



# TOUCHSTONES

**Reverence**

**October 2021**

Reverence is our theme for October. Reverence, the dictionary will tell you, means deep respect. But of course, that's insufficient. Reverence is a quasi-religious value and requires a religious explanation.

Reverence is not idolatry. It is not worshiping something that doesn't deserve it. Reverence, instead, is respect where it is due, and it is a sense that there is "something more" in what we have reverence for.

What are things worthy of reverence?

Well, the universe itself. The world we live in. The sense of majesty and wonder of life. Start there – which can be deeply overwhelming. But reverence is how we manage the "overwhelm," actually. Through reverence, we give our sense of majesty a name and place.

Other life is also worthy of reverence. To see in another person or any living thing something "more than" the sum of its parts is to have reverence for life. To see it as worthy of respect and honor.

These two reverences will shift our ethical choices, because they remind us that neither the world nor those who inhabit it belong to us, but instead they belong to themselves.

Some people have reverence for tradition, and I don't think that's always a bad thing. Something done by the ancestors is often worthy of some respect. We have something to learn from those who have gone before. I also think we should have a kind of reverence for our descendants – for the future. We owe them, too, a duty of respect.

One thing I rarely choose to have reverence for is political authority. I often don't "pledge allegiance to the flag" or participate in the trappings of this kind of civic reverence. I'm not that comfortable with doing so, though I don't begrudge those who are. But I do not find the nation-state worthy of reverence. The idea of democracy? Yes. The particular nation? Not really.

And this is actually clarifying, right? Because what we decide to have "irreverence" for can teach us what we have reverence for. If you revere everything, then nothing is really sacred. But if you revere nothing, then we become unmoored and adrift.

I invite you this month to consider what you want to revere. What deserves sacred respect – and what doesn't? What do you revere now, based on your actions and choices? Is that what you want to revere? What will it take to make the change?

In faith,  
Matthew

## Readings from the Common Bowl

### Day 1:

"Reverence is an organic human experience that requires no supernatural explanations." Rev. Kendyl Gibbons



**Day 2:** "Pursue some path, however narrow and crooked, in which you can walk with love and reverence."  
Henry David Thoreau

**Day 3:** "Spring passes and one remembers one's innocence. Summer passes and one remembers one's exuberance. Autumn passes and one remembers one's reverence. Winter passes and one remembers one's perseverance." Yoko Ono

**Day 4:** "In reverent pauses, when we slow down and think about the gift of life, we may briefly touch humility." Bryant McGill

**Day 5:** "Ethics is nothing else than reverence for life."  
Albert Schweitzer

**Day 6:** "That sense of sacredness, that thinking in generations, must begin with reverence for this earth." Paul Tsongas

**Day 7:** "Life must have its sacred moments and its holy places. We need the infinite, the limitless, the uttermost—all that can give the heart a deep and strengthening peace." A. Powell Davies

**Day 8:** "When we approach with reverence, great things decide to approach us. Our real life comes to the surface and its light awakens the concealed beauty in things." John O'Donohue

**Day 9:** "Love, Hope, and Reverence are realities of a different order from the senses, but they are positive and constant facts, always active, always working out mighty changes in human life." Elizabeth Blackwell

**Day 10:** "There is only one valid way to partake of the universe.... That way is characterized by reverence—a reverence born of a felt sense of participation in the universe, a kinship with all and with all matter." Larry Dossey

**Day 11:** "We may be divided from one another by our beliefs, but never by reverence." Paul Woodruff

**Day 12:** "Reverence is a deep sense of respect for marvels that surround us and that brought us into existence. It is an awareness of ourselves ...in an order beyond the grasp of any single human mind." Wisdom Commons

**Day 13:** "Without reverence, there is no sense of presence or wonder."  
John O'Donohue

**Day 14:** "The problem to be faced is: how to combine loyalty to one's own tradition with reverence for different traditions."  
Abraham Joshua Heschel

**Day 15:** "Let's think of reverence as awe, as presence in and openness to the world.



The alternative is that we stultify, we shut down. ...This is our goal ...to help others have this sense of ... wonder, of seeing things anew, things that can catch us off guard, that break in on our small, bordered

worlds." Anne Lamott

**Day 16:** "Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world." John Milton

**Day 17:** "Science is ...about reverence, not mastery." Richard Powers

**Day 18:** "While arrogant intellect seeks to control and manipulate the world, the poetic spirit bows with reverence before its mysteries." Daisaku Ikeda

**Day 19:** "Reverence calls us to service. When we have a mindset of reverence, it seems natural to use our life energy to preserve, honor and elevate something greater than ourselves." Wisdom Commons

**Day 20:** "Bring nothing but silence / Show nothing but grace / Seek nothing but shelter / From the great human race. Take nothing but pictures / Kill nothing but time / Leave nothing but footprints / To show you came by." John Kay

**Day 21:** "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes." Marcel Proust

**Day 22:** "Science enhances the moral value of life, because it furthers a love of truth and reverence—love of truth displaying itself in the constant endeavor to arrive at a more exact knowledge of the world of mind and matter around us, and reverence, because every advance in knowledge brings us face to face with the mystery of our own being." Max Planck

**Day 23:** "A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the Universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths." Carl Sagan

**Day 24:** "True spirituality makes you loving and grateful, and forgiving, and patient, and gentle, and long-suffering. True spirituality breathes reverence into every act and deed." Marjorie Pay Hinckley

**Day 25:** "It is as impossible to live without reverence as it is without joy."  
Henry Beston

**Day 26:** "By having a reverence for life, we enter into a spiritual relation with the world. By practicing reverence for life, we become good, deep, and alive."  
Albert Schweitzer

**Day 27:** "Authentic faith leads us to treat others with unconditional seriousness and to a loving reverence for the mystery of the human personality." Brennan Manning

**Day 28:** "If you desire peace in the world, do not pray that everyone share your beliefs. Pray instead that all may be reverent." Paul Woodruff

**Day 29:** "Religion, according to Alfred North Whitehead, is a phenomenon that begins in wonder and ends in wonder. Feelings of awe, reverence, and gratitude are primary, and these can never be learned from books." Rev. Gary Kowalski

**Day 30:** "The cause of violence is not ignorance. It is self-interest. Only reverence can restrain violence—reverence for human life and the environment."  
William Sloane Coffin

**Day 31:** "Reverence is profound respect mingled with love." David O. McKay



### Fluent in Faith

Rev. Jeanne Harrison Nieuwejaar

Two generations ago, Edith Hunter, one of the great religious educators of that era, wrote the much-needed book *Conversations with Children*, calling on parents, and those who worked with children in their congregations, to embrace opportunities to talk with children about the deep religious questions and ethical struggles that are a part of every child's life. ...

...Engaging in conversation is an act of love. It is listening, hearing the cries of the other's heart, and offering the cries of our own heart in return. This is what we must do. We must find ways to have our conversations and to convey our faith, as parents and as a religious body, without framing them as ultimates, as orthodoxies. We must learn to talk comfortably, confidently, joyfully about our shared religious meanings. ...

...Let our conversations with children open them—and us—to ever-wider circles of awareness. Let them open up wider circles of spiritual life, spiritual joy, wider circles of faithful living. Let them also give our children strength and hope and meaning for those times when they feel lonely and we cannot be there for them; when they feel pain because of the cruelties of the world; when they feel guilt and shame and struggle for direction; when they face dangers from which they need more than human protection; when they feel grief and rage as well as awe and reverence. Let us have conversations that will ground them in faith, giving them songs and stories and images that make that faith accessible.

Source: *Fluent in Faith: A Unitarian Universalist Embrace of Religious Language*, Jeanne Harrison Nieuwejaar

### A Classroom is a Place for Life

Kimberly Franklin

[In] the film *Monsieur Lazhar*, Monsieur Lazhar's clear assertion [is] that a classroom or school is a place of "friendship, work, courtesy and life, a place to offer life." He says these words to his students on the day he is forced to leave them and in response to the actions of other adults in the school who

have "infected the school with their personal despair." Monsieur Lazhar, himself, is dealing with significant personal tragedy, as well as, the challenge of being a political refugee in an unfamiliar culture. However, he shows reverence for the needs of his students and recognizes that he is there for them, that their healing is more important than his. Monsieur Lazhar is not a perfect teacher, but what comes through to the students are actions and words qualified by a spirit of love, attentiveness, and care. There is something self-emptying about the role of the teacher that he embraces and a recognition that there is something very dangerous about becoming needy as a teacher. What was especially remarkable was that Monsieur Lazhar did not fall into the trap of becoming a divided person, who leaves part of himself "at the door" of the classroom in order to fulfill the expected role of teacher. It was clear that his personal experiences stayed with him, but he didn't allow those experiences to "infect." Instead, he used his own suffering to understand the suffering of his students, and to pay attention to them in a way that allowed wisdom to arise. He found life in his suffering and offered that life to his students.

(The 2011 movie is based on the play, *Bashir Lazhar*, by Évelyne de la Chenelière that tells the story of an Algerian refugee in Montreal who steps in to teach at an elementary school after the former full-time teacher commits suicide. ... It was filmed in Montreal.)

Source: <https://educatingwithreverence.com/2012/02/>

### Family Activity:

#### Petting Zoo

Nature and animals can evoke wonder and awe in children and cultivate reverence. Go to a petting zoo and allow your children to interact with the animals. Learn what different animals need to flourish. What do they eat? How long and when do they sleep? What other things are necessary for them to grow and be healthy?

### Love First

Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker

Loving our neighbor implicates us in loving the whole network of life. ... We cannot turn from our bonds and obligations for and with one another and expect everyone to be okay. We cannot love after the fact and expect love to be able to save life. ...

We must learn again to live with reverence. Reverence is a form of love. ... Reverence greets all humanity as sacred. It genuflects before the splendor of the grass and the magnificence of the trees. It respects the complexity, beauty, and magnitude of creation and does not presume to undo its intricate miracles. ...

Reverence for life has to be learned. It is not just a feeling; it is a way of life. ... Reverence involves full-fledged devotion enacted in deeds of care and responsibility. It involves knowledge, study, and attention. ...

Our task now is to do what we can to advance reverence for life and deepen the promise of love. Let us dedicate ourselves to the thinking, researching, practice, and learning that will bring more love into the world. Let us be a witness for the new science that tells us how connected all life is and let us work for social policies that embody our responsibility for one another and for the earth. Let us give reverent attention in our worship life and our educational work to knowing and serving the beauty and goodness of life.

...Let us make love the first, not the last, resort.



Source: adapted from *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now* by Rebecca Ann Parker, edited by Robert Hardies, Skinner House Books, Boston, 2006.



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- Touchstones: contact your touchstones group facilitator for the time and meeting ID, if you do not already have it.

Want to have a group – a book group, a parent group, a “circle supper”, or whatever you like?  
– just email Autumn at [office@uurockford.org](mailto:office@uurockford.org) and she can give you the Zoom login and password

### ***Reverence & Repairing the World***

It is impossible to repair the world if we do not have reverence for the Earth, this amazing planet that gave birth to us, and to the ten-thousand-thousand things with whom we share life. The chance of the existence of Earth and of our species on Earth are considered to be less than 1 in 60 billion. Not great odds, but here it is and here we are. As Wendell Berry writes, “it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it.” Respect is not enough. Love is not enough. Humility and reverence can create right relationship so that care and repair can matter.