

# All Souls Church Unitarian

Covenant Group Guide

January 2016

## “Reverence”

### Practicing Reverence

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. . .

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.

Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat

The inner value of any entity—men or women, trees or stars, ideas or things—is, as a matter of fact, not entirely subject to any purposes of ours. They have a value in themselves quite apart from any function which makes them useful to our purposes. . . .

Further, piety is an attitude toward reality in its entirety. It is alert to the dignity of every human being, and to those bearings upon the spiritual value which even inanimate things inalienably possess. The pious man, being able to sense the relations of things to transcendent values, will be incapable of disparaging any of them by enslaving them to his own service. The secret of every being is in the divine care and concern that are invested in it. In every event there is something sacred at stake, and it is for this reason that the approach of the pious man to reality is in reverence. This explains his solemnity and his conscientiousness in dealing with things both great and small.

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. There is a unique kind of transparency about things and events. The world is seen through, and no veil can conceal God completely. So the pious man is ever alert to see behind the appearance of things a trace of the divine, and thus his attitude toward life is one of expectant reverence.

Abraham Joshua Heshel

## **Earth Prayer**

Root of the root  
Mother Matter, for whom nothing is ever lost,  
only transformed,  
you teach us how to change  
and how to sit in stillness.  
When life scatters us in all directions  
you whisper, "Just be."  
You urge us, "Honor the body."  
You tell us, "I will never let you go, I will hold you safe forever."  
All praise to the humble holy ground.  
We are part of you no less  
than seed or grass or antelope.  
We belong.  
May we learn new ways to honor you.  
May our presence here be of benefit to you.  
May we heal the harm we have done to you.  
In the name of earth,  
Be so.

Cait Johnson, *Earth, Water, Air & Fire: Essential Ways of Connecting to the Spirit*

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

## **Reverence as it relates to human limitations**

Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control—God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all. This in turn fosters the ability to be ashamed when we show moral flaws exceeding the normal human allotment. The Greeks before Plato saw reverence as one of the bulwarks of society, and the immediate followers of Confucius in China thought much the same. Both groups wanted to see reverence in their leaders, because reverence is the virtue that keeps leaders from trying to take tight control of other people's lives. Simply put, reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods.

Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*

Reverential thinking is not a luxury, but is a condition of our sanity and grace.

Henryk Skolimowski in *The Participatory Mind*

Let everything you touch be treated as if it were as precious as the altar vessels. Whenever you handle any equipment or any person, be reverent. Be full of care with everything entrusted to you. Everything you touch or see, everyone for whom you have responsibility, is to be viewed as something cherished by God, and thus to be cherished by you.

Norvene Vest, *Friend of the Soul*

Try and penetrate with our limited means the secrets of nature and you will find that, behind all the discernible concatenations, there remains something subtle, intangible and inexplicable. Veneration for this force beyond anything that we can comprehend is my religion.

Albert Einstein

Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove has been made holy by some sad or happy event in days long vanished. Even the rocks, which seem to be voiceless and dead as they swelter in the sun along the silent shore, thrill with memories of stirring events connected with the lives of my people. And the very dust upon which you now stand responds lovingly to their footsteps because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch.

Chief Seathi

One way to open your eyes is to ask yourself, "What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?"

Rachel Carson

Never wade through the pretty ripples/of perpetually flowing /rivers, until you have looked at their lovely waters,/and prayed to them,/and washed your hands in the pale enchanting water."

Hesiod

## **Reverence as it relates to writing and reading**

I honestly think in order to be a writer, you have to learn to be reverent. If not, why are you writing? Why are you here? Let's think of reverence as awe, as presence in and openness to the world. The alternative is that we stultify, we shut down. Think of those times when you've read prose or poetry that is presented in such a way that you have a fleeting sense of being startled by beauty or insight, by a glimpse into someone's soul. All of a sudden everything seems to fit together or at least to have some meaning for a moment. This is our goal as writers, I think; to help others have this sense of—please forgive me—wonder, of seeing things anew, things that can catch us off guard, that break in on our small, bordered worlds.”

Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*

## **Lack of Reverence Has Caused Incalculable Harm**

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, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays*

## **For Reflection and Discussion**

1. Understanding Reverence. What is your understanding of reverence? Is it an important element of your spiritual life?
2. Cultivating Reverence. Who has helped you cultivate a sense of reverence for life and for the natural world? Have you had experiences that relate to your experience of reverence? Does nature play an important role? Are there sounds or songs that you associate with reverence? What music would be on your personal “reverence” play list?
3. The Challenge of Reverence. What is/are the opposites of reverence? Functionalism? Boredom? Something else? The question really is: what gets in the way, what prevents us from being reverent?
4. How does All Souls relate to your experience of reverence?

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