There are few sights in the natural world more enchanting than the spectacle of snow geese descending at dusk toward the tidal salt marshes just north of Atlantic City, New Jersey. As the sun slips beneath the western horizon, the geese make their wheeling descent, filling the sky with ten thousand glitter-drops of flashing white bodies and flapping black wing tips, falling like manna from heaven to the sands below. For anyone lucky enough to see such a sight, it’s a spellbinding experience, an awe-inspiring example of why some things are called wonders of the natural world. For the geese, it’s a welcome stopover on an arduous journey from their breeding grounds in Arctic Canada to their winter home in the Gulf of Mexico.

A couple of weeks ago, the Science section of the New York Times described how scientists have been able to attach tracking devices to arctic terns, the blue jay-sized ultra-marathoner of the gull world. From their nesting grounds in the Arctic, the terns fly south to summer in Antarctica, taking a circuitous route that measures 15,000 miles. They stop along the way to rest and eat, of course, but their annual migration covers 30,000 miles. Over a lifetime, an arctic tern migrates a total of 1.5 million miles—that’s to the moon and back three times.

The migratory champion, in my book at least, is the diminutive blackpoll warbler, a slender, chickadee-sized bird that breeds in the Arctic and winters in Venezuela. As Jack Connor recounts in his book *Season at the Point* (the point being Cape May, at the southern tip of New Jersey), the blackpolls travel south from Canada to the eastern coast of the U.S. between Cape Cod and Cape May. There the blackpolls feed on insects and build their fat reserves until they have increased their body weight by up to 50 percent.

Then, on a night when the sky is clear and the winds are favorable, the blackpolls take to the sky. With wings pumping constantly—warblers can’t glide—they fly south, high above the ocean. Passing Bermuda at sixty-five hundred feet, they meet the southeast trade winds and gain altitude, passing Antigua at twenty-one thousand feet until, ninety hours and fifteen hundred miles later, these tiny little birds at last reach the coast of Venezuela. Some drown along the way, and others land too emaciated to find food and die soon after arrival. For the blackpoll warbler, migration is an all-or-nothing, do-or-die venture.

Why do blackpolls make the journey, given the hazards? Because they can, and because they must. If blackpolls stayed in the Arctic after hatching their young, they would die in the winter’s cold. If they stayed in the warmth of Venezuela, they would not be able to propagate their species. Blackpolls migrate because, in evolutionary terms, they have no choice. It’s a risk they must take for the sake of their own lives and the lives of their progeny.

People migrate too: from home to college, from advertising executive to guidance counselor, from omnivore to vegan, from Methodist to Unitarian Universalist. People
migrate because they can, searching for a job that is more fulfilling, a relationship that is more satisfying, a faith that yields more meaning.

In many cases, however, people migrate because they must. If they stay put in a job or a relationship, their emotional waters will freeze over; their spiritual springs will run dry. This is also true in the religious realm. Many of our 64 new members came to All Souls either because they had rejected another religious option or because they had found themselves alone in a spiritual desert. So they got moving.

A recent survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion in American Life found that slightly over half of all Americans migrate from the faith of their childhood to something else. If you add those who grew up outside a religious tradition and found one as an adult, the percentage climbs even higher.

I am one of the migrants. As some of you already know, I was born on a dairy farm in a small Mennonite community in central Delaware. Present-day Mennonites range from the Amish, who shun almost all the insights and conveniences of the modern world, to mainstream Mennonites, whose appearance and lifestyle are similar to those of other Bible-centered, pacifist Christians. The middle ground between the two is occupied by the Conservative Mennonites, who try to meet the modern world halfway. This was the faith of my initial upbringing. We had electricity, but no television. We dressed in a manner that was two decades behind the times, not a century behind like the Amish. Our lifestyle was austere without being reactionary.

My challenge growing up was to accept the doctrine, conform to the lifestyle, and take on the identity. I struggled mightily to make it work, remaining a Mennonite through my mid-twenties. But I finally realized that I did not fit the Mennonite mold. And so I migrated.

After a prolonged journey, I discovered Unitarian Universalism. Unlike the faith of my upbringing, our tradition insists on the freedom of the individual in matters of faith and practice. For me, the opportunity to plot my own religious destiny was a gift beyond measure. This faith—and this congregation—have been a source of spiritual sustenance and religious purpose.

Birds migrate, people migrate, and so do religions. Like birds and people, religions migrate because they can. Like other human institutions, religions reflect the human quest for meaning and purpose, adapted to the needs and narratives of a particular time and place. Some religions fail to migrate, of course: they cling to obsolete beliefs and outmoded practices. Listening to the Pope argue that women shouldn’t be priests, or watching Anglicans in Uganda expel Bishop Christopher Senyonjo for supporting the LGBT community is like watching an emperor penguin try to hatch an egg during a blizzard. They are frozen in time—petrified relics of a bygone era.

If religion is to remain alive and relevant over time, it has no choice but to migrate. Sometime a founding article of faith turns out to be misguided, or unnecessary, or even wrong. When this happens, a religious tradition is pressured to adapt to a new landscape that better nourishes the hopes and dreams of its people. In many cases, this migration happens slowly.

It took five hundred years for the church to forgive Nicholas Copernicus for looking into the night sky and reporting what he saw: that the sun, not the Earth, lies at the center of our solar system. Copernicus died of natural causes before the theological backlash against his discovery gained lethal momentum. Two of Copernicus’ scientific contemporaries, Giordano Bruno and Galileo, weren’t so fortunate. They agreed with
Copernicus that the Earth—and thus humanity—wasn’t the center of God’s creation. Bruno even dared to suggest that space is boundless and the universe might be home to many solar systems; he was burned at the stake. Galileo was tortured, forced to recant the Copernican discovery, and spent the rest of his life under house arrest.

In more recent centuries, scientists have come to another conclusion of similar theological magnitude: that the laws of nature apply everywhere and always. In 1905, Albert Einstein articulated the theory of relativity, which applies to large-scale interactions among and within galaxies. Over the following few decades, a group of scientists (including Einstein) developed quantum mechanics, a branch of physics that describes physical interactions at the atomic and subatomic levels. It’s too soon to tell whether superstring theory will fully reconcile relativity and quantum mechanics, but one thing is clear: the fundamental laws of nature have existed from the very beginning, they apply everywhere, and they do not change.

What does this discovery mean for religion today? The religions of the West—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, along with their various permutations—are based on the belief that God exists above and beyond the realm of nature. In a word, they believe God is supernatural: able to command and control the forces of nature at whim, in order to carry out the divine plan for creation. God can stop the sun, impregnate a virgin, inhabit a human body, and walk on water.

As we’ve peered into the inner working of the universe, however, we’ve come to the inescapable conclusion that the universe isn’t set up this way. The laws of nature are not subject to change without notice. The idea of a supernatural God, like the idea of an Earth-centered universe, must be left behind. Religion needs to migrate.

Some people today, including many leading scientists, trumpet this conclusion about the nature of God by arguing that religion doesn’t need to migrate because it’s extinct. If God isn’t supernatural, they insist, then the idea of God and the role of religion are obsolete. This is sloppy logic. If Bruno and Galileo had followed a similar line of reasoning, they would have declared that if the Earth is not the center of the universe, then the universe doesn’t exist. We certainly need to rearrange the theological constellations, but this doesn’t mean the sky is empty. Our challenge is to integrate what we have learned about God into what we know about religion.

In fact, if God isn’t supernatural, then religion becomes even more important, not less. With a supernatural God, who makes all the rules and hands them down to humanity, religion is merely obedience in fancy clothes. If God is not supernatural, then religion has a serious role to play. Religion is the process of taking everything we know about the universe into account and creating a life of meaning and purpose within it. In order to play this new role, religion must adapt, and the idea of God must adapt as well.

God is not an object like an apple, but rather an idea, like beauty. We use this idea to account for certain kinds of experience. Relativity theory tells us that the past and future don’t actually exist. Yet we need to account for our sense that they do. The idea of God points toward our sense that the past doesn’t vanish and the future is possible. It accounts for our sense that, just as atoms are never lost in physical reactions, our experiences don’t cease to exist once they’ve happened. It also accounts for our sense that the future is possible, even though possibilities don’t actually exist before they happen.

As the refuge of the past and the source of the future, however, God cannot change the present. Only we can do that. The only way God plays an active role in time is
through us. To say that we are the presence of God in this world is not a metaphor. We are the face of God in this world, and God’s voice and hands. God changes outcomes in this world only as we change them.

How long will it take for the religions of the West to adapt to this new reality? My guess is that it will take a long time. The religious backlash against these late-breaking scientific realities has become ferocious and well-organized, and in some places it has become lethal.

But for us as Unitarian Universalists, our religious migration has already begun. We’ve accepted the conclusion that God isn’t supernatural. We’re rethinking our idea of God and reshaping the form of our religious life. For us, the periodic table of theological elements is no longer made up of orthodoxy, dogma, and obedience, but rather of meaning, purpose, and value. We’ve shifted from understanding religion as complete obedience to experiencing religion as ultimate meaning.

When a bird reaches the end of a long migration, the safe landing isn’t the end. It’s only the end of the beginning. What comes next? Finding sustenance for the current generation and creating a future for the next.

Those of you who just landed at All Souls are probably hungry, spiritually speaking. You’ve had a long journey. Welcome! Each Sunday we prepare a feast, with meals aplenty in between.

Nourished by our presence together, we’ll continue adapt our faith to the landscape around us. We migrate because we must, and we’ve landed here because we can. This is the end of the beginning.