

*Rev. Fran Dearman, Interim Minister,
Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, Sunday September 17th, 2017*

Sermon—On Reverence: The opposite of reverence is arrogance.

There are words that sound the same and look the same but mean something different to every different person who speaks them, words like religion, theology, worship, and reverence. It gets fuzzy. This morning I shall speak, not too fuzzily, I hope, about reverence; I will be relying heavily on the 2nd edition of Paul Woodruff's book, "Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue". Please note—references to Woodruff's book are noted within brackets at the close of the line. Woodruff's reflections on the millennia-old conversation around the virtues shape many of my sentences, even when not directly quoted.

Reverence is a virtue—the strength of a shining character and a clear and compassionate mind, that pay attention and commit to justice, with patience, modesty, and courage. Reverence is “the capacity for a range of feelings and emotions that are linked; it is a sense that there is something larger than a human being, accompanied by capacities for awe, respect, and shame; it is often expressed in , and reinforced by, ceremony.” (57)

Reverence may be influenced and taught by religion. Or not. Virtues can stand on their own—what Buddhists might describe as “right action”, without reference to divinity. Philosophers speak of the unity of the virtues—that right action in one area leads into right action in another.

Virtue begins with empathy—the power of entering into and understanding another's feelings. We acquire and sustain empathy through literature, stories, and the power of imagination—to see the spark of one's humanity reflected in another.

And so I take my text this morning from Homer's “Odyssey”. Odysseus, named Ulysses here in the Samuel Butler translation, is having a very bad day.

(Samuel Butler died more than a century ago, and so his work has entered the public domain; I have abridged and paraphrased, for length, Butler's translation as found online in the Internet Classics Archive, at Ulysses' heart now began to fail him. He could see land, after swimming so far that he had given up all hope. He could not see a landing place on the rocky, surf-beaten coast, where the smooth rocks rose sheer from the sea, un-climbable, with deep water close under them, and no foothold.

He was afraid of being dashed against the rocks. He was afraid, if he swam further in search of some shelving beach or harbour, that he'd be carried back out to sea. While he was thus in two minds a wave caught him and took him with such force against the rocks that he would have been smashed and torn to pieces if he had not caught hold of the rock with both hands and clung to it groaning with pain. But a wave came, tearing his hands on the rocks, and carried him back out to sea, drawing him deep down under the water.

Here poor Ulysses would have certainly perished but Minerva helped him keep his wits about him. He swam seaward again, beyond reach of the surf that was beating against the land, and at the same time he kept looking towards the shore to see if he could find some haven, or a spit that should take the waves aslant. By and by, as he swam on, he came to the mouth of a river, and here, he thought, would be the best place, for there were no rocks, and it afforded shelter from the wind. He felt that there was a current, so he prayed inwardly and asked the river god to save him:

“Hear me, O King, whoever you may be, and save me from the anger of the sea-god Neptune, for I approach you prayerfully. Any one who has lost his way has at all times a claim even upon the gods, wherefore in my distress I draw near to your stream, and cling to the knees of your river-hood. Have mercy upon me, O king, for I declare myself your suppliant.”

Then the god stayed his stream and stilled the waves, making all calm before him, and bringing him safely into the mouth of the river. Here at last Ulysses’ knees and strong hands failed him, for the sea had completely broken him. His body was all swollen, and his mouth and nostrils ran down like a river with sea-water, so that he could neither breathe nor speak, and lay swooning from sheer exhaustion.

When he had got his breath and came to himself again, he took off the scarf that the sea-nymph Ino had given him and threw it back into the salt stream of the river, whereon Ino received it into her hands from the wave that bore it towards her.

Then he left the river, laid himself down among the rushes, and kissed the bounteous earth. He considered his options, and took to the woods, on some high ground not far from the water, and sheltered in a dense thicket where he made himself a bed to lie on. There was a great litter of dead leaves lying about—enough to make a covering for two or three men even in hard winter weather. He was glad enough to see this, so he laid himself down and heaped the leaves all round him.

Then, as one who lives alone in the country, far from any neighbor, hides a brand as fire-seed in the ashes to save himself from having to get a light elsewhere, even so did Ulysses cover himself up with leaves; and Minerva shed a sweet sleep upon his eyes, closed his eyelids, and made him lose all memories of his sorrows.

Book Three, Homer’s Odyssey, as translated by Samuel Butler.

And there it is—the spark of humanity, like a banked fire, where we might recognize one another in empathy for all our travails and sufferings and vulnerabilities.

This passage from Homer, from almost three thousand years ago, speaks to the human condition. We humans are fragile, we are born to die, and we know it. We shape our religious and spiritual

response to the world in the light of our own times, our own cultures, our own material circumstances, building on the stories passed down from those who go before us.

Specific denominations and faith communities emerge, in some cases widely differing, in some cases more similar. Most world religions lift up the Golden Rule: Do not do unto others what you would not done unto you. Show respect. Be virtuous. Act with reverence. Virtues and Ethics are how we walk upon the earth together, church or no church, religion or no religion.

Paul Woodruff is a philosophy professor in Texas, and a veteran of the Viet Nam War; his ethics are deeply grounded in his experience of war, leadership, violence, and redeeming acts of grace. I find his reflections useful, helpful, and compelling, and I commend to you his book.

Woodruff begins by exploring the tradition of discourse around virtue, a conversation that goes back to Aristotle, Plato, and Aquinas, and the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Bible.

Woodruff also seeks out discourse on virtue in the Analects of Confucius; he wishes to examine two cultures with minimal contact, ancient Greece and ancient China. Woodruff seeks to establish that the virtues lifted up in human societies are universal, across cultures, and not dependent on a particular belief system.

Woodruff is especially interested in reverence as demonstrated by those in positions of public responsibility. By coincidence, a news item appeared while I was preparing this sermon that spoke to reverence in political life. The Friday edition of the *Globe & Mail* (page A9, September 15th, 2017) spoke to the death—and life—of Arnold Chan, 1967-2017, husband and father, member of parliament for Scarborough-Agincourt.

Chan's colleagues lauded him for the respect he showed his office, and his impassioned pleas for civility. Mr. Chan urged his colleagues to treat the institution—and each other—more honourably. He was a faithful and eloquent guardian of democracy, said his peers, disinterested in games, focussed on the matter at hand, non-partisan. He reminded his colleagues of the nobility of their role and the importance of the institution they served—a place of discourse, discussion, and conversation.

An exemplary life, modelling reverence in political leadership.

Says Woodruff, “Reverence serves timeless ideals through social practices” (70). Reverence serves some transcendent ideal, some awesome goal that humans “did not make and cannot mar”, something beyond our own limited selves. Like the ideal of justice. Or a scientist's truth. Reverence relies upon fair mindedness, clear headedness, and compassion. And awe. “The chief

limitation on reverence as a virtue is this: it must have an object that is not a slave to human interests, and that is not held to be a mere product of culture (63).

As an example of reverence, Woodruff describes the performance of a string quartet: they gather as a group to work towards their project—to create fine music; they observe ceremony—an agreed, respectful way of doing things; they set aside ego; they fit into an effective, respectful, satisfactory hierarchy that supports teamwork; and “they have achieved in the end a shared feeling of inarticulate awe.” (41-43)

Have you ever been at a concert or other event where, at the close, there are several long seconds of silence—awe-struck silence—before the audience begins to clap? That is reverence.

Woodruff finds a similar reverent awe expressed in poetry.

Many will find wonder and awe in nature.

“Any virtue can be abused. Tyrants can exploit the courage and reverence and even the justice of their peoples.” “People pay a high price for clinging to virtue when they find themselves in a vicious system, and so one of the classical goals of statecraft is to build a system in which virtue may safely flourish.” (64)

Woodruff argues that most of us, by our modest positions in life, may well find ourselves easily led to reverence by circumstance and our own vulnerabilities. Where reverence is most vital is at the levels of leadership; there is set the example that lifts up justice and compassion most effectively. He poses the question: “Why should leaders be any stronger in reverence than the rest of us?” and answers: “Because even in democracy, virtue—or vice—trickles down. All virtues belong to leadership, but reverence is particularly a virtue of leaders.

Both ancient Greek and ancient Chinese traditions lift up reverence in discussions of leadership. If leaders do not show reverence then their followers will need to act crudely in order to be heard.

What would reverent leadership look like, I wonder? Universal Health Care? National Parks? Equal marriage? A Bill of Rights? The Rule of Law? Politics can be and should be a most reverent and dynamic undertaking. Reverence leads us to respect the worth and dignity of all persons, to cease discrimination, to stand on the side of love.

A boss who is arrogant will come to a bad end, because he will not hear the opinions of other people, and so he will have no check on his natural human tendency to err—unless someone breaks through his barriers of contempt. Breaking barriers leads to habits that are fatal to

reverence. But around a reverent leader there are no thick walls to crash through, and habits of mutual respect can flourish.” (73) A reverent leader listens.

We speak, sometimes, in praise of irreverence, by which we mean a certain lightheartedness—“boldness, independence, honesty, and a boisterous contempt for anything pretentious or arrogant”. (74) The true irreverence, the opposite of reverence, is an overweening presumptuous arrogance. Hubris, the Greeks would call it.

Says Woodruff, “Reverence is the greatest virtue of leaders, because it gives powerful people the strength to listen to those who are weaker than they, and it reminds them that no one, no matter how successful, was “born complete, knowing everything”.” (89)

Gods might be thought to know everything. “Think yourself equal to a god, and you will commit the most dangerous kind of irreverence.” (90) “Reverence is the virtue that protects the helpless. That means it is also the virtue that protects me, when I am powerful, from abusing those who are helpless.” (255)

Virtue protects the leader’s followers from moral harm. Woodruff lifts up examples from Viet Nam, as well as the scandalous abuses at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Subordinates within any care-less, vicious environment, where leadership is unmindful and does not pay attention, are exposed to moral harm.

Woodruff argues that an intentional society that teaches ethics and lifts up virtues can help a young person cultivate the clear headed wisdom and mindfulness for justice and compassion that walk hand in hand with reverence; reverence saves lives.

Woodruff returns again and again to mindful and sincere ceremony for sustaining the virtue of reverence. Thus certain types of custom embody reverence, customs by which human beings distinguish themselves from beasts of prey: respectful treatment of the dead through our traditions of memorial and funeral; the observance of certain laws of war such as the Geneva Convention; the protection of suppliants; the keeping of oaths; respect for sacred places—places set apart—or the secrets of certain rituals.

Looking around our own time and space, respect for a sacred place—some place set aside for a special purpose, would include keeping one’s dog on a leash in certain parks during bird nesting season, turning off one’s cell-phone at a concert, respecting one’s marriage, respecting one’s home, respecting one’s person, one’s health and well-being. And staying off the football field while an NHL game is in progress!

Reverence is a virtue, and a virtue is cultivated through practice.

I close with a very old story, perhaps as old as Aristotle, about learning virtue by doing virtue.

Once upon a time, long ago and far away, one person loved another and craved their company. Let's call them Alpha and Omega. Omega was as pure and generous in character as they were beautiful of person. Alpha was as harsh in face and form as they were harsh in character, distorted by a life of violence.

Alpha made a mask of silver that would conceal the furrows and frowns that marked their face, and wore the mask, and pretended the reverent and courteous demeanour that would win Alpha the regard of Omega, whom Alpha so strongly desired. And won their heart.

Years passed, in perfect harmony.

Finally, Omega, the beloved, asked—please, let me see your face, let me know you truly. In apprehension, Alpha complied. And behold, the face of Alpha had become as fair as the mask; Alpha had become the thing they pretended and practiced to be.

We learn reverence, by choosing to be reverent, by seeking out some wonder in the world that holds us in awe and calls us to act upon our capacity for reverence, for wonder, for justice, courage, and compassion.

May it be so.

Bibliography

Matthew Arnold, "Lines Written in Kensington Gardens" is the source of the line, "did not make, and cannot mar": "Calm soul of all things! make it mine/to feel, amid the city's jar,/ that there abides a peace of thine,/ Man did not make, and cannot mar."

Samuel Butler's translation Homer's "Odyssey", abridged; available on line at <<>> . Samuel Butler was a nineteenth century satirist, quoted as saying that "I find the nicest and best people generally profess no religion at all, but are ready to like the best men of all religions."

Collins Canadian English Dictionary, 2004.

Paul Woodruff, “Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue”, 2003, 2nd ed. 2014. Oxford University Press. Thanks to Amazon for placing this book in my hands within 48 hours.

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