

## ***Flower Festival***

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

May 12, 2024

### **Reflection on the Theme by Lacey Stokes**

I grew up gardening with my grandparents. I loved working out in the garden with them, making forts out of bean teepees and digging up potatoes. Spuds, my Papa called them. One of my favorite memories of my grandfather, even now so many years after he's been gone, is him sitting in his old red chair by the garden just "watching the corn grow." Rows of tomatoes, peppers, beans, and always, flowers.

When I grew up I knew I wanted my own garden and when we moved into a duplex on two and half acres, I received permission from our landlord to plant one. It was my Papa who came over with his tractor to plough out a garden plot. Just a little one, I told him and he told me that was silly and plowed a huge garden bed. That year, I had romantic visions of my first vegetable garden. I was heavily pregnant, due in August with my third child and had infant twins. I imagined the twins playing happily on an old quilt while I weeded and tended. It did not go to plan and that first garden became mostly weeds and zucchini. A LOT of zucchini.

It took me a few years into adulthood to really be able to have a garden, between living in apartments, moving frequently and raising a whole bunch of little toddlers. But for the last decade, I've planted a big garden every year.

I am a little obsessed with growing food. I find it absolutely exhilarating to put a tiny seed into soil and a few months later fill a basket with ripe, red tomatoes. There's a magic in the garden I've yet to find anywhere else. A few years ago though, I discovered my garden could become more than just the utilitarian, food focused space I had created. My grandma has always said, "A garden is not a garden without flowers." I had often scoffed at this because unless it was a zucchini blossom, there weren't any flowers in my garden. I was focused on producing food. The garden had a purpose. It was practical.

I think I first planted flowers in my garden the same year I myself began to break away from ideas of tying value and productivity together. Especially for a woman raised in a religion that had very high expectations for women's productivity in the home and having a mother who had been quick to punish me for taking a break, I have struggled my entire adult life to relax and simply enjoy. It's a worldview that's foreign to me and as a result, I have had to very consciously choose to let go of this innate need to be productive at all times.

I literally used to feel guilt over taking time to bathe.

My garden and I have evolved and grown together over the years and now what was once a very practical space used only for growing food has blossomed into a colorful, chaotic jungle. Each raised bed spills over with a wild mixture of flowers, vegetables and herbs. They all tangle together creating a riot of colors and textures and my time spent in the garden helps me heal. It reminds me that I don't have to be practical and utilitarian at all times. I can enjoy my life. I can rest when I need to. I can sit in this space full of impractical flowers and remember that beauty can exist simply for the sake of being beautiful.

As it turns out, my grandma was right all along and I was silly for questioning her wisdom. She has proven through years of quiet lessons and shared hugs and smiles, taking time to visit whenever someone needs it and to lend a helping hand to anyone in need. Her wisdom and kindness has made her an elder who deserves respect, a matriarch for my family that I am so honored to know and love. Long after she's gone, I will be echoing her words. A garden is just not a garden without flowers.

***Flower Festival*© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

*Y por eso los grandes amores de muchos colores me gustan a mí*

And this love, this great love for all the colors pleases me greatly

This Mexican folk song is well-known in much of Latin America. I've never liked the English translation in our hymnal, but folk songs are passed down from one generation to the next, usually without notation and often because there is no original version written down, it gets changed as it passes along from one person to the next. They often wind up with nonsense words in them or seem rather silly – like the line

*All the colors, yes, the colors of pennants and streamers and plumes and bandannas* – sung to rhyme with banners.

But I suppose it is no worse than the verse in Spanish, *canta el gallo, canta el gallo con el quiri quiri quiri quiri quiri* – which means the rooster sings, oh the rooster sings cock-a-doodle, doodle do.

Despite its nonsense, the song is a celebration of colors and diversity – perfecto para este hermosa exhibición de flores – perfect for this beautiful display of flowers before us.

Květiny. *Flowers* in Czech. Norbert Capek would have conducted this ritual in the language of Czechoslovakia, now the Czech Republic, and the language is called Czech. *Květiny*. *Flowers*.

101 years ago, Norbert Fabian Capek introduced the flower ceremony to his congregation in Prague, Czechoslovakia, a congregation that became the largest Unitarian church in the world at the time. To understand the ceremony, it is important to understand the time in which Capek lived and died. Probably the children in the room have heard of the Nazi party and Adolf Hitler. What's important to know about them (for this story) is they espoused a really ugly and strange belief that you could tell by race (skin color, in part) which people were good and which were bad. They thought that small subgroup of white people were good, and everyone else bad – mostly Jewish people, but also gay people, transgender, black people, Poles, Ukrainians, Roman Catholic, Unitarians, freemasons, people who were disabled – basically everyone who did not fit their very narrow definition of this perfect person. They wanted to create a world in which everyone in it was the same, of the same race, of the same religion, of the same beliefs.

Hopefully, everyone in this room knows that this belief system is quite the opposite of what the Unitarian faith has stood for always. As a Unitarian minister, Capek was seeking a way to celebrate the variety of people that we are, and honor our lives as we are. This was a not so subtle way to defy the emerging Nazi philosophy that was endangering the world. And so he used the flower as the symbol of a human being. It's easy to see how beautiful this bouquet of flowers is – and how the variety – the pansies and flox and tulips and roses combine to make a more beautiful bouquet than a collection of flowers that are identical. The same is true for humans. Sure, there may be less conflict when we're more alike, but we sure don't get any wiser if we all hold the same beliefs, have the same backgrounds, speak the same languages, and see the world in the same way.

To some of you, this may seem like the same old sermon, the same old message about how we value diversity and deal with the differences among us... but let me tell you why I talk about this so much. It is because we have not figured it out yet and we are not good at it. We. I include myself in the we. It is difficult work. It's easy to say that we value diversity. It's harder to live through those moments of disagreement and hold onto our dignity and identity. Why is it so hard? Because we are relational beings. We live in relationship with others and crave relationships with others. We are born into families we love or want to love. We seek approval from others and want to be loved by others. Sometimes the differences feel like they threaten our identity or dignity or both, and so we have to talk about it again and again and again, so we can eventually stop repeating the tragic story from Capek's time.

Of course, talking is not the only thing we need to do. We need to listen. We need to interrupt our everyday interactions and try again, and try again. We need to experiment with other ways of doing things, and look at the world from someone else's perspective, as much as possible. In short, we need to change, while holding onto our dignity and identity.

Change, while holding onto our dignity and identity... what does that mean? Well, I think it means we celebrate who it is we are even as we seek constant improvement, to get better. But we notice and acknowledge our unique contributions in this world.

I'm curious about what you may think are your unique contributions to this community? How are you unique and different from those surrounding you? just answer the question for yourself in the silence. Or if you've got a small child with you, feel free to have a little conversation. How are you unique and different from those around you? [silence]

and then think of someone who you consider to be different from you. How are they unique and different and how do they contribute to our community? What have you personally learned from them? [silence]

What flower do you see or smell before you which you think best represents you? Which flower before you would you choose to represent that person you think of as different from you?

That's the simple beauty of this ceremony. As you leave this building today, you are invited to approach the flowers at the exit with a sense of how important it is for each of us to address our world and one another with gentleness, justice, and love. And you are asked to select a flower – different from the one you brought. Notice its color and shape, smell and beauty – handle it carefully. For it is a gift that someone else has brought to you. It represents that person's unique humanity and therefore deserves your kindest touch. Additionally, this morning, you are invited to take home a sheet of seed paper to grow your own wildflowers in remembrance of this day.

This is my favorite UU ritual. I remember it mostly from First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City where our minister, the Rev. Richard Henry, celebrated it without fail. He traveled to the Czech Republic many times to research the origin of the service and wrote a book on Capek's life, ministry, and death.

When I got married 33 years ago this July, we held a flower ritual in the service – Perhaps not the most well thought out idea, given we got married in a city most of our family didn't live in, so they had to basically buy flowers at the local grocery to contribute – but it was beautiful and meaningful.

Last year you held this ceremony without me. Our intern minister, Jennifer Springsteen, led this service with Allison King and our then acting Director of Religious Education, Erin Nugent. I was traveling to Michigan to be "mother-of-the-groom" to my son who was getting married on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May.

As we left that service, they too gave us seed paper of wildflowers. Most of us had to travel to be at their wedding also, and as scientists, my son Theo and his beloved, Marie, thoughtfully researched the region we each came from so that the seed paper we received would grow flowers that would thrive in our home region.

This ceremony reminds us that we accept, cherish and celebrate our differences. The next time you encounter someone whose differences make you uncomfortable, remember your flower and its beauty, and may your actions and words be ones of gentleness, justice, and love.

Will you please join me in a moment of prayer. This prayer written by Unitarian minister, Norbert Capek, before he was sent to a Nazi concentration camp and made a martyr to our movement and our liberty. Let us pray.

“In the name of Providence,  
which implants in the seed the future of the flower  
and in our hearts the longing for people to live in harmony;

“In the name of the highest, in whom we move  
and who makes the mother and father, the brother and sister,  
lover and loner what they are;

“In the name of sages and great religious leaders, who sacrificed their lives  
to hasten the coming of the age of mutual respect-

“Let us renew our resolution-sincerely to be real brothers and sisters (and siblings)  
regardless of any kind of bar which estranges us from each other.

“In this holy resolve, may we be strengthened  
knowing that we are God's family;  
that one spirit, the spirit of love, unites us;  
and endeavor for a more perfect and more joyful life. Amen.”