

THE VIEW FROM HERE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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If this happens to be your first exposure to the Unitarian Universalist celebration of Flower Communion, you can be excused for thinking the idea sounds a little, well, silly. After all, communion is a Christian commemoration of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth by Roman soldiers 2,000 years ago. Whatever else you may think about the event Christians view as the hinge of human history, flowers don't play a role. Indeed, they would seem completely out of place.

Christians today commemorate Jesus' suffering and death by eating bread and drinking wine, as Jesus himself supposedly requested. He apparently didn't specify what kind of bread — whether it should be whole-grain and hearth baked, or whether Wonder Bread or some other nutrition-free and preservative-laden loaf would do the trick. Nor did he specify red wine or white wine — or whether grape juice would suffice for people who prefer to steer clear of alcohol. Come to think of it, commemorating the suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth by eating Wonder Bread and sipping Welch's grape juice seems silly as well.

But it's not, of course. The role of a symbol is to point toward something, not to be the thing it points toward. The ring I wear on my left hand is not my marriage to Holly, nor is a smattering of stars on a fabric field of red and white stripes our nation. Indeed, any symbol, if divorced in meaning from the thing it is intended to symbolize, can end up looking silly. But as signs that point toward experiences that can be meaningful and even transformative, symbols wield enormous power. You just have to be “in the know” in order to tap into them.

As originally conceived by Norbert Chapek in Prague during the 1920's, Flower Communion points toward the reality that we are individual people of faith, yet we have chosen to unite as a spiritual community. In so doing, we become much more together — more beautiful, more powerful, more transformative — than we could become individually. It takes many flowers to make a bouquet — and that's the only way you can make a bouquet.

While this observation about flowers and bouquets is worth celebrating, there's another reality toward which flowers point that I'd like to highlight this morning. Especially over the past couple of weeks, I've been thinking about how flowers insist on blooming even in the most difficult environments. It is the nature of flowers to bloom, no matter what.

The influential poet and rapper Tupac Shakur, who was fatally wounded in 1996 at the age of 25 during a drive-by shooting in Las Vegas, once penned a poem titled “The Rose That Grew From Concrete.” In the poem, Shakur writes:

Did you hear about the rose that grew
from a crack in the concrete?
Proving nature's law is wrong it
learned to walk without having feet.
Funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams,
it learned to breathe fresh air.
Long live the rose that grew from concrete
when no one else ever cared.

This poem by Shakur may well have been influenced by R&B legend Ben E. King’s 1960 song that begins, “There is a rose in Spanish Harlem.” The song includes the lines, “It’s growing in the street right up through the concrete / but soft and sweet and dreaming.” King died last year at the age of 76.

It’s lovely to see an exuberant bouquet of freshly cut flowers in a vase, or an exquisite carpet of wildflowers in a meadow, or a beautiful border of flowers alongside a drive, or a festive profusion of flowers in a sidewalk plot on 80th Street. But what can be even more beautiful to the discerning eye is the site of a single flower peeking out from beneath a dumpster, or blooming in an abandoned lot, or bursting through a crack in the concrete. It is the nature of flowers to bloom, no matter what — even through cracks in concrete.

And that’s a triumphant worth celebrating, especially given how much concrete there is in the world — the concrete of sexism, and racism, and bigotry, and greed, and so on. All of these hard-hearted forces conspire to suffocate possibilities and keep other people down — women, people of color, LGBTQ people, poor people, and so on.

Miraculously, some flowers insist on blooming anyway. Sometimes they find a way to bloom on their own, and sometimes they need some help. Our role as people of faith is, among other things, to find flowers blooming in unlikely places and celebrate them. It is also to bust up concrete wherever we find it, so that more flowers can bloom more profusely. We need to do whatever we can to help the flower of humanity bloom wherever it can.

This morning, I’d like to tell you about two unlikely places I’ve come across in the past couple of weeks where flowers are blooming against all odds. Earlier this week, my wife Holly and I attended a gala fundraiser for an organization called SeriousFun Camps. Originally started by Paul Newman, this network of summer camps provides a week of fun and camaraderie each year for seriously and chronically ill children, who otherwise could not attend summer camp — or participate in sports or similar activities of any kind.

The campers who participated in the gala program obviously love going to camp, perhaps more than anything else. And it's not hard to understand why. Instead of being seriously sick kids surrounded by mostly healthy kids, which is how they spend 51 weeks of their lives each year, they get to spend a week where they are just like everyone else, doing what everyone else is doing.

Paul Newman started these camps because of luck — his own good luck. During World War II, he was stationed in England as part of a bomber squadron. One day his plane — he wasn't the pilot, but served as a member of the crew — was scheduled to fly a bombing sortie over Germany, but Newman fell violently ill with a stomach ailment shortly before takeoff, and he couldn't go along. The bomber and its crew never returned.

Later in Newman's life, when the child of a close friend fell ill with a serious disease, Newman reflected on the child's bad luck at contracting the illness and his own good luck at not having been shot down with the rest of his bomber crew. He decided to do what he could to ensure that the child's bad luck at falling seriously ill wasn't multiplied by the bad luck of not being able to go to summer camp. Thus was born the idea of SeriousFun Camps, which now number sixteen in the US and around the world.

Let me mention four of the campers who spoke at the gala. Michael survived a very rare, very aggressive brain cancer that permanently damaged his pituitary gland. Nicholas was born with hemophilia. Anya has acute lymphoblastic leukemia. Camryn, as she explained at the gala, has a disease known as McCune-Albright Syndrome, which is caused by a mutation in the GNAS1 gene, which in turn overproduces a molecule called cyclic adenosine monophosphate or cAMP for short. "Ironic, isn't it," she said: "lowercase c, capital AMP."

Camryn went on to say, "In the world of science fiction there is an idea called the Multiverse Theory, which states that there are other universes where other actions occur — like there's a world in which I am not sick. In that world, lowercase "c" cAMP does not exist, and neither does capital "c" Camp, the one we're celebrating tonight. So 26 IV infusions, 37 injections, 71 blood draws, 21 surgical procedures — they'd all be erased, but then so would memories of friends by the fire, sending handmade boats across Pearson Pond, and sing-offs from our porches in the middle of a thunderstorm." She added, "It defies logic, but I choose this universe — both camps: lowercase and capital."

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And let me tell you about a flower named Orubba Almansouri, who was the salutatorian of the graduating class at the City College of New York, where Michelle Obama gave the commencement address last week. My wife Holly participated in the ceremonies as a new member of the faculty of a newly-forming medical school at CUNY, and she told me about Almansouri's speech.

Almansouri graduated with a 3.97 GPA, having earned dual degrees in English and history. She's headed to NYU for a master's degree in Near Eastern Studies, before

heading to the University of Michigan to study for a PhD. Given that Almansouri was born and raised in Yemen, this flowering of academic performance and future potential seemed wildly improbable. She said, “I couldn’t have imagined attending college simply because we weren’t allowed to. My sisters weren’t allowed to. Girls before me weren’t allowed to. That was the case.”

The same was true for other girls in her village. The girls and their families were locked in a tribal tradition that had been in place for generations. Parents told their daughters that college would ruin them, strip them of their identities, their religion, their tradition — it would corrupt them.

But Almansouri had a dream of attending college, especially after her family migrated to the United States. She fought constantly with her father, who persisted in saying no to college, yet stayed engaged in debates and arguments with his outspoken daughter, allowing her to push him and persuade him, rather than shutting her off, which would have been the norm.

Almansouri said of her father, who was in attendance at graduation along with her mother, “He stood up for me — did not lock me up, did not shut me off, did not send me back. He did not send me back on the first plane to Yemen to marry me off like many families do.” Eventually, Almansouri’s father did permit her to go to college — and with his blessing and support, for which she thanked him in her speech.

Toward the end of her speech, Almansouri addressed her father directly: “Daddy, I’m standing here today with the First Lady of the United States of America.” And she also said, “Let me just tell you the view from here is absolutely incredible!”

Wherever flowers bloom, especially if they are blooming in difficult places, the view is incredible indeed. We need to do whatever we can to help the flower of humanity bloom wherever it can.

As you leave the service today, please feel free to take one of these flowers with you. And let it remind you to look for places where flowers are struggling to bloom — or could bloom, if someone would bust open a crack in the concrete. To paraphrase Tupac Shakur, “Long live the rose that grew from concrete when someone else ever cared.” And there’s nothing at all silly about that.