

1 22 23—Finding Our Center Together UUFM—Rev. Rita Capezzi

Video

Starlings murmurate. They murmurate, which is the distinct relational pattern that enables them to keep warm at night, to exchange information, to find good feeding places, to stay safe and whole. A flock of individual birds can act in concert by orienting their own movements to that of six other individuals. Single birds become one strong body, ensuring that the whole will endure from the center to the edges. Let's watch now an example of murmuration. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRNqhi2ka9k>

Reflections

In her award-winning sermon, "The Land of Enough," the Rev. Cecelia Kingman Miller says, "Communities of faith perform a singular function. They have what sociologists call an *alternative imagination*, an ability to posit a future different from, and better than, the present we know" (5). A singular function—a function not performed in any other area of society. Here at UUFM, we offer an alternative imagination, a mission we re-state each Sunday morning—to nourish the spirit, to broaden the mind, to nurture the earth, and to build community. Reminding ourselves that that is our reason for existing, that might be the best reason to attend Sunday morning worship. Like a flock of starlings, each bird individual yet oriented toward several others, we find our way into relationship, we invite and include, we move together in joy, we make beauty and wonder in the world. How can we sustain, widen, and deepen this glorious dance of commitment?

And in order to perform this singular function, in order to create "alternative imagination" for a world made better through more love and more justice, there is a question to answer, a question for all for each of you. A question for those present here and those far away in terms of their connections to the Fellowship, those who find themselves and whom we find at the edges of our murmuring flock. As we hope to be a beacon of light in this community, a spiritual home including for those feeling themselves outcast in some way: what are you called "to give of your resources to [this] ministry of love and justice? What percentage of your resources does Love ask you to share?" (7). What percentage are you called to give? Ah yes, it is Stewardship Sunday, and we must talk about, that dirty word, money.

The Rev. Miller says, on any Sunday morning, "we grapple with life's most profound matters: justice, death, the nature of humanity, even the existence or non-existence of God. Still, the subject of money rarely comes up. In many churches, it is easier to talk about sex than finances" (2). Case in point: the Board voted to put condoms and emergency contraception in our restrooms, but it struggles to set a target number for the annual pledge drive. Yet here are some financial truths. When I was called nearly five years ago, this congregation could only call me by running a deficit. I knew this quite well when I accepted your call. But calling a minister in such conditions was part of the leap of faith the members decided to take, in order to make the next move in growth. The deficit continues to be part of the financial reality of this congregation, and the leadership has tried mightily to show this to you, and to provide the implications if reserves run out before you raise enough in pledges and contributions to operate in the black rather than the red.

If the percentage you will give is an inevitable stewardship question, I ask, as well, another today: Will you continue to murmur, as do the starlings? Will each of you individuals continue to look to the outer edges of current reality, as well as to your individual companions, and continue to shape a joyful and exuberant alternative imagination—for this religious community and for the larger world?

An alternative imagination was what I was looking for when I discovered Unitarian Universalism. Ours is a faith tradition where I both felt comfortable as I was, as well as able to grow and transform beyond my then-limitations. I was attracted to Unitarian Universalism because I could experience meaning and value even when I felt most depleted and most vulnerable, even when the world was cruel and insane in its glorification of profit and wealth and the oppressions that produce scarcity and destruction, violence and hatred. I would not be the self that I am today, with a promise of more transformation in my future, without Unitarian Universalism.

Within this faith, generative and loving processes foster the diversely adaptable and resilient, even while the world seeks so often to rip itself to shreds. Creating a world of liberation and fairness was not something for the afterlife. I could be part of the processes, large and small, that would honor the multiplicity of life rather than trying to suppress it. I could be part of the processes that fostered compassion and companionship and oppose the processes of competition and lack and resignation. As the Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt, current president of the Starr King School for Ministry, as she says: “By no means are we [Unitarian Universalists] perfect; we often fail as much as we succeed. Yet even when ‘we have broken our vows a thousand times,’ we return to this essential work of justice and liberation for all.” I am a true believer in the saving and healing power of this faith.

I know some of you here have stories that intersect with mine, not the same as but sharing some aspects while bringing different ones in as well. Yet all of us seeking, in some way, an alternative imagination. This community, UUFM, has for 70 years endured and transformed, has provided some of that imagination. UUFM has kept the faith of building a community in tune with the rhythms of the earth, nourishing the spirit and broadening the mind by serving that pot of red stew, by sharing a Fellowship lunch, by including and welcoming new people and the prodigals and the seekers who are not sure yet that we can be a community for them. For 70 years, UUFM has re-imagined what community can be and kept our doors open to those seeking. And we have done this by blessing, not cursing, the world with our time and talents and treasures, by our faithfulness within and to this community.

The Rev. Miller reminds us that the “old proverb about the Lord loving a cheerful giver is often misunderstood. It doesn’t mean that we should give an amount that is easy for us. It doesn’t mean you should grin and bear it! It means that we should give a gift that gladdens our hearts, that gives us joy. It means that when we give generously, with authenticity and integrity, as the Divine moves in us. The Divine moves in us” (7). What is moving and motivating you?

Soon, we will leave the sanctuary to share together a luncheon prepared by those who feel the call to feed our Fellowship literally. You will sit face to face with friends of long years, as well as those newer to

the congregation. You might even decide to knit a square from recycled t-shirts, learning from other committed congregants who join for companionship, who seek to nurture the earth by keeping that excess cloth out of the landfills, who desire to create something meaningful to share with those in our larger community who need to feel themselves remembered and cared for.

And you might also reflect on your gift to keep this Fellowship whole and vital, the gift you have already made—and thank you for that—or on the gift you are contemplating. Our Treasurer Liz Kipp can talk to you about how to make your pledge. But before you give, and before you consider your gift all finished, I ask you to consider the meaning of giving one more time—“What gift can you give that will be meaningful to you, that will give you strength and clarity in the months ahead? What gift would be exciting and nourishing to your spirit?” (7). What gift will remind you, fully and beautifully, of the plenty that the Fellowship provides? What gift will remind you of the plenitude that you provide to keep UUFM and Unitarian Universalism the beacon, the open door, the refuge that it can be and must be?

Gratitude Ritual

I invite you to write down the names of those with whom you orient as our Fellowship seeks to move together for the benefit of all of us and for the greater good in our alternative imagination. Write the names on the index cards for your own sake. And write each name on a post-it note. Then bring those notes forward and put them on the board here. If you see a name already on the Board that you have in your hand, place the post-it over that name. Later, we will begin to see the patterns that help us stay together, the patterns that help us dance in joy together, in celebration of life and of a greater, deeper alternative imagination for our future and for our community.

As people came forward, Nancy plays “From You I Receive, to You I Give.”

Here is how we fly and dance together as a people, grateful for companionship, grateful for compassion, grateful for purpose to make the larger world better, grateful for the Unitarian Universalist faith that tests and guides and inspires us. May we sing to the power of the love, the joy, the hope, the faith within but also among and beyond yet spilling out into this very room, all of us together. May this kinship remind us, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together, “Amen!”

<https://academic.oup.com/beheco/article/21/6/1349/333856?login=false>

<https://bigthink.com/life/murmurations/>

<https://healthyspirituality.org/mystical-murmuration/>

“The Land of Enough,” Cecelia Kingman Miller. In *The Abundance of Our Faith: Award-Winning Sermons on Giving*. Ed. Terry Sweetser and Susan Milnor. Boston: Skinner, 2006. Pp. 1-8.