I Am One of Everybody
by Phyllis Cole-Dai

Yesterday I awakened to several inches of snow. Today, as I write this, big wet flakes are falling yet again. The world outside my window looks like a holiday postcard, and my family hasn’t even raked our leaves yet.

I just pulled my winter coat out of the closet. Made of quilted goose down, it reaches below my knees. It’s guaranteed to keep a body warm down to -40F. (Yep, it gets that cold here, before the chill factor.)

This bright red coat warms me in winter not only because of what it’s made from but also because of what it’s covered with: hundreds of signatures, all scribbled in black or silver ink. Last time I counted, people had signed my coat in at least eight languages besides English, from Arabic to Hindi to Dakota to Chinese. Most of the signers have been complete strangers to me. What they’ve had in common is a hunger to belong. A desire for community.

All this coat-signing began nine years ago. That August, in anticipation of winter, I told my husband I was ready to shell out the money for a serious coat. Having moved to South Dakota nearly a dozen years before, I’d grown weary of being bone-cold during the winter months.

I soon found the perfect coat online, in cardinal red. (Color, too, can help keep you warm in winter.) The coat arrived at my door only two days later. I stuffed it into my closet with a satisfied smile and promptly forgot about it.

Then, in October, I stumbled onto “Everybody,” a poem by Marie Sheppard Williams. The narrator of the poem tells how she was standing at a bus stop one day, when a seemingly poor (perhaps even homeless) man asked her to sign his “dirty canvas coat.” The coat was covered in signatures. He held out his pen to her, saying, “I’m trying to get everybody.” The poem concludes:

I signed. On a little space on a pocket.
Sometimes I remember:
I am one of everybody.

That year, at our first snow of the season, I knew what I had to do. I took out my new coat and laid it across the family table. With a huge black marker, I printed these words on its back in bold letters: “The `I AM PART OF EVERYBODY‘ coat. Sign if you believe!”

I was grinning now. (Better watch out for poetry. It can make you do crazy things. It can be downright dangerous.)
After my giggling nine-year-old son, the first person to autograph my coat was a woman friend. She was half-laughing, half-chiding, as she inscribed her name. “What would your mother say,” she asked, “if she knew you were ruining a brand-new coat?!”

As I told my friend then, and many others since, my coat only becomes more valuable, not less, with each signature added. People have autographed my coat in check-out lines, on street corners, in airports, in restaurants, in classrooms and auditoriums. An introvert by nature, I rarely invite them to sign. I wait for them to ask. When they do, I smile and pull a marker from my deep red pocket.

Once, on a flight to Washington, DC, I was sitting beside a little girl from China. When she signed my coat, she expressed concern through an interpreter that someday it might be too crowded for any more signatures. Laughing, I flipped the coat over to reveal its lining, as yet untouched. Her eyes grew wide and bright. “Don’t worry!” I said, through the interpreter, “we can fit the entire world on this coat!” I truly believe that. We can make enough room for everybody.

Every winter, wearing this coat, I have felt like I’m carrying the world on my back, in a good way. I’ve hoped that everybody who signs will feel, at least for one happy moment, that they belong. That their life is bigger than themselves. That nobody has to be all alone, out in the cold.

This winter will be different, though. Isolating at home, socially distancing when I venture out, I doubt that any new signatures will bless my coat.

Unless you want to help me....

You see, the red lining of my coat remains mostly pristine, as if waiting for just this moment. I’m devoting that part of my coat to you and everybody else who believes in the power of community. Especially now, we need more than ever to understand that what is good for us is bound up with what is good for others.

If you’d like me to inscribe your name on my coat’s lining, send me an email. Tell me how you want your name to appear. After I’ve added it to the coat, I’ll email you a photo, to remind you that you are, indeed, part of everybody, and that I’m happy to carry you on my back.