



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

"A Faith So Bold: Flower Communion Centenary"

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To celebrate and honor the history of the Flower Ceremony on its 100th anniversary, it is wonderful that we have already named the Rev. Dr. Norbert Čapek. I want to spend a few moments now honoring his wife, the Rev. Mája Čapek. Born in Czechoslovakia in 1888, Mája emigrated with her family to the United States in 1907, and she attended the Columbia University School of Library Science. She met Norbert, then a Baptist minister, there and they married in 1917. Norbert found his faith challenged and changed towards more liberal views and Mája not only supported his shift to the Unitarian faith but was a partner in his ministry. They returned to Czechoslovakia in 1921 and founded what was then the largest Unitarian church in the world in Prague. Mája Čapek was ordained a Unitarian minister in 1926. She was on a lecture tour in the United States when the Second World War began, and so was unable to return to her home. During her tour and time in the United States, she introduced the Flower Communion to First Parish Church, Unitarian, in Cambridge Massachusetts. While her husband died in Dachau in 1942, she did not learn of his death until 1945.

In a letter from the Rev. Mrs. Mája V. Čapek, to the Rev. Dr. Ernest Kuebler of the American Unitarian Association dated June 1, 1961, speaking of the Flower Communion which she brought to the United States, she writes "The exchange of flowers means that I shall walk, without reservation, with anyone - regardless of his social status, or his former religious affiliation, as long as he is ready and willing to go along in search of truth and service to man."

The Rev. Mája Čapek died in December, 1966.

Both the Reverends Čapek are ancestors of the great faith tradition we have inherited and it felt important to name and honor both of them as we consider the roots both of this specific ceremony and our literal roots - the ways we are connected.

When we reenact a ritual that has been shared across time, we are joining all those who went before us and all those who will come after us. We are acknowledging that we are all a part of something larger than ourselves and that who we are is bound up in relationship with all our ancestors and our inheritors. We are naming that which we want to preserve, to uplift, and to declare of highest worth - as Mája put it, to “walk, without reservation, with anyone - regardless of his social status, or his former religious affiliation, as long as he is ready and willing to go along in search of truth and service to man.”

Taking a moment to note the way that language use has shifted since 1961, this is still such a radical statement at its heart. Mája and Norbert Čapek wanted this ceremony to encourage participants to consider taking their faith journey without reservation with anyone regardless of status or former affiliation so long as they are bound in the desire to search for truth and to be of service. A living, active faith. A faith in motion. A faith willing to reexamine when it has fallen short of its high ideals and to engage in restorative work.

No faith, no institution, no single person nor group of people can uphold its ideals at all times. We fail and we falter. And we return again and again to repair. This is also the power of returning again and again to the ritual, considering its heart and its truth. I wonder if the Čapeks ever considered that Unitarian Universalists would still be honoring this gift, and participating in this ritual, one hundred years later. Whatever they imagined, their faith led them to plant a seed that would nourish the world for generations to come.

And so we come to our reading from [Ross Gay](#), poet, professor, and gardener, and his own take on seeds today nourishing the future.

“[P]lanting that [orchard](#) [...] reminded me, or illuminated for me, a matrix of connection, of care, that exists not only in the here and now, but comes to us from the past and extends forward into the future. [...] We are in the midst of rhizomatic care that extends in every direction, spatially, temporally, spiritually, you name it. It’s certainly not the only thing we’re in the midst of, but it’s the truest thing. By far.”

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We know we’re in the midst of it, don’t we? Didn’t we just list off twenty-two cities in the United States (four of them here in Pennsylvania) where gun violence killed or injured four or more people in mere moments in the last week? Lives changed forever, lives ended, lives impacted, and our list doesn’t even bring the shooters into the conversation - but they, and their families, also experience lasting impact and harm. Hurt people hurt people, as the saying goes - but the other side of that is the truth that resides in our rituals of beauty and joy, in the music we make together and the love reflected in the faces of everyone selecting a flower. The other side is that healing people heal people.

One small flower is not functioning on a scale of a fruit tree - certainly not a whole orchard of them! But regardless of size, every planted, growing, healing, thriving thing in the world can be a balm to our souls, to heal us to go be healing forces in the world. Not out of a sense of unchanging perfection but rather one of messy, imperfect, striving for truth and desire to be of service. Not just to ourselves and those around us, but to the generations that will come after. We not only choose our companions, our chosen family, we not only give them beautiful gifts of growing things, but we plant the seeds that grow tomorrow’s gardens, that feed tomorrow’s dreams. We seek not for perfection but for a willingness to repair. We seek not to perpetuate hurt but to instill healing.

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