

## **Flower Communion celebrates values—and memory—of former Orange minister, who perished in the Holocaust.**



Norbert Capek  
1870-1942

[Dr. Capek's belief in the worth and dignity of every individual is celebrated on June 11 in one of his early "homes," the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Essex County.]

Flower Communion, an international ceremony of hope and affirmation, which is celebrated annually by many Unitarian Universalist churches around the world, has a special connection—and meaning—for the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Essex County, located at 35 Cleveland Street in Orange, New Jersey. The church, which will be celebrating the 83rd anniversary of the original Flower Communion on Sunday, June 11, was home to Norbert and Maja Capek, who signed the church's membership book on January 10, 1921. The Capeks, who eventually left the church to return to their native land in Eastern Europe, went on to organize the Congregation of Liberal Religious Fellowship in Prague, Czechoslovakia, where services quickly drew standing-room-only crowds and where the very first Flower Communion was celebrated on June 24, 1923.

During the Flower Communion service in Orange, which recalls the spirit and celebration of the first Prague ceremony, each member is asked to bring a single flower to the service, which begins with the flowers being placed in a large vase. The flowers symbolize the members, each unique and free, joining together in fellowship and accepting each other regardless of their differences. At the end of the service, the children distribute a flower to each member, who accepts it "just as it comes without making any distinction where it came from and whom it represents, to confess that we accept each other as brothers and sisters without regard to class, race, or other distinction, acknowledging everybody as our friend who is human and wants to be good."

This milestone service also provides an opportunity for many Unitarian Universalists to honor the memory of Dr. Capek, whose belief in the worth and dignity of every human being was considered "dangerous" by the Nazis, who took control of Prague in 1940. According to Nazi court records, Dr. Capek's gospel of equality and justice was "...too dangerous to the Reich [for him] to be allowed to live." Although Norbert Capek was not

actually convicted of treason, both he and his daughter Zora were sent to the concentration camp at Dachau for the crime of listening to foreign radio broadcasts. On October 12, 1942, they were sent on an "invalid transport," and evidently killed that day with poison gas, though Norbert's official death certificate states that he died October 30 of a cerebral hemorrhage.

### **Another connection**

In celebrating Flower Communion, Dr. Capek's message of hope lives on. This year, the service will be led by Reverend Yielbonzie Charles Johnson, the consulting minister who is finishing his first year at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Essex County. Reverend Johnson, like Norbert Capek, was formerly a Baptist but found that Unitarian Universalism was more in sympathy with his spiritual beliefs. Prior to coming to Orange, Reverend Johnson founded the Church of the Restoration in Tulsa, OK in 1987 and has also taught preaching at Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, CA. He is currently completing his thesis for his Doctor of Divinity degree at Harvard Divinity School.



The Reverend Yielbonzie Charles Johnson discusses the values of Unitarian Universalism with young church members Olivia Grady of South Orange, Emily Braham of Union, Claire Evans and Anna Evans-Winters of Maplewood.

### **Norbert and Maja Capek: A brief history**

Flower Communion was started in 1922 by Norbert Capek and his wife, Maja, and was first celebrated on June 24, 1923. Norbert Capek was a minister, missionary, publicist

and composer of hymns, and he and Maja, both born in Bohemia, were instrumental in the flourishing of Unitarian Universalism in Eastern Europe during the 1920s and 30s. Norbert Capek served as a Baptist minister in Newark and in Belleville from 1915 to 1919. During this time, he organized an alliance of the various Slovak associations in New Jersey and was active in the movement for Czechoslovak independence.

In 1920, having resigned his pastorate in Belleville and eager to return to his native land and play a part in its spiritual reawakening following World War I, Norbert and Maja sold their Belleville home to secure money for the voyage. Because of a delay in the buyer's payment, they found it necessary to vacate the house and rent an apartment in East Orange. While living there, they encouraged their three school-age children to try out various church Sunday schools and report back to their parents on the lessons. The one they finally found that pleased them was the First Unitarian Church of Essex County (in Orange). After the children had attended several times, Norbert and Maja also visited the church, and found there "not only clear heads but warm hearts, too." They signed the membership book on January 10, 1921.

Norbert and Maja left for Czechoslovakia and by 1922, Capek had organized the Prague Congregation of Liberal Religious Fellowship, and the services were soon drawing standing-room-only crowds. On June 24, 1923, the first Flower Communion was celebrated. In 1930 the Unitarian Church of Czechoslovakia was officially recognized by the Czech government.

In 1942, both Norbert Capek and his daughter Zora were sent to the concentration camp at Dachau, for the crime of listening to foreign radio broadcasts, and on October 12, 1942 were sent on an "invalid transport," and evidently killed that day with poison gas, though Norbert's official death certificate states that he died October 30 of a cerebral hemorrhage.

Maja Capek, who did not learn of Norbert's death until after the war, brought the Flower Communion service to the United States in 1940 and introduced it to the members of the Cambridge, Massachusetts Unitarian Universalist Church. She also lectured throughout the country and served as a minister in New Bedford, Massachusetts for three years. From 1944 to 1950 she worked for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, helping displaced persons settle in Yugoslavia, Egypt and Palestine. She died December 1, 1966.

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