

***The Fragrance of Freedom***  
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Flowers have delighted people as long as memory serves and are natural symbols of the divine. When the Buddha wanted to transmit the heart of his teaching to his disciples near the end of his life, according to Zen tradition, he wordlessly held aloft a single flower, and beholding that blossom, at least one of his disciples attained enlightenment. When Jesus spoke to his followers of the reign of God, he compared those living in the kingdom to the lilies of the field, “who toil not, neither do they spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.” In Hinduism, the lotus signifies the goddess Lakshmi, whose depths contain both mother earth and the absolute of nirvana. And when the Hebrew people wanted to speak poetically of paradise, they settled on the image of the garden, filled with flowering shrubs and fruit bearing trees, and they called the garden Eden, which in the semitic tongue means “delight.”

What religion suggests, science confirms. Flowers hold a special potency for the pleasure centers of the human brain, at least according to Professor Jeanette Haviland of Rutgers University. Besides being my sister-in-law, Jeanette spent most of her tenured career in the psychology department studying human emotions, and one of her experiments involved measuring people’s reactions when presented with various gifts. Subjects were told they had been chosen to receive a free present, which was delivered to their door while their facial expressions were being surreptitiously recorded. Some of the recipients got an attractive basket of fruit. Some received a decorative candle, and still others got a colorful bouquet. All the gifts elicited a courteous thank you, as might be expected, along with a polite smile. But not all smiles are created equal, and Jeanette happens to be an expert in analyzing the 12 separate facial muscles that are involved in creating a grin, from the *Orbicularis oculi* that put the happy crinkles in the corner of the eye to the *Levator anguli oris* that elevates the angle of the mouth. She can spot what’s called a “zygomatic” or genuine smile a mile off, and can see right through a forced smile or smirk right away. And the upshot of her research made her the darling of the floral industry, for Jeanette discovered that candles and fruit and other gifts were more likely to get a feigned expression of happiness, while a bouquet of flowers made people light up with real joy. Something about flowers seems to trigger a whole cascade of positive emotions. And this is not a cultural artifact. People everywhere authentically like flowers, and apparently people always have.

A biologist could probably explain why this might be so. Because flowers and emotional life co-evolved on planet earth. The angiosperms, or flowering plants, first appeared about 100 million years ago, toward the end of what’s called the Mesozoic Era, or age of dinosaurs. Giant reptiles lived among vast forests of conifer and swamps where ferns grew to enormous heights. But there was very little color in that world and even

less emotional warmth. There were no fruits or grasses or grains. There were no maples, no beans, no buttercups, only an unrelieved monotony of green in the vegetable world, and among the thunder lizards who ruled the terrestrial sphere only the primitive instincts of survival and aggression generated by the oldest, most rudimentary regions of the brain. But flowers changed all that, transforming the planet with the simple invention of a seed.

Unlike the spores that plants had used to reproduce previously, seeds were actually a tiny organism, embryonic but ready to grow, packaged along with a built-in store of nutrition. And that extra packet of nutrition available from the seed gave the world an entirely new source of edible and abundant energy—energy which could be converted into heat—that boosted the metabolic level of the four-legged and flying creatures up a notch, from cold-blooded to warm. Coincidentally, the brain expanded and evolved. As the earth's flowers began to bloom in greater profusion, the dominance of the dinosaurs ended. Birds and mammals evolved, the limbic system that governs the emotions was laid over the old reptilian brain, and the inner landscape also changed. Mothers began to feel a deepened bond with their children, and children clung with affection to their parents. Love appeared, and loyalty, and grief, tears and laughter and curiosity and play, all made possible by the blooming plants that had turned the earth into a botanical buffet of rare fragrances and sweet perfumes, iridescent blues and shocking pinks, meaty nuts and mouth-watering melons.

One needn't attribute any form of higher consciousness to flowering plants to say that they have been extremely ingenious in their adaptations. Plants have used the warm-blooded creatures they engendered for their own purposes, like the sedges, whose burrs catch in your dog's coat on early morning rambles. Sometimes they used barbs and hooks or snares or wings for gliding on the air to attain their ends. But often, they employed more sensual inducements—tantalizing aromas or flavors or bright and gaudy tints—to entice us to do their bidding. So it's no accident that there are usually flowers here on our table where we gather to worship. The explanation is not that flowers want to go to church, or come to coffee hour, just that they're biological wayfarers who want to go anywhere and everywhere, and have hit on a variety of wiles to inspire people to cultivate them in their backyards, carry them into their homes and temples, and turn them into universal tokens of romance, holiness, purity and peace. Over the millennia, flowers have learned how to push the very emotional buttons that they helped bring forth.

So flowers were perhaps an inevitable choice when Norbert Capek wished to devise a celebration that would reflect Unitarianism and freedom of the spirit. Capek was born in 1870 in Czechoslovakia, then part of what was called Austro-Hungary. He studied theology in Germany and was ordained a Baptist minister at the youthful age of twenty-five. But there was limited tolerance at the time for faiths other than Catholicism, which was the state-sponsored religion. And political liberty was also in short supply. When Capek wrote a series of articles critical of Kaiser just prior to World War One, he had to

flee the country and came to the United States for refuge. And it was in America that Capek discovered Unitarianism—a more liberated approach to religious living than any he had encountered in Europe. After the war, Capek was encouraged to take his newfound denomination back to his homeland, to start a Unitarian congregation there.

He and his wife Maja found a receptive audience. The old Austro-Hungarian Empire had been dissolved as a result of the war, and Czechs had gained an unaccustomed taste of self-government and independence. Many were ready to throw off the remnants of their religious past, as Rome and the Vatican had by this time become associated with foreign rule. Thomas Masaryk, the first President of the Czech Republic, was among the early Unitarians who supported Capek in his effort to introduce a new faith for the new nation, and there were many like him. They were spiritual democrats and reformers who wanted a break with tradition. They desired no elaborate rituals, no gown for their minister, no formal or prescribed prayers. The congregation they founded in downtown Prague was not even called a church. The name they chose instead was “The Liberal Religious Fellowship.”

Under Capek’s leadership, the fellowship grew until it boasted several thousand members, making it the largest Unitarian congregation in the world. The Flower Communion that he introduced exactly one hundred years ago today, on June the 4th, 1923, was quickly imitated by religious liberals in America and has become a fixture in many of our churches, here and abroad. But the flourishing of religious freedom in Czechoslovakia was short-lived. When the Nazis invaded in 1939, Capek organized a committee of resistance which met in his church to help his countrymen escape from the Gestapo. Declaring bravely that “I must speak the truth and not be a coward,” he took his underground opposition into the pulpit two years later, using his Sunday sermon to contradict a speech of Hitler’s. Soon afterward, he himself was arrested and sent to the notorious concentration camp at Dachau where he would die in the gruesome medical experiments performed there. Thousands of others were arrested, too, and during these years and subsequently under the brutal Soviet regime that followed, the Unitarian church of Prague clung to existence by the slenderest of threads.

During those dark days, the thunder lizards ruled. Intellectual life was stunted, and many Unitarian ministers were imprisoned for “thought crimes” against a totalitarian state. Artistic and religious expression was curtailed. Faces were guarded; the emotional tone was bleak and flat. There was little laughter around and very few genuine smiles. The physical environment itself—from the architecture to the clothes people wore—seemed dull and monochromatic. The age of the dinosaurs, whose power lay in brute strength and naked aggression, seemed destined to last forever.

But in the last generation, the buds have re-opened, and hope has returned to the people of Eastern Europe. The thousands of Unitarians in Hungary and Transylvania are free again to practice the faith that has sustained them through so many years of

repression. Hundreds of religious liberals are members again of the Unitarian congregation in Prague and can celebrate the flower communion that Norbet Capek originated there one century ago. Threats still remain. Ukraine shares its longest border with Romania, where Unitarian congregations have begun receiving refugees from Odessa and other nearby war zones. Freedom House reports that in Hungary, the so-called “soft fascist” president Viktor Orban has managed to consolidate control over almost all the country’s independent institutions, the judiciary as well as the press and universities that might challenge his party’s rule.

But like the seed-bearing plants when they first appeared millions of years ago, or like the little mammals who scampered among the shadows of the once mighty tyrannosaurs, free churches and the principles they embody represent the wave of the future. For the smell of human dignity is like the fragrance of a flower. It exerts a beguiling power over those who inhale its aroma. Not the kind of power that works by command-and-control, not the power of the primitive reptilian brain with its unthinking reflexes of fight or flight, but a more subtle force that charms and enchants and uplifts the soul, that stimulates and energizes the higher centers of mental life, appealing to our capacity for idealism and charity and solidarity with other children of the human family. As a child smiles a zygomatic smile at the face of its mother, as a parent smiles in contentment when children are safe and well, so the heart rejoices when people meet face-to-face in recognition of their co-humanity, when they live in freedom from fear. And this freedom has the stamp of inevitability about it. It is almost like a force of nature. Because the conscience cannot be coerced. People cannot be forced to believe. Friendship can’t be exacted by threats or intimidation. Love blossoms freely or not at all. Our minds have evolved and our spirits are adapted to live in a climate of liberty as our bodies and brains are designed to live among the flowers. Such things are not only our heritage and birthright, but also our pleasure and delight.

## Offering

Our flower people this morning are Mya Coursey and Wally Cox and Meredee and David Vaughn. I would like to ask them now to please come forward and distribute our flowers among the members of the congregation. Each one of you, please take a blossom home with you this morning, and note its particular shape and color, remembering to handle it carefully. In Prague, where the ceremony is being celebrated this morning, the flowers may be roses or have thorns, reminding us that even prickly people deserve our appreciation and care. But whether you have a rose or an iris, remember that this is a gift from a stranger. It represents their unique humanity and deserves your kindest touch. In receiving it, remember how important it is to address our world and treat each other with gentleness and love.