

# "Flamingo Theology and Climate Change"



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

To the Unitarian Universalists in Falmouth, Massachusetts.

Grace to you and peace.

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.

"One Island Family" is the name for the Key West congregation.

"One Island Family" is a small congregation, but the members know what's needed during an era of climate change, and they help each other and the whole community. Mutual aid has become a way of life on Key West.

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 multigenerational families that arrive from Haiti, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and from other places in the Caribbean. Many are trying to escape from political systems that have failed, and from poverty, and from environmental damage, and from other problems.

Environmental justice is important in Florida. In some ways, it's easy to explain. The environmental justice movement joins environmental protection concerns with social justice concerns. In the midst of climate change, we're concerned about the people who are often kicked aside or left behind. We're concerned about human rights. So, I talk with Unitarian Universalists about the United Nations and its Sustainable Development Goals. Unitarian Universalists are concerned about problems like systemic racism, economic injustice, the abuse of migrants, and the neglect of young and old, and these are some of the major concerns that are raised by the United Nations agencies, as the agencies prepare for humanity's future.

There's something else than needs to be said. In February, the "One Island Family" congregation celebrated Charles Darwin's birthday. Darwin taught the world that all creatures, great and small, are part of the same family. We can respect our unity. And we can respect our diversity. What's surprising is that humans can learn a lot from non-humans. In Florida, some of the Unitarian Universalists have rediscovered the flamingoes. They're flamboyant birds, but don't laugh at their behavior.

I'll say more about flamingoes in a few seconds. For the moment, I'll mention a strange custom on Key West. At the end of the day, people gather at the docks to applaud the sunset. Sometimes there's drumming, and different street artists may appear, but, mostly, everything is very spontaneous, and there's no need for an elaborate explanation. The crowd comes together and individuals stand in awe of the universe. Flamingoes aren't present for the Key West celebration, but we have chickens at waterfront, because it's Key West and that's the custom. Similar celebrations happen on the beaches in Tel Aviv, and in Hawaii, and in towns in India.

Here's the lesson that the flamingoes teach: They practice mutual aid. The birds care for each other. It's their way of life. Being a flamingo isn't easy, because the humans cause lots of problems, including the climate change problem.

Mutual aid is not a panacea. Obviously, global problems require global solutions. There's a need to lobby and to raise protests with Congress and the Bank of America. There's a need to talk about the United Nations. Still, don't rely too much on the United Nations, although it's a wonderful organization, and it deserves your recognition and support. There's a need for big institutions, and, also, there's a need for local organizations that are voluntary, participatory, and equalitarian.

At the local level, encourage people to take responsibility for personal care, for helping their neighbors, for lifelong education, and for caring for their environment. It's not just a project for Earth Day or the harvest holidays. If you're a parent, or a grandparent, you know that there's a constant need for caregiving. Caregivers need lots of support.

All of this talk about sunset gatherings, mutual aid, caregiving, and concern for justice, may seem very religious. No surprise. As we rediscover these things, we 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 old-time Universalists said, "We will be saved together or not at all." That's a radical understanding of how salvation happens, and Charles Darwin's teachings are also a bit radical. Always, there's a need for grounding, and there's a need for grassroots organizing and a better way of living. We live in an era of pandemics, climate change, and roller coaster economics. Mutual aid, "wellness checks," and support groups are essential. If you're actively involved with these things, you may be saved, despite environmental problems. It may happen.

Maybe the flamingoes will migrate to New England. Each summer is hotter than the previous summer. There are palm trees in Ireland, and because of climate change, there are rumors that palm trees have appeared in Massachusetts. In any event, the monarch butterflies will continue to migrate to your part of the world, from Mexico and Florida. When you see them, try to be helpful. Your kindness is appreciated.

With best wishes,

Rev. Robert Murphy  
Saint Petersburg, Florida