

Hello everyone, I am Ina Song, a freshman at Mercer Island High School. Are you enjoying the Belonging assembly so far? Nice! To take a little break, I'm going to ask you to do something *really* quick. I want you to close your eyes and think of a moment when someone made you feel **included**. (count 10 slowly in your mind) You can open your eyes now.(p)What came to mind? You might have recalled the first time your friend group opened up for you, or that one *magical* time when someone said, "I do too!" when you told them you like something. I feel like *everyone* can agree that one of the *greatest* moments in life is when we are *truly* accepted as who we are. When someone holds their hand up and waves at us while we are looking for someone to have lunch with or a partner to work with in class, we feel like we **belong**. When we come out of the bathroom and find that our friends are still waiting for us, we feel like we **belong**. We *love* the feeling of being accepted and belonging. So, **what** makes us *truly* belong as who we are? Though belonging is one of the **best things** that we have in life, sometimes it is not so easy to belong as ourselves. It would be *really* nice if we could just pull out our magic wands and turn the person who doesn't accept us into something funny, but, we are just muggles and we don't have wands.(p) I know how hard it is to belong because I struggled too. I came from South Korea 3 years ago. I was a very talkative and extroverted kid growing up in Korea, but that *all* changed when I came to the U.S. When I first came here, I only knew how to say "Today is Friday" and "The weather is nice." Since I was bad at English and was not used to the culture, I had trouble talking to people, and it made it hard for me to be accepted or belong to any group. Some people made fun of me in front of others for my poor English. Naturally, I started losing confidence. But I didn't want to give up because I wanted to *talk* and **belong**. I started with sending messages to my teachers, because it felt more comfortable than talking to someone face to face. I pushed myself to *speak* if I had the *chance*, to participate in discussions and prepare for presentations. And in that journey, I was able to find myself **piece by piece**. Now I have found myself, and I can belong as who I am. The reason why I couldn't belong as myself was because I **lost** myself. I forgot what kind of person I was before I came to the U.S., and it took me **3 years** to find myself **again**. The first step in belonging is **loving** yourself and **believing in** yourself. For example, you have to be prepared to like pineapple pizza no matter what others say. Don't *pretend like* you like cheese pizza or *get embarrassed* for liking pineapple pizza. Because(sp) **you are you**. If *someone* doesn't like you because you like pineapple pizza, *believe me*, there's plenty of other people who like you and *would* like you even if you told them you like the smell of an old pair of socks. But to find these people and to be *accepted* and *belong* with them, *you* have to be ready to include others as who they are too. After I found myself, I started trying to include others who are left out or I have never talked to before and that led me to meet many new *amazing* people who in turn accepted me as who I am. You are a **brilliant** person. You are really cool and nice, and there's no reason for other people to look down at you when you bravely go up to them and say hi. If they do, that doesn't mean you aren't a brilliant person. They might have their own reasons, so don't get too hurt. Simply move on to someone else, and you will find someone who will accept you just the way you are. So, I'll leave you with a challenge: look for a person who might be left out or need a friend and include them at recess or ask them to sit next to you at lunch. You can do it, right? Great! Go West Mercer Wolves!