

Beautifully Defiant

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society

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Flower Communion Sunday

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Imagine you're on a game show, let's say Jeopardy, and the final Jeopardy question is, "What do the following books all have in common: *Gender Queer: A Memoir*; *Flamer*; *Tricks*; *The Handmaid's Tale: The Graphic Novel*; *Crank*; *Sold*; *Push*; *A Court of Mist and Fury*; *This Book is Gay*; and *Milk and Honey*?"

As the familiar countdown tune begins you think. Some of these titles may be known to you, even if you've not read them, others, perhaps most, you've never heard of. You wonder, maybe they've all won the same literary prize, or have been on the New York Times bestseller list. Or perhaps they're all books that have been adapted for television? You think and think...then the music ends. Time's up! You scribble down an answer.

Slowly you learn none of the other contestants have answered correctly. You then, will win, if you answered, "What are ten of the most banned books in US schools this year."

According to PEN America, an organization dedicated to the protection of free expression in the United States and worldwide, of the thousands of books banned in various schools and school districts around the US, the books most often targeted for bans are by or about LGBTQ+ people and people of color, have characters or themes related to their experiences, including issues of race, racism, and self-discovery. This, despite the fact, as PEN notes, "books available in schools, whether in a school or classroom library, or as part of a curriculum, were selected by librarians and educators as part of the educational offerings to students. Book bans", then, "occur when those choices are overridden by school boards, administrators, teachers, or even politicians, on the basis of a particular book's content."

The states with some of the largest number of book bans are, perhaps not surprisingly, Florida and Texas, whose increasingly authoritarian governors make regular headlines in the national press. But it would be a mistake to assume this is a so-called "red state" issue. Indeed, New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts are also among the states with current or recent book bans somewhere within their borders.

By now you may be wondering, what do book bans in the US today have to do with flower communion, a ritual created over 100 years ago that we've gathered to observe this morning?

Well, take a look at that bouquet created from the various flowers and plant life you brought to church today. Remember, to Norbert Capek, the creator of flower communion, the flowers, leaves, and branches that make up our bouquet are intended to symbolize the diversity of all life, including human beings.

As his wife Maja described it,

“No two flowers are alike, no two people are alike;
yet each has a contribution to make;
each would help to make this world as beautiful
as a colorful bouquet.
Organized and growing into a true community.
We are ready to serve one another,
The nation and the world.
By exchanging flowers we signify that we are willing,
in the spirit of tolerance and patience,
To march together in search of truth,
Disregarding all that usually divides humankind.”

Now, imagine looking at this bouquet someone decides, purple doesn't belong in this bouquet and so all the purple flowers are removed. Then someone else says, yellow doesn't belong either, and so the yellow flowers are taken away. Soon another person says, there's something I don't like about those red flowers. They should go too. And so they too are removed. Slowly, the color drains away and the bouquet becomes monochromatic, giving it the illusion of unity.

At first the people who culled the bouquet rejoice in its perceived harmonious uniformity. But then someone notices a petal that is folded over, a leaf with a ragged edge where an insect once nibbled, and one blossom, well, it seems to have, if you squint just right, a hint of one of the colors deemed inappropriate. Not everyone sees it, but why fight it? And so one by one these are taken away too until no sees color or any other distinguishing feature. After a while it becomes clear only a select few of the original flowers will make the cut and be deemed worthy to remain.

Can you image such a world?

Norbert Capek didn't have to imagine it. He lived in it.

For while Capek conceived of flower communion as a joyous ritual to celebrate human diversity, by 1941, the Nazi occupiers of Capek's homeland had made clear they saw diversity differently. In their view human diversity was not to be celebrated but denied, removed, or destroyed.

Capek was arrested by the Gestapo and his writings seized. Tried by the Nazi's, he was deemed "too dangerous to be allowed to live." Imprisoned, he was eventually sent to Dachau where he was executed in the gas chambers in 1942.

Between the time of his arrest and execution, Capek remained a champion of his ideals, offering comfort to and solace to his fellow inmates, living a beautifully defiant life right to end. In his last letter to his wife, he wrote, "I am faithful to my best and highest hope, resolve, and belief, wishing everyone well, believing in the future good of all of you: the family, the nation, humanity, and especially those most sorely tried."

Friends, while the book bans of today are not predictive of gas chambers tomorrow, fear and intolerance of difference are the architects of both. To abuse the power of the state to insist everyone conform and live according to an unscientific, ahistorical version of reality or face suppression or erasure by force of law is authoritarianism plain and simple. Yet, authoritarianism is incompatible not only with the ideals of human life and liberty it claims to defend, but with the reality of the very world in which we live. And there is nothing so lethal to body and soul as the forced denial of reality.

The natural world is abloom with every imaginable color. It pulses with life forms of infinite variety. It is a living, breathing, beautiful monument a diverse, pluralistic, and interdependent reality of which we a part. And whether you believe a god or a big bang is responsible for this reality, who are we, ourselves creations not creators of this reality, to question who does or doesn't belong, is natural or unnatural.

Banning books about LGBTQ people, people of color, issues of racism, reproductive health, and the like won't make them disappear any more than removing purple or orange flowers from our bouquet will mean they cease to exist, but it will perpetuate the unnecessary strife and trauma wrought by the fear and suppression of difference, which is to say, reality.

In the midst of those who would deny or denigrate this reality we are called by our faith to be beautifully defiant. To live true to ourselves and support those aspiring toward the same. For as Norbert Capek proclaimed shortly before his execution,

“It is worthwhile to live and fight courageously for sacred ideals.
Oh blow ye evil winds into my body's fire; my soul you'll never unravel.
Even though disappointed a thousand times or fallen in the fight and
everything would worthless seem,
I have lived amidst eternity.
Be grateful, my soul,
My life was worth living.
He who was pressed from all sides but remained victorious in spirit is
welcomed into the choir of heroes.
He who overcame the fetters giving wing to the mind is entering into the
golden age of the victorious.”

A hundred years after its creation, flower communion, remains both a beloved ritual and powerful reminder that our sacred ideals require more of us than passive admiration. Indeed, in a world where, as the lupine says, People “forget [or deny] that we bloom in our own way and in different seasons to make the world more beautiful”, our sacred ideals require commitment to remind them. Commitment, like that of the daisy, having once been placed into the barrel of a gun to proclaim peace, a commitment to live beautifully defiant.

May it be so.
Amen and Blessed Be