

Brave, Clean, and *Reverent*?  
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If you had asked me, when I was, say, ten years old, “what is reverence?” I might have said something like “keeping quiet in church.” And maybe I would have mentioned that on those occasions when we said grace before dinner – and that was only when we were with my grandparents – when my father or grandfather would say grace – on those occasions reverence meant “sit still and bow your head.” Though perhaps I’m giving my ten-year-old self too much credit.

Now, if you had asked me fifty years later, “what is reverence?” I’m not sure I would have done any better.

Some of you may recall that a few years ago, when Bill Sinkford was the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, we had the debate within Unitarian Universalism over the use of what was called “the language of reverence.” Sinkford observed that our seven principles – from worth and dignity to the interdependent web – you’ll find all seven of the principles in the hymnal, a page back from hymn #1 – Sinkford pointed out that our principles do not use religious language. Indeed, the discussion was about *religious* language. There apparently was an implicit assumption that the language of *religion* is the language of *reverence*. We’ll see about that. And by religious language was meant the language of Christianity, or at least the language of a non-Trinitarian Christianity – words like “God,” “prayer,” or “salvation.” [see Dean Grodzins, ed., *A Language of Reverence* (2004), with contributions by Bill Sinkford, David Bumbaugh, Laurel Hallman, Sharon Welch, and Thandeka]

A couple of years ago, when Kerry and I were the ministers for the UU congregation in Fayetteville, Arkansas, I learned that the philosopher Paul Woodruff was coming to town, to give a lecture at St. Paul’s – that was our local Episcopal church – a lecture on the topic of reverence. Kerry and I decided that we should attend. We could stop in at the Goddess Festival – organized to a great extent by members of our congregation– later in the evening.

The person who introduced Prof. Woodruff that evening posed three questions to him: (1) do you have to be a *Christian* to be reverent? (2) do you have to be *religious* to be reverent? and (3) can a *criminal* be reverent? His answers to the first two questions were No and No: Reverence is *not* restricted to Christians, and reverence is *not* restricted to those who are religious. I assume that Woodruff would agree that being a Christian or being religious does not guarantee that one will be reverent. His answer to the third question was that he hopes that criminals can be reverent.

Woodruff’s lecture on reverence was based on his book: *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* (2001), published three weeks after the September 11 attack. [Bill Moyers, interview, PBS, 1/3/03]

In reading the short biographical sketch of Paul Woodruff in the program, I noticed that he had attended Princeton. The program didn't say when, or whether it was for his undergraduate education, graduate school, or Princeton seminary, which is quite a different thing from Princeton University, although just on the other side of the street.

I approached him after the lecture, and he told me that he was a member of the Class of 1965 at Princeton University, just one year behind me. But we did not remember each other. Though he is a professional philosopher now, specializing in ancient Greek philosophy, he was not a philosophy major as an undergraduate. I was.

The topic of *reverence* took me back to my Boy Scout years. The so-called Boy Scout *law* states various characteristics of the proper Boy Scout, but the only ones I could remember, 50 years after leaving Scouting, at least remember in the correct order, were the last three: *brave, clean, and reverent*. As a Scout, I had a vague concept of bravery, though I don't think I had had any personal experience of being brave. I don't think I have had any since then, either, for that matter. I thought *clean* was simple enough – wash your hands before eating. Little did I imagine that they had something quite different in mind.

In case you were curious, here is the Boy Scout explanation of reverence, from their website: “A Scout is reverent toward God. He is faithful in his religious duties. He respects the beliefs of others.” If you don't already know what it is to be reverent – or if you're not sure about God – how does it help to be told that “a Scout is reverent toward God?”

With respect to the requirement of fidelity to religious duties, what if you are not aware that you have any religious duties? Does that give you a pass on that requirement, or is that a disqualifier?

And the advice that being reverent requires one to respect the beliefs of others could lead to unfortunate results, depending on what the others believe.

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This sermon is actually *not* about Boy Scouts, but I should mention – and you've probably heard about this already – that a week ago Thursday the Scouts' leadership voted to allow gay boys to be Scouts. [see NY Times, “Boy Scouts End Longtime Ban On Gay Youths,” May 24, 2013, p. A1 and [www.scouting.org](http://www.scouting.org)] Gays are still banned from adult leadership positions, but for the kids, it's OK now. Perhaps during coffee hour you can explain to me how this distinction – gay boys, OK; gay adults, No Way – could be justified in a principled way – or explained to the Scouts.

There has been no change in the official Boy Scout position with respect to God: you've got to believe, in *Him*.<sup>1</sup>

But, as I said, that's not my topic this morning – but I should add that Scouting was an important and valuable part of my life for several years, and I received the Scouts' God and Country award, but I didn't come close to becoming an Eagle Scout.

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So what is reverence, anyway? As I read earlier, here's Woodruff's description:

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. (Woodruff, p. 3)

Reverence, to summarize, is the capacity for awe, respect, and shame. Woodruff goes quite a ways beyond *this* ten-year-old's notion of not misbehaving in church, and I find his explanation more helpful than that of the Boy Scouts. I readily agree with the role of awe in reverence. I'm not so sure about the inclusion of respect and shame.

I had always assumed, without feeling the need to give it much thought, that reverence related to religion, that reverence was on religion's corner of the playground. Woodruff sees it differently. Reverence, he explains, is more relevant for politics than for religion. Reverence is

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<sup>1</sup>Article IX. Policies and Definitions—From the Charter and Bylaws

Section 1. Declaration of Religious Principle, clause 1. The Boy Scouts of America maintains that no member can grow into the best kind of citizen without recognizing an obligation to God. In the first part of the Scout Oath or Promise the member declares, "On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law." The recognition of God as the ruling and leading power in the universe and the grateful acknowledgment of His favors and blessings are necessary to the best type of citizenship and are wholesome precepts in the education of the growing members. No matter what the religious faith of the members may be, this fundamental need of good citizenship should be kept before them. The Boy Scouts of America, therefore, recognizes the religious element in the training of the member, but it is absolutely nonsectarian in its attitude toward that religious training. Its policy is that the home and the organization or group with which the member is connected shall give definite attention to religious life. [from the website, scouting.org]

essential for community, for our living together. And we have to live together: we cannot survive as isolated individuals. But we can, he insists, get along without religion, and religion is possible without reverence.

Woodruff sees reverence and religiousness as overlapping, but they can exist independent of one another – neither entails the other. Atheists can be reverent. (Woodruff, p. 67) Of course, Unitarian Universalism is living proof that atheists can be religious.

Some religions place a high value on reverence, and others do not. Faith-centered religions – these are religions emphasizing beliefs and adherence to creeds – may have little interest in reverence. (Woodruff, p. 66)

In his discussion of reverence and belief, Woodruff makes his only reference to Unitarian Universalism – a reference that doesn't make it into the book's index. He argues that if reverence were a matter of belief, then reverence would be real only if the underlying beliefs were true. But if that were the case – and I'm not persuaded – then Presbyterians and Unitarians could not both be reverent, because Presbyterian and Unitarian beliefs about God conflict: they cannot both be true. (Woodruff, p. 53)

Woodruff here shows a confidence about UU attitudes towards God that is possible only for someone who is not a UU. Indeed, I strongly suspect that Presbyterians have a much wider range of beliefs about God than their official creeds would suggest.

A central part of religion – or, I should say, a central part of *some* religions – is worship. Reverence is no more tied to worship in particular than it is to religion generally. Worship may be practiced without feeling, and thus without reverence. Worship can emphasize faith, which is different from reverence, and worship, Woodruff asserts, can be “downright vicious.” (Woodruff, p. 46)

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Reverence is awe for things outside our control. That doesn't just mean things outside my *personal* control, but rather, things outside humanity's control. Thus I shouldn't say that I have reverence towards our sound system. I have no understanding of it at all, but humanity collectively, and even a few humans in this room, understand the sound system, and can control it. I have a feeling of awe for the Grand Canyon, for the miracle of life of each new child, for the string quartets of Beethoven, for the ideal of a world of peace with justice.

If reverence is awe for things outside our control, that suggests that the more ignorant we are, as a people, the more reverent we can be. It suggests that expanding the frontiers of science is an anti-reverent activity. That can't be right, can it? I am for poking about in the things for which we have reverence. The idea of maintaining reverence through forced or even voluntary ignorance strikes me as wrong-headed. Some things, perhaps, after study, will no longer inspire

feelings of awe. Our reverence for sausage may be less after a visit to the sausage factory. Or perhaps our reverence for the British royal family – as an American I don’t actually feel such reverence – will decline after we read the butler’s memoirs. Here’s what the 19th century British constitutional scholar Walter Bagehot was quoted as saying about British royalty: “Above all things, our royalty is to be *reverenced*, and if you begin to poke about it, you cannot *reverence* it. Its mystery is its life. We must not let in daylight upon magic.” (New York Times, April 24, 2011, p. WK5)] But with other things, our awe may increase with our understanding. The cosmologist’s awe at the wonder of the universe increases with study.

Is it adequate to call reverence a feeling, or the capacity for feelings of awe, respect, or shame? Here my attitude about reverence is similar to my attitude about spirituality: a feeling is not enough. You can feel in awe of the Grand Canyon, of its natural beauty, of its incredible size, of how it took millions of years for it to form, but then if someone proposes a dam or a quarry, or advertizing on the canyon walls, or an elevator to the bottom, and you do nothing to stop the desecration, in my mind, your reverence for the Canyon becomes suspect.

If you claim a reverential attitude towards Beethoven, but you always find a way to avoid attending concerts featuring his string quartets, I will eventually doubt that your reverence for Beethoven is authentic.

If you claim to stand in awe of the beauty, the power, the mystery of mathematics but then you resist paying higher taxes to provide an adequate mathematical education for our community’s children, again, I will find your reverence credentials unpersuasive.

Thus I find Pooh’s anger in response to the possibility that the 100-acre wood might be cut down consistent with reverence. [see the story earlier in the service]

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I’ve been praising reverence, but in our society we often hold *irreverence* in higher esteem than we do reverence. Which side should we be on? If we think of irreverence as the opposite of reverence – and certainly the prefix that transforms *reverence* to *irreverence* encourages that thought, then *irreverence*, when used for a praiseworthy attitude, is probably the wrong word. Woodruff suggests that praise for *irreverence* is really praise for “boldness, independence, and honesty” and contempt for anything “pretentious or arrogant.” (78) True irreverence is for a mortal – someone like us – to act like a god, or at least to act the way we imagine a god would act. (132)

And that brings me to the adjective *reverend*, which you often see in front of the name of a clergy person, as in *the Reverend Dave Hunter* or *the Reverend Kerry Mueller*. While *reverent* – ending with a *T* as in tiger – describes someone who feels or shows reverence, *reverend* – ending with a *D* as in donut – describes someone who deserves to be treated with reverence. As I see it, we humans deserve to be treated with respect – at least I hope that most of us do, most of

the time – but we do not deserve to be treated with reverence. That treatment should be reserved for the gods – but only if they truly deserve it.

If I've gone too far in my generalization, let me simply say that I do not feel that I deserve to be treated with reverence. I'm not entitled to that.

The dictionary (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (1970)) (Woodruff, p. 41) comes to our rescue here. The first meaning listed – of “reverend” – is the one I explained, a description of someone who deserves to be treated with reverence. The second meaning is simply *pertaining to or characteristic of the clergy*, and the third meaning is *designating a member of the clergy*. So if I'm called Rev. Dave, that simply identifies me as a minister; it doesn't describe my moral worth or status in the heavenly hierarchy.

By the way, in case you were wondering, *reverent* comes from the present participle of the Latin verb *reverēri*, which means to revere, and *reverend* comes from the gerundive of the same Latin verb. [*re*, again, + *verēri*, to respect, feel awe for; from *wer-*<sup>4</sup>, to perceive, watch out for, as in aware] If you want to learn more about the etymology or the Latin grammar involved, see Kerry after the service.

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Some of you have probably been wondering, what did Confucius have to say about reverence? Haven't you? Well, the Confucian concept of *li* refers to “rites (that's r-i-t-e-s), proper conduct, courtesy, doing things the right way, propriety.” “What has been lost in all the standard translations [of *li*],” according to Woodruff, “is the reverence that has to be in the minds of those who practice *li*.” (Woodruff, p. 41) Woodruff explains that *li* refers also to civility as well as to reverence. (Woodruff, p. 105)

Confucian *li* leads human beings to accept their proper niche between the divine and the animal. *Li* restrains human power, protecting the weak. One acquires *li* through the careful observance of ceremony. Through ceremony one acquires the acceptance, the feelings that are necessary for one's conduct to count as civility or reverence. (Woodruff, pp. 104-05)

Those who have cultivated *li*, Woodruff explains – that is to say, not mere ceremony, but ceremony accompanied by the right feelings – have developed their capacity for feeling grief, shame, respect, and reverence, when appropriate. (Woodruff, p. 106) The emperor, and others with power, follow *li* because they feel it, they have internalized it, *li* has become a settled virtue in them. (Woodruff, p. 107)

“Confucians are silent about the gods, and so they must understand *li* as reverence toward a Heaven about which there is nothing to be said,” about which nothing is known, Woodruff tells us. “*Li* preserves a harmonious relationship between humanity and Heaven by maintaining in human beings a sense of their place in a larger (but unknown) scheme. *Li*, then, is independent

of any particular beliefs about the gods and focuses primarily on the expression of reverence in daily life.” (Woodruff, p. 144)

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To be honest, I did not expect Woodruff’s journey through the land of reverence to lead us to Confucius, and I certainly did not expect to go from ancient China to Vietnam, and, in particular, to the Vietnam War. While I was in Washington, D.C., protesting the war and organizing against it and fighting the draft, Woodruff was a junior officer in Vietnam [see Moyers interview], learning about reverence. Or perhaps it’s safer to say he was absorbing experiences and lessons that a few decades later would inform his understanding of reverence.

When was the last time that the Army Field Manual was quoted in a book of philosophy?

During his first few weeks in the army the soldier often asks – and this is Woodruff, quoting the Army Field Manual – the soldier often asks, “Why are drill and ceremonies needed? Why couldn’t I use my time more advantageously learning how to fire my weapon?” The answers are that individual efforts alone do not bring survival or victory for the soldier; that the soldier has to learn teamwork and the value of unified and cooperative action. (Woodruff, 177)

In the military, you do not receive respect from another because the other holds you in good opinion. Rather, respect comes first, and good opinion grows from it. “Long before they have any opportunities to test each other, junior officer and colonel must show respect to one another. Respect is given, not earned, and to think otherwise would tear any hierarchy apart.” “Reverence,” in this setting, “is a shared devotion to high ideals. Respect – the respect that flows from reverence – requires that we recognize each other’s devotion to those ideals.” (Woodruff, p. 180)

If you’d like a homework assignment, I suggest you write a 500-word essay, applying what Woodruff learned in the Army, to life in a congregation. What implications for the respect we have for each other flow from our reverence, that is, from our shared devotion to high ideals?

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Unitarian Universalists sometimes assert that, underneath, at their core, all religions are the same. All religions share basic values, such as the Golden Rule. We look at the Holy through different windows, perhaps, or we feel a different part of the elephant, but we have the conviction that, deep down, there is common ground. Stephen Prothero, a religion professor, has devoted a book to the contrary view: *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World – and Why Their Differences Matter* (2010). Prothero describes the various religions in order to show us that the questions they ask are different, and thus, so are the answers.

In a chapter on Relativism, Woodruff, agreeing with Prothero, but writing almost a decade earlier, states that “It is not reverent to say that all religions are the same deep down.” (Woodruff, p. 149) He argues that anyone “who is reverent towards the truth,” – and who could revere the truth more than a UU? – will want to avoid the false belief that all religions – especially those involving beliefs – are at heart the same. We cannot claim that truths are personal and thereby avoid the confrontation of conflicting beliefs.

Woodruff reminds us of Plato’s famous argument against the Relativism espoused by Protagoras. “The instant Protagoras defends his relativism against criticism, he implicitly abandons it – because at that point he has to disagree with those who reject his position.” (Woodruff, p. 150, see *Theaetetus* 171)

Complete relativism is arrogant, and thus irreverent, in the proper, and harsh, meaning of that word. Complete relativism tries to offer us an immunity from argument that denies or ignores human fallibility. Relativism is hubris, an attempt to claim equal status with the gods, and hubris is the antithesis of reverence. “Relativism,” Woodruff concludes, “here as elsewhere, is an evasion of responsibility.” (Woodruff, p. 161)

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Some of you may have observed that I’ve used the term *God or the gods* somewhat freely this morning. I’ve tried to make it clear that Woodruff’s approach to reverence does not imply the existence of any sort of god or supreme being, and nor does my approach.

But what *is* required is something beyond you and me. Protagoras, in his relativist approach, maintains that “a human being is the measure of all things.” (Woodruff, p. 151, see *Theaetetus* 152b) But there is much that is beyond humanity, isn’t there? – the ideal of justice, the mystery of existence, the reality of death, the wonder of love, the endurance of truth. Let us put aside haughtiness, hubris, and arrogance, and embrace civility, humility, and reverence.

Let us, like good Boy Scouts, be not only Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, and Clean, but also Reverent as well.

And I’ll leave it to Paul Woodruff, and to you, to come up with a better short explanation of reverence for the Boy Scouts.

Like Pooh and Piglet, we’re all walking in the 100-acre wood, at least metaphorically, with trees so tall we can’t see the tops of them. So may it always be. Amen.