

Meditation on a Single Flower  
Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching  
Unitarian Flower Communion Sunday, June 2, 2024  
Circle Service for All Ages, UU Society of Sacramento

Reading

In a few minutes we will exchange flowers in the Unitarian Flower Communion ritual, which was created in Prague, Czechoslovakia, in 1923, by Unitarian minister Norbert Čapek. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, it was introduced to American Unitarians in 1940 by his wife, Maija [Maya]. Many of you brought one or more flowers which you grew at home. Many of us may have purchased flowers in a store. This is a reading by Jen Rehbein, who is a member of the UU Church at Washington Crossing in Titusville, New Jersey.

*Why I Brought a Dandelion Instead of a Rose*

Because they're free. They root where they choose and live without apology or boundary, thrive in vacant lots and sidewalk cracks. They don't need your fussing or your tending. Because they're tough. Resilient. Tenacious. They've faced down some serious resistance in their day, and look. They're still here.

They don't care what the neighbors say. Don't concern themselves with the rigid beauty standards the world imposes--on lawns, on people, on anything. They're here for the raggedy edges and gleeful self-expression.

They side with the bees and the slugs, walk with the rabbits and the woodchucks, with the butterflies and earthworms. They are in solidarity with wild things, shy things, outcasts, migrants. They've been outcast and migrant themselves so they know.

*Dandelions give back more than they take.* They're community minded. They make others welcome. They believe in mutual aid. They break up compacted soil, draw nutrients up from the depths/ to make them available to other plants, remove toxins. They hold space against less-beneficial invasive plants.

And then there's the fluff. Dandelions are pretty. They grant wishes for happy children, and hopeful lovers. They fling fuzzy winged seeds out onto the wind without counting the cost. Generous. Uninhibited in their giving, in their love for the world, in their belief that every seed will find a home.

All they ask ever is to be allowed to live.

Let them live.

Bring them here with you and share them.

What would a yard, a church, a world

look like

if dandelions were to belong

equally

alongside the peonies, zinnias, snapdragons, or the roses?

## Homily and Flower Exchange

Two friends of mine have been hiking in Italy on a pilgrimage between Florence and Assisi. They've posted pictures online of hills, farmlands, churches, village flower gardens, and country fields teeming with wildflowers. They've posted brief words of appreciation as well. Last week, they wrote: "Another gorgeous day in these green hills. We can't get enough of these red poppies! We had feared we'd miss the peak of jasmine blossoms in California, yet the fragrance of jasmine fills the air here." As they testify, beholding the sight or scent of a field of flowers is powerful. Even taking in this table of blossoms up here (on the center table) can lift the heart. There is something so full and abundant about a big bunch of flowers. For the next few minutes, however, I want to ask you to consider just one flower. It doesn't matter what kind. Think of just one flower all by itself. [Preacher selects a flower and comes back to the pulpit.]

During my sabbatical I started a morning practice of attending a group meditation on the YouTube channel of the Insight Meditation Center. Every weekday, after a half-hour of guided Buddhist meditation, the teacher provides a 15-minute talk, a Dharma talk. A few months ago, the teacher told us a saying of the Buddha which has stuck with me. I believe he said it's from the *Dhammapada*, which is the most read of the Buddhist scriptures.

As I recall, it goes like this: Consider a single flower. This individual blossom is lovely. It lives out its potential in its own way, with its color, size, shape, and fragrance. It's complete and whole unto itself. You can appreciate that it's beautiful, he said. Then you can add other kinds of flowers to it--other sizes and colors and varieties. Now, he said, it's one among many.

It's no less lovely or complete than before, but now that flower is subject to comparison. It may be found lacking or inferior. Or it may come out on top, as a better flower, a *superior* one. But it's still the same flower! It hasn't changed. It is just as appealing to its particular pollinating insects as it was before being put alongside other flowers. But its value *to us* now depends on outside factors.

Now think about an individual human being. Consider yourself, or me, or someone else, or someone you don't know. Each one of us is whole and complete in our uniqueness. Yet pretty quickly we fall into comparing people to others we know. This is not useful or helpful in creating community. Or we fall into comparing ourselves to others; this is not reassuring or motivating.

How liberating it would be to adopt the perspective of a dandelion. In the reading we heard, Jen Rehbein says: "Dandelions don't care *what* the neighbors say. Don't concern themselves with the rigid beauty standards the world imposes--on lawns, on people, on anything. They're here for the raggedy edges and gleeful self-expression."

When I was growing up in the 1960s and 70s in Indiana, dandelions were so widespread on a home's green lawn that my family and most of our neighbors thought of them as a threat to our way of life. Here in my yard in Sacramento, dandelions are not plentiful. They're outnumbered by many other invasive weeds. Now I can see them as pretty flowers. Vendors at the farmers' market and the co-op grocery store don't sell them as flowers, but they sell dandelion greens. These have a strong taste whether eaten fresh when cooked, and they are good for you. They're nutritious. This makes me regret all the dandelions we dug up when I was young, and those we poisoned with weed killer.

Dandelions don't compare themselves to others, but I certainly used to. When I was growing up, I was so self-conscious. Even into my young adult years, my uniqueness was the last thing I wanted to show. I spent so much energy worrying about whether I fit in, and how to fit in. I wanted to avoid any comparison with other kids my age. As an older adult, I have come to realize that most of my peers back then also had worried about fitting in. Very few of us felt confident that we could measure up to our families as well as our classmates and neighbors. We suspected that at least one person in our age group knew the standard for coolness, strength, and attractiveness, they kept them as if in a guidebook, and they lived by those standards. But we knew we were not that person.

So today, consider the invitation to be your own flower. Show yourself without comparison. Behold your beauty in its uniqueness and singularity. *Allow us* to behold your beauty. Consider what it would be like to practice going through a week without *comparing* your gifts, your identity, *yourself*. Or perhaps we could try to do this not for a full week, but just one day at a time, or an hour at a time. Just accepting, just beholding, without comparing. Let us resist the haunting delusion that we must change ourselves to meet some external ideal or standard.

At the same time, we can practice radical acceptance of other people. We can behold others in their own individual identities. Rather than comparing, ranking, or measuring, we can practice curiosity about the variety of ways that we human beings inhabit the world.

We can practice empathy. If we were a flower, we could wonder: what would it be like to live that person's life? What would it be like to live in a different kind of soil? While hiking in Italy, my friends marveled at the sea of red poppies and swooned at the perfume of the jasmine bushes. They celebrated a floral multitude. Yet each flower was just being what it knows how to be.

Jen Rehbein imagines the unique purposes of dandelions. She says: "They grant wishes for happy children, and hopeful lovers. They fling fuzzy winged seeds out onto the wind without counting the cost. Generous. Uninhibited in their giving."

Each flowering plant has its own beauty, and its many purposes on this planet Earth. And so does every human being. We can practice curiosity about the variety of ways that human beings live out our purpose. We can marvel at this human variety just as we marvel at every one of the countless flowering plants.

Each flower up here on the altar today has its own beauty. And each one reflects the beauty of the individual person who brought it here. It reflects the uniqueness of each person who grew it, nourished it, and harvested the flower so another person could offer it, and then another person could receive it.

Let us behold each flower as a reminder of each person's life, each person's identity, each person's dignity and beauty. Human worth need not be compared to be affirmed. Human beauty need not be compared to be appreciated. So may it be. Amen.

## Ritual

Now we are invited to participate in this Unitarian ritual we call the Flower Communion, to participate in it or just bear witness to the ritual. Before I give instructions on how to line up, I'll let you know how we will exchange flowers today.

We will make two lines coming down the sides of the centerpiece altar. Each of you will take a flower out of a vase, and then turn toward the person behind you, and give it to them. You will already have your own flower, for someone ahead of you will have chosen one to give to you.

Each flower we take home today will be a gift. It will be a gift many times over—given by the person who hands it to you, by the person who brought it, by the people who tended it as it grew, and harvested, transported and maybe sold it.

Now, to line up, please go to the back of the sanctuary and come around the outside of the seating area. Then come down each side here and move down your side of the altar to receive the gift of a flower from the person before you. Keep that flower, and then choose another one to give to the person behind you.

If you would like a flower but would prefer not to line up for it, ask your neighbor to bring one to you, which means they get to choose two flowers to give away. As you line up, let us enjoy the music from Irina by not having conversations. Now let us begin.

[Later, say:] If you would like a flower and didn't ask a neighbor to bring one for you, raise your hand and a Greeter can bring one to you.

## Blessing

Now for a moment, let us behold the flowers we are holding and notice the ones held by others. Let us take in the flowers that remain up here.

Each one is blessed and complete in itself. Each one is a gift. So may we treat one another and ourselves. So may we treat everyone we encounter: as blessed and whole, as a gift. Here together and beyond this congregation, let us practice curiosity compassion, understanding, and peace. Today and always, may we receive the gift of peace, and share it.

So may it be, blessed be, and amen.