

Flower Communion: Beauty from the Rocky Soil

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD, June 14, 2020

I see them when I go hiking – those flowers that emerge from that rocky soil. I see them lining sidewalks or creeping up exterior walls. That dirt doesn't look life sustaining or like it's about to create something beautiful. It looks dark and dry and crusty and filled with gravel or rocks – it looks lifeless, uninviting. And yet. Those flowers come. First peaking out of that crusty earth as but a mere green shoot, slowly over the days growing taller and elongating, eventually with green buds about to break open, finally bursting with color as those yellow or purple or red or blue petals emerge – the flower made it. Beauty made it. From that crusty, gravel filled earth arose the flowers.

Gilbert writes in his poem that “flowers have the gift of language.”¹ That they speak of life. That they speak of courage. That they speak of beauty. Life, courage, and beauty, peaking out from that crusty soil.

Flowers have always held significance to me. As a child, I would press petals from our back yard in a thick stack of books. As I grew older, I would save special flowers by hanging them upside down to dry, therefore preserving them. I carefully packed these dry, delicate flowers in boxes every time I moved. There were joyous flowers celebrating love! Flowers from anniversaries, from holidays, from my wedding. There were also flowers from difficult occasions. Flowers I saved from memorial services, in memory of those I loved. My flowers speak to me.

Gilbert writes,

“The flowers have the gift of language.

¹ *For the Flowers Have the Gift of Language* Richard S. Gilbert

At the occasion of birth they are buds before bursting.

At the ceremony of love they unite two lovers in beauty.

At the occasion of death, they remind us how lovely life is."²

Flowers at birth, ceremonies of love, and death. Flowers that arise from the cracks. Flowers that speak to all of us. Flowers that draw us here – together – today.

Flowers coming from rocky soil. This simple metaphor depicts beauty coming from hardship. And those flowers that do emerge offer us so much meaning. So often beauty can arise from hardship – folks who suffered offering healing through their vocation, or tragic loss leading to activism, or sorrow leading to strength, or pain leading to a revolution. Blue, purple, pink petals emerging. I also note that often beauty and hardship are present side by side – often, there is both, although it may be hard to see. In hardship, beauty, and in beauty, hardship. We can see this in the history of Flower Communion!

Unitarian minister Norbert Capek created flower communion to highlight beauty and diversity and inclusivity and inherent worth. Each person entered the sanctuary with their own, unique flower, where they were gathered in a bouquet and blessed, and each person left with a different, beautiful, unique flower. This ceremony was created to foster community. These flowers were like the congregation – all flowers are needed for this unique bouquet, each one was needed. Each flower – each person – could be appreciated for what they brought to this beautiful mix.³ As we heard in our Story for All Ages, "These flowers are like ourselves... Different colors and different shapes, and different sizes, each needing different kinds of care—but each beautiful, each important and special, in its own way."⁴ What

² *For the Flowers Have the Gift of Language* Richard S. Gilbert

³ <https://www.dailypress.com/life/dp-fea-religion-column-millard-0429-story.html>

⁴ <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/lovesurrounds/session7/flower-ceremony>

Capek tried to highlight was that each person has inherent worth – each person is whole and good and has beauty to offer the world. In highlighting these principles of Unitarianism, he created this beautiful ritual that is Flower Communion. And yet alongside this beauty – hardship. There is more to this story – there is justice, resistance, and a deep commitment to inherent worth. There are flowers that emerged through the rockiest of soil

Norbert Capek and his wife Maja lived in Czechoslovakia in World War II. With Nazi occupation, they could have fled to the United States, but they didn't. Instead they stayed, and collected money for the Czech relief efforts to help those at risk flee the Nazis. The Capeks, those who focused on and celebrated beauty, also dedicated themselves to justice. Norbert Capek preached those ideals he ritualized in Flower Communion – highlighting inherent worth, inclusivity, and diversity. In 1941, he was arrested for listening to foreign radio broadcasts – a crime at the time. He was charged with treason – and they cited his radical sermons of love as evidence. Ultimately, he was executed in a death camp.⁵

Often, there is both beauty and hardship. There is both. Among beauty there is pain and among pain beauty. This story highlights this – just as it highlights love, inherent worth, diversity, and a commitment to justice and resistance. Even when that soil is rocky; even when surrounded by injustice – those flowers immerge. When Capek was confronted with the horrors of the Nazi regime, he sided with love. He sided with courage. He sided with beauty. He sided with life. His flowers blossomed.

We are responding as a nation to black bodies being killed by police. Every day, we see evidence of police brutality and white supremacy culture. Everyday we are reminded of this tragedy. And. Every day

⁵ <https://www.dailypress.com/life/dp-fea-religion-column-millard-0429-story.html>

we see protests. Every day we see new legislation being put into effect. Every day we see more and more support for the organization Black Lives Matters. Every day we experience the masses grappling with necessary police reform. This soil – this rocky soil – this crusty soil of systemic racism. And yet those green buds are emerging. Horrible. Tragic. And yet flowers are showing through the cracks.

A congregant brought to my attention a quote they thought fitting to this theme. She was listening to the Rachel Maddow show, where they were discussing the memorials and monuments being constructed around Lafayette Square, memorials decorating the streets of DC. I have seen this in many cities – beautiful memorials. And yet this specific memorial bore a sign that read, “They thought they could bury us, but they didn’t know we were seeds.” Not only bury but cover in rubble! Buried in racism. And yet these seeds? These seeds are blooming. These seeds are the youth and young people starting a revolution. These seeds are those people singing and chanting in the streets. These seeds forming a beautiful bouquet, rich with diversity, pulling together folks from all walks of life for justice. Flowers of every shade – I’ve seen these budding seeds and I’ve marched with them.

Norbert Capek penned a poem to his daughter:

“It is worthwhile to live and fight courageously for sacred ideals

Oh blow, ye 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 would worthless seem,

I have lived amidst eternity. Be grateful, my soul – my life was worth living.”⁶

This life of a man whose ideals were founded in inherent worth – who created ceremonies of beauty that spanned continents, and acted for justice that saved lives from the hands of Nazis. The bouquets

⁶ <https://www.dailypress.com/life/dp-fea-religion-column-millard-0429-story.html>

he envisioned were diverse. Those bouquets he envisioned included flowers from folks of every race, ethnicity, country of origin, faith journey, age, socioeconomic status, gender – those bouquets he imagined were beautiful because each flower was unique and necessary – each flower was whole. These bouquets were emblems to the strength and beauty of diversity – flowers that spoke of courage, life, and beauty. Each flower unique, whole, loved, and necessary.

And these flowers? Each one of them took work – flowers don't simply happen, they become. Before there is life, courage, and beauty, there is work. Before they can speak to birth or a ceremony of love or death, they must be cultivated. Flowers require water and sunlight and nutrient rich soil and protection from the elements. Our metaphorical flowers require action to bloom as well. Just as Capek resisted the Nazis so must we resist systemic racism and all the horrors it has birthed. We need to educate ourselves and we need to act. We highlighted action last week. Follow those grassroots organizations – those organizations led by folks of color. Respond to the asks. Show up when needed. Donate to the cause. Help folks vote. Do that internal work, that work that changes your soul. Cry out for inherent worth and dignity. Live our values – live through our morals. Our church, our society, our country, we need to celebrate the flowers! Celebrate that which peaked through that rocky soil and started a revolution.

And there are personal ills – each one of us has personal ills. Rocky soil is inevitable. In nature, yes, and in every human life. But without that rocky soil we wouldn't know the beauty of those flowers that persist – those flowers that make it. Those flowers that need to be cultivated – cultivated with soul work. With internal work guided by therapy or the recovery process or deep, intentional self-care. We each at some point have and will struggle with that rocky soil. With intentional work, we will bloom. With intentional work, we will blossom. We will speak of courage, life, and beauty.

We gathered here, today, our own unique bouquet – bringing pictures of those flowers that spoke to us, perhaps beauty or life or courage – flowers that spoke to us in a way that we decided to share those words with others in our beloved community. Remove one flower, and the bouquet will not be the same.⁷ We bring with us, in our hearts, each and every one of us, those flowers that we cultivated from that crusty soil – perhaps those flowers we are currently cultivating – filling our souls with rich perfume as our hardships become roses, poppies, and rhododendrons. Remember the beauty of Norbert Capek whose life was “worth living.”⁸ Alongside hardship, there is beauty. There is often both, even if hidden in that crusty soil – a seed about to flourish. Alongside beauty there is resistance, and justice. And our bouquet? This collection of beauty? In order to progress, we need one another. When the world seems dark, when we seem surrounded by that desert soil – we need one another. We need one another to flourish, to recognize in each other inherent worth, to join together celebrating our diversity because of the unique, special, celebrated beauty it provides. Each one of us is good, whole and loved. We need one another. Together, let us blossom. Together, let us bloom.

I see them when I go hiking – those flowers that emerge from that rocky soil. I see them lining sidewalks or creeping up exterior walls. From that crusty, gravel filled earth arose the flowers.

May it be so, and Amen.

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