

NORBERT CAPEK'S FLOWER COMMUNION:
A RITUAL OF BEAUTY AND BRAVERY

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While Norbert Capek's Flower Communion is regarded as a beautiful and comforting annual ritual in many Unitarian Universalist churches, there is an element of radical and courageous thinking that went into its creation, which is further evinced in the bravery and tragedy of Capek's own life. While this depth of meaning and experience is belied by the apparent simplicity of the tradition, it is also true that the mechanics of the ritual itself are fairly basic, though each church tends to alter the details to fit its own community. Essentially, the ritual entails congregation members bringing flowers from their own gardens and placing them in a communal vase at the front of the sanctuary. This collective bouquet is blessed by the minister, and then members each take a flower from the vase, making sure that they take one that another congregant has brought. Usually done in the springtime, this lovely tradition is typically regarded as a celebration of creation and the joy of sharing. While those qualities are certainly elements in Capek's original intention for the ceremony, there are further qualities to the ritual, both in its formation and its historical significance, that often go unexamined by the average Unitarian Universalist. Specifically, in looking at the formation of this ritual and its subsequent progression to institutional tradition, one can determine that from Capek's early ministerial formation, his later work as a key Unitarian leader, and then his final confrontation and demise at the hands of the Nazis, this ritual has layers of meaning that go far beyond an earnest if superficial appreciation of beauty.

Born in Czechoslovakia in 1870, Norbert Capek was originally Roman Catholic. At eighteen, Capek recognized that the doctrinal strictness of Catholicism created a tension with the more open idea of faith that he was instinctually drawn to.¹ Influenced by a charismatic Baptist

¹ Richard Henry, *Norbert Fabian Capek: A Spiritual Journey* (Boston: Skinner House, 1999), 9. 20-23.

minister, Capek soon became a Baptist.² This conversion led him to evangelizing door to door, and this early period of dialogue and discovery had perhaps the greatest effect on Capek's ministerial formation. While he initially set out with the earnest desire to convert those he met from state-imposed Catholicism to the Baptist faith, he quickly found himself being challenged by even more radical ideas. Perhaps because of his youth and winning personality, he was welcomed into many homes, and the ensuing discussions did much to continue to open the mind of the earnest young evangelizer. On top of that, archival research he did convinced him that "a free Christian faith was native to his people" and "though its history was buried and forgotten, free Christianity had been very widely practiced for centuries before. . .state enforced Catholicism."³ This openness to a free Christian faith and diverse theological perspectives would eventually become a key foundational element in Capek establishing the Flower Communion, though that was still many years away. And, despite the many questions these encounters sparked inside him, Capek steadfastly continued on within the Baptist church institution, even going as far as to become founder to almost a dozen Baptist churches.⁴ Even then, Capek's propensity for questioning continued, marking him as a likely candidate for Unitarianism, a faith that had a long history of questioning traditional dogma.⁵

In the flower ritual itself, we see much of the theological concerns of the young Norbert Capek. Each flower, in its uniqueness, serves the ritual as a reflection of the uniqueness of the individuals within the congregation. This speaks to the diversity within Capek's own

² Henry, *Norbert Fabian Capek*, 29.

³ Richard Henry, "Norbert Capek." Unitarian Universalist Association, <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/norbertcapek2.html> (accessed April 17, 2012).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone, *Out of the Flames: The Remarkable Story of a Fearless Scholar, A Fatal Heresy and One of the Rarest Books in the World* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002), 233.

congregation, diversity that he first became sensitive to during his years as an evangelizing minister. The more he spoke with different people of different faiths, the more he became aware that there were many theological perspectives that were valid within their own right, all of which led to his own sense of faith evolving into a very liberal one.⁶ The flower ritual he would later create would serve Unitarian congregations (in one of several ways) as a reminder of that theological diversity, and the metaphorical representation of diverse theologies by uniquely beautiful flowers would express the inherent beauty to be found in each of those theologies. The theme of diversity, began in these early years through Capek's travels, conversations, and study, would continue to grow as the years passed, and would ultimately manifest itself (along with other themes) creatively in the form of the ritual for which Capek would become known for in Unitarian congregations throughout the world.

Eventually, after several difficult years where Capek's increasing religious liberalism was met with suspicion and contempt, Capek left the Baptist church and finally embraced what would be his life's work: he became the central figure in bringing Unitarianism to Czechoslovakia. Capek had converted to Unitarianism while living in the United States, where he had fled after receiving pressure from German officials who didn't like his provocatively liberal writings. Capek encountered kindred spirits in the writings of Unitarians like Jonathan Mayhew, who wrote, "We all have liberty to think and act for ourselves in things of a religious concern."⁷ With that independent spirit at its core, the Unitarian church began by Capek in Prague was one that welcomed people from a variety of backgrounds, and this tolerance would remain as a major characteristic of this church, just as other "European Unitarians, as oppressed

⁶ Henry, "Norbert Capek."

⁷ David B. Parke, *The Epic of Unitarianism: Original Writings from the History of Liberal Religion* (Boston: Skinner House, 1985), 55.

minorities. . .made this commitment to freedom and peace.”⁸ The Unitarian Church of Prague was also free of unquestioned ritual and dogma and, as a result of the emphasis on reason, services often had more the atmosphere of a lecture hall than a church. Still, the charismatic Capek's church quickly grew quite large, membership reaching into the thousands, in large part thanks to the strength and coherence of Capek's liberal theology.⁹ As Unitarian historian Earl Morse Wilbur explained, Unitarianism could be encapsulated as a commitment to three principles: religious and theological freedom, tolerance of differences, and “the rights of reason in religion.”¹⁰ These principles were a welcome approach to religion for persons wounded or unfulfilled by their experiences in other churches; yet, for many in Capek's congregation, something ineffable remained missing even in Capek's church. The congregation consisted of people from Catholic, Jewish, and various Christian denominations. While they had left their original churches in search of a more open faith grounded in reason, there was the feeling that a spiritual dimension was missing from their new church home, a criticism that Capek would take seriously and ultimately lead him to create the spiritual ritual known as the Flower Communion. In many ways, this progression represents on a micro-scale the Unitarian faith movement as a whole, which began as rational interpretation of scripture, then moved on to introducing sources other than scripture into worship and using reason to explore them, and then finally adding to worship a dimension of spirituality tempered by reason.¹¹ In similar fashion, Norbert Capek, who himself had made a personal religious journey coincidentally matching the phases of that of

⁸ Charles A. Howe, *For Faith and Freedom: A Short History of Unitarianism in Europe* (Boston: Skinner House, 1997), 186.

⁹ Lucia Faltin, *The Religious Roots of Contemporary European Identity* (London: Continuum, 2007), 147.

¹⁰ Earl Morse Wilbur, *Our Unitarian Heritage, Volume One*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956), 488.

¹¹ Charles A. Howe, *For Faith and Freedom: A Short History of Unitarianism in Europe*, (Boston: Skinner House, 1997), 186.

Unitarianism itself, created the Flower Communion as a manifestation of the natural progression from strict rationality to spirituality (within a rational framework, of course).

From the start, Capek's solution was evident, though the details were not. He wanted to create a ritual that would bind the congregation, unifying them around a ritual that would help introduce a more spiritual element to church life, one that would appeal to emotion and have the quality of sacredness about it. Yet, this ritual, while ostensibly resembling traditional rituals like the Christian communion service with its bread and wine, needed to be wholly new in substance and meaning. Moreover, while this ritual needed to be one centered on spirituality and beauty, it also needed to complement the concerns of the Unitarian church with its emphasis on community, social justice, and intellectual and theological diversity. To achieve all these ends, Capek looked toward nature, which surely all his congregation could agree on as an entrance to the spiritual, and which would engender even "the most dry and rationalistic members" to have "an eye brightened through tears."¹² This ritual would utilize flowers, and as has already been discussed, while these flowers would represent the diverse theological beliefs and backgrounds of the congregation, they would also serve as living embodiments of the beauty of creation. In this way, the Flower Communion could have meaning for everyone from theists to the most pragmatic humanists, who would certainly acknowledge the importance of appreciating and honoring the natural world. Likewise, the values of the church itself would be reinforced in this ritual with the coming together of the flowers to create one bouquet signifying the power of connection and the necessity of each individual person's unique gifts in creating that bouquet. Unitarian Reginald Zottoli, in explaining the ritual in his short book utilized in many Unitarian churches, describes the significance of the bouquet by saying, "Our common bouquet would not

¹² Henry, *Norbert Fabian Capek*, 143.

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."¹³ In taking a flower that another has brought, the congregant also shows her willingness to join with others "in the search for truth,"¹⁴ "without regard to class, race, or other distinction, acknowledging everybody as our friend who is a human and wants to be good,"¹⁵ as Capek himself explained it. Finally, carrying that flower into the world outside the church walls symbolizes the congregant's spiritual connection to his fellow church members, even when they are physically apart, as well as their call to take action for good in the concrete world outside of the church. For such a simple ritual involving the exchange of flowers, there were many layers of meaning for Capek's congregation to ponder.

The Flower Communion was quickly embraced in the Prague church, bringing with it that missing spiritual dimension that some church members had longed for. But Capek's church was not to remain in blissful peace for long. World War II brought with it "devastating" impact for Europe and the Unitarians in Czechoslovakia "were inevitably and profoundly affected."¹⁶ Nazi-occupied Prague was, of course, no exception to these effects. At every one of Capek's services, two Gestapo agents were now present, and they "were frustrated by sermons that seemed to contain subversive messages and even jibes at the occupiers, but which were hard to pin down."¹⁷ Capek's ministry with its emphasis on unity within diversity, manifested in ritual form so creatively in the Flower Communion, was the antithesis of Nazi ideology, yet Capek

¹³ Reginald Zottoli, *The Flower Communion: A Service of Celebration for Religious Liberals* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, undated), 3.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Henry, *Norbert Fabian Capek*, 144.

¹⁶ Howe, *For Faith and Freedom*, 167.

¹⁷ Susan Elisabeth Subak, ed., *Rescue and Flight: American Relief Workers Who Defied the Nazis* (Nebraska: University Press, 2010), 22.

refused to alter his ministry or his principles, despite the presence of evil within his own church walls during sacred worship time. Ironically, decades later, in 1990, the European Union would adopt the very motto of “Diversity in unity,” with the idea of unity coming from the shared values of dignity, freedom, justice, and solidarity.¹⁸ Unfortunately for Capek, this idea of unifying diversity, so prevalent in his ministry and so beautifully translated into ritual with his Flower Communion, was considered a dangerous and radical one by the occupying Nazi forces fifty years before the European Union adopted it as its slogan. So, in 1940, Capek was arrested by the SS, convicted of treason, and sent to Dachau concentration camp,¹⁹ following in the tradition of many other Unitarians of earlier years, going all the way back to the 1500's, when, in Transylvania, “leaders of the Unitarian movement were often imprisoned or executed.”²⁰ Capek, the bright-eyed, affable seventy-year-old man who was minister to up to 3,200 parishioners, was an unlikely religious martyr, but that is exactly what he would eventually become.

Yet, even within the walls of Dachau, where one could easily imagine losing all hope, Norbert Capek stayed committed to the Unitarian principles that had led him to create the Flower Communion. “I’m managing to apply my art of living principles;” Capek wrote in one letter that he was allowed to send home, “I can say by 100%.”²¹ He talked further in that letter about the importance of religion in building a strong character that can endure hardship, and that religion is “something more than pious phrases and prayers,”²² an acknowledgment that evil such as Nazism would not be overcome by prayer alone, a viewpoint shared by other religious thinkers like Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Amongst the starvation and punishments of the camp, eyewitnesses

¹⁸ Faltin, *The Religious Roots of Contemporary European Identity*, 14.

¹⁹ Subak, *Rescue and Flight*, 23.

²⁰ Goldstone, *Out of the Flames*, 234.

²¹ Henry, *Norbert Fabian Capek*, 265.

²² Henry, *Norbert Fabian Capek*, 265.

discussed how Capek remained in good spirits, even helping others to feel a connection to God, despite the abuses they suffered.²³ While it might have been natural in the atmosphere of the stark, haunting realities of Dachau for Capek to dismiss his own Flower Communion as trite or insignificant, eyewitness accounts told a different story. Fellow prisoners described how Capek oversaw a Flower Communion in the camp, which Bert Clough, using a classical writing style, recounts, saying, “And one Sunday there being no flowers in that barren place, the prisoners brought stones and twigs which were blessed by Capek. And there was much joy amongst the multitude.”²⁴ Moreover, during his imprisonment at the hands of the Nazis, Capek continued to write songs to keep up the spirits of his fellow prisoners, many of whom said they would have given up all hope had it not been for Capek's unwavering faith. One surviving song's lyrics are marked by the optimistic perspective that even within the face of extreme adversity, one can find the strength to carry on inside oneself, and from that inner strength “will rise again God's flower.”²⁵ Once again, even amidst the darkness of concentration camp life, Capek turned to the imagery of flowers for meaning and connection to the divine, suggesting that his choice of nature's beauty for his famous ritual was anything but arbitrary.

In October 12, 1942, the end came for Capek at last, when he was put to death in the gas chamber. Third Reich documents explicitly state that it was “too dangerous to the [Reich] for him to be allowed to live.”²⁶ Yet even to the end, all evidence suggests that Norbert Capek

²³ Ibid., 268.

²⁴ Brian Clough, “Spiritual Journey,” Unitarian Association for Lay Ministry, http://ualm.org.uk/norbert_capek.htm (accessed April 17, 2012).

²⁵ Daniel Harper, “Singing for Freedom,” Unitarian Universalist Church of Palo Alto, CA, <http://danielharper.org/archive/?p=318> (accessed April 17, 2012).

²⁶ Audette D. Fulbright, “Flower Communion and a World of Unitarian Universalism,” Unitarian Universalist Church of Roanoke, Virginia, <http://uuroanoke.org/sermon/050508Flower.htm> (accessed April 17, 2012).

maintained the courage and conviction of his faith.²⁷ While he would have probably known that the Flower Communion had been introduced in North America in 1940,²⁸ it is unlikely that he would have foreseen how it would eventually become standard practice in Unitarian churches all over the world. Still, despite knowing the lasting impact his ministry would have, in one of his last letters, written amongst the horrors of starvation and degradation at Dachau, he summed up his attitude toward the religious life, an attitude that could very well also describe the thematic concerns of the Flower Communion: “The goal [of religion]: a harmonious, strong, confident, active, creative, loving personality in harmony with itself, with nature, with humanity and the spirit of life.”²⁹ All of those adjectives could easily describe the ritual Norbert Capek had created; in acting out the Flower Communion, congregations partake in a ritual that creatively celebrates the harmonious connection between nature and humans, humans and each other, and humans and God. The fact that Capek gave his life for his principles, and went to his death still believing in them, invests the Flower Communion with strength, depth, and spiritual authenticity.

Thus, the legacy of Norbert Capek remains strong as the Flower Communion, due to both its inherent meaning and historical significance, has become a tradition of the Unitarian church in all its incarnations. Capek's legacy stretches across the earth, evinced in diverse global voices articulating the power and meaning behind the Flower Communion he created and, to be true to its meaning, died for. In Scotland, author Lyanne Mitchell, says in introducing the ritual, “We belong to a heroic movement. A proud and hard won heritage of liberal religion by remarkably courageous Unitarians like Norbert Capek. In Glasgow, we follow 200 years of fellow Unitarians

²⁷ Henry, *Norbert Fabian Capek*, 294.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 316.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 266.

who also stood up for their beliefs and had the courage to be different.”³⁰ In the Philippines, Unitarian Bob Guerrero describes the tradition, saying, “The flower communion is a reflection of the joyful hope that we must have to face life’s hardships.”³¹ Rev. Richard Beal, the minister of the Auckland church in Australia, explains how the Flower Communion is a ritual used in Unitarian churches “all over the world,” including “the Khasi Hills of India, the centuries old Unitarian villages of Transylvania, and the emerging UU groups in Pakistan, SriLanka, and Latvia.”³² Indeed the worldwide success of the Flower Communion—a ritual in a church both lacking in and suspicious of rituals—is based on the fact that it encapsulates Earl Morse Wilbur’s conception of what makes a good religion, which is “not orthodoxy of belief, but. . .the kind of character it produces; and that we do not realize its whole purpose until we get beyond thought of ourselves, and give ourselves to the service of others, as all members of one great family of God.”³³ Nowhere in the Unitarian Universalist church do we see a ritual that encompasses more succinctly or beautifully this concept of connection and service than the Flower Communion. By living out the themes of this ritual to the end of his days, Norbert Capek provides inspiration to contemporary Unitarians and great depth to this ritual, which should always be enacted with careful consideration respecting the history, bravery, creativity, and pain that both created and sustains it. As Capek himself said in response to those who questioned the spiritual depth of Unitarianism, “After all these experiences, nobody dares to say anymore that we are so

³⁰ Lyanne Mitchell, “Norbert Capek’s LEGACY,” Glasgow Unitarians, <http://www.ukunitarians.org.uk/glasgow/pdfs/service060610.pdf>. (accessed April 17, 2012).

³¹ Bob Guerrero, “Flower Communion,” Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines, <http://www.sportsmanila.com/uu/?p=102> (accessed April 17, 2012).

³² Richard Beale, “The Following from Richard Beale.” Australian and New Zealand Unitarian Association, http://www.anzua.org/anzua_alt/quest/dec01_auckland.htm (accessed April 17, 2012).

³³ Wilbur, *Our Unitarian Heritage*, 489.

rationalistic as to have nothing 'for the heart.'"³⁴ Indeed, Capek's life, ministry, and Flower Communion are testaments to the importance of both heart and head in sustaining faith.

³⁴ Henry, *Norbert Fabian Capek*, 144.

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