

## FLOWER POWER

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When My Dad, who you have failed to meet, like the good Irishman he is tells any new joke he hears, he tells it with childlike glee. As a good tea party sympathizer, he loves this one...every time he sees a politician on the campaign trail he mimics their voice saying "I never stole a thing...I just want the chance." The joke depending upon where you stand, is a Rorschach test to your view of human nature, civic life, and power.

If you live with the underlying assumption about whether people who want power want to use it for self gain or too abuse it, it is immediately either boldly or honestly funny. If you feel that politicians and the government can stand as buffers to that self gain, then the joke likely reeks of an unhelpful cynicism. Either way it reveals that power is deep stuff in the human psyche.

The most popular films of the last twenty-five years all mythically approach this. The Lord of the Rings trilogy, with the intoxicating power of "the Precious"; the Star Wars films, and how one channels "The Force"; "The Godfather" and that peculiar balance of caring for ones family, while abusing all others; to "Harry Potter", and the constant conflict about how one uses magic.

The very important question in these films is how one is going to use this power. Mostly we don't acknowledge power until it goes bad, but power is value neutral. Power can abuse and power can liberate.

*(Flower Communion blossoms are distributed throughout the congregation)*

As I said last year, If puppies are inconceivably cute, mountains majestic, and love divine, flowers really are almost miraculously pretty, aren't they. Just look at them—they almost define beauty on a small scale. Another thin, they are is different. Within the broad category of "flowers" these are crazy different. And so are we. So are humans, black and tall, yellowish and round, smart and clumsy, athletic, charming and boorish, kind, cruel, slow, fast, etc., and all the combination of things above mixed together. Take a minute to think about all the Baskin Robbins-type adjectives your neighbor is.

Chapek and the Prague Unitarians got that, and got it so instinctively that at about the same time the Nazis were so infatuated with their uniformity that they felt the need for rituals that united them in their diversity rather than in their uniformity. The Prague community of Unitarians—some Christian, some not—were tired of old rituals that had divided people rather than united them. And they decided to bring and exchange flowers as a symbol of that. In a world where nearly all the religious holidays anyone really celebrates go back forever- I take pride that this is our own homegrown UU ritual, only 75 years old at the most.

The Flower Festival (as it was called when started in Prague) immediately caught on. And it in relatively short order come to sweep the U.S. as well, brought here by Norman Capek's wife, Maya Capek, herself an ordained minister, who while touring the U.S. in the 1940s started to introduce it to churches on the East Coast.

On a longer time-line a change that speaks to our diversity happened too. Two hundred million years ago, there were no flowers. Before the innovation that was flowering plants, plants were exclusively green and reproduced only by cloning themselves or casting their pollen and fate to the wind in the hope that it would find its way to another plant of the same species. The world before



flowers was a world fundamentally more local, less diverse, and one which evolved much more slowly. With flowers, the world became more diverse and more interdependent. With the creation of flowers, insects were provided a pretty target for nutrition and flowers got the gift of reproductive transportation. Essentially, flowers changed the process of evolution. Over time, flowers co-evolved with the bees that fed off them. The process of flowering brought fruit and brought seeds, and these remade life on Earth. Remove flowers and you remove many of the steps in the journey of life that led to us. Without flowers it is likely that reptiles might still rule.

So, now in a quiet way, you don't want your neighbor to think you a loon, thank your flower for its beauty, and its role in you.

See, Chapek felt the full brunt of those whose idea about how to improve the garden is to pull up everything determined to be a weed in order to plant their favorite mono crop.

It is a vision that does simplify things.

And, if your model for success is built upon controlling and organizing; well then, razing the field is one way to approach life. However, that need for order is really the product of simple minds.

When we look at the flowers held up all around the room, can't you just hear Chapak, if he had survived the concentration camps and lived long enough to see that wisdom that science spread, looking around and saying, "I think the Nazis got wrong that a garden of one plant is prettier. However, I'll accept that is a matter of taste, but what we know now from the science of ecology—they definitely get wrong is that one kind makes the garden stronger. If we as a religious group have ground to defend, a hill to fight for, a place to pull out our swords of tolerance, it is this one. We have special eyes to see diversity. It is our specialty."

Mostly we don't acknowledge power until it goes bad, but power is value neutral. That's on the test. Because power is most easily seen and identified when it is abused—when it makes the news, we want it, but don't want to claim we want it, pretend we don't have it, or want to keep it. Our weirdness about power is a core reason we have the political cultural problems we do. But we have to step in here before we get ahead of ourselves. As smart and honest spiritual people, we have to check our instincts to let those who abuse power set the tone, for how we think about it.

Historically, good people fall into the trap that power is something not to be desired. We well-meaning religious types and progressives have so constructed our identity around the suspicion of the abuse of power that we abdicate power so that we are not sullied by it. And that is dangerous. When you or the collective we get to the point that going to get power feels like hypocrisy, a queasy heresy to your politics of good-will, you can know you have a warped political philosophy. I only know because I do it all the time. It is a shirking of our responsibility to define the world with our values.

Power can abuse, and power can liberate. Had the European churches utilized their power more willfully in the late 1920s and thirties, millions might have been spared. We need to reclaim the power it will take to shape the world according to our vision of justice and compassion.

James Luther Adams reminds us that we don't believe in an immaculate conception of virtue, or believe that all the decisive forms of good in this country have been organized forms of power which have required organization to sustain it. I want people to embrace it because you are needed by your family members and by our society to be good, bigger. We are good here aren't we. We need to be more powerful. Go forth and be good and be big.

**AMEN**