



White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Grow Your Soul & Serve the World

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Theme for January

Reverence – the practice of giving things their proper due

Each month, our church gathers around a monthly theme and practice to guide our congregational life: worship, small groups, religious education, justice, and classes. Use these readings for reflection around the dinner table, in your own prayer practice, alone or with others.

If you are interested in a monthly theme Sharing Circle, contact:

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QUESTIONS

How have you experienced reverence and awe in your life?

What helps to make a space or experience worthy of awe?

Have you experienced reverence as something that can be cultivated, spontaneous, or both?

In what ways is the feeling of reverence, awe, or humility beneficial for an individual or a community?

QUOTES

Reverence must stand in awe of something – something I will call the object of reverence. What could it be? Something that reminds us of human limitations...Therefore you must believe that there is one Something that satisfies at least one of the following conditions: it cannot be changed or controlled by human means, is not fully understood by human experts, was not created by human beings, and is transcendent.

- Paul Woodruff, *Reverence*

Reverence for Life says that the only thing we are really sure of is that we live and want to go on living. This is something that we share with everything else that lives, from elephants to blades of grass—and, of course, every human being. So we are brothers and sisters to all living things, and owe to all of them the same care and respect, that we wish for ourselves."

- James Brabazon

Pursue some path, however narrow and crooked, in which you can walk with love and reverence.

- Henry David Thoreau

What if our religion was each other; if our practice was our life; if prayer, our words? What if the temple was the earth; if forests were our church; if holy water - the rivers, lakes, and oceans? What if meditation was our relationships; if the Teacher was life; if wisdom was self-knowledge; if love was the center of our being?

- Ganga White

Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world.

- John Milton

Spiritual sensitivity heightens when we know how to see, touch, and taste the physical world with exquisite reverence and contemplative discipline.

- Tessa Bielecki in *Holy Daring*

Nothing is insignificant, and everything worthy of respect and care. Nothing is second-class. What God has made is of value.

- Paula D'Arcy in *Gift of the Red Bird*

The challenge of the saints of the twenty-first century is to begin again to comprehend the sacred in the ten thousand things of our world; to revere what we have come to view as ordinary and devoid of spirit.

- Edward Hays

Reverence is a specific attitude toward something that is precious and valuable, toward someone who is superior. It is a salute of the soul, an awareness of value without enjoyment of that value or seeking any personal advantage from it.

- Abraham J. Heschel in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*

I cannot but have reverence for all that is called life. I cannot avoid compassion for everything that is called life. That is the beginning and foundation of morality.

- Albert Schweitzer quoted in *Reverence for Life* edited by Harold E. Robles

POETRY & LYRICS

A Meditation: Every Land (From a Saying of Black Elk)

Watch where the branches of the willows bend; see where the waters of the rivers tend.

Graves in the rock, cradles in the sand, every land is the holy land.

Here was the battle to the bitter end; here's where the enemy killed the friend;

blood on the rock, tears on the sand; every land is the holy land.

Willow by the water bending in the wind; bent till it's broken and it will not stand.

Listen to the word the messengers send: life like the broken rock, death like the sand.

Every land is the holy land.

- Ursula K. LeGuin

Holy Now

When I was a boy, each week
On Sunday, we would go to church
And pay attention to the priest
He would read the holy word
And consecrate the holy bread
And everyone would kneel and bow
Today the only difference is
Everything is holy now
Everything, everything
Everything is holy now

- Peter Mayer, singer-songwriter

Singing the Living Tradition, #21 For the Beauty of the Earth

Singing the Living Tradition, #326 Let All the Beauty We Have Known

READINGS & EXCERPTS

David Pugmire's article, "The Secular Reception of Religious Music" explores the unique experience of reverence through music. In particular he looks at how religious music has the capacity to instill emotions of reverence, awe, wonder, and veneration in secular people who lack the context to fully understand the transcendent through religion. "Sacred music seems to have a surprising power over unbelievers not just to quicken or delight them as other music does, but also to ply them, as little else can, with what might be called devotional feelings"...

Pugmire believes that reverence belongs to the range of emotions that can be classified in their devotional or sacred forms, "Emotions of reverence, solemnity, agape, hope, serenity, and ecstasy". To connect the secular and the sacred emotions Pugmire looks at the emotions which can be experienced equally in both contexts. These are, "Love, humility, sorrow, pity, joy, serenity, ecstasy". Pugmire then suggests that devotional emotion is: "The transfiguring of mundane emotion into what one might call emotion of the last instance, to the reception and expression of which religious imagery is especially well-suited, and not accidentally". The emotion of the last instance refers to the capacity of the emotional imagination to lose the sense of self and engage in the infinite and the ineffable. Pugmire is suggesting that religion, "Provides a strikingly apt vocabulary for the expression of emotion of the last instance". Reverence is perhaps the most critical of these "emotions of the last instance" and can be adequately accessed through religious music.

- A review of David Pugmire's article, "The Secular Reception of Religious Music"

We have lived by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. And this has been based on the even flimsier assumption that we could know with any certainty what was good even for us. We have fulfilled the danger of this by making our personal pride and greed the standard of our behavior toward the world - to the incalculable disadvantage of the world and every living thing in it. And now, perhaps very close to too late, our great error has become clear. It is not only our own creativity - our own capacity for life - that is stifled by our arrogant assumption; the creation itself is stifled.

We have been wrong. We must change our lives, so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires that we make the effort to know the world and to learn what is good for it. We must learn to cooperate in its processes, and to yield to its limits. But even more important, we must learn to acknowledge that the creation is full of mystery; we will never entirely understand it. We must abandon arrogance and stand in awe. We must recover the sense of the majesty of creation, and the ability to be worshipful in its presence. For I do not doubt that it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it.

- Wendell Berry, *A Native Hill* in The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays

Reverence is the way of radical respect. It recognizes and honors the presence of the sacred in everything — our bodies, other people, animals, plants, rocks, the earth, and the waters. It is even an appropriate attitude to bring to our things, since they are the co-creations of humans and the Creator. Nothing is too trivial or second class for reverence. But it has to be demonstrated with concrete actions. Don't abuse your body — eat right, exercise, get enough rest. Don't abuse the earth by being wasteful of its gifts. Protect the environment for your neighbors and future generations.

Reverence is also a kind of radical amazement, a deep feeling tinged with both mystery and wonder. Approaching the world with reverence, we are likely to experience its sister — awe. Allow yourself to be moved beyond words. There is one unmistakable message in the spiritual practice of reverence: because everything is touched by the sacred, everything has worth. This practice, then, builds self-esteem.

Its opposite is irreverence, the "dissing" of the Creation. Examples aren't hard to come by: pollution, wasteful consumption, cruelty to animals, exploitation of forests, overuse of the land. On a personal level, irreverence may manifest as ennui, a kind of world-weariness. Or it may take the form of a defiant disregard for the feelings of others and a reckless, devil-may-care, use of resources.

- Spirituality and Practice