

“FLOWER COMMUNION”

**A message by the Rev. Roger Bertschausen and the Rev. Dottie Mathews
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**

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Call to Gather: “Bouquet” by the Rev. Lynn Ungar

What a gathering-the purple
tongues of iris licking out
at spikes of lupine, the orange
crepe skirts of poppies lifting
over buttercup and daisy.

Who can be grim
in the face of such abundance?
There is nothing to compare,
no need for beauty to compete.

The voluptuous rhododendron
and the plain grass
are equally filled with themselves,
equally declare the miracles
of color and form.

This is what community looks like-
this vibrant jostle, stem by stem
declaring the marvelous joining.
This is the face of communion,
the incarnation once more
gracefully resurrected from winter.

Hold these things together
in your sight-purple, crimson,
magenta, blue. You will
be feasting on this long after
the flowers are gone.¹

¹ <http://clf.uua.org/quest/2002-06.html>.

Message

Roger: Each year at this time we celebrate the beauty of the spring and of this community with the Flower Communion ceremony. The roots of this ritual lie in Eastern Europe, where the Rev. Norbert Capek introduced it to his church in 1923. Ordained a Baptist minister in 1895, Capek ably served Baptist congregations in what is now the Czech Republic. Always outspoken in support of freedom and justice, he drew the attention and anger of the authorities. As a result, on the eve of World War One, he went into voluntary exile in the United States. He also served Baptist churches here, but he began to question the Baptist doctrines. Here he drew the attention and ire of the religious authorities—most notably when he was tried for heresy by a Baptist tribunal in 1915. Eventually he concluded that the Baptist faith was no longer a spiritual home for him. He found a church that better fit him: the Unitarian church. Shortly after returning to his homeland in 1921, he founded the Prague Congregation of Liberal Religious Fellowship. A few years later his wife Maja was also ordained as a Unitarian minister. Their church took off like wildfire and quickly became one of the largest in the world.

Many people in their church were like Norbert Capek: they came to Unitarianism seeking a new and fresh faith. But many of them also did not want to give up all ritual and ceremony. So Capek created rituals which beautifully combined elements from the old traditions with new ideas. One of these was a ritual in the spring he called the Flower Festival or Flower Celebration. For that ceremony, he'd invite the congregation members to each bring a flower to the service. All of the flowers were put together on the altar, forming a beautiful bouquet. Capek would bless the flowers and then invite people to come forward and select a flower to take home with them. The Flower Celebration quickly became a favorite rite at the Unitarian church in Prague.

With the rise of Hitler and the Nazi's in the 1930s, being a Unitarian in that part of the world became a dangerous thing. But Capek refused to silence his eloquent voice for freedom and justice. The Nazis deemed him and his message too dangerous to live, and he was arrested in 1941. He was executed at the concentration camp in Dachau in October of 1942.

His dangerous message of justice and freedom for all survived the atrocity of his arrest and execution. It lives on in our faith. It lives on in this congregation. It lives on in us. And his Flower Festival survived, too. Over the past fifty years it spread throughout the Unitarian Universalist movement in this country and became popularly known as the Flower Communion. The ceremony eventually also returned to the Unitarian church in Prague.

More than anything else, to me the Flower Communion is an inspiring symbol of unity in diversity. Each individual flower in the bouquet is unique and beautiful. Put them together, though, and the beauty of the bouquet transcends the beauty of the individual flower. There is an underlying unity which ties them into a magnificent whole.

The same is true of Unitarian Universalism. Each congregation is unique. There is an incredible variety within UU congregations in this country and around the world. But underneath this dizzying variety, there is a unity that ties us all together into a beautiful whole. We are better together. We are stronger together. And we are better able to change the world with our dangerous message of freedom and justice.

Dottie: Roger and I regularly hear that this is one of the favorite rituals we celebrate here each year. In our Unitarian Universalist faith, given the wide spans of theologies we cover, “sacraments” (as most people think of them) often don’t quite fit because many of the typical religious rituals represent some version of a more confined belief system. It’s not uncommon for us to hear, though, that even as they have departed from a more rigid belief system, some people nonetheless miss the sacred rituals of their past. So we, like our ancestor Norbert Capek, honor this very human desire to express ourselves ritually – to find ways to represent our feelings, our connection with the holy, through ceremonial activities together.

And, like this vibrant splash of unbound color we see up here today, we know ours is a faith that celebrates a theology large enough to hold us all – whatever our story, wherever the spiritual journey that has brought us up to this point on this day. All are welcome – all are celebrated – all are recognized as having unique and individual gifts with which to bless this community and our world.

Interestingly, as Roger noted, this ceremony began with Rev. Capek’s inspiration in Prague many decades ago. And it eventually found its way across the Atlantic the old fashioned way – it came to the United States via the memory and papers of Norbert Capek’s wife, Maja, who guided the first U.S. Flower Celebration in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1940.

This weekend is similarly momentous because today this ceremony has again found its way **back** again across the Atlantic through a far more technologically advanced method.

Let me explain: A few weeks ago, I was very happy to participate in an internet video-conference call with Rev. Zoltan Koppandi, the minister of the Deva congregation. Our Deva partner church team (Tony Salsich and others) had set up a Skype call through the internet back in our Founders Room and, fortunately (it’s not always the case with such things), we had a terrific connection. We were able to share for a good long time – all of us chatting together with Zoli. And as we talked about what we’re looking forward to in each of our congregations, Zoli spoke of May 31st being special as their Pentecost Sunday and, so, it was going to be one of the handful of times they share communion together throughout the year.

I responded with the pleasant coincidence that we’d also be celebrating a similar ritual here with our flower communion. To our surprise, Zoli wasn’t clear on what I meant. I had presumed that because of its Eastern European origins, the Flower Communion would be something he knew well. But it seems that like so many other things, rituals have a life of their own. They ebb and flow as the times and people require and, apparently, the Flower Communion has not been a part of the Transylvanian Unitarian’s annual calendar – at least in Zoli’s memory.

However, on hearing our description of this beautiful and inspiring service, he excitedly agreed that they, too, would incorporate Flower Communion into their services this weekend.

It seems so very fitting then for us to pause to remember that our Eastern European sisters and brothers – and ancestors - who suffered so much so that our faith would endure – that this ceremony also honors them, and we can appreciate the poignant truth that this ritual has come full circle. From them to us; from us to them. Like the growth and evolution of our faith, like the unending circle of life. Always new and

always changing. Ever evolving in uncharted directions, and sometimes re-embracing and revivifying things from the past.

And we are ever and always reminded each year at this service, these flowers, these brilliant bouquets, represent one of the most central and enduring truths of our faith, in Deva, in Prague, in Appleton, and throughout the world. As was first so clearly and brightly said by our Transylvanian ancestor, Francis David, “We need not think alike to love alike.”

This is the core and most central truth of our faith which is represented in this array of color, today and always, all around the globe, we believe and affirm, “We need not think alike to love alike.” Amen.