

## **Flower Communion 6 6 21**

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### **Origins of the Flower Communion**

The Flower Communion originated with Dr. Norbert Čapek, founder of the modern Unitarian movement in the former Czechoslovakia. On the last Sunday before the summer recess of the Unitarian church, all the children and adults participated in this colorful ritual, which gives concrete expression to the humanity-affirming principles of our liberal faith. Today, all over this country and all over the world, Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists are celebrating the Flower Communion. This is our faith. This is our religion.

It was on June 4, 1923 that Dr. Čapek introduced the Flower Communion to his Prague congregation. For some time, he had felt the need for a symbolic ritual that would bind people more closely together. Čapek had witnessed the devastations of World War I, the beginning of a loss of faith especially among Europeans. He was witnessing the emergence of the nationalistic party that eventually became the Nazis. He could see on the horizon, as all prophets do, that the people needed more communion with each other, more community, to sustain them in good times and bad, to hold them together when social forces would seek to drive them apart and against each other. His times were not so different from our times. Dr. Čapek understood that the format had to be one that would not alienate any who had forsaken other religious traditions. He turned to the native beauty of the Czech countryside for elements of a communion which would be genuine to them.

We can understand this, can't we, as during this COVID time we turn to our gardens and the fields of green surrounding our towns. And the Flower Communion was the result. It reflects Čapek's understanding that, in hard and frightening times, we too easily divide from one another, judge one another, even seek to kill one another. He acknowledges that relationship is challenging across our differences, but vitally necessary for our living together on this earth and flourishing as both individuals and as a species interdependent with each other. That a higher power of goodness calls for our unity when division beckons.

The ritual was introduced to American Unitarians in Cambridge, Massachusetts by Dr. Čapek's wife, Maja V. Čapek. Both Maja and Norbert had been born in Czechoslovakia, but they met each other in New York City while he was studying for his Ph.D. It was at Maja's urging that Norbert left the Baptist ministry and turned to Unitarianism. The Čapeks returned to Czechoslovakia in 1921 and established their dynamic liberal church in Prague. Maja Čapek herself was ordained in 1926. During her tour of the United States in 1940, Maja introduced the flower communion. Due to the outbreak of World War II, Maja was unable to return to Prague. It was not until the war was over that Norbert Čapek's death in a Nazi concentration camp was revealed.

When the Nazis took control of Prague in 1940, they found Dr. Čapek's gospel of the inherent worth and beauty of every human person to be—as Nazi court records show—“...too dangerous to the Reich [for him] to be allowed to live.” Dr. Čapek was sent to Dachau, where he was killed the next year during a

Nazi "medical experiment." This gentle man suffered a cruel death, but his message of human hope and decency lives on through his legacy of beauty and unity.

Thus, the Flower Communion holds both beauty and hideous death, both joy and sorrow in its enactment. Relationship is hard, but profoundly necessary. Our differences can push us apart, but they are also the source of learning, curiosity, and compassion creating a web to hold us, to bind us, one to another and each to all. It is altogether fitting that we reaffirm bonds of community through our Flower Communion today.

<https://www.uua.org/files/documents/zottolireginald/flowercommunion.pdf>

### **Flower Communion Closing Words—We Are the Garden**

"If you look the right way, you can see that the whole world is a garden." And what is a garden? Certainly, we may imagine a garden to be a deliberately and humanly cultivated patch of earth, purposely filled with a variety of blooming flowers and tasty vegetables offering our eyes and our bodies the array of nutrients we need for spiritual, mental, and physical sustenance. A multiplicity making us strong and capable for our being in this world.

And whether tidy or wild, crowded or spacious, gardens take a lot of work. Many of you know this already quite well. Maybe it's ensuring a new flower blooming every week of the spring and summer or thinning out the hostas and bee balm that seems to take over every square inch or adjusting the soil composition or transplanting the parched columbine into a shade spot. In any case, a garden takes a lot of work and care. It ain't a four leaf clover, a simply matter of luck. No. A garden is a commitment, more like love than luck. A garden of beautiful flowers, from bud to bloom to blown, it takes love to make, and it evokes love in the making and in the viewing.

Yet, a garden may simply be any patch of plants, yielding the beauty of liveliness and the love of the tender and resilient. Western plant biologists are just beginning to understand what indigenous biologists have known for generations, that any patch of plants, including a garden, is a community. We tend our gardens to get them into the shape that appeals to us. And left to its own devices, a garden will orchestrate and coordinate among the different plant species, sharing resources to create an equilibrium of health for the whole.

Now this balancing among species in a garden, or any patch of vegetation, takes place on its own time scale, not on human time. While up north last weekend, I felt saddened by the disease taking the spruce. What a shame. And my spouse kept reminding me that while the spruce were dying, other plants were thriving. Certainly, climate change is changing the forests, changing our gardens. And the plants adapt as they can, as a community of species. A garden, a plant community, is healthiest when composed of contrasts, "a variety of colors, shapes, and sizes." Each bringing what it uniquely has to offer to the whole symbiosis, whether under stress or not.

A garden of humans, as much as a garden of plants, is like that, too, if we know how to look the right way. It's the diversity of the individuals that make a for a rich community. "Some of us grow in bunches. Some of us grow alone." "Some of us are old and dried and tougher than we appear. Some of us are still in bud." Some of us feel like weeds and carry seeds and are sometimes prickly or smelly. "And all of us are beautiful. What a bouquet of people we are!"

Within the human garden, a community nurtured by commitment and nourished by love, you will find a marvelous complex of differentiation—who we are drawn to love, how our bodies and spirits express our genders, how our brains work and process information, neurotypically or neurodivergently, how we privilege logic or body knowledge or emotional connection as we gauge our experience in relationship to the experience of others. All the colors and beingness of all people now taking their place in the sun, working to ensure liberation and thriving. These are just a few of the beautiful and valuable contrasts among us, bringing liveliness to our whole community.

And like in a garden of plants, our diversity enables the whole to thrive, to triumph at last over "the snows, over the centuries, over the heavy feet of cattle and of soldiers treading down the fragile places of the earth." When some of us are resilient to challenges, we help others to have faith those challenges can be met. When some of us practice forbearance to adversity, we help others endure what seems unbearable. When some of us speak truth to power regardless of personal gain or loss of privilege, we help others find their voices. When some of us learn to accept the truths of the silenced, we grow in compassion for ourselves and for those living differently in the world.

Now it's nothing but flowers. And yet a garden of plants or a garden of humans, it's hard work. We get so used to our cars and factories and shopping malls and parking lots. We love our Dairy Queens and 7-Elevens and Kwik Trips. Such a limited view of community. We get so used to thinking that "different" is a problem, that diversity is divisive. Can we get used to the lifestyle where we see the value of all our human blooming? When we love each other by embracing our multiplicity, we accept the challenge to acknowledge our own limitations and welcome our need for each other.

May you feel the power of a garden created by the commitment of love without fear, with all the colors of human flowers flourishing and bountiful for the whole world around and for ev'ryone under the sun, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together, "Amen."