

Nature's Healing Spirit

Real Life Stories to Nurture the Soul

Murmuration

By Sidney Stevens

I'm not sure when I noticed I was in a parade. A parade of one.

It seemed my spectators arrived at once. One moment the oaks, maples and elms lining the trail were bare against the brilliant late-fall sky, limbs and branches twisting upward like reaching arms. The next minute the treetops were filled with iridescent, vibrating black bodies.

Hundreds, maybe thousands of starlings, on mass migration, draped over me like a noisy, living canopy. Spectators to my parade. Or so it seemed. But why?

Parades show off something beautiful, celebrate victories, commemorate holidays and anniversaries. But they also march criminals through streets and ne'er-do-wells out of town.

My parade felt more like that. Did this crowd sense my numbness? Had they gathered to witness my uncertainty? I stood for a moment, letting the thunderous cacophony roll over me.

I'd traveled this trail almost daily for years, wandering through the quiet forests, past farm fields and ravines. These places brought me peace. But lately I'd lost my way. I kept waiting for inspiration and revival that used to come from moments among growing things, when my mind could slow down. But this place where I did my best thinking, the refuge where I worked out the knots of my life, had lost its ability to stir and energize me. The pungent forest air wafted over me day after day, clear sky or clouds sprawled overhead, sunlight dappled the trail floor or rain dropped. But my sanctuary no longer brought answers or release. My life felt stagnant.

This was my parade of shame. The giant pulsating chorus above me seemed abuzz with cat-calls. Countless beady eyes gawked with scorn. Or so it seemed.

You come to certain plateaus in life, where you need to grow or you won't anymore. I'd seen it happen to others, and I was there. I could feel the fear and inertia, a block of doubts about trying something new with my writing, my artwork, my life. I was successful enough as a freelance writer, had published some essays and even tried a novel once, but it never got published. I didn't try again. I'd recently begun dabbling in mosaic-making. I was doing work that others seemed to like, but ... but what? My creations usually pleased me. I pushed myself to excel, but something left me unfulfilled, even when I thought I was giving my all.

I shivered in the sunlight and trudged on, head down, feeling suddenly exposed, as though my dark-winged witnesses could see the stuck places inside me, the restlessness that worked at cross purposes, the unfair twist of mind that ever nagged and haunted me with a sense that I was meant to do more.

I glanced up from the litter of other leaves on the trail. Something odd was taking shape overhead. Maybe a trick of imagination, but as I moved my audience seemed to move with me. Improbably, batches of starlings directly above me opened their wings and glided to trees further down, hopscotching from branch to branch as I paraded beneath them. It seems impossible, but I swear it's true.

This was beyond my control – this mass of starlings. Predatory. Aware. Would they swoop with eagle talons to carry me off? Drop me from the sky? Pick my bones clean? There were so many of them, raucous and chaotic like a wild,

windy thunderstorm or powerfully rattling tornado, beautiful and mesmerizing but also potentially murderous.

My mind, as always, turned to fear. I tightened inside, braced as usual for something bad. And then a moment of remarkable clarity. I had the power to choose my interpretation. Sinister omen or wondrous revelation? Fear or awe? I chose the latter.

And in that instant the blue sky seemed suddenly wilder and extraordinary, shimmering. The air throbbed. The trees quivered. I closed my eyes to absorb the starlings' majestic earthquake presence overhead. The enthralling din enclosed me, surreal and eerie, but also strangely reassuring. I joined their world for a moment, as they had apparently joined mine.

Then in a flash, all together, as if on cue, they emptied the branches as quick as they'd filled them. A great rumbling shook the world as thousands of wings beat simultaneously and shiny black bodies soared out of the treetops in ballet unison to flood the sky. I hadn't heard their signal, but it had arrived, invisibly, in an instant of miraculous instinct. I've since learned it's called a murmuration. A lovely word for the lustrous bird-cloud that swelled and rolled and swirled as one into the heavens like a giant stream of twisting liquid, a single shape-shifting beast.

Part of me wished I could grow great black wings and murmurate with them. *Come with us. Feel your place in the grand rhythms of the earth. Rise and be part of the world's ever-migrating, ever-evolving, ever-moving soul.*

I thrilled at their raw, frenetic outpouring of joy and freewheeling abandon. They were who and what they were, on an audacious journey without fear or apology. They followed their callings and called what they felt. This was their parade. Just for me, a spectator of one.

And then they were gone. Calm blue and silence returned. Something stagnant was flushed out of the air and out of me. It was a moment of magic. A shift from fear to certainty that I'm more than what's seen, part of something sublime. We all are.

The starlings had stopped to watch my parade, and I ended up watching theirs. But these weren't parades at all. They were pilgrimages. I know that now. My walks have always been marches into the wild heart of the world to gather inspiration, the place where creations arise and life is formed. I wander to feel the guiding embrace of grace and things greater than me. So do the starlings.

I'd lost my way, but in truth, I'd never really found it. I was still searching for a way to shine with my full toolbox of emotions and talents and share from my most submerged places. The ideas for my creations were mostly directed by others, their bones and guts mostly fashioned from the works of courageous pioneers. A lucky few seem born to circumvent this struggle, grasping early their connection to things, like my starlings, that know no bounds and have no doubts. I had yet to dig creations out of the messy, authentic center of myself, forever hesitating to lay bare the odd bend of my mind, nerves and heart for fear the world would laugh.

The starlings had invited me to stop and see. They hollowed out a wild place inside me, cleared my path for something sweet and ancient – and bolder – to flow in. They showed me their unabashed artistry, how to live and fly in harmonious unity, guided by the perfect choreography of an unseen force. They swooped and skimmed fearlessly together through a world reverberating with life and energy, form and spirit, where anything can happen if you choose to grab hold. *Trust what you know. Follow life's deepest cues and cadences. Never doubt the air will catch your wings perfectly and transport you in a dance of splendid flight.*

Our pilgrimages are the same, mine and theirs. All life's pilgrimages are. We wander for the thrill of magical murmurations, a feeling of oneness, synchronicity and creative joy that my shiny friends dwell in all the time, and I hope to dwell in more.

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