

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

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**“Color My World with Joy:
The Language of Flowers”**

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Grace Note: “The Language of Flowers”

The Language of Flowers

I have a friend who, many years ago, went to Central America on behalf of the World Council of Churches. Whether a mission of peace, or fact-finding about the violence there, or the condition of refugees, I forget. What I do remember is a flower story he told me.

He was staying with a family and brought them a bouquet of the small daisies he'd found while he was out walking, and the mother took them into the kitchen, and then served him tea. He was pleased and maybe a little embarrassed that his gift had sparked her hospitality. But later, he wondered where his flowers had gone – he looked around surreptitiously for the vase, or glass, bearing his gift, but he never saw it. Did they throw them out? Didn't they understand that flowers can be put into a vase for enjoyment in the house? Was it a cultural disconnect or a language problem? But flowers speak their own language.

The next day, he brought flowers again, thinking he'd put them in a vase himself to surprise the family, and so maybe they'd understand that he was giving them those pretty daisies for everyone to enjoy their beauty. They made a lovely bouquet, but the flowers soon disappeared out of the vase, and again that day, the mother served him chamomile tea.

I forget how he discovered the misunderstanding, but of course, chamomile flowers look like small daisies, and the mother thought he was bringing her tea, and that he wanted to drink tea.

Flowers have their own language – they communicate much, often love, but also friendship, congratulations, pride, sympathy, happiness, appreciation, healing, hope, peace, and joy. This language can be quite specific, as certain flowers have their meanings, and even particular colors of certain flowers are supposed to mean quite specific things. So, for example,

a peony means bashfulness, an iris signifies a message, chamomile flowers apparently mean tea, and a pink rose means admiration or gratitude.

In my friend's situation, the language of the flowers may have become a bit mixed up, but those little fake-daisy chamomiles still communicated friendship, hospitality, and enjoyment. I imagine that when they all finally realized what had happened, their 'international flower incident' brought smiles all around.

Color My World with Joy: The Language of Flowers

Last week I went to buy a few flowers to spruce up my place for the company I was expecting, and I was reminded of something from my youth. Soon after college I shared a house with a few people and one of them was a young woman artist, Ilene. She lived simply, was a vegetarian, made some money modeling for art classes and editing film for people, and earned a tiny bit of money from her art, but she spent as much time as she could at work on a huge surface in her room where she sat perched on a stool, bringing beauty into the world. When I stopped by Ilene's room one day, I noticed that she had an impressive flower on her big artist table, a single stem. I didn't know the variety – only that it was extravagant, exotic, big and beautiful. Ilene, who was so careful with her sparse resources, had bought a gorgeous piece of nature's art to accompany her in her creative process. I thought that was great.

Last week, I was on the quest for just such an amazing single stem flower to put in the guestroom where my nephew and his girlfriend would be staying, but the florist didn't have anything very exotic in their buckets of flowers. At the checkout counter, though, they had the loveliest large purple and white irises in a vase – their own decoration – and I asked if I could please just buy a couple of those stems. She asked the manager, who said yes, and she wrapped them up beautifully in tissue tied with a ribbon, and then refused to take money for them – they were just flowers that had been picked from the yard. The florist had given me the gift of understanding and extravagance, spoken so beautifully by those irises. I felt I had truly honored Ilene's spirit and returned with flowers of exotic simplicity to bring beauty into the world of my household and guests.

Years after I lived with Ilene, I read this verse from the Koran that reminded me of her flower, “If I had but two loaves of bread, I would sell one and buy hyacinths, for they would feed my soul.” Those hyacinths, like all flowers, symbolize that “something more” in life. Not the necessities – bread, food, work, sleep – but the ineffable extra that feeds our spirits – flowers represent beauty, creativity, caring, faithfulness, hope, love, and more.

Flowers represent so many different important aspects of our lives that they are present for all the big transitions, all the tender loving moments of triumph and tragedy, joy and sorrow, beginnings and endings. Flowers accompany births, accomplishments, rites of passage, weddings, birthdays, illnesses, anniversaries, celebrations, graduations, and funerals – and always they speak to us special messages: “Hope is possible.” “Love is here.” “Suffering is accompanied.” “Beauty and joy are shared.” “You are not alone.” “Life is glorious.” Flowers remind us that we will continue to blossom and unfold, with hope and with love, in ways that are as varied and lovely and unique and amazing as flowers.

When we do a Child Dedication within Unitarian Universalism, there is often a flower – usually a rose – presented to the child. Here are the words I would say at such a time: “As a token, we give you this rose that it may be a symbol of the beauty of life that we wish for you. Like a flower, you are unique in all creation. May all your life long you unfold and blossom just as you must, in all your own individual and natural beauty.” Flowers accompany us all our life long as we unfold and blossom in our unique ways.

We do these marvelous flower communions as part of a Unitarian Universalist tradition that arose in Czechoslovakia. Two 20th century Czech Unitarians, Norbert and Maja Capek, invented and developed the flower communion in Prague, and then Maja brought it over to the suburbs of Boston, a ceremony which Unitarian Universalists practice today all over the world.

Norbert was the minister of the largest Unitarian congregation in the world in Prague, in the years before World War II. It was a diverse congregation, with former Protestants, Catholics and Jews together in one place. The flower communion was designed to be meaningful for that diverse group.

Norbert was a man of action and integrity and Maja, his wife, was his energetic and creative assistant in the ministry. In 1940 she came over to the U.S. to lecture and raise money for the Prague church, but was unable to return because of the war. On Norbert's last Sunday in the Prague pulpit in March of 1941, he criticized Hitler, despite knowing that there were Nazis in the pews. He was taken to prison and later to Dachau, where he was killed in 1942.

Maja brought the flower communion to the United States, and introduced it at the First Parish Church in Cambridge. Later, she said that her husband's motivation in creating the flower communion "was to stress and bring about brotherhood. As a symbol he used flowers because in the name of a flower... no wars were waged...." Maja continued, "The flowers are used as symbols of the gifts which each person can make to the church and through the church to other persons. The exchange of flowers means that I shall walk, without reservation, with anyone, regardless of social status or former religious affiliation, as long as he is ready and willing to go along in search of truth and service." Maja Capek carried on the ministry in this country, and the flower communion spread.

Our flower communion symbolizes the beauty of each individual, the strength and power of the bouquet of us all together in our diversity, and the gifts of peace and hope we give to each other and to the world.

Hope springs eternal and so do the flowers, which each spring, return to remind us that life is good, and they renew us with their beauty. Whether the dependable ones that come back

every year, maybe for a hundred springs, like the peonies, without any or much attention from us, or else the fragile ones, changing to seed almost before our eyes, fading with the twilight – the flowers return; our hope returns. Some flowers are wild and free, the first tangible gift that most children ever give – behold, a toddler’s fistful of dandelions, the sign of hope that they will grow in love and generosity. Some flowers are from the cultivated garden, the product of hard work, sweat, and artistry, the reminder of the blessing of hope which is a process, a struggle, and requires all of our creativity. Whether wild or planted, the flowers of hope arrive in profuse variety and extraordinary beauty, and we are amazed again, and renewed.

Flowers are trustworthy; they always return to us, in varying form. Maybe they travel a bit, or crowd each other too much, but we can rely upon their seasonal presence in our lives in a world that often feels unreliable, untrustworthy. When losses and anxieties try to root themselves around us, when fear comes nipping at our heels, flowers are the sign that we can trust the universe to be good, and trust ourselves to be well, for even the most vulnerable life, like the fragile flower, is strong and resilient.

I heard one of our Unitarian Universalist ministers in New Orleans speak soon after Hurricane Katrina struck and she noticed that they felt so much sorrow and grieving for people and places and ways of life and buildings and trees and pets all gone, but a huge moment of joy came for her when the first weed flowers pushed their way through the sidewalk cracks and announced bravely to all onlookers that life is ongoing and Nature and New Orleans could be trusted to return.

Some of you may remember the song by the rock group “Chicago”, “Color My World”. One line begins: “Color my world with hope.” I like that. What about: ‘Color my world with joy’? ‘Color my world with appreciation.’ ‘Color my world with compassion.’ Or, ‘Color my

world with flowers,' and flowers will color in all the beauty and love and hope that we are longing to enjoy and to share.

Sometimes, especially during this profuse season of spring, I think I am seeing the world through vibrant rose-colored glasses, and violet-colored ones, and yellow, and magenta, and lavender. The colors of the flowers do color my world with their beauty, and their colorfulness spills into everything I am doing, bringing grace and gentleness and joy.

That 'old saw' about "seeing the world through rose-colored glasses", is supposed to be a negative judgment upon the person, who is seen to be living, not in reality, but in polyanna land. I have been accused of being a polyanna in the past; I admit it. Perhaps I do see the world with rose-colored glasses. However, I believe that we all have viewing lenses that bring positive and negative effects to our daily viewpoints. If my multi-colored flower lenses are firmly in place right now, it just means that I'm finding the world colored by the beauty and friendliness of flowers, and what's wrong with that?

Forrest Church would have agreed with me, I believe. He was one of our most published and most famous UU ministers, and he died of cancer a few months ago. In his farewell book, *Love and Death*, he wrote about the image of the symbolic glass we look out on the world through, being "like a lightly stained glass window", "rosy and translucent", casting a "gentle glow" on what "we look out on". The many panes of this glass represent the many parts of our lives – family, vocation, avocation, health, etc. He explains that when one aspect of our life is in trouble, it's as though that pane grows "cloudy", then darker, and we tend to put our nose up against that one frame to try to see through it, and instead, our whole world goes black. What we should do, alternatively, he says, is to keep looking through the other rosy panes, while bringing

our soulful window, or whatever appropriate cleaning supply, to the glass pane that is bothering us so much.

I believe that the world is full of tints and hues, and our beings are capable of bringing colors to what is already there – augmenting or offsetting the world we are experiencing. In nature, and especially in flowering nature, we are bathed in colors that literally change the coloring, emotional and otherwise, of our world.

Flowers are extravagant gifts to our spirits. They accompany us throughout our life passages; they remind us of the importance of our beautiful uniqueness, as well as the wonderful strength of our bouquet of togetherness. Flowers speak to us of the hope of renewal and the trustworthiness of the universe. They color our world with beauty and goodness and joy.

As we drink in the colors and scents of our flower communion today, I'd like to leave you with the prayerful words of one of our ministers, The Rev. Alan Deale. He wrote a blessing poem about flowers, for our flower communion.

Flowers speak to us of joy.

 May joy be with you.

Flowers give us hope when life
begins anew each spring.

 May hope begin anew each spring
 in your heart.

Flowers stand for sharing.

 May we share together the beauty
 of the flowers.

Flowers send a message of sympathy.

 May you feel sympathy for others.

Flowers tell of friendship.

May your friendships be
everlasting.

Blessings of the flowers and their colors be upon you. May the flowers color your world with joy. As Unitarian Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, “The Amen! of Nature is always a flower.” Amen.