

**Thank You, Maja Capek
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The Flower Celebration is a beloved ritual in Unitarian Universalist congregations. It was created by Norbert Capek in 1923, and it was introduced to Unitarian congregations on the East Coast in 1940 by Maja Capek. This year, our focus is on Maja – on seeing the world through her eyes. I will tell Maja’s story as a first person narrative. I have drawn upon excellent research done by others. I lift up in particular Richard Henry, who has written a biography entitled Norbert Fabian Capek, and Daniel R. Harper, who presently serves a Unitarian Universalist congregation in New Bedford, Massachusetts, the community where Maja Capek served as minister nearly 70 years ago.¹ By a moment of silence, I invoke the spirit of Maja Capek . . .

My name is Marie Veruna Oktavec Capek. My friends and family called me Maja. I was born in 1888 and grew up in the city of Chomutov, then in Western Bohemia, now in the Czech Republic. As a young woman, I rejected Catholicism. I became quite liberal in my religious outlook, though I was not a member of any specific church. My parents, my sister, and I emigrated to the United States in 1907. I was 19 years old at the time.

It was not easy learning English. I envied the immigrant children that I knew. They seemed to learn the language so easily! I worked hard to learn English because I wanted to go to college. Some people said that I was ambitious, and they did not mean that as a compliment. I felt some pressure to get married and start a family, but I longed for something else. I never felt so alive as when I was learning something new. I wanted a life of the mind, as well as a home life. I wanted to be able to support myself.

¹ See <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/norbertcapek.html>, an article by Richard Henry on the Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography website; <http://www.essexuu.org/capek.html>, an article on the website of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Essex County in Orange, New Jersey; <http://archive.uua.org/aboutuu/flowercommunion.html>, an article by Reginald Zottoli on the UUA website, <http://danielharper.org/archive/?p=268>, a sermon by the Rev. Dan Harper entitled “Maja Capek and an Immigrants’ Church; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flower_Communion, the Wikipedia article on the Flower Communion; <http://clf.uua.org/quest/2002-06.html#becelaere>, a sermon by the Rev. Joan Van Becelaere entitled “Fragile and Rooted” in the UUA Church of the Larger Fellowship’s “Quest” newsletter; and <http://www.eliotchapel.org/sermonDocs/Flower-Communion-2006.php>, a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Daniel O’Connell entitled “Flower Communion.”

I was admitted to the School of Library Science at Columbia University, and I graduated. You cannot imagine how good that felt! I began working in a branch of the New York Public Library. At the library, I met another Czech emigre, Norbert Capek. He spent a lot of time there because he was studying for his Ph.D. and also because there he could read newspapers from Bohemia. He was 47, and I was 29 when we met. The 18-year age difference between us bothered some people, especially because he had been married twice, and he had eight children. Norbert was so bright, so fun to be with, so handsome, and so kind. We fell in love and were married in 1917.

Norbert was a Baptist minister when we met. Norbert's father was a religious agnostic, and his mother was a devout Catholic. At age 10 he became an acolyte at St. Martin's Church, but soon was disillusioned by the priest's cynical attitudes and behavior toward his parishioners. At age 18, Norbert resigned from the Roman Catholic Church and was baptized a Baptist. At that time he was in Vienna as an apprentice to his uncle, a tailor whose shop supplied the House of Habsburg. A chance encounter had led to his introduction to the Baptist way in religion. Norbert soon became a Bible distributor and Baptist evangelist in Saxony and Moravia. He founded almost a dozen churches from Ukraine to Budapest, and he edited various journals.

He married and had several children. Sadly, his first wife died. Within a year, he re-married, and they had three new children within four years. As the editor of various journals, Capek was quite outspoken in his anti-clericalism. The threat of government reprisals prompted him in 1914 to leave Bohemia and accept a call to serve a Baptist church in New York City.

After a year in Manhattan he moved to a larger congregation in Newark, New Jersey. In 1914, Baptist church leaders accused him of heresy because of his liberal religious views. At the heresy trial, he was asked about this passage from the church's newsletter: "We are neither a club nor a church in the common meaning of that word. We are a spiritual family, brothers & sisters, and we have One Father, One God and only one leader, our oldest and most perfect brother, Jesus Christ." That sounded as though he thought Jesus was not God.

In another pamphlet, Norbert wrote that the Kingdom of God will only come about with the elimination of injustice and when the gulf between rich and poor is not so huge. That sounded

heretical to Baptist church leaders because they said that the Kingdom of God will only come about when everyone accepts Jesus Christ as God and as their personal savior. Norbert was not found guilty on heresy, but it was a stressful time. It was also stressful because, sad to say, his second wife had a stroke and died. He had eight children, can you imagine?

As I said, Norbert and I married in 1917. It was clear to us that Norbert was too liberal to be a Baptist minister. In 1919, after 25 years, he resigned from the Baptist ministry, and he had my full support. Our plan was to go back to Czechoslovakia to start a liberal church. Many people were leaving the Catholic church, and we thought they would be interested in a liberal religious church. We had trouble selling our house in Newark, so we rented an apartment in East Orange, New Jersey.

Norbert and I did not want to go to any church, but we wanted the children to learn about religions. We sent them off every Sunday to a different church and had them report to us when they got home. One day in 1920, the children went to the Unitarian Church in East Orange. When they came home and told their parents about what they learned at the Unitarian Church, we thought, "My goodness! This is different. We need to investigate this church for ourselves."

In January 1921, we signed the membership book of the Unitarian Church in East Orange and became Unitarians. That year, we returned to our country, now called Czechoslovakia, and we started a church in Prague. The American Unitarian Association provided us with encouragement and some money. We first rented space wherever we could, and once again Norbert was a popular preacher. Within a year, we were ready to officially open the church; 1,200 people show up to celebrate! Over 20 years, the congregation grew to over 3,000 members.

The congregation ordained me into the ministry in 1926. My ordination was important to the congregation, and it was important to me. Yes, Norbert was charismatic; he had many talents. He composed over 90 hymns, for example. Yet it is not bragging to say that we were co-ministers. I was not the minister's wife. Those years were tiring and exhilarating. We did such good ministry together. Among other things, the Prague church sponsored a counseling program conducted jointly by Norbert and a medical doctor. The program provided classes for expectant

parents, marriage counseling and conflict resolution courses, and counseling for those suffering the loss of a loved one.

It is hard for me to talk about what happened next. Nazi Germany invaded and occupied Czechoslovakia in 1938. In early 1939, Norbert and I decided that I should go to the United States to speak to Unitarian churches across the country and raise funds for relief work in Czechoslovakia. American Unitarians told him he could have a job if he wanted to, if he wanted to escape the Nazis and go to Boston. He thought about it, and we talked about it. Norbert decided that he had to stay.

We knew there were no guarantees that we would see each other again. It was an emotionally difficult time. After two decades of sharing daily life and building a church together, we loved each other so much. Our call to ministry required of us love in a different form, a larger form. I went on my lecture tour in the United States. It became clear that I would not be able to return to Czechoslovakia during the Nazi occupation. The loneliness was nearly unbearable at times.

During my 1940 speaking tour in the United States, I introduced the “Flower Celebration” to various Unitarian churches, including the Unitarian Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts and also to North Unitarian Church in New Bedford, Massachusetts. The Flower Celebration was something that Norbert and I first introduced at the Prague Unitarian church in 1923.

What was the Flower Celebration like at the church in Prague? People were asked to bring a flower of their choice, either from their own gardens or from the field or roadside. When they arrived at church a large vase stood waiting in the vestibule, attended by two young members of the Church School. Each person was asked to place their own flower in the vase. This signified that it was by their own free will they joined with the others. The vase that contained all the flowers was a symbol of the united church fellowship. The young people helped with the arrangement of the bouquet. Later they carried the vase up to the front of the auditorium and placed it on a table.

Then Norbert said this prayer: “In the name of Providence, which implants in the seed the future of the tree and in the hearts of men [and women] the longing for people living in [human] love; in the name of the highest. in whom we move and who makes the mother [and father], the

brother and sister what they are; in the name of sages and great religious leaders, who sacrificed their lives to hasten the coming of [peace and justice]--let us renew our resolution--sincerely to be real brothers and sisters regardless of any kind of bar which estranges [one from another]. In this holy resolution may we be strengthened, knowing that we are God's family, that one spirit, the spirit of love, unites us, and [may we] endeavor for a more perfect and more joyful life. Amen.”

After the prayer, Norbert walked over and consecrated the flowers while the congregation stood. The two attendants then took the vase back out into the vestibule. After the service, as people left the church, they went to the vase and each took a flower from the vase other than the one that they had brought. The significance of the flower celebration was that just as no two flowers are alike, so no two people are alike, yet each has a contribution to make. Together the different flowers form a beautiful bouquet. Our common bouquet would not be the same without the unique addition of each individual flower, and thus it is with our church community, it would not be the same without each and every one of us. By exchanging flowers, we show our willingness to walk together in our search for truth, disregarding all that might divide us. Each person takes home a flower brought by someone else - thus symbolizing our shared celebration in community.

I settled in the north end of New Bedford, Massachusetts, where there was a large population of Czechs, Bohemians, and other people who had come from central Europe. I became a part of North Unitarian Church. A minister had begun trying to reestablish worship services there. (For the previous 14 years, the church had a Sunday school but no worship services.) A student minister led services for a year, and then I was invited to serve as minister. I served North Unitarian Church from late 1940 through most of 1943. I helped to revitalize the church. My ministry at North Unitarian Church helped me focus on something positive during the agonizing time of Norbert's imprisonment.

In March of 1941, Norbert and his daughter, Zora, were arrested by the Gestapo and taken to Pankrac Prison. Zora was accused of listening to foreign broadcasts and distributing the content of some BBC transmissions. Norbert was accused of listening to foreign broadcasts and of "high treason." Several of his sermons were cited as "evidence" of the high treason. Listening to foreign broadcasts was a capital offense at that time. Two separate trials were held, the first at

Pankrac Prison soon after their arrest; the second, an appeal of the original decision, at Dresden in April 1942. I imagine that Norbert might have caught a glimpse of the night sky and used it as inspiration for these words:

“View the starry realm of heaven, shining distant empires sing.
Sky-song of celestial children turns each winter into spring,
turns each winter into spring.

Great you are, beyond conception, God of gods and God of stars.
My soul soars with your perception, I escape from prison bars,
I escape from prison bars.

You, the One within all forming in my heart and mind and breath, you, my guide through hate’s
fierce storming, courage in both life and death.

Life is yours, in you I grow tall, seed will come to fruit I know.
Trust that after winter’s snowfall walls will melt and Truth will flow,
walls will melt and Truth will flow.”

The appeals court found Norbert innocent of the treason charge, recommending that, given his age, the year between his arrest and the appeals trial be counted toward his jail time. The Gestapo, ignoring the court's recommendation, nonetheless sent Norbert to Dachau and sent Zora to forced labor in Germany. It was not until after the war ended that I learned he had been killed. Norbert’s name appeared among a group of invalid prisoners sent on October 12, 1942 to Hartheim Castle, near Linz, Austria. They died of poison gas. My dear husband was 72 years old. My grief was beyond words . . . So many people lost their lives at the hands of the Nazis.

By 1944, I was working at the headquarters of the American Unitarian Association in Boston, doing work for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency. I felt that I honored Norbert’s memory and my own call to ministry by that work, which I did until 1950. It included work for a number of years as a Displaced Persons Specialist in Egypt and Palestine. After I retired, I continued to speak at Unitarian churches and gatherings in Europe and North America

in support of the Prague church, so dear to my heart. I leave you with these words, which Norbert wrote in Dresden prison:

“When a holy enthusiasm seizes the heart
Your face lights up. You feel like a star singing.
Your very soul, hearing your song, is radiant.
It was, and it will be again.

*With the sun on our brows,
Enthusiasm will bloom once more.
With paradise in our hearts
Clouds will disappear,*

And the sun’s rays bring the earth back to life.
The sun of your hope will shine again
Along the dangerous narrows of your life,
Bringing warmth and light

*And the air of freedom, peace and happiness.
It was, and it will be again.*

Courage will be astir in the air
And prompt you to action
To create warmth in harmony with the Highest
And Nearest Friend.

*Success will attend you.
It was, and it will be again.*

You would embrace the whole world,
Have peace touch every flower,

You would like to give yourself away completely to everybody,
Forgive everything, play host to everyone.

You would lift this earth to heaven.

It was, and it will be again.

Maja Capek died in 1966 at the age of 78. Let us now consecrate these flowers by reading in unison Norbert Capek's words, found in the back of the hymnal as number 724. After the consecration, you are invited to come forward in silence and select a flower to take home. We remember the spirit of Norbert and Maja Capek and the spirit of all who love.