

A Glance at the Life of Norbert Čapek
A Chancel Drama / Reader's Theater

The Chancel Drama is designed for an intergenerational cast and is a "reader's theater" piece which means, the players can sit on stage on stools, or add as much blocking as the director would like.

I developed it because the adults and children in my congregation had only a vague sense of what the flower communion was about or where it came from or why it was so important to our history. I figured it would be more interesting and educational than in me trying to preach the same content in an intergenerational setting. I derived most of my material from early monographs on Čapek by UU ministers, but especially the biography by Richard Henry (*Norbert Fabian Capek: A Spiritual Journey*, Skinner House Books, 1999)

We perform this drama with an intergenerational cast most every year at our Flower Communion service and it has proven to be one of those services that outside family and visitors come to because it explains some of the history and tenets of our faith in a relatively straightforward way.

I usually include the following prayer in the service:

Flower Communion Prayer

Daniel Ó Connell

We come together this spring morning as a people of faith
Like the flowers arrayed here before us
we look somewhat alike, but we each have an inner beauty
and a sparkling joy, if we would but be still enough to see it

May we remember the women and men who
came before us and made our religion possible.
May we remember that some of them died
to give us what we often take for granted

May we remember to occasionally get up,
turn off the TV and walk outside
to go take a look at a flower
a flower as common, unique, & precious as life itself
Let us take a moment to be together in silence.

<Silence>

Amen.

SCENE ONE - "Norbert Sets Out" Props: **Rottmayer** has a slip of paper. Stage: Two people standing & talking.

Narrator: Norbert Fabian Čapek was born in 1870 to a tailor and his wife in a part of the world we now call the Czech Republic. Norbert's father had some Moravian Baptist in him, and Norbert's mother was Catholic.

We take you now to when Norbert was 18 years old, and he is saying good bye to a mentor of his named Reverend Rottmayer.

Rottmayer: Well, Norbert, are you sure you want to be a missionary all the way out in Hungary? What does your family say? Don't they want you to stay in the family business?

Norbert: Oh not any more, Reverend Rottmayer. I maybe the son of a tailor and I may have apprenticed at my uncle's, but I can tell you sewing clothes together is not the life for me. My parents are poor and my aunt & uncle do not feed me very well. I am ready to do something different. I am ready to see the world!

Rottmayer: But are you sure a Baptist missionary? You've left Catholicism for good?

Norbert: Well, you know I love singing and the ritual of church, and I like discussing the big ideas: What is God like? How can we become happier people? I want to spread the good news of my new faith!

How can people who believe we are all saved from hell claim that other people who don't believe the same thing are going to hell anyway? It doesn't make sense!

Rottmayer: Well, I suppose there is nothing else to be done. You know your parents are outraged. Your aunt and uncle are embarrassed you converted! They told me they kicked you out of the house, so I suppose you must make your way.

I tell you what. On this slip of paper, I have the names of 2 families who live in Bratislava. You can stop there for a couple days on your way to Hungary. God bless you, Norbert Čapek!

Narrator: And so young Norbert went on his way. When he arrived in Bratislava the 2 families liked him so much they asked him to stay and preach to a small group of Baptists there, and so he did.

Soon his congregation got bigger and they had a choir, a youth group, and a church school. After marriage and several children, his first wife died. Within a year, he re-married. Four years of his new marriage brought three new children. And like his family, his liberal ideas kept growing, and this got him into trouble.

SCENE TWO - "The Trial" Props: Prosecutor has papers in hand. Stage: **Norbert** is in a

chair facing the audience at stage right, in front of the piano. The "jury/chorus" (composed of the other characters at this point) faces the audience. The **Prosecutor** paces back in forth between Norbert and the jury.

Norbert: A Baptist parish opened up in America. And so I moved to Newark, New Jersey. But even moving to America, my enemies caught up with me, and they put through a heresy hearing! It was December 1914.

Prosecutor: You may continue, Mr. Čapek.

Norbert: Mr Prosecutor, I established the First Baptist Church of Brno. It started with 3 members. Within a year, we had grown to a church of 12, and then to 250. I know some who accuse me are jealous of me. I cannot help it that my church is more popular than theirs. After all, I had the largest Baptist congregation in the province!

Prosecutor: And what of the newsletter you began to publish? That would be the newsletter where you say:

"We are neither a club nor a church in the common meaning of that word. We are a spiritual family, brothers & sisters, and we have One Father, One God and only one leader, our oldest and most perfect brother, Jesus Christ."

That makes it sound like you don't think Jesus is God, Mr. Čapek! It sounds like a denial of the trinity. It almost sounds– Unitarian!

Chorus: Heretic! Heretic!

Prosecutor: And here in another pamphlet you wrote, you say the Kingdom of God will only come about with the elimination of injustice and when the gulf between rich & poor is not so huge! But we all know that the Kingdom of God will only come about when everyone accepts Jesus Christ as God and personal savior!

Chorus: Heretic! Heretic!

Prosecutor: And finally Mr. Čapek, what kind of minister sets up shop as a vocational counselor doing character analysis for a fee?

Norbert: A minister who isn't paid enough to support his family!

Chorus: Heretic! Heretic!

Narrator: Fortunately, Reverend Čapek was not found guilty on heresy, but it was a close trial. His second wife had a stroke and died. Once again, Norbert was left alone, this time with 8 children at home. When WW I finally ended, Norbert spent a lot of time at the New York Public

Library where he could read newspapers from his homeland. There he met Maja, not yet 30 years old.

SCENE THREE - "Sunday School" Props: **Norbert & Maja** each have newspapers in hand. Stage: Norbert & Maja are sitting in chairs next to each other at stage right in front of the piano. Their **children** are standing center stage, in a row, bodies angled to the audience but looking at Norbert & Maja.

Maja: After I first met him, I wondered how he could be a Baptist. I was flattered he confided in me, just a girl working at the library, and I found him very exciting to be around. Much to my surprise, he asked me to marry him. Of course he had a household of eight children at home! That made me think a bit. Even though he was 47 and I was 29, we had much in common and we were good for each other.

Narrator: After 25 years, Norbert Čapek left the Baptists. The Čapeks decided to go back to Czechoslovakia, because large numbers of people were leaving the Catholic church and had nowhere to go. Norbert & Maja wondered if it was time for a new religious movement in their homeland.

Maja: We had trouble selling our house in Newark, so we took an apartment in East Orange. Norbert wrote articles and every week, he sent the children off to different Sunday schools.

Norbert: And what did you learn today children?

Child 1: We learned that Jesus died for our sins.

Norbert: Oh, I see. Well, let's send you on to another Sunday School next week.

Child 2: Oh, all right father.

Narrator: A week later, after another Sunday School, Norbert again asked his children:

Norbert: And what did you learn at this Sunday School, my children?

Child 1: That God is the father, the son, and the holy ghost.

Norbert: Oh, dear. Let's send you to another Sunday School next week.

Child 2: Another one? Do we have to?

Narrator: Another week goes by, the children go to Sunday school, and again Norbert asks:

Norbert: And what did you learn today in Sunday School, my children?

Child 2: We learned that people are not born in sin,

Child 1: and that they can make the world a better place.

Norbert: My goodness! Tell me more!

Narrator: After a while, they signed the membership book, and became Unitarians. Eventually, the American Unitarian Association agreed to give Norbert Čapek a small amount of money to spread the Unitarian message, and in 1921, the Čapeks went back to their homeland, which was now a free and independent country, full of people on a spiritual search.

Maja: Once again, Norbert started a small church, renting space where he could. And once again, he became a popular preacher. Within a year, we were ready to officially open our first church and we had 1200 people show up to celebrate!

SCENE FOUR - "Flower Communion" Props: None. Stage: **Norbert & Maja** are sitting center stage, chairs next to each other, facing the audience.

Narrator: In June of 1923, Čapek introduced the Flower Communion to his congregation.

Maja: That first Flower Communion three thousand people brought a flower and put it in a big vase with everyone else's flower.

Norbert: In my sermon, I emphasized the individual character of each 'member-flower.' And I emphasized our belonging as one spiritual community.

Maja: When people left, they were supposed to take one flower just as it comes, without making any distinction where it came from and whom it represents, to confess that we accept each other as brothers and sisters

Norbert: Without regard to class, race, or other distinction, acknowledging everybody as our friends who is a human and wants to be good.

Maja: It was beautiful. People crowded in to hear Norbert's eloquent preaching with its message of hope and a joyful life.

SCENE FIVE - "Martyrdom" Same.

Narrator: The years go by and once again, war would come to Czechoslovakia, but this time from a German named Hitler.

Maja: In 1939, Norbert and I agreed I would go on a lecture tour of the United States and try to raise money to help the refugees. Norbert stayed on, even though the American Unitarians told him he could have a job if he wanted to, if he wanted to escape the Nazis and go to Boston. But, Norbert decided he had to stay. [PAUSE]. I never saw him again.[SHE STANDS UP & LEAVES STAGE].

Norbert: If death were the end of everything, then life would be the stupidest of all comedies, and would lack all meaning or purpose...How could God abandon and betray us when our lips

have barely touched the rim of the cup of life? Death is nothing but the greatest stress a soul can experience, the effort to separate itself from the body and start a new life.

Narrator: Norbert Čapek was arrested by the Gestapo for listening to the radio. He went first to a prison in Dresden, and then to the concentration camp at Dachau where he was put to death. He was 72 years old.

Norbert: What kind of religion is this Unitarianism? It is humanity lightened by divinity. It is humanism and theism combined. It is not the kind of humanism without God and without a soul, but the humanism of those who from time to time call us to new life.

Narrator: We call your attention to the responsive reading in your order of service. The players will take the first part, and the congregation will take the part in italics. As you can see, Norbert Čapek composed this hymn as he suffered in prison, soon to die, but still filled with courage and optimism.

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Where Holy Enthusiasm Is

(Kde svaté nadšení, Composed by Norbert Čapek in Dresden Prison, 1942. Adapted from *Norbert Fabian Capek: A Spiritual Journey* by Richard Henry, Skinner House Books, 1999).

When a holy enthusiasm seizes the heart
Your face lights up. You feel like a star singing.
Your very soul, hearing your song, is radiant
It was, and it will be again.

*With the sun on our brows,
Enthusiasm will bloom once more.
With paradise in our hearts
Clouds will disappear,*

And the sun's rays bring the earth back to life.
The sun of your hope will shine again
Along the dangerous narrows of your life,
Bringing warmth and light

*And the air of freedom, peace and happiness.
It was, and it will be again.*

Courage will be astir in the air
And prompt you to action
To create warmth in harmony with the Highest

And Nearest Friend.

*Success will attend you.
It was, and it will be again.*

You would embrace the whole world,
Have peace touch every flower,
You would like to give yourself away completely to everybody
Forgive everything, play host to everyone.

*You would lift this earth to heaven.
It was, and it will be again.*