

“Garden Gospels”

June 10, 2018

The Rev. Heather Janules

This past Friday, I began my day of writing in a place I visit many times a week, Horn Pond. It was a gorgeous morning, sunny but cool, with many people and their dogs enjoying the weather. All around us was wildlife: geese – protective adults and their fuzzy-feathered, adolescent offspring – ducks, heron and chipmunks. And, as I joked with a couple I ran into, the pond’s wildlife included more than one member of the Winchester Unitarian Society. Around every turn, large bushes of white wild roses greeted me and my dog, Temple. Friday was a day to be in nature and to be with one another.

I am reminded this time of year that walking through nature is a common practice of ministers, clearing our minds to prepare for the coming Sunday. As the story goes, one such minister, Norbert Čapek, found inspiration on such a meditative walk. Čapek, a convert to Unitarianism, led a large congregation named Unitaria in his native Czechoslovakia. He and members of his community rejoiced in the free and reasoned faith they practiced together. Yet, Čapek observed, liberation from dogmatic rituals offered little in the way of ceremony and beauty in their worship. He longed for a ritual that would not ask anyone to violate their conscience but would celebrate the reality of the diverse and unique community he served.

As Čapek strolled through the Bohemian countryside, the scene moved him. The riot of wildflowers – daisies and thistle and yellow blossoms– appeared before him as symbols of the people of Unitaria, beautiful in their individuality and stunning in their collective variety. This moment outdoors inspired the ritual Čapek hoped for. He imagined each member bringing a flower to worship, the children gathering the flowers, Čapek blessing the bouquet – a sign of the community itself - and then redistributing the flowers, with each person choosing a new stem. Nature is what they had in common and the blooming flowers gave them a spiritual vocabulary to celebrate individuality, community and covenant.

Thus, on June 4th, 1923, the Flower Communion was born.¹ And, as the need for inclusive rituals remains, Unitarian Universalist congregations such as this one practice this ritual once a year.

As we recall the origin story of Flower Communion, we remember the experience of Čapek finding symbolism of humanity in the natural world. Looking over that flower-filled meadow, Čapek saw a reflection of the people and the principles he loved deeply.

This year, I became inspired to approach this ritual from another perspective. Nature reflects us and how we strive to live. But what can nature teach us? Is there a “theology of botany?” What are “Garden Gospels,” the “good news” of plants?

My inspiration for these questions began with an episode of the science-based podcast *Radiolab*, titled “From Tree to Shining Tree.”² Ecologists invite us to consider not just the life revealed in singular trees but in forests. We know that trees compete for light and nutrients but do we know they also care for one another? That one can understand many trees in a forest more like one large, complex organism, revealing what some might call a collective “intelligence?”

Trees care for one another by alerting other trees to danger. With some species, if a beetle bites into the wood or a large animal begins eating a leaf, the tree emits a smell that warns neighboring trees who, in turn, exude a bitter-tasting substance to repel the nearby predators.³ In other words, trees practice collective resistance to forces that threaten community health.

I see some of this “arboreal intelligence” in the life and ministry of Norbert Čapek. While studying the Unitarian Service Committee’s ministry during World War II, I learned about life under Nazi occupation. Worship services were the only times Czech citizens were permitted to gather in groups. Thus Čapek and other clergy of his time preached coded and carefully-worded sermons to instill resilience within their communities living under siege.⁴ “When my government tries to silence me, I find my voice here.”

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flower_Communion

² <https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/from-tree-to-shining-tree/>

³ <http://podcastnotes.org/2016/09/20/radiolab-from-tree-to-shining-tree/>

⁴ *Defying the Nazis*. Joukowsky, Artemis. Audible.com

So much of the health of individual trees and the vitality of a forest depend on the network between trees, an underground network made of fibers so thin they are barely visible. This network is composed of fungi that form a symbiotic connection with trees. The trees feed fungi twenty to eighty percent of the sugar they produce and fungi nourish trees with minerals they extract from rocks and decomposing animals. If trees did not consume minerals, they could only grow to be a few feet tall. The fungi also grant trees the ability to communicate with one another. This underground fungal network warrants an inevitable name and pun. It was the journal *Nature* that first described this network⁵ as the “wood wide web.”⁶

Forest Ecologist Suzanne Simard has studied the “wood wide web” and has made fascinating discoveries. Through injecting radioactive isotopes into the network and tracking the radiation, Simard found that one tree was connected to forty-seven other trees. She also learned that tree and fungal networks function in a dynamic way, with trees giving fungi their extra sugar in seasons of plenty and the fungi supplying sugar to depleted or diseased trees, with chemical signals the catalyst for transmitting resources. These chemical signals are another way trees communicate with one another about the presence of danger.

It is unclear where the “brain” of the system lives - with trees, with fungi or somehow both together.⁷ Simard also observes that trees in decline will bequeath their energy stores not to their descendants and not necessarily to trees of the same species but the newest trees in the forest, perhaps making long-term forest survival part of their legacy.

Again, I hear a little bit of “tree wisdom” in the story of Norbert Čapek. Part of the Unitarian Service Committee’s ministry in the Czech Republic included providing staples - sugar, flour, powdered milk, medical supplies and wool – that church leaders hid under the sanctuary tiles for distribution throughout months of war-time deprivation.⁸ Just as trees with extra resources feed the hungry, sometimes even a tree we might describe as a “stranger,” at our best, we humans care not

⁵ <http://podcastnotes.org/2016/09/20/radiolab-from-tree-to-shining-tree/>

⁶ https://www.jstor.org/stable/2588942?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

⁷ <http://podcastnotes.org/2016/09/20/radiolab-from-tree-to-shining-tree/>

⁸ *Defying the Nazis*. Joukowsky, Artemis. Audible.com Chapter 11, 13:57 – 14:30

only for our own needs but the health and longevity of the whole community. “When the world is about to crush me with its weight, I find safety here.”

This *Radiolab* episode inspired me to learn more about the “wood wide web” and what I might call “plant theology” so I contacted our resident gardeners, Fritzie Nace and Margaret Lowry, for insight. It was Fritzie who introduced me to the book *The Hidden Life of Trees* by German forester Peter Wohlleben which became a piece of scripture for today’s reflection. I wish we had a few more hours to share what Wohlleben teaches about the community culture of forests. As time is limited, I offer a few important lessons.

Wohlleben writes of old growth forests and the trees we find in cities, what he calls “street kids” as they are isolated from their families and struggle to survive in hostile conditions. His book also compares trees he calls “pioneers,” who do not participate in the “wood wide web,” and those who become active members of these ecosystems.

Pioneer trees are particularly hearty as they are solely responsible for their health and defense. Yet, there is a cost for independence; self defense requires many resources. In time, pioneer trees weaken as they are unable to perpetually maintain their guard, a weakening that serves as the beginning of their end.

The cost, then, for living interdependently, is choosing to be vulnerable. The fungi that connect trees and create the “wood wide web” do not invade the tree roots but connect with the tree’s compliance and consent. There is a lesson here for us humans, about balancing the vulnerability of intimacy, of trust and openness, with the possibility of stability and sustenance as storms come and seasons turn with the waxing and waning of abundance.

Trees also have a lesson to teach about time. Wohlleben reminds us that, compared to trees, the human lifespan is very short. Under the right conditions, many trees can live about five hundred years. In one European forest, old stumps, hundreds of years old, were traced back to a root that was more than four thousand years old. Some species of tree don’t reach the age of reproduction until they turn eighty. Thus, the ecological lesson is about leaving forests undisturbed so they have the capacity to evolve and develop over centuries while

the spiritual lesson is about making the most of our human lives. “When I run around and take simple things for granted, I find meaning here.”

But perhaps the most profound lesson trees teach us is about immortality. We say it so often in the wake of loss it can sound like a sentimental cliché: Our loved one is not truly gone; they live in our memory. Love is stronger than death.

Wohlleben has discovered that this affirmation is a biological reality. One day, he came upon what appeared to be a circle of stones in the forest. When he investigated further, he discovered that the stones weren't rock at all but hardened moss, clinging to remnants of old wood. The circle was the ghost of a stump from a tree felled hundreds of years ago, the center of the stump decayed into nothingness. But when Wohlleben scraped away some of the moss, he found the wood underneath still green. The stump was still alive as it received nourishment through the “wood wide web” from other trees in the forest. Because the tree was not forgotten, it still lived and had its place.

And perhaps this is why we tell the story of Čapek year after year, to keep him alive, to renew his place among us.

As the war raged on, Čapek refused to heed warnings about his political defiance. The Gestapo eventually arrested him for listening to foreign broadcasts, a capital offense. He was executed at Dachau, soon after he wrote these words:

It is worthwhile to live and fight courageously for sacred ideals.
Oh blow ye evil winds into my body's fire; my soul you'll never unravel.
Even though disappointed a thousand times or fallen in the fight and
everything would worthless seem,
I have lived amidst eternity.
Be grateful, my soul,
My life was worth living.
He who was pressed from all sides but remained victorious in spirit is
welcomed into the choir of heroes.
He who overcame the fetters giving wing to the mind is entering into the
golden age of the victorious.

Thus, when we practice Flower Communion, we remember Čapek not only as the architect of a beautiful ritual but as a martyr to the ideals it symbolized. Through us and by us, his ministry continues, as does the struggle to create a world where the diversity of life's bounty may live on earth in peace, nurtured – like a forest – by one another. “When I am gone and have left only my name, I know I will be remembered here.”

When I asked Margaret about what lessons gardens teach her, she replied that they teach her the importance of vision. In deep winter, a gardener can only imagine what might be possible when the days lengthen and the earth warms. How committed are we to making our dreams real?

Norbert Čapek had a vision of a community united, not by religious belief but by beauty, inclusion and affection. He gave his life to that vision, just as we are invited to lend our hearts to its possibility and its promise.

As Wohlleben observes, “a tree can be only as strong as the forest that surrounds it.” With the wisdom of the forest as our guide, may we tend the forests in our lives with reverence, commitment and love.