

## How Does Your Garden Grow?

Reflection for Flower Communion Sunday  
Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society  
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This year's adult religious exploration program focused on aging as a spiritual practice. In one of the sessions participants were invited to reflect on and name what they considered the greatest blessing of aging. Several named, in one way or another, what could be summarized as "a sense of perspective" as the greatest blessing that has come with age. And indeed, the ability to pause, discern, and act...or not...appreciative but not absolutist concerning one's lived experience is a hallmark of maturity.

Of course, everyone ages, but not everyone matures.

Aging requires little more than the passage of time. Maturity, as I've already alluded, requires something more.

One of the things I like to do in my leisure time is visit historical houses and gardens. I especially like to examine old photographs of a house or garden when it was first constructed. In these early photographs the landscape is often bare and the foliage and flora small or sparse. Comparing these early photos to the current state of a landscape often reveals whether or not the property has merely aged or if it has matured.

Mature landscapes reflect a certain level of thoughtfulness, planning, direction and care...and this is true whether it presents as a formal space, like those designed for a grand estate - the gardens at the Villa Borghese in Rome, for example - or more freestyle, like the Berkshire botanical gardens in Stockbridge, MA. Whether formal or freestyle, they are places and sources of joy, awe and wonder, inspiration and beauty.

Aged landscapes tend to appear a random afterthought. They may be overgrown or underdeveloped. They may be uncomfortable places that engender feelings of anxiety, loneliness, or isolation. Often they are weighed down by an air of melancholy and sense of missed opportunity. The grounds surrounding strip malls in the US or Soviet era apartment blocks in central and eastern Europe come to mind as such landscapes.

Our spiritual lives are, in some ways, like a landscape or garden. Though initially quite bare, it will not stay that way for long. Feelings, thoughts, and ideas will take root and be given wings through our action or inaction. Our garden will age until our last breath, but without some effort it will never actually mature.

Like the gardens I enjoy visiting, our spiritual lives, in order to mature, require more than the passage of time. They require practice within time, the practice of growth. So, how does your garden grow?

Part of the answer to that question can be found in the ritual and story of Flower Communion. Norbert Capek, the Czech Unitarian minister who created what we today call Flower Communion described it as “A new experiment in symbolizing our liberty and unity (originally brotherhood)...in which participants confess that we accept each other as siblings without regard to class, race, or other distinction, acknowledging everybody as our friend who...wants to be good.”

In this brief statement, Capek alludes to several essential practices of growth. One is ritual. Capek created a ritual. That is, he specifically set aside time to focus on the nature of our humanity and our relationship to others. Ritual can be as elaborate as a formal ceremony with a set liturgy and music or it can be simple, like time put aside each day to sit in silence or walk in the woods or along the shore. The point is to regularly set aside time to step out of one’s routine and shift one’s attention or focus, quieting the strategic mind that we might hear the wisdom or our hearts. With ritual growth is practiced through intentionality.

Another is boundaries. Capek speaks of “our liberty and unity.” And here Capek points to our need to establish both a healthy sense of self and connection to others in community. People with a good sense of self learn to respond to life from an understanding of their own feelings and values rather than in reaction to the feelings and values of others. Community provides opportunities to refine our self-understanding, to learn from and share with others, which may inspire us to shift, redraw, and sometimes reinforce our boundaries, reflecting an ongoing deepening and broadening of our experience of what it means to be human as well as the particular human that is you. Through establishing boundaries growth is practiced by discerning one’s place in the world.

Then there’s humility. Capek notes participants in the flower ceremony “confess and accept each other...without regard to class, race, or other distinction, acknowledging everybody as our friend..who wants to be good.” This is perhaps Capek’s most daring statement because it goes against the message we receive from our culture from the minute we’re born which basically tells us our gain requires another’s loss and vice versa. Capek challenges us to renounce this message and instead confess and accept not just a radical tolerance, but a radical

valuing and affirmation of others rooted in an acknowledgement of our interconnectedness. Humility is a gate through which the ego may come and go, where growth is practiced through transcendence of an entirely self-focused life toward a life lived within and for a greater good.

Now, lest we think Capek's words and ideas quaint musings for people with time on their hands, they, in fact, cost Capek his life only 84 years ago...in a Nazi gas chamber. Indeed, his ideas were deemed not simply radical or dangerous, but powerful. Powerful enough to subvert and bring down the ruling party. Powerful enough to unite people in celebration, rather than fear, of human diversity. A threat without equal to any system or ideology of oppression.

We are here today, even in the present political climate under a boorish, authoritarian- inspired administration, still largely protected rather than persecuted by our government, in our pursuit and exercise of religious and spiritual practice. Indeed, it is probably hard for most of us to imagine life without this freedom. An unintended consequence of this freedom, is the diminishment of the value and urgency of developing a mature spiritual life, a life, when joined with others over time, is capable of liberating humankind from the very conditions which cause us so much despair.

Still, though we are not subject, as Capek, to full blown tyranny of government, we are at the mercy of time. There is no question we will age and with us, the garden of our spiritual lives too. The question is, will we mature and our garden grow?

Together, may it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be