

Reverence for Life

A Sermon by Steve Maier

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Champlain Valley Unitarian Universalist Society, Middlebury, Vermont

Responsive Reading: Words by Rev. Richard Gilbert

Why do we continue to work for justice even when we are at times so discouraged?

Why do we give money to causes when we know that the groups we support will be greatly outspent by the powers and principalities of the world?

Why do we continue to work for justice when it so often opens us up to criticism?

Why do we seek peace when no one pressures or rewards us, and it would be much more satisfying to go and cultivate our gardens or otherwise indulge ourselves?

Why do we involve ourselves in community service and social action when no one seems to care and we often fail?

And why have people done these things for centuries?

No external power is forcing us to meet these obligations;

We are truly on our own, moved not by the "cudgel but an inward music: the irresistible power of unarmed truth, the powerful attraction of its example,"

Sermon

This past summer, shortly after returning from a sabbatical year away from home, I was

rummaging around in the basement of our house. It was dark and shadowy, like most basements, and I was examining various cans of paint on a shelf to see what we had. Hmmm, Cameo White, Atrium White, Cobalt Blue.... If it had been a movie, the music would have started, for little did I know that a huge spider was also hanging out with the paint can ... and I mean big; bigger by a lot than anything I had ever seen, except maybe on TV. In an instant, I had jumped back 5 feet and was choking on my Adam's apple. Now, oooooohhhh, spiders really get to me – must have been some horror movie I saw as kid. In times gone by, I would have reached for the closest weapon and swung, perhaps many times.

But on this day, I hesitated, and after my heart rate re-entered the safe zone, I considered the options. I could kill it, but it was big enough to create some confusion about how this might be accomplished. I could leave it alone, but again, it was big enough so that I would not have been able to continue with my day knowing of its presence in my basement. Finally, I decided I would try to move it to a new home ... outside. A large jar and piece of wood did the trick and I was soon showing the spider its new surroundings under a tree in my yard.

A short while after this incident, I found myself wondering about what had just happened. Why had I hesitated? I had had some sort of feelings for the spider. Why should it have to die? It was just doing what spiders do (apparently very well!). The problem was that it was doing it in my house. Now, I don't know how well the spider liked its new home or whose dinner she became, but I felt good about how I had handled the situation.

This story illustrates what I have come to believe is a fundamental ethic – Reverence for Life. Webster's defines "ethic" as "a set of moral principles and values." These are the things we live by, that define our conscience or our character. What's fascinating about ethics, though, is that they are largely unenforceable. Some become laws (Thou shalt not kill), but many others we adhere to simply because we come to believe they are the right things to do.

In our reading today, UU Minister Richard Gilbert asks a series of questions:

Why do we continue to work for justice even when we are at times so discouraged? ... Why do

we seek peace when no one pressures or rewards us, and it would be much more satisfying to go and cultivate our gardens or otherwise indulge ourselves? Why do we involve ourselves in community service and social action when no one seems to care and we often fail? And why have people done these things for centuries?

“No external power is forcing us to meet these obligations,” he says; “we are truly on our own, moved not by the cudgel (in Boris Pasternak’s words) but an inward music: the irresistible power of unarmed truth, the powerful attraction of its example.”

Gilbert talks of an inward music and the power of truth. But I find myself wondering, where does all this come from? How much of it is ingrained as part of our genetic makeup and how much do we learn? Is it nature or is it nurture? This has been the stuff of philosophers and theologians (and preachers I suppose) for ages. Increasingly over the past 300 years, it has also become the realm of scientists. It is a complex and difficult area of study and I don’t pretend to have conclusive answers. But what I can do is tell you what rings true for me; what I have come to believe. In this sense, what I will be saying today is more a statement of my own spiritual beliefs than of someone’s concept of objective truth; of my own philosophy of life and not the history of philosophy.

Now this is an interesting and delicate challenge because I know that what I have come to believe is based on what I see as truth in the world around me – things like the principles of ecology and the devastating impacts of human violence on other humans and on all other life on Earth. And I would like to share this view of the world with you. This is partly because that’s what we Unitarian Universalists do. We promote and honor the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” our 4th Principle. But, truth be told, I’m also standing here today under the seemingly logical assumption that what rings true for me might also ring true for you. Put another way, I hope my words today will help you see things differently or perhaps more clearly, even if only a little bit. If so, then maybe it can help each of you in your individual searches for truth and meaning.

I had an important “AHA” moment last spring while reading Gilbert’s book, *The Prophetic*

Imperative, Social Gospel in Theory and Practice (2nd Edition, Skinner House Books, 2000). This is a wonderful book, one, by the way, that would be great for an adult discussion group. Its main thesis is that spirituality and social action are inseparable. In a forward to the book, former UUA President John Buehrens refers to Richard Gilbert as “a practitioner of the faith he advocates: publicly engaged religious leadership.”

Well into the book, Gilbert makes the case for coming up with universal principles in defining ethics; in his case a “religious social ethic.” Almost too matter-of-factly, he identifies the concept of “Reverence for Life” as the “ordering” or universal principle for a liberal religious social ethic. He says that “reverence for life gives rise to a moral imperative for love in personal relationships, justice in social relationships, and trusteeship in our relationship with our environment.”

Wow, I thought, when I first read this sentence. This means that if we had “Reverence for Life,” if this was a part of our ethic (that is, a part of what we collectively come to believe is the right thing to do), then we would feel compelled to seek “love in personal relationships, justice in social relationships, and trusteeship in our relationship with our environment.” That just about covers it, don’t you think? Well, I’d like to come back to these three ideas and suggest one important modification, but first I want to explore the concept of Reverence for Life.

I think most of us are familiar with the word “reverence.” It is used in many of our religious traditions to describe how one feels about God or Buddha or Yahweh or the Great Spirit. With Reverence, there is a great respect for the god-figure, but just as importantly, a profound depth of feeling in the believer. I love the collection of four words that Webster’s strings together to define “Reverence” – “profound adoring awed respect.”

In this case, though, the reverence is for “Life,” and not a god-like figure. Life, in all its forms and manifestations, becomes the object of a profound adoring awed respect. Like my friend the spider, with a Reverence for Life ethic, all forms of life have an intrinsic value. They have a right to do what they do and we humans have an obligation to respect those rights. True

believers of a Reverence for Life go even further, it seems to me. Their respect comes to include awe and adoration, and Life, with a capital "L," becomes sacred.

Where does this idea come from, Reverence for Life? Albert Schweitzer is generally credited with coining the phrase and the ideas behind it. Schweitzer, who lived from 1875 to 1965, was a musician, minister, theologian, and university professor, all by the age of 29. In his early 30s, he became a medical doctor and devoted the rest of his life to serving the medical needs of the people of Africa. In his later life, he was a well-known critic of nuclear arms and nuclear energy and, in 1953, won the Nobel Peace Prize.

In 1915, Schweitzer came upon the insight, "Reverence for Life," as a universal principle of ethics. Schweitzer wrote of what he believed to be the fundamental fact of human awareness. He said, "I am life that wants to live in the midst of other life that wants to live." From this universal "will to live" evidenced in all living beings, Schweitzer postulated that ethical humans would feel compelled to approach all life with the same reverence they have for their own lives. From such a point of view, he said, "'good' means to maintain life, to further life, to bring developing life to its highest value. 'Evil' means to destroy life, to hurt life, to keep life from developing." Such a simple description of good and evil makes for a basic and universal principle of ethics.

Whew, now that's a mindful; sort of like a mouthful, but of ideas and not food. It's how I often feel when reading or thinking about ethics or theology. I would now like to show you why I find this both so fascinating and so important.

It's fascinating because it's a perfect sound bite – three words to remember to get you out of any ethical fix. As Schweitzer says in the words at the top of today's Order of Service, "Reverence for Life contains all the components of ethics: love, kindness, sympathy, empathy, peacefulness, power to forgive." Wouldn't it indeed be fascinating if Reverence for Life was all we needed to know to have appropriate ethical responses to all the things that happen to us and the world around us?

But fascinating wouldn't be enough if it didn't work; if it didn't ring true or make sense. It's here that I'd like to bring Richard Gilbert back in, for he helps me to put this all together. Remember, he says that Reverence for Life gives rise to three things: love in personal relationships, justice in social relationships, and trusteeship in our relationship with our environment. Let's look at each one.

Personal relationships – it is true in my experience that having reverence for the life of another leads to successful, meaningful relationships. Reverence implies an acceptance of the inherent worth and dignity of others, our 1st UU principle. It enables love, compassion, understanding, caring; and it disables actions that hurt or violate others. If my relationship with another person, as a matter of my ethics, starts from a place of reverence, it is sure to lead to good things.

Similarly, if we look at social relationships, the relationships between groups of people in society, reverence is a wonderful place to start. It commands that we empathize, that we work to understand and then rectify the sources of injustice among classes and races of peoples. It commands peace among nations, for Reverence for Life does not permit unnecessary killing or indiscriminate violence. And it allows for forgiveness, for when we revere others, we can begin to see what they need in order to live full and meaningful lives, even if they themselves have done bad things.

Finally, Gilbert says that Reverence for Life leads to trusteeship in our relationship with the environment. Here's where I would like to modify Gilbert somewhat, for while trusteeship is a good and necessary thing, I don't believe it is a sufficient ethical principle for our relationship with the environment. Trusteeship suggests ownership and control and I believe that the proper relationship between humans and the environment requires more humility, more of a sense of "profound adoring awed respect," to go back to our definition of reverence. So, true reverence for the environment would mean a deep understanding of ecology – the interconnectedness of all life. To put in UU terms, it would mean a commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of all life, not just human life.

So, for me, Reverence for Life is a worthy ethical principle. It gives me a guide to moral decisions and actions. But that, in and of itself, is also not enough. An ethic that works is a good thing, don't get me wrong, but I don't believe it would have lasting or universal value if that's all it did. For an ethic to be truly successful, it must also reach deeply into our souls. It must touch us in ways that change how we feel about ourselves and our place in the world.

What I have come to know about myself is that when I live my life according to this ethic and (this is important) when I even just try to make life decisions based on a Reverence for Life, my life has more meaning. I feel more fulfilled, like I'm doing the right things. And not just the right things for society or for Earth, for as important as those are, ultimately what I need to know is that it's right for me personally.

When this happens, I touch my spirit and what a powerful thing that is! I feel good and I feel right with the world. I feel transformed and can see clearly what I need to do.

Funny thing, though. These feelings only last for hours, or if I'm lucky, days at a time. There is so much in the world around us to knock us down to size, to minimize what we do and who we are. I am becoming more and more aware, however, that these connections with spirit are fundamentally important for all of us. When we stop long enough to recognize an inner ethic (like Reverence for Life) and listen to that calm, small voice within us, amazing things can happen.

Blessed Be.

Closing Words

May we all be filled with a profound adoring awed respect for Life and, in so doing, may we come to know our spirits and change the world.

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