

Homily – Written and delivered by Jay Roller, September 19, 2010

I want to give a short history of the Flower Communion or Flower Celebration as written by Reginald Zottoli.

“The Flower communion service was created by Norbert Capek (born 1870-died 1942), who founded the Unitarian Church in Czechoslovakia, now the Czech Republic. He introduced this special service to that church on June 4, 1923. For some time he had felt the need for a 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, Catholic, Protestant or Jewish. 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 at the beginning of summer.

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 Capek. The Czech-born Maja had met Norbert 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 was ordained in 1926. It was during her tour of the United States that she 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 in Cambridge the service has spread to many of our Unitarian Universalist congregations and has been adapted along the way. (For example, we've moved it this year to the late summer.)

As a side note, two of the hymns we are singing today use the words of Norbert Capek, *Mother Spirit*, *Father Spirit* and *Color and Fragrance*, our closing hymn

I want to tell a personal story now:

Disbudding the mums

My parents were florists and we grew a lot of our own flowers on several acres of land. Starting when I was 10 or 11, I helped during the summertime with the beds of mums. We probably had a few thousand plants. In late June when the plants reached a certain height, say 3 feet, we moved through the rows, taking off the side buds, which we called dis-budding. This would leave one central bud to grow and take all the nourishment from the plant. That's how we got the big mums that were used for corsages at college football games in the fall.

Later in the summer I would go out about 7 PM and cover up the beds of mums. You see, mums develop as the days get shorter. The mums were planted with wire mesh forming a cover over them. So in order to speed up the process we covered the mums under black cloth to increase the number of hours of darkness. We were using Nature's rules, but bending them to

a human purpose. Like any gardener, I was learning the ways of plants by spending time with them, getting their smell on me and their stains on my fingers.

In a few minutes we will celebrate the Flower Ceremony or Communion where you are invited to select a flower that came from someone else's garden. You may get one that was grown commercially, such as from my parent's mum beds, or one that someone here in this room planted, watered and tended. In any case we will spend a few minutes noticing what the Buddha and Jesus both suggested, that we consider the flowers.

Visit to Prague

In 2000 I took a trip to Transylvania to visit the family I had grown so close to when they lived in Berkeley. We went on a vacation to the Czech Republic, traveling by train. Prague is just such a picture-postcard city, not bombed during the Second World War, so it retains its amazing architecture intact. One day while we were wandering around near the famous Charles Bridge, we happened on a plaque that said Unitarian Church. I had heard about the church in a sermon, but had no idea if it still existed and where it would be found.

We went in and met the lay president, a wonderful woman who spoke good English and introduced us to the minister, a woman whose first name I recall was Lilia. As we toured the building we came into the main meeting space and there were two oil portraits of men hanging on the wall, the minister said they were of her father and grandfather. Laszlo paused a moment and looked at the grandfather's photo and said, but isn't that Norbert Capek? Yes, replied Lilia, he was my grandfather.

So there we were, standing in the meeting hall of the Prague Unitarian Church where three generations of Capeks had preached. It caught me up short and brought me into an awareness of the special space and moment in time.

I now invite you to let the flower you select, bring you to the teachings of the great ones, whether that be your grandmother, the Buddha or anyone whom you admire.

As the music plays, please come forward to select a flower, return to your seat in silence and see what might be gotten from a few minutes of communion WITH the flowers in the company of this congregation.

Let the flower ceremony begin: