

June's Calling **- Flower Communion**

a Sermon by Rev. "Twinkle" Marie Manning

Norbert Fabián Čapek (pronounced CHAH-pek)

(June 3, 1870 – October 30, 1942)

Mája Oktavec (Apr. 8, 1888-Dec. 2, 1966)

“Smell the flowers of faith,
Breathe the air of love,
Open your soul to the streaming rays of the sun.”

These words by Norbert Fabián Čapek (CHAH-pek) are from the traditional Flower Ceremony hymn sung each year at the Unitarian church in Prague.

The Flower Communion is unique to Unitarian Universalism. It is said to be the oldest and longest lasting of UU rituals. It has endured through times of democracy and in eras of fascism.

It was first hosted at Liberal Religious Fellowship in Prague, Germany in the Spring of 1923 created by Rev. Dr. Norbert Fabián Čapek, the fellowship's founder ((and later founder of the Religious Society of Czech Unitarians)).

Many of the traditions and rituals celebrated within the halls and walls of Unitarian Universalist fellowships, societies, meeting houses and churches have been adopted from within the cultures of other religious and spiritual traditions. Typically with ties to Judeo-Christian roots, in ways that distinguish as new or divergent, even as they hold close to familiar traditions.

The Flower Communion is no different.

Author Reginald Zottoli, said:

“For some time he (Čapek) had felt the need for some symbolic ritual that would bind people more closely together.

The format had to be one that would not alienate any who had forsaken other religious traditions.

The traditional Christian communion service with bread and wine was unacceptable to the members of his congregation because of their strong reaction against the Catholic faith.

So he turned to the native beauty of their countryside for elements of a communion which would be genuine to them.

This simple service was the result."

(Reginald Zottoli, "The Flower Communion")

As Reginald Zottoli explains in a pamphlet he published circa 1962, the Order of Service used by Dr. Čapek during the early years The Flower Communion was similar to a typical UU service even down to our modern day, with a few exceptions.

- Prelude
- Scripture Reading
- Opening and closing Hymns—(*typically Hymns written by Čapek singing of Brotherhood, of unity*).
- A Sermon - praising the diversity of their congregation, reminding of the uniqueness of each member
- There would be Organ Music and a Postlude

And amid the traditional OOS Čapek would lead a Prayer which would be followed by the consecration of the Flowers.

Dr. Čapek's Prayer at the First Flower Communion Service,
in the language of his time, was this:

“In the name of Providence,
which implants
in the seed
the future of the tree
and in the hearts of men
the longing for people living in brotherly love;

in the name of the highest,
in whom we move
and who makes the mother,
the brother
and sister what they are;
in the name of sages and great religious leaders,
who sacrificed their lives
to hasten the coming of the kingdom of brotherhood--
-let us renew our resolution--sincerely to be
real brothers and sisters
regardless of any kind of bar which estranges man from man.

In this holy resolution may we be strengthened
knowing that we are God's family;
that one spirit,
the spirit of love, unites us;
and endeavor for a more perfect
and more joyful life
leads us on.
Amen.”

With that kind authentically benevolent of vision
of wholehearted, unconditional, welcome and unity,
it is little wonder that within
the first twenty years he and his wife
establishing their first Unitarian congregation,
it grew to be the largest Unitarian Church
in the world at the time
with estimates of 2,800 - and possibly up to 3,800 - members,
plus additional church-plants throughout the region.

The Flower Communion Ritual was
a leap of Faith for Norbert.

After being introduced to, *and claiming himself a Unitarian* after
a visit to the United States,
when he first brought the ideals of liberal religion
back to his Homeland,
the services he led were extremely simple, *intentionally excluding*
any remnants of traditional religious orders,
so as to not trigger or deter any potential new members.

While now a Unitarian at heart, he even took caution when
naming his first organization,
selecting “**The Liberal Religious Fellowship**” as its name.

A name that would draw in those inclined to liberal spirituality.

A name that held no history,
a name that met people where they were at, religiously,
and beseeched seekers to look towards the future.

A future in which they could be part of a transformational
Spiritual tradition.

His early services included

- opening sentences,
- solo music,
- a lecture-sermon,
- meditation,
- and closing a solo.

Slowly, Čapek (CHAH-pek) introduced some of the more traditional elements of worship, but very patiently, gradually.

The first step was the singing of hymns.
And even here it was with hymns *he himself wrote*,
With expressions in alignment with
the new hope,
the *new theology*,
this *new gospel*,
he was bringing to them.

His was no God of hellfire and brimstone;
Not a God of prejudice and punishment.
Norbert Čapek's (CHAH-pek)'s God was *accessible* to everyone;
His God was kind, friendly, approachable.
Benign.
A God of True Love and lasting commitment.
Someone to rely on and trust.

As was Norbert himself.

Norbert trusted His God, and he trusted his own instincts.

He believed that people needed more than mere intellectual stimulation.

Psychologically and symbolically, they needed something that would bind people together, emotionally, *spiritually*.

He sought to craft services and messages that would accomplish this.

He was keenly aware the format had to be one that would not alienate anyone who had left other religions.

Yet he also knew that from within those religious traditions there was undeniable benefit to ritual, especially rituals that could be embraced as methods of worship and as ways to foster unity.

So he went on to creating a religious ceremony that would draw his people closer together, *ironically* by pointing out their differences.

Placing those difference in the spotlight, right alongside the things they had in common.

The Flower Communion Ritual has existed in USA since the 1940s.

Brought here by Norbert's wife, Mája Oktavec.

Visiting in 1940, she introduced the flower celebration to the Unitarian Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The circumstances of World War II prevented Maja's journey home to Prague.

And to her husband, Norbert, who would eventually be imprisoned in Dachau concentration camp by the Nazi regime because his liberal religious teachings were deemed *too dangerous*.

His message of the inherent worth and beauty of every human person was—as Nazi court records show—

“...too dangerous to the Reich [for him] to be allowed to live.”

<https://uufbozeman.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2017.06.11-The-Story-of-the-Flower-Service.pdf>

In Dachau he was tortured and eventually murdered.

During his time in the concentration camp, and even while experiencing unspeakable treatment, according to survivors of Dachau it is said that he continued to minister.

He was *minister to the ministers*.

He would have been held in Pfarrerblock, or *Priesterblock* - the **Priest Barracks of Dachau Concentration** where incarcerated clergy who had opposed the Nazi regime of Adolf Hitler were kept.

From December 1940 onward, the order came from Berlin

issuing to transfer all clerical prisoners held at other camps to Dachau.

This camp became the center for imprisonment of clergymen.

This would remove their what would be considered “dangerous” influence on prisoners they may have otherwise attempted to provide solace and comfort to.

It also could have been seen as a way to undermine the faith of each clergy member as they would be pitted against leaders of opposing faiths.

Yet this possible ploy did not dissuade Norbert Čapek, his faith, nor his mission to minister to others.

One survivor of Priesterblock, a catholic priest, who was there with him

Says this:

“He (Norbert) achieved his greatest ministry **there**, among the despairing who lived in the very shadow of death. Without him we could not have endured.”

<https://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/biographies/uu-composers-norbert-capek/>

It is even said he did a flower ceremony in Dachau; instructing other prisoners to go out among the weeds and bring anything that looked like a flower for the interfaith communion.

What bravery;
What commitment to serving others;
What *Faith!*

Norbert Čapek (CHAH-pek) was executed in Dachau,
but his ministry lives on.

It lives on in the hearts and minds
of all those who, like him,
acknowledge the
"hidden cry for harmony with the Infinite"
in every soul.

And to those who hold true to the belief that
each of us is the embodiment of the divine.
In Norbert's words:
*"Every person is an embodiment of God
and in every one of us God struggles for higher expression."*

And his ministry lives in every person who
peaceably seeks religious freedom,
sees the inherent worth and dignity in every person,
offers radical acceptance even in the face of
extreme difference,
and has a vision of Life on Earth with the goal
of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

Norbert Čapek believed we should be life-long religious seekers.

He defined religious education as
"an endeavor to awaken the inner forces ~~of the child~~
(of a person) and teach ~~him~~ how to organize, harmonize and
adapt them to the ever-changing influences which come to him
from outside."

He identified five 'fundamental'
and five '*supplementary
feelings and abilities*'
which a modern religious education should elicit.
And for which he founded his in, including:

- the ability to have faith and confidence,
- the ability to hope,
- the feeling of worship (also seen as reverence for life),
- charity or selfless love,
- and conscientiousness.

A person characterized by these qualities,
to Norbert understanding of faith,
could be said to be a truly religious person.

<https://uudb.org/articles/norbertcapek.html>

His faith, is something that remained true
throughout his incarceration.
As evident by words written shortly before his death,
he said:

“I have lived amidst eternity.

Be grateful, my soul.

My life was worth living.”

<https://www.gloucesteruu.org/home-page/worship-music/flower-communion/>

Flower Communion

August 26, 2021

Led by Lucille LePage July 18, 2021

In his lifetime he wrote hundreds of inspirational hymns and dozens of books.

The manuscript translated as ***Toward a Sunnier Shore*** “*K slunnemu brehu*” originally published in 1929, is considered his most important work.

On the eve of World War II, in 1939, in what he describes as “*at a time of great sadness for my nation,*” he published a second edition of this book, wishing it might spread “*a few rays of sun to the wounds of the heart*” he knew with certainty the war would bring.

At its core, the essential message he imparted in his book was that,

"people can choose their own moods [and] direct their own feelings,"

and that they should, above all,

"try everything with humor."

<https://uudb.org/articles/norbertcapek.html>

Within his own theology,
and of the Unitarian religion,
he felt strongly that the church's primary task
*"must be to place truth above any tradition,
spirit above any scripture,
freedom above authority,
and progress above all reaction."*

His faith was one that viewed life as a journey;
other humans as companions,
each of us with unique purpose,
connected to God
and to all that is and ever will be.

In his hymn entitled, "**Closer to Home**" he paints a picture of a female traveler:

*"Immersed in the peace of twilight;
Where hope knows no fatigue."*

Contemplating her work, and in awe of the web of life.

In her song of delight she sings:

"Everything is good, great God, which brings You nearer to me."

"I am going home."

Norbert felt the Divine present in his life
and in the warm embrace of that feeling,
it felt like *Home*.

That is the kind of welcoming feeling he wished to create for others.

It was with that sentiment he created the Flower Communion.

Of the flowers, Čapek described them as:
“messengers of fellowship and love.”

To which he is said to have referred to his congregants
as flowers,
as they too were to be messengers of fellowship and love
as they brought the good messages
he was sharing with them
in invitation to others.

The Flower Communion offers more than a mere gift exchange.

It is rich in symbolism.

When you arrived today and placed your individual flower
in one of the vases, it signified that by your own free will you are
here and wanting to join with one another in this ritual.

The flowers:
Every single flower is unique;
It is beautiful.
Each one has *unique needs*
and thrives when it is taken care of in ways that are best for them.

Just like every member of our congregations.
Every person who comes through the doors of our sanctuaries.

The vases symbolize our unity
even as it holds our diversity.

Symbolizes this church, this congregation.

Our agreed upon search for truth and meaning.
Our radical welcome of all those
peaceably seeking spiritual solace.

Our covenant of love.

A dynamic transformational tradition we each desire to be part of.

And, at the conclusion of this service,
when we each take a flower from within the beautiful bouquet
we've created together,
it symbolizes *our commitment* to walk together
in love and in peace,
on this chosen journey,
striving for harmony even amid our differences.

We agree to not allow our differences to divide us.
Nor to dissuade us from welcoming additional others
who are different than us.

No! We celebrate our differences!

As Rev. Meredith Garmon of Community UU Congregation in
White Plains, New York has explained
regarding the Flower Communion, he says:

*“This communion of sharing
represents the essence of who we are
as a free people
of a free religion.”*

<https://www.liberalpulpit.org/2016/07/beltane-and-flower-communion-may-1.html>

The essence of
who we are
as a free people
of a **free** religion.

This is the legacy of
Rev. Norbert Čapek and Rev. Májka Oktavec ministries.
(Oh yes, she became an ordained minister as well!) :)

(She also worked with the *International Association
for Liberal Christianity and Religious Freedom* (~~now IARF~~).
From 1944-1946, she worked for the *United Nations*,
and from 1947-1949, for the *American Relief for Czechoslovakia*.)

Perhaps stories for another day.

For now, may we honor both Norbert and Májka
as they rest in
The Peace that can be known,
in life and in death,
by those who answered their callings
to the best of their abilities
and beyond what anyone would have asked of them.

The Peace of being faithful co-creators
of The Beloved Community.

In the words of Norbert Čapek in his
Consecration of the Flowers

*“Infinite Spirit of Life,
we ask thy blessing on these
thy messengers of fellowship
and brotherly 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 thy work in this world.”*

When you exit the sanctuary today,
please select a flower that resonates with you.

For those of you at home and tuning in from afar,
know that we hold you *here in spirit*.
Your uniqueness is part of the beauty of this congregation.

May our diversity and our friendships
continue to blossom.
As we do good work in the world.

May it be so.

Amen.