

## Reverence – The Forgotten Virtue

- a sermon message compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

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Galen Guengerich, the Senior Minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City believes that “[The] great moral issue of our time is the dearth of virtue...” “Virtues” - those attitudes, dispositions, or character traits that enable us to be and to act in ways that develop this [our human] potential. They enable us to pursue the ideals we have adopted.

Back in 2011 we spent a year in this congregation with Rev. Guengerich’s sermon series “The Necessity of Virtue” in which he proclaimed that “[It’s] time for a renaissance of virtue. In a culture that champions the individual, **virtue is an approach to ethics that individuals can believe in.** And it gives us a way to respond religiously in a world where so many people act so horribly. The language of human rights is a vital political tool in our efforts to extend the domain of civilization and the rule of law. And the language of virtue is a vital religious tool in our efforts to extend the domain of morality and the rule of character.” Guengerich goes on to identify his seven “necessary” virtues as: “**wisdom, courage, compassion, justice, temperance, transcendence, and hope.** Each virtue, in turn, is made possible by two or more character strengths that support it.”

“This approach to ethics has been described by the philosopher Richard Taylor as the ethics of aspiration, which emphasizes the kind of people we aspire to become, rather than the ethics of duty, which emphasizes rules that have been laid down by someone else. To be sure, there are rules we must follow in life. But even animals can be taught to follow rules. Human beings, in contrast, **have the ability to develop character**—to fulfill our potential as human beings. Virtue is to human as sharp is to knife or pungent is to pepper: **it’s the state of being everything we possibly can be.** Each of us has the capacity to be wise, courageous, compassionate, just, temperate, transcendent, and hopeful. The Greeks held up these qualities of character as the epitome of human endeavor.” (Galen Guengerich, from 2009 sermon “The Necessity of Virtue” which became a lecture series in the 2010 Minneapolis GA.)

And as Unitarian Universalists who tend not to believe in salvation by grace or faith but rather in a life well-lived, **the state of our character is important to us.** Virtue is a state of character, or as philosopher Paul Woodruff explains, “virtue is a capacity to do what is right; according to virtue ethics, a good person is one who *feels like* doing what is right. People who do good are aware of moral rules, but so are people who do bad. **The difference is virtue.** Virtue is the source of feelings that prompt

us to behave well. Virtue ethics takes feelings seriously because feelings affect our lives more deeply than beliefs do...**virtues are habits of feeling**, and these are much harder to learn or forget...Virtues grow in us through being used, and they are used mainly by people living or working together...in community.”

Back in 2001, Paul Woodruff – that philosopher I just quoted – wrote a little book about a virtue not included on Guengrich’s list of the necessary ones titled *Reverence – Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*. I would like to begin today to make the argument for the expansion of the list to include reverence. Reverence is one of those words that UU’s struggle with. When I joined this congregation back in 2007, our tradition was in the midst of vigorous debates over “language of reverence” or “God language” as some of us referred to it. Woodruff’s exploration of reverence has awakened in me the realization of my own limited view of what reverence means...and our current political and cultural climate has heightened perhaps our collective awareness of its absence. For “**reverence is most obvious when it’s missing**, says Woodruff. And it’s missing most often when people forget their human limitations. When we think we are exceptional, when we get ‘so rich, so powerful, or so successful that [we] push every thought of failure away from [our] minds – every thought of human error, madness or death...‘You can forget your humanity in either of two ways: by taking on the airs of a god, or by acting like a beast of prey.’ Some people are able to do both of those things, and almost at the same time.”

Sound familiar?

I think many of us confuse reverence with solemnity but:

Woodruff says that reverence is compatible with making mock of solemn things. ‘Reverence and a keen eye for the ridiculous are allies: both keep people from being pompous or stuck up.’

We also confuse reverence with respect, but:

Reverence is not synonymous with respect, although the capacity for respect is necessary for developing reverence. ‘It is silly to respect the prating of a pompous fool; it is wise to respect the intelligence of any student. **Reverence calls for respect only when respect is really the right attitude.** To pay respect to a tyrant would not be reverent; it would be weak and cowardly. The most reverent response to a tyrant is to mock him [or her].

Reverence is not synonymous with awe, although the capacity for awe is necessary for developing reverence. Standing in the presence of beauty – whether manmade or natural –

one can feel awe. When we see or hear something that is greater than we are – and so much is greater than we are! – the feeling of wonder, admiration, even dread is wholesome and appropriate. But awe alone doesn't make one reverent.

**The capacity to feel awe and respect are two legs on this stool**, and the third is equally strong and important – that is the capacity to feel ashamed when our actions are unworthy. We all have flaws, goodness knows. We all make mistakes. And that feeling of embarrassment when we spill, or blurt out the wrong thing, or forget an important name is to our credit but isn't really shame. **Shame is that feeling you get when you have been morally wrong, or foolish.** Shame is what we should feel when we lie or steal or cheat or kill. The virtue of compassion and the ability to be humble and make amends insofar as we can is what eventually relieves our shame, when we are able to forgive ourselves. (<http://fpucanton.org/reverence-a-sermon-with-readings/>)

Sara Huisjen once wrote that “Humility is the seat of **reverence**. To spurn humility is to be in a kind of denial about the scale of our existence and our understanding of it.” Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations. Woodruff's schema for reverence looks like this: “Reverence is the well-developed capacity to have the feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have.”

One place where we need to pay particular attention to developing our capacity for awe, respect and shame is when we are in leadership positions. You can be the leader in your neighborhood, or on a committee, or at work.

Woodruff writes, ‘Reverence is the mainstay of a leader's good judgment. Good judgment is the intellectual virtue that guides deliberation in the absence of the relevant knowledge. Leaders in real life must make decisions without knowing for certain how those decisions will turn out...

‘If you master people by force without reverence, you will depend on force for your very safety; you will become isolated from the people you are trying to lead, and in this isolation you will make mistakes. From the other side of command, people will see you as more tyrant than leader, and perhaps even as the enemy.’

This is what happens when parents don't respect their children, or teachers their students, or political leaders their constituents. Using force – and punishment is a form of force – using coercion or threats will not make loyal children or students or constituents. To build trust in any

group of people – a family, classroom, community or state – the leaders have to treat people with the utmost respect, honesty, and humility.

By humility I do NOT mean self-effacement, although a funny self-deprecation well placed goes a long way toward building trust. When people think you do not respect yourself they won't respect you – when they think you are strong enough not to take yourself too seriously, they appreciate you more.

When choosing leaders it is always wise to look for the person who doesn't think she has all the answers, but who will consider all the angles. When we appoint someone to our Board of Trustees we look for people who don't always have to have it their way but people who can listen with respect to others, and yet balance his or her energy. In leadership the reverent person knows the Arab proverb: 'the dogs bark but the caravan moves on.'

So as we work on becoming our very best selves, as we cultivate virtue, remember reverence. Develop your capacity for awe, respect, and shame when those are the right feelings to have. And look for those capacities in leaders. If you are giving your time and talent to an effort, be sure the leader you're following is working as hard on his or her character as you are on yours. (<http://fpuucanton.org/reverence-a-sermon-with-readings/>)