

“A Mixed Bouquet”  
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UUCM

You may already know that the Flower Communion is one of the most popular rituals celebrated by Unitarian Universalist congregations across the continent. Yet, very few of us know much about the remarkable man who created our annual “Flower Communion”. Norbert Capek was his name. He was a Czechoslovakian ex-Catholic, ex-Baptist liberal religious heretic – who finally found his home as a Unitarian minister.

He is our most recent true Unitarian martyr. He dreamt of a new religion, unheard of in his country, founded not on dogmas, but as he put it “on the divine spark, which is in each person’s, own soul”.

His life story, and depth of spirit captured my heart. The message of hope and freedom and joy he brought to his people in a time of orthodoxy, intolerance and oppression is one we need to hear now. Especially in this climate of increasing religious fundamentalism and political fascism.

Norbert Capek’s parents were not well educated and didn’t have much money. He was sent to live with his

uncle and aunt in Vienna when he was fourteen and worked as a tailor until he was eighteen. When his relatives discovered that he no longer practiced Catholicism **and** even worse, had been secretly **baptized**, they kicked him out. But instead of going back to his parents, Capek, with a fire in his soul, became a missionary for the Baptists.

At the time the state-religion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was Catholicism. **Anyone** practicing another form of religion was subject to harassment and often **violent** attacks - while the police looked the other way. "Baptist" was not even recognized as a religion to check off on official forms.

Even within the Baptist tradition Capek's ideas became progressively more liberal – so much so that the Catholics and Evangelicals were hinting at heresy. The Austrian censors increasingly refused to print his articles. It came to a head when even his Baptist colleagues and members of his congregation turned on him and began to question his orthodoxy.

In 1914 a friendly police commissioner tipped Capek off that he was on the Austrian blacklist and suggested he get out before he was taken to jail. At this point he was at the end of his rope – he and his family were

often sick due to lack of food. So he and his wife and 9 children left Bohemia, grateful for an offer to serve a small Baptist church in New York City.

But Capek did not escape trouble with the Baptist church by coming to the United States. Later that year he was forced to stand heresy trial - though was exonerated.

Five years later he left the Baptist ministry. He concluded in his diary, "I cannot be a Baptist any more, even in compromise. The fire of new desires, new worlds, is burning inside me." More than once Capek was told that his extreme liberal views were really Unitarian.

After leaving the Baptist church, to earn a living for his family, he became a journalist. As the editor of various journals, Capek continued to be quite outspoken in his anti-clericalism.

In order to find a new spiritual home, Norbert and his wife Maja sent their kids out, like scouts, to explore the different churches in the neighborhood. The kids would come home and tell their parents what they learned in Sunday school. When Maja and Norbert finally liked what they heard they decided to check out the church for themselves. That church they then

ended up joining was the Unitarian Church in Orange, New Jersey in 1921.

The minister of the church introduced them to the American Unitarian Association president, Samuel A. Eliot. Capek convinced Elliot that Eastern Europe was hungry for the good news of liberal religion. With financial backing from the AUA the family went back to Prague and started a Unitarian congregation.

In just twenty years the Prague church became the largest Unitarian congregation in the world - **with 3200 members.**

Like our congregations today the people in that congregation were spiritual refugees from many different backgrounds. Theologically they formed a very liberal humanist (yet theistic) congregation who tended to distrust religious language and didn't like ritual. (sound familiar?)

Capek believed it was important to have some kind of a ritual to celebrate this diverse community. He created what he called the Flower Festival and held the first Flower Festival Service in 1923.

Capek felt that orthodox Christianity's doctrine of human depravity was **itself** sinful.

In a sermon he called the human soul “the spark of God”. He writes:

“There is in every soul a thirst for something that is higher and greater than all science and all art.... We call it by different names but in essence it is nothing other than a hidden cry for...harmony with the Infinite. God is...the soul of our soul and the life of our life...Closer than breath and one’s heartbeat is [God]... Every person is an embodiment of God and in every one of us God struggles for a higher expression.... We light the spark of God within ourselves when we serve others and bring a bit of glow and joy to other people’s lives.”

"Religion," he said, "can never die because human beings cannot but be religious regardless of the form of [their] religion."

Norbert’s wife Maja was always a partner the work and in 1926 was herself formally ordained a Unitarian minister. In 1939 she came to the United States to lecture and raise money for the fledgling Czech Unitarian network. It was then that she introduced the flower communion here, at the First Unitarian parish in Cambridge.

When the war broke out she couldn't go back to Europe, so she stayed in the United States and served as a minister in several congregations in New England. I imagine it must have been heart-wrenching for her to have been cut off from any news about what was happening at home.

Frederick May Eliot invited Norbert Capek, along with his daughter and son-in-law to come to the United States as a ministers-at-large for the AUA. They declined, choosing instead to minister to their people in those terrible times.

Back home, the Germans were moving in. The Gestapo was now closely monitoring Capek - sitting in on his church services and listening to his sermons.

At his seventieth birthday party Capek's congregation gave him a radio. It was a capital crime to listen to foreign broadcasts, but Capek did anyway. Every evening in secret, he would tune into the BBC for news of the war.

He shared what he learned with his congregation in the subtle form of parables and stories – things the Czechs would understand but the two Gestapo officers wouldn't catch on to. In this way he was able to

continue to preach against oppression and minister to his congregation.

He did eventually get caught. He and his daughter were both arrested for listening and spreading news of the war. Capek was sent to Dresden for 11 months and then, just when his term was almost up, Hitler cracked down - and orders came to send him to "Dakaow" his papers were stamped "return unwanted".

UU minister Richard Gilbert writes:

"While [Capek] was in "Dakaow" his courage in the face of torture and starvation was a source of inspiration to his fellow prisoners.

While in the camp he led (his companions) in worship, using the Flower Communion ceremony as the ritual. Each prisoner brought what flowers they could find in the camp to a service. At the end they took with them a different flower than the one they brought, to symbolize their sense of community...

After the war, survivors testified that the Unitarian minister could not have been sent to a place where he was more needed."

His inspirational presence encouraged the others in the camp to endure. One survivor wrote: “If it hadn’t been for Capek I probably wouldn’t be alive now, nor would others who survived.”

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Norbert Capek was executed on October 12, 1942.

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Before he was put to death, he wrote this prayer, reflecting on his own life and the state of his spirit:

It is worthwhile to live and fight courageously for sacred ideals.

Oh blow ye evil winds into my body's fire; my soul you'll never unravel.

Even though disappointed a thousand times or fallen in the fight and everything would worthless seem,

I have lived amidst eternity.

Be grateful, my soul,

My life was worth living.

He who was pressed from all sides but remained victorious in spirit is welcome in the chorus of heroes.

He who overcame the fetters giving wing to the mind is entering into the golden age of the victorious.

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Norbert Capek created the Flower Festival ritual to bring the people of his congregation together. His church, like most of ours, had members from many different religious backgrounds. He wanted a spiritual celebration that would not exclude anyone, but would celebrate the whole community.

Unitarian Universalism is a garden, wild with theological diversity. Members come in many varieties: Humanists, Pagans, Christians, Buddhists, Jews, Theists and Atheists and many combinations in between.

We are most definitely not a monoculture garden – that is, a garden made with only one kind of plant, stripped of its wild spirit. Most gardeners will tell you that a “vast field of identical plants will always be particularly vulnerable to insects, weeds, and disease” – that is, susceptible to extinction. (Not to mention boring.)

It is in times of extreme religious conservatism that our liberal religious community becomes all the more precious. As the German occupation increased in Prague, Capek expected the numbers in church to dwindle. Instead he found the attendance swelling. Many people **walked** sometimes for **hours** to the

Unitarian church on Sundays. Indeed, the spiritual community becomes life-giving.

So many people I've talked with, especially when I was in the Midwest, testify to feelings of relief and gratitude for having found Unitarian Universalism. In a sea of religious fundamentalism - it is in this denomination that they are free to express and discuss and grapple with their theological ideas without fear of judgment. In that sense this little chapel with its tape on the walls and plastic garden chairs does truly become a sanctuary.

There are some times when words cannot adequately capture meaning. That becomes the time for symbolism, for ritual. I don't think it is a coincidence that the Flower Communion is one of the very few rituals that most Unitarian Universalist congregations participate in annually. It is so simple - and yet expresses so much about who we are as a community. A spray of many colors, textures, shapes and sizes mixed up together yet held collectively by a common container.

“Rituals of communion in all their many forms share a power and blessedness that transcends words yet reveal the truth of who we are. And that's what we're about

today, noticing within a small ritual act something at the very core of our being, of what we are and what we can be.”

We put our little flower in a vase, it gets mixed it up with flowers already placed there for those who have forgotten or missed the announcement, or are visiting us today - because that’s as it should be too - we always welcome new friends to join us. Then we pick a different flower chosen carefully and brought by someone else and we take it home. It is so simple...

But that’s the way it is, simple and complex at the same time. We are all mixed up together. With all of our diversity of thought and belief we find ourselves drawn together by the Unnamable Mystery.

I have led the flower communion several times now. I love the celebration of the beauty inherent in diversity. Each time I participate I find myself at first simply marveling at the splendor of the bouquet and how the ritual binds us one to another.

As it goes one I begin to ponder the fact that UU congregations all across the continent and even throughout the world also celebrate the flower communion and I realize how amazing it is to be

connected in this way to Unitarian Universalists worldwide.

And then I consider that the flower communion has been celebrated by hundreds of congregations for over seventy years. And that this simple ritual was life-sustaining for people in a Nazi concentration camp.

When we take a moment to contemplate all the people and all the history involved, this ritual becomes so much more than a flower exchange. It becomes a **living** vessel connecting us all through time.

So may it be!