

“A Fireweed Grows in Prague”

Written and Delivered by Rev. Jennifer Youngsun Ryu

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Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists

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How is it, that some people can face all that is wrong with the world;
all that is destroyed by evil
and still remain hopeful?

How does a person decide to hold on to sacred ideals,
even when that act puts ones life at risk?

How did a little boy, born in a small Bohemian village become a Unitarian martyr; a man
whose name is spoken in the same breath as Jan Hus, Michael Servetus, James Reeb?

When Norbert Capek was 12 years old, he was sent his live with his uncle because his
parents couldn't afford to keep him. During the day, he was a tailor's apprentice. At
night, he was an avid reader and thinker. He was especially interested in religion, and
constantly questioned what it meant to be Catholic.

All that questioning led him away from the state-sponsored Roman Catholic Church, and
at the age of 18, he became a Baptist.

His uncle saw this as an act of great disrespect and kicked him out of the house.

The Baptists happily took him in and, sensing that Capek was a natural preacher, sent
him to seminary.

As a young man, Capek sold Bibles door-to-door, and started almost a dozen churches
from the Ukraine to Budapest.

Along the way, he learned about the native religion of his people.

Liberal Christianity had been practiced in Bohemia from as early as 1404.

He learned of a community called the “Brothers and Sisters of the Free Spirit,”

who rejected the Trinity and believed in the inner light more than the letter of the Bible;
the spiritual life above any dogma.”

Capek also added to his sources of inspiration, the American Social Gospel movement
and the American Unitarians.

Growing up Catholic, Capek had never heard these ideas before, and he quickly came to
believe that “religion ought to apply to the lives of real people.”

Eventually his thinking became more and more liberal.

He decided to leave Bohemia to serve a Baptist church in New York.

Maja Octavec, also from Bohemia, arrived in New York about 7 years earlier. She was also one of those children who questioned the faith of her fathers and mothers. She enrolled at Columbia University in 1907 to study library science. In 1914, the same year Capek arrived, she was put in charge of the Czecho-slovak department of the New York Public Library. And that's where they met and soon married.

A year later, Capek's persistent liberal leanings got him into trouble. He was put on trial for heresy by a Baptist tribunal. Even though he was acquitted, this was the beginning of the end of his career as a Baptist minister.

Four years later, he left, writing in his diary, "I cannot be a Baptist any more, even in compromise. The fire of new desires, new worlds, is burning inside me."

Capek sent his wife and two daughters into the New Jersey suburbs to find a new church home. They came back with enthusiasm for the Religious Education program at the Unitarian Church in Orange. The Capeks signed the book and became members of that congregation.

Their minister introduced Capek to the president of the Unitarian Association, Samuel Atkins Eliot. Capek convinced the Association to help him start a Unitarian church in the newly independent country of Czechoslovakia.

In 1921, Norbert and Maja Capek, along with their daughter and her husband moved to Prague to build a nationwide religious movement.

Because their new congregants had rejected Catholicism, the new church avoided singing, prayers and rituals. Instead of a collection plate, members paid an admission fee at the door. But after a year or two, Capek wanted to add spiritual and experiential elements to the service that would move people beyond the spoken word of the sermon. And that's how he came to create the Flower Communion service.

For 20 years, constrained by neither government nor Pope nor Baptist tribunal, Capek preached from a free pulpit: "Every person," he declared, "is an embodiment of God..." and "the deepest human desire is for harmony with the Infinite."

The church's task, then, must be to
"place truth above any tradition;
spirit above any scripture;
freedom above authority."

For 20 years, the people came to hear these words. The Unitarian Church in Prague grew to be the largest Unitarian congregation in the world with over 3200 members.

Then, in 1939, the Czech regions of Bohemia and Moravia became protectorates of the Third Reich, and its citizens once again lost their independence.

The Gestapo targeted Czech politicians and intelligentsia. Given the wide and inquiring reach of Capek's ministry, it was not surprising that the Gestapo watched him closely.

Knowing this, he and his congregation supported one another by keep hope alive in quiet, subversive ways.

They had created a symbol for their church, one that they still use today. It's a large U, acting as a chalice that holds two bright, golden sunflowers. Underneath are the words Truth Prevails printed in Latin. During the Nazi occupation, those words were forbidden, so the church changed the words to Pravda Vitezi. The Nazis never discovered that those Czech words meant the same thing. Truth Prevails.

In his sermons, Capeck would use metaphorical language to predict the eventual downfall of the Nazi regime. He would say things like, "no matter how cold the winter, no matter how long, spring will come again."

And all through those years of Nazi occupation they continued to celebrate flower communion.

"On March 28th, 1941, Capek and his youngest daughter, Nora, were arrested for listening to enemy broadcasts and distributing the content of some BBC transmissions," a capital offense. The courts ruled in the Capeks' favor, granting leniency for his age.

But the Gestapo ignored the court's recommendations sending Zora to forced labor in Germany and Capek to Dachau.

The exact circumstances of his death are unclear, but it seems that he was killed either by poison gas or lethal injection on October 12, 1942. He was 72 years old.

Life in Williamsburg in 2007 couldn't be more different from Prague in 1942. And yet, in our media saturated culture, we are constantly brought face to face with the manifestations of evil from every corner of the world. The litany of genocide, oppression and injustice is too familiar to bear repeating.

What then is to be our response to the persistence of cruelty and malevolence ?

Shall we turn off the TV and stop getting the paper?
Shall we retreat to our gardens, our travels, our friends?

Shall we turn away from unpleasantness and greet only that which is beautiful, that which we have in such abundance here where we live?

Last week I listened to an interview with the playwright, Eve Ensler, who talked about this very situation in her own life.

Ensler is the creator of the “Vagina Monologues,” and has committed her life to ending violence against women.

She describes the pre-activist period of her life as one where she turned away from the cruelties of the world.

For most of her life, she says, almost all of her consciousness was closed off to what was happening to the vulnerable and powerless.

But instead of finding solace and protection in that insulated state, she found that closing herself off actually diminished her vitality.

Her life felt sad, disconnected and meaningless. (TED Talks, Finding Happiness in Body & Soul, 2004 audio recording of Eve Ensler).

We know it would be the same for us if we chose to turn away from the suffering of the world.

Because, as Capek said,

“It is worthwhile to live and fight courageously for sacred ideals.

Oh blow ye evil winds into my body's fire;

my soul you'll never unravel.

Even though disappointed a thousand times

or fallen in the fight

and everything would worthless seem,

I have lived amidst eternity.

Be grateful, my soul,

My life was worth living.”

Capek wrote these words while imprisoned at Dachau.

We know we have to face the real presence of evil among us, but how can we do it without plunging into despair, without losing heart?

One important way is by Remembering

By remembering that the human spirit cannot be extinguished, even in the midst of devastation and death.

Norbert Capek did not possess supernatural abilities.

He was a flawed human being – just like the rest of us.

Yet, he seemed to be more in touch with that inextinguishable human spirit than most people.

We can hear that spirit in his written words, words that echo a basic Unitarian tenet, first expressed by William Ellery Channing:

“I always ... start from the consciousness
that I am eternal, that what is highest in me is godly, and
that I am given the creative powers
to be able to cope with
and reshape every life, every situation, every pain,
every disappointment and every setback.
If we know we are eternal, we cannot lose anything, but
only gain and once more gain.”

What kind of practice will help us to remember these important truths about ourselves—
truths to which Capek was so powerfully connected?

It is the practice of coming together with others
seeking to recover the same memories
Retelling the old stories
singing the familiar songs
celebrating heroes
and reenacting the rituals in which the symbols of our heritage and our essential humanity
are displayed.

What I am describing is Communion.

Christians do this by the Eucharist.
By the sharing of wine and bread, they remember the life of Jesus.
“Do this in memory of me,” he told his followers on the eve of his death.
Despite centuries of persecution and violent oppression, those early Christian
communities remembered who they were by repeating their holy communion.

The Eucharist is not our ritual.
But Flower Communion is.
And for me, this communion is not a hollow exercise to fill the spaces at the end of a
worship year. It’s not merely a springtime celebration of gardening.

As a ritual, it binds intention and action; mind and body.
As a communal ritual, it binds us one to another
As a practice with a specific origin, it binds us to the story of Norbert Capek, the
Unitarian Church of Prague, and our distinguished tradition of honoring dissent and truth.

We use flowers, and not berries, or vegetables.
Because that’s what Capek used, and there’s something evocative about doing something
the same way again and again. In our times of trouble, this tradition is consoling to us.

Flowers come in such a diverse array, just like people.
And when you put them together in a bouquet, the whole arrangement is lovelier than
the individual flower.

And yet, there is a deeper meaning to the flower.
Flowers are tangible objects--
proof of the invisible, indomitable Spirit of Life.

“No matter how cold the winter,
no matter how long,
spring will come again.”

On May 18, 1980, Mt. St. Helen erupted.
An ash-filled plume rose 15 miles into the air.
Within three minutes, 230 square miles of land and timber were completely destroyed.

Yet just a few months later, a wildflower, known as willowherb, or fireweed, emerged from ashes. The Fireweed attracted new life into a place that appeared to be hopelessly uninhabitable. Bees and spiders; hawks and songbirds followed, along with elk who loved the taste of Fireweed blossoms.

The Fireweed is a compelling symbol of the heroic resilience of life.

Heroism comes from the audacity
to persevere in life when it seems utterly hopeless
and to sustain hope when it seems utterly lifeless.

Norbert Capek answered this audacious call
and so can we,

As a Community of Memory and Hope.

For what are we in this world to do
if not to be on the hopeful side of remembrance
rather than the despairing side of forgetfulness?

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