

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

August 15, 2010

“The Joy of Reverence”

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The Joy of Reverence

Today I am talking about reverence, which is not to be confused with “the Reverend”, a title that I only use formally, such as when I’m signing rousing, justice-seeking letters. And I realize you might think it would be more apropos to speak of the “*joy of irreverence*”, of which there is much, I admit, and we do especially love our irreverence in this beloved religion of Unitarian Universalism. Reverence may sound serious and stuffy, but today I want to share with you the joy of reverence.

Unitarian Albert Schweitzer was beside himself with exuberance when he finally found the three simple words to unite his ethics and his affirmation of the world: “reverence for life”. This great joyful breakthrough happened when it was awfully hot, when he was looking at hippopotamuses, (not usually known for their awe-inspiring beauty), when he’d been called to tend a sick woman far away, in such a hurry that he didn’t pack food and had to share with the Africans on the boat who undoubtedly did not have any extra, and when he’d been using his analytical mind in overdrive, writing pages and pages of philosophy as he steamed up the river for three long days. You see the problem, don’t you? This hardly seems a likely setting for *joy*, more like a recipe for disaster and suffering, but joy is what he obviously felt, and a deep sense of reverence for life. Reverence can grab hold of a person anywhere, anytime, especially when you are seeking greater meaning, as Schweitzer was, and the surprise is that it is accompanied by joy.

Today we might expand Schweitzer’s “reverence for life” concept to include “reverence for everything”, for the interdependent web of all existence. If the hippopotamuses and sweltering humid Africa can be included in reverence, then surely

there's room for the stars and mountains and Beethoven's 9th Symphony, for everything to bring us joy. Herman Hesse wrote, "You are to learn to live and to learn to laugh. You are to learn to listen to the cursed radio music of life and to reverence the spirit behind it and to laugh at its distortions."

So what is reverence? I begin with the recent words of one of our ministers, Phillip Hewett, although he and Schweitzer might disagree in part and would have to work out at least some linguistic differences. Hewett writes, "Reverence is profound respect mingled with love and awe. However, it also includes humility. You don't give it to things or to people, for that would be a form of idolatry. You accord them respect, to be sure; but reverence is reserved for what those things or people give us. Reverence touches us at a much deeper level, in which we are meaningfully involved as we receive their gift." Reverence involves respect, love, awe, humility, giftedness.

On good days, I walk around savoring a phrase from another of our ministers, "I count the day thin if I have not stopped in amazement five times at least." (Mark Belletini) Or I appreciate the enthusiasm of an older woman I know for what she calls "Alleluia days". Awe, amazement are keys to reverence, and certainly naturally include the humility and sense of giftedness, but reverence goes further. It includes respect and love and touches us at a deeply meaningful level, as Hewett said, and still there's something more, I believe. The response of reverence that wells up in us can feel like adoration or worship. But we are Unitarian Universalists – we may be confused about what this means, in terms of faith.

Hewett didn't use the word God at all, you may have noticed, and yet we often hear 'reverence' associated with what humans are supposed to do toward the divine. In traditional religions, when God is approached with reverence, it is often coupled with

fear. We are a liberal religion and even our theists may or may not have a traditional understanding of reverence about their relationship with God, but we are not afraid, theologically.

In Unitarian Universalism, the first one to bring up the need to have a “vocabulary of reverence” among us, several years ago, was a Humanist, the Rev. David Bumbaugh. Our President then, the Rev. William Sinkford, took up the rallying cry for the use of the language of reverence a couple of years later, and he did speak of God, as well as of Humanism.

When Bill Sinkford talked about the need for a language of reverence and faith in his 2003 sermon, he told a very personal story about his religious journey, which included a long stretch as a Humanist. But during middle age, he said, suddenly there was a moment of transcending wonder, an experience that called him to reverence and prayer. Bill said, “It was in the midst of a crisis – my son Billy, then 15 years old, had overdosed on drugs, and it was unclear whether he would live. As I sat with him in the hospital, I found myself praying. First the selfish prayers for forgiveness...for the time not made, for the too many trips, for the many things unsaid, and sadly, for a few things that should never have passed my lips. But as the night darkened, I finally found the pure prayer. The prayer that asked only that my son would live. And late in the evening, I felt the hands of a loving universe reaching out to hold. The hands of God, the Spirit of Life. The name was unimportant. I knew that those hands would be there to hold me whatever the morning brought. And I knew, though I cannot tell you how, that those hands were holding my son as well. I knew that I did not have to walk that path alone, that there is a love that has never broken faith with us and never will.”

Bill Sinkford's experience of reverence included love, awe, humility, and faith. He wrote about it because he realized that we all have a variety of experiences of reverence, but not necessarily the language we need to speak about them; including the word 'reverence'. And language is important to us – we understand our experiences better when we can talk and write about them, including the intangible experience of reverence.

Reverence is a universal experience. Bill Sinkford doesn't advocate that we name the experience as being about God, though he would; what he came to know in the depths is that Love Eternal is stronger than our loneliness, and that the universe will hold our needs; and the word God felt right to him in describing his experience. We feel reverence naturally and we may search for where to aim the trajectory of this powerful sense, but it can embrace all places and possibilities. As Paul Woodruff said, reverence is a "developed capacity for a feeling of inarticulate awe at whatever it is that we recognize as transcending us and our culture: truth, nature, beauty, justice – or perhaps God, or life itself." He also wrote, "Reverence runs across religions and even outside them through the fabric of any community, however secular." "We may be divided from one another by our beliefs, but never by reverence." What a joyful thought.

John Muir, the great American naturalist, had reverence for nature in all its grandeur and fierceness. From exploring the California wilderness to trekking across Alaskan glaciers, Muir was always thrilled with his experiences of nature, even of an earthquake, certainly of ongoing danger. It is reported that he stood, drenched in storms, shouting "Glorious!" What a joyful reverence.

Eric Liddell, immortalized in the film, "Chariots of Fire", is remembered for his traditional sense of reverence, which prevented him from competing in Olympic events

scheduled for Sunday, the Sabbath. Carl Scovel tells us that, to him, Eric had a finer moment. Liddell's understanding of "reverence for life" meant that he refereed a game in the prison camp rather than risk more violence between the youth, even though it was on a Sunday. I am sure that his joy was in the peace which triumphed that day.

Reverence is both natural and acquired. We well up with a sense of awe and power and love, at times, when we can hardly help but have the experience of reverence. But sometimes we need to have put ourselves into the storm, to have loved our way to the hospital bedside, to have grasped for the meaning in life along the uncomfortably hot journeys we have to make. And sometimes we need to let the reality before us change our ways of being reverent, whether moved to prayer as Bill was, or moved to forsake his usual understanding of prayerfulness, as Eric was.

We come to reverence in the midst of being stripped down by grief, loneliness, suffering; we come to reverence in the midst of being torn open by love, justice, beauty; we come to reverence in the midst of being used as a channel for creativity, hope, peace; we come to reverence when our openness to the interdependent web of all existence leaves us held by faith, touched by love, and trembling with joy.

Reverence is not just something we may stumble upon, or even that we can try to put ourselves into the path of – it is a force that we do well to seek. William Sloane Coffin wrote, "only reverence can restrain violence, violence against nature, violence against one another." Reverence is the power of awe mixed with love, mixed with humility, mixed with faith, mixed with joy. What could be more potent for making the world a better place than to cultivate reverence in our lives? How will you seek reverence as you heal in yourself and heal the world? May we all find a way to know reverence in our lives.

Finally, as Unitarian Oliver Wendell Holmes said, it's a good reason to go to church, (or to have any other spiritual practice for that matter), for, as Holmes put it, "There is a little plant called reverence in the corner of my soul's garden, which I love to have watered once a week." So may we be blessed with the joy of reverence. Amen.