

Truth-telling, Soothsaying and Ancestral Wisdom.

UU Church of Vancouver

May 7, 2023

### **Reflection on the Theme by Allison King**

How the flower communion started.

100 Years ago, in 1923, a Czechoslovakian Unitarian minister named Norbert Čapek developed the wonderful tradition that we now celebrate as our Flower Ceremony. Čapek was raised catholic, and eventually became a Baptist minister. He accepted a call to lead a Baptist church in New York City in 1914, but resigned in 1919 after he realized that his viewpoints no longer reflected the Baptist tradition. He and his wife began to attend a Unitarian church in New Jersey in 1921 - for the same reason a whole lot of you come here: their children liked the religious education program.

After WW1 ended, and with Czechoslovakia now independent, he and his wife Maja returned home to Prague, where they founded the Prague Liberal Religious Fellowship. In just 20 years, his church had 3,200 members.

The early days of that church consisted mostly of lectures - no hymn singing, no rituals, no prayers or meditations - and some of his congregants felt that a spiritual component was missing. He didn't want to do a Christian communion service of bread and wine because his church—like ours—had people who believed different things.

So in 1923, he developed the flower ceremony. He turned to the beauty of flowers, and asked his congregants to bring a flower to church—from their gardens, the field, or the roadside. He invited each person to place their flower in a vase. Following the service, each person could take a flower from the vase—a different one than they had brought.

Čapek was a visionary minister, creating a church thinking beyond its doors, beyond what it thought possible. It was a church that was willing to take risks and to build a new way.

That is our church. That was Čapek's church.

His wife came back to the US in 1939 to help raise funds for relief efforts in Czechoslovakia, and brought the flower ceremony to the Unitarian Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts where she actually served as minister from 1940 - 1943.

Čapek was arrested by the Nazis in 1942 and sent to the Dachau concentration camp, where he died after being there for 14 weeks.

Even in starvation and torture, he held a flower ceremony with his fellow prisoners, finding whatever flowers they could among the weeds of the camp. They testified to a beauty larger than themselves, and a love that would outlive them. His spirit, courage, and commitment live on, today.

We continue the Flower Ceremony today not as a historical reenactment of something from the past, but an affirmation of our continuity with the generations of struggle for justice. The flower ceremony is for us to remember that even in the midst of difficulty and darkness, there is always the light of beauty.

Today, we celebrate this ritual of solemnity and joy.

### **Truth-telling, Soothsaying and Ancestral Wisdom by Jennifer Springsteen**

Our theme this month is truth, and like I usually do with a theme, I let it roll around my mind like a marble, hitting on this thing and that. I thought about what it means to tell the truth and also the mysterious soothsayers of the past who predicted the future, then about my grandmother who predicted the future, and then about when telling the truth is helpful and when it could be harmful. Really, that marble bounced all over the place.

When I think of soothsayers, I think of books that take place in the dark ages, with dungeons and old women and men hunched over or wicked-looking, moving around bones and stones and breaking eggs into cups to see into the future—usually because a king or queen requested it, hoping to gain some advantage on their enemies.

I also think of invisible soothsayers like the mirror in *Snow White*. “Mirror Mirror on the wall...”

But then I think about my own grandmother—we called her Nena. I told a story about her last week, too. Nena grew up a country girl in Virginia and like my grandfather, she worked tobacco and cotton fields. She loved fancy cloths and shoes and she was enamored with the glamorous actress, Elizabeth Taylor. So when Liz’s husband John Warner ran for the state Senate, Nena was front and center campaigning for him—which meant she was able to meet Liz Taylor. Anyway, Warner lost the race, but when Nena was asked, she said, “Oh, he’ll be in

office,” but she didn’t say how she knew. It was bad news, because the man who was elected died in a plane crash and Warner was in.

The other story hit closer to home. She had a vision about my great Uncle Willard’s death: a heart attack in his wood shop. She pined over whether to tell Willard or Aunt Addie, and decided against it. It would either be this thing or some other thing that killed him, and she didn’t want to interfere with the natural course of events. Sure enough, Willard died three days later in his shop.

Do you think she should have said something? What is the right action to take if you know what you think to be the truth? Would you tell every time? Would you tell your best friend they had a piece of food stuck in their teeth? Would you tell them you think they should work harder in school? Or that you don’t like their friends? Or visiting their house? All of that might be true, but sometimes the truth can be hurtful. How do you decide?

I listened to another story about a politician, this one was Diane Feinstein from California. After this country was attacked in 2001—911—Diane found out that our country tortured prisoners. She thought it should stop and that if people knew, they’d be so mad, they’d make sure it stopped. So she told the world what she knew. She told the truth. Some people think she shouldn’t have done that because it caused harm to the reputation of our country. It would be so hard to know the truth about something, something that went against what you believed was good and right, and not be sure if you should tell what you know. Again, how would you decide?

When I’m not clear on the right thing to do in a situation, I sit on my meditation

cushion and try to listen deeply to what wisdom I already have in my heart. Sometimes, I call on my grandmother, Nena, or other ancestors who might be able to help me out. I know that sounds odd to some people, but many of my recent teachers have opened this up for me. One asked, *Why would you call up a friend on the phone when you need help and support, but not consider calling upon your ancestors in the same way?* She said the ancestors were waiting to speak to us, the healthy ones in our line loved being called to us in this way.

Taya Ma Shère is a Jewish priestess and a professor at Starr King School for the Ministry where I attend seminary. She teaches Ritual Craft as Transformation and Multireligious Studies. Several years ago, before Covid, she traveled to Poland to perform an ancestral ritual at Auschwitz. She told us that in preparation for the ritual, she walked barefoot across the grounds, listening intently to what the ancestors might have to say and to learn how she could connect them to the living relatives who would take part the following weekend. The ritual was emotional, deeply moving, and she said there was so much anguish, she was sick for a week after, but she felt certain the ancestors appreciated this devotion.

It was Taya Ma who guided my class in meditation to “clear our ancestral lines.” I thought it was best to start my meditation with my grandmother, Nena, who I told you about before. She took me to a stone cottage in Ireland where I met two other ancestors, one who sat before a loom. I loved that vision, because my sister is also a weaver and a dyer of wool. I told my mother about these meditations and she said we had ancestors from Ireland named Coates (C O a t e s) which comes from cote (c o t e) meaning hut or cottage. These are the folks my grandmother wanted me to connect to. I have so much more listening to do here.

I'll admit to feeling doubtful and even a little goofy about receiving messages from ancestors or guides, but while it isn't the same or as easy as receiving an email message, I do believe we can trust what we are hearing. It is the same as having a gut feeling about something, and following that intuition. Unfortunately, we've been taught to ignore those feelings, our innate ways of knowing. Something to do with "reason" or the intellectual qualification of proof, which has left many of us disconnected from those who have gone before us. We shouldn't let reason keep us aloof from the world around us. There is so much beauty to our interconnected web that was once only mystery, that is now scientifically understand: the great networks of mycelium channeling conversations among trees, water that can be as strong as rock, generations of butterfly who stop at the same tree during migration. The list goes on.

And besides, we understand what our animal companions tell us, don't we? We know the difference between their barks and mews, hungry or excited or scared. We have come to understand them because we love them and want to communicate—the same goes for ancestors, human or otherwise. We need the desire and practice.

We are celebrating the flower communion today, and you heard Allison's story of how this tradition came to be. By following this tradition, those of us here today are following the truths of our ancestors. We are "building a new way" as one of our hymns says. We might not be able to see the future like Nena could, but we can push ourselves towards a future we long to be a part of.

One last memory my marble rolled into as I thought about truth. When I was young, maybe around Ethan's age or a little younger, I'd visit my friend Candace Johnson's house. Her parents had a large bathroom with mirrored cabinets on opposite sides of the wall, one with a sink, one a dressing table. I loved to go in there, because when I opened the mirrored doors just so, I could see the back of me and then millions of little me's all the way to the beginning of time, and in the front of me, little's me's into infinity. It gave me such a feeling in my belly. I stood transfixed by all that I could ever have been and all that I could be. There in the middle was the truth of it all—the truth of the real me, holding on to everything I could possibly know.

Because we are here today with many generations, let's offer a blessing to our families. You are also welcome to just close your eyes and listen, or to say the words with me.

May all my ancestors be happy and at peace.

May my living family be happy and at peace.

May I be happy and at peace.

May all future generations of my family receive only blessings and love from our ancestors.

May my ancestors guide me on my path of destiny and purpose, and may I embody their love and wisdom for the benefit of all my relations.

May all my ancestors and all my family be happy and at peace.

So it will be. Amen.