

In June of 1923, Norbert Capek began the custom we celebrate today, Flower Communion. In 1921, Capek founded the Unitarian movement in Czechoslovakia. He had returned to Czechoslovakia, after years of exile in the U.S., where he had discovered Unitarianism. Ironically, he brought Unitarianism back to a place very close to its original homeland in Eastern Europe. But the origins of the movement were not his concern. He had dedicated his life to his new religion and wished to establish it in his native country. The church he founded in Prague was very stripped down; no ministerial vestments or robes, no elaborate ceremonies, hymns, decoration or formal prayers. It was intended to be an alternative to the churches in which most of the new congregation had been raised. Some in the congregation felt that the excessive rituals of the Catholic or Calvinist or Lutheran churches in the area impeded true worship and so welcomed the austerity of the church. But some missed rituals and felt that more was needed to help in their spiritual lives. And so they approached Capek, who devised Flower Communion in response to their requests.

Rituals only work when they strike a chord with people. They only become part of the life of a church when they answer a true need. Many people have devised rituals that never catch fire, never are repeated because they are mainly decorative and do not help people respond to something beyond themselves. There are also many rituals that have become so worn, repeated mindlessly so many times that

they have no real meaning besides familiarity. We have few rituals in this church but two forms of communion, flower communion and water communion, have endured and appear to have some staying power. Both involve a form of sharing of our lives with each other. Both involve sharing elements that are both necessary and beautiful, water and flowers.

It is easy to see, every day of our lives, just how necessary water is. A no-brainer, one might say. But flowers? Oh, of course this is when we talk about pollination and the tricks that flowers have evolved to attract bees and butterflies and similar helpful critturs to ensure that there are more flowers. But somehow, faced with a ravishing peony or a devastatingly beautiful rose, it seems a bit like overkill. It's hard to see it all as practical. Wouldn't a few plain petals and a stamen or two have done as well? So perhaps there's more to it than the botanists suggest, and so, for this sermon, I have assembled a number of thoughts about flowers, poems and prose from people famous or unknown that may explain why flowers have been so important to human beings in expressing their feelings. We use flowers to help us say things that words cannot convey. We decorate our altars with them and, for Buddhists, fresh flowers are an indispensable part of a ceremony. They welcome a new baby, celebrate a wedding or mourn for us at a funeral. There is a higher order of communication, which Phillip Pulfrey recognizes, "The flower offered of itself/ And eloquently spoke/Of God/In

languages of rainbows/Perfumes/ and secret silence...”Ralph Waldo Emerson touches on this eloquence when he says, “The earth laughs in flowers.” Today we have created a bouquet of mirth.

Flowers ability to represent our deepest thoughts and emotions carries a message far beyond the facts of biology, something more like Jean Giraudoux says, “The flower is the poetry of reproduction. It is an example of the eternal seductiveness of life.” Terri Guillemets explains the magic in this way, “Flowers rewrite soil, water, and sunshine into petal’d poetry.” I think even the most scientifically oriented person must occasionally wonder, as does Robert Brault, “Even if you think the Big Bang created the stars, don’t you wonder who sent the flowers?” And who could not agree with Walt Whitman that flowers exceed explanation, “A morning glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books.”

Though most plants in some way flower and though it is possible to think of flowers as simply one stage in the chain of plant development and, hence, to the production of most of our food, sensible people give into the mystery, yield to the beauty. Beauty has its own usefulness, is nourishment as essential as any other as a Chinese proverb says, “When you have only two pennies left in the world, buy a loaf of bread with one and a lily with the other.” Or, according to Iris Murdoch, her

name itself a flower, “People from a planet without flowers would think we must be mad with joy the whole time to have such things about us.” Perhaps we should be more attentive to them, see them with other eyes, as Emily Dickinson does, “The lovely flowers embarrass me,/They make me regret I am not a bee—“ For a bee’s eye view of the matter, I’d like to read to you reading #492 by Carolyn Owen-Towle. Follow along if you would like.

For all their fragility, they are surprisingly tough, as Tennessee Williams notes, “The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks.” And they are generous beyond measure. This is Rumi’s *The Seed Market*. “Can you find another market like this?/ Where,/ with your one rose/ you can buy hundreds of rose gardens?/ Where,/ for one seed/ you can get a whole wilderness?/ For one weak breath/ the divine wind?”

Flowers remind us of both our mortality and our immortality, as in these haiku. The first one from Moritake, on the brevity of life, “A morning glory!/ And so—today!—may seem/ my own life-story. And the second, from Buson, “A short summer night.../ but in this solemn darkness/ One peony bloomed. But, in contrast, here is Basho, on life’s endurance. “The temple bell stops/ but I still hear/ the sound coming out of the flowers.”

Life's beauty, life's promise, all around us, but it takes some attention to hear it. That's what Robert Francis wants when he says, "One flower at a time. I want to hear what it is saying." Or Nickos Kazantzakis' words. "If only we knew what the stones and rain and flowers say. Maybe they call—call us—and we don't hear them. When will people's ear open? When shall we have our eyes open to see? When shall we open our arms to embrace everything—stones, rain, flowers and men?"

When will we open our ears, our eyes, our arms? When, indeed? All these reflections on flowers come from many, many sources, from all times in history, for all around the globe. They are from people who have opened themselves to the beauty and miracle of flowers and they find a response in us as we look at the many ways in which beauty manifests itself here, in these vases.

Last week Arn and I went to our great-niece's kindergarten performance. Wiggly five and six year olds sang a selection of songs and I wondered at the power of kindergarten teachers to harness all that energy and blend those voices and gestures into one. One of the songs was "See Me Beautiful." Sixty or so children asked us to, in the words of the song,

See me beautiful
Look for the best in me
It's what I really am

And all I wanna be
It may take some time
It may be hard to find
But see me beautiful
See me beautiful
Each and everyday
Could you take a chance
Could you find a way
To see me shining through
In everything I do
See me beautiful

Sixty plus children, all of them different from each other, different in sizes, colors, features, abilities, each of them beautiful in their own way. Together they made a beautiful bouquet.

Hearing the song, I could only hope that each child would continue to see themselves as beautiful all their lives. I could only hope that each child would see everyone else as beautiful all their lives. We know how quickly that can change, how we fail to see the beautiful in ourselves. How we fail to see the beautiful in each other.

Norbert Capek died in Hitler's gas chambers. He didn't leave Czechoslovakia when it fell to the Nazis, though he could have returned to the U.S. to be with his family. Instead, he preached against the Nazis, gave radio talks against the Nazis, until he was captured by them, tortured and executed.

At the low points of human life, in Rwanda, in Serbia, in Germany, there is always someone who wants to weed all the flowers but one from a garden. There are always people who can be made to be afraid of difference, of the unknown. There are always people whose inner torment and hatred finds relief in the torment of others. People who need to blame others for their own feelings of failure and despair. These remedies never work very long. On the one hand, it is never a satisfying remedy and it never really works to make people feel all right about themselves and so the situation escalates until it collapses. On the other hand, most people cannot sustain the burden of hatred indefinitely and, somehow, love creeps in, like a stray seed. After the Blitz in Great Britain, in WWII, people were astonished to find in the bombsites wildflowers growing, varieties of flowers that had not been seen since the 1600's.

Flowers, beautiful, fragile, resilient, a rainbow of flowers, a bounty of flowers, Norbert Capek's choice for a ceremony for us, a ceremony that has spread like windblown seeds to every U-U congregation. When he created this ceremony, Capek would never have thought that less than twenty years later, he would give up his life in the defense of the values we still guard. I was thinking of flower communion and Norbert Capek when I saw those kindergarteners and it was chilling to think that, had the Nazis succeeded, many of those children would not have been allowed to live. When we look at these bouquets, remember that what so

many died to protect. They died for the beauty of diversity, the richness of variety. The sayings that we shared today were from a great variety of traditions, each voice making us richer in our inner life. Each voice adds to our appreciation and understanding. No flower takes away the beauty of another flower.

As Leigh plays the postlude, I invite you all to come up and take a flower. Take a flower that is not the one you brought. Take it home with you; enjoy its beauty and, as you do, think of the variety of people who enrich our lives and make our world more interesting. Think of the beauty around us and give thanks.