

Encourage (Flower Celebration)

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

Rev. Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel

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During the spring of 2020, author, vlogger, and Liverpool football fan John Green wrote a series of essays exploring how he feels about the many human things that he encounters in his life. This became his collection *The Anthropocene Reviewed: Essays on a Human-Centered Planet*. His opening chapter is about the showtune “You’ll Never Walk Alone” and how it brought him great comfort throughout the Pandemic.

Although he admits that he finds the song somewhat cheesy, he also finds a truth in it about the importance of carrying on, with an invitation to consider that, even when one feels alone, we aren’t necessarily so. He particularly appreciates that, alongside its call to *go on*, it doesn’t gloss over the fact that tragedy is there. He notes how the song is sung by fans of the Liverpool Football Club both in celebration *and* in lamentation.

Green cites a moment when medical professionals *encourage* one another by singing the song, through a glass wall, reminding each other that things are tough, *and* that they are not alone, as colleagues cheer on their colleagues. And they do that with a song that brings fond memories, and which acknowledges hard times.

“You’ll Never Walk Alone” may not be your particular flavour, but you may have other songs, anthems, hymns, that bring out that bitter and sweet reminder that times can be tough, *and* that there are others out there, somewhere, who share in your feelings, and who can be there for you.

Or maybe it's not a song that you find encouraging... it might be something that can be done together.

This past month, many Indigenous folks in our country began an online “challenge” to pose as *mermen*... men in mermaid-like poses. Why? To bring some more fun into the Indigenous community... a bit of the humour in daily life that has fostered resilience in their shared experiences; to challenge perceptions of masculinity, and play around with the way men can look in public; to *encourage* each other through the reality of hard times they have lived through – and which they want to live through.

They posed a “challenge” to remind each other... that they were *there* for each other. They challenged each other to remind their community that they'd never walk alone. That, yes, they might feel alone... that the world is not always a just or a happy place, but that they'd be there. That they can laugh together, and do something together, to show to each other that they will *go* on.

In interviews about their participation, some of the men expressed initially feeling a degree of embarrassment, or discomfort, in posing for the pictures... the challenge was indeed *challenging* for them to follow through with. And... they also felt they wanted to engage, to participate in a showing of mutual support. And maybe even find out that it was a worthwhile experience all along, to encourage each other, through all that the Indigenous experience can entail. Even if that means pretending to don on the tail of merfolk.

Merfolk are back in vogue these days, perhaps in part because of the live-action remake of the animated classic *The Little Mermaid*, which has recently come out in theatres. The original film has become a lot of things, since it came out in 1989. It is was a commercial success, it was a critical success, it is an Academy Award-winning cartoon (which is

rather rare), it is also considered the beginning of what is now called the Disney Renaissance.

For me, it is a reminder of my dad, and what his fatherhood looked like when I was a kid in Mexico.

I fondly remember when my dad took me to a movie theatre in Mexico City called the Disney Castle, which specialized in children's features, to see the new animation feature that would usher in that new golden age of Disney movies – *The Little Mermaid*.

My dad has never been a fan of singing in movies, but he understood that taking his kid to the newest animated feature was one way to embody late 20th-century fatherhood, and he endured the singing that came with the cartoon crab, and the mermaids prancing around with fish and stingrays, dubbed in Spanish to the Oscar-winning calypso tune of *Under the Sea*.

I recently watched the new live action remake, and despite whatever cynicism may come with this latest wave of Disney remakes... I gotta tell you, I was *hopping* when I heard the opening chords to *Under the Sea*. It brought up those fond memories of that time my father took me to see *The Little Mermaid*, at the Disney Castle theatre in Mexico City, whatever his misgivings might have been.

A lot of things come with fatherhood and parenting, and it's hard to get it right all the time. That's true of my dad, and I suspect it may be true for those of you who've had fathers, or who have been fathers, or who have experienced parenting in any way.

Along with that reality, my dad has done a lot of things right, teaching me how to get hydrogen out of water for science fair projects, how to write clearly and concisely, how to think critically about the news of the world and about pursuing responsible spiritual learning and practice. And about the value of sitting through *some* discomfort, from time to time, for the sake of duty to self and others.

He has encouraged my growth, and has been part of the choir that reminds me that I don't go it alone, even when it feels that way.

He has also taken me to the sea, at the movies and in real life – partly for *his* sake as he has pursued his passion of exploring the ocean, as well as for *my* sake as I pursued my passion of... being a kid in the water, around and under the sea.

And the showtune *Under the Sea* will always be part of that.

Showtunes have often been seen as a staple in the Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ experience. They can remind folks in sexual and gender minorities that there is a community out there that has their back, that also lives their pain – the real pain of exclusion; that shares their celebration and their pride, even when they feel alone. That there is a family for everyone, be it a family of birth, or a family of choice.

A spiritual family of choice is what Norbert Čapek had in mind when he led the Liberal Religious Fellowship in Prague, in then Czechoslovakia. A hundred years ago, he understood that people were often left out from some communion services that excluded folks who did not subscribe to a Trinitarian understanding of the sacred, or who were not included in the bread and wine celebrations at other communities of faith.

He wanted to include *anyone* who would partake in a shared ritual. Sharing in the beauty of a flower with others, no matter your religious or spiritual background, or your gender. He understood that flowers can transcend artificial norms of masculinity or gender expectations, that they called on our common human experience and appreciation for the sacred, and to our drive to remind each other that we are not alone, even when we feel that way.

A hundred years ago, Norbert Čapek, his wife Maja, and those around them found that a ritual based on accessibility was a way to encourage each other, through difficult times.

On days like today, my friends, we are often invited to participate in this, now-centennial practice.

The flowers that we share in a Flower Celebration are brought in by others, who share our space and our time, and when we take a flower, we can bring, in a sense, those other people along with us, as a reminder that there are others out there, alongside us.

Even when we are on our own, my friends, and when we may *feel* alone, because we will, flowers shared can be a reminder on days like today, that we'll never *really* go it alone.

Be it a shared flower, my friends, a shared song, or a shared cause, encouragement can take many forms.

My friends, may we seek such encouragement in its many forms.

So may it be,
In the spirit of diverse mutual encouragement,
Amen

*Suggested Hymns:***Opening Hymn #78 Color and Fragrance**

~)| Words: Norbert F. Čapek, 1870-1942

~)| trans. by Paul and Anita Munk, © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

~)| English version by Grace Ulp, 1926-

~)| Music: Norbert F. Čapek, 1870-1942

O BARVY VUNE

Hymn #8 Mother Spirit, Father Spirit

~)| Words: Norbert F. Čapek, 1870-1942

~)| trans. by Paul and Anita Munk, © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

~)| English version by Richard Frederick Boeke, 1931-

~)| Music: Norbert F. Čapek, 1870-1942

~)| harmony by David Dawson, 1939-

MĀTI SVETA 8.3.8.3.8.3.

Closing Hymn #66 When the Summer Sun Is Shining

~)| Words: Sydney Henry Knight, 1923-

Music: From *The Southern Harmony*, 1855, arr. by Margaret W. Mealy, b. 1922,

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HOLY MANNA