

Letter from Rev. Robert Murphy, for Earth Day, 2023

To the Unitarian Universalists in Falmouth, Massachusetts.

Today's letter is about congregations and climate change. Lyn and I minister to small Unitarian Universalist congregations in Florida, including congregations in Port Charlotte, Tarpon Springs, Odessa, and Key West.

Key West is at the end of the road. The end of Highway One.

What will you find when you get to Key West?

You'll find palm trees and flamingoes, and you'll find crocodiles, striped mud turtles, and some other endangered species. It's a different environment, although humanity's needs stay the same. You'll find Unitarian Universalists in Key West. Our Key West congregation is called "One Island Family." Sunday services sometimes begin with a blast on a conch shell trumpet - it's pronounced "conk" - and it's helpful on Earth Day and on other special occasions. The trumpet provides a wake-up call, for the religious community. It's time to get active, people. Hear the good news: "Come together people, because a better way of living is needed. It starts in places like this congregation. Right here. Right now."

A conch trumpet or a shofar works well with this proclamation.

The Unitarian Universalists on Key West have seen the AIDS pandemic, and the congregation has suffered through the COVID-19 pandemic, and the congregation knows about fentanyl and the opioid crisis, and there are some other problems that should be mentioned. Key West has been hit very hard by climate change. The sea keeps rising, and each summer is hotter than the previous summer. So there's a need for a trumpet, to raise the alarm. Individuals are searching for a better way of life.

In some ways, Key West is like a tropical version of Provincetown. All sorts of people arrive on Key West, for all sorts of reasons. Key West is an island that's popular with artists, and with tourists. Florida is a destination for families that arrive from Haiti, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and from other places in the Caribbean.

The Coast Guard has collected some of the rafts and rowboats that have been used by the refugees. It's an impressive collection that can be seen on Key West. Many of the boat people have escaped from political systems that have failed. They've seen the effects of imperialism, neocolonialism, and the different forms of dictatorship and exploitation. Many are trying to escape from environmental problems, because "the sea keeps rising, and each summer is hotter than the previous summer." The different islands in the Caribbean have their different problems. You'll meet some of the refugees, as they move to Massachusetts and other states.

If you live close to the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, you know that a better way of living is needed. Obviously, there's a need for good government. However, if you're waiting for government to provide you with sustainable happiness, you'll have a long wait. For humanity, there are two things that should be mentioned on Earth Day. There's a need for wisdom. Spiritual wisdom. Ecological wisdom. And there's a need for healthy relationships.

For Unitarian Universalists, these two things go together. We understand the need for a just and loving community. We understand the need for healthy relationships that rest on free, mutual consent and not on coercion. James Luther Adams was the great Unitarian Universalist teacher in the 20th century who helped to define liberal religion.

For Earth Day, there's something else that needs to be said. Charles Darwin taught the world that all creatures

are part of the same family. Maybe there's a powerful deity who cares for all creatures great and small. Maybe not. In any event, we know that we live with our neighbors in one great ecosystem. And, heaven knows, there's plenty of diversity in this world, and multiculturalism isn't a problem. Unitarian Universalists know that the natural world doesn't exist for one nation, one race, one gender, one religion, or even one species.

The people on Key West have a strange custom. At the end of the day, crowds gather at the waterfront to applaud the sunset. Sometimes there's drumming, and different street artists may appear, but, mostly, everything is very spontaneous, with a minimum of preparation. The flock comes together and individuals stand in awe of the universe. Similar celebrations happen on the beaches in Tel Aviv, and in Hawaii, and in towns in India.

Flamingoes are seldom present for any of these events, but the birds have their own spiritual wisdom. Here's the lesson that the flamingoes teach: They practice mutual aid. The birds care for each other. Being a flamingo has never been easy. There are lots of predators and problems in the environment. Still, despite the difficulties, the flamingoes know how to survive and thrive. They're as happy as many of the people on Duval Street. And it's possible that the birds will be living on tropical islands after the humans depart for other places.

All of this talk about sunset gatherings, mutual aid, caregiving, and concern for justice, takes us back to our roots. No surprise. As we rediscover these things, humanity may discover the importance of organized religion. Although we may have to go to the dolphins, and the flamingoes, and to other creatures, in order to learn some lessons.

A few years ago, a wise woman on Cape Cod told me, "If I disappear for five weeks, I want people to notice." This explains the importance of congregations. Although, please, don't wait for five weeks before asking questions.

The message is simple: "We will be saved together or not at all." What's expressed here is an ecological understanding of how salvation happens, and it's a bit radical, and a call for systemic change is included with today's message. Healthy change will develop from the grassroots. The flamingoes can help congregations to understand best practices. Are the flamingoes religious? In some theological circles, it's a scandalous question, but the Unitarian Universalists are accustomed to outrageous sermons on Earth Day.

Maybe the flamingoes will visit New England. Maybe they'll appear at some of the seminaries and they may walk along the Boston waterfront. Each summer is hotter than the previous summer and tropical birds may be attracted to your region. In any event, the monarch butterflies will continue to migrate to your part of the world, from Mexico and Florida. You'll meet some humans from foreign lands. When you see them, try to be helpful. Your kindness is needed and appreciated.

With best wishes,

Rev. Robert Murphy
Saint Petersburg, Florida