

*Flower Communion***A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on August 1, 2021**

While away on my recent leave, someone asked me how I decide what to write about. I want to hold up what is happening in our lives. I want to hold up what I've learned in my spiritual life and share it. Hopefully, I sprinkle it with history and scholarship, and I arrive on Sunday with a message. I had written a flower communion message this week, but over the weekend I felt it wasn't enough, it wasn't on target for what is happening in our lives right now. I decided not to abandon our flower communion service this morning. But I desperately needed to look at communion considering the pandemic and in light of the delta variant and the unvaccinated. This life-or-death situation is most pressing in our lives.

The theme for our messages this month is communion. I know for some of us Unitarians the word communion may ruffle our theological feathers. Well, here is another—ritual. Yes, we Unitarians have a communion ritual. It is the flower communion service. This service was created by Norbert Capek (1870-1942), who founded the Unitarian Church in Czechoslovakia. He introduced this special service to that church on June 4, 1923. For some time, he had felt the need for some symbolic ritual that would bind people more closely together. The format had to be one that would not alienate any who had forsaken other religious traditions. The traditional Christian communion service with bread and wine was unacceptable to the members of his congregation because of their strong reaction against the Catholic faith. So he turned to the native beauty of their countryside for elements of a communion which would be genuine to them. This simple service was the result. It was such a success that it was held yearly just before the summer recess of the church.

The flower communion was brought to the United States in 1940 and introduced to the members of our Cambridge, Massachusetts, church by Dr. Capek's wife, Maja V. Capek. The Czech-born Maja had met Norbert Capek in New York City while he was studying for his Ph.D., and it was at her urging that Norbert left the Baptist ministry and turned to Unitarianism. The Capeks returned to Czechoslovakia in 1921 and established the dynamic liberal church in Prague; Maja Capek was ordained in 1926. It was during her tour of the United States that Maja introduced the flower communion, which had been developed in the Prague church, at the Unitarian church in Cambridge. Unfortunately, Maja was unable to return to Prague due to the outbreak of World War II, and it was not until the war was over that Norbert Capek's death in a Nazi concentration camp was revealed.

From this beginning the service has spread to many of our Unitarian Universalist congregations and has been adapted along the way. People were asked to bring a flower of their choice, from their own gardens. or from the field or roadside. When they arrived at church a large vase stood waiting in the vestibule, attended by two young members of the Church School. Each person was asked to place their own flower in the vase. This signified that it was by their own free will they joined with the others. The vase that contained all the flowers was a symbol of the united church fellowship. The young attendants helped with the arrangement of the bouquet. Later they carried

the vase up to the front of the auditorium and placed it on a table there. Dr. Capek then said a prayer, after which he walked over and consecrated the flowers while the congregation stood. The two attendants then took the vase back out into the vestibule. After the service, as people left the church, they went to the vase and each took a flower from the vase other than the one that they had brought. The significance of the flower communion is that as no two flowers are alike, so no two people are alike, yet each has a contribution to make. Together the different flowers form a beautiful bouquet.

This common bouquet would not be the same without the unique addition of each individual flower, and thus it is with our church community, it would not be the same without each and every one of us. Thus, this service is a statement of our community. By exchanging flowers, there is a willingness to walk together in our search for truth, disregarding all that might divide us. Each person takes home a flower brought by someone else - thus symbolizing our shared celebration in community. This communion of sharing is essential to a free people of a free religion. And so, it turns out that Norbert Capek's ideas around ritual and tradition, finding ways of binding us together, even when separated is relevant this morning. We are living in a time where separation just might save our lives, and so we need to create new rituals and practices for ourselves. I wonder which rituals have helped you manage the pandemic and its effects. How has tradition informed and shaped you in this strange time?

Beginning in the late 20th century, many began to observe a deterioration in the social networks of the United States. In the book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam observed that nearly every form of civic organization had undergone drops in membership exemplified by the fact that, while more people are bowling than in the 1950s, there are fewer bowling leagues. This results in a decline in "social capital", described by Putnam as "the collective value of all 'social networks' and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other." Let us hold up the idea of communitarianism which emphasizes the need to balance individual rights and interests with that of the community as a whole and argues that individual people are shaped by the culture and values of their communities. Communitarianism and our faith have the goal of uniting with others, not personal fulfillment. Virtue is always conceived of in terms of relationship and not in terms of self.

I've share with you before that in 2007 I started working with the United Nations Women's Human Rights Network. It was then that I met my first real swami. Before then the only notion of a swami I had was Bugs Bunny. Do you remember Bugs as a swami? He asked a guy if he wanted his palm read and then painted his extended palm with red paint. His name was Swami Agnivesh. I am introducing him to you because he said something to me that I've held onto. In fact, what he said is a reason I love Unitarian Universalism and will always hold this faith close. The Swami said, "If one of us is not free, none of us are free." This phrase wasn't new to me but hearing it while looking in the eyes of a Hindu religious teacher was a transcendent experience for me. Another hero of mine is Nelson Mandela who said, "To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others." Our freedom is inextricably intertwined. This morning we are talking about the freedom from disease and death as a community. I'm clinging to the wisdom of these two teachers in these times. The disagreement of how to move forward through this pandemic is heating up.

The silly Americans refusing and protesting vaccinations and collective health do have freedoms and rights. But if exercising your rights causes pain, injury, illness, and is threatening the good of all, you are not doing it right. This brings us to the idea of collective liberation. If one of us is not free from disease and death, then none of us are free. Collective liberation means recognizing that all of our struggles are intimately connected, and that we must work together to create the kind of world we know is possible. We believe that every person is worthy of dignity and respect, and that within systems of oppression everyone suffers. Those opposed to communitarianism ask, “So how can you liberals 'balance' those rights with those of the community?” or “Individuals have rights and responsibilities, but the community has rights as a whole, what is that? The collective?” Communitarianism differs from liberalism in that it affirms that the community as a whole has rights. This view has suffered a great deal of bad press over the last twenty plus years, pretty much ever since Ross Perot and various other politicians espoused it. Attack dogs strove hard to discredit it as a dressed-up form of leftism. We all have our days when we think what happens in our country is about us; what we need and what we want. We all have our own issues that prevent us from being totally accepting, communitarian, and loving universally. We may sometimes think individuality trumps community.

The real challenge, the message of Universalism and the work of communitarianism, is discarding the notion of meeting one’s own needs. Our task is to understand what life asks of us. What do we need to put aside to heal and create wholeness? True community doesn’t happen unless everyone is willing to give up some of their identity as an individual to take on the identity of the group. If this doesn’t happen, then we are merely a group of individuals sharing common space but not becoming a community. It doesn’t mean that we go to the extremes of everyone wearing the same clothing, praying the same way, if at all, or believing the same things. However, it does mean that we move individualism from the center of our focus and replace it with a new concept of shared community, in which everyone gives up a little so that we can gain a lot.

Collective Liberation is not just a value, but an action. When we work together across the barriers kept in place to divide us, we strengthen our organizing. When combined, our diverse identities and experiences give us the tools to dismantle systems of economic, political and social oppression, and to create a world in which all people are seen as fully human. How does our current dilemma measure up to collective liberation? As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Junior put it, “We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality ... This is the inter-related structure of reality.” He writes, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Injustice anywhere is a threat justice everywhere. There are some things in our social system to which all of us ought be maladjusted. Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that. We must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation...The foundation of such a method is love. Before it is too late, we must narrow the gaping chasm between our proclamations of peace and our lowly deeds which precipitate and perpetuate war. One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek but a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means. We shall hew out of the mouton of despair, a stone of hope.”

In true community, we gain an affirmation of who we are both as individuals and as part of a group. We gain the wisdom of others who may have ideas different from our own. In true community, we are supported in our life's journeys because we feel safe to be known at our deepest levels, and because we are all committed to the health of the community. In a thriving community people want to be treated as members; and they aspire to full membership. Therefore, inclusion is a major principle of not only communitarianism but of justice. The most important ways of being included—of participating in community—flow from some of the basic continuities of life: kinship, friendship, and effort. Religion and justice are distorted if these continuities are weak, or absent, or if they are excessively demanding. The underlying truth is that community brings people together, not as manipulated or mobilized "masses," but in ways that sustain the wholeness and soundness of our lives. Above all, we gain the commitment and the power to change the world. The traditions of our faith, of justice equity and compassion create a saving faith. Our faith is one of universal love, one of community, one of friendship and membership.

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together” says Lila Watson an aboriginal activist. I am a Unitarian Universalist with these beliefs. Liberation means recognizing all the trauma, oppression, and human struggle as connected and the truth that working together is a way to implement the world we want to live in. We have to be willing to recognize the greatness within each of ourselves, the beauty that we are of the earth – we hold our own sacredness and the instinct to heal, transform, and change. We all have a role in this creation and when we each understand the complexity and vulnerability to sit with our humanness; we have the courage and capacity to be ourselves with those walking beside us. No act of resistance is completely independent of another. We must be courageous and rise in these times. We must rise, with our vision, our values, our communities, our courage, for collective liberation. Collective liberation emphasizes the importance of maintaining conscious decision making capacity and practicing active consent.

We want all to be free, to be safe, to be healthy, to be considered because if one of isn't, none of shall have it. May we be witness to a living Universalist heritage that allows us to consider the community over the individual. We need each other—at our highest natural glory—in order to be free.”

May it be so.