



The Flower Communion

A Service of Celebration for Religious Liberals

by Reginald Zottoli

The Flower communion service was created by Norbert Capek (1870-1942), who founded the Unitarian Church in Czechoslovakia. He introduced this special service to that church on June 4, 1923. For some time he had felt the need for some symbolic ritual that would bind people more closely together. 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. This simple service was the result. It was such a success that it was held yearly just before the summer recess of the church.

The flower communion was brought to the United States in 1940 and introduced to the members of our Cambridge, Massachusetts, church 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. The Capeks returned to Czechoslovakia in 1921 and established the dynamic liberal church in Prague; Maja Capek was ordained in 1926. It was during her tour of the United States that Maja introduced the flower communion, which had been developed in the Prague church, at the Unitarian church in Cambridge. Unfortunately, Maja was unable to return to Prague due to the outbreak of World War II, and it was not until the war was over that Norbert Capek's death in a Nazi concentration camp was revealed. From this beginning the service has spread to many of our Unitarian Universalist congregations and has been adapted along the way.

People were asked 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 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 said a prayer, after which he walked over and consecrated the flowers while the congregation stood. The two attendants then took the vase back out into the vestibule.

After the service, as people left the church, they went to the vase and each took a flower from the vase other than the one that they had brought. The significance of the flower communion 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. Thus this service is a statement of our 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.

The Beginning

The service begins with the flowers being placed in the communion vase.

If the service is being shared by a family or small group, participants should bring their flowers to the vase in silence as they enter the room.

If you are celebrating the service alone, say to yourself the name of the person each flower represents as you place it in the vase. Once the flowers have been gathered, you are ready to proceed as follows.

Opening Words

Children of the earth and sky, we are nurtured, sustained, given warmth and light from above and below.

Supported by earth's strong, firm crust, we build our homes, till the fields, plant our gardens and orchards.

When we turn from self and seek to be aware, we will find holy light in human faces, in blossom, birdsong, and sky.

Then earth is truly our home, and we are one with all earth's creatures,
Parents of earth's children yet to be.

-- Alice Berry

Song: "Spring Has Now Unwrapped the Flowers"

sung to the tune of the old English Christmas carol, "Good King Wenceslas"

Spring has now unwrapped the flowers, Day is fast reviving;
Life in all her growing powers, Towards the light is striving;
Gone the iron touch of cold, Winter time and frost time;
Seedlings working through the mold, Now make up for lost time.
All the world with beauty fills, Gold the green enhancing;
Flowers make merry on the hills, Set the meadows dancing.
Earth puts on her dress of glee; Flowers and grasses hide her.
Go we forth in charity, One and all beside her.

The Flower Communion

You or a member of your group may read the following paragraphs aloud:

The Unitarian Universalist Flower Communion service which we are about to celebrate was originated in 1923 by Dr. Norbert Capek [pronounced Chah-Peck], founder of the modern Unitarian movement in Czechoslovakia. On the last Sunday before the summer recess of the Unitarian church in Prague, all the children and adults participated in this colorful ritual, which gives concrete expression to the humanity-affirming principles of our liberal faith. When the Nazis took control of Prague in 1940, they found Dr. Capek'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. Capek 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 Flower Communion, which is widely celebrated today. It is a noble and meaning-filled ritual we are about to recreate. This service includes the original prayers of Dr. Capek to help us remember the principles and dreams for which he died.

The Consecration

Whenever Dr. Capek conducted his Flower Communion in Prague, he would say this proverb as he "consecrated" the flowers:

Infinite Spirit of Life, we ask thy blessing on these, thy messengers of fellowship and love. May they remind us, amid diversities of knowledge and of gifts, to be one in desire and affection, and devotion to thy holy will. May they also remind us of the value of comradeship, of doing and sharing alike. May we cherish friendship as one of thy most precious gifts. May we not let awareness of another's talents discourage us, or sully our relationship, but may we realize that, whatever we can do, great or small, the efforts of all of us are needed to do thy work in this world.

Partaking of the Communion

If you are celebrating the communion with your family or small group say:

It is time now for us to share in the Flower Communion. I ask that as you each in turn approach the communion vase you do so quietly--reverently--with a sense of how important it is for each of us to address our world and one another with gentleness, justice, and love. I ask that you select a flower--different from the one you brought--that particularly appeals to you. As you take your chosen flower--noting its particular shape and beauty--please remember to handle it carefully. It is a gift that someone else has brought to you. It represents that person's unique humanity, and therefore deserves your kindest touch. Let us share quietly in this Unitarian Universalist ritual of oneness and love.

The communion is shared silently.

If you are celebrating the communion by yourself, read:

It is time now for the Flower Communion. As I gaze upon the flowers before me, I do so quietly--reverently-- with a sense of how important it is to address our world and other persons with gentleness, justice, and love.

As you now touch each flower, speak the name of a person who is dear to you. Each blossom represents a person's unique humanity, and therefore deserves your kindness touch. Quietly share now in this Unitarian Universalist ritual of human oneness and love.

The Communion Prayer

Listen now to Dr. Capek's Flower Communion prayer:

In the name of Providence, which implants in the seed the future of the tree and in the hearts of men [and women] the longing for people living in [human] love; in the name of the highest, in whom we move and who makes the mother [and father], the brother and sister what they are; in the name of sages and great religious leaders, who sacrificed their lives to hasten the coming of [peace and justice]--let us renew our resolution--sincerely to be real brothers and sisters regardless of any kind of bar which estranges [one from another]. In this holy resolution may we be strengthened, knowing that we are God's family, that one spirit, the spirit of love, unites us, and [may we] endeavor for a more perfect and more joyful life. Amen.

Closing Words

Just before he was put to death in Dachau, Dr. Capek 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 welcomed into the choir of heroes.
He who overcame the fetters giving wing to the mind is entering into the golden age of the victorious.

Flower Ceremony for Children's Day Service

We use flowers in our ceremony this morning to help us symbolize the love that is hidden deep inside us.

Flowers are beautiful, and so are the feelings of love among people.

Their beauty cannot be measured, and neither can the feelings of people be measured.

Their life is short but new flowers will replace the flowers that die, and new love can come into our hearts.

This bud is for the new babies who have joined us this year. Last year these babies did not exist. This year they are here among us. Before they could lift a hand, they learned to smile. Before they could speak, they learned to love. If we help them keep this love in their hearts, they will pass it on to others, many years in the future.

This flower represents the people living all over the world. Maybe we will never see them face to face, or touch their hands. But we can still warm our hands on their hearts, because we know that their hopes are like our hopes, their pain is like our pain, their love like our love.

These flowers were each brought here by a different person and put together on these trays. They stand for all the people here today.

These flowers, so lovely today, will fade tomorrow. But the love among brothers and sisters, families and friends, will go on and on. We know one another, we know what is in each other's hearts.

We have brought our flowers and our love to brighten our church and gladden our hearts.

--Author Unknown

Unison Affirmation

remain standing

We believe it is here we must begin
To seek the wisdom of children,
And the graceful way of flowers in the wind.
For the children and the flowers are my sisters and my brothers.
Their laughter and their loveliness could clear a cloudy day.
Like music of the mountains and the colors of the rainbow
They're a promise of the future and a blessing for today
And the song that I am singing is a prayer to non-believers;
Come and stand beside us, we can find a better way.
From "Rhymes and Reasons" by John Denver

Music Notes from Flower Communion

from First Unitarian Universalist Church Portland, Oregon

See also in Singing the Living Tradition these hymns by Norbert Capek: 8 "Mother Spirit, Father Spirit"; 28 "View the Starry Realm"; 78 "Color and Frangrance"

We have chosen music from Renaissance and Modern sources for this celebration. At the Prelude, we hear a duet, solo, and madrigal from the Elizabethan era. The texts are given below:

"It Was a Lover and His Lasse"

Thomas Morley, from *The First Booke of Ayres* (1600)

Ir was a lover, and his lasse,
With a haye, with a hoe and a haye nonnie no,
That o'er the green come fields did passe
In springtime, the onely prettie ring time,
When Birds do sing, hay ding a ding a ding,
Sweete lovers love the spring.

Betweene the Akers of the rie,
With a haye, with a hoe and a haye nonnie no,
These prettie Countrie fooles would lie,
In the spring time, the onely prettie ring time,
When Birds doe sing, haye ding a ding a ding,
Sweete lovers love the spring.

This Carrel they began that houre,
With a haye, with a hoe and a haye nonnie no,
How that a life was but a flower,
In spring time, the onely prettie ring time,
When Birds doe sing, hay ding a ding a ding.
Sweete lovers love the spring.

Then prettie lovers take the time,
With a haye, with a hoe and a haye nonnie no,
For love is crowned with the prime,
In spring time, the onely prettie ring time,
When Birds doe sing, haye ding a ding a ding,
Sweete lovers love the spring.

-Words by William Shakespeare (?)

"What is Beauty but a Breath"

Thomas Greaves, from *Songs of Sundrie Kindes* (1604)

What is beauty but a breath?
Fancies twin at birth and death,
The colour of a damaske rose,
That fadeth when the northwind blowes;
Tis such that though all sorts do crave it,
They know not what it is to have it:
A thing that some time stoops not to a king
And yet most open to the commonst thing:
For she that is most fair,
Is open to the aire.

-Words are from an anonymous source

"Sing We and Chant It"

Thomas Morley, from *The First Booke of Balets* (1595)

Sing we and chant it, while love doth grant it, Fa la la la la la la (Repeat)
Not long youth lasteth, And old age hasteth; Now is best leisure to take our pleasure, Fa la la
la la la la la (Repeat)
All things invite us now to delight us, Fa la la la la la la. (Repeat)
Hence care, to be packing, no mirth be lacking;
Let spare no treasure to live in pleasure.
-Words are attributed to Michael Drayton (1563-1631)

At the Anthem we hear the very familiar song associated with peace and the protesting of war,
"Where Have All the Flowers Gone," by Pete Seeger in an *a capella* arrangement by H.
Roberts.

At the Offering, we hear a movement from Benjamin Britten's festival Cantata, *Rejoice in the
Lamb*, Opus 30, written in 1943. The words of the Cantata are taken from a long poem,
Jubilate Agno, by Christopher Smart, an eighteenth-century poet, deeply rooted in the Roman
Catholic heritage, but of a strange, if not deranged, mental inclination. This poem was written
while Smart was in an asylum, and is chaotic in form but contains some of his most inspired
writing. The major theme of the poem, and that of the Cantata, is the worship of God, by all
created beings and things, each in its own native fashion. The solo at the offering is the sixth
section of the Cantata:

"For the Flowers are Great Blessing"

For the flowers are great blessings,
For the flowers are great blessings,
For the flowers have their angels even the words of God's Creation.
For the flower glorifies God
And the root parries the adversary.
For there is a language of flowers.
For flowers are peculiarly the poetry of Christ.

PSALM 150, VERSE 6, provides a final summons to praise for today's celebration: "Let
everything that lives and that breathes give praise to the Lord, Alleluia!"

For the Flowers have the Gift of Language

*Speak, flowers, speak!
Why do you say nothing?
The flowers have the gift of language.
In the meadow they speak of freedom,
Creating patterns wild and free as no gardener could match.
In the forest they nestle, snug carpets under the roof of
Leaf and branch, making a rug of such softness.
At end tip of branches they cling briefly
Before bursting into fruit sweet to taste.*

*Flowers, can you not speak joy to our sadness?
And hope to our fear?
Can you not say how it is with you
That you color the darkest corner?*

*The flowers have the gift of language.
At the occasion of birth they are buds before bursting.
At the ceremony of love they unite two lovers in beauty.
At the occasion of death, they remind us how lovely is life.*

*Oh, would that you had voice,
Silent messengers of hope.
Would that you could tell us how you feel,
Arrayed in such beauty.*

*The flowers have the gift of language.
In the dark depths of a death camp
They speak the light of life.
In the face of cruelty
They speak of courage.
In the experience of ugliness
They bespeak the persistence of beauty.*

*Speak, messengers, speak!
For we would hear your message.
Speak, messengers, speak!
For we need to hear what you would say.*

*For the flowers have the gift of language:
They transport the human voice on winds of beauty;
They lift the melody of song to our ears;
They paint through the eye and hand of the artist;
Their fragrance binds us to sweet-smelling earth.*

*May the blessing of the flowers be upon you.
May their beauty beckon to you each morning
And their loveliness lure you each day,
And their tenderness caress you each night.
May their delicate petals make you gentle,
And their eyes make you aware.
May their stems make you sturdy,
And their reaching make you care.*

The Flower Communion Service, originated by the Rev. Norbert F. Capek in his native Czechoslovakia in 1923, is perhaps the most widely-celebrated ritual in Unitarian Universalist congregations today. Every spring, most of our churches and fellowships devote a Sunday to this festive participatory service which celebrates both the earth's beauty and humanity's oneness. Its simplicity and universality make it meaningful for children as well as adults.

We have created this service for members of the Church of the Larger Fellowship around the globe to share--whether you find yourselves living alone, in a family unit, or in a small UU group. Here's how it works.

Whether this service is being celebrated by a group or an individual, a "communion table" should be set up in an appropriate and attractive place. Elements on the table could include a tablecloth, a candle or candles, and a vase or other receptacle for the flowers.

If you celebrate this service with others, each participant needs to bring a flower or sprig of green to the "communion vase" as a symbol of his or her individual humanity.

If you celebrate this service alone, you may place several flowers in the communion vase yourself--each to symbolize someone who is significant in your life, whether living or dead.

Either way, each flower involved in the service should symbolize the personality, spirit, and beauty of a particular human being.