



TOUCHSTONES

Small Group Discussion Guide

Reverence & Repairing the World

Before You Gather

Read the following pieces prior to gathering.

1. *Reverence for the Visible and Invisible Worlds*

by Yahia Lababidi

Al Ghazali wrote, “This visible world is a trace of that invisible one and the former follows the latter like a shadow.”

...I’m consumed with idea of the artist as mystic, and the worship of beauty as a form of prayer. I pray by admiring a rose, Persian philosopher-poet Omar Khayyam is supposed to have said. There, in this deceptively simple utterance one finds the connection among the visible, invisible, and indivisible laid bare. Our metaphysical eyes are expert at collapsing distances this way, seeing through the apparent to the infinite.

...Rilke wrote, “It is our task to imprint this temporary, perishable earth into ourselves, so deeply, so painfully and passionately, that its essence can rise again, invisible, inside of us. We are the bees of the invisible. We wildly collect the honey of the visible, to store it in the great golden hive of the invisible.”

Reverence for the visible world is not in opposition to the invisible one; in the same way that it is through the body we access the life of the spirit. Remembering we are “bees of the invisible,” sweetens the suffering and even cheats death of its ultimate sting. We are saved by the very idea of a back and forth, between a Here and There. Bodies are like poems that way, only a fraction of their power resides in the skin of things. The remainder belongs to the spirit that swims through them.

...Poets, philosophers and mystics, by their nature, seem especially well-suited to exposing the false divisions between the visible and invisible worlds.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/reverence-for-the-visible-and-invisible-worlds/>

2. *The Inner Landscape of Beauty*

by John O’Donohue

...When you wake in the morning and come out of your house, whether you believe you are walking into dead geographical location, which is used to get to a destination, or whether you are emerging out into a landscape that is just as much, if not more, alive as you, but in a totally different form, and if you go towards it with an open heart and a real, watchful reverence, that you will be absolutely amazed at what it will reveal to you.

...One of the recognitions of the Celtic imagination [was] ...that landscape wasn’t just matter, but that it was actually alive. ...Landscape ...calls you into a mindful mode of stillness, solitude, and silence, where you can truly receive time.

...It’s not just a matter of the outer presence of the landscape. ...The dawn goes up, and the twilight comes, even in the ...roughest inner-city.... And ...that connecting to the elemental can be a way of coming into rhythm with the universe. ...There is a way in which the outer presence, even through memory or imagination, can be brought inward as a sustaining thing.

The world is always larger and more intense and stranger than our best thought will ever reach. And that’s the mystery of poetry. Poetry tries to draw alongside the mystery as it’s emerging and somehow bring it into presence and into birth.

...Everyone is involved, whether they like it or not, in the construction of their world. So, it’s never as given as it actually looks. You are always shaping it and building it. And I feel that from that perspective, that each of us is an artist.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/programs/john-odonohue-the-inner-landscape-of-beauty-aug2017/>

3. *Reverence for Life Remembered*

by Frederick Franck

The words contempt for life had fallen again, and that made me think at once of “Reverence for Life,” Albert Schweitzer’s life motto that he lived from 1915 to his death in 1965.

...I was drawing the old man, he was eighty-six then, when he sat writing at his desk, his face almost touching the paper, his bristling mustache at times sweeping it as the old hand wrote on, slowly, painstakingly. Once in a while his head would straighten to turn toward the screened window that looked out over the river. Turning back, for an instant aware of me, he mumbled a few words and went on writing. It was getting dark. The file of his pet ants marching across the paper went out of focus in the falling dusk. He stopped his writing, got up stiffly, put on his faded crumpled felt hat, and said, “Let’s sit outside.”

We sat on the steps of his cabin, mutely watching the dusk deepening on the Ogowe River. He looked worried. “One should have the skin of a hippo,” he suddenly grunted without explanation, “and the soul of an angel.” His little mongrel Tzu-Tzu sat between us. “Ah! Look at that tree,” Schweitzer said after a while, pointing at a kapok in the distance, still gleaming in the setting sun. Then all of a sudden — it sounded at one hopeless and hopeful — “Do you think that the idea of Reverence for Life is really gaining ground?”

I was perplexed. I felt my eyes getting moist. I had just flown across half of a world that seemed to be getting ready to destroy itself in a spasm of violence. What could I say? ‘Who knows?’ I tried. ‘There is such terrible violence all over, isn’t there? Still, you sowed the seed. If anyone did, you did sow the seed.’

He sighed.... “Ja, ja” ...and got up, for the dinner bell was ringing.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/14111>

4. *Otherness* by Maggie Ross

What we have most in common with the creation and other people is otherness: the mysterious otherness of the deep mind, the mysterious otherness of other people, and the mysterious otherness of creation. It is through otherness that we share the common center of the circle that is everywhere. This otherness calls forth from us a

reverence, a humility and respect, an awe before ourselves, one another, and the creation that turns our gaze away from the comparisons of difference and finally relinquishes even the seductive metaphors of difference. Our most profound commonality with ourselves, with each other, with the creation, is not affected by what we can know, but by what we cannot know. Our communion is engagement with the mystery of otherness, our own, that of other people, the creation as a whole of which we are a part, and the mysterious Other beyond all knowing.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/28091>

5. *I Am Because We Are* by Steve Paulson

Consider the African philosophy of “ubuntu” — a concept in which your sense of self is shaped by your relationships with other people. It’s a way of living that begins with the premise that “I am” only because “we are.” The Kenyan literary scholar James Ogude believes ubuntu might serve as a counterweight to the rampant individualism that’s so pervasive in the contemporary world.

“Ubuntu is rooted in what I call a relational form of personhood, basically meaning that you are because of the others,” said Ogude.... “In other words, as a human being, you—your humanity, your personhood—you are fostered in relation to other people.”

In practice, ubuntu means believing the common bonds within a group are more important than any individual arguments and divisions within it. “People will debate, people will disagree; it’s not like there are no tensions,” said Ogude. “It is about coming together and building a consensus around what affects the community. And once you have debated, then it is understood what is best for the community, and then you have to buy into that.”

Archbishop Desmond Tutu drew on the concept of ubuntu when he led South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which helped South Africa reckon with its history of apartheid. Ubuntu promotes restorative justice and a community-centric ethos. “We have the ability, as people, to dig into our human values, to go for the best of them, in order to bring about healing and to bridge the gap,” Ogude said. This idea also extends to our relationships with the non-human world of rivers, plants and animals.

Source: <https://www.ttbook.org/interview/i-am-because-we-are-african-philosophy-ubuntu>

6. *The Meaning of Namasté* by Karson McGinley

...Namasté is a salutation of respect and reverence. A traditional Indian greeting, it literally translates to “I bow to you” (namah or namas, meaning bow, te meaning you).

In India, the gesture of *Anjali Mudra* (prayer position of the hands) not only accompanies the word, but is synonymous with its meaning. People passing on the street, family members greeting one another, children acknowledging their elders, and strangers meeting for the first time all join their palms together and bow their heads in respect of one another.

...One of the most common translations of namasté is “The divine light in me bows to the divine light within you.” However, ... [there are] many beautiful ... translations of namasté, such as:

- I honor the place in you where the entire universe dwells.
- I bow to the place in you that is love, light, and joy.
- When you and I bow to our true nature, we are one.
- My soul recognizes your soul.
- We are the same, we are one.
- I honor the place in you that is the same as it is in me.

...It is always helpful to find a concise phrase that captures a spiritual teaching. However, there is more to namasté than what can fit on the side of a coffee mug.

Namasté represents the idea that all are one. It affirms that, beneath the outer trappings that make you appear different from others, you are made of the same stuff. You are more the same than you are different.

Source: <https://chopra.com/articles/learn-the-meaning-of-namaste>

Gathering

Business: Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

Opening Words: *Reverence for Life* by Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland

May we be like Albert Schweitzer on a boat in the Ogowe River in Gabon in west central Africa. May our uncertainty open our eyes to see a group of

hippos or a sunset or a newborn or anything else that evokes such awe that we finally understand “Reverence for Life.”

Chalice Lighting: *At times our Light goes out*

by Albert Schweitzer

“At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.”

Source: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/31512-at-times-our-own-light-goes-out-and-is-rekindled>

Check-In: How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

Claim Time for Deeper Listening: This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

Read the Wisdom Story: Invite someone to read aloud the following wisdom story.

When Everything Was Made from Light

by Scott Russell Sanders

In his book *A Private History of Awe*, Scott Russell Sanders remembers a spring day when he was a young boy, old enough to run around and small enough to be carried in his father’s arms. The wind was booming; lightning flashed everywhere as a heavy rain fell. His father carried him out on to the porch, held him against his chest, and hummed as the thunder rumbled. They looked out at the trees and the huge oak which was the tallest thing the child knew. The oak swayed in the storm. Suddenly a flash and boom split the air. Everything became a white glare. “Sweet Jesus,” his father cried out, grabbing him and pulling him close. Lightning had struck the oak and it snapped like a stick. Its top shattered onto the ground and a charred streak ran down the trunk.

One moment the great tree was there as solid as the father, bigger than anything Scott knew, and the next moment it was gone.

Fifty years later that day still haunts Scott. That was the day when power, energy, wildness that

surges through everything was revealed in a flash. Scott writes, “The sky cracked open to reveal a world where even grownups were tiny and houses were toys and wood and skin and everything was made of light.”

Source:

<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/life/workshop4/159225.shtml>

Readings from the Common Bowl: Invite group members to read the following selections aloud. Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

“Bowling is a form of respect used in the martial arts, as well as throughout Asia. In a Dojo, the act of bowing is considered proper etiquette, equivalent to a handshake in Western cultures. ... There is a hidden meaning to the bow — it is the recognition of the Divine in another person. This ... is literal. Within each person and everything in our universe is a portion of Divine energy. ... Traditional martial arts teach you to bow to another person because you see the Divinity in that person, because you are both directly connected to the Infinite and thus to each other. ... A bow is Divine energy sent into the world. By bowing to someone, you actively choose what kind of energy comes back to you.” *Joseph Cardillo*

“This morning when we were bowing in the zendo, we heard a big noise overhead because upstairs in the dining room people were pushing chairs across the tile floor without picking them up. This is not the way to treat chairs, not only because it may disturb the people who are bowing in the zendo underneath, but also because fundamentally this is not a respectful way to treat things. ... When we pick up the chairs one by one carefully, without making much noise, then we will have the feeling of practice in the dining room. We will not make much noise of course, but also the feeling is quite different. When we practice this way, we ourselves are Buddha, and we respect ourselves. To care for the chairs means our practice goes beyond the zendo.” *Shunryu Suzuki*

“Most of us take water for granted: we turn on a tap and there it is. ... For many, water has no “soul,” no history, no sense of rootedness in place. When we

suddenly touch and taste water that came from somewhere, it has a special sweetness. I will never forget drinking from my first stream, a tiny one that fed the Loch Raven Reservoir near my childhood home in Maryland. Before that, water had always come from the faucet, boring and dead. Now here was this living water, surrounded by small green plants, just off the path where I had been thirstily walking on a hot summer day. That stream water was completely delicious: cool, with an earthly mineral tang, alive and exciting. It had soul for me.” *Cait Johnson*

“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*

“...our capacity for awe is the lens through which creation passes.... So, reverence should be thought of as prior to belief. It is the human predisposition, perhaps as universal among us as any other, to sense the grandeur of the event we call being, to consider the heavens, to ponder the cunning of a hand. ...reverence is the great corrective to the tendency of belief to warp, contract, harden. This is true, I think, because reverence is a kind of awe, and awe is a kind of humility.” *Marilynne Robinson*

“When we experience ourselves as one small part of nature, we feel reverence. Zen teaches that we should feel reverence for all beings no matter how insignificant they might seem. From the enlightened vantage point, we should appreciate everything equally, from the most basic and small to the most complex and vast. Each has the whole reflected within. The tea ceremony represents this

relationship. The tearoom, the utensils, the tea, and every action is treated with reverence for its being.”
C. Alexander & Annellen Simpkins

“Awe and wonder are concepts that have fallen into extreme disfavor, if not actual contempt, in our culture. Rather than admiring what is greater and better than ourselves, we try to destroy it. We disfigure what is more beautiful than we are and ridicule what is more profound than we are and drag what is higher than we are down to our own level. We feel diminished by the existence of these things, whereas we should feel exalted. We shut ourselves off from everything that would lift us up.” *William H. Herr*

“Reverence is the recognition of something greater than the self — something that is beyond human creation or control, that transcends full human understanding. God certainly meets those criteria, but so do birth, death, sex, nature, truth, justice, and wisdom. A Native American elder I know says that he begins teaching people reverence by steering them over to the nearest tree. “Do you know that you didn’t make this tree?” he asks them. If they say yes, then he knows that they are on their way.”
Barbara Brown Taylor

“I understood that the great commandment to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God must be translated into the discipline of practicing reverence for all life. I was forced to recognize that all members of the commonwealth, all species rare or common, shared an unconditional will to live, which is the divine spirit within us. Standing, or kneeling, in the presence of the mystery of death and the miracle of life I had carelessly extinguished, I felt that ultimately there was no distinction among sparrows, sapsuckers, and me. I owed reverence, respect, and restraint to all.” *Sam Keen*

“Paul Woodruff ...says that reverence is rooted in the understanding that there is a world beyond human control, human invention, and human understanding, and that no matter how sophisticated our technologies for probing reality become, the Great Mystery will be there forever. It’s not ours to solve. When you come upon something incomprehensible, some dimension of this Great Mystery, reverence brings you to your knees. You

can open up to it and come out of your own little small tiny place in the world and realize what it is to be fully alive, a part of all life evolving.” *Barry Lopez*

Reading

7. *The Riddle of the Ordinary* by Cynthia Ozick

The Extraordinary is easy. And the more extraordinary the Extraordinary is, the easier it is: “easy” in the sense that we can almost always recognize it.... The Extraordinary does not let you shrug your shoulders and walk away.

But the Ordinary is a much harder case. In the first place, by making itself so noticeable—it is around us all the time—the Ordinary has got itself in a bad fix with us: we hardly ever notice it. The Ordinary, simply by being so ordinary, tends to make us ignorant or neglectful; when something does not insist on being noticed, when we aren’t grabbed by the collar or struck on the skull by a presence or an event, we take for granted the very things that most deserve our gratitude.

And this is the chief vein and deepest point concerning the Ordinary: that it does deserve our gratitude. The Ordinary lets us live out our humanity; it doesn’t scare us, it doesn’t excite us, it doesn’t distract us.... Ordinariness can be defined as a breathing-space: the breathing-space between getting born and dying, perhaps, or else the breathing-space between rapture and rapture; or, more usually, the breathing-space between one disaster and the next. Ordinariness is sometimes the status quo, sometimes the slow, unseen movement of a subtle but ineluctable cycle, like a ride on the hour hand of the clock; in any case the Ordinary is above all what is expected.

And what is expected is not often thought of as a gift. Source: [Gift of the Ordinary Edited by Charles S. Stephen, Jr.](#)

Living the Questions: Explore as many of these questions as time and interest allow. Fully explore one question before moving to the next. The questions do not need to be discussed in order.

1. In reading #1, Yahia Lababidi discusses the visible and invisible world. It accords, in a way, with both Plato and the new physics. He notes that humans have the ability of “seeing through the apparent to the infinite.” And Rilke adds that, “It is our task to imprint this temporary, perishable earth into ourselves, so deeply, so painfully and passionately, that its essence can rise again, invisible, inside of us.” It seems that this is what reverence does. When have you experienced reverence for someone or something? What did it feel like? What did/does it mean? Rilke than says that, “We are the bees of the invisible. We wildly collect the honey of the visible, to store it in the great golden hive of the invisible.” What could he mean by this? Is this what memory is, the great golden hive of the invisible? And what of the memories of experiences of reverence. What do they suggest about the visible and invisible world?
2. In reading #2, John O’Donohue wrote that, “One of the recognitions of the Celtic imagination [was] ...that landscape wasn’t just matter, but that it was actually alive.” He meant more than just the plants and animals. He meant the soil and rocks and water and sky. What landscapes have most affected you? Why? He included the city in his concept of landscape. What urban landscape have you found especially beautiful and awe-inspiring? Why? While, as he said, “The world is always larger and more intense and stranger than our best thought will ever reach,” we are part of the world and of every landscape we witness. What does this fact mean to you? What landscape have you taken into yourself and how has it sustained you? O’Donohue concluded, “...Everyone is involved, whether they like it or not, in the construction of their world. So, it’s never as given as it actually looks. You are always shaping it and building it. And I feel that from that perspective, that each of us is an artist.” Given this, in what ways are you an artist shaping and building your world? Finally, since we bring the world into ourselves, what do you think O’Donohue meant by *The Inner Landscape of Beauty*?
3. In reading #3, Frederick Franck recalls his visit with Albert Schweitzer in 1953 when Schweitzer, who lived to be 90, was 86. Schweitzer asked, “Do you think that the idea of Reverence for Life is really gaining ground?” How would you answer this? How do you feel about your answer? Franck thought that “contempt for life” was gaining ground. Where are we presently on the continuum between contempt and reverence? Is this concept of Reverence for Life important to you? Why or why not?
4. For Maggie Ross in reading #4, reverence can be called forth by “the mysterious otherness of the deep mind, the mysterious otherness of other people, and the mysterious otherness of creation.” Have you ever experienced this mysterious otherness? When? What was it like? She continues that we are actually deeply connected not “by what we can know, but by what we cannot know.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
5. In reading #5, Steve Paulson discusses the African philosophy of “ubuntu [u-bun-tu].” He writes, “It’s a way of living that begins with the premise that “I am” only because “we are.” How does this promote reverence for one another? How does this run counter to Western individualism? How could ubuntu contribute to the creation of beloved community? To the repair of the world?
6. In reading #6, Karson McGinley writes about the Indian salutation of Namasté. As she notes, a common translation is, “The divine light in me bows to the divine light within you.” It is a reminder of the reverence that we should have for each other, yet seldom do. How can we promote an attitude of reverence for others? How can we cultivate an inward attitude of namasté, if not the actual word and hand gesture?
7. In reading #7, Cynthia Ozick writes, “The Extraordinary does not let you shrug your shoulders and walk away.” Often, the extraordinary is a cause for reverence. By contrast, we tend to take the ordinary for granted, yet it is the ordinary that holds everything together. Is the ordinary worthy of

reverence? Why or why not?

8. In the wisdom story, *When Everything Was Made from Light*, Scott Russell Sanders' experience as a child of lightning destroying a huge oak tree haunted him 50 years later. Not all experiences of awe are pleasant and uplifting. Some are quite scary. Have you had an experience like his? What was it? What did it/does it mean to you?

The following questions are related to the Readings from the Common Bowl.

9. Joseph Cardillo writes about bowing in Asian cultures. It carries a meaning similar to that of namasté. In competitive endeavors beyond the martial arts, how could a bow shift the dynamics from one of conquest to mutuality? How would this contribute to reverence for one's opponent?
10. Shunryu Suzuki focuses on how we treat chairs. It raises the question, "Should we treat inanimate objects with reverence instead of taking them for granted?" What is your view? Why? Suzuki concludes, "When we practice this way, we ourselves are Buddha, and we respect ourselves." How can reverence for a chair or a skillet contribute to self-respect?
11. Cait Johnson is concerned about how most people take water for granted. Do you? Why or why not? She writes about drinking water for the first time that did not come out of a faucet. When did you discover that water could come from places other than a faucet, hose, or pool? What did this discovery mean to you? Do you agree with Johnson that water has a soul? Why or why not?
12. Paul Woodruff who saw the horrors of the Vietnam War went on to write a remarkable book about reverence. He writes that, "Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations..." Do you agree? Why or why not? Woodruff concludes that, "reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods." Is this true? Why or why not? How?
13. Marilynne Robinson suggests that "reverence should be thought of as prior to belief." Until a child acquires language, experience is unmediated. It just is. And this continues for a number of years since belief develops slowly. So there is reverence before belief, and reverence beyond belief. Do you have a memory from childhood that involves reverence? Please share. What value does it have for you? Why? Robinson adds, "...reverence is the great corrective to the tendency of belief to warp, contract, harden." Do you agree? Why or why not?
14. The Simpkins write that reverence pervades the ritual of the tea ceremony. Everything about the tea ceremony must be treated with reverence. Is there a ritual that you regard with reverence? What is it? Why do you regard it the way you do?
15. William Herr is concerned that awe and wonder have fallen into disfavor because, "Rather than admiring what is greater and better than ourselves, we try to destroy it." Do you agree? While this may not seem apparent, how else can we make sense of the tribal and political enmity that seems to grip society? How are we all diminished by such attitudes and behavior?
16. Barbara Brown Taylor writes of a Native American elder who begins teaching people reverence by steering them over to the nearest tree. "Do you know that you didn't make this tree?" he asks them. If they say yes, then he knows that they are on their way." Does this suggest that we all have the capacity for reverence? Why or why not? As we have been drawn into worlds of technology, have our senses been dulled to the possibility of reverence? Why or why not?
17. Sam Keen translates the great commandment to "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God" into the discipline of practicing reverence for all life. Does this approach resonate with you? Why or why not? He concludes, "I felt that ultimately there was no distinction among sparrows, sapsuckers, and me. I owed reverence, respect, and restraint to all." Do you? Why or why not?
18. Barry Lopez writes, "When you come upon something incomprehensible, some dimension of this Great Mystery, reverence brings you to your knees." Have you ever fallen to your knees in response to reverence? What was the occasion? In her poem, *The Summer Day*, Mary Oliver ends up on her knees. She was a nature poet, which is to say that she was a poet of reverence. She wrote, "I don't know exactly what a prayer is. / I do know how to pay

attention, how to fall down / into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, / how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields, / which is what I have been doing all day. / Tell me, what else should I have done? / Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?" Given this, shouldn't we extend reverence to all of creation? If yes, why? In no, why not? She ends the poem with a haunting question" "Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?" A poignant and challenging question. What is your answer?

Deeper Listening: If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person the time claimed. Using a timer allows the facilitator to also listen fully.

Checking-Out: One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together and the experience of exploring the theme.

Extinguishing Chalice: *We extinguish this flame*
by Elizabeth Selle Jones
We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth,
the warmth of community, or the fire of
commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we
are together again.

Source: [SLT #456](#)

Closing Words: *May the love that gives to life its beauty* by Rev. George Brooks
May the love that gives to life its beauty,
the reverence that gives to life its sacredness,
and the purposes that give to life its deep
significance
be strong within each of us and lead us into ever
deepening relationships with all of life.
Amen.

Source:

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/closing/5987.shtml>