

**“Albert Schweitzer’s Religious Philosophy of Reverence for Life:
Part V: The Ethics of Reverence for Life”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
March 16, 2008
Rev. Bruce Bode**

Quotation for Order of Service

“To have reverence in the face of life is to be in the grip of the eternal, unoriginated, forward-pushing will, which is the foundation of all being.... In reverence for life religious feeling lies before us in its most elemental and most profound form, in which it is no longer involved in explanations of the objective world, nor has anything to do with such, but is pure religious feeling founded altogether in implicit necessity and therefore devoid of care about results.”

(Albert Schweitzer, from Civilization and Ethics)

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

We gather this hour as people of faith
With joys and sorrows, gifts and needs.
We light this beacon of hope,
Sign of our quest for truth and meaning,
In celebration of the life we share together.

(Christine Robinson)

Opening Words

This is a resplendent new day that has been given to us.
Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.
And let us count our many, many blessings:
Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,
And for the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.
Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.

And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love which bind us together, giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

Responsive Reading

This morning's sermon is the fifth in my sermon series on Albert Schweitzer's religious philosophy of Reverence for Life.

Last week I spoke about the basis of Reverence for Life as being rooted in a reflection on the will-to-live, which Schweitzer regards as the most immediate fact of human consciousness – "I am life which wills to live, in the midst of life which wills to live."

This means that we humans who have the capacity for reflective thought become aware that the same will-to-survive and will-for-self-realization that is present in us is also present in all life about us. There thus develops in us what Schweitzer calls a "will-to-solidarity," or "will-to-relatedness," or "will-to-love." (Last week I spoke about those three aspects of the will-to-live.)

But how do we bring about this solidarity, relatedness, and love when life feeds on life – when our life depends on the taking of other life to maintain itself? That is the issue explored in this morning's responsive reading.

MINISTER: The world offers us the horrible drama of the will-to-live divided against itself. One existence holds its own at the cost of another: one destroys another.

CONGREGATION: Only in the thinking human has the will-to-live become conscious of other will-to-live, and desirous of solidarity with it.

MINISTER: This solidarity, however, one cannot completely bring about, because the human is subject to the puzzling and horrible law of being obliged to live at the cost of other life, and to incur again and again the guilt of destroying and injuring life.

CONGREGATION: But as an ethical being one strives to escape whenever possible from this necessity,

MINISTER: And as one who has become enlightened and merciful to put a stop to this disunion of the will-to-live so far as one's influence reaches.

CONGREGATION: One thirsts to be permitted to preserve one's humanity, and to be able to bring to other existences release from their sufferings.

MINISTER: Existence will thereby become harder for one in every respect than it would be if one lived for oneself, but at the same time it will be richer, more beautiful, and happier.

CONGREGATION: It will become, instead of mere living, a real experience of life.

(Albert Schweitzer, statements from Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography)

Reading

This morning we come to the heart of Albert Schweitzer's religious philosophy of Reverence for Life. What he was seeking as a philosopher was a foundation in thought upon which civilization could be anchored. This foundation needed to both affirm our natural world – not seek escape from it – and be ethical – that is, it needed to be able to fully affirm our highest ideals and our notion of goodness.

My reading this morning is Schweitzer's own account of the moment when the idea of Reverence for Life came to him as a solution to this philosophical problem. This "aha moment" is recorded in his autobiography titled, Out of My Life and Thought, and takes place a couple of years after he had come to Africa.

While in this mental condition [i.e., struggling to find a foundation in thought that was both affirmative and ethical] I had to undertake a longish journey on the river [the Ogowe]. I was staying with my wife on the coast at Cape Lopez for the sake of her health – it was September, 1915 – when I was summoned to visit Madame Pelot, the ailing wife of a missionary, at N'Gomo, about 160 miles upstream. The only means of conveyance I could find was a small steamer, towing an overladen barge, which was on the point of starting. Except myself, there were only natives on board, but among them was Emil Ogouma, my friend from Lambarene. Since I had been in too much of a hurry to provide myself with enough food for the journey, they let me share the contents of their cooking pot. Slowly

we crept upstream, laboriously felling – it as the dry season – for the channels between the sandbanks. Lost in thought I sat on the deck of the barge, struggling to find the elementary and universal conception of the ethical which I had not discovered in any philosophy. Sheet after sheet I covered with disconnected sentences, merely to keep myself concentrated on the problem. Late on the third day, at the very moment when, at sunset, we were making our way through a herd of hippopotamuses, there flashed upon my mind, unforeseen and unbidden, the phrase “Reverence for Life.” The iron door had yielded: the path in the thicket had become visible. Now I had found my way to the idea in which affirmation of the world and ethics are contained side by side! Now I knew that the ethical acceptance of the world and of life, together with the ideals of civilization contained this concept, has a foundation in thought.

(Albert Schweitzer, Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography, pp. 156-157)

“THE ETHICS OF REVERENCE FOR LIFE”

Schweitzer’s basic moral principle

Is there a basic principle of morality?

If so, what is it, and upon what is it founded?

YES, replies Albert Schweitzer, there is a basic principle of morality, namely:

... the fundamental principle of morality [is] that good consists in maintaining, promoting, and enhancing life, and that destroying, injuring, and limiting life are evil.

(Civilization and Ethics, p. xviii)

Or, again:

It is good to maintain and to encourage life; it is bad to destroy life or to obstruct it.

(Civilization and Ethics, p. 242)

And upon what is this basic principle of morality founded? Schweitzer's answer: Reverence for Life.

Life, for Schweitzer, is the great mystery with which we have to do. The will-to-survive and the will-to-develop, which is found within us and all living things – the urge that brings us into being, that accompanies us from our first cry at birth to our last sighing breath at death, the power that we see at play so dramatically all about us in the spring of the year – this unoriginated, irrepressible, and forward-pushing force of life is what commands our reverence and awe.

And the natural reverence we have toward our own life feels the urge in us being of self-consciousness to extend itself to other life.

In the very fibers of our being we bear within ourselves the fact of the solidarity of life. Our recognition of it expands with thought. Seeing its presence in ourselves, we realize how closely we are linked with others of our kind. We might like to stop here, but we cannot. Life demands that we see through to the solidarity of all life which we can in any degree recognize as having some similarity to the life that is in us.

("The Ethics of Reverence for Life," Christendom, Vol. I, Winter, 1936, p. 237)

Thus:

Ethics consists ... in my experiencing the compulsion to show to all will-to-live the same reverence as I do to my own.

(Civilization and Ethics, p. 242)

Does ethics have a limit?

Is there no limit to the extent of my connections with other life and my ethical obligations to other life? NO, says Schweitzer:

A person is truly ethical only when one obeys the compulsion to help all life which one is able to assist, and shrinks from injuring anything that lives. One does not ask how far this or that life deserves one's empathy as being valuable, nor, beyond that, whether and to what

degree it is capable of feeling. Life as such is sacred to him or her. One tears no leaf from a tree, plucks no flower, and takes care to crush no insect. If in summer one is working by lamplight, one prefers to keep the window shut and breathe a stuffy atmosphere rather than see one insect after another fall with singed wings upon one's table....

(Civilization and Ethics, pp. 242-243, quotation adjusted for gender)

But, but, but, but ... but how can one live with such an idea ... for life feeds on life?! We damage and destroy life at every turn, both deliberately and inadvertently. Can't we at least set up a scale of higher and lower, a hierarchy of value, with respect to life-forms? Says Schweitzer:

The ethic of Reverence for Life is found particularly strange because it establishes no dividing line between higher and lower, between more valuable and less valuable life. For this omission it has its reasons.

To undertake to lay down universally valid distinctions of value between different kinds of life will end in judging them by the greater or lesser distances at which they seem to stand from us humans beings – as we ourselves judge. But that is a purely subjective criterion. Who among us knows what significance any other kind of life has in itself, and as a part of the universe?

Following on such a distinction there comes next the view that there can be life which is worthless, injury to which or destruction of which does not matter. Then in the category of worthless life we come to include, according to circumstances, different kinds of insects, or primitive peoples.

To the person who is truly ethical all life is sacred, including that which from the human point of view seems lower in the scale. One makes distinctions only as each case comes before one, and under the pressure of necessity, as, for example, when it falls to one to decide which of two lives one must sacrifice in order to preserve the other. But all through this series of decisions one is conscious of acting on subjective grounds and arbitrarily, and knows that one bears the responsibility for the life which is sacrificed.

(Out of My Life and Thought, pp. 180-181)

So there you have it. Schweitzer refused *in his theory* to draw up a scale of values with respect to more or less valuable life. In practice, of course, being a medical doctor, he literally operated with a scale of values, preserving human life as opposed, to say, the life of given bacteria.

But *in his philosophy* Schweitzer would draw no divisions. Life is of one piece; all of it is precious; no part of it is to be disrespected; all of it is to be revered.

Late in his life, at the age of eighty-eight, the following interview with a journalist was recorded, and it indicates that Schweitzer had not departed from this unusual position.

JOURNALIST: I've read in one of your works that you were very much moved at the sight of a microbe under a microscope, and that you said to yourself that you were about to destroy a human life.

SCHWEITZER: No, not a "human life," a *life*, a life...

JOURNALIST: My mistake ... a *life* that you were about to destroy ...how do you reconcile that with the demands of science?

SCHWEITZER: Necessity forces us to sacrifice lives. You tread on them. You crush ants ... *But*: we must try as much as possible to respect all life. This is our constant battle.

JOURNALIST: So, there's a problem of selection.

SCHWEITZER: Oh, far from that. I don't know any "problems of selection."

JOURNALIST: But in so far as you choose between lives ... in so far as you choose between lives, there are lives that you save at the expense of others.

SCHWEITZER: One must save every life when one can. And necessity *obliges* us to sacrifice. And it's most painful to sacrifice...

JOURNALIST: But isn't there a limit, or should one save even the lives of microbes and parasites?

SCHWEITZER: Well, I respect them.

(Erica Anderson, the Schweitzer Album, p. 143)

Lecture by a medical researcher

Last evening in this sanctuary a number of us had the privilege of attending a very fine presentation by Dr. Nina Salama, a medical researcher at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle. Currently, her professional life is spent studying a bacterium, the *helicobacter pylori*, that is able to live in human stomachs and causes much mischief there, including the possibility of being linked to gastric cancer ... so that with certain medicines that could destroy this bacterium, this type of cancer is able to be prevented.

But as Dr. Salama showed several magnified photos of this bacterium and described its various capacities, its shape-shifting abilities and so forth, I couldn't help wondering whether, like Schweitzer, she had developed a respect for this tiny living organism, which was simply seeking its own kind of life.

Whether or not this is the case with Dr. Salama – I didn't get the chance to ask her – Schweitzer was much taken with the marvel of life in all its manifestations, and could see even in tiny bacterial life a connection with his own life. And he wished, if it were possible, that all life might be allowed to live itself out – a minor version, you might say, of Isaiah's vision of the wolf lying down with the lamb.

The ethical and the necessary

So Schweitzer held out for an *absolute ethic* – no relative ethic for him – an absolute ethic in which one was called to help all life that one could. The necessities of reality may compel one to compromise *in practice*, but he believed one should not compromise *in theory* or *in feeling*.

It is not by receiving instruction about agreement between ethical and necessary that a person makes progress in ethics, but only by coming to hear more and more plainly the voice of the ethical, by becoming ruled more and more by the longing to preserve and

promote life, and by becoming more and more obstinate in resistance to the necessity for destroying or injuring life.

In ethical conflicts a person can arrive only at subjective decisions. No one can decide for a person at what point, on each occasion, lies the extreme limit of possibility for one's persistence in the preservation and furtherance of life. The individual alone has to judge this issue, by being guided by a feeling of the highest possible responsibility towards other life.

We must never let ourselves become blunted. We are living in truth when we experience these conflicts more profoundly.

(Civilization and Ethics, p. 251-252; quotation adjusted for gender)

So Schweitzer is quite ready to let a person experience the vast gulf between the ethical and the necessary, the ideal and the possible. He is not inclined to try to lighten the load of guilt that might result from this situation, indeed, he once remarked, perhaps half-humorously, half-seriously, "A good conscience is an invention of the devil." (Civilization and Ethics, p. 252)

And as we saw from this morning's responsive reading, Schweitzer felt keenly the disunion, the split, in life, a split present in the will-to-live itself. This is the split between, on the one hand, the will-to-survive and the will-to-develop, and, on the other, the will-to-solidarity or relatedness love, out of which the ethical will is born.

For Schweitzer, we would untrue to our inner ethical will if we were to ignore, cover up, or avoid this split in the will-to-live. Rather, he believed, it is the human task to feel that split, and to the extent we can to try to heal that split.

Have you ever thought that it's tough being a human being? Part of the reason why it's tough, if you follow Schweitzer's thinking, is that we have an inner compulsion to give to other life the same consideration we give to our own, a compulsion which only expands with our acquaintance with other life. And Schweitzer's ethic of Reverence for Life obviously only makes things tougher, though also, as in the responsive reading, it becomes "instead of mere living, a real experience of life."

The limitation of European philosopher

Schweitzer was critical of other European philosophers, who, no doubt, sensing problems in expanding ethics beyond the human realm, kept ethical obligations within tight boundaries, namely, almost exclusively related to other humans. Traditional European ethicists, Schweitzer complained, scrub their systems clean of any non-human creatures. Humorously, he writes:

Just as the housewife who has scrubbed out the parlour takes care that the door is kept shut so that the dog may not get in and spoil the work she has done by the marks of the paws, so do European thinkers watch carefully that no animals run about in the fields of their ethics. The stupidities they are guilty of in trying to maintain the traditional narrow-mindedness and to raise it to a principle borders on the incredible.... It seems as if Descartes with his dictum that animals are mere machines had bewitched the whole of European philosophy.

(Civilization and Ethics, p. 228-229)

An adjustment needed to Schweitzer's basic moral principle

In the end, however, I don't think Schweitzer's basic moral principle holds up; or at least, I don't think it can stand by itself. I don't think it will do to say that one's primary moral duty to is save all the life that one can and to avoid injuring or killing any life.

Imagine for a day that it would were possible to be ethical in Schweitzer's terms ... that all living forms would flourish, that no living forms would be destroyed. It is, of course, impossible ... the thought cannot even really be finished ... for in the only reality we know life and death, creativity and destruction, are component parts of one larger whole.

Still we wish it might be otherwise. As poet Kahlil Gibran has written:

Would that you could live on the fragrance of the earth, and like an air plant be sustained by the light.

(“On Eating and Drinking,” The Prophet)

But that is not our world. And ethics to be ethical, I believe, must be in conversation with actual reality and with what is actually possible. And so Schweitzer's basic moral principle, I believe, needs an adjustment.

Schweitzer is to be much commended for enlarging the scope of the Western ethical enterprise to include non-human life. And, certainly, he was well ahead of his time in moving us toward an environmental ethic. Nevertheless, his basic moral principle needs adjustment. And, actually, there are some places in his writings where he himself has made the adjustment.

For example, he speaks on occasion of the primary principle of morality as being:

...the maintenance of life at its highest level, and the furtherance of life.

(Indian Thought and Its Development, p. 260)

Here he says nothing here about not destroying life, only about seeking to raise it to a higher level. And, as Schweitzer recognizes in practice, in order to maintain some life and to raise it to its highest level, other life will have to be sacrificed.

Also, as I indicated before, *in practice* Schweitzer follows a very consistent scale of values in which there is a hierarchy in life, so that he sacrifices the less complex forms of life to the more complex forms. I think it would be helpful in his system of ethics if he were to make explicit in his theory what is implicit in his practice.

And then, secondly, there at times when Schweitzer speaks of the compassion and the lessening of suffering as being the basic ethical principle. He says, for example:

However seriously a person undertakes to abstain from killing and damaging, one cannot entirely avoid it. One is under the law of necessity, which compels one to kill and to damage both with and without one's knowledge. In many ways it may happen that by slavish adherence to the commandment not to kill compassion is less served than by breaking it. When the suffering of a living creature cannot be alleviated, it is more ethical to end its life by killing it mercifully than it is to stand aloof. It is more cruel to let domestic animals which one can no longer feed die a painful death by starvation than to give them a quick and painless end by violence.

Again and again we see ourselves placed under the necessity of saving one living creature by destroying or damaging another.

The principle of not-killing and not-harming must not aim at being independent, but must be servant of, and subordinate itself to, compassion. It must therefore enter into practical discussion with reality. True reverence for morality is shown by readiness to face the difficulties contained in it.

(Indian Thought and Its Development, pp. 83-84;
quotation adjusted for gender)

So here, I believe, are some necessary adjustments to Schweitzer's ethic of Reverence for Life. His sense of a reverence for the whole of life is, I believe, an inspiring and worthy religious philosophy, but the absolute ethic of non-killing and non-destroying is unworkable and even undercuts itself, given the realities of our world.

Thus, there must be, within the larger unity of life, a hierarchy of value, and a scale of value ... so that the ethical principle is not non-killing as such, but rather the principle that one should not take life wantonly, casually, unthinkingly, unnecessarily; but rather, as Schweitzer says, in the sense of sacrifice ...

... which is, indeed, the way of most so-called primitive peoples, in which the killing of life is generally accompanied by a ritual of some kind – the recognition that a sacrifice is being made, that guilt needs to be expiated, and that gratitude needs to be expressed. Here, in these rituals, it is understood that the power by which I take this life is the same power by which my own life will one day be taken.

(Paraphrase of Kahlil Gibran from “On Eating and Drinking,” The Prophet)

So the basic ethical principle, I suggest, is that of not killing or not destroying *unnecessarily*, or, as Schweitzer says:

Whenever I injure life of any sort, I must be quite clear whether it is necessary. Beyond the unavoidable, I must never go, not even with what seems insignificant. The farmer, who has mown down a thousand flowers in his meadow as fodder for his cows, must be careful on his way home not to strike off in wanton pastime the head

of a single flower by the roadside, for he thereby commits a wrong against life without being under the pressure of necessity.

(Civilization and Ethics, p. 252)

In an approach to life such as this, difficult as it may be, a spiritual connection is made with life. There develops a deepening, an inwardness, a mindfulness, and a reverence for this beautiful/terrible reality in which we are a tiny particle.

This coming Friday, at the noon hour, I will speak more about this sense of spiritual connection with life under the title, “The Fellowship of Those Who Bear the Mark of Pain.”

And then this coming Sunday – Easter Sunday – I will conclude my series on Schweitzer by speaking of the sacredness of all that lives.

Benediction

May peace be in our hearts,
And understanding in our minds,
May courage steel our wills,
And the love of truth forever guide us. Amen.

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish our chalice
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.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on March 16, 2008. The sermon, “The Ethics of Reverence for Life,” is the fifth of seven planned on “Albert Schweitzer’s Religious Philosophy of Reverence for Life.” The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)