

# Flower Communion: Background and Meaning

Bill Baylis for service on June 12, 2016

The origin of the flower communion goes back to 1923. It was an inspiration of Norbert Fabian Čapek (1870-1942) and his wife, Maja. Here's a bit of history about the Čapeks:



Norbert was born on June 3, 1870, into a Catholic family in Southern Bohemia. Even as a boy, he had wanted to join the priesthood, but he soon became disillusioned by the Catholic church and the cynical attitude of his priest. At Age 18 he left the Catholicism and became an evangelical Baptist minister. He traveled, preached, and published widely from Saxony to the Ukraine, and founded almost a dozen churches. He was particularly influenced by the Moravian Brotherhood and the idea of Free Christianity (Christian Unitarianism). Čapek played a significant role in an international religious organization now called the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), founded in 1900 by Unitarians. At the 1910 Berlin IARF congress, he was introduced to officers of the American Unitarian Association. Čapek also attended congresses in London, Copenhagen, Boston and Oxford. He frequently pushed IARF leaders to be more ambitious in organizing and recruiting than they were

inclined to be.

His views became progressively more liberal and anti-clerical, and he published many articles not only on religion, but also on politics and psychology, and some of these upset ruling German authorities. In 1914, he fled to the U.S., where he became editor of a Czech language newspaper and served as pastor of the First Slovak Baptist Church in Newark. He began to study for his Ph.D. in New York and there he met Czech-born Maja Oktavec, who had come to the U.S. in 1907 at age 19. She graduated from Columbia University in Library Science and worked in the N.Y. Public Library. They married on June 23, 1917. (He had been married and widowed twice before and had 9 children).



Maja Čapek



Norbert Čapek

Meanwhile, Norbert's increasingly liberal views were getting him in trouble with Slovak Baptists. They subjected him to two heresy trials, starting in 1915, and although he was acquitted, he decided to leave the Baptist ministry in 1919 and seek a more accommodating outlet for his spiritual drive. He and Maja turned to a more progressive and liberal religion, Unitarianism, and in January 1921 they joined the First Unitarian Church of Essex County (in Orange, New

Jersey), led there by Maja and their children's enthusiasm for the church's religious education program and by the "clear heads and warm hearts" they found there.

Čapek worked hard during World War I—writing, speaking and sponsoring public meetings—in a campaign to win U.S. public and governmental support for the independence of Czechoslovakia from the Austro-Hungarian Empire at war's end. He also wrote hymns. Now the war was over and their homeland

of Czechoslovakia was independent. They decided to return to Prague in July 1921, and in the following year, they founded a new Unitarian congregation called the Liberal Religious Fellowship. It grew rapidly and with financial help from the American Unitarian Association and the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, soon purchased a large building dubbed "Unitaria" at the foot of the Charles Bridge. The early worship services generally consisted of lectures.



The minister wore no robe or vestments; and the congregation dispensed with elaborate rituals, singing of hymns, ornate decoration, and formal or prescribed prayers. While popular, some members felt that the congregation lacked a spiritual dimension.

Now, Unitarians are said to be the most highly educated of any church group. That also makes them some of the most independent and, like cats, they don't herd easily. They have independent and differing thoughts, hopes, perspectives, and visions. While this is a valued trait, it can lead to a serious lack of community. Čapek felt a need for ritual of communal participation to replace Catholic communion, and with Maja, he introduced the Flower Communion in June 1923: each member would bring a flower to the church, where it was placed in a large central vase. At the end of the service, each would take home a different flower. This symbolized the uniqueness of each individual, and the coming together in communion to share this uniqueness.

The flower communion was popular and its practice spread rapidly. It was usually performed on one of the last Sundays in June, just before the summer break. Maja was ordained as a Unitarian minister in 1926 and helped spread the Flower Communion throughout the U.S. during her 1940 tour. Together with daughter Bohdana and her husband, Karel Hašpl, Norbert and Maja built a vigorous nation-wide religious movement. In just twenty years the Unitarian Church in Prague, grew to 3,200 members, to become the largest Unitarian congregation in the world and some 8,000 Czechs considered themselves Unitarian.

Let's begin the ceremony. Many of you have brought flowers this morning and added them to our communal bouquet. A single flower can be lovely, but it is a bouquet of flowers that most inspires the senses and moves the spirit. Let's start the ceremony. Please take part whether or not you have contributed to the bouquet yourself. We have brought extras so there should be enough to go around.

At the start of the flower communion, Dr. Čapek would consecrate the flowers with words like these:

*In the Spirit of Life, let us bless these flowers as messengers of fellowship and love. May they remind us, amid diversities of knowledge and of gifts, to be one in desire and affection, and in devotion to justice and the search for truth. May they also remind us of the value of comradeship, of doing and sharing together. May we cherish friendship as one of our most precious gifts. May we not let awareness of another's differences discourage us, or sully our relationship, but may we realize that, whatever we can do, great or small, the efforts of all of us are needed to secure the place that love, respect, hope, and justice should have in this world.*

I invite those willing and able to stand and come to the front of the church, circulating around in a counter-clockwise fashion. Please choose and take a single flower other than one that you brought, and return to your seats. [Instruct to make this orderly. This is an experiment!] While the flowers are being selected, I will take a subset to those who remain seated. In the words of Maja Čapek, the exchange of flowers today means that we shall walk, without reservation, with anyone—regardless of social status, or former religious affiliation, as long as they are ready and willing join in a search of truth and service to humanity.

[After people are settled again.] Look at your flower, admire its beauty, cherish it. It is a gift from our UU community, part of a lovely bouquet. You are part of this community and share in its love, hope, and friendship.

Flowers remind us of the unity of life and the continuing changing nature of the world. Beauty, bright colours, fragrance, and even electric fields attract insects like bees, humming birds, and insect predators like birds. They're an integral part of any tranquil or healing garden to calm the soul and to stir the senses. But flowers were not always present on Earth. Earth is evolving, growing ever more complex and interconnected.

During the [Cretaceous period](#) about 130 million years ago (MYA), the first flowers (angiosperms) appeared (*Montsechia vidalii* reported in August 2015, in current Spain and *Archaeofructus*, in current China—both aquatic species) and co-evolved with bees and other insects. This was long after the first dinosaurs but well before their extinction 66 MYA. First, before any flowers, came seeds—a fantastic evolutionary development for plants—roughly 300 MYA. Seeds can survive in a dormant state (delayed germination up to 2000 yrs documented) for ages of droughts, heat, cold, physical beating (even shotgun blasts), competition, and even time in space. Some seeds from 125 MYA have been studied and it's pretty certain that the first seeds go back about 300 MYA. Flowers gave plants a way of distributing their genome in pollen not only through wind and rain but through animals. It was more specific and wasted less pollen if it could be tied to specific insect species. One way this is accomplished is by holding the pollen tight until insects, usually bees (bumble bees but not honey bees), come and vibrate at the right frequency, about middle C (261 Hz – again, like the gravitational waves!) in a process called sonication or buzz pollination. Potatoes, tomatoes, eggplants, and peppers; pumpkins, zucchinis, blueberries and cranberries (some 20,000 species): these food plants are examples of crops that require buzz pollination.

This co-evolution of flowers and insects is a good example of the inter-dependence of the web of life: species do not evolve independently but in concert with the evolution of others and of the world. Another example is the co-evolution of fruit trees with nuts and squirrels, but this came much more recently, about 30 MYA. May it remind us of the interconnectedness of the web of life and the fact that life is changing; lives are transitory, precious, and fragile. The only constant is change. Life changes the very world that nurtured it. We can see the effects of change that humankind is now inflicting on Earth.

Let me finish by returning now to Norbert Čapek and his fate. Liberal Unitarian tradition embodies the search for truth and meaning and the inherent worth and dignity of people of differing faiths, and this can be seen as dangerous to controlling idealist regimes like the Nazis or communists, and Prague was under the Nazi regime from 1939 to 1945 and under communist control from 1948-1989. When the Nazis took control of Prague in 1940, the very success of the Unitarian Church raised apprehension. Dr. Čapek's gospel of the inherent worth and beauty of every human person was found to be--as Nazi court records show-- "...too dangerous to the Reich [for him] to be allowed to live." On March 28, 1941 Norbert Čapek, the Minister of the Unitarian Church of Czechoslovakia and his youngest daughter Zora were arrested by the Nazi Gestapo. They were charged and convicted of listening to foreign radio broadcasts and high treason. Čapek's initial sentence was for a year in prison with time credited for the eleven months that he had already been confined while waiting for trial. However, the German official in charge of the occupied Czechoslovakia then was killed, and Dr. Čapek became a victim of the fierce German retaliation for his murder. Čapek spent a year in Dresden Prison before being sent to Dachau and was killed the next year during a Nazi "medical experiment." This gentle man suffered a cruel death, but his message of human hope and decency lives on through his Flower Communion, which we celebrate today. Maja Čapek did not learn of Norbert's death until after the war. After her lecture tour, she served as a minister in New Bedford, Massachusetts, for three years. From 1944 to 1950 she worked for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, helping displaced persons settle in Yugoslavia, Egypt and Palestine. She died December 1, 1966.

The closing words from Rev. Norbert Čapek:

*In the name of that which implants in the seed the future of the tree and in the hearts of humanity the longing for people living in neighborly love; In the name of the highest, in whom we move and who makes the mother, the father, brother, and the sister what they are; In the name of sages and great religious leaders, who sacrificed their lives to hasten the coming of the kingdom of peace and justice; Let us renew our resolution sincerely to be real brothers and sisters regardless of any kind of barrier which estranges person from person. In this holy resolution may we be strengthened, knowing that we are one family; that one spirit, the spirit of love, unites us; and that our work together for a more perfect and more joyful life leads us on.*

See also in *Singing the Living Tradition* these hymns by Norbert Čapek: 8 "Mother Spirit, Father Spirit"; 28 "View the Starry Realm"; 78 "Color and Fragrance", readings 723, 724, and the book by Richard Henry, *Norbert Fabian Čapek: A Spiritual Journey* (Skinner House, 1999). Material freely adapted also from the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Essex County, UUA and Wikipedia websites: <http://www.essexuu.org/capek.html>, [www.uua.org/documents/zottolireginald/flowercommunion.pdf](http://www.uua.org/documents/zottolireginald/flowercommunion.pdf), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norbert\\_%C4%8Capek](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norbert_%C4%8Capek)