

MOST THIS AMAZING DAY

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Northern Westchester – June 22, 2008

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i thank you god for most this amazing day

e. e. cummings, the great 20th century poet and fellow Unitarian expressed in this poem a deep and meaningful connection to all things around him—to the greenness of the trees and the blueness of the sky, to the tangible and sensory as much as to the infinite and unknowable.

As only a poet can do, he wrapped up in few words all that we celebrate about summer.

This is the season when the sun's rays are at their brightest, when plants that have emerged from the ground in springtime put on their glorious show of growth, surrounding us with lushness.

This is the season when fruit begins to ripen, bursting forth with sweetness and abundance. Farmers markets open with their tables overflowing with strawberries and squash, later tomatoes and cherries, and soon melons and peaches and pears.

This is the season when we are driven by the heat to slow down, to sit with a glass filled with ice and a fan and marvel at the fact that the world can be so full of life even as we are so exhausted.

It is summer, when our bones ache for the feeling of cool water—surrounding us in pools and lakes, crashing over us as waves and waterfalls, soaking into us as the stuff we drink.

And in this season, here at the birthday of the sun, *of life, and of love and wings*, e. e. cummings sensed his connection to something infinite. Something unimaginable, something at once natural and somehow mystical. And he wrote about it: *i thank you god for most this amazing day*.

Norbert Capek, too, sensed connection in the teeming creativity of summer. Capek was a liberal Christian minister who came to the United States from his native Czechoslovakia in 1914, driven out of his country by his outspoken beliefs in liberal religion. Here, he met his wife, Maja, also Czech-born, who urged him to join a Unitarian church, which he did.

After their country's independence was secured at the end of World War I, the Capeks returned to Czechoslovakia, where they founded the Unitarian Church in Prague.

In twenty years, their church blossomed to include over 3,200 adult members in Prague, and some 8,000 adults in six other locations throughout Czechoslovakia.

Richard Henry, in his biography of Capek for the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society's website, describes Capek's beliefs:

“Subscribing to no theological system, Norbert Capek celebrated the ‘hidden cry for harmony with the Infinite’ in every soul. ‘Every person,’ he wrote, ‘is an embodiment of God and in every one of us God struggles for higher expression.’ ‘Religion,’ he said, ‘can never die because human beings. . . cannot but be religious regardless of the form of [their] religion.’ Religion should, before all else, provide that ‘inner harmony which is the precondition of strong character, good health, joyful moods and victorious, creative life.’

“‘It is my ideal,’ he wrote, ‘that unitarian religion in our country should mean a higher culture... new attitudes toward life and practically a new race.... In short, unitarian religion should mean the next advanced cultural level of a certain people.’ The church’s task, he felt, ‘must be to place truth above any tradition, spirit above any scripture, freedom above authority, and progress above all reaction.’” (Henry)

In Prague in 1923, Norbert and Maja Capek developed a ritual they called the Flower Festival, designed as a celebration of community and diversity. Celebrated each year on the final Sunday of what was considered the “regular church year,” near the beginning of summer, the Flower Festival was meant to be a ritual that symbolized the bonds between people in community.

It was meant to remind people of the bonds of community as people went their separate ways over the summer, when things even in the large and vibrant Unitarian Church in Prague got a little more relaxed. Yes, it’s a long-standing Unitarian tradition to be more casual in the oppressive heat of summer.

Because the traditional Christian communion service was unacceptable, Capek “turned to the native beauty of the countryside for elements of a [ritual] which would be genuine to them.” (Zottoli)

My colleague the Rev. Tony Johnson writes that “in reporting the creation of the festival to his... [American] sponsors, Capek emphasized the symbolism of the flowers as representing the members in all their diversity and their acceptance of each other by... receiving a flower at random.” (Johnson)

As a side note, it is interesting and puzzling that most Unitarian Universalist congregations that celebrate this ritual today call it the Flower Communion. Both Norbert and Maja Capek were very clear that it was called the Flower Festival, to “differentiate it from traditional religious rites.” (Johnson)

In any case, the Festival was meant to celebrate many of the aspects of liberal religious community: “our willingness to walk together in our search for truth,” (Zottoli) our diversity of opinion, belief and identity, our free choice of one another to be in community with, that each of us has a contribution to make to this community, and that we are willing to share those gifts with one another.

Maja Capek returned to the United States to be ordained in 1926 and again in 1939 for a tour of Unitarian congregations to raise funds for the burgeoning church in Prague. It was on that tour that she introduced the Flower Festival, first to First Parish in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and later to many other congregations. By the end of her tour, war had once again broken out in Europe, and she was unable to return home.

In 1940, Norbert Capek and his daughter Zora were arrested by the Gestapo and imprisoned for treason. His sermons and religious writings were used as evidence against him—evidence that he supported the freedom of thought and belief, if nothing else. While he was acquitted of the charges in April of 1942, the Gestapo ignored the court's orders and sent him to Dachau, and later, to the gas chambers at Hartheim Castle in Austria, where he was killed in October of 1942.

So today, we celebrate a uniquely Unitarian ritual invented by great heroes of our faith.

As we do so, we are reminded of our connections to Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists around the world, many of whom struggle for religious liberty in nations not as free as ours.

We are reminded of our connections to people who are different than we are—as roses and daylilies and coneflowers and carnations are different from one another, none less beautiful, none less marvelous, each bringing its full essence to the garden of creation.

We are reminded today that, wherever we might go this summer, whether we meet here every Sunday over lemonade and discussion or we fly away only to appear again in September (or, more likely, something in between), we are together in this endeavor of liberal religion.

We are together in this worship, in this Fellowship, in this life.

As we prepare to celebrate the Flower Festival, we are also reminded of our connection to the great, happening, illimitably Earth, to the spirit that flows as breath through each of us, to the ground of all being, to the interdependent web of creation.

We gather here, at the beginning of summer, as a community deeply and meaningfully connected to one another. We gather to awake the ears of our ears, to open the eyes of our eyes, to learn, to teach, to be inspired, to be challenged.

We gather here in gratitude for the blessings of nature, for the bounty of summer, for most this amazing day.

SOURCES:

Henry, Richard. Norbert Capek biography at <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/norbertcapek.html>

Johnson, Anthony, personal e-mail.

Zottoli, Reginald, UUA Flower Communion resource at www.uua.org/documents/zottolireginald/flowercommunion.pdf