

Belonging

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan / Mount Pleasant, Michigan October 6, 2019

The theme of my message this morning is *Belonging*, and the story that Kendra read for us today is an excellent way to look at this theme. This book, *Stellaluna*, is a favorite of mine and one that I read to my children many times. I love it because it has so many layers when it comes to belonging.

First of all, I want to consider the character of Mama Bird. At first I am inclined to be sympathetic to Mama Bird. Her main priority is to protect her own children and have a safe, orderly nest. When she sees that Stellaluna, the baby bat, is teaching the baby birds to hang by their feet on the edge of the nest, she says, "You are teaching my children to do bad things. I will not let you back into this nest unless you promise to obey all the rules of this house."¹

I can see some parallels here. The message of Mama Bird is similar to what a teacher in a classroom might say: *to be welcome in this classroom, you have to behave in exactly the right way*. Or a minister in a church might say: *you are welcome in this congregation as long as you believe certain things*. Or the leader of a nation might say: *you can only enter this nation if you fit our criteria*.

But I hope for a higher standard, and this is why I'm ultimately critical of Mama Bird. I think we can and must balance the need for order and safety with the obligation to be welcoming and inclusive. I want Mama Bird to say to Stellaluna: "we need to have order and safety in this nest, but we have room for you to be yourself." Just like I want the teacher to say: *in this classroom we have rules for order and safety, but everyone is welcome with their ideas and perspective*. And I want the leader of a nation to say: *we have laws for safety and order, but we welcome all kinds of immigrants*. And finally, I would hope the leader of a congregation would say: *we have commonly held values here, but we welcome all kinds of diversity of identity and opinion and religious belief*.

Viewing the story from Stellaluna's perspective, it's clear that she gains some measure of happiness and welcome, of belonging, in the nest. I can't help but think that this is like middle school—or at least like middle school was for me. To feel like I belonged, I wore what the other kids were wearing and acted like the other boys were acting. This sense of belonging – a shallow kind of belonging – is not the worst thing in the world. For some of us, that's the best that we get in life. But that is sad, because true belonging is so much better, and we see this in the story when Stellaluna has two transformative moments.

The first moment is when she's hanging right side up, struggling to hang by her thumbs because she thinks that's what she should do, and the other bat comes along and hangs upside down. I can't help thinking that this is a tremendous metaphor: it's like a person whose gender or sexuality is opposite from what everyone expects of them....and they finally find their people.

Are you upside down or am I upside down? What's up for you may be down for me. And I imagine the powerful sense of belonging when you find someone else who hangs upside down also...if you're still following my metaphor.

The second transformational moment is when Stلالuna discovers her power. Once she finds her people, she unlocks the gift that she was born with: night vision. It was always there but never blossomed until she had the chance to fly with her people. **May we all find our people and freely exercise our gifts!** And she uses her gift to save lives: the lives of her friends/siblings Pip, Flitter, and Flap—she saves them because they can't fly in the dark. **May we all know that we have life-saving power!**

And of course, this leads to the climax of the story, when the bat and the birds are together and they wonder,

How can we be so different and feel so much alike?

How can we feel so different and be so much alike?²

To me this moment of being together in spite of differences is a great metaphor for this congregation, or any Unitarian Universalist congregation. We are like bats and birds in the same nest. But as UUs we are so much more diverse than that: we're like bats...and birds...and butterflies...and dragonflies...and pigeons and eagles.

For instance, imagine someone who is part of this Fellowship and identifies as a Pagan. They may experience the divine in the earth and in nature; they may find meaning in the cycles of the year, and celebrate holidays and rituals at solstice, equinox, and in between. Then imagine another member of this Fellowship who identifies as Christian. They may find the divine in the god of the Bible, whose name is Yahweh, and in Jesus; they may find comfort and meaning in the stories and lessons of the Bible, and meaning in holidays such as Christmas and Good Friday and Easter. And let's take this a little further. As a third example, imagine someone who is here who identifies as an atheist. They might not be comfortable with words like *prayer*, *church*, *worship*, *god*, or *divine*. They may find meaning through reason and science; perhaps they contemplate the mysteries of life with wonder and curiosity.

And all of these people, the Pagan, the Christian, and the atheist, can all be Unitarian Universalist. United in values of equity and compassion, we believe that all of us are figuring out life and death, truth and meaning, in our own way; we say that every person is valuable and worthy—whether they look like us or not, whether they were born here or not, whether they are mentally ill or not, whether they are rich or not; and that we are all connected – all people to each other, and all of humanity to the vast ecosphere of life.

How can we be so different and feel so much alike?

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The sense of belonging can be profound when you come into a UU community, and realize that we are different (we are bats and birds and butterflies and dragonflies, pigeons and eagles) but this nest is where we belong, and where we can find our power, and use our gifts to save others.

I have felt at home like that in UU communities, that sense of belonging more profound than other communities I was part of – it is profound and it makes me want to stay and be a bigger part of it. **May we all find our people and our sense of belonging.**

I'll close with these words of blessing:

May we learn to listen deeply to one another, daring to be witness to one another's pain and fear.

May our listening make way to greater understanding, offering a greater sense of welcome, so that we all may feel a deeper sense of belonging.

May this welcome and belonging be strengthened here in this congregation; may we take the same welcome into the community so that others may find that precious sense of belonging.

May love, kindled here, spread to bless the world.

Andrew Frantz

¹ Cannon, Janell. *Stellaluna*. Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1993.

² Cannon, Janell. *Stellaluna*. Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1993.