

A BLOOM OF SACRAMENT
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Opening Words

Let us come together today resolved to be brothers and sisters
Knowing that we are all one family,
Knowing that we are all one spirit,
And that that spirit of love unites us for a more perfect and more joyful life.

Chalice Lighting

Let us light our chalice today for the heat of August;
That time when trees stand still in the motionless air
And seem to stand silent sentinel over us.
Like them, let us make time for calm reflection
And for simple appreciation of the stillness.

Sermon – A Bloom of Sacrament

With little effort on my part, the lawn around my home actually contains a good deal of grass. However, if the wide variety of weeds were shades other than green, my property would look like a jigsaw of colors. I wish I could claim that my belief in environmental consciousness precludes my use of weed killers and pesticides. In reality, I am just lazy when it comes to caring for my lawn.

One of the more persistent weeds in my yard is this little purple flower that blooms early every spring. Unlike dandelions, natural selection evolved this particular intruder just short enough to evade the spinning blade of my mower. But, it does not last long or squeeze out the small amount of actual grass, so my concern quickly moves on to other chores.

In all honesty, I like wild flowers and, if I had my preference, our yards would have no grass at all. Imagine a neighborhood of front yards, each a cacophony of buttercups, teasel, phlox, and morning glory. And no lawnmowers.

Lawnmowers “should” us. Like making beds, or ironing clothes, “shoulds” consume our lives. “Shoulds” are those ritual behaviors that often serve little real purpose other than adhering to social paradigms. Millions of us think nothing of pushing that lawnmower each week in labyrinthine patterns, striving to impose order on an ecosystem where order is neither desired nor sustainable without Herculean effort. No wonder we little time for religious sacrament, with lives crammed full of such rituals. We may ask ourselves, as religious liberals, what role would we prefer sacrament to play in our lives?

Following World War I and the establishment of an independent Czechoslovakia, Norbert Čapek founded a Unitarian congregation in Prague called the Liberal Religious Fellowship. He introduced the Flower Festival service on June 4, 1923 as a symbolic ritual to unite people in the new congregation. The traditional Christian communion service was unacceptable to many who had joined the new fellowship after leaving the Catholic Church. Čapek decided to utilize the native beauty of the land to create a ritual unique to the new religious body.

People were asked to bring a flower of their choice to church and to place them in large vases at the entrance. During the worship service, Čapek consecrated the collected flowers.

Afterwards, people returned to the vases and took a different flower home with them. It was such a success that it was held yearly just before the summer recess of the church. His fellowship grew into the largest Unitarian congregation in the world, with a membership of almost 3,400 by 1932.

With the outbreak of World War II, Čapek chose to remain in Europe, despite invitations to come to America. He delivered a series of sermons on the topic of freedom and justice that got the unwanted attention of Nazi authorities. In March 1941, the Gestapo broke into Čapek's apartment, confiscated his books and sermons, and arrested him and his 29-year-old daughter, Zora. Čapek was charged with listening to BBC broadcasts (a capital offense) and with treason. The Nazis cited several of his sermons as evidence. A year later, he and his daughter were found guilty. The court found Čapek innocent of the treason charge and recommended that, given his age, the year served in prison be counted toward his jail time. The Gestapo, however, ignored the court's recommendation, sending Čapek to Dachau and Zora to forced labor in Germany. Čapek's name appears among a list of prisoners sent on an invalid transport on October 12, 1942 to Hartheim Castle, near Linz, Austria, where he died of poison gas.

I cannot begin to imagine what life was like for Norbert Čapek during his last year. Alone in a dank cell, prisoner of the Nazis, knowing that he faced capital charges. I like to think that he bore up bravely under the pressure. I like to think that the courage of his convictions gave him the strength to accept the scorn of his enemies and to resist the temptation to hate the Gestapo soldiers. I like to think that I would have even a fraction of his resolve and his bravery.

The Flower Communion today represents a significant ritual unique to Unitarian Universalism. Like similar events in other faith traditions, the Flower Communion functions on many levels. We remember the martyrdom of Norbert Čapek, as well as others who sacrificed and died for the cause of liberal religion over the years. We celebrate life, through its most colorful and fragrant representatives – flowers. We come together, in body through worship and in spirit through the gifts we have brought to share with others. And by them all, we experience the awesome mystery of the universe, through our history, our unity with nature, and the mingling of our thoughts and deeds. We take a flower home with us, a tangible symbol of the power of this religious community in our lives.

Why, then, did Čapek prefer the term “festival” to “communion?” Čapek was raised Roman Catholic, the state-supported religion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. At 18, he became a Baptist and served congregations in the region. Over the years, his nationalistic sermons occasionally drew the attention of Austrian authorities leading to accusations of subversion. Čapek first became interested in Unitarianism at age 40. At the beginning of World War I, Čapek moved to the United States. His liberal leanings attracted the ever increasing attention of his Baptist superiors, who tried him for heresy. A Baptist tribunal finally acquitted Čapek, but shortly after the end of the war, he resigned his pastorate. With the help of the American Unitarian Association, Čapek returned to Prague and organized the Congregation of Liberal Religious Fellowship.

Like Čapek himself, the majority of the congregation's members had belonged to the state-sponsored church, which they left when Czechoslovakia became independent. Not surprisingly, many were suspicious of traditional church rituals. Specifically, Čapek's congregants looked askance at rituals defined as sacraments by the Catholic Church, including the Eucharist, the Holy Communion. Calling the ritual a festival avoided association with the Christian practice of consuming the body and blood of Christ.

According to a 2005 study by the Unitarian Universalist Commission on Appraisal, nearly 90% of Unitarian Universalist congregations engage in this ritual, most calling it a Flower Communion. This finding raises three questions.

- Is the Flower Communion a sacrament for Unitarian Universalists?

- Did Čapek himself consider his Flower Festival a sacrament?
- What exactly is a sacrament?

Let's take these questions in reverse order.

What exactly is a sacrament? Like most of Čapek's congregants, the majority of adult Unitarian Universalists today come into the movement from other faith traditions. These churches of our past usually believed in some formal sacraments. For the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, sacraments include baptism, confirmation, the ordination of clergy, the Eucharist (communion), confession, matrimony, and unction for the dying. Protestant churches largely retain only baptism and communion among their sacraments. Sikhs and Hindus recognize as many as 42 samskāras. These ritualistic rites of passage celebrate accomplishments of life and prepare the individual's mind and body for full membership into the community. While these rituals represent the recognized sacraments, what actually defines something as a sacrament?

A common thread running through the many definitions you will find of this term is that a sacrament is an act that bestows grace through a material vehicle to a recipient, where grace (in the Christian theology) is God's free expression of love. So, by consuming the wafer and the wine, God transfuses the faithful with his spiritual energy. The touch of water during baptism blesses a child with the enabling power of God. Generally, therefore, a sacrament requires the right *matter* (such as the wafer and the wine), the right *form of ritual action* or ceremony, and the right *intention* on the part of the participant. The sense of such requirements prevents the mundane or our simply habitual practices from acquiring the important status of sacrament. Sacraments show that the grace of God lies not always in the invisible and the unknowable, but can work through specific matter, people, and institutions.

One additional attribute as recognized by other faith traditions *mandates* the performance of sacraments in order for a person to attain salvation or to achieve religious consciousness. Since our Universalist tradition adheres to the belief that a loving god would not create a soul destined to an eternity of damnation, then all souls will be redeemed. Therefore, for Unitarian Universalists, no specific act is required to attain salvation, which is inherent for every person.

Did Čapek himself consider his Flower Festival a sacrament? Čapek generally preached an ideal of harmony among people – learning what he called “the great art of living.” He believed in a God both transcendent and immanent; a God manifested in the glorious wonders of creation as well as represented in even the most common realms of human activity. So, Čapek was comfortable with the notion that God was present within each of us, working through the practical deeds of responsible and aware people to develop and improve themselves and their world. The Flower Festival is consistent with a belief that a ritual can infuse us with spiritual power. He described his focal point for the festival – flowers – as “nature's most tender, common, and beautiful gift, as our symbol and *sacrament*.”

Čapek, and later other ministers, contrasted the Flower Festival with rituals practiced by other religions, primarily from the Christian tradition. He emphasized that the Flower Communion is intended as a modest celebration involving no magic, no supernatural powers or beings. Rather, the ritual stressed the need for mutual understanding, empathy, sharing, and forgiveness among people. For Čapek, the Flower Festival represented a religious communion in a real sense, open to anybody in the community. Participants were asked neither whence they came nor what their religious background. They were asked to learn compassion, to share, to forgive.

As part of the first Flower Festival service, Čapek read the passage from I Corinthians 13. Clearly, to Čapek, the grace flowing to and among participants was the greatest gift

available to humankind – that enduring spiritual love that transcends all knowledge, foresight, charity, and deeds. In a letter to then President of the American Unitarian Association Samuel A. Eliot, Čapek told of his sermon that emphasized the individual character of each “member-flower,” our common cause, and our belonging together in spiritual community.

Is the Flower Communion a sacrament for Unitarian Universalists today? The Flower Communion certainly meets the basic criteria cited earlier. The celebration involves *matter* – flowers – that act as the vehicle for grace, a ritual *form of action* by which grace is delivered, and the *intention* of congregants to receive that grace. The determining factor then becomes whether we believe that grace, however we define that essence, is actually transmitted and received during the ritual.

Using a strictly Christian definition, then, the Flower Communion is not a sacrament because Unitarian Universalists do not uniformly accept as a matter of faith the existence of the Christian god. Čapek’s own theology held that the power of the ritual flowed between us and among us and not strictly from God. If, however, we open the definition to recognize that grace may derive from all of existence (which would include all things natural or otherwise), then the Flower Communion is indeed a sacrament. If we define a sacrament as a ritual during which one seeks, receives, and accepts through a physical act and form the sensation of unexpected energy from unknown sources, or the revelation of deep personal or universal understanding, then the Flower Communion must be considered a sacrament.

One may actually argue that the Flower Communion provides even more access to this enabling power of the universe and among the beloved community than Čapek originally designed. For today, the Flower Communion represents far more than the simple expression of the need for human connection and love. The Flower Communion is more than a simple declaration of community unity and pride. And, certainly, the ritual is more than an expression of appreciation of nature’s beauty as reflected in local flora and fauna.

The Flower Communion commemorates the death, not only of Norbert Čapek, but of countless courageous women and men who have sacrificed for our free faith. The Flower Communion celebrates our international legacy and our ongoing connections across the globe. And, like the blossoms themselves, whether simple or elegant, fragrant or functional, the Flower Communion honors human equality and our freedom to believe and to search for truth and meaning wherever we find it here in this world.

You might ask one last question. Does it matter whether we believe in sacraments or whether we label any of our practices or rituals as sacraments? Because of the nature of our governance, our system of congregational polity, by definition one might never expect unanimous agreement on any particular ritual as a denomination-wide sacrament. Individuals or single congregations, of course, are free to consider any practice or ritual as sacramental.

The word “sacrament” originally derives from the Latin *sacramentum*, which ironically was the oath of allegiance sworn by Roman soldiers. Early Christians adopted this word of commitment to represent their own devotion to celebrate acts practiced by Jesus. So, for instance, the very visible acts of baptism and the Last Supper represented powerful acts of commitment to Christians living during the time of the Roman Empire. So, you might conclude that we might best leave the word “sacrament” to our Christian colleagues.

One could argue, however, that value exists in our considered use of this term for a number of reasons. One, the label “sacrament” lends weight to the importance we Unitarian Universalists place on various rituals and observances, particularly when we engage in dialogue with colleagues from other faith traditions. As Unitarian Universalist minister Tony Lorenzen put it, using terms like “sacrament” make it so “our call to those both within our churches and our call to the world outside our congregations and our association may be more clearly heard as religious proclamation and the voice of a herald, the voice of good news for spiritual seekers,

caught in the wastelands of limiting creeds, oppressive dogmas, and restrictive traditions." Our use of the term is akin to learning another's language in order to better appreciate their culture and to achieve stronger understandings.

In addition, one might argue that, based on the definitions discussed earlier, we already consider child dedications, coming of age celebrations, and bridging ceremonies as sacraments. I certainly would argue for the joining of loving hearts of any sexual orientation into marriage as a sacrament. What stronger argument can we make to expand the rights of matrimony to gay, lesbian, transgendered, and bisexual individuals? And given our rich history of theological leadership, I would also consider our calling and ordination of ministers a sacrament. Unitarian minister and transcendentalist Frederick Henry Hedge once wrote:

A church without a ritual, without symbols and sacraments and corporate organism, as a permanent institution, is an impossibility, a contradiction in terms. The religious sentiment, it is true is spontaneous and eternal; in one form or another it will always exist where man exists; but this spontaneous religion, unfixed and uncertain, may so degenerate as to become an evil rather than a good.

Using the term "sacrament" and making it our own represents our very public commitment to participating as full members of the interdependent web of all existence and to accepting and sharing our love for each other, that all important enduring gift of human life.

All of these academic arguments pale in significance to what I consider the most important defense of using the term. When I participate in a Flower Communion, the mundane evaporates. The "shoulds" of my life recede in favor of the "musts." I am with Michael Servetus, tied to a stake in Geneva awaiting the touch of the torch. I am with Francis David, sitting alongside his prison deathbed. I am with James Reeb, walking the streets of Selma, Alabama moments before a club of hate strikes him to the ground. I am with Unitarians and Universalists, heretics and holy men and women, everyone in history oppressed for practicing their free faith.

When I participate in a Flower Communion, in my mind and in my heart, I see this hungry, beaten, and frail man led to a train filled with other frightened prisoners. I see the train passing through the countryside – past field after field of wild flowers sneaking in one last bloom before the onset of winter. Even better, though, is the image of a crack in the floor of his lonely prison cell...a chamber of cold stone and steel perhaps with one tiny window. But, through that window shines the sun onto that crack in the floor. And, over that long year, a solitary seed blows through the window, lands in the crack, and takes root in the grit. An hour or two of sunlight each day, and perhaps, for a brief moment, a solitary plant fights for survival in that desolation. And, maybe, for just a day, a small purple flower blooms in honor of the man who created the Flower Communion.

Closing Words

Norbert Čapek wrote these words just before his death:

"It is worthwhile to live and fight courageously for sacred ideals. Oh, blow, you evil winds, into my body's fire. My soul, you'll never unravel. Even though disappointed a thousand times or fallen in the fight, and everything worthless seem, I have lived amidst eternity."

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