

“Reverence for Life”

sermon digest

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Deuteronomy 22:6-7

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A call came to Robertsville Baptist Church when I was pastor there from the manager of a nearby hotel. A man at the hotel who had been drinking wanted to see a minister. When he came to my study, I said: "I'd be interested to know why you wanted to see a minister." He said: "Well, my mother liked the teachings of Jesus. My father liked the writings of Paul. You take me, I like Deuteronomy." I couldn't think of anything in Deuteronomy that would match Jesus and Paul, so I asked: "What is it in Deuteronomy that you like?" He paused, then said: "You got me there, preacher." I replied: "Well, you got me, too!" But . . . there are nuggets here and there in Deuteronomy--like this text, which the rabbis called "the least of the laws." If you are hungry and come upon a mother bird sitting on eggs or fledglings, don't eat the bird but let her live to lay eggs and raise her young another day, thus perpetuating life. This is but one text in the Old Testament that teaches such reverence for life (cf. 20:19, Gen. 2:15). That's the text for the sermon, suggestive as it is.

The topic of the message--"Reverence for Life"--comes from the writings of Albert Schweitzer. Schweitzer was a 20th-century German pastor, New Testament scholar, concert organist, and lastly, a medical doctor. His 1906 *Quest for the Historical Jesus* is still a must-read for serious students of the historical Jesus. As a child, Schweitzer experienced the spirit of "reverence for life":

From childhood, I felt a compassion for animals. Even before I started school, I found it impossible to understand why, in my evening prayers, I should pray only for human beings. Consequently, after my mother had prayed with me and had given me a good-night kiss, I secretly recited another prayer, one I had composed myself. It went like this: 'Dear God, protect and bless all living beings. Keep them from evil and let them sleep in peace.

But it would be many years later when Schweitzer was a doctor in French Equatorial Africa, in Lamborene, that he coined the actual phrase "reverence for life." It occurred to him as he was on a long boat journey to attend to the sick wife of another missionary:

At sunset of the third day, near the village of Igendja, we moved along an island set in the middle of the wide river. On a sandbank to our left, four hippopotamuses and their young plodded along in our same direction. Just then, in my great tiredness and discouragement, the phrase, "Reverence for Life," struck me like a flash. As far as I knew, it was a phrase I had never heard nor ever read. I realized at once that it carried within itself the solution to the problem that had been torturing me. Now I knew that a system of values which concerns itself only with our relationship to other people is incomplete and therefore lacking in power for good. Only by means of reverence for life can we establish a spiritual and humane relationship with both people and all living creatures within our reach. Only in this fashion can we avoid harming others, and, within the limits of our capacity, go to their aid whenever they need us. (May, 1964, *The Courier* reprinting of "Albert Schweitzer Speaks Out," *World Book Yearbook*.)

Schweitzer viewed "reverence for life" as fundamental to all religions worthy of the name and as the wellspring that must feed the on-flowing river of civilization. It fused Schweitzer's completion of his book, *The Philosophy of Civilization*, Chapter 26 of which speaks pointedly of "reverence for life" as necessary for the survival of civilization, and life itself.

What of today? What of us 21st century people? Today our reverence for life has become so desperately needed that--not a rabbi, nor priest, nor minister this time--but a most sensitive humanist scholar, Paul Woodruff, Professor of Ethics and American Society, University of Texas (of all places! We know another scholar from TX!), has written a whole book on it: *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*. Woodruff claims:

Simply put, reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods. To forget that you are human, to think you can act like god--this is the opposite of reverence: Ancient Greeks thought that tyranny was the height of irreverence, and they gave the famous name of hubris to the crimes of tyrants [which the early church also listed first among the seven deadly sins].

The Good Lord surely overlooked a prime candidate to call to the ministry! Listen to Woodruff!

An irreverent soul is arrogant and shameless, unable to feel awe in the face of things higher than itself. As a result, an irreverent soul is unable to feel respect for people it sees as lower than itself--ordinary people, prisoners, children. [Whom would you add to these?] . . . If an emperor has a sense of awe, this will remind him that Heaven is his superior--that he is, as they said in ancient China, the Son of Heaven [and in Israel, a son of God, Psalms 2:7]. And any of us is better for remembering that there is someone, or Someone, to whom we are children; in this frame of mind we are more likely to treat all children with respect. (p. 4)

PRAY TELL, HOW DO WE BECOME SO IRREVERENT TOWARD LIFE?

Do we grow up and lose touch with our childlike spirit like Schweitzer as a child put into his prayer for all life?

Do we become habituated to the abuse and loss of life like a gang member becomes habituated to murder?

Have we taken the admonition in the Genesis creation story (1:26) and Psalm 8:6 to have dominion over life to mean we can mindlessly destroy life?

Have we become so enlightened and technologically advanced that we have overly objectified life into something merely to study, to abuse, or to enjoy for ourselves?

BUT: PRAY TELL, HOW COULD WE NOT BE REVERENT TOWARD LIFE? Given what we know from psychology and science, as well as our Judeo-Christian tradition--how could we not be reverent?

1. LIKE SCHWEITZER'S CHILDHOOD PRAYER, OUR CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES SEND BRIGHT FLASHING SIGNALS THAT

REVERENCE FOR LIFE MUST BE INBORN. Counselors and teachers consider a child who abuses animals to be aberrant and in dire need of help. We affirm the opposite: We delight in a child feeding the birds, planting seeds, smelling the flowers. We invest much money and effort to provide our children with pets and delight in their learning to care for them. I wish I knew the high number of children who asked Santa this year for pets--from frogs to ponies. And unless parents objected, Santa was going to do his best to bring those pets to those children!

Maybe a first step to renew reverence for life would be to get in touch with our inner child of the past--even if that took professional counseling! And if I were a legislator (don't worry, I'd never be elected!), I would pass laws requiring those who litter, pollute, and ravage natural resources to get counseling--while behind bars!

2. FOR SURE, SOME OF OUR OWN CHILDREN IN SCIENCE COURSES AT SCHOOL, TO SAY NOTHING OF SCIENCE TEACHERS AND SCIENTISTS THEMSELVES, COULD TEACH US ADULTS MUCH ABOUT REVERENCE FOR LIFE. They are learning and teaching us--as is our Forums on Religion and Science that Larry and Rufus began--that cosmologists and astronomers and biologists and chemists and other scientists have become veritable prophets to us of the reverence for life.

A. THAT OUR PLANET EARTH IS EVEN HERE GIVES US BREATHLESS PAUSE.

--Where did I hear that a difference of one second--tick--after the Big Bang could have aborted the birth of the earth! Reverence for life!

--The chances that our earth--a speck of dust in our known universe--even came about must be worse odds than winning the lottery! In 2006, the Hubble Telescope did an Ultra Deep Field imaging from 400 orbits, till then the deepest imaging ever of the universe. It was equivalent to an 11.5-day-long photographic exposure. This took us "to within a stone's throw of the big bang itself," said Massimo Stiavelli of the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore. What did Hubble see? First, an estimated 10,000 galaxies. Yes, 10,000 galaxies. Our Milky Way is a galaxy. These 10,000 galaxies varied in size, shape, and color. Many of them were not the usual spiral or elliptical, but oddball shapes like a toothpick and links on a bracelet. A few appeared to be interacting. Hubble was seeing a period when the universe was more chaotic; order and structure were just beginning. A second astounding phenomenon Hubble saw--take a deep breath: 70 sextillion stars! That's a 7 with 20 zeros after it! This is (the scientists admit to waxing poetic here) ten times more than the number of grains of sand on the earth, eleven times more than the number of cups of water in our oceans, ten times the number of wheat kernels produced on earth, one hundred million times more than the number of ants in all the world, ten billion times the number of cells in a human body, one hundred billion times the number of letters in the 14 million books in the Library of Congress!!! (*Astrobiology Magazine*, March 11, 2004). Martin Heidegger, German philosopher, was famous for asking: "Why should anything be?" Hubble prompts us to ask: "Why should SO MUCH be?" And how did the earth--a speck of dust in cosmic comparison--arrive and survive amidst all this uncalculable cosmic flux! Reverence for life!

--If the universe were a neighborhood, a lot of it would be arrested for disorderly conduct. Yet our earth and solar system is, comparatively, an oasis of orderliness and beauty, with the earth LIFE-giving and LIFE-sustaining. But that there IS life on earth is nothing short of miraculous. William Ward of the Center for Astrophysics, Harvard--where they have a minimum of mediocre professors, claims that if earth did not have a large moon positioned as it is, the gravitational influence of the larger planets would probably cause such extreme climactic changes that they would render the earth uninhabitable! The next time we look at the moon, we should address it like St. Francis of Assisi did: "Sister moon"! Family support! Reverence for life!

--That's not by any means all the earth has escaped! Across hundreds of millions of years, there have been what cosmologists call the Big Five catastrophic impacts of meteors upon the earth, with many smaller ones in between. According to geological scientists at Ohio State Univ., an estimated 250 million years ago, the largest meteor ever--perhaps up to 30 miles wide, twice the size of the one that probably took out the dinosaurs--plunged into East Antarctica, now south of Australia. In 2006, NASA's Grace Satellites showed gravity fluctuations--e.g. the color red indicates higher elevated land--that revealed a crater about 300 miles wide--that's about the distance of my hometown in West Tennessee, and it was large enough to hold the whole state of Ohio. This awesome impact, purportedly occurring at the time of the Permian-Triassic extinction, disappeared most of life from the earth--up to 95% of marine life, 70% of vertebrates on earth. (See Ohio State Research 7-29-06; cf. Mark Buchanan, *Ubiquity* [NY: Crown Publishers, 2001] 85-88) Yet, all but unbelievably, life rebounded and is still abounding on earth. Reverence for life!

B. THAT HUMAN BEINGS LIKE US EVEN LIVE UPON THE EARTH IS BREATHTAKINGLY IMPROBABLE.

--For the first 3 billion years of life on earth, only single-celled organisms such as bacteria and blue-green algae existed. Then approximately 570 million years ago, the first multi-cellular organisms, such as sponges, began to appear in the fossil record. About 40 million years later, an astonishing explosion of life on the earth took place, called the "Cambrian Explosion." Within a comparatively narrow window of about 5 million years, at least 19, and perhaps as many as 35 phyla, of the total of 40 phyla families of animal life--like mollusks (squids, shellfish), arthropods (crustaceans, insects, trilobites), and chordates, the phylum to which all vertebrates belong--all suddenly made their first

appearance on earth. That astounds scientists, much more us lay folks. It even prompted Charles Darwin to wonder if it discredited his theory of gradual evolution, and he devoted a chapter to it in his *Origin of Species*.

But, if the history of all life were compacted to within an hour, we human beings would arrive on the scene in the last seconds of the hour--just barely making it for the last note of the Postlude. And no scientist can test out exactly why we should have appeared. Yet, here we are. Reverence for life.

--And just consider the probability of your own existence: just one sperm from among millions of your father found the receptive egg of your mother to bring you into existence. Now, factor in your grandparents and their parents and their parents and their parents. The odds are that we could not be here! All the more so when we factor in the chances of dying from childhood diseases (my parents lost their first infant to the flu), from accidents while traveling (most of us have probably lost a loved one or friend), from being killed during war (29 graduates killed in Viet Nam from a small GA college, celebrated this year by vets led by my brother-in-law). I once saw a cartoon that pictured a student standing before a map on the wall at the door to the Physics Department of a college. There was an arrow pointing to the place where he was standing, and on it these words: "You are probably here"! Reverence for life!

--However we came to be against such improbability, our cells all but defy calculation. For example, the amount of genetic information in the DNA of every cell of our bodies is greater than the information of all the volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. How could such intricately complex beings have arrived on an earth that most of its life brought forth only one-celled life? Yet, somehow, Powers of Creation beyond ourselves programed us into being! Reverence for life!

--We parents can identify with Physicist Bob Compton of U.T., former student of Sam Hurst. Bob made a comment in one of our Forums on Religion and Science about reverence for life when his children were born. In a follow-up email, Bob said he believes in the basic tenants of evolution, but: "Life to me is the biggest mystery and I stand in awe of its existence from a nat to an elephant. . . . No thinking person could deny a supreme being after seeing their own child born . . . the ultimate mystery." Reverence for life!

C. AND THIS QUESTION THAT Baffles us all: HOW DID HUMAN INTELLECT AND CONSCIOUSNESS THAT ALLOW FOR SUCH ANALYSIS AND ETHICAL REFLECTION AS WE ARE UP TO RIGHT NOW, DERIVE FROM MATERIALITY? How utterly astounding! Where is the scientist who can explain this? Are the psychics like Sylvia Brown and James Van Praagh right when they say our souls, pre-existent in Heaven, choose to enter an infant near birth? Who can say? Reverence for life!

All of this and more led the genius mathematician Albert Einstein to claim, sounding like a sensitive minister: "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead. His eyes are closed. (In S. M. Ulman, *Adventures of a Mathematician* [NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976.]

CONCLUSION

Where might reverence for life lead us? It led Albert Schweitzer to leave an established career as a pastor-teacher and concert organist to become a physician and then a medical missionary for most of his life in Lamborene, W. Africa. It led him in 1957 to oppose publicly nuclear weapons testing for fear of radiation fallout. It led him to respect even the insects in his hospital, removing them only if necessary for the safety of patients!

Where might reverence for life lead us for our time?

--Become green conservationists?

--Lobby and agitate for the protection of the environment?

--Trade our gas guzzlers (I'm conflicted by my Tahoe) for battery/electric powered vehicles?

--Become vegetarians? (Son Paul has a fellow doctoral candidate writing his dissertation on "Animal Rights." Another confliction on the way?!)

How would your reverence for life look in practice? Wherever reverence for life may lead each of us individually, we all can surely agree with how it led Alfred Lord Tennyson to write so movingly in his "Prologue" to "In Memoriam":

Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of thee;
And thou, O Lord, art more than they.

We have but faith: we cannot know;
for knowledge is of things we see;
And yet we trust it comes from thee,

A beam in darkness: let it grow.

Let knowledge grow from more to more;
But more of reverence in us dwell;
That mind and soul, according well,
May make one music as before,
But vaster.

APPENDIX

I am life which wills to live, in the midst of life which wills to live. As in my own will-to-live there is a longing for wider life and pleasure, with dread of annihilation and pain; so is it also in the will-to-live all around me, whether it can express itself before me or remains dumb. The will-to-live is everywhere present, even as in me. If I am a thinking being, I must regard life other than my own with equal reverence, for I shall know that it longs for fullness and development as deeply as I do myself. Therefore, I see that evil is what annihilates, hampers, or hinders life. And this holds true whether I regard it physically or spiritually. Goodness, by the same token, is the saving or helping of life, the enabling of whatever life I can to attain its highest development.

.....
Ethics consist in my experiencing the compulsion to show to all will-to-live the same reverence as I do my own. A man is truly ethical only when he obeys the compulsion to help all life which he is able to assist, and shrinks from injuring anything that lives. If I save an insect from a puddle, life has devoted itself to life, and the division of life against itself has ended. Whenever my life devotes itself in any way to life, my finite will-to-live experiences union with the infinite will in which all life is one.

True, in practice we are forced to choose. At times we have to decide arbitrarily which forms of life, and even which particular individuals, we shall save, and which we shall destroy. But the principle of reverence for life is nonetheless universal and absolute.

Such an ethic does not abolish for man all ethical conflicts but compels him to decide for himself in each case how far he can remain ethical and how far he must submit himself to the necessity for destruction of and injury to life. No one can decide for him at what point, on each occasion, lies the extreme limit of possibility for his persistence in the preservation and furtherance of life. He alone has to judge this issue, by letting himself be guided by a feeling of the highest possible responsibility towards other life. We must never let ourselves become blunted. We are living in truth, when we experience these conflicts more profoundly.

Whenever I injure life of any sort, I must be quite clear whether it is necessary. Beyond the unavoidable, I must never go, not even with what seems insignificant. The farmer, who has mown down a thousand flowers in his meadow as fodder for his cows, must be careful on his way home not to strike off in wanton pastime the head of a single flower by the roadside, for he thereby commits a wrong against life without being under the pressure of necessity.