

## **Celebrating Blessings**

**By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD June 12, 2022**

In this season, not a day goes by without my witnessing a flower – the purple or orange annuals offering small splashes of color in my backyard, small fields of daffodils lining the highways, dandelions peeking through cracks in the concrete, or the first blossoms on a tree tucked away in the woods. The prevalence of these flowers could be enough for my consciousness to slip into the mundane or the ordinary, these offerings of vibrant color, gentle fragrance, and delicate touch unnoticed. Instead, I invite us to see each bud peeking through the soil as a simple blessing.

What is a blessing? Blessings are those big or little things that remind us of wholeness, of our true essence, of beauty and the sacred that we hold within and witness beyond.<sup>1</sup> Blessings remind us of goodness and worth and sometimes overwhelming grace and awe. I think of flowers – simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary, beautiful and unremarkable, pervasive and yet each a gift. And I see each flower as a gift from the sacred – that which is greater than ourselves sends us everyday blessings – if only we notice. What is the sacred to each of us? A being in the sky or the awe of nature or our ancestors or a sacred companion. Whatever it is, it is calling us; it is beckoning us. I see each flower as more than a culmination of science and instead as an essence gifted the breath of life. A small miracle. A genuine blessing offered by our sacred. We are reminded of beauty. Of color and smell and visual delights. We are reminded of goodness - there is nothing of ill will in a flower! Flowers become an offering of love and compassion and care to each person given from the divine through their simple beauty and unassuming, dependable presence. What else are gifts from the sacred? What else seems to bubble up with more than simply science creating it? Canyons and anthills, placid lakes and the immense depths of the ocean. The warmth inside of us when we hug a beloved, the innocent smile of a toddler. First, we are called to recognize and to truly notice. Each piece of beauty and awe that surrounds us – these are not coincidences, but reminders of the sacred.

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<sup>1</sup> “Calling on Wholeness” Rev. Elea Kemler

And they are not gifted out of divine boredom but of love, and as such we are called to engage. To pause and smell, or feast our eyes upon, or to emulate in a piece of artwork. This offers a chance for each of us to re-orient how we engage with the world – how we engage with our surroundings. How will our days change if we see each element of nature – each tree, each cloud, each breath of wind – as a gift from the sacred? How will our lives be altered if we notice and accept each of these blessings – these things that can remind us of goodness and wholeness? What a beautiful way to engage with the daily, hidden, seemingly mundane treasures of life.

Flower Communion was created by Unitarian Norbert Capek in Prague, brought to this country by his wife Maja. The ritual of bringing and exchanging flowers began as a communion, a meaningful ritual derived from the Christian communion and yet open and available to people of all faith backgrounds and beliefs. People were asked to bring a flower to church, whether from a garden or alongside a dusty road. The flowers were placed in a vase, symbolizing the free will of the church community joining together and honoring the beauty of diversity found amongst any gathering of people. Just as no two people are alike, no two flowers are alike – a bouquet would not be complete without this array of color and shape and size and smell. At the end of the church service, each attendee came forward to collect a different flower. By exchanging flowers, those at the service honored their commitment to one another – their commitment to shared community. Flowers became greater than science – flowers became the gift of diversity and flowers became a celebration of each unique identity. Flowers became a commitment to one another.<sup>2</sup> This was during the time of World War II, and ultimately Capek was captured and died in a Nazi concentration camp. And yet, even when held within the confines of that horror, he created a Flower Communion with his fellow prisoners, finding flowers amidst the weeds of the camp. Those flowers were a testament to something greater than them, and a symbol of a love that would survive them all.<sup>3</sup> And we still celebrate Flower Communion to this today.

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<sup>2</sup> “The Flower Communion: A Service for Religious Liberals” by Reginald Zottoli

<sup>3</sup> “The Story of Norbert Capek’s Flower Ceremony” by Teresa and David Schwartz

I think of my own simple, ordinary, and yet profound interactions with and celebration of flowers. I think of those delicate wildflowers I see when immersed in the depths of nature, reminding me of the oneness of all the world as foliage and consciousness overlap. Or of how watering a small annual becomes a reminder of possibility and hope peeking through the dirt. While planting roses as a child with my father, I was offered an introduction to the simple pleasures of beautiful, small blessings. Flowers – the seemingly mundane – become so much more as they offer blessings in each of our days.

And I invite us, again, beyond flowers, for the gifts of the sacred are abundant! A fallen tree, slowly decaying and offering new life to the moss upon it - this is a gift. A gift reminding us of the cycle of life. Clouds, saplings, squirrels – each a gift. Not a gift to humans, but a gift to every conscious being. A rabbit feeling its fur blown by the wind, a snake coiling up under the sunshine for warmth. We are an interdependent web of blessings.

And gifts are reciprocal – let us not simply be vessels for receiving but also beings who co-create with the sacred. When we create art, we offer a blessing. When we offer a parched and browning bush water, we offer a blessing. When we raise our voice in song, we offer every being that has a gift of hearing a blessed melody. Imagine how we can re-orient ourselves and our engagement with everything in this realm if we interact with and appreciate each caterpillar as a divine gift, every breath of wind as a small treasure offered by the sacred. And imagine the wonder of each day if we offer our thanks by deeply engaging with all that we are surrounded with, overcome with beauty at fallen trees and anthills alike. These are all gifts. Let them not go unnoticed. Let them not go forgotten. Let us not bypass the beauty and wonder of life in that mundane slumber and monotony of routine – let us not waste our time in this precious realm.

Reciprocal blessings also arise when we appreciate the gifts we are surrounded with and actually engage with all that is offered to us. This means taking the time to pause and smell the

scent of cherry blossoms or crafting an image in our minds inspired by inanimate clouds or cherishing the laughter of a beloved or embracing melodic tunes of birds and pianos alike, dancing to the beat. Every creature that has consciousness is offered these things so that they can delight in them. We offer gratitude and appreciation when we engage with these multitudes of gifts.

The sacred does not have to be a God or a Goddess or any sort of divine entity – humanists have sacred blessings as well, gifts from an unknowable force. A gift that is simply and yet profoundly the awe of nature. I imagine to a humanist these are gifts of heaven on earth. There is no afterlife hidden in the sky or another realm – it is here. As such roses and rhododendrons and morning glories and chrysanthemums are an earthly heaven. Anthills and falling snow and paw-prints of a wild fox – to miss out on these blessings would be to live a life and transition out of this realm while missing out on the only form of heaven ever offered. Nature offers itself as a sacred gift – to humans, bears, swordfish, and bumblebees alike. The divine need not be an entity but a force of beauty and goodness.

I invite us to engage with the world as a pantheist would. Pantheists are theists who believe nature and the divine are one in the same – that they are, in a sense, identical. A bush is not simply a gift from something greater than ourselves but is in and of itself a sacred entity. The divine – by any name we call it – God, Goddess, spirit of life – this entity is literally the waves of the ocean and the delicate web created by a simple spider. That is God. Imagine missing out on Goddess or higher power in a state of monotony! Imagine walking past the spirit of love without offering a second glance. Flowers – each flower we brought with us here today – is a piece of the divine. The bouquet we create is our way of intermixing blessings and creating beauty and offering appreciation with intention.

Or through the lens of a panentheist, seeing the divine as within us and nature and as a transcendent being. We become connected and enmeshed with the earth and everything inhabiting it because we are all vessels containing the same sacred, divine force. To me, this

force is love. Imagine each thing as a resting place, as a home, for love. Love becomes pervasive and overwhelmingly present within each moment of each day.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a Transcendentalist who understood heaven to be in this realm and not beyond, who saw divine presence in the everyday. He wrote, “Never lose an opportunity of seeing anything beautiful, for beauty is God's handwriting.” Beauty is how our sacred expresses itself, a way for the divine to communicate, an offering of pure love. Emerson writes, “The earth laughs in flowers.” Beauty emerges as all that is sacred offers us a smile.

With this intention of noticing and celebrating beauty, I am reminded by Mary Oliver’s poem, “Invitation.”

Oh do you have time  
to linger  
for just a little while  
out of your busy  
and very important day  
for the goldfinches<sup>4</sup>

Do we have the time to notice the birds? Or to relish in delicate pink and orange petals? Only if we are intentional will these gifts and blessings not pass us by. Nature offers an invitation – an invitation to notice blessings – but only if we linger. Then goldfinches become small, unassuming treasures. Can there be anything more important than this pause in each of our days? Oliver continues further in her poem,

it is a serious thing  
just to be alive  
on this fresh morning

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<sup>4</sup> “Invitation” by Mary Oliver

in the broken world.

I beg of you,  
do not walk by  
without pausing<sup>5</sup>

I wonder of the gift that is our own life – our own personal existence. It is a serious thing just to be alive. In this gift we are called to notice – to pause – to bask in all the beauty that has been offered us. Not to traverse life within the slumber of routine or the shadow of monotony or the veil of boredom or the trap of the unimpressed – but with sacred, intentional pause. We are otherwise sleeping through life. Let the tulips awaken us.

And yet we are invited to go beyond noticing – we are called to offer sincere appreciation for all that has been offered us on this precious planet – interacting with the sacred and with transcendent love as a way of saying “thank you,” as a way of offering a gift in return – a way of co-creating blessings. Bernadette Miller writes,

Savoring the substance

of existence

is a serious

Frivolity.

Someone must do it.<sup>6</sup>

Savoring the substance of existence. Relishing in that profound and yet often unrecognized and overlooked joy and wonder that we are even alive. What can we offer in return for this gift of

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<sup>5</sup> “Invitation” by Mary Oliver

<sup>6</sup> “A Serious Frivolity” by Bernadette Miller

life? How can we gift the sacred, just as the sacred as gifted us? Beyond noticing, we are called to engage. The poet calls us to love. To love the leaves at sundown. She calls us to interact with our senses – to speak to the lilacs and bask in the beauty around us. She urges us to give a little piece of ourselves to those places that call to us. A serious frivolity. An intentional and playful joy in engaging with our surroundings, offering gratitude and grace for the beauty in our lives. Someone must do it. Will you?<sup>7</sup>

These gifts come from an entity greater than ourselves and offer the entire planet beauty and love. We can never know the gifts of the whole world, but we can know and appreciate and cherish the gifts in our own tiny corner. Life and all that surrounds it is a blessing. So, when we engage with the wildflowers, let us be reminded of our wholeness, our true essence, our own beauty and the love and delight of our sacred. May fragrant petals of blue and purple remind us of goodness. Of worth. May we engage with each and every day – with every single thing we encounter – with overwhelming grace and awe. What is greater than us, what is beyond us? The expanse of oceans and canyons and the intricate details of a spider web or a beehive. The power and force and energy of love. The wildly unknowable and yet tantalizingly close essence of the sacred. Life is ordinary. And life is exceptional. May we be an active, engaged piece of this beautiful, breathtaking expanse each and every day.

May it be so, and Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> “A Serious Frivolity” by Bernadette Miller