

TO SHAPE OUR ART
SERMON BY REVEREND KATHLEEN HEPLER

FIRST PARISH IN FRAMINGHAM UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
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The hymn we just sang together was written by the Rev. Norbert Capek, Czechoslovakian Unitarian Minister who created the flower communion we will celebrate today.

“Mother Spirit, Father Spirit, where are you? In the sky song, in the forest, sounds your cry. What to give you, what to call you, what am I?” Imagine in the 1920s writing a hymn referencing God as Mother Spirit! This begins to give you some insight into the person of Norbert Capek. Let me tell you a little about him and his wife Maja, who was also to become a Unitarian Minister.

The Czech born Maja met Norbert Capek in New York City while he was studying for his PhD, and it was at her urging that Norbert left the Baptist ministry and turned to Unitarianism. The Capeks lived in East Orange New Jersey and were members of the Unitarian Church nearby. They returned to Czechoslovakia and founded the Unitarian Church in Prague, which grew to 5,000 members. Maja Capek was ordained there in 1926.

Norbert Capek introduced the flower communion service to that church on June 4, 1923. For some time he had felt the need for some service that would bring people together but would be different than the traditional Christian communion service. Capek looked to the natural beauty of the countryside for elements of communion which would be genuine to Unitarian sentiments. This simple service was the result. It was such a success that it was held yearly just before the summer recess of the church. For this service, one was asked to bring a flower to place with others' flowers symbolizing that each joins the assembly of one's own free will. All flowers together in the vase symbolized the whole church as one body. The flowers were brought to the altar. Capek blessed the flowers. The vase was then carried back to the entry room of the church.

At the end of the service, the congregation left the sanctuary as music played, and each took a flower other than the one each had brought. This symbolized their acceptance of one another and that in giving and receiving of community grace and beauty arose from their diversity.

Certainly an apt metaphor for our times!

It was during her tour of the United States as World War II was about to begin that Reverend Maya Capek introduced the flower communion to our church in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Unfortunately, Maja was unable to return to Prague once the war had begun, and it was not until the war was over that Norbert Capek's death in a Nazi concentration camp was revealed.

“In the spring of 1941, a knock came on Norbert Capek’s door in Prague: it was the hated SS, who took him to fort Pankratz prison with his youngest daughter, then shipped him to Dresden, where, in a so-called trial, he was convicted of treason and sent off to Dachau concentration camp. Some who survived the camp told of Capek’s composing songs for the prisoners to sing, and that they would march around the barbed-wire enclosure singing at the top of their lungs as though in celebration of some holiday. Many have said that had it not been for Norbert Capek, many of those who survived, as well as those who eventually died, would have given up hope far earlier than they did. The Germans apparently took his behavior as long as they could, then came one morning to Capek and told him he was about to be transferred to a better section of the camp and given better food. Instead, they put him in the medical experimentation section, and on October 30, 1942, he died from the injections he was given.”¹

Maya Capek went on to work for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (1944-1950) and was, for three years, the minister in New Bedford, Mass.

The Capek’s life story tells us to keep our awareness on beauty in order to live the lives we most desire to live. Their legacy is courage sustained through faith that is steeped in the celebration of beauty.

And, this courage lived through faith that is sustained by beauty is my theme today.

We have, in our common lives, the worst environmental challenge in history anywhere perhaps. Greed drilled down into the sea without adequate understanding or preparation for what would be done in the event of a spill. Looking at the pictures of the birds in the Gulf gasping for air through the oil slick that covers them, who can remain untouched by angst and compassion? Every fear about the future of our children’s lives rises as we look at these helpless creatures of the sea and sky.

Every idea about how corporate greed is overtaking human sense and unity and love is stirred within my soul. When I hear that BP has paid 50 million to a PR company to manage their image, but still has given nothing to those whose livelihoods are now gone, I rage with incredulity. When the chairman of BP, Tony Hayward, begins a statement to the public by saying, “Nobody wants this to be over more than I do”, I wait for his statement of solidarity and sorrow to follow. I realize I need him to say how despairing he himself is. But, then, he only goes on to say, “No body wants this to be over more than I do....I would like to have my life back again”.

It is easy to blame this one man, but the depth of the problem that created this spill is so much larger than this one man. It is a world view attached to many systems that has a harshness, a coarseness to it, a tendency to objectify life and see its elements as products. Tony Hayward is the representation of a world view attached to many systems of “doing” in which we all reside and are complicit. He is the symbol for all that has become separate from beauty in the most sacred sense in our lives. It will not help to blame

¹ Taken from; “Norbert Capek, Unitarian Martyr”, Sermon by Richard Henry D.D.

this one man and think that justice is done by doing so...to clean it up and make someone pay and then go back to business as usual. We are in need of a sea change, a spiritual transformation, a change of heart and mind in each and every one of us. I write this letter to the CEO of BP...but it is a letter to myself and all of us really:

Dear Mr. Hayward,

You have been castigated for wishing that this whole mess would be over so that you can return to your life. I want to say something different to you, for I believe you are a scapegoat for many things that are amiss in the soul of humanity...a projection screen for the illness in our own beings.

This is a threshold moment. I ask you to consider that the yearning you feel to go back to your old life is born of the fear and discomfort that this tragedy has evoked. Rather, I ask that you stay with this moment and look deeply into the eyes of the world and feel the dismay and the terror there. Sit with the human beings in the Gulf who will not be able to make a living. Watch the people as they wade in the water and try to pick up the clumps of oil, hoping against all sense that they can, somehow, stem the tide. Visit the places where humans are trying to save the animals from their oily death.

This event has your world, and everyone's world turned upside down, and it is an opening for all of us to see ourselves full and to release ourselves into a new way of being. You have the opportunity here to speak out from this threshold.

Tell the world how lonely it has been to deny your humanity to dig the wells of danger and deceit. Stand up and tell us all what it is like to be the scapegoat for a world gone mad for money, when you have also been worshipped for the savvy business person you are, and idolized for your wealth-making. Tell us that when you watch the oil belching into the sea, that you, too, are filled with pain and recognize that this pain wants to wake you up.

This despair is the road to our salvation, for it is the heart that breaks for a truer home.

We don't need you to pay 50 million dollars to buy an image that will keep "the way it used to be" alive. Don't go back... wake up to something calling you down from the throne of elite profit and into the necessary vision and way of being to which the world's beauty is calling us all.

Stand with us Mr. Hayward and tell us that you are done abandoning your heart and seeking the god of excess in order to stay at the top of your game. Tell us that it is a false god and that the oil covered pelicans are proof of it. Tell us that until these past few weeks, your vision was tunneled and that you had relentlessly separated yourself from the beauty of this web of life in which we all reside. Tell us you are weary of such ways and that your heart has been opened wide in the wake of this tragedy. Help us to go another way...for in our most honest moments each and every one of us knows that we yearn to do so.

In recognition of the fact that I am not separate from you,
Rev. Kathleen Hepler

We are all broken open by this disaster. Our hearts ache with the sight of the animals that look like clay statues and the water crabs coming onto the land because they will not survive in the oily deeps of the ocean. This ache, these tears, are the beginning of our journey back to our awareness of our true natures that are anchored in the eternal and which we glimpse as our true home through our awareness of beauty. Even in the bleakest of moments, one flicker of this beauty can light up the whole moment with radiance and promise.

The Greek word for beauty is closely related to the Greek word meaning “to call”. Beauty is calling us to a new vision of living. You see there is a brightness that braids the world together, a radiance that is always present, but requires our awareness in order to co-create with us. Beauty brings us to that awareness. It is our path to the eternal.

We have heard that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”. Some interpret this to mean that what is beautiful to one is not beautiful to another. But consider that this might mean something altogether different; that we have to change our vision if we want to know the profound nature of the beauty of living. It means that we must shape how we see in order to be present to the call to co-create life. It means that the wisdom to know the deepest “beauty-truth” will require a transformation of seeing that is often counter-culture. From Plato to Dionysius to Kant the subject of beauty has been key to the understanding of human life and what it calls forth in us.

Beauty is a call that awakens under the heart some layer of forgotten brightness.

These words from the philosopher Dionysius:

The soul makes beautiful, to the fullest of their capacity, all things whatsoever that it grasps and molds. The radiance of the good makes beauty real, but how are you to see into a virtuous soul and know its loveliness? Withdraw into yourself and look and if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful. He cuts away here. He smooths there. He makes this line lighter. This other purer. Until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also. Cut away all that is excessive. Straighten all that is crooked. Bring light to all that is overcast and labor to make the glow of shine and never cease chiseling your statue.

Beauty is calling us to continue to see the radiance that is everywhere and to align with it in our daily living. It is the human condition to lose touch with that brightness over and over again. Beauty is the path to our remembering.

“Take our hands and let us work to shape our art”. These are the words of the last verse of the Capek hymn we just sang. “Take our hands and let us work to shape our art.”

The celebration of the Flower Communion is a going home to beauty that aligns our souls with our true home. When we see the beauty of this life, we see the beauty in ourselves and each other and love can flow. From this place we increasingly know our place in the scheme of things as co-creators of the beloved community, as those who walk in beauty and share its bounty, as those who more and more often understand, in the deepest sense, that life cannot be bought or sold, only shared with love.

It is easy to lose this vision. It is easy to be seduced into other ways. Remembering is the purpose of our gathering; to remember that even in the bleakest moment, radiance shines. This is the purpose of our community; to help one another keep an image of light in our hearts until the darkness breaks. ..to look into one another's faces and see there the eternal illumination of memory, story, dream, gift, need and possibility. (Some ideas and phrases from John Donohue interview on "Beauty"; Sounds True)

I end with these words by the poet Kathleen Raine

CHANGE

Kathleen Raine

Change
Said the sun to the moon,
You cannot stay.

Change
Says the moon to the waters,
All is flowing.

Change
Says the fields to the grass,
Seed-time and harvest,
Chaff and grain.

You must change said,
Said the worm to the bud,
Though not to a rose,

Petals fade
That wings may rise
Borne on the wind.

You are changing
Said death to the maiden, your wan face
To memory, to beauty.

Are you ready to change?
Says the thought to the heart, to let her pass
All your life long

For the unknown, the unborn
In the alchemy
Of the world's dream?

You will change,
Says the stars to the sun,
Says the night to the stars.

