a foothold on a mountainous topic.

The office hours were held through the months of July and August. In that time we garnered some incredible insights and ideas, reflecting a beautiful diversity of the ways in which belonging manifests. In the short period of time that these sessions ran, we found that participants found the discussion to be an emotionally fulfilling, moving and joyful connection - and people started to return. In short, the conversations about belonging had sparked a sense of belonging.



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Claus Raasted
College of Extraordinary Experiences

"The serendipity of belonging is magical - finding out you belong somewhere you didn't expect to, and finding someone who belongs with you you didn't expect."



Carter Parrish
WXO - World Experience Organization
Robotproof

"The magic is seeing the impact on others. It's not just for flash, it's about the personal connection, the consumer journey, and the storytelling of what you're trying to accomplish."



Amit Kataby
Facilitator | Coach | Speaker

"We need to make experiences about the people we are bringing together. It's about uniting humans on the basis of being human."



Allie Magyar

"Belonging to me is also about self discovery. As humans we're built to mirror, seeking shared values and reciprocity. We recognize the beauty in other souls by seeing ourselves in them."



Flo Miniscloux
Crawford Group

"A group of individuals putting all their efforts towards a common goal fosters belonging. If you don't have that sense of belonging, you won't work well as a team."



Allison Crooker
VMware

"We are fighting between corporate need and attendee want. Attendees are preferring smaller and more intimate sessions, but how do we create intimacy in scale?"



Julie Lynch
F5

"When we feel safe, seen and heard, it allows us to be more vulnerable in what we do. When we are more vulnerable, we tend to then share more, do more, and make deeper connections. And that I think is where the magic of what we do is."



Justin Boone
Untitled Future

"There is magic in discovery. The recipe I look for in creating magical experiences is that sense of universality in the work. Where it is inclusive of virtually anyone, and anyone can take something from it."

We are incredibly thankful to all of the Wheel of Belonging contributors who gave the gift of their time, energy and minds to the thoughtful consideration of what Belonging means to them.





Jenn Artura
CHIEF

"It's not just that one moment, but belonging is wanting to keep coming back to that experience and meaning with others. Remembering and continuing that connection.

Belonging is something that is sustained and ongoing."



Allie Magyar

"When you contribute and co-create, you feel like you are part of the event and present.

We need to foster that ability to bring yourself fully to an experience and contribute"



Elizabeth Sage

"What made [this experience] so magical was the curiosity, openness, and togetherness. I believe in the value every individual brings to the table and everyone was open to receiving each others' uniqueness."



Carter Parrish
WXO - World Experience Organization
Robotproof

"Who you surround yourself with is important. Finding your tribe is a big part of belonging in life."



Anne Gorman
streamlinevents

"Magical moments are about the people I was WITH more so than where I was."



Amit Kataby
Facilitator | Coach | Speaker

"There is magic in showing people they really aren't different from one another. Even with big gaps in interests or what you do, we can search for the connection point between people/groups."



Ashley Brueck

"It is powerful knowing other people in that room 100% shared that experience and it touched them like it touched me. We need to let people bond and have that connection."



Scott M. Kerr
[INVNT GROUP]

"There is magic in hearing the real life discourse between luminaries. The gathering of people from different walks of life creates a unique alchemy of connection."



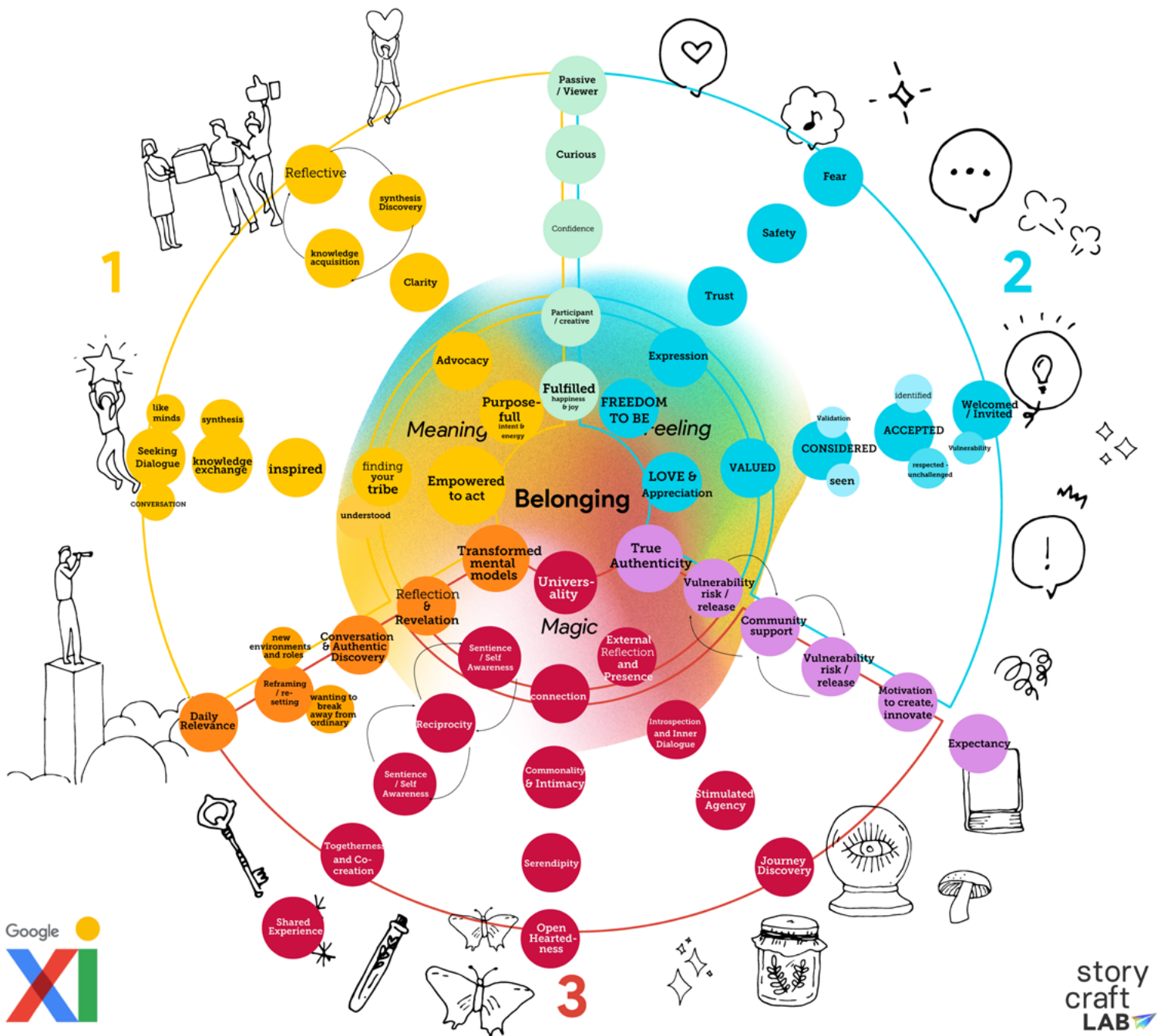
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Ladders to *Belonging*

As the Wheel of Belonging conversations continued we saw a progression of sequential steps to belonging. The journey to belonging was built on a series of these related progressive steps - we called these ladders. We saw emerging a series of these daisy-chains where individuals might move from feeling to meaning and magic - and ultimately to belonging - in a highly expressive and organic way based on their unique journeys and contexts.

After 70 collective hours of conversation between 40 people and 1235 sticky notes, we used word counts to extract quantitative data and map the words we were hearing onto the regions of the Wheel of Belonging. We established eight ladders to belonging, each originating from different areas of the Wheel: Meaning, Feeling and Magic.



Joy & Fulfillment - *a pathway of happiness.*

Fulfillment & Joy

Starting from a passive role as viewer, this journey to belonging sits on the cusp of meaning and feeling. It is sparked by a curiosity that enables the attendee to grow in confidence through controlled experimentation, leading to participation and encountering new degrees of creativity. This growth and progression sparks joy and happiness, and belonging through a feeling of "this is where I am meant to be".

Creative Participant

Confidence

Curious

Passive Viewer

Purpose-full - *a pathway of intention.*

Purpose-full

Here people begin in a reflective state, seeking clarity through knowledge-driven discovery. They continue with synthesis, knowledge acquisition and reflection until they reach a point of clarity, after which they become advocates for meaning and reach belonging as a result of a Purpose-full energy where they can contribute and receive from a community of knowledge and practice.

Advocacy

Clarity

Synthesis

Knowledge Acquisition

Reflective

Empowerment - *a pathway of action / ignition.*

Empowerment

On this ladder the attendee begins with seeking dialogue with like minds, and through a process of knowledge exchange they become inspired, uniquely understood - "these are my people! They really get me! I love how they think!" - and are ultimately empowered to act and spark action as a result of the tribe's affirmation.

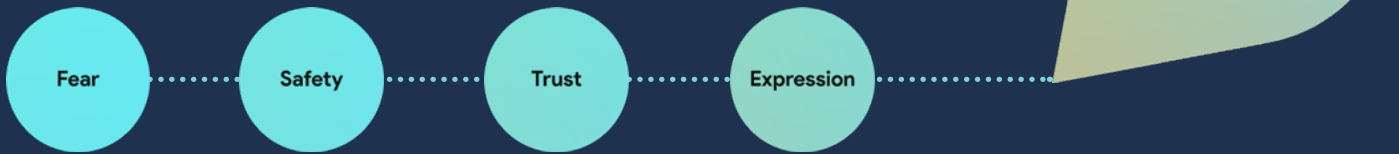
Finding Your Tribe

Inspired

Knowledge Exchange

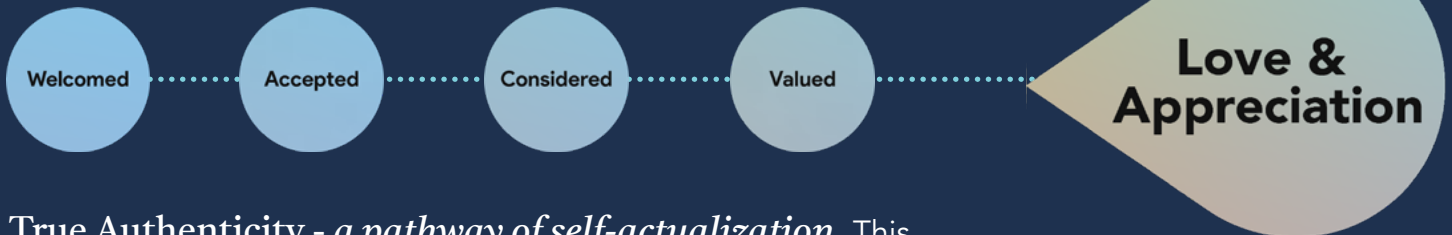
Seeking Dialogue

Freedom to be - a pathway of acceptance. The lowest rung - or entry state - on this ladder is Fear. The attendee moves from a feeling of Fear, to Safety, to Trust, then Expression and ultimately a feeling that they are to exist, as they are, successfully within a group or experience.



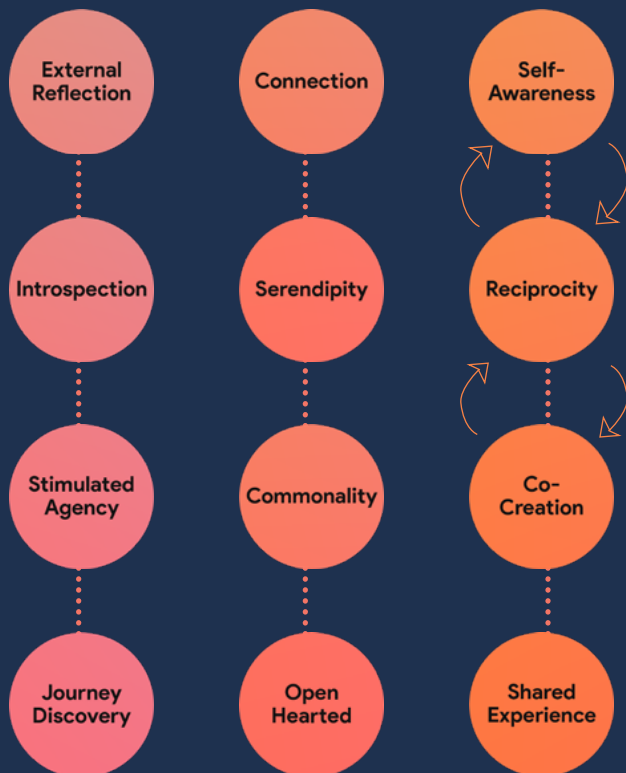
Love & appreciation - a pathway of recognition.

This pathway begins with an invitation, and from here our experience design must support the audience to enable feelings of acceptance, recognition, consideration, value and appreciation. This manifests in the knowledge that the experience would not be the same without them.



True Authenticity - a pathway of self-actualization. This pathway sits at the intersection of Feeling and Magic, and its beginning state is one of Expectancy or hope. On this pathway the attendee brings a desire to innovate or change, and encounters Community support through the work of vulnerability, risk and release opening up space for change. The ultimate destination is a changed state - being able to operate openly without masking.





Universality - *pathways of connection.*

Here we found three ladders that can lead to a state of universality, and these vary according to scale of shared experience.

The first pathway is more **solitary**, moving from the context of an individual journey of discovery, to heightened sense of agency, to introspection and reflection, at which point they begin to externalize and connect to a universal dialogue.

The second pathway is **serendipitous**, based on one to one or **one to few interactions**. Beginning from a state of open-heartedness and a desire to find commonality, this pathway uses serendipity to make unexpected interactions that generate intersectional connections. "Imagine that in this big world, we found each other and we share the same...."

The third pathway is **social**, and begins with a desire for a **shared experience** and through acts of co-creation, the individual increases self-awareness through a reciprocity loop with others. As their sentience increases they see themselves and their impact within and upon the universe magnified.

Thinking Differently

Revelation

Conversation

Reframing

Daily Relevance

Thinking Differently -
a pathway of transformation.

This pathway sits on the cusp of magic and meaning, and begins with the attendee feeling interested in the daily relevance that an event or experience might offer. On this ladder they move toward transformed mental models as a result of re-framing and re-setting to break away from the ordinary to discover through conversation, reflection and revelation.

Ladders to Belonging

Joy & Fulfillment - *a pathway of happiness.*

Purpose-full - *a pathway of intention.*

Empowerment - *a pathway of action / ignition.*

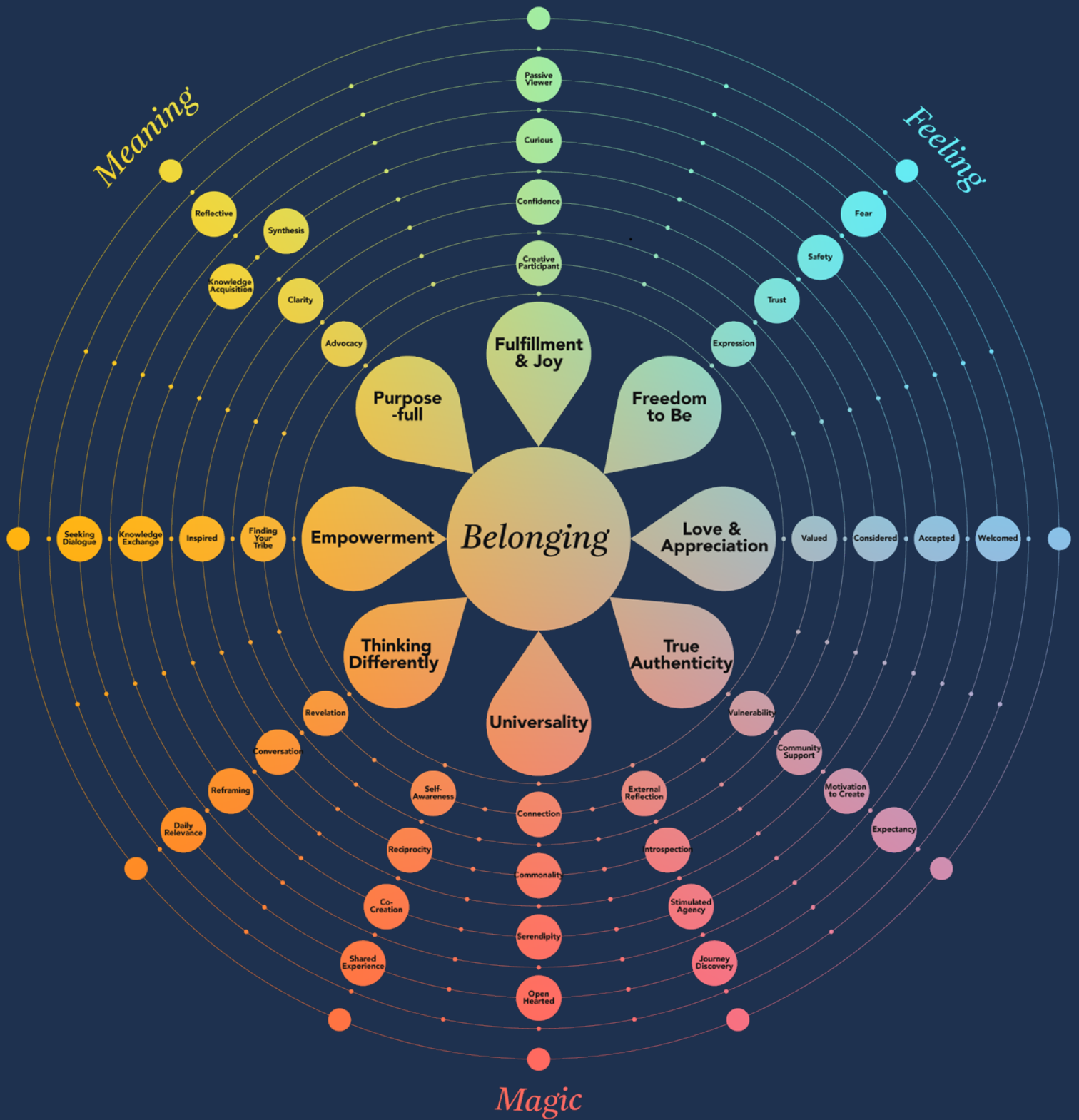
Freedom to be - *a pathway of acceptance.*

Love & appreciation - *a pathway of recognition.*

True Authenticity - *a pathway of self-actualization.*

Thinking Differently - *a pathway of transformation.*

Universality - *pathways of connection (Solitary, Serendipitous, Social).*



As we studied the unique journeys to belonging, a series of sequential and progressive steps to belonging emerged, where individuals move from feeling to meaning and magic by engaging with one another.

These journeys to belonging are expressive, reflective and highly organic, based on unique contexts and preferences. The ladders represent pathways or a framework that can inform intentional design.

We learned that true connectedness comes when we allow attendees to follow their interests and find meaning for themselves, encountering and engaging with others along the way. While communities are spaces where we can gather, belonging is the outcome of communities when they are successful.



Moments of *Belonging*

Belonging means different things to different people. And yet people are the thread that connects us all. We learned that true connectedness comes when we allow attendees to follow their interests and find meaning for themselves, encountering and engaging with others along the way. While communities are spaces where we can gather, belonging is the outcome of communities when they are successful. So, belonging becomes one of the ways in which we can assess and measure the function of community.

In defining the ladders as pathways to belonging, we also noted that people are not confined to experiencing one ladder. People can move from ladder to ladder and occupy ladders simultaneously, reflecting our human complexity. This is where we started examining the function of these insights. We understood that as designers this tool allows us to focus on moments on the journey. At a particular moment, how might we design to enable our audience to move forward, from a current to future state.

By aligning alongside the progressive ladders, and suggesting how they might respond to the audience state, event creators can design to support the journey forward for attendees. Whatever rung the audience is on, it is an opportunity for designers to meet the need at that moment, allowing the attendee to make their next leap upward.

We started to find ourselves filling the spaces in between - asking, how might we build an experience that allows an attendee to move from a sense of being *accepted* to being *valued*, and even being *loved*? **Using the ladders to belonging as a provocation for design thinking helps individuals and teams place their audience at the center of their design decisions.** It establishes and necessitates an empathetic dialogue with the humans we design for.

Dialogue and *Belonging*

The Wheel of Belonging has great potential as an interactive framework. Instead of generating a framework complete with our own recommendations, it reaches it's fullest potential when we share with others and invite their input. As we apply the framework as a tool, it underscores the essential connection between dialogue and design.

How do we assess where on the Wheel of Belonging our audience members might be? What can we learn about our audience that helps us build an experience that meets their needs? The answers will be found through dialogue - inquiring of your audience will give you the information you need to build for. It will also give you a benchmark against which the progress toward belonging can be measured.

Here the Experience Profiles tool can be incredibly helpful in opening up dialogue and assessing the audience entry to your event. Learn more about the Experience Profiles at eXProfiles.io

It's important to note that the Wheel of Belonging is not a fixed or final outcome. It is intended instead to be generative and will continue to evolve. In the next stage of our investigation we will open the Wheel of Belonging to event creators so that they might help fill open spaces, ideating and sharing techniques for how they might build belonging at the events they create.

This effort of cocreation will be launched at the Xi Days event in early 2023 and another WonderPaper will follow shortly after. Sign up [here](#) to be notified when it is released.



Authors & Contributors



Naomi Clare Crellin is passionate about using empathy to power enterprise in the experiences we create. She is founder of Storycraft Lab, an Experiential Engagement agency with expertise in audience design and strategic development. She consults with organizations such as Google, NASA, Intel, Marriott and more, on projects from product launches to pop-ups, education to enablement, creative and content strategy. Naomi is also adjunct faculty at NYU teaching engagement strategy for events - and is an artist whose work has been displayed as far afield as the Bauhaus Archiv in Berlin.



Megan Henshall (she/her) joined Google in April 2019, and serves as the Events Strategic Solutions Lead. She partners across Google to understand how events drive business, build communities and promote cultural continuity, informing strategy for a global team of amazing event professionals. She leads an internal/external innovation effort called Experience Institute, focused on exploring and reimagining human-centered multi-modal experience design.



Maya Manciangli graduated from Duke University with a degree in Global Health and Sociology. She is currently an Experience Strategist at Storycraft Lab, where she leverages her background in Social Innovation & Entrepreneurship, experiential education / high-impact learning, and Sociology to help organizations create meaningful change. At Storycraft Lab, Maya has worked on projects with clients from Intel, NASA, Google, Second Nature, and more.



Katy Mull is an experience designer and creative strategist with a passion for empathetic design and magical thinking. Katy is the Director of Experience Strategy at Storycraft Lab. She crafts digital and physical spaces where humans can connect and messages are thoughtfully expressed and has led Storycraft's work with a diverse range of clients. Katy spent several years as a multimedia storyteller in the nonprofit sector, producing and editing succinct video stories and creating narratives that dealt with a diverse range of topics, including advocacy issues, human-centered stories, and international policy discussions. Her personal pursuit of stories about human connection has translated into her work as an experience designer.



Special thanks to our Wheel of Belonging conversation contributors:

Tonya Almond, Tag Agency
Jenn Artura, Jenn Artura Consulting LLC
Justin Boone, Untitled Future
Ashley Brueck
Paul Bulencea, College of Extraordinary Experiences
Usha Chazhiyat, Intel
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Alisha Wenc, Center for Cyber Safety

