

**All Ages Flower Festival**  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver  
May 17, 2026

**Reflection on the Theme** Laura Nissen

Spring in the pacific northwest is like nothing else. For months and months we watch it rain - sometimes we love to jump in the puddles...but other times we don't and we really wish it could just be sunny again and we could all be outside and play without our coats on. Sometimes we even forget that spring exists...and then...all at once, it starts getting warm again, the birds start singing and spring is BACK!!! A sure sign of this is the explosion of flowers that happens every year at this time. So many different kinds, colors, shapes and smells. Pretty soon - everyone seems to just be happier again...full of smiles, laughs and a little bit of springtime hope for things we can't always put into words, but feel in our hearts. Summer is coming! I just feel better in every possible way - don't you too?

This time of year is kind of magic - and it reminds us how special it is to live in our part of the world. And it all the more special when we get to share it and celebrate it with people that we love. Like people in our families, or people in this community.

As a UU, the flower communion has always been my favorite service of the year. Imagine my delight at getting the chance to share today, to spend extra and special time with this UU ritual where we all file in with our flowers, share them, and welcome spring together.

The story of Norbert Capek's original ceremony with its devotional, "outside" the Christian tradition, the stubbornness of hope in the face of unbearable challenge and oppression. This ceremony is an act of determined, intentional resilience, an expression of both gratitude AND generosity, and an open act of colorful rebellion against all forces that seek to squelch the passionate desire for justice and well-being. Every year, this inspires me so much...and the image of us all (still) coming together with our flowers, imbuing them with our love for the world and for each other and for the possibility of a time ahead we cannot yet see being better is a beautiful one.

Of course we need some hope these days. Every day some new variation of darkness becomes visible and we are faced with a deeper need to create hope together. Maybe you get worried too. However in the midst of this, there is also light, possibility and extraordinary grace clearly visible if you look around. Communities are loving each other through these times, and I love being part of that with all of you.

I recently learned about a new effort and movement, inspired by the work of the activist Grace Lee Boggs, called the "civic love" project where people come together to search for community bonds and opportunities to connect with each other. Learning about strangers (and actually seeking to actively and explicitly eliminate the concept of strangers) is the goal. This quality, these practices, I believe are our best tool with which to confront authoritarianism and people who tell other people how to live and what to think. Look for ways to connect through these days, through these times. In other words - say hi to people that you don't know when you get a chance. You will be doing your part to heal this hurting world. Our flowers are not just inspiration, they are our tools to remind us how much we mean to each other. This is where our best energy for change and renewal comes from - and spring our most precious backdrop for nature's reminder that though it may look bleak at times, there are surprises (important and life affirming ones...) yet ahead.

I will spend a lot of this springtime with my nose and my camera buried in every flower I can find. On purpose. I will analyze, rage and strategize about the news and I will carry this inspiration towards whatever comes next. And I will be open to be learning about new depths of love, beauty, community and resistance in these times of struggle, of war, of fear.

May spring flowers fill your heart with unimagined grace and possibility.

***Flowers Over the Years*** © by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

I find myself particularly moved this morning by this, my last, Flower service with the congregation. As most of you know, I'm retiring at the end of July. There is a continuity with this service throughout my life and like Laura, it is my favorite service of the year. I don't remember the flower communion or celebration in churches I attended before the First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City. We began attending there when we moved to Utah and I was in high school. The flower communion was an important part of that congregation's liturgical year. The minister in Salt Lake City when I was there was the Rev. Richard Henry and he wrote a book about Norbert Čapek – let me quote from the book jacket:

“This is the true story of an inspiring leader who, during one of the most turbulent periods in modern history, built a religious movement in his native Czechoslovakia that numbered close to 10,000 people. Based on years of research with documents uncovered in the Čapek Family library in Prague, Richard Henry draws on Čapek's diaries, unfinished autobiography and personal items such as sheet music, scrapbooks and photographs. Čapek is an engrossing story of political upheaval, religious freedom, murder, great heroism and loss.”

My mom traveled with Dick Henry to the Czech Republic in 2001 and brought me back this vase, which I bring to church every year we celebrate the Flower service.

But maybe I should start this story in middle school, when I learned I was to have Ms. Watkins as my social studies teacher. Ms. Watkins turned out to be one of my favorite teachers ever, but before I knew that, when I had only heard of her, she terrified me. Some of what terrified me was that she taught about the Holocaust. The Holocaust is the name we give to a terrible episode in human history in which the German Nazi's imprisoned, starved, and executed millions of people: most of them were Jewish, but some were gay or LGBTQ+, Unitarians, members of other minority groups. Nearly 2/3 of the Jewish population of Europe was killed. It is a terrible chapter of human history and I really didn't want to learn about it. I remember crying and telling my mom I really didn't want to have Ms. Watkins as my teacher and I didn't want to learn about this violence. But of course, I did get Ms. Watkins, and I did come to really love her and learn so much from her. I survived 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and learned about some of the terrible things humans can do to other humans.

It was then two years later that my family moved to Utah and we drove 45 minutes from Ogden to Salt Lake City in order to attend the only Unitarian church in Utah at the time, First Unitarian Church. It was

there we met Dick Henry, another influential person in my life, and I first remember this flower ceremony we are celebrating today.

Skip then another few years, and after graduate school, I moved to Chelan, Washington with the man who would become my husband, Stuart. He had a job as the city planner and I would eventually get a job teaching – yep – 7<sup>th</sup> grade, just like Ms. Watkins. There was no UU church in Chelan, so we drove 45 minutes down to Wenatchee to the Cascade Unitarian Fellowship. The first Sunday we went just happened to be Flower Communion! It was in late May and, as I recall, it was the last Sunday of the year – for they shut down over the summer entirely. I made Stuart pull over on the highway to pick some yellow roses – we joked about the yellow rose of Texas – my husband, Stuart, is from Texas – and we participated in that Flower service in Wenatchee, and went to the end of the church year picnic following that service, making lifelong friends.

When Stuart and I married – I think that very summer – we decided to incorporate the Flower Celebration into our wedding service. We got married in Colorado Springs – a place neither of us knew - because Stuart had a brother there, and it was half way between my home of Washington state (yes, even though I've lived many other places, I was born in Seattle and always had family here) and his home in Texas – he also had lived many other places, but his family was still in Texas. It was a great way to get beautiful flowers for a wedding without having to buy them! We held a very low tech wedding, planning it (to my mother's consternation) in months. I wrote the ceremony myself – you could tell I wanted to be a minister! I now feel sorry for that poor minister we hired who was asked to read my words instead of utilizing his own experience and training to craft the service. But I did learn how to run a wedding rehearsal from him – and still do it the way he did.

I don't really recommend a flower communion as a wedding strategy for a destination wedding, because basically everyone had to buy flowers at a store because they were far away from their yards and gardens, but we didn't think of that then. It was a beautiful wedding and as my grandfather would remark years later, the marriage took. We're still married – it will be thirty five years this July.

First I was a teacher, like Ms. Watkins, and later I became a minister like Dick Henry. Here is a photo of Dick, Stuart and me at my ordination. That's the ceremony that gives ministers the title of Reverend. I served a congregation in Michigan for 15 years, and then came here to be with you in Vancouver. It was in that Michigan congregation that a member gave me this stole – felt morningglories which I wear each year now when I hold this ceremony.

Here's the hard part: I never imagined that those horrible events that I learned about in 7<sup>th</sup> grade with Ms. Watkins could ever take place again. I didn't understand how the citizens of Germany could elect a man like Adolf Hitler and watch concentration camps be built and rights taken away from its citizens, and allow masked men to invade cities violently hurting, imprisoning, and killing people.... That scary things like that are taking place in this country at this time just reminds me that humans can and do do terrible things to other humans.

What helps us survive, however, is being together with groups of people who share our values in congregations such as ours in 2026, and the one in Prague in 1923. Ceremonies such as the flower celebration remind us that we are all different and beautiful and valued and loved. We reject the ideologies that say some people are more important than others, or that power and money matter more than people.

This morning we have brought flowers that represent us – I brought a yellow rose this morning, and I share this flower and myself with this community of flowers. When we leave today, we take home a different flower. It is intentional that we take with us a flower different than the one we brought. Norbert Čapek taught that it is a symbol of our acceptance of diversity, our acceptance of difference. It is the admonition to love your neighbor as yourself that Jesus taught – we take home a different flower as a symbol of the acceptance and love of neighbor, and know that a neighbor, another will take home our flower symbolizing their acceptance and love of our individuality and uniqueness and beauty. Together we make up a bouquet of flowers

“Who can be grim in the face of such abundance?” Asks Lynn Ungar. “There is nothing to compare, no need for beauty to compete.” “This is what community looks like—this vibrant jostle, stem by stem declaring the marvelous joining.” We are grateful for these gifts, these flowers, this ritual, and this community. Giver of all, we thank thee. Will you please rise in body or voice to sing hymn #76, For Flowers that Bloom?