

Murmuring Along – *Maypole Sunday*

Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

Sunday, May 6, 2018

First Unitarian Universalist Church

Rochester, Minnesota

READINGS

Maypole of Merry Mount by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Weaving Our WE by Carol Bebel

Homily

Last year, at my first Maypole celebration here,
as we were given careful instructions
on how to create a beautiful weave of ribbon,
alternating high and low,
half going clockwise, the other half counter clockwise,
we began our slow maypole dance,
and all of the sudden, a small, energetic child,
began running underneath them all
like it had become a little Nascar track –
if *Jollity and Gloom were contending for an empire* –
clearly this little one was taking Jollity into his own hands
and running with it –
and eventually, after infusing the space with good, fun, laughing energy,
found a way to weave in his ribbon –
even if it was an unconventional way.

What struck me most
was that as we weaved our ribbons,
and we got closer together, more deeply woven –
the tallest among us needed to bow down the most.

The ribbons woven together in the dance of the Maypole
remind us that we are but one strand among many,
that we literally bow to each other and to the Spring,
in reverence,
and together,
we weave
our individual colors and threads
and create something
that reaches in color and beauty
to the sky.

Perhaps that is the spiritual task for each of us,
to create space in the middle of our lives,
to pay attention to whatever it is
that calls us beyond the self –
and find something that is beautiful enough
to bow to.

Our monthly theme for May is *Humility*.
May is also when Muslims will observe Ramadan this year,
in a practice of fasting and nightly feasting,
reminding them of the fragility, and sacredness, of life.

I've always admired the deep devotion of Muslim prayer –
stopped 5 times, each day, in a posture of reverence and connection
to Allah, and to millions of others around the world,
making space in their day for breath and devotion.

I wonder, sometimes,
about how such a practice changes a person –
how such regular practices of reverence
orienting the heart toward something larger than the ego,
toward something that nourishes the spirit –
several times a day – changes you.

Submit to a daily practice.

writes the Muslim mystic Rumi,

*Your loyalty to that is a ring on the door.
Keep knocking and the joy inside
will eventually open a window
and look out to see who's there.*

*Keep knocking,
and the joy inside
will eventually open a window
and look out to see who's there.*

Justice activist Adrienne Maree Brown writes about communities,
wondering about how we move together,
travel together – in our institutions, and in our wider world.

She writes,
*My dream is a movement of such deep trust
that we move as a murmuration,
the way groups of starlings billow, dive, spin,
dance collectively through the air –*

*to avoid predators, and, it also seems,
to pass time in the most beautiful way possible.*

*Here's how it works with a murmuration:
each creature is tuned in to its neighbors,
the creatures right around it in the formation.
This might be the birds on either side,
or the six fish in each direction.*

*There is a right relationship, a right distance between them –
too close and they crash,
too far away and they can't feel the micro-adaptations
of the other birds.*

*Each creature is shifting direction, speed, and proximity
based on the information of the other creatures' bodies.*

*There is a deep trust to this:
to lift because the birds around you are lifting –
to live based on your collective real-time adaptation.
In this way thousands of birds or fish or bees
can move together,
each empowered with the basic rules and a vision to live.*

*Imagine our movements cultivating this type of trust and depth with each other,
having strategic flocking in our playbooks.*

*Strategic flocking –
that's what community, at its best, can be.*

Where we attend to those around us,
we adjust, we adapt, we make space
for different beliefs, ideas, identities –
we make space by adjusting our posture,
adjusting our spirit,
to meet the complexity and diversity of this world
with openness, and wonder, and curiosity and grace.

We have had a decent amount of crows near our home this year –
sometimes flying down in groups,
that, for a moment, makes you wonder if you are enter a Hitchcock movie –
and we were talking about crows
and wondering about their bad reputation –
which seems to be mainly hitchcock's fault...

And then, by some strange coincidence,
after we turned off Netflix for the evening
up popped a PBS documentary on crows.

So I sat there for a few moments,
in this late-night confused daze –
knowing I should go to bed but also mesmerized by PBS for some reason.

One study in particular fascinated me –
now Crows are smart, and figure out little tasks and tricks
placed in front of them by researchers.

In this instance, there was food that was in a closed container –
the top could either be pushed in by the beak to break,
or pulled off the top to access the food.

They split them into two groups –
where one crow at a time would try to open it –
with other crows looking on - two groups of this.

The first was taught to push in the top,
and all the other crows then did the same.

The other group, the crow was taught to pull out the top,
and all the other crows did the same.

It's not that earth-shattering of a discovery,
but was a new realization to these ornithologists –
that these birds will teach and learn complex skills
based on the birds around them –
they are more social than their stereotype.

Like flying geese,
who find lift and air from the draft of the birds around them,
and take turns leading and following so that wings won't overtire –
the leader will grow tired and fall back and another will take its place -
we are like the birds of the air –
we learn from each other's' movements –

we adjust and adapt off of each other's effort –
we follow what we see others do
and it's hard to break habits and learn something new –
but we learn from each other.

If the way we meet each other
is in a posture of aggression, it is often met with aggression –
or in a spirit of negativity, it is often met with negativity –
if we approach each other in a posture of grace and humility,
in reverence and appreciation,
of hopeful and glad hearts,
often, the return is the same.

When we feel the wind, and adjust our path,
based on our proximity – body and heart – to those around us,
we are able to sometimes lead,
sometimes follow,
so that we can offer our gifts, take a rest,
and together – fly.

Lay me low –
sang the choir.

Not to some place of shame, or diminishment, or a place of *less than* –
but a place of lowering the ego,
stepping off any pedestal
that places us over and above anyone else –
being so connected to the earth,
so grounded in how we live and breathe and move together
that we can pause, rest, breathe –
and be covered in, cloaked in
beauty and wonder and awe.

You can't weave together
ribbon, color,
stories, hopes,
identities and dreams
without stopping to at least acknowledge,
if not bow in reverence,
to those around you –
otherwise you'll just run right into them,
you'll stumble, knock each other over,
and the weave, and the web of life,
begins to fray and break apart.

Humility
is not to be ashamed of who one is,
but be reminded that we are one strand,
among many,
in the weave and dance
that makes up the color and vibrancy
of this life.

What has caused you to pause –
either an intentional daily spiritual practice,
or an unexpected moment that stops you in your tracks,
where you have found yourself,
in some way,
so taken by the beauty of something, someone, some place,
that you have felt no other worthy response
but for your heart, your soul,
even your body,
to settle into a posture of reverence –
as if you had bowed your head to the ground
in gratitude, in humility, in wonder,
at the beauty before you.

We must gather all winter before the spring
we must gather all night before the dawn of a new day,
we must gather our whole lives
to pass on something of beauty and color and love
to the world and generations of tomorrow.

What spirit, what energy,
are we casting to those around us –
what air is lifting us –
what beauty
are we struck by,
in one another, in our common formation,
that we are willing to bow to
in wonder and awe?