

The Freedom to Blossom

Rev. Lyn Cox

May 20, 2018

When Norbert and Maya Čapek founded the Congregation of Liberal Religious Fellowship, they were ministering in a country that had been affected by the first world war. Their members were seeking a community that valued different ideas, a place where people could come to their own conclusions. The flower ceremony wasn't just about affirming individuals, it was about binding the congregation together in their commitment to liberation. As the Nazis came into ascendancy, a congregation that promoted freedom of thought turned out to be threatening to authoritarian, racist powers. Promoting knowledge, critical thought, and acceptance of differences is politically radical.

As the Čapeks were doing their work in Prague, the United States was going through the after-effects of World War I and the industrial revolution, not to mention Reconstruction, the backlash of lynchings and Jim Crow, and the Great Depression. Out of this context, Oliver LaGrone grew up and shared his spirit with others. LaGrone was an African-American sculptor, poet, educator, and humanitarian. He absorbed from his parents respect for education and pride in his heritage. He translated these into sculpture and poetry, and into lecturing and teaching African American history, as well as advising students and mentoring young artists. LaGrone translated the human experience into beauty and relationships. Being creative and unapologetically proud of who you are and mentoring young people to do the same changes the world. Promoting human dignity is radical.

In all of their cases, these role models knew something about destruction and devastation. They knew something about violence that had been used to intimidate and oppress whole groups people. And yet they responded with kindness, creativity, and by passing the flame of human dignity from one generation to the next.

I think we need to remember these ancestors now more than ever. There is so much violence in the world. There are those who ridicule education and respect for differences. Racism and xenophobia are expressed boldly. We might be tempted to despair. Yet our prophetic role models remind us to have hope and courage. They demonstrated that our differences are beautiful; that we can come together in community; that our powers to create, heal, and grow can be used for good.

Here we are, the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, celebrating the Flower Ceremony and Oliver LaGrone Scholarship Sunday. We inherit the tradition of Norbert and Maya

Čapek, a tradition that builds strong communities of beauty and resistance, a tradition that honors all people, whatever their gifts. We inherit the influence of Oliver LaGrone, a tradition that strengthens communities of learning, that promotes pride and curiosity and cultural understanding through beauty.

From both of these streams, may we carry forward the courage to be ourselves, and the greater courage create times and places where other people can be themselves. May we carry the spirit of hospitality and welcome toward those who migrate to escape violence. May we carry the commitment to education and to freedom of speech and expression, because the capacity for creativity and critical thinking are essential for our collective liberation.

So be it. Blessed be. Amen.