



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

Flower Communion

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Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike.

These words were written by naturalist John Muir once wrote in his 1912 book *The Yosemite*. He described beauty as a “hunger.”

This natural beauty-hunger is made manifest in the little window-sill gardens of the poor, though perhaps only a geranium slip in a broken cup, as well as in the carefully tended rose and lily gardens of the rich, the thousands of spacious city parks and botanical gardens, and in our magnificent National parks--the Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Sequoia -- Nature's sublime wonderlands, the admiration and joy of the world.

Muir points to the fact that beauty is a deep and universal need that cuts across lines of race, class or national origin. He also points to the abundance of beauty in the natural world. Not only is beauty a human need, but it is a need that is easily met by the lavish availability of nature, whether in the most humble or grandest scales. Beauty has the potential to equalize, unify, and even democratize in a world so rife with inequality, conflict and cruelty.

Muir's lifelong passion for our national parks did just that...to bring the nation together for the sheer delight and enjoyment of the natural world. I know many of you make summer pilgrimages to our California national parks, inspired by Muir's famous saying “the mountains are calling and I must go.”

This congregation knows firsthand the hunger for natural beauty. It is this drive that motivates us to drive hours to see wildflowers in the desert and to go to great lengths to tend our gardens. We also value making natural beauty available and accessible to all. I think of our wonderful Flower Committee who beautifies our altar every week from their own gardens, or our Big Saturday garden work at Willard Elementary yesterday. I think of Mud and our friends at Muir Ranch, who create a community of high school student farmers, and our friends at New Horizons Muslim elementary school, who have finally completed their incredible peace garden project.

Yes, we understand this hunger for natural beauty and how important it is to make beauty available. But is it enough, in a world where we could be doing so many other things to end the social problems of the world? Elaine Scarry's book *On Beauty and Being Just* asks the important question of whether beauty in itself has the power to contribute to justice. She counters the claim that beauty is irrelevant and unnecessary for political life, a distraction that diverts attention from the suffering of the world. She argues that beauty in fact assists in addressing injustice.

Scarry looks at the definition of justice as set forth by philosopher John Rawls. In his definition, “justice” is articulated in terms of “fairness,” in particular, “fairness as a symmetry of everyone's relations to each other.”

Scarry looks at the interconnectedness between the symmetry of fairness—true mutuality of relationship, equal distribution of power and force, stewardship of the common good, and authentic accounting for

dynamics of difference, and the symmetry expressed in beauty-- the balance and harmony inherent in the natural world and other manifestations of beauty, like great art or literature. She writes:

The symmetry of beauty, which assists us in discovering the symmetry that eventually comes into the realm of justice.

In periods when a human community is too young to have created justice, as well as in periods when justice has been taken away, beautiful things (which do not rely on us to create them but come on their own and have never been absent from a human community) hold steadily visible the manifest good of equality and balance.

Beauty, she argues, not only assists in addressing injustice, but it is crucial “soul food” to heal us and help us re-center our attention on the ideals of equality. We need beauty too to imagine the end point of justice—what we might call the beloved community, the spiritual term introduced by Dr. Martin Luther King—and to notice moments of its presence among us.

I think back to our religious ancestor Norbert Capek when he created the flower communion nearly a hundred years ago. His new Unitarian Church in Prague was growing like a weed—over 3000 members, seekers and intellectuals, were flocking to the church, all eager to make sense of the dark and dangerous times between one World War and another. Their building was not grand or majestic, a plain sanctuary with no stained glass or ornate décor. They didn't even have a choir. No symbols appeared on the walls of the church, and the ritual of the bread and wine failed to have the same meaning for people leaving Christianity for a new faith.

I think about Reverend Capek taking a walk in the countryside to think about how he could bring his people together on one of the first Sundays of summer. He needed a new ritual. I imagine him stumbling upon a field of wild flowers, dancing in the breeze. I imagine beauty calling to him, demanding his presence, and his attention, longing to be shared. In a 1961 letter to American Unitarian Association, his wife Maja Capek explained Norbert Capek's choice to use the flower as the symbol of the new ritual:

As a symbol he used flowers because in the name of a flower no wars were waged as was the case with the Cross of the Chalice. The flowers are used as symbols of the gifts which each person can make to the church and through the church to other persons. Because a large variety people are able to express their individuality, the exchange of flowers means that I shall walk, without reservation, with anyone—regardless of social status, or former religious affiliation, as long as [they are] ready and willing to go along in search of truth and service to all.

Amidst the great light and hope of Capek's ministry expressed through the Flower Communion ritual, his outspoken advocacy of liberal religion, peace, and progressive political thought made him a target for the encroaching Nazi regime. On March 28, 1941 Norbert Capek and his youngest daughter Zora were arrested by the Nazi Gestapo, charged, and convicted of treason. Capek spent a year in Dresden Prison before being sent to Dachau, where his life would end. During his imprisonment, he remained committed to his creative spiritual work, writing poems, prayers and hymns, which he would sing to other people in captivity to offer hope.

Unitarian Universalist minister Richard Gilbert writes this about his time in the concentration camp:

“While [Capek] was in “Dakaow” his courage in the face of torture and starvation was a source of inspiration to his fellow prisoners. While in the camp he led (his companions) in worship, using the Flower Communion ceremony as the ritual. Each prisoner brought what flowers they could find in the camp to a service. At the end they took with them a different flower than the one they brought, to symbolize their sense of community. After

the war, survivors testified that the Unitarian minister could not have been sent to a place where he was more needed.

For Capek, beauty beckoned him to create more beauty, to bloom where ever he was planted and spread hope in the most hopeless of situations. His legacy of the flower communion helps us to understand that we can touch justice in these moments when we see the beauty of the natural world reflected in one another's faces, and we live justice when we act out of this vision of mutuality each and every day.

May beauty call us to create justice, blooming wherever we are planted, today, and all the days to come.

Amen, and blessed be.