

The Story of the Flower Service  
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet  
Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on June 11, 2017

The Unitarian Universalist Flower service was first imagined, created and celebrated by Dr. Norbert Capek. Dr. Capek was also the founder of the modern Unitarian movement in Czechoslovakia. He introduced this special service to his congregation at the Unitarian church of Prague on June 4th, 1923.

For some time prior to that first flower service he had felt the need for some symbolic ritual that would bind people more closely together. He believed 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. On the last Sunday before the summer recess of the Unitarian church in Prague then, all the children and adults participated in this colorful ritual—a ritual which Dr. Capek created to give concrete expression to the humanity-affirming principles of our liberal faith. This simple service was the result. It was such a success that it became a yearly ritual which was held every year just before the summer recess of the church. Today we hold our Flower Celebration on our final service here at Christus Collegium as our typical church year draws to a close.

The flower communion, which is what this service has become known as, was brought to the United States in 1940 by Dr. Capek's wife, Maja V. Capek. The Czech-born Maja had met Norbert Capek in New York City while he was studying for his Ph.D., and it was at her urging that Norbert left the Baptist ministry and turned to Unitarianism. He received some training and support from both American and British Unitarians and then returned to Prague in 1921. Soon afterwards he organized the Liberal Religious Fellowship which became the largest Unitarian church in the world. Maja Capek was ordained in 1926. During a tour of the United States Maja introduced the flower communion at the Unitarian church in Cambridge, Massachusetts. From this beginning the service has spread to many of our Unitarian Universalist congregations and has been adapted along the way. During the course of her tour World War II began. Unfortunately, she was not able to return to Prague while the war was raging.

While Maja was here in the U.S., her husband remained in Czechoslovakia. When the Nazis took control of Prague in 1940, they found Dr. Capek's gospel to be a threat. 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." Dr. Capek was sent to Dachau, where he was killed the next year during a Nazi "medical experiment." Maja did not learn of his death until the war ended. This gentle man suffered a cruel death, but his message of human hope and decency lives on through the Flower service he created and which is widely celebrated today.

When Dr. Capek led this service each year, he would invite people to bring a flower of their choice, either from their own gardens, or from the field or roadside. When they arrived at church a large vase stood waiting in the vestibule, attended by two young members of the Church School. Each person was asked to place their own flower in the vase. This signified that it was by their own free will that they joined with

the others. The vase that contained all the flowers was a symbol of the united church fellowship.

The young attendants helped with the arrangement of the bouquet. Later they carried the vase up to the front of the auditorium and placed it on a table there. Dr. Capek then would say a prayer, a prayer that I will offer shortly. At the conclusion of the prayer he would consecrate the flowers while the congregation stood. The two attendants would then take the vase back out into the vestibule.

After the service, as people left the church, they went to the vase. Each person would take a flower other than the one that they had brought. The significance of the flower service is that, as no two flowers are alike, so no two people are alike, yet each has a contribution to make. Together the different flowers form a beautiful bouquet. Our common bouquet would not be the same without the unique addition of each individual flower, and thus it is with our church community, it would not be the same without each and every one of us. This service then, is a statement of who we are together as a community.

By exchanging flowers, we show our willingness to walk together in our search for truth, disregarding all that might divide us. Each person takes home a flower brought by someone else - thus symbolizing our shared celebration in community. This communion of sharing is essential to a free people of a free religion. Dr. Norbert Capek dedicated his life to furthering religious values that continue to underpin our covenantal faith. Like him, may we strive to live out the values which we hold dear.

So May It Be.