

Flower Communion Ceremony – June 11, 2023

Introduction

This morning's introduction is an adaptation of The Story of Norbert Čapek's Flower Ceremony By Teresa and David Schwartz

His mother was a devout Catholic, his father agnostic. He became an acolyte at age 10, in 1890 at St. Martin's Catholic Church. In the years that followed, he became disillusioned: his priest was a cynic.

At 18, apprenticed to his uncle, a successful tailor in Vienna, Norbert discovered the Baptist religion and became a minister. During his time as a minister, he founded almost a dozen Baptist churches from Ukraine to Budapest.

Yet, slowly, his faith became more and more liberal.

He left Bohemia under government threat and accepted a call to serve a Baptist church in New York City... until one day in 1919. That day, he wrote in his diary: "I cannot be a Baptist anymore, even in compromise. The fire of new desires, new worlds, is burning inside me."

Norbert and his wife, Maja Čapek, joined a Unitarian church in New Jersey in 1921—for the same reason a lot of us here did: their children liked the religious education program. That's the power of our RE teachers – and kids, that's your power, too!

World War I ended. His home country now independent, he and Maja returned home to Czechoslovakia.

Norbert brought his new Unitarian faith to Czechoslovakia and founded the Prague Liberal Religious Fellowship. In just 20 years, his church had 3,200 members.

The early worship services generally consisted of lectures without any rituals or hymns. Some members missed the spiritual aspects of their old faiths. But Norbert knew the traditional Christian communion service of bread and wine wouldn't meet the needs of his congregation, because his church—like ours—had people who believed different things.

Čapek turned to the beauty of the countryside; to the beauty of flowers. In 1923, he developed the flower ceremony – sometimes referred to as the Flower Communion.

Čapek was a visionary minister with a church ahead of its time, a BOLD church, a church thinking beyond its doors, beyond what it thought possible.

It was a church that was willing to take risks; to make tough decisions; to bear disappointment; and to build a new way...first by building a church so that church could build up the world.

That is our church. That was Čapek's church

In 1939, Maja went to the United States to raise funds for relief efforts in Czechoslovakia. Norbert and his daughter were invited to join her, but they remained behind to minister to their congregation.

For this, the Gestapo arrested him in 1942. The Nazis accused Čapek of listening to foreign broadcasts, and sent him to the Dachau concentration camp.

Even in starvation and torture, he held a flower ceremony with his fellow prisoners, finding whatever flowers they could among the weeds of the camp. They testified to a beauty larger than themselves, and a love that would outlive them.

The Nazis tortured and killed Norbert Čapek in 1942, but his spirit, courage, and commitment live on, today. Those qualities have passed, now, to us, to make them real.

Flower Ceremony

As a Unitarian, Norbert Čapek sought to create a unified community that embraced diversity. The Flower Ceremony he created was designed as a way to celebrate the uniqueness of each individual while affirming the interconnectedness of all.

When he celebrated the first Flower Ceremony, 100 years ago this month, he asked his congregants to bring a flower to church—from their gardens, the field, or the roadside. He invited each person to place their flower in a vase, just as we have done this morning.

What we are about to do is not a historical reenactment of something over and done, but an affirmation of our continuity with the generations of struggle for ever-widening liberty.

This flower ceremony, lovely though it is, isn't a diversion from ugly reality, but a gentle fierceness which proclaims that in the midst of sinister days there is always the light of beauty.

We are here not to recall something that happened, but to remember something that is happening: to re-member—to put it back together again—and in that remembering, may we put ourselves back together again, each as a part of the body of this community: out of many, one.

Today, we celebrate this ritual of solemnity and joy.

As Čapek asked his people to bring a flower and celebrate beauty, so shall we.

Let us begin.

While a single flower can be lovely, a bouquet of flowers has the power to inspire the senses and move the spirit.

At the start of the flower communion, Dr. Čapek would consecrate the flowers with words like these:

Infinite Spirit of Life, we ask thy blessing on these, thy messengers of fellowship and love.

May they remind us, amid diversities of knowledge and of gifts, to be one in desire and affection and devotion to thy holy will.

May they also remind us of the value of comradeship of doing and sharing alike.

May we cherish friendship as one of thy most precious gifts.

May we not let awareness of another's talents discourage us, or sully our relationship, but may we realize that whatever we can do, great or small, the efforts of all of us are needed to do their work in this world.

Many of you have brought flowers this morning and added them to our communal bouquet. We also brought extras, so if you forgot or were unable to bring a flower, you are still encouraged to participate. As Caleb plays some background music, everyone is invited to come to the front of the church, take a single flower other than one that you brought, and return to your seat using the side aisles. If you are unable to come to the front yourself, raise your hand and I'll bring you some to choose from. And if you're joining us online this morning and would like a flower from our community bouquet, let us know in the chat and one of our volunteers will deliver one this week (provided you are somewhat local).

In the words of Maja Čapek, the exchange of flowers today means that we shall walk, without reservation, with anyone—regardless of social status, or former religious affiliation, as long as they are ready and willing join in a search of truth and service to humanity.

[After people are settled again.]

I now invite you to look at your flower, admire its beauty, cherish it. It is a gift from our UU community, part of a lovely bouquet. You are part of this community and share in its love, hope, and friendship

We close our ceremony with an adaptation of the Flower Communion Prayer written by Rev. Capek:

In the name of that which implants in the seed the future of the tree and in the hearts of humanity the longing for people living in neighborly love;

In the name of the highest, in whom we move, and who makes us who we are;

In the name of sages and great religious leaders, who sacrificed their lives to hasten the coming of peace and justice;

Let us renew our resolution sincerely to be real siblings with one another, regardless of any kind of barrier which estranges person from person.

In this holy resolution may we be strengthened, knowing that we are one family; that one spirit, the spirit of love, unites us; and that our work together for a more perfect and more joyful life leads us on.

May it be so.