

“Stopping for Blackberries, a Grasshopper, and the Odd Flower”

Flower Communion Sunday

Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield

June 14, 2009

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Henry Hikes to Fitchburg* D. B. Johnson¹

Henry David Thoreau was a real person who lived in Concord, Massachusetts—not very far from here and very near where I live. He lived more than 150 years ago but we still remember him today. Henry loved to take long walks through the woods and fields. He wrote about the plants and animals he saw along his way. He filled his pockets with lots of stuff he might need like a pencil and paper, a jackknife, some string, a spyglass, a magnifying glass and a flute. You never know when you might need a little music! I think Henry had very big pockets. Henry could easily walk thirty miles in a day. Our story this morning is called *Henry Hikes to Fitchburg* and was written by an illustrator, D. B. Johnson. It tells the story of Henry David Thoreau and a friend of his who decide to take a walk as part of their summer vacation.

MEDITATION Norman Capek, adapted for inclusive language

"In the name of Providence, which implants in the seed the future of the tree and in the hearts of (all) the longing for people living in ...love; in the name of the highest, in whom we move and who, makes the mother, the brother and sister what they are; in the name of sages and great religious leaders, who sacrificed their lives to hasten the coming of the kingdom of (peace)--let us renew our resolution--sincerely to be real brothers and sisters regardless of any kind of bar which estranges (one from another). In this holy resolution may we be strengthened knowing that we are God's family; that one spirit, the spirit of love, unites us; and endeavor for a more perfect and more joyful life leads us on. Amen."

READING Lynn Ungar

What a gathering-the purple
tongues of iris licking out
at spikes of lupine, the orange
crepe skirts of poppies lifting
over buttercup and daisy.

Who can be grim
in the face of such abundance?
There is nothing to compare,
no need for beauty to compete.

The voluptuous rhododendron
and the plain grass
are equally filled with themselves,
equally declare the miracles
of color and form.

¹ Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000.

This is what community looks like-
this vibrant jostle, stem by stem
declaring the marvelous joining.
This is the face of communion,
the incarnation once more
gracefully resurrected from winter.

Hold these things together
in your sight-purple, crimson,
magenta, blue. You will
be feasting on this long after
the flowers are gone.

**HOMILY “Stopping for blackberries, a grasshopper, and the odd flower”
Reverend Maddie Sifantus**

My thanks to the choir for singing the wonderful old piece we just heard by Sir Edward Elgar, with words by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Longfellow is another of our literary forebears here in New England that Henry’s friend in our story might have worked for to earn his fare to Fitchburg. The words from the Longfellow’s epic poem were used in Elgar’s Cantata named “King Olaf”. Listen to the words again of his poem:

As torrents in summer, half dried in their channels,
Suddenly rise, tho’ the sky is still cloudless,
For rain has been falling far off at their fountains.
So hearts that are fainting grow full to o’er flowing,
And they that behold it, marvel and know not
That God, at their fountains far off has been raining.

Too me, this poem, and Lynn Ungar’s I read earlier, evoke the summer day—a day like yesterday and those lazy, hazy days we dream of all winter and we hope for in the summer. Perhaps summer is the season most suited to reading poetry. Perhaps it is that we have the time we have to read it—or for some of you perhaps to take your pencil and paper like Henry and write down some prose or poetry. Goofing off time that feeds our very souls.

Another poem of summer I love is this one by Mary Oliver. Perhaps you know her poem:

The Summer Day

Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?²

So what do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life this summer? Will you stop and watch a grasshopper going about her summer day, perhaps staring at you with “her enormous and complicated eyes”? Will you find a prickly blackberry patch and take the time to fill a pail? Will you wonder next to a stream that flows through its bed, seeming to dry up in the hot weather but suddenly coursing in its banks because somewhere, far upstream the magic of nature or the holy has created rain at its fountain. Will you remember to bring back some of that water to share with us in September in our ingathering water ceremony service, complete with the story of its mystery and life giving power? Will you pay attention?

Today we pay attention, as we do each June, to a very special ritual—one that is shared by most of our congregations in the Unitarian Universalist world. We pay attention to the beauty of flowers, to their diversity. This ritual had its beginnings with our Unitarian brothers and sisters in Prague, Czechoslovakia. During the Austro-Hungarian Empire there was no religious freedom in Czechoslovakia. Before World War I, a liberal religious thinker and Baptist minister named Norbert Capek left the ministry and became a journalist. He fled to the United States after articles angered those in authority. While Capek was in our country, he discovered Unitarianism.

² Oliver, Mary (1992) *New and Selected Poems*. Boston: Beacon Press.

When he returned to Czechoslovakia after the war, he founded a Unitarian congregation in Prague called the Liberal Religious Fellowship. Thousands flocked to his new church. It was just the kind of religion that so many were looking for. Most had come from the Roman Catholic Church, and they wanted a religion that looked nothing like it. Some of us can still relate to this! They wanted no elaborate rituals, no singing of hymns, no ornate building, no formal or prescribed prayers. During his ministry with them, Norbert Capek felt that the Unitarian church in Prague had taken simplicity to the extreme, and he wanted to incorporate more religious elements. For instance, he gradually introduced the singing of hymns with songs he wrote himself for his congregation. Three of them are included in our hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*. Here are words from his hymn *Color and Fragrance* (SLT 78):

Delicate beings, lacewing and sparrow

In field and forest, clover and yarrow;

Life greeting life with light brightly glowing,

None are too small to be God's vision growing.

Sounds like Capek was the kind of guy who stopped to look at the grasshopper staring him in the eye and wondered at the torrents in summer.

Norman Capek created the ritual of flower communion we are celebrating in a few moments. He wanted to have symbolic ritual that would help bind people closer together in which former Catholics, Protestants and Jews could all participate without reservations. You may not know that Capek was arrested by the Nazis and was brought to the Dachau concentration camp. It was his wife, Maja, who brought the flower communion to the United States. It was first celebrated in the United States in our congregation in Cambridge. May we, today, stand in solidarity with all those who have died for the cause of liberal religion as we celebrate Capek's ritual. May we know with him "life greeting life" and the fact that no two flowers are alike, just as we celebrate the inherent worth and dignity of every human being. Together all our flowers make a colorful and diverse bouquet. And may we take this celebration of diversity with us as we break for the summer and hold close the promise of our spiritual home.