

RENEWING REVERENCE

A sermon given by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason

at UU Wellesley Hills on

Sunday, January 13th, 2019

This month marks my final turn as Lecturer in Denominational Studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York, my alma mater, and it's made for quite a full month so far. I am in the midst of teaching an intensive course on Unitarian Universalist history and polity this January term to a small but eager and inquiring group of divinity students that meets for long hours each Friday on campus. The class is a requirement for my students to be granted ministerial fellowship and be ordained for ministry, as they move toward becoming the Rev. So-and-So at one of our UU congregations. These seminarians are fascinated by the particulars of our liberal religious tradition, certainly, but they are perhaps more curious about their own qualifications for leadership and whether they themselves have cultivated the necessary virtues for the job, reverence of course being chief among them.

In his marvelous book Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue, humanities professor Paul Woodruff ask us all to consider and reconsider what we understand about this cardinal virtue. Dr. Woodruff explains that a cardinal virtue is one that is constant across various cultural, political and religious contexts. In this regard, he likens it to courage or honesty; it is a virtue that make other moral choices possible, and at times, even obvious. He notes that reverence

“survives among us in half forgotten patterns of civility, in moments of inarticulate awe, and in nostalgia for... lost ways...” While such signs of reverence persist, Dr. Woodruff fears that any wholesome notion of it gets largely overlooked in America today. With the notable exceptions of seminarians, I suspect his assessment is correct.

As a respected scholar of both classical Greek philosophy and ancient Chinese teaching, Dr. Woodruff proposes “that we restore the idea of reverence to its proper place in ethical and political thought.” That sounds like a tall order in an era when our elected officials call each other ugly names, when our public discourse skews toward the strident and inflammatory. A sense of reverence allow us to exercise a necessary degree of restraint. According to Dr. Woodruff, a civilization cannot survive the complete loss of reverence; the center of civic life will not hold without it, nor can communal norms be maintained. “Without reverence, things fall apart,” he declares. “And life without reverence? Entirely without reverence?” he asks. “That would be brutish and selfish, and it had best be lived alone.”

We all have a capacity for reverence, argues Dr. Woodruff, but like all virtues, it has to be developed into a habitual attitude. We have to routinely practice reverence. We need to practice, practice, practice. In this case, though, practice makes imperfect, because reverence inspires “the feelings that keep us humble and respectful of one another.” It reminds us that our own immediate interests and inclinations are not in fact the sum of all things or even the highest good. As the author tells us in his book, “reverence is not easy.” It never was, which is why both the ancient Greeks and Confucians took

such care to cultivate it. What has to happen here and now to foster renewed reverence on our part?

Faith communities such as UU Wellesley Hills have an obvious advantage in that we worship together. Even if your settled minister is away on January study leave, you still gather together. The choir leads everyone in the hymns, our Sexton sets out candles for Joys and Sorrows, the ushers collect our Sunday offering, the worship associate reads the responsive reading, the guest preaches tells the Story for All Ages, and a congregant extinguishes the same chalice he lit at the start of the hour. These are just some of the gestures of our collective devotion, and they all shore this community up over time. They are not mere formalities. As Dr. Woodruff observes, in our rites and rituals, we practice reverence. We strive to inculcate the virtue within ourselves. “Reverence is a matter of feeling and as far as feelings go,” he writes, “it doesn’t much matter what you believe.”

Quoting the old Confucian adage, “Virtue has neighbors”, Dr. Woodruff note that “people who seek reverence don’t merely try to improve themselves — they try to involve family or church or community in the language of reverence — in shared events, in ceremony, even...” Since 2003, when our UUA President at the time called on us all to reclaim “the language of reverence” in our congregational life and public witness, we have spoken that more freely and openly than possibly we dared to before. This latest era demands that we be fully fluent.

In his 2017 article titled “Achtung, Maybe: Reverence in the Age of Trump”, book critic Robert Zaretsky complain that “our own time and

place... make visible... the darkness of a [political] leader incapable of reverence”. In the middle of the latest governmental shut-down over a “strange and foolish” wall of separation, we see the damage that such a leader can do to the soul of a nation; we see how demoralizing such a leader can be to the whole world. We see how dearly a lack of basic respect for our shared humanity costs us. That 2017 article states: “Reverence rarely gets the upper hand on irreverence. This was as true in antiquity as it is in postmodernity.” Our national dialogue becomes debased as our social media and communication channels flood with crass and crude declarations, some false, some libelous, some plainly malevolent.

Technology has allowed us to inflict more damage to civility than we ever imagined possible. One of the best known Greek myths is the tale of Prometheus, that epic hero (anti-hero?) who steals fire from the gods on Olympus, hoping to improve the lot of people down on earth by placing it in their hands. But those people who were so grateful for it at the outset soon start to misuse their fire-power and fight each other with disastrous consequences. After he mercilessly punishes Prometheus for the theft, Zeus sends winged Hermes to bring two virtues to the warring populace: first, Justice, so that people would deal equitably with one another, and last, Reverence, so that human society people would feel themselves bound together.

Rather convincingly, Dr. Woodruff argues that the enacting of justice is inadequate for the purposes of human harmony and that reverence has to figure prominently in our relations. As he notes, “Reverence, not justice, is the virtue that separates leaders from tyrants.” So even

where we are right and others are wrong, that does not relieve us of our duty to be reverential.

Disagreements around civic matters can and should be expected in democracy, Dr. Woodruff rightly maintains. We hold elections precisely because we have a diversity of opinions among us. He sees voting as an important ceremony for citizens, one that can serve as “an expression of reverence — not for our government, but... for the very idea that ordinary people are more important than the juggernauts that seem to rule them.” Of course it is important for people to honor their deepest convictions, whether or not they are rooted in a personal faith. But it is important too that they campaign for those without demonizing the opponent or turning every election cycle into a holy war. “All too often,” the author contends, “believers in any religion set themselves against reverence” by espousing an ideology that claims the divine rightness of a given stance.

“Reverence... straddles boundaries...” Dr. Woodruff concludes “and bridges the gap between religious and secular life.” Throughout our church program year, we’ve been talking about what we as UUs believe and using the Rev. David O. Rankin’s popular ten-point outline as a guide. His fifth point is this: “We believe in the unity of experience. There is no fundamental conflict between faith and knowledge, religion and the world, the sacred and the secular, since they all have their source in the same reality.” That larger reality itself is the object of our reverence.

“Reverence must stand in awe of something,” Dr. Woodruff writes, something transcendent, something ultimate. Our individual

conceptualizations may vary, but our sundry experiences of the transcendent prove unifying and point our attention outward and upward. The religious pluralism within our UU congregations helps us to understand reverence as broadly as possible, and even offers a model for how things might be in these United States. “Reverence is not faith...” the author cautions; “see how you might share reverence with people who do not worship with you or share your faith”, or for that matter your politics or social commitments or cultural tastes. What sort of sacred bonds might still hold?

“Reverence, as a virtue, is primarily a capacity for having certain feelings at the right time and in the right way,” he concludes, in particular feelings of awe, respect, and being ashamed. “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.” We may also find that our individual allotments change over time.

Surveying his discernibly reverent students, Dr. Woodruff observes that they hold relatively few religious beliefs in common, and yet, he writes: “some shadow of belief appears to be universal among those who practice reverence; it is the idea that human beings are weak and fragile by comparison with whatever ideals they have of power or longevity or moral perfection.” I see a similar belief in the seminarians I teach. Because they are so very idealistic, they feel inadequate to their high-minded ideals. Yet I don’t think we should be in too much of a rush to close that gap.

These are cynical and somewhat challenging times to enter ordained ministry. Being a Reverend seems antiquated and outmoded because as Dr. Woodruff notes, in America these days, “[w]e hear more praise of irreverence than we do of reverence.” What’s called irreverence, though, is not always that. As the author notes, reverence is capacious enough to allow people to be simultaneously adventurous, humorous, or boisterous. Being reverent is not synonymous with being solemn. There are strains of satire, even, that help us challenge misguided postures of reverence to causes that are unworthy of it. Real reverence can give us a powerful sense of reach at the same time that it keeps us right-sized.

Recently, a ministerial colleague here in Mass Bay told me I was brave. She’s definitely not the first person to tell me that, so I suppose I am. I mention this not to boast, because I’m not sure I ever had the chance to be anything else. I come from an Irish Catholic family, a family of nurses and firefighters, where the governing ethos was: find a burning building, already, and rush into it. Being brave was a primary virtue in my upbringing; my relatives were sometimes brave when frankly, they and select situations might have been better served by their something else. But bravery became a kind of muscle memory for me. My father warned against being a disgrace to the uniform, and he always emphasized that it did not matter in the least which uniform was I was wearing. Do it justice, he insisted; make us proud. “Reverence should leave no gap between generations,” Dr. Woodruff wrote. As a student in parochial school, I was raised in a uniform, first in a jumper and then in a kilt. Growing up, I was never out of uniform.

Today, when I think of the problematic but popular stereotype of the fighting Irish, I no longer associate it with pugnaciousness. Indeed, my Irish relations had zero tolerance for cowardice. But they also had - I see now - such stubborn reverence. They were exceedingly reverential people. They wanted lives of service. For them, the uniform represented the power of the office, regardless of what the office was, and the sacred obligation the office holder had to it, however temporarily and provisionally. This morning, I stand before you in a very particular uniform, wearing this robe and stole, and I hope yet to do it credit. My desire is to make you proud. “The respect that belongs to reverence expresses a moral character in neither too thick or too thin,” Dr. Woodruff notes. My sense of reverence perpetually reminds me of all the manifold ways I could disappoint and fail you, and it helps me to recover when I do, as I expect I will from time to time.

Some of you in this congregation unfailingly call me Rev. Kelly, some of you intermittently call me Rev. Kelly, and some of you here will never call me Rev. Kelly. That variability is to be expected in a UU congregation, and really it’s fine — call me whatever you want. I intend to be Rev. Kelly anyway, because I have no doubt that you all deserve a Reverend — it is what you are due in this community of faith. You should have an intently reverential presence in your midst that notices all that you do here, in this Sanctuary and across the church campus, in your households and communities and the wider world, who notices that whatever hat you wear, in or out of uniform, you have chosen to wear with dignity. As that book critic noted in 2017, “Reverence... is the realization that there is more than this and

that there is more than me. And that goes for everyone.” It goes for everyone here, surely.

As my teaching tenure at Union Theological comes to a close, I take tremendous satisfaction in all the students whose ministerial formation I participated in years since 2011, when I first returned to the campus of my alma mater. Several have since graduated and many have gone on to become the Rev. So-and-So, a few in UU congregations near to us in Metro Boston. Those divinity students are now my colleagues and my teachers, too. I respect the work they are doing. “Respect is a feeling that goes with sharing a great project,” Dr. Woodruff writes, “one that has an aim worthy of reverence”. I admire what they have undertaken in shared ministries at local churches, much as I admire the devotion all of you here have evidenced in long years shared ministries here at UU Wellesley Hills, well in advance of my arrival here.

Together, we can do much to prevent reverence from fading away from our conscious lives, not just in our immediate municipalities but in our country during a time of crisis. Together, we can help renew a forgotten virtue. “Unlike rules, virtues give us the strength to live well and avoid bad choices,” Dr. Woodruff concludes. “To be reverent is to take care to never play the part of god or beast.” Cultivating a cardinal virtue like reverence helps us incline toward the good and noble more and more immediately and reflexively. The paradox here is that “reverence runs with the grain—or, rather, as you cultivate reverence, you are changing the way your grain runs.” That’s a large part of what we do here Sunday after Sunday, most reverentially. Let’s keep on doing it.