

Unitarian Universalists are not known for their rituals. We are not known for easily identifiable traditions. But today's tradition, today's ritual of the flower ceremony is found in UU congregations all over the world. Now in all honesty, I have to acknowledge this tradition is celebrated quite differently and known by different names depending on which UU congregation you encounter it. It is called a Flower Ceremony, a Flower Celebration and a Flower Communion.

By whatever name and however conducted, the Flower Celebration is usually held during the last service before changing to a summer schedule. And I named it as such in the Blast this week. But this year we conduct our celebration the second Sunday before our summer schedule because I leave for GA tomorrow and won't be back in time for service next week. Call it privilege of a free pulpit.

This Flower Ceremony has a long and noble history. The first such celebration was held on June 4th 1923 and was created by Norbert Capek, in the Unitarian Church in Prague. While the original flower ceremony was intended as a communal ritual, it has since come to also represent the life of Norbert Capek and his fight against tyranny.

As you heard earlier, Capek became a martyr at the hands of the Nazis. Capek (1870-1942) was born a Catholic, but became a Baptist minister while a young man. While in the United States, finding his religious views had become more liberal, he joined the Unitarian Church in Orange NJ. He was apparently led to that church because his children enjoyed the Religious Ed program there. He later returned to Prague and founded what became the largest Unitarian church in the world. The Nazis found his views and influence to be a danger to their endeavors. He died at Dachau.

Capek had a visceral understanding of the importance of symbols and ritual. He chose not to hold communion because he knew many in his congregation had left the Catholic and other Christian churches and would find such a celebration painful.

He found in nature, the elements of the celebration he sought to share with his congregation. He asked each member to bring a flower to the service, symbolizing their individual beauty and uniqueness. He asked each to place their flower into a single bouquet. The notion of individuals choosing to place their flower among the others was important to Capek. He saw it as a reflection of free will, a conscious choice to be a part of something greater than self, an active participant in the creation of community.

The taking of a flower different from the one brought was symbolic of the give and take of being in community. It was a symbolic accepting of one another. It symbolized the acceptance of everyone in the community because the specific bringer of the flower was unknown. This simple act of accepting a flower, from an unknown, was symbolic of the acceptance required in any successful, vibrant and effective spiritual home.

At that point in his life, Capek did not adhere to any particular theological system of belief. Instead, he's said to have been driven by the "hidden cry for harmony with the Infinite" which he believed resided in every soul. He said, "Every person is an embodiment of God and in every one of us God struggles for higher expression. Religion can never die because human beings. . . cannot but be religious regardless of the form of [their] religion." He felt the highest calling of religion is to feed that "inner harmony which is the precondition of strong character, good health, joyful moods and victorious, creative life." He's quoted as saying, "It is my ideal, that unitarian religion in our country should mean a higher culture. . . new attitudes toward life."

The Flower Ceremony was originally a celebration designed specifically for his Czechoslovakian congregation. One can easily see, however, how it so aptly reflects a Universalist and Unitarian Universalist sentiment. It's a celebration that connects to the earth, to nature and the connectedness of us all through love and acceptance.

I'm convinced that the *concept* of nature, is our most comprehensible manifestation of the *concept* of God. And that our *experience* of nature...its aliveness, its enormity, its penchant for life and its complete uncontrollability... is our most tangible *experience* of God.

Nature seems to have had no beginning and seems never ending. Its constantly creating new life. And we continue to discover new life forms that may have been around for eons, in newly discovered ecosystems, in the boiling depths of the ocean, under icecaps. We seek to discover forms of life on or in meteors and other astral bodies.

We know that life changes. We know that life changes us. We know life comes and goes. New islands are created and emerge in our lifetime. Mountains and volcanoes create new terrain. The Grand Canyon is created by something as simple as water. The earth is alive, it changes of its own volition, if we don't believe in an interventionist God.

Think about it, God or no God, that's mystical stuff! The constant creation and destruction of life, over eons, is fundamentally beyond our ability to fully understand. Oh, we have ideas and concepts about how it all works, but we don't really know. As we are reminded by some of our evangelical Christian friends, evolution is just a theory.

If our accepted laws of physics are true, matter can not be created nor destroyed. If true, the same cells or energy force they contain, have been around forever. If true, we are comprised of all that has been before, animate and inanimate. We are comprised of the same stuff of dinosaurs and stardust. We contain the same stuff of the birds, rivers, trees and flowers.

It feels to me, there is something important in stopping to consider the notion of connectedness. There is something important in pondering the idea that we are all connected, not just metaphorically, but in actuality. Alternately, separate from *thinking* about these things, perhaps it's a valuable exercise for us to endeavor, repeatedly, to *experience* our own deep connection to self and non-self...be it in the form of nature, God or other human beings.

Norbert Capek, found a way to simply, beautifully symbolize our connectedness to nature and beauty. He found a way to physically represent our need for interpersonal connection, for community. He found a way to both symbolize and allow us to experience a connection to nature and to each other. And he did it in a way that honored and bridged multiple belief systems, multiple sensibilities, multiple pains, failures and disappointments at the hands of established religious dogmas.

As in Capek's time, we here and now, are different people with different belief systems, different sensibilities. We come to this time and place with different life experiences. Some of which have left us buoyant, happy and open to the world. Some of which have been painful, wounded us, and left ugly scar tissue in our minds and in our hearts. Some of us have grown reticent to reach out one more time, to hope, to trust others, beyond a very small circle.

As in Capek's time, we need one another. We need one another not only to survive, but in order to thrive. We continue to be connected, whether we are aware of the fact or not. We, like all others, continue to be comprised of stardust and the stuff of forever and always.

We, here today, are a particular segment of the "all". We are a particular and special community. And we can become even more special, more impactful in our own lives and the lives of others, in the world in fact, if we truly recognize and honor our connectedness.

The concept is simple. The doing, not so much. Norbert Capek understood the fundamental importance of individual choice. He understood the importance of an individual, freely choosing to offer themselves into community. He understood the importance of each of us accepting the flower, the beauty of another person.

He understood the importance of choosing to be open to accepting other people in order to bring to life the vibrancy of nature, the importance of community and the power of a spiritual home. Let us ponder our connectedness; let us experience the power and regenerative nature of a spiritual life in community. Let us honor, value and cherish the beautiful bouquet that we are...and remember to mow the lawn.

May it ever be, Namaste.