

“Starlings in Winter”

Fiona Heath, Unitarian Universalist Minister
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“Starlings in Winter” by Mary Oliver

Chunky and noisy,
but with stars in their black feathers,
they spring from the telephone wire
and instantly

they are acrobats
in the freezing wind.
And now, in the theater of air,
they swing over buildings,

dipping and rising;
they float like one stippled star
that opens,
becomes for a moment fragmented,

then closes again;
and you watch
and you try
but you simply can't imagine

how they do it
with no articulated instruction, no pause,
only the silent confirmation
that they are this notable thing,

this wheel of many parts, that can rise and spin
over and over again,
full of gorgeous life.

Ah, world, what lessons you prepare for us,
even in the leafless winter,
even in the ashy city.

I am thinking now
of grief, and of getting past it;

I feel my boots
trying to leave the ground,
I feel my heart
pumping hard. I want

to think again of dangerous and noble things.
I want to be light and frolicsome.
I want to be improbable beautiful and afraid of nothing,
as though I had wings.

Reflection "Starlings in Winter"

T.S. Eliot wrote that April is the cruelest month, but not for us.
Surely it is February.

The holidays are long gone, and it seems the sun is too.
Our signal sign of spring - the tapping of the maple trees -
is still weeks away.

The snow - when there is any - is no longer pristine white,
but great piles of dirty brown slush which leave salt stains on everything.

We live in a winter place. Or at least we used to.
Now it could be snow, it could be rain, who know what the weather will be next week.
Climate change seems to me to be the best and worst example
of the imbalance in our relationship to nature.
Weather extremes - even for those of us who prefer beaches to ski lifts - aren't healthy.
Large scale system imbalances harm the land and all the creatures living there,
including us.

How do we deal with imbalance?
How do we - as Unitarians - find balance in our lives?
Balance, I believe, is the basis of our tradition.

Balance is the Unitarian Universalist way of being in the world.

We seek balance, not redemption or enlightenment.

As Unitarian Universalists we choose to stand on the earth,
within the mystery, honouring both the material and the spiritual.
We offer a middle way, an emerging balance theology,

which links science and spirit. This balance tradition is an ancient perspective but new to western culture.

World religions scholar J.D. Windland places religions into three categories – Middle Eastern, Indian, and Balance.

The Middle Eastern are the Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They focus on the one God.

The one reality faiths which originated in India, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, focus on the self and emphasize the unity or oneness of all.

Balance traditions have a focus on the universe.

They originated in China, with Daoism and Shintoism, but also occur in indigenous cultures through out the world.

In a balance tradition there is a striving for harmony with self, society, and nature.

Balance traditions affirm humanity and the world.

Canadian Unitarian Universalism holds an emerging balance theology in addition to its liberal Christian and liberal humanist theologies.

A focus on the here and now, valuing the earth as much as the mystery, acknowledging the connections between beings. This is our balance orientation.

Balance is a complex concept.

The religious idea of balance is deeper than making things equal out, or moving between two opposing poles.

This is not about big brass scales weighing and measuring our time and behaviour. Some for family, some for work, some for exercise.

Judging what we should or shouldn't be doing.

Religious balance is more subtle and complicated.

As anyone experiencing trouble walking – or even just standing – knows, it isn't just about having two feet to touch the ground.

It is about centering.

About finding the mid-point which can align with the earth.

(Think of the tree pose in yoga where you stand on one foot).

It is an act of alignment.

There are artists who balance rocks. They don't stack them.

They balance chunks of rocks on each other to make strangely beautiful stone sculptures.

It takes incredible skill, patience, and "listening fingers".

They find the balancing point of an asymmetrical heavy rock and stand it gently on another.

They connect at a single point. It looks impossible.

The sculptures are temporary as only gravity holds them together,
but for a little while these ungainly rocks are graceful.

Finding balance in our lives is like stone balancing:
difficult, temporary, and lovely.
Balance means to find the centre,
the still point that allows it all to hang together.
Finding the alignment.

Unitarian Universalism is an orientation which helps us
balance the stones. Each set of stones will be different.
We seek to find harmony within and among the self, community, earth and mystery.
Finding our balance helps us flourish.

But we often feel out of balance. We live in a world out of balance. This is a time of
fragmentation as various religions, cultures, ethnicities, politics, and values all smash
up against each other in the great ocean of global capitalism.

There is a famous 1983 documentary Koyannisqatsi (Koh-ah-nis-kaht-see). The title is
a Hopi word for Life out of Balance.
The filmmaker, Godfrey Reggio, explored how lives globally were shaped by
technology. There was no narration, only music by Philip Glass.

Deserts and cookie cutter suburbs.
Skyscrapers and red rock canyons. Inner city decay.
In time lapse, people are moving frantically, building cars, packaging sausages in a
factory, rushing down city streets.
White and red lights glow in streaks as cars and more cars zoom along the highway.

I first saw Koh-ah-nis-kaht-see when I was studying film at Queen's University as an
undergraduate. I found the images compelling and haunting.
Strange to see the world from a distance. I suspect I became an environmentalist partly
because so many of these images felt wrong, that we shouldn't be parts of a machine.
And thirty years later we are more into technology and fast time than ever.
I get so annoyed when my son doesn't respond to my text messages immediately...

Out of balance - ever faster technology yet we feel more caught by time than ever
before. So out of balance that spring rain comes in January, summer heat waves come
in April and winter frosts come in June.
All these shifts in culture and nature mean this is also a time of transition.
And transitions, while difficult, are also opportunities.

We are living a paradigm shift.

We are living into a new world order.
 Mad Men Modernity of the mid twentieth century looks old-fashioned.
 Linear cause and effect has been scribbled over by systems theory.
 The old ways of thinking and being don't work so well anymore.
 Now we live in a social network.
 We pretend we understand quantum physics....
 We are mediated, post modern, mashed-up.

And good stuff is happening too.
 Local food movements. The creative handmade anything explosion. Wind farms.
 Social media as tools for democracy.
 The 350.org climate change movement.

There is a sincere seeking of meaning as we figure out this new paradigm. It hasn't been settled yet. It can still be shaped.
 Perhaps values such as justice, equity and compassion,
 the inherent worth and dignity of all people,
 honouring the interdependent web, have a role to play.
 Perhaps we have a role to play.

We don't have the answers. Maybe David Suzuki does. I don't know.
 But we can ask questions that might shape the future towards harmony and health.
Perhaps part of our work is to help bring society back towards balance.

Not by starting a revolution.
 Not by becoming the biggest religion in Canada. (Although we could dream....)
 And not by ourselves. But we can join in the conversation.
 Ask questions around meaning and values.
 Think out loud about dangerous and noble things.
 Paint a picture of possible futures.

As UUs, we don't have it right,
 we are as attached to the old models as any other protestant church,
 but we have a religious orientation worth sharing.
 A balance theology both challenges and resonates in this time of transition.

We accept scientific knowledge as well as mystical experiences.
 We honour diversity of life and beliefs.
 Liberal attitudes foster inclusivity.
 We strive for harmony between self, society and nature.
 We learn from the planet. We look for balance.

Balance can only be found in the moment,

in the centring point related to the earth.

So when we seek balance, we find our centre, in the here and now,
in February, in Durham Region.

Mary Oliver says "Ah, world, what lessons you prepare for us, even in the leafless
winter, even in the ashy city."

We can learn about balance from the starlings in winter.

If we think of starlings at all, we tend to consider them as noisy, nuisance birds.

Introduced in the 1890s in an odd bid to bring all the birds named in Shakespeare's
plays to North America, about 80 starlings were released in Central Park. They thrived
and began to spread.

By 1919 they had reached Ontario.

A flock of starlings is a grand vision.

I have one that wanders my neighbourhood each winter.

The sudden woosh and coalescence into a great flight is spectacular. They have such
rhythm, dancing together,
swooping and sweeping the sky.

Seemingly random, leaderless, imperfect,
they come back into alignment time and again.

Together they create a whole that moves with great beauty.

Balance arises from the whole as well as the self.

Balance can be found with others.

We live in a society that encourages individual isolation, individual excellence.

It can be hard to find a welcoming community.

In a fragmented society, with work, family, home, friends all in different parts of town,
people slip through the cracks and end up alone and lonely.

I think this is why flash mobs are so popular. It gives people a chance to be part of
something, even if it is just Gangman style dancing.

When I feel out of balance, I sit in a Sunday service and the music gives me hope.

I may be frustrated or tired, depressed by reading the globe and mail,
the cats may be eating dog food because I didn't have time to go shopping...
but I can join my voice - my no range out of tune can't read a note voice -
into a joyful whole.

And the group will still sound good.

Unbalanced as I feel, I can still contribute,

I can still be part of something bigger than myself.

Like the starlings in winter, swooping together in delight.

And by being part of these moments of grace,

I know I will find, sooner or later,
the centring point in my own life.

For some of us the centre may be in the devotion to our work,
for others it may be in a hobby, or caring for our family.
All of us have a centre, all of us struggle to experience it.

Unitarian Universalism is a tradition which reminds each of us that **balance is an act of alignment, not a scale of judgement.**

That even if we are struggling, we can still find balance together,
as part of a greater whole.
In a world in transition, out of whack, moving to a new paradigm,
Unitarianism has a gift to offer.

May we learn how to share it with the world,
May we find ways to bring the world back into balance.
Unitarian Universalism has an emerging balance orientation.
We come as individuals into community,
standing on the earth, surrounded by the mystery.

We seek balance in an unbalanced world.
Each of us looks to find our centre point, where we can align the stones. Knowing that
balance is a process, we come together in community, like starlings in winter,
to dance the balance together.

May it be so.