

“In The Spirit of Friendship”

(Flower Communion)

Delivered to the UU Church of Roanoke on Sunday, May 10, 2026  
by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

On the Roanoke River Greenway, between Cook Drive and Aerial Way, behind a building that houses the Barrows office furniture store, there is a tremendous profusion of wildflowers. They are intentionally cultivated, though “cultivated” is probably a fancier word than this process requires - I believe this process is sometimes called “seed bombing,” where a large clutch of assorted seeds are scattered and the result is a wildly cacophonous and joyful mishmash of colors, shapes, and sizes. They do this every year. I discovered it two summers ago when I first came to Roanoke, and it has become one of my favorite things about the season. It’s a small thing, ultimately. The flowers don’t need tending. It probably saves them the work of mowing for the small slope leading from the rear of their building down to the land by the river where so many of us walk, bike, or roll past.

Those flowers are like grace. They are an unlooked-for, unasked-for surfeit of beauty, of glad profusion, of the kind of riotous abundance that lifts the heart and gladdens the spirit.

“I think we have an obligation, like an ethical obligation, to study what we love, what we want to preserve and keep with us and grow. Joy strikes me as one of the ways we know we are in the midst of such things. It’s like a finger pointing to the thing, saying ‘Take care of this!’ Saying, ‘Sing about this!’”

The annual Flower Communion ritual is one of my very favorite Unitarian Universalist traditions. I love seeing the riot of colors and forms and shapes, I love the intermingling of scents and the way we bring some flowers in plastic from the store, some in paper towels from the garden, some just loose from the grace of volunteer seeds strewn along our path. I love the powerful story of Dr. Norbert Čapek whose deeply held values led him to create this ritual, and ultimately turned him into an enemy of the Third Reich. I am also a great admirer of his wife, the Rev. Mája Čapek, who was also a Unitarian minister and responsible for bringing this ritual to the United States in the 1940s following her husband's death. It was in part a way to keep her husband's ministry, and memory, alive.

When we engage in this beloved annual ritual, as Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists have practiced for over 100 years, we are mindfully cultivating an attention to joy. We invite one another to bless these flowers and one another, as each of us has individual gifts and beauties, and as we know that this riotous profusion of all those gifts and beauties together is greater than the sum of its parts.

Take care of this!  
Sing about this!

When we enact this ritual we are also calling to mind both the gifts and the heartaches of the story of Norbert and Mája Čapek. Ministers who wanted to tend the hearts and spirits of those in their care. Ministers who caught the attention of forces of evil, wielded by human hands, and paid a terrible price for their

audacious faith practice. Their practice called for recognition of the inherent dignity and worthiness of all peoples, an idea too radical to be tolerated in a murderous, fascist state.

Take care of this!  
Sing about this!

“All is never lost.  
Some of what remains  
of my father swims amidst the breathing  
roots of the plum tree. You could almost  
see him look out from the leaves' stomata  
in spring, or his fingerprints pressed into  
the delicate whorls of the young bark.  
And when the tree makes its first  
fruit next year, or the next,  
it won't only be in dreams  
he's back. I think I too will be  
so lucky some day. Some day,  
I think, so too will you be.”

We coexist, daily, in a world that surprises us with joy and beauty AND with tragedy and terror. This is our life. The flowers that the Čapeks held up as the messengers of grace and love now remind us of those gifts, yes - and those forces in the world that serve to separate us from those gifts.

All is never lost. This poem is only one of several works by Ross Gay that eloquently, even joyfully, eulogizes his father. The beauty

of the plum tree, and the taste of its eventual fruit, exists alongside and beneath and between and among the sorrow of loss, the ashes of a loved one planted at the same time, the root ball gently set in soil that is more than soil. We cultivate joy in our life right alongside sorrow. The plum tree erupts into blossom not despite but because of that more-than-soil into which it was planted.

We ask a lot of flowers. We place them in the hands of brides and at the head of graves. We arrange them in arches and scatter their petals. In Victorian times in Western civilization, an elaborate language of flowers - "floriography" - arose so that humans could send flowers to communicate very distinct messages. I once sent white tulips to a young man I had a crush on, hoping the magical alchemy of this grand gesture would turn our friendship into something else. Not only did this not work, I later learned that white tulips - which I selected because I thought they were classy - were the flowers to send to ask forgiveness. Oops!

After I had decided to pursue the Unitarian Universalist ministry, knowing it would mean quitting my corporate job and going to seminary, changing my life in ways I had barely begun to understand, I found myself thinking about my father. He had a vocation of his own, serving as a permanent deacon in the Catholic church. He died before I found UUism, but I wondered what it would have been like to tell him of my plans. That year, when it was time for Flower Communion in my home congregation, I thought, "Why not tell him?" I took two flowers that Sunday - one for me, and one for him. After church, I drove to the cemetery where my father is buried, and I put one of the flowers

on his grave - but I didn't rely on some elaborate flower language to say what was in my heart, I just told him. I planted that seed there, the way Ross Gay planted his plum tree.

Take care of this!  
Sing about this!

It is a dance, always. The way we cultivate joy within sorrow, the way we celebrate love and loss and all the range of human emotion and experience with a simple gesture - the gift of a flower.

I would be dishonest if I did not note that today is a particular dance of joy and grief for me. I took two flowers today - one for me, and one for my mother. I cannot drive to place this on her grave today, but I can hold it in my heart as a messenger. The flower can speak to my grief and my joy.

Each of you here today, participating in this ritual, is holding a unique set of emotions and experiences. It is that richness and diversity of experience, in every one of us, that we honor in this ritual. These flowers are messengers of grace and are to remind us of our friends, the trusted beloved ones who don't always get the special holidays. How many of us have bought flowers for a friend, just because? No occasion, just to say "You, friend, are awesome"? Yeah - I have done it but I haven't done it enough. Maybe we take time to consider the gifts all those friends who have cried with you in sorrow and laughed with you in joy, and maybe we can consider who we'd like to send flowers to -

whether literal or figurative. Who would we like to surprise with joy?

“Joy strikes me (it is funny that I am inclined to say that joy strikes me; this is a good strickenness, trust me) as, like, I don't quite know how to say it, because I was going to say a kind of fabric between us, but it's more like the way the fabric holds itself together. Joy alerts us to the moments when our alienation diminishes, or, even, disappears. It reminds us of our wholeness, our togetherness — which is the truth.”

Our wholeness. Our togetherness. The truth of who we are, the gifts we bring to the world, this riot of color and presentation. No matter that we appear gaudy or plain, tall or short, creeping vine or single bloom growing directly upright - there is room for all of us. In fact the more of us there are, the more our colors and shapes and sizes and scents and postures gather together in bright profusion, the more beautiful we become. Our alienation diminishes, or, even, disappears.

We must pay attention to joy and cultivate it, because we know there are other harvests within the human heart.

You created this tableau today, together. Think about the profusion of gifts represented here. Think about the beautiful people that brought these flowers here. Think about the beautiful world from which these gorgeous messengers sprang forth. Think how when we gather, we too can be riotously beautiful. Think about the way joy surprises us. Think about the way you can surprise others with joy.

Take care of each other.  
Sing about each other.

So may it be.