

6th June Lyanne Mitchell - Title 'Norbert Capek's LEGACY'

This week (3rd of June) marks the 140th anniversary of the birth of Norbert Fabian Capek, a Czechoslovak Unitarian minister of extraordinary vision and courage who became the founder of Prague Unitarian church which is the largest Unitarian church in the world. He built a vigorous new Unitarian movement across the land. Capek was a martyr of his free faith - he was an uncompromising foe of tyranny and a dauntless champion of freedom.

Among Unitarian Universalist heroes and heroines, only a handful were martyred for our values—Norbert Čapek is one of that handful. He embodied the best of our faith in the worst of times.”

Capek’s ideas and religion could not be tolerated by the Third Reich. His last six months were spent in the infamous concentration camp at Dachau.

It would be easy to dwell on his sufferings, to tell of the horrors to which he was subjected. In the rooms where he was first questioned there can be seen the diabolical instruments that were used without mercy. The barracks and dungeons where he drew his last breath, were veritable hells on earth.

But this morning we are going to celebrate his belief in what he called “the still, sad music of humanity.” He was a man of many talents - Capek was a writer, a teacher and founder of educational institutions, a counsellor, public speaker, outspoken Editor of various journals and tireless spokesman for liberal religion. He played a significant role in the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) founded by Unitarians in 1910.

He identified five 'fundamental' feelings and abilities' which a modern religious education should elicit . They included, in his terms, the ability to have **faith and confidence**, the ability to **hope**, the **feeling of worship** (akin to Albert Schweitzer's reverence for life), **charity or selfless** love, and **conscientiousness**. He believed that a person characterised by these qualities could be said to be a truly religious person.

He wrote more than 90 hymns, often composing the music as well as the verses. Several became widely known popular songs. His hymns are still sung. Three were included in a new American UU hymnal published in 1993.

He invented **The Flower Communion**, a ceremony which has become one of the few Unitarian 'rituals'. It is now celebrated annually in most congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association and in many Unitarian communities here in Britain. It would please him to know that the ritual has also been a part of interfaith services at international meetings of the IARF. This morning we too, are going to do the same in honour of his memory and the anniversary of his birth.

There can be no doubt that Norbert Capek has earned his place as a Unitarian hero and martyr. If you would like to learn more about his remarkable witness and contribution to our movement, there is a piece in the current issue of N&V written by Steve Dick, with websites you can visit and material you can download. Rather than devoting this whole service to his life and memory which would be a kind of 'history service', I would rather reflect on the meaning for us, thrown up by the Flower Communion ceremony that he invented.

Look at the flowers arrangements we have created here in this simple ritual. Each flower, with its distinctive shape and colour - coming together to create a beautiful bouquet. It would be interesting to ask each one of you why you chose the flower you chose - in what way does it symbolise what you bring to this Unitarian congregation? (my flower?)

One of our members said her first choice would be to choose a dandelion. This reminded me of when I was a wee girl and I picked a bunch of dandelions for my mum, because quite simply, I thought they were stunningly beautiful flowers. This was before I was conditioned by the conventional attitude that dandelions are weeds. There may be a children’s storybook in there...or even another sermon!

Some of you will remember Bert Joiner, who was a long-time member of this church. He died about 12 or 15 years ago. He was a lovely, gentle, philosophical man - a great friend of my father’s in their young days. They were keen cyclists and founder members of SYHA (Scottish Youth Hostelling Association). They were both committed pacifists and conscientious objectors in World War 2. Bert always wore a big coat with lots of pockets,

usually with books in them. He was an avid reader. He met up with my parents one day in town, after a long break in their friendship. They went for a coffee and Bert learned that they were grieving for my late brother, who had tragically committed suicide at the age of 29 in 1976. Mum & Dad told him of how they felt they were in a spiritual desert and were experiencing a crisis of faith in the Church of Scotland. Bert listened quietly to their story, then reached into one of his pockets and gave them a slim paperback book called 'My Journey from Calvinism to Unitarianism' (author?) and gently suggested they read it.

Mum read it in one go in bed that night, and when she finished it, she woke my Dad up in a state of excitement and said - 'Bob, we need to find out if there is a Unitarian church in Glasgow!' And as they say, the rest is history! Through Bert Joiner, they became committed members, and through them, I became a member. This is how we can influence one another's lives.

As a new member of this church, I used to give Bert a lift to and from church and we often had long, deep philosophical talks on these runs. I remember when I was a bit discouraged, I expressed to him that I wasn't getting much out of the services and was considering stopping coming. He turned to me and said "You are asking what you are **getting** from the church....have you ever considered what you are **contributing** to the church...and how much others would miss you if you stopped coming?" He always could put the other side of an argument. I remember him with great fondness and gratitude.

This prompts me to ask you all this morning to reflect not only on what you **bring** to this congregation but also what you **take away** from it. We all remember the classic film 'It's a Wonderful Life'. The main character hits an all time low and is considering suicide, when a canny old angel, who is trying to gain his wings, intervenes. When the hero, played by Jimmy Stewart, expresses the thought that he wishes he had never been born, the angel grants his wish and he is plunged into a trail of painful encounters with people who had never met him because, **he had never been there to help them**....his younger brother who had become a war hero and saved many lives, never did, because Harry had never saved him when they were ice skating as boys. Others had become bitter and cynical, because Harry had never been there to have an impact on their lives.

This morning, let's reflect on what our lives might have been like if we had never known about Unitarianism? In my case, I would never have experienced the healing love I received when I was deeply bereaved, following my brother's death - from special friends at Great Hucklow, Derbyshire at the old Unitarian Family Conference holidays (now continuing as Unitarian Experience Week) One Unitarian minister was able to see below the sunny outward show I was making - and asked me to share my pain. He sat up all through a whole night, just listening as I poured it out. I will never forget that.

I don't think I would have found the courage to stand up and be counted, and express my views in a variety of situations during my working career, when I felt there was injustice or intolerance prevailing. Being a member of this church and this wider movement, gave me clarity in my beliefs and the **confidence to express them**. When both my parents died within 10 days of one another in 1995, this congregation acted as a loving church family, giving me the support and comfort I so badly needed in facing two funerals so close together - which was rather surreal to say the least.

I was talking to Iain Brown a while ago and we were sharing a feeling we have both experienced, when we visit beautiful, awe inspiring cathedrals and churches on holiday, or in some capacity, visit our early roots in the Church of Scotland. As Unitarians, there can be a deep feeling of loss and poignancy - having stepped aside from and consciously left behind all the certainty, security and comfort of our earlier faith, which was so strongly instilled into us by our parents when we were children. Some of you may identify with that sense of loss? But this morning, I'd like to ask you what you have **gained** by taking that step away? Few of us here, can claim the courage or remarkable example of Norbert Capek's life and death....but as ordinary Unitarians, we all have taken a mindful decision to choose this liberal faith, to develop our own theology, to join this fellowship and to follow our own conscience.

Can I remind you of Capek's 5 fundamental feelings and abilities, which he believed added up to being a religious person.....the ability to have **faith and confidence**, the ability to **hope**, the **feeling of worship** (akin to Albert Schweitzer's reverence for life), **charity or selfless** love, and **conscientiousness**. Has becoming a Unitarian helped you to develop these ?

I wonder if any of you would like to share with us something you feel you might have missed if this church had never been born?

Sharing session

Thank you. While the music plays - I invite you to come forward and choose a flower that **someone else brought this morning** - as a symbol of what you feel you take away from this place, and this community.

MUSIC PLAYS - flowers are chosen

A number of years ago you might remember that GUC was invited to take part in a BBC Scotland programme about 'Alternative Religions'. We shared a slot with followers of Yoga. Rev Douglas Webster who was our minister at the time, and myself, were chosen to contribute our Unitarian beliefs on behalf of the congregation. Douglas drew a very apt analogy - about being a musician. He or she can make lovely music alone....but when he or she joins an orchestra and adds their instrument's voice to that of all the other instruments, then the music can be glorious! When we **join together**, we create a much more powerful energy.

Each one of these flowers is lovely - unique, colourful - but altogether, they make a really beautiful display.

This is a challenging time of transition for our church. The refurbishment of our building....how we manage it....the changes it will inevitably bring.....and our Constitution is currently being reviewed and up-dated. It is also a time of transition for our country, coalition and a spirit of cooperation prevails (at the moment!).....It is important that none of us loses sight of the BIGGER PICTURE. We are not just a group of random people in a club, who happen to own and look after this building. We belong to a **heroic movement**. A proud and hard won heritage of liberal religion by remarkably courageous Unitarians like Norbert Capek. In Glasgow, we follow 200 years of fellow Unitarians who also stood up for their beliefs and had the courage to be different.

Thank you for sharing your flowers and your perspectives this morning.