

## **Peace: The Virtue of REVERENCE**

**by C. Forrest McDowell, PhD**

*Do you believe you have been dealt an unfair hand: that life seems to be filled with struggle and disappointment? **Or,***

*Do you have a renewable sense of enchantment with the world, a feeling that life is so special, in spite of apparent injustices and suffering, that it simply cannot be squandered?*

*Do you believe that your job, money, recreational activities, and the items you purchase and use are a measure of the success of your life? **Or,***

*Do you feel that self-worth is really about how you honor and respect all aspects of life without doing any harm?*

The great awakening of our time is that we are inseparable from each other. It is as if we are part of a vast Web of Life, and our desires and actions vibrate and effect all beings and nature in this planetary community. Physician Dr. Larry Dossy reminds us: “There is only one valid way to partake of the universe — whether the partaking is of food and water, the love of another, or indeed, a pill. That way is characterized by reverence — a reverence born of a felt sense of participation in the universe, of a kinship with all others and with matter.”

The concept of reverence for life can be one of the most profound philosophies and ways of moving toward a goal of peace. By embracing and respecting the sacredness of all beings, and our kinship with them, we make Earth a sanctuary. Reverence also gives our character a quality so that others may see us as a peaceful refuge of friendship in the day.

Nobel laureate and humanitarian Albert Schweitzer, who dedicated his life to educating others about reverence, said: “I cannot but have reverence for all that is called life. I cannot avoid compassion for everything that is called life. That is the beginning and foundation of morality.” A reverential treatment of life — as if all beings and things were sacred and special — is not about how much you own or desire. It is about your intent to make this planet a better and more peaceful place for all to live. Plato said it even more simply: “Let parents bequeath to their children not riches, but the spirit of reverence.”

### **A Covenant of Respect**

In its most simple form, reverence is about practicing respect. Such respect recognizes and honors the presence of the sacred in everything — our bodies, other people, animals, species, or nature. By sacred is meant that something is precious, but it may also mean we accept that God as Creator is reflected in all Creation. Respect is also an attitude we should have toward personal possessions, those of others, or things in our neighborhood, village, community and surrounding landscape. These are co-creations of humans, nature, and the Creator.

Modern society appears to lack a consistent demonstration of respect characterized by courtesy. People are impatient, impolite, easily angered (as seen in “road rage” while driving), and often do not say, “Please” or “Thank you.” People also show discourtesy by interrupting conversations, talking loudly, taking cell phone calls at inappropriate places or times, or insulting others with vulgar language. Furthermore, people rudely talk mean about or toward others; they show little heartfelt service to customers; or, they whine or gripe about not getting their way. Finally, people don’t take care of personal possessions, such as their homes, clothes, recreational equipment, appliances, cars, or the like; instead, they practice the mentality of a “throw away” society whereby they can easily acquire replacements.

In short, society is in need of a healthy dose of common courtesy, simply because many people lack a guiding view of life that allows them to “love their neighbor” or respect their own possessions, no matter what. The Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh says: “I know to love is to respect. And reverence is the nature of my love.”

It is good, then, to ponder how you personally embrace respect in your day, how you demonstrate it as common courtesy, and if it complements a reverential covenant with life.

But there is a deeper form of courtesy that appears challenging to practice today. It is a noble courtesy of non-violence shaped by love and compassion. The Jain religion of India uses the word *ahimsa*, to describe this behavior of doing no harm. Mahatma Gandhi’s efforts to free India from British rule were fully based on the practice of *ahimsa*: doing no harm, either to oneself or one’s enemies. Today, almost all peace movements ascribe to this philosophy and practice.

Saint Francis believed and showed that love of God; love of humanity, and love of nature was not only compatible with one another but were also the natural, divinely purposed state of humanity. He believed that, “Courtesy is one of the properties of God who of His courtesy, gives His sun and rain to the just and the unjust; and courtesy is the sister of charity by which hatred is extinguished and love is cherished.” Francis’s courtesy was more than the common kind; it was deeply heartfelt, respectful and humble. It reflected the way he thought and felt and acted upon life, be it humans, animals or nature.

How have you created a sanctuary of peace in your life? You can practice no harm to yourself by not abusing your body — exercise, eat right, get enough rest; by ridding yourself of negative thoughts, and by thinking good thoughts about others. Similarly, don’t harm the earth by being wasteful of its gifts. Be generous and helpful to others. Try to live more simply so that others may simply live. Try not to disrespect Creation, and that means this Earth Sanctuary.

### **A Covenant of Awe and Wonder**

There is another quality of reverence that can deepen your daily search for peace. It is that of awe and wonder: the desire and ability to embrace the miracle of creation with an open heart.

In Buddhist mythology the term “hungry ghost” is used to describe a wandering soul who is extremely hungry and thirsty but whose throat is too narrow for food or drink to pass through. Understand: this is not a physical condition. It is a dilemma of a person whose heart is closed — their soul is disabled, unable to receive and respect the miracle of creation. Thich Nhat Hahn suggests: “They may understand in principle that there is beauty in life, but they are not capable of touching it.”

*Are you able to appreciate the beauty in life?*

*What does the miracle of creation mean to you?*

*What experiences, if any, do you consciously create in your day so that you behold the wonder of this planet, and thus embrace the sacredness of life?*

There are numerous ways to create more awe and wonder in your day, each of which increases your capacity to embrace reverence as a way of life and a path toward peace. The following list is a good start:

1. Awaken with a childlike view of your surroundings as if never seen before.
2. Look at yourself in the mirror, not with disgust, but with the wonder of your body as a miraculous creation.
3. Watch children at play; play with a child; be playful yourself.
4. Fall in love with nature throughout the seasons. Spend time everyday, if possible, *feeling* nature: its sounds, smells, color, lighting, texture, taste.
5. Admire nature: a sunrise or sunset, the moon and stars; ocean waves, moving water, rain, snow, wind, trees, falling leaves, clouds.
6. Admire animals: take care of them, watch them feed, hunt, play and rest.
7. Observe how human and animal life in the city or country stirs early in the morning, intensifying its rhythm throughout the day and comes to rest in the evening.
8. Admire human-made creations: the architect and beauty of buildings, places of worship, parks; machines and inventions that transport people; gadgets that make life interesting and easier to handle.
9. Steward a garden, yard, or a houseplant.
10. Listen to beautiful music or music of great composers; marvel at musical instruments.
11. Admire the many forms and expressions of art, and the art forms of other cultures.
12. Admire other cultures: their life, their history and stories.
13. Write down your thoughts and feelings about someone you dearly love or admire — as a poem, letter, song or journal entry.
14. Give thanks to God for the gift of your life, and the gift of this Earth.

**Remember:**

Do not live a life of quiet desperation; strive to live a life of humble devotion to peace and goodness. Only then will life cease to be a personal burden, but become one of reverential service to honor, respect and uphold the sacredness of life. Commit yourself to this ethical statement: “I want an Earth that is healthy, a world at peace, and a heart filled with love. I want my life and every life to count.”

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