

“BIRDS OF A FEATHER”
A Sermon by Rev. Vail Weller
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Appleton, Wisconsin
www.fvuuf.org

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Reading “The Gift” by Mary Oliver (from House of Light)

I wanted to thank the mockingbird for the vigor of his song.

Every day he sang from the rim of the field, while I picked blueberries or just idled in the sun.

Every day he came fluttering by to show me, and why not, the white blossoms in his wings.

So one day I went there with a machine, and played some songs of Mahler.

The mockingbird stopped singing; he came close and seemed to listen.

Now when I go down to the field, a little Mahler spills through the sputter of his song.

How happy I am, lounging in the light, listening as the music floats by!

And I give thanks also for my mind, that thought of giving a gift.

And mostly I’m grateful that I take this world so seriously.

Sermon:

I am guessing that I must have been about ten years old. My father and I had just finished lunch at a restaurant and we were driving home. Suddenly he gasped and called my attention to the forest clearing near the road. Birds! There were birds – so many of them that we could hear the cacophony through the closed car windows. There were thousands of them. Tens of thousands of them. Thinking quickly, he turned the car around and we made our way back. We pulled over and got out of the car, stepping into the foreign, chaotic, delightful crush of sound.

Starlings filled all of the trees as well as the sky. We watched as they gathered their collective strength into the air, so many of them that the light from the mid-afternoon sun was dimmed. They became an expanding and contracting organism, diving and rising, flattening out and ballooning, all moving in the same direction...somehow, all moving together as one.

I have since come to learn that a flock of starlings is called a murmuration. Brandon Keim reported on the phenomenon in Wired Magazine.

Starling flocks, it turns out, are best described with equations of “critical transitions” — systems that are poised to tip, to be almost instantly and completely transformed, like metals becoming magnetized or liquid turning to gas. Each starling in a flock is connected to every other. When a flock turns in unison, it’s a phase transition (what we see when a solid transforms to a liquid, or a liquid to a gas).

What we see in the beautiful flight of these birds in unison is a concrete illustration of what interdependence looks like. They communicate in some way – whether its chemical, biological, or the new physics, we aren’t completely clear. But they affect one another, and they transform.

As Roger mentioned earlier, I am the Congregational Giving Director for our UUA. This means that I manage the Annual Program Fund, which asks each of our congregations support the larger faith financially.

Your congregation has been an Honor Congregation in the past, contributing the full amount requested (though it’s been a while, since 1995) and I want to encourage you to return to that full level of giving, as other congregations are counting on you. I also want to thank you for the great support you have offered over the years. For this, many are truly grateful. I want to suggest that your support of our APF allows you to fly together: along with all of the other contributing congregations in the Association.

What does your money do? Your disciplined giving provides worship materials for the small struggling fellowship in rural Texas. It provides a comprehensive search and settlement process for the congregation in Maine in the midst of calling a minister for the very first time. Your giving allows the OWL (Our Whole Lives sexuality education curriculum) to give hope to a young person in Nebraska. Your support saves the marriage of a couple in Maryland who never before knew there was a possibility for them to attend church together, given their previous religious backgrounds.

Your help coming here from Appleton means that members of the congregation in Anchorage will each get the UU World magazine. The list goes on and on.

Your covenantal support gives real people, real hope...and brings concrete connection and spiritual sustenance to Unitarian Universalists across our entire Association. THANK YOU.

Now...there is a joke told about Unitarian Universalists – perhaps you have heard it. Outside the pearly gates, there are two signs. One says “heaven” and points that way, and the other says “discussion about heaven” and points the other way. The joke is that the Unitarian Universalists will choose the discussion of heaven rather than the real thing, every time.

This joke really does point to something true about us! We like to think about ideas. We like to learn. We like to discuss (and it’s true, we even like to debate). But the point of the religious life is not to learn about being kind; it is to BE kind. The point of the religious life is not to intellectually consider theories of love; it is to BE loving.

The point of the religious life is not to become well-versed in the study of generosity; it is to BE generous. And of course, we don’t become generous by learning about it in theory, by reading books about stewardship or even by attending stewardship workshops. *We learn how to be generous by doing it, in practice.* The only way to “get it” is to do it, to be generous.

How is it that we, who have so much, can feel as if we have so little when it comes to giving? We live in a culture, of course, which tells us that we can never have enough. That we can never KEEP enough. But the goal of religious life, as all of the sages have told us through history, is to experience an unclenching of the fist, an unlocking of the heart, an opening of the hand, to share.

There are many ways to practice the art of generosity, and not all of them have to do with money.

Be generous with your presence. In this day and age of constant computer connectivity, it is rare to see someone waiting for a bus or a train or even in line at the grocery store not looking down at their phone. Do an experiment. Use that time instead to talk with someone, to make a connection...or if you aren’t feeling talkative, simply send thoughts of loving-kindness. Live as if you are really present in your life. We may think we are doing something for another, but it is we, ourselves, who are transformed. Be generous with your presence.

Be generous with your attention. When your partner or child speaks to you, do an experiment. Focus on them completely. When you are at the grocery store or the library, make a point of

paying attention to the clerk. Imagine that they are the most important person in the world at that moment (for they are).

Every person we cross paths with longs to be seen, acknowledged, honored for who and how they are. By recognizing the truth of this, we may think we are doing something for another, but it is we, ourselves, who are transformed.

And yes, be generous with your money. Do an experiment. Give a very large tip to your next server, so large that you know it will make their day, week or even month. Give someone on the street a \$20. Drop off a supply of paper, pencils, and Kleenex at an elementary school near you (teachers are buying supplies with their own money these days). These are things to do in a senseless-act-of-generosity mindset. Do it without any chance of being acknowledged, to get back to the basics of giving. By giving in this way, we may think we are doing something for another, but it is we, ourselves, who are transformed.

Now, settle in. Did you know that statistically speaking, Unitarian Universalists are the second-highest earning religious group? That is statistically, now. And do you know where we fall compared to other religious folks in terms of our giving to support our own faith? Want to guess? DEAD LAST. We can do better. We **must** do better.

The Chronicle of Philanthropy published a study in 2012 ranking the states in terms of percentage of income given to charity.¹ You might guess which state's residents are the most generous: Utah, where charitable giving averages about 10.6% of income.

The next most generous states are interesting: Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee (giving between 6-7% of income). So now, Wisconsin: where do you think your state ranks? I am sorry to tell you that out of 50 states, you are 44th. The average portion of income given to charity in this state is 3.4%...

This is not a sermon to bring shame or guilt into your life. Quite the opposite. I hope that your pledging to this community will be grounded in your individual spiritual health, and will build our

¹ "How America Gives: Generosity in the States: A Ranking", The Chronicle of Philanthropy (August 19, 2012)

movement's collective power. This sermon is about that: **your spiritual health and our collective power.**

I do think that it is important to have a sense of where we stand in our giving, so that you can have that full knowledge when you make your financial pledge for the support of your religious community – this religious community which has changed your life, and which is changing many other lives, as well. You can be a part of the murmuration that helps to move us in a new direction – one in which values and resources are fully aligned and in perfect integrity. If you are enriched by this faith, then you are asked to enrich it.

Here's why to give to support Unitarian Universalism. My favorite New Yorker cartoon of all time depicts a traditional god-type figure, standing with an angel. They must be on another planet or at least a very, very high cloud, for they are looking down on our Earth. Earth isn't in good shape – there are bombs exploding and it is clear wars are raging. The god-figure looks exasperated and says, "This human experiment has gone on long enough. Give the hippos control."

This world is in need of the healing message of our faith. The world is filled with suffering, injustice, division.

Our communities need the presence of civic-minded, justice-oriented, religious allies with open minds and open hearts. 50 years ago, a number of our forebears showed up in Selma, heeding Martin Luther King, Jr.'s call, just as our people near Ferguson, Missouri today are showing up to say that "Black Lives Matter".

There is a child being born this very weekend right here at your community hospital who will discover themselves to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. They will long for a place such as this in which to be fully accepted as they explore who they are becoming. When they discover this congregation, it will be literally life-saving.

But the world is not only painful. It is also filled with heart-wrenching beauty. Miracles of nature. Music that heals the wounded soul. Times of justice fulfilled. Celebrations of growth, new life, love that triumphs. Children that grow into thoughtful, kind, amazing youth and young adults in our midst. Mockingbirds that sing Mahler.

We give to this place because it supports us at every stage of life, no matter our circumstances, and because this church encourages us to *grow spiritually, which changes our lives*.

I want to invite you into a deeper relationship with the spirit of stewardship. When you make your pledge of financial commitment, I ask you to be generous this year, to a degree that you **never have before**. We are the only ones who can begin the shift. As you personally commit to giving at an appropriately-outrageous level of generosity (10% of your income, perhaps, as those in Utah do?) –

as you personally commit to that, you not only shift the starling-effect within your congregation's system that is poised to tip, to be almost instantly and completely transformed, you also have a part in changing the giving in the larger district and region. Most significantly, however, you have the experience of the spiritual growth only found through sacrificial giving.

I urge you to go to the pledge drive table right after the service today and make your commitment, **from a place of gratitude for the opportunity to so bless this community**. If you have already made your commitment, I invite you to listen for the call to grow your generosity even further.

I close with a poem called "Blackbirds" by Julie Cadwallader Staub.

*I am 52 years old, and have spent
truly the better part
of my life out-of-doors
but yesterday I heard a new sound above my head
a rustling, ruffling quietness in the spring air
and when I turned my face upward
I saw a flock of blackbirds
rounding a curve I didn't know was there
and the sound was simply all those wings
just feathers against air, against gravity...*

*...the whole flock taking a long, wide turn
as if of one body and one mind.
How do they do that?*

*Oh if we lived only in human society
with its cruelty and fear
its apathy and exhaustion*

*what a puny existence that would be
but instead we live and move and have our being
here, in this curving and soaring world
so that when, every now and then, mercy and tenderness triumph in our lives
and when, even more rarely, we manage to unite and move together
toward a common good,
We can think to ourselves:
ah yes, this is how it's meant to be.*

Yes, that is how it's meant to be.

May it be so.

Here is the film clip we watched during the closing poem:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1Q-EbX6dso>

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