

“Flowers by Any Other Name”

a Sermon by Rev. “Twinkle” Marie Manning

Many of you know, that in addition to being a minister,
I have a long career in the media world -
- television & radio production
as well as *columns* in magazines, newspapers and journals.

In 2012 I wrote an article for
Colonial Times Magazine covering the 70th Anniversary
for a Lexington, MA nonprofit parents group.
Originally called the
Lexington Pre-School Association,
it was formally organized on September 7, 1942
by the President of the Lexington Council,
Mrs. Robert C. McAnaul.

Its founding mission, according to the official minutes from
the 1942-43 Annual Report, documented that:
*“The object of this association
shall be to study all problems of child nurture
prior to the school age
and to promote child training for
parenthood and homemaking.”*

To that end, the Board invited special guests to speak about
topics relevant to that time period:

“Discipline;”

“Controlling Communicable Disease;”

“Intelligence Rating and Religious
Education of the Pre-school Child;”

and

“Meals for Little Folks.”

Though some of the subjects and themes have changed,
decade through decade,
this organization has continuously provided
the forum for parents
to continue their educations
in *parenting*.

When the organization was founded in 1942
"pre-school" as we know it today *simply did not exist*.

As such, there was no confusion about who was eligible for
membership and who was not.

If you had children who were
not yet old enough for elementary school,
you had "pre-schoolers"
and were welcome to join the association.

This was clarified in the preamble of the charter:
*“All mothers of pre-school children are cordially invited to
attend these meetings, and it is hoped that a large number
will be interested enough to become members...”*

In September of 1958, the still young organization
began using the designation,
“Lexington Pre-School P.T.A.” in conversations
and on its official forms: **“LPPTA.”**

In the mid 2000s, after many years of newcomers asking, “*My child is not in pre-school, can we still become members?*” The board began to consider a name change that reflected the times.

LexFun! is what it is called in modern time. To this day is mostly comprised of women. To this day it offers a wide variety of educational programs for parents, and for the community. It also does a huge amount of fundraising and philanthropy.

It was founded by influential women. Today the members are women with such varied backgrounds and expertise (attorneys, accountants, high-level marketing executives, technology geniuses, entrepreneurs, authors and more) they could truly run a Fortune 500 company!
In fact, some do!

Why am I talking to you about a Massachusetts parents group, let alone an article I wrote about them?

Well, about 90 minutes in to researching this sermon, I began to feel Déjà vu, with a similar feeling as I had back then trying to research the founding women of that organization.

In sentiment if not in exact detail.

The founding members of the 1942-1943 Board included:
○Mrs. Gandolfo Andolina,

- Mrs. Frank H. Ready,
- Mrs. William P. Clark,
- Mrs. Stanley Robbins,
- Mrs. George Wood,
- Mrs. Lynman Carlow,
- Mrs. Handel Rivinius,
- Mrs. George Regan,
- Mrs. Bertram Gustin,
- Mrs. Ernest Rogers.

Their - these remarkable philanthropic women's - *given names* are lost to history.

Where their husbands full names are carried forward through time.

What does this have to do with our
Flower Communion service?
And, with UU History?

Each year, in UU Congregations around the world,
Rev. Norbert Čapek is credited
with being the creator of the Flower Communion.

We can find and access Norbert's writings and music.
Including his lengthy thoughts on

- life,
 - the purpose of living it,
 - the meaning of charting one's own path,
- And
- the importance of being good stewards of each other.

Indeed, though much has been lost, his ministry overall is fairly well documented
- as is his influence and how he grew his congregation in Prague to be the largest liberal (Unitarian) congregation of the day.

Yet, his wife **Rev. Maja Čapek** is only mentioned as an aside.
Always, only in addition to citing him and his relevance.

Yet, she was by his side helping build this iconic Unitarian ministry the entire time.

Known as **Maja**, “**Marie Veruna Oktavec Čapek**, was born in 1888 and grew up in the city of Chomutov, then in Western Bohemia, now in the Czech Republic.”
(2007, Sermon, Rev. Daniel Harper)

From an early age, Maja rejected Catholicism (according to Rev. Daniel Harper — the religion that had been imposed on her land by an *invading army* centuries before —)

And, while she was not a member of any specific religion, for many years she developed a liberal religious outlook.

She, with her family, emigrated to the United States in 1907.
She graduated from
Columbia University's School of Library Science.
There she met another Czech emigre,
the man who would become her husband,
Baptist minister **Norbert Fabián Čapek.**

Maya and Norbert married in 1917.

She was his third wife and step mother to his children
as he had been twice widowed.
In total they raised 9 children together.

Norbert, who had also been developing
more liberal spiritual and moral views himself,
found encouragement by his wife,
who had herself long ago
let go of conservative religious holds.

In 1919 Norbert resigned his Baptist ministry.

Seeking a new religious home that
better fit their liberal theologies,
in 1921 Maya and Norbert joined the
Unitarian Church in Orange, New Jersey

During that same year, they also approached the
American Unitarian Association
seeking to transition Norbert's ministerial status to the **AUA**.

Yet, they were met with rebuff by the AUA.

In similar fashion that ministers ordained in other faith traditions are rebuffed by the UUA today.

So Maya and Norbert
wanting to faithfully live into their call
to lead a liberal religion,
yet not finding welcome in the AUA
to do so in the United States,
they returned to the country of their origin
and grew their ministry from there.

And grow indeed!
Their independent interfaith ministry was wildly successful!
It was truly dynamic,
living into all the best ideals of a liberal religion.
It grew to several thousand members in a short period of time.

And, eventually Maya and Norbert's ministry
was recognized by the AUA,
and welcomed and incorporated
into the modern day fabric of Unitarian Universalism.

1923 under the then name the
“Society of the Free Fellowship”
Maya and Norbert *co-facilitated*
the first documented **Flower Celebration**,
as it is known in Czech Republic.

Rev. Dan Harper shared a quote
from **Iva Fiserova**

- a woman who grew up in the Prague Unitarian church
and as a young girl
was present for the first **Flower Celebration**.

She reflected years later on her childhood memories
of that inaugural Flower Celebration that
Maya and Norbert hosted. She recalled a:

“Sunny morning...

...a granny walking holds a grandchild’s hand

*... carrying the most beautiful flowers from the garden,
entire families enter a big house*

*... there are floods of flowers on the stage of one of the biggest
concert halls in the city*

*... a vivid community sharing the mutual happiness of the
gathering*

... thousands of people giving each other friendly greetings

... a warm and festive atmosphere

... the personal joy of belonging to this community”

Iva concluded her musings by saying,

*“... These are tiny fragments of
childhood memories
that influenced my life deeply
and that have been
treasured since those days.”*

Maja fully embracing her (until then lay-ministerial role), was ordained as a minister in 1926.

With the growth of the church and the impact-fullness of this newly created liberal *religious ceremony*, it is little wonder that the American Unitarian Association finally adopted both Maya and Norbert's ministry.

Forward a few years, with the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, **Rev. Maya Čapek** brought her ministry to the United States in 1939 to commence a ministerial lecture tour to educate and to raise funds for relief work in Czechoslovakia.

During that time, **85 years ago**, in 1940, Maja facilitated the first Flower Communion service in Cambridge, MA.

Unable to return to her homeland, she began serving **North Unitarian Church in New Bedford, MA** in 1940.

She served as a minister there for three years.

In 1943 Maya began efforts in collaboration with her congregation to work with the United Nations,

seeking to help those
ravaged by the Second World War.

From **1944 to 1950** Maya worked extensively
with the
United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency,
helping displaced persons settle in
Yugoslavia, Egypt and Palestine.

Though in her lifetime the UU Principles
did not exist in the language we use today,
Yet, throughout her life Maya lived out the
UU Principles in the largest way possible.

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

She and her husband followed their own conscience
first separately, then together
as they cultivate a free and responsible search
for truth and meaning.

Their ministry embedded acceptance
and the inherent worth and dignity of every person,
honored the interconnectedness
with Earth and all living beings,
used the democratic process,
sought justice and the creation of peace and liberty for all.

Theirs was a ministry of compassion through unity.
And, by example.

Together, the **Reverends Maja and Norbert Čapek**
grew Unitarianism and liberal religion in
a **manner, speed** and **scope** no other minister has to date.

And, initially without the support of a formal association.

Norbert died while imprisoned by the Nazi's **circa 1942**.
Maya died more than two decades later
in December of **1966**.

Much, if not all, of her legacy, has been lost to history.

After a few days of research
and with the help of online search engines,
I still have not been able to locate a transcript
of even one of her lectures or sermons,
nor even a single documented quote of hers.

I hope to someday be able to visit
the congregations she served,
the places she spoke while on tour
and the University she graduated from
and perhaps will be able to locate there
some of her original work.

Until then, what I have - *what we all have*
- is the legacy she left us in the Flower Celebration
Maya and Norbert originated all those years ago.

What we call our Flower Communion.

Each year as we honor this tradition,
we are reminded of one of the most significant
of Maya and Norbert's teachings
stemming from their Flower Service:
that there is
beauty and sacredness in our uniqueness.

We can also take time to remember
where the flower comes from,
how a flower grows and blooms:

as it is rooted in rich soil,

organically fertilized
and lovingly nurtured.

Just as the flower blooms and blossoms,
when well cared for
so do we.

I now invite you to come take a flower from our altar of
beautiful flowers.

Which one will you take home with you?

(Continue next page After all select their flowers):

Let us remember our
Thought for Contemplation - the words of India Arie:

*“Cause you're beautiful like a flower;
more valuable than a diamond”*

This means you!

Each of you!
*Are beautiful like a flower;
more valuable than a diamond.”*

As you look at the flower you selected
and the ones that remain in your memories
in the days and weeks to come.

Remember your unique beauty.
Remember your inherent value.

And, know that each of us here
are so grateful you are
growing and blossoming among us.