

**“THE FLOWER COMMUNION”**  
**The Rev. Roger Bertschausen with the Rev. Dottie Mathews**  
**Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
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**June 6, 2010**

**Call to Gather:**

Children of the earth and sky, we are nurtured, sustained,  
Given warmth and light from above and below.  
Supported by earth's strong, firm crust,  
We build our homes, till the fields,  
Plant our gardens and orchards.  
When we turn from self and seek to be aware,  
We will find holy light in human faces,  
In blossom, birdsong, and sky.  
Then earth is truly our home,  
And we are one with all earth's creatures,  
Parents of earth's children yet to be.

~Alice Berry

**A Story of Norbert Capek—by the Rev. Dottie Mathews**

Each year at this time, we like other Unitarian Universalists, celebrate Flower Communion. In our Flower Communion, we share the beauty of these eclectic bouquets with one another, just as we share our lives and our longings together in the sacredness of this Fellowship.

This day is cherished in Unitarian Universalist congregations in part because it offers us an opportunity to partake in a sacrament-like communal ritual. Ours is a faith without dogma or creeds. We believe that God, the holy, the divine, the sacred, the eternal mystery - by whatever name it is called - the magic of the universe is no more contained inside these walls than in every existent inch of dirt and sky and flesh and fur. So, for us this Flower Communion bestows no special indulgence, no particular heavenly grace but it honors our community and commemorates the passion and enormously powerful work of a Unitarian minister who worked ceaselessly in the first half of the last century to spread the good news of our free faith. We celebrate the fact that he was absolutely convinced that our liberal religious beliefs - indeed *all* religious beliefs - are vapid and worthless without a gut level and active commitment to social justice. This minister's name was Norbert Capek. Capek was a brilliant preacher, a prolific writer, a man who throughout his career stood up to dictatorial religious and political authorities in across the globe with unabashed bravery and persistence. In the end, Capek paid for his many

courageous acts with his very life. He died at the hands of the Nazis because (in their words) he was deemed too dangerous to the Third Reich to be allowed to live.

Imagine being named by an authoritarian regime as someone who was an actual threat to their tyrannical goals! Given this, you might envision Capek to have been a man of great stature; but, in fact, he stood only five feet five inches tall. And, contrary to the mental picture his booming and spirited voice conjured, there were occasions when the entranced congregation could barely see him over the height of the pulpit. It didn't matter. His words never failed to inspire them to continue to face the difficulties of their own lives with courage and endurance, and to join him in his calls to seek justice in this troubled world.

When he instituted the Flower Communion ritual in his congregation in Prague, he described it this way, "Each of us choosing a different flower - and one that speaks for us. The vase is again a symbol for us - our Unitarian brotherhood [and sisterhood] is the vase that holds our [religious] organization. We need it to help share the beauties but also the responsibilities of communal life. In ... community, by giving the best that is within 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, but each of us needs to give something away for the same reason."<sup>1</sup>

Today we celebrate the beautiful diversity held within our congregation and we celebrate Capek's commitment to live our faith to the fullest. His religious journey (which, before he found his way to Unitarianism, started in orthodoxy just as it did for many of us) ended in the free pursuit of truth and unending faith in what might be accomplished as we each give our hearts and souls in service to humankind.

The last known record of a personal contact with Capek was his daughter, Zora, who the Nazis permitted to have just a moment with him the day before his trial. In their visit, he and his daughter hugged and cried and kissed each other and as he was leaving, Capek pressed a piece of paper into his daughter's hand. On it was a poem he'd dedicated to her (adapted for neutral gender language):

It is worthwhile for me to live  
And bravely fight for saintly ideals  
Although disappointed a thousand times  
And perhaps even to fall in this fight  
When everything would seem in vain.

Blow angry winds through my stony body  
You will not conquer my soul  
I have lived in the center of eternity  
My soul will be eternal  
My living was worth it.

Whoever has been set upon from all sides,  
But [whose] soul has conquered

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Henry, *Norbert Fabian Capek, A Spiritual Journey* (Boston: Skinner House, 1999), 145.

Is welcome in the chorus of heroes  
[All those who have broken their] shackles  
And given wings to [their] minds  
[Are] marching into a golden future<sup>2</sup>.

Today we celebrate this community, our colorful and diverse faith, and the life of Norbert Capek who indeed gave wings to his mind and offered his life so others might also walk into their own golden future.

### **Message—by the Rev. Roger Bertschausen**

Quite some time ago Dottie and I decided to focus this year's Flower Communion service on celebrating nature. The presence of these resplendent flowers; the beautiful opening hymn honoring the living treasures of the earth under foot and the ever flowing waters of the oceans and rivers; the closing hymn we'll sing in a little while celebrating "the tides as they answer the moon, rushing on a far distant sand" and "rising green to bring a new day"—it was, we hoped, going to be a beautiful and inspiring service.

But as we met earlier this week to dig more seriously into preparing for this service, we had a hard time conjuring up images like the tides answering the moon and the rising green. All we could picture were pelicans covered with oil, distressed sea turtles climbing out of oily waters, fragile and important coastal marshlands inundated with oil. Like so many people, our hearts are heavy with sadness and grief and anger over the tragedy that continues to unfold in the Gulf of Mexico. Each day seemingly brings another round of bad news as one attempt after another to stop the oil from flowing into the water fails. It feels a little like some people we have known who suffer the body blow of a cancer diagnosis, and then every visit to the doctor yields more bad news as their odds of survival and length of remaining days steadily shrink. The delicate ecosystem of the Gulf of Mexico is like that cancer patient. Watching the tragedy unfold in the Gulf is like watching cancer destroy the body of a loved one.

We feel powerless in the face of this spiraling tragedy. Is it enough to lament our American appetite for oil (which we share in) and the power of rapacious multinational corporations and the laxness of government regulations and enforcement that virtually gave BP license to operate recklessly? Can we just say no to all that led to this terrible, avoidable tragedy? What would saying no look like? What would it mean in our lives? And what do we do with this grief that weighs on our hearts and threatens to paralyze us in inaction?

As Dottie and I met earlier this week, we thought about all of this. And we asked ourselves: If he were alive today, what might Norbert Capek say about this tragedy? What might he do? Does his story offer us any light?

Capek lived in a time of incalculable tragedy. As horrible as the Gulf oil catastrophe is, I'm not suggesting that we compare it to the immense suffering heaped on humanity and, though we don't often think of it, nature, too, by the Nazis. Surely it would have been easy—and entirely understandable and even excusable—for Capek to feel so overcome with fear and grief and horror and powerlessness that he threw up his hands in despair and gave up. What could one person possibly do in the face of Hitler's war machine as it spread death and destruction throughout Europe and beyond? But Capek steadfastly refused to give up. He refused to be silent. He refused to feel hopeless. Even though he knew the odds were long and the risks to

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 282.

himself and his family were real and potentially deadly, he spoke and acted for justice. He knew that he had to do his part to stop the Nazis. He was not grandiose: he knew that he alone could not stop the atrocities. But he knew that with others, at least there was a chance. And he knew that if everyone gave up, there was no chance. In doing what he could do, Capek—and untold others like him—inspired other people to speak up and stand up.

So what can I do in the face of the Gulf tragedy? Like Capek—and at infinitely less personal risk—I can speak up. I can speak up about accountability and the role of government in preserving the common good. And I can act. I can look at my own life and do an honest inventory: What am I doing that helped enable the oil spill to happen? I can refuse to let my grief and feelings of hopelessness and despair and powerlessness paralyze me. I can recognize that the oil-stained pelican is my sister, the sea turtle is my brother, the marshland is my relative. If enough of us do this, we can mend our ways. We can use this tragedy as a spur to do the work of living in greater harmony with the rest of our world.

And one last thing: I refuse to let this human-created disaster and the grief it has caused permanently prevent me from seeing the incredible beauty and strength of the natural world. I want to keep the oil-soaked pelican in my mind and my heart so that I can speak and act in ways that promote justice. But I also want to keep in my mind and heart the beauty of the oil-free pelican soaring through the air. I want to keep in my mind and heart the intricate beauty of the Louisiana bayou and the Florida Panhandle beach and majestic dolphins gracefully swimming through the Gulf. I want to keep in my mind and heart the beauty of the flowers in my backyard, and the beauty of the flowers we have lovingly brought and offered to one another here this morning. Appreciating all this beauty can, like remembering the oil-soaked pelican, help me say and do the right thing. As I participate in this timeless ritual of sharing flowers in our spiritual community, I renew my deep sense of hope and my resolution to do my (little) part to help bring a new day on this magnificent planet. May it be so!

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