



## Story

### Sermon

As a child, I watched my mother spend the long winter looking at seed catalogues. They usually arrived in January, and even though the frozen ground wouldn't thaw for another four or five months, she would dream of her next garden, gazing at the colorful pictures of flowers and vegetables. The seeds would arrive in a small box, sometime around March, and even though our harsh Ontario climate meant that we would be lucky to plant those seeds by mid-May, she would open the box and hold the seed packets in her hand, already feeling their potential.

My father spent the winter preparing his machinery for the coming spring, and by the end of April, the restlessness to begin farming would set in. It did for all the farmers. You could see them, like the cicadas that are popping up in all our yards, coming out from winter hiding, ready to go! They'd circle their land like hawks, slowly driving the country roads in their big pickup trucks, stopping at a field, walking on the drying soil to see if their boots sunk in, digging in the earth with their hands to check its moisture and warmth. And if it wasn't ready, then they'd drive to the donut shop in town to get the news about everyone else because although no one would admit it, everyone wanted to be the first to get onto the land. It was kind of like an unspoken competition. Whose land is ready? Who's in the field? Whenever my dad heard a tractor go by, he'd go to the front window to see who it was. Sometimes he could tell simply from the sound of the engine. That's how well they knew each other. Then, when he went to the donut shop he'd have news to share.

This year has been a difficult one already. With the cold and wet weather, no one in my hometown has even able to break soil, and the anxiety is mounting. The donut shops are filled with restless farmers, aching to get started, drowning their nervousness in pots of coffee as they watch rain after rain move through.

This is what every one of them knows all too well - you can have the best seed, you can have the most powerful tractor and top of the line machinery, you can have the best soil, and you can be the farmer who is most astute at determining the readiness of your fields, but ultimately, it is out of your control. The seed, the machinery, and the credit to buy the best land is no guarantee because the biggest part rests somewhere else. It rests with the earth. All you can do is put your affairs in order, and then it's up to the wind, and the rain, and the sun, and the temperature whether your hard work will yield a harvest or not.

When Norbert Capek and his first wife made the decision to leave Czechoslovakia with their children and come to the United States in the 1914, it wasn't because they hadn't tried to make things work in their home country. Capek was a Baptist minister in the Austro-Hungarian Empire where not being Catholic was akin to a crime against the state. He firmly believed in freedom of conscience and religion and did everything he could to make room for that in his world. But the soil of his country was not ready for religious diversity of any kind. He was getting tired of being harassed and left for New York City to serve a Baptist congregation. He also spent as much time as possible with other exiled Czechoslovakians. Not unlike farmers in a doughnut shop, they met and shared the things they had heard from home, compared stories, and waited. Every one of them hoped things would improve and that they would be able to return.

Coming to America deeply shaped Capek. He felt constrained in the Baptist theology he was expected to preach and resigned from the Baptist ministry. One Sunday, his children convinced him to take them to a Unitarian Sunday school. It wasn't the first time he'd met Unitarians. He had been part of the International Association of Religious Freedom, founded by Unitarians in 1900, and he liked their ideas. But like so many, he first entered a Unitarian congregation for his children, and ended up staying for himself. It was like new life for him and he fell

in love with Unitarian theology. He began to dream of what Unitarianism could bring to Czechoslovakia. Like my mother pouring over her seed catalogues, he began to plan for spring. He was going to plant a Unitarian church in his home country.

In 1921, when Czechoslovakia gained independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he decided it was time. He returned like a man on fire, and with his wife Maya, daughter Bohdana, and son in law Karel, built a nationwide liberal religious movement. His Prague congregation grew to 3,200 members in 20 years, the largest Unitarian congregation in the world. You would have thought he would be happier than he'd ever been, but he soon learned that leading free thinkers was kind of like herding cats! No one could agree on anything! After years of having their right to free speech denied, it was hard to even think of compromising for the sake of ... anyone or anything. In the early years of the movement, there were so many factions in the church that it became paralyzed with division.

Some years ago, my father realized that it was time to make a big change in how he farmed. Conventional farming, which is the term used for farming with chemicals and fertilizers, was no longer viable to sustain a small family farm. He either had to go big to stay conventional, or go organic to stay small. My father has never been the agribusiness kind, so he chose to go organic. One of the things he learned was that the first few years would be the most difficult because when land is freed from chemical use, it basically goes crazy. The chemicals are like a drug, and the soil first goes through withdrawal, and then it's almost like it goes into overdrive trying to restore itself. Thistles go crazy. Burs go crazy. Ragweed goes crazy. Elephant ear goes crazy. Each of these plants absorbs a different set of toxins and releases what the soil needs to be restored. If you want to go organic, you have to understand what the soil is doing and see the weeds not as invasions, but as supporting new health.

This is what was happening in Rev. Capek's church. His people were like depleted soil charging into freedom. They were ornery, demanding, and sometimes not very mature. His members came from Protestant, Catholic and Jewish backgrounds and even though they wanted to leave the restrictions of those backgrounds behind, they often still judged those who came from different backgrounds. Those prejudices were so old and powerful. They also argued about ritual. They had such different religious experiences that it was difficult to find rituals that they could all relate to. All this made it hard for them to disagree respectfully. Resentments built and factions became very strong. The church seemed to be disintegrating through division.

Let me tell you what my father learned to do with the weeds. You had to let them grow because the soil needed something that they offered, but not long enough so that they flowered and took over a field. The trick was to let them grow until just before they flowered, and then chop them out. The members of the Prague Unitarian church were like that soil. All that tension was there for a good reason. It gave them so much energy, and they needed to go through this internal struggle to learn what it meant to be free and in community. But, the struggles needed to be managed so that they did not poison the church itself. Left unchecked they would choke off any new growth.

Somehow Rev. Capek needed to find a way to help his congregation harness the energy behind the struggle before the struggle choked off new growth. As he walked to church one morning he saw that the roadsides were filled with all kinds of different flowers, and they were all equally beautiful, and he thought to himself, "Who could possibly argue with flowers?" He told his congregants to bring flowers the next week and to place those flowers in the vases as they entered worship. He then invited everyone to take a flower different from the one they brought. He told them that every single human being had something special and unique to offer and that it should be treasured. The most important religious task they had was to give of themselves fully, and to receive from others just as fully. Everything else was secondary.

The Flower Communion became the most beloved service of the Prague Unitarian Church. It helped them to begin to see that their differences were precious, not something to be feared, and that everyone was a brother or sister. Their religious task was to trust in the diversity, to cherish it and to protect it.

To be an organic farmer is to be o.k. with fields that look a little messy, because the weeds have their place along with the crops, and in fact good crops won't be possible if you don't allow the weeds to do their part in restoring the soil. Everything has its place and everyone has their place and we all belong.

We are still learning this deep truth. There is no life that is free from struggle. There is no life that is free of messiness. There is also no life that is without beauty, truth, and power. In fact, this is one of the cornerstones of our Unitarian Universalist faith. The truth is in soil that restores itself. The promise of Unitarian Universalism is that we too can be restored and made whole when we commit ourselves to lives of giving and receiving.

The rain that we had here in St. Louis late last week just arrived in southwest Ontario, so the machinery still stands dormant, bags of seed lie unopened, and as the farmers sit in the donut shop bemoaning the late start of planting season, the soil waits. It's in no rush. The rains will come and go, as will the sun. The soil will receive it all, and the growing will happen whether we're in charge of it or not. And that is, indeed, a blessing.