

# Honoring the Spirit of People



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Flower communion sermon

June 5, 2016

This morning we are gathered in our annual ceremonial event of the flower communion. Without doubt this ceremony is one that speaks volumes about the strength, courage, and spirit of people. The people, I will be focusing on are from a part of the world that we call Eastern Europe- which includes, Hungary, Romania, Bosnia, Herzegovina and once included Transylvania. If you look at a current world map you will not find this country any longer, in fact many of these countries have merged and changed. The history and turmoil and changes brought about by wars of both a religious and civil nature have had a profound impact on the people and on our Unitarian Universalists history.

For our Unitarian forebears were from this area. In the 1500's Michael Servetus sought refuge there from John Calvin and the Catholics both of whom had condemned him to death. The Socinian Brethren from the area known as Poland and Czechoslovakia were among our first cousins. And from Transylvania we can boast the one and only Unitarian King -John Sigismund, who with his mother Queen Isabella authored the Diet of Torda. This not only recognized the individual's right to believe what they chose, but also recognized and insisted that each and every religious choice be tolerated and accepted without prejudice. Our history of religious tolerance comes to us from them, mostly through the teachings of Francis David.

This radical preacher who began as a catholic, who was then a Protestant after Luther's Reformation in the late 1500's , who then pursued his religious thinking to eventually dispute even those teachings is, if you will, our great great Unitarian uncle. That he was burned as a heretic, that he suffered persecution, is part of his story and part of the story that has continued our reputation as heretics and outsiders. Yet before David fell into such disrepute, his interactions with the advisor to the Queen Isabella and her son, the future King John Sigsigamund paved the way for their willingness to understand religious choice as an act of free will and a right that should be extended to each and all.

As a born Unitarian I was interested in our historic roots and that we had decendants from Transylvania, that romantic homeland of Dracula and the right of religious freedom, it was therefore upsetting to me when in about 1987-88, while serving on the UUA Board Of Trustees that I began hearing about persecution against the ethnic groups in Hungary/ Romania. This was not new for after WWI a growing prejudice and destruction of ethnic communities especially those people in Transylvania began occuring. I remember sitting at a UUA Board of Trustees meeting and meeting the Bishop of the Unitarian Church in Hungary. He was ethnically Transylvanian, a sweet, elderly and pleasant preacher and religious leader- Josef Frenz. He was telling us about and we were seeing pictures of entire villages, including the Unitarian churches being razed by bulldozer in the name of rural renewal but in effect it was the destruction of an ethnic village. These villages, sometimes of a thousand or more people, would be made up entirely of Unitarians. He told us families were forced to relocate and that they were not being allowed to name their children other than names approved by the dictator Cuschessco's government. After a church was destroyed the inhabitants were not allowed to gather for worship separately, if they tried to apply to the government's Minister of Religion they were told that the Unitarian religion was not a "state approved" religion and that they would not be allowed to gather for worship. The religion that was allowed was a sort of "liberal Christianity" an off shot of Lutherism and Catholicism. Unitarian ministers would not be recognized and leadership positions were denied to these Hungarian/ Transylvanian Unitarian persons. I was struck by the resiliency of the people and their

ability to remain true to Unitarianism even if it meant possible destruction of their homes and churches. Their spirit was undaunting, irrepressible. To remember this long history of persecution, their resiliency of spirit, willingness to stand firm in their right to choice is why we celebrate the flower communion in Unitarian Universalist churches today.

Today the Unitarians in that geographic region are enjoying some renewal. The former Bishop's resident is being renovated and will be used for enacting business of the Unitarian's in Hungary and for rental property of a coffeeshop and some office space. Some of the churches in outlying villages are being reopened but the people who attend are poor and are still prejudiced against for their religious beliefs. It is not easy being a Unitarian in Transylvania and Rumania and Eastern Europe. The history and tradition is rich and this is where the Flower Communion comes from.

The first flower communion was celebrated in June of 1923 in Czechoslovakia. This communion was held each year thereafter even during the year and half of the originator's imprisonment in German concentration camps. At times the lines of people waiting to get into the church for the Flower Communion, and for Sunday services, would reach as far back as our library. Each person entered with a flower, placed it in a vase, as you did, and each person left with a different flower, as you will. But it is not just for the Flower Communion that we remember Norbert Capek, it is not just for the thousands that came to the church complex called Unitaria for worship and education, it is not just for religious education programs he developed to train lay leaders and ministerial leaders that we remember him; we remember him because of Capek's, as the Rev. Josiah Bartlett called it, "irrepressible" spirit. What does it mean to have an irrepressible spirit?

During the reign of Hitler's terror, by even the most conservative estimates, over ten million persons were killed. Most of these were Jewish, gay, lesbian, or disabled persons. Many were intellectuals, revolutionaries, resisters and leaders of the people. Capek was one of these. He lead by example, he lead by words, he lead by following a spiritual path of prayer, acceptance, preparation for whatever life might deal to him, and by planning for the continuation of his dream even if he might not be around to experience it. He was known to say, " I expect the best but plan for the

worst.” This philosophy, though, was not one of passive acceptance, nor of gloom but grew out the overarching spiritual goal of his life.

Stories and letters from those who knew Capek during his last days in Dachau reported that he was living his imprisonment grounded in his basic Unitarian beliefs .

He was age 70 when he was found to be listening to radio broadcasts that were forbidden. He was imprisoned and his family was told that he would be released in a month. Instead he was killed about one year later. The rumor that he was used for experimentation seems not to be true. It appears that he along with a number of elderly were transported to gas chambers and exterminated there. His family was give a death notice that said that the cause of death was a brain hemorrhage. For many years the family held out the promise that Capek had been able to escape and that he would show up alive and well, perhaps in America where some of his children lived and where his third wife had gone earlier to raise money for the congregational needs of the church Unitaria. His irrepressible spirit, his unflagging optimism and his strength of positive attitude led his family to have this vision. Wish it were so, but it was not and finally after three years of trying to find him they accepted the reality of his death on Oct. 12, 1942 and they then held a memorial service.

His third wife, his beloved Maja continued to live in America. Some of her time was spent in friend’s home in Cambridge and much of her ministry was at Unity home a community home associated with the First Unitarian Church of New Bedford, Mass. She died at age seventy-eight at the home of one of her sons in California. Norbert Capek had eleven children, with three wives, two of these wives died at young ages. His third wife Maja was his soul mate, together, in the early 1920’s, they worked with many congregations in America, with the American Unitarian Association and with the Czechoslovakia groups in America to raise enough money to return to their home land and begin a Unitarian congregation that would bring hope, love, religious tolerance and freedom to those who wanted to develop strength of character and a hopeful positive creative attitude of living. Capek loved the Unitarian religion for it supported the primacy of the individual, it built upon one’s life experiences, and it was a practical religion that taught how to live in the here and now.

Of the millions who were exterminated during the years of Hitler's time, why would we single out one? I think it is to remind us that the personal can not be separated from the political. That sometimes in ways unknown even to us, we will be called upon to be pillars of strength, paragons of virtue, persons of character, and individuals who must call on our deepest spiritual strengths and wisdom to guide, sustain, support and nurture ourselves and others. This is the irrepressible spirit of Capek and it is something we are all capable of.

During the flower communion services the people would sing the following song. It is one of the few surviving, of the over one hundred songs that Capek wrote. Its words give us a hint of the man Capek, and its words may inspire us to aid and support others during their times of sorrow as we know they too will be there for us:

*“Kindle the flame of love, where people's sorrows reign. Tell the happy story of those who overcame sorrow. Smell the flowers of faith, breathe the air of love, open your soul to the streaming rays of the sun. Join your heart of solace with those who suffer, send your warm sympathy to your fellow.*

*Chorus: Enough tears run down the face! Enough hearts are wounded. Now let the eyes shine with joy ! Someone is joining us [in] to a great community,[brotherhood], someone is calling us to [Fatherly] love.*

Let us now bless these flowers and know that as their unique and individual spirit shines through, we too are blessed by our uniqueness and irrepressible spirit. As you freely placed a flower in the vase as a symbol of your freedom to choose your religion, so may you chose a flower that represents the unity of this religious community and the irrespressible spirit of acceptance of one another. So Be It.