

FLOWER COMMUNION

This is the end of Earth Day week. The 46th Annual Worldwide Earth Day was celebrated on the 22nd, while we celebrated last Sunday and the Stockton area celebration is going on right now at Victory Park. As we discussed last Sunday, the Earth Day Network is working to inspire people to plant 7.8 Billion Trees by 2020, one for every human being on Earth. I plan to plant several trees by then, but I hope we will all do our part! Another celebration that fits well with Earth Day for Unitarian Universalists is our Flower Communion, to which we have also added a dedication of new roses at the end of today's service. One of the most important messages of Flower Communion is that we are each an important part of this community, just as Earth Day recognizes that we each hold an important place in the whole earth community, and our Rose Garden helps us to remember those who are no longer with us. Today we continue to celebrate our connections through the interdependent web of all existence!

NORBERT CAPEK AND FLOWER COMMUNION

(The life of Norbert Fabian Capek, based on the Biography by Richard Henry, 1999 Skinner House)

The Flower Communion has become an important ceremony in many Unitarian Universalist Congregations. Like the Water Communion Ingathering which we usually share the Sunday after Labor Day, and our ritual of holding hands at the end of each service, the Flower Communion serves to remind us of the connections we share. And like the flaming Chalice which is lit in a vast majority of UU congregations each week, Flower Communion is a fairly recent (20th Century) ritual incorporating elements that go far back in time in earth-centered traditions. The Flower Communion is celebrated in the Spring, but there is not a set date for it. Some congregations celebrate it on Easter, which falls in March or April, or near the Vernal Equinox, while others celebrate it in May or June. This year, we celebrate Flower Communion near Earth Day!

As we prepare to celebrate the Flower Communion today, may we take time to think of those members and friends with whom we have shared in this congregation who are no longer with us. May we take time to remember those experiences we have shared together. May we celebrate the life of this congregation, for what it has meant to us in days gone by, and for today, and even more for the future it offers us together.

This morning I want to share with you the story of a very special minister whose courageous life has inspired recent generations of Unitarian Universalists. Rev. Norbert Capek, was the minister of the Unitarian congregation in Prague, Czechoslovakia before and during World War II. Flower Communion is a ritual developed by Capek and the Prague congregation to celebrate unity, community, and freedom. Skinner House published a Biography of Capek by Richard Henry in 1999 on which the following information is based or quoted.

Norbert Fabian Capek was born on June 3, 1870. His father and grandfather were tailors in Radomysl, in South Bohemia. Norbert was the only son of Josef and Marie Capek. Though much loved, he was a rather sickly child who was quickly baptized in the local Catholic Church. During Capek's life, the world turned over in the attempt to annihilate itself not once but twice. Capek saw two wives die young, being left to raise a household of children on his own. Raised Catholic, Capek became a Baptist Missionary, the editor of several publications, and then finally, a Unitarian Minister.

Capek mixed the hope for a free Czechoslovakia with his belief that people should be free to choose their own religion. His journey also brought him to the United States, where he met his third wife, Maja, and where he became a Unitarian. His love for his homeland drew him back to Czechoslovakia.

Capek initiated the first Flower Communion on June 24, 1923, the 1st anniversary of the founding of The Prague Congregation of Liberal Religious Fellowship.

The following somewhat lengthy quote from a letter reporting to Dr. Samuel A. Eliot, President of the American Unitarian Association, which had provided funds for Capek to return to Prague to begin this work, describes the service. As Richard Henry records, Capek wrote:

We are trying to find new expressions of our religious life very slowly and carefully. Whereas the dedication of a child, weddings, and burials were kept rather close to the general Unitarian custom, we have made a new experiment in symbolizing our Liberty and Brotherhood in a service which was so powerful and impressive that I never experienced anything like it. The most dry and rationalistic members were moved and many an eye brightened through tears.

On that very Sunday, it was the last before the Holydays, everybody was supposed to bring with him a flower. In the middle of the big hall was a suitable vase where everybody put his flower, some lady members helping to do it nicely. The sight of the many beautiful flowers was wonderful. And more and more of them were coming—solemnly yet joyfully

with full understanding of the meaning. We had a common song, I read I Cor. 13, and in my sermon I put emphasis on the individual character of each "member-flower," on our liberty as a foundation of our fellowship. Then I emphasized our common cause, our belonging together as one spiritual community, as brethren. And when they go home each is to take one flower just as it comes without making any distinction where it came from and whom it represents, to confess that we accept each other as brothers and sisters without regard to class, race, or other distinction, acknowledging everybody as our friend who is a human and wants to be good. After the sermon the flowers were brought to the platform, a prayer was said including a dedication and all standing sang, which was the culmination of the service. (Henry, pp. 143-4)

Karel Haspl, Capek's son-in-law and successor, reported Capek's message as including the following thought:

Each of us is choosing a different flower and that one speaks for us. The vase is again a symbol for us. For us in our Unitarian brotherhood the vase is our church organization. We need it to help us share the beauties but also the responsibilities of communal life. In the proper community by giving the best that is in us for the common good, we grow up and are able to do what no single person is able to do. Each of us needs to receive in order to grow up, but each of us needs to give something away for the same reason. (Henry pp.144-5)

Richard Henry records the guiding principles for Capek's preaching as, "The development of a strong religious personality and the practice of the art of living a beautiful and creative life." According to Henry, "Nothing less than the spiritual rebirth of the nation was the driving force behind the seemingly inexhaustible energy of the man." (Henry p. 175)

Capek was concerned over the welfare of all persons in his country, especially children who had few playgrounds. He was concerned about the need for healthy trade and over the way trade was controlled. He was concerned about the spiritual needs of the people and the way that the Catholic Church still maintained a dominant presence even after political control had been wrested away from it. He was a broad minded liberal who sought the betterment of all and believed that it could happen.

Richard Henry records one version of Capek's vision:

It is my ideal that Unitarian (sic) religion in our country should mean a higher culture, more joy and health, better housing conditions, more good will, and new attitudes toward life and practically a new race. I picture an ideal Czech Unitarian as a person who shows other people how to overcome difficulties with a smile on his face, how to do things which other people regard as impossible. In short, Unitarian religion should mean the next advanced cultural level of a certain people. (Henry p. 182)

On March 15, 1939 the Nazis invaded Prague and the rest of the Czech Republic. Martha and Waitstill Sharp had just come to Prague to help in relief efforts supported by the American Unitarian Association in the beginnings of what would later become the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Though Capek and his assistant were invited to come to the United States, both declined, committed to the work in Prague. In August the Sharps returned to the U.S., and during the fall of 1939 the Jews began to be deported, and soon student leaders were killed or arrested and the Universities closed. For two more years, until he was arrested by the Nazis, Capek and his assistants continued their work, ministering to the people. Capek carefully used parables and allusions to help keep hope alive.

Capek was arrested, and then in June of 1942, Capek was ordered sent to Dachau by the Gestapo in Prague after criticizing Nazi actions. On October 12th he was sent on invalid transport to Hartheim Castle, near Linz, Austria. He died in a gas chamber.

Even in the Nazi prisons and concentration camp, Capek was an inspiration to those around him. He wrote hymns and poems and hoped for release. His last recorded words were in a letter to his wife Maja, who was in the United States lecturing and raising support, in which he expressed his love for her, their children, and the church which he so loved. Maja continued work for human rights, lecturing and preaching, and ended her years living in California, including some time at Pacific Unitarian Church in Rancho Palos Verdes. Maja died in December 1966.

Capek stands as a modern martyr and inspiration to Unitarianism, free thinking, and rational but heart-warming religion. In the Flower communion, we celebrate our loving community, and each other, and we remember the lives of all those who have spoken out, shared, and given their lives for a free and liberal religion. Even in the most difficult of times, Norbert Fabian Capek was able to see beauty, sing out richly, and inspire all those he met with his hope for a better future. He believed that our spirits continued beyond even death, and we certainly can celebrate his ongoing memory today as we remember his commitment to life, love, and our religion.

This Flower Communion, initiated by Norbert Capek in the Unitarian Church in Prague stands as a living symbol of the best that Unitarian Universalism may offer to individuals and to the world. We live connected to each other and to those heroes who have stood for religious freedom and a progressive religious community. May the love and beauty that we create in the world which we celebrate as we stand holding hands together be the living testament of our faith.

May we ever and always find inspiration and courage in Norbert Capek's service to humanity! May this Flower Communion help us to renew our commitment to living our vibrant Unitarian Universalist faith in the world!

Namaste, Shalom, Salam, Blessed Be, and Amen!