

Flower Celebration Sunday©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on June 2, 2019

Those of you who have been attending these Flower services since I arrived here at UUFB have previously heard parts of what I am about to share. As I am sure you have noticed, our membership has grown significantly in the past couple of years. With those new to our Fellowship in mind I thought it would be important to share again the history of how this service originated and became what it is today.

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 allow people to feel more intensely their common bond. 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 not an acceptable option to many members of his congregation because of their aversion to the dogma and dictates of 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. In years past we would hold our Flower Celebration in mid-June, just before we would take a recess from church services for the summer. Last year however, we made a significant change and held services every Sunday of the year. Since we now hold services year-round, this year we are able to hold our Flower Celebration Service as close as possible to the anniversary of that very first flower service.

The flower communion, which is what this service has become know 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. World War II began during the course of her tour. 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—a service 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 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 arrived with them. 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, not simply as individuals, but who we are together as a community.

By exchanging flowers, we show our willingness to walk together in our search for truth, setting aside all that might divide us. Each person takes home a flower brought by someone else—thus symbolizing our shared celebration in and of the diverse community we belong to. 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—values such as the ones found in our Seven Principles. The dedication and commitment he had to his values made him a significant threat to a totalitarian regime.

As I consider the current state of the world, it seems to me that the world needs many more people who are willing to uphold values that threaten those who seek power for power's sake or for personal gain. Today it is my hope that, like Norbert Capek, each one of us may do our best to live out the values we hold in common and that are dear to each of us. If enough of us do so, we will not only threaten those who hold power and seek to abuse it, we will eventually be part of the movement that removes them from the positions of power they hold. Together we can and we will change the world for the better.

So May It Be.