

## **Life in Spirit: Reclaiming Reverence**

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You may remember the movie “The Wizard of Oz,” the 1939 classic based on the works of L. Frank Baum. As Dorothy and her companions enter the Wizard’s chamber, they are astonished to see smoke and bright lights surrounding the stern visage of an elderly man, who questions their intentions and belittles their quest. It’s a very stirring moment in the film.

Awed, fearful, needy, and overwhelmed, yet respectful of the Wizard’s alleged amazing powers, the friends gulp and cower and try to screw their courage to the sticking point. Dorothy tentatively moves forward to state their case and humbly ask for the Wizard’s assistance. It’s not met with a kindly response.

I used to think that God was an awful lot like that Wizard – smoke and bright lights and a frightfully stern look, elevated and unreachable and demanding my respect, my veneration, and my humility.

To be reverent, to appropriately interact with this godly “wizard,” I needed to find just the right mix of respect and esteem, fear and affection in order to make him happy, to approach his magnificence, to ask him for favors or consideration of my pleas for mercy, grace, or help. I shouldn’t expect too much in return. “I’m not worthy.”

Reverence had been explained to me as a need to approach the divine with fear and trembling, even though I’d been told that God was a loving, caring deity. As the years went by and the dissonance of my

early theological instruction became clearer to me, I moved myself away from a sense of awe and wonder, from an ability to feel a sense of reverence in and for the world.

For me, that was a lonely place. It was like I had partitioned off a part of myself, and it was dying from a lack of attention. I think we all have the capacity for wonder and amazement. I think it is a human blessing to be able to see and appreciate the world around us. I don't know if our fellow creatures can experience awe, but I know that we can. And, I no longer feel that that experience only applies to our possible relationship with some divine entity. I believe we can, and should, connect with a sense of reverence for all life, starting with the fact that we have a life, at all. I think it is something that we need to claim and reclaim in our human journey.

In our denominational history, as we moved to embrace humanist values and viewpoints, we moved away from a language of reverence. There has been a lively discussion within the denomination over the last few years about reclaiming a sense of reverence, and the language that would articulate our appreciation for all of life. I'm not suggesting that we consider a move back to Christian dogma or language, but rather an embrace of the spirituality that is already a part of who we are.

As Rev. Dr. Thandeka, a Unitarian Universalist theologian teaching at Meadville Lombard Seminary, has said, "Our reverence for the spirit of life – for life itself – is not a creed, an idea, or a thought. It

is not a doctrine. It is a feeling – the feeling of being held, loved, and cherished.” As we seek to reintegrate ourselves as whole beings, to accept and appreciate not only our thoughts, but our feelings and needs, as well, the concept of reverence, of wonder, of awe reemerges into our awareness. We find ourselves needing a way to articulate our feelings and experiences of the awesomeness we have come to know and appreciate.

I’d like to share with you some word from Dr. Albert Schweitzer, who studied the plants, animals, and people of equatorial Africa, and who yearned to find a way to express his sense of awe and wonder at the life he saw unfolding around and within him.

“For months on end, without the least success, I let my thoughts be concentrated on the connection between a positive view of the world and ethics. All that I had learnt from philosophy about ethics left me in the lurch. I felt like a man who has to build a new and better boat to replace a rotten one that’s no longer seaworthy, but does not know how to begin. I had to undertake a longish journey on the river... The only means of conveyance I could find was a small steamer, towing an over-laden barge, which was on the point of starting. Slowly we crept upstream. Lost in thought I sat on the deck of the barge, struggling to find the elementary and universal conception of the ethical which I had not discovered in any philosophy. Late on the third day, at the very moment when, at sunset, we were making our way through a herd of hippopotamuses, there flashed upon my mind, unforeseen and unsought, the phrase,

"Reverence for Life."

**Dr. Schwietzer's** "Reverence for Life" is a philosophy that says that the only thing we're really sure of is that we live, and want to go on living. And this is something that we share with everything else that lives – from elephants to blades of grass. So we are brothers and sisters to all living things, and nothing else, should be more important than this one deepest, most extraordinary thing connecting us.

The whole world, indeed the whole universe, has evolved to give us life - you and me and the rest of the living world.

But only humans are aware of all this. This is some responsibility. Because we also have the ability to neglect, to destroy, to cause suffering and death. And indeed some suffering and death is inevitable. Even vegetarians can only survive by eating some living thing.

*Reverence for Life is not some cranky and impossible commandment. It just says we must be aware of what we're doing.*

We must take responsibility for what we do when we harvest a crop of grain, when we eat the bread that's made from it, when we grill a steak, when we kill a dangerous insect.

*The key is awareness. Which makes us more alive.*

For life is extraordinary. Every scientific advance tells us this. We now know the billion to one chances ever since the Big Bang that have enabled life to develop and then to survive on this planet, and the extreme rarity of it in the universe. More than ever, we have good reason to feel reverence for it

1. (n.) Profound respect and esteem mingled with fear and affection, as for a holy being or place; the disposition to revere; veneration.