

Flower Power

A sermon by Jackie Clement

Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington Normal, IL
May 24, 2015

If I were to ask you what the most powerful thing on earth is, what would you say? What image of ultimate strength and might comes to your mind? Would it be a force of nature—perhaps a hurricane, tsunami, tornado, avalanche—something that can reduce cities to rubble and toss cars into neighboring counties? Or would it be something manmade like nuclear weapons or a highly trained and equipped army that can bring to bear not only power but also human agency.

There are many images that might come to mind in considering what is most powerful in this world, but I am going to nominate this—this tiny, fragile blossom—as my image of an unstoppable force. For one simple reason. Because life wants more life. Because life is compelled to reproduce, to adapt, to overcome, to want more life.

Like the miracle flowers improbably sprouting between concrete blocks of sidewalk, like magnolia trees and sunflowers announcing returning life to New Orleans, like daisies staking their claim in parking lots and ballparks, flowers are nature's last laugh at our attempts at domestication.

I remember a family car trip when I was about 10 years old. After all the games of license plates and Botticelli had been played, after all the songs on mom's emergency distract-the-kids song sheet had been sung, there was nothing to do but stare out the window and watch the scenery pass. I was struck by one particular stretch where nature was busy reclaiming what human beings once thought to tame. Barns and tire stores and roadside garages, having served their purpose, were abandoned to the grip of vines and weeds and flowers. Green things and blossoming things engulfing and regenerating and making the land fertile once again. The flowers won.

A few years after that road trip, when I was 12, our school held a Memorial Day assembly. In preparation, we were made to memorize a poem that reinforced that message for me, a poem wherein flowers stood as the final testament to life's indomitable need to blossom.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

The details of that long ago assembly are sketchy with the mists of time. I was chosen to play Taps on the trumpet. Someone or other, perhaps all of us, recited the poem. But while the details are lost the feeling is not. My reaction to that poem was that the flowers

won.

It was 1968, and the song *Where Have All the Flowers Gone* was popular. That perhaps as much as anything formed my understanding of that poem, *In Flanders Fields*. The poem may have spoken of the First World War, but the assembly for which we learned it was just five months after the Tet Offensive was launched and two months after the massacre at My Lai, though we wouldn't hear about that atrocity for another year and a half. With the innocence and idealism of 12 years of living, I needed the flowers to win.

I know now, of course, that humans have the capacity to destroy faster and more thoroughly than nature can repair, but still I believe, I know, that life wants more life. Having come of age in the sixties I still cling to the idea—the ideal—of flower power, that flowers ultimately carry more power than bullets. That peace and goodness can overcome war and evil.

The service we celebrate today is an example of what I'm talking about. The flower communion service was created in 1923 by Norbert Capek to celebrate the first anniversary of Unitarian church of Prague, a church dedicated to the inherent worth and dignity of all. In Capek's own words, the flower service asked the congregation to "to confess that we accept each other as brothers and sisters without regard to class, race, or other distinction, acknowledging everybody as our friend who is a human and wants to be good."

By the time the Nazis occupied Prague, Capek's church was the largest Unitarian church in the world with 3,200 members. The church was too prominent for its leader to be preaching dangerous ideas on the equality of all persons. Capek was tried for high treason and executed by the Nazis.

The Nazis, an image we might well have nominated as one of our images of ruthless power, were able to exert their domination over the person of Norbert Capek. In that time and place, they won. But here, 73 years later, a mere blip in the history of the world, the Third Reich is despised dust, but there are still people all around the world who live by the ideas Norbert Capek shared and who celebrate the flower communion he created. The flowers have won. We here today and Unitarians around the world who celebrate the flower service stand as testament to the power of the ideas symbolized by these flowers. The power of the idea that all people are beautiful, and, together, more beautiful still. The idea of unity in diversity. The idea of sharing life's beauty with others without regard to class, race or other distinction. The idea that life wants life.

This is what faith, what religion, is about. It is one way we humans respond to the impulse of life wanting more life. As UU minister Forest Church said, "Religion is the human response to the dual reality of being alive and knowing we must die." The clearest example lies in the many theologies of afterlife, in notions of heaven or reincarnation or returning to common universal energy, in the continuance of human existence in some form. But I don't think religion or faith need hold any particular idea or any idea at all of life after death in order to be the product life's impulse to continue. The meaning making

functions of religion, its desire to create ethical and moral precepts that draw us closer into community, the call to justice making that enhances life for others, the comfort or surety or safety of a wider understanding, all of these are ways of extending life—not in numbers of days but in depth of purpose.

More life does not necessarily mean more years in a human life span or more people on the planet but an increased vibrancy in what life we have. Whether you see that as energy or meaning or purpose or experience, it is always life affirming, life enhancing, life fulfilling itself. It is the flowers winning.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day. As we take time to remember those whose lives were taken by war, let it be their lives we remember. Let it be their smiles, their accomplishments, their love and their life that we remember. As the Rev. Duncan Littlefair wrote, “the richness of our life depends upon how we surround ourselves with those who care for us, and how much we live in the spirit that does not pass away with the passing of the body. We need to treasure more deeply those who have loved us and died; they give greater joy and beauty, greater meaning and worth to our days, because they help us to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand more deeply.”

Surely we mourn their loss, the loss of all they were and all they gave. We grieve the lost potential of how much more they could have been and done because we want more life for them. Because we loved them, and it is that very love that serves as the cradle of loss. In facing his own last days, Forrest Church wrote these words, “We pay for love with pain, but love is worth the cost. If we try to protect ourselves from suffering, we shall manage only to subdue the very thing that makes our lives worth living. Though we can by a refusal to love, protect ourselves from the risk of losing what or whom we love, the irony is, by refusing to love we will have nothing left that is really worth protecting.”

So on this Memorial Day and on every day may we know that it is not war or death that win, it is life. It is the flowers that win. It is love which carries the greater power. It is life wanting more, ensuring more.

In Blackwater Woods
—Mary Oliver

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is

nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

The flowers we share today come from someone else in this congregation, their gift of beauty to this day. The flowers themselves will not last long, but the intention of kindness, sharing, joy, beauty, community, that intention remains to enhance all life, the life of the giver, the life of the receiver, the life of this community. May the flowers go on winning. May we choose love.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.