

Let Our Voices Sing Our Parts
(Flower Communion Sunday)
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska

Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka
June 8, 2008

Flower Communion Opening

A well-known Jewish Rabbi, famous for his meaningful stories, began a teaching once by saying, “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they do not toil, and neither do they spin: And yet I say to you, that even King Solomon, in all his glory, was not arrayed like one of these.”

Flowers are a glory in this world. Flowers are a beautiful presence in this world of sometimes harsh pain, destruction and struggle. Here in the northern Midwestern United States, when it can sometimes take until June 8th for spring to arrive, the arrival of the first flower of the year is a reminder that the entire world is not cold and frozen.

When I was in high school, I lived in northern Florida, and I remember being amazed at how spring lasted from February through May, with a new batch of flowers exploding each month like fireworks on the Fourth of July. As a young adult I spent years out west, and I was amazed, after hiking to heights of 12,000 feet, to find small tenacious mountain flowers peering out from between the cracks of granite on the leeward side of mountaintop boulders. My wife, Heidi, and I, just moved into a new house. We first looked at the house in December, closed on it in February and moved into the house in March, in the midst of ongoing and repeated wet snowstorms. Only in the past month or so we’ve actually gotten to see what our yard looks like. Turns out we’ve got peonies, Hostas, azaleas, lilacs, day lilies and probably a few others I haven’t figured out yet. All these flowers, over all these years of my life, arise unexpectedly and I am always surprised by the joy and beauty they restore in my heart after a cold and colorless winter.

Flowers are as unique as the places we may find them. They grow on vines and they grow on decayed logs. They grow in clay pots and around houses and gardens. Flowers grow in boulevard planters as we speed past in our cars, heedless of their beauty, and flowers grow in tender tended greenhouse rows where they are nurtured and cared for. Flowers grow among rocks on icy mountaintops, and they grow on lily pads through the water in everglade swamps. They grow on cacti in the desert, and creep through cracks in our sidewalks.

We humans often attempt to be rational, measured, purposeful – but flowers spring forth from the earth pointless, irreverent, spectacular, insistent, and beautiful. Mary Oliver once wrote a poem about Morning Glories, saying:

[Continue on next page]

Morning Glories

By Mary Oliver

Blue and dark-blue
 rose and deepest rose
 white and pink they

are everywhere in the diligent
 cornfield rising and swaying
 in their reliable

finery in the little
 fling of their bodies their
 gear and tackle

all caught up in the cornstalks.
 The reaper's story is the story
 of endless work of

work careful and heavy but the
 reaper cannot
 separate them out there they

are in the story of his life
 bright random useless
 year after year

taken with the serious tons
 weeds without value
 humorous beautiful weeds.

When spring arrives, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the earth is extravagant. Each spring the earth reminds us with the splash of flowers that we have more than enough, that, if we can hold our passion for possession in check, we will realize this earth always provides us with more than we need. The poet Alice Persons once wrote a poem about stealing lilacs:

[Continue on next page]

Stealing Lilacs

By Alice N. Persons

A guaranteed miracle,
 it happens for two weeks each May,
 this bounty of riches
 where McMansion, trailer,
 the humblest driveway
 burst with color—pale lavender,
 purple, darker plum—
 and glorious scent.
 This morning a battered station wagon
 drew up on my street
 and a very fat woman got out
 and starting tearing branches
 from my neighbor's tall old lilac—
 grabbing, snapping stems, heaving
 armloads of purple sprays
 into her beater.
 A tangle of kids' arms and legs
 writhed in the car.
 I almost opened the screen door
 to say something,
 but couldn't begrudge her theft,
 or the impulse
 to steal such beauty.
 Just this once,
 there is enough for everyone.

Ultimately, each flower is unique. Each flower – whether it is a dandelion or day lily, a rose, a morning glory, a cactus flower or a tulip – has it's own unique beauty, it's own unique scent. Each flower grew from its own seed, with a genetic code that shapes it's unique story. We humans are like the flowers. What the earth has bestowed on the flowers, it has also bestowed upon us.

Today, each one of us brought a flower or was given one when we entered. These unique flowers symbolize the uniqueness of each one of us. In a few moments, I will invite you to come forward and place your flower in the vase up here at the front. As you come forward, remember that this flower communion is a ritual that reminds us of our unity. The free will with which you come forward to add your flower to the bouquet is a reminder of the free will that you – and we – join with others in this spiritual community in common fellowship.

As you contemplate the unique scent and color and shape of your flower as you place your flower in the vase, I invite you to share with us a word that describes a unique gift you bring to this community. Of course, you may also place your flower in silence, but if you feel comfortable, please share with us a gift you bring to our larger community. If you have a flower you would like to share, please come forward now.

(People bring their flowers forward)

Part II – “Let Our Voices Sing Our Parts”

The Flower Communion service was created by Norbert Fabián Čapek, a minister who founded the Unitarian Church in Czechoslovakia. He introduced this service to that church on June 4, 1923. He had felt the need for a symbolic ritual that would bind people more closely together. For many Unitarians, the traditional communion service lacked sufficient meaning, and Dr. Čapek felt it was especially necessary in post-World War I war-torn Europe to communicate to children, and adults, that there were still such things as love, friendship, good will and joy. So he turned to the native beauty of their countryside for elements of a communion that would be genuine to them. He felt that the language of flowers is that of beauty and hope, understandable by everyone.

The phrase that I used for the title of this homily is a line from our closing hymn, “Mother Spirit, Father Spirit,” written by Norbert Fabián Čapek. The tune is in a minor key, and is not a tune we would normally associate with joy, but it is in keeping with what I understand as one of the Eastern European styles of music.

The song is meaningful to me, however, for a number of reasons. It was written in the 1920s in the middle of a time and a place that was deeply influenced by strongly traditional Catholic imagery and theology, and yet he begins the hymn invoking not Jesus or a God, but the balance of a mother and father spirit. It is a song filled with yearning. Recognizing our human condition, often torn between a sense of loneliness and a desire to bond with a community, the song is filled with a desire to discover our unique human gifts and purpose, and how – if at all – our unique purpose is related to what Čapek calls a “mother spirit” and “father spirit.”

In the final verse, Čapek once again invokes the mother and father spirit, asking that this spirit take our hearts. Even more, he writes, “Take our breath and let our voices sing our parts. Take our hands and let us work to shape our art.”

These two lines may be some of the most difficult words for us to utter. We humans, especially here in the United States, and even more especially Unitarian Universalists, like to think that we are self-sufficient. We like to think that no God controls us, and often prefer to believe that no spirit can even help us. We like to believe that we are the ultimate power, that we have ultimate control over what happens in our lives. If you ever doubt our human arrogance, just take a look in the self-help section of the nearest bookstore. It is ironic to me that the very act of buying a self-help book written by someone else is an act of reaching out, of connecting with an author who has gone through a similar situation.

We humans are, by nature, torn between our individuality and our desire to bond with a community. Many forces act upon us, some in vivid consciousness before our eyes, some from old and shaming visions from our childhood, and some unseen in the DNA of our heritage and in the forces of gravity and stardust between planets. So many forces act upon us in every moment of our lives that all we can do – all we can really do – is to find the courage to learn who we are, and then react as well as we can to all those forces.

So we enter the world of metaphor. We enter a world not of science or self-help, but a world of faith. This is what I prefer calling the “real world.” We enter a world populated by a mother spirit and a father spirit. When we enter this world fully, of our own free will and with our own good will, we may come to accept that we do not have any control over all the forces that act upon us. In this world, and in resonance with the language of many faith traditions, we

may learn to “let go” of what we think we know, and allow the spirit of life, the mother spirit and the father spirit, to move through us with inspiration and beauty. “Take our breath,” we say to all that is larger than who we are, “take our spirit, take our breath, and let our voices sing our parts.”

As the bouquet is a symbol of our unity, so is the music we make. As the choir sings today, and as we sing, we join together in the creation of a moment, the creation of a symphony, and the creation of a community larger than our selves.

Part III – Flower Communion Closing

One of the more poignant qualities of our Unitarian Universalist Flower Communion is the memory that its creator, Norbert Fabián Čapek, a minister who had a great faith in freedom, was sent to the Dachau Nazi concentration camp, where he was executed in 1942 because of his beliefs. So as part of our service today, we also know that part of this celebration is a recognition of all those who died because they dared to live out their liberal faith in a repressive atmosphere.

In a few moments I will invite you to come forward once again, and take from this vase a different flower than the one you brought. This act of not making a distinction between flowers is, in Čapek’s words, “to confess that we accept each other as brothers and sisters without regard to class, race, or other distinction, acknowledging everybody as our friend who is human and wants to be good.” But before we participate in this final act, I want to share with you the prayer of consecration of the flowers that Dr. Čapek spoke in his original 1923 service. Please join with me now in an attitude of prayer:

Infinite Spirit of Life, we ask your blessing on these flowers, your messengers of fellowship and love. May they remind us that, amid diversities of knowledge and of gifts, to be on in desire and affection, and devotion to good and beauty. May they also remind us of the value of comradeship, of doing and sharing with one another. May we cherish friendship as a most precious gift. May we not let awareness of another’s talents 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. May we be strengthened by the knowledge that one spirit, the spirit of love, unites us, and may we endeavor together for a more joyful life for all. Amen.

Mindful that our hands, our gifts, our sharing, and our prayers have blessed these flowers, I invite you now to come forward and take a new flower home with you.