

“Albert Schweitzer’s Religious Philosophy of ‘Reverence for Life’”
Part I: “Reverence for Life: An Introduction”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
February 3, 2008
Bruce Bode

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

Blessed is the fire that burns deep in the soul.

It is the flame of the human spirit touched into being by the mystery of life.

It is the fire of reason, the fire of compassion, the fire of community, the fire of justice, the fire of faith.

It is the fire of love burning deep in the human heart, the divine glow in every life.

(Eric Heller-Wagner)

Opening Words

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather together on this Sunday morning.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve integrity, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Responsive Reading

In the next several weeks – through Easter – I will be giving a series of sermons on the religious philosophy of Albert Schweitzer. He is a person whose thought and life has had a profound influence on my own life. Though I never met him personally and knew of him only through what he wrote and what others wrote about him, still it’s hard for me to imagine what my life would have been like without having encountered him.

Our responsive reading this morning, taken from his writings, has to do with the influence of one person on another.

MINISTER: I do not believe we can put into anyone ideas which are not in him or her already.

CONGREGATION: As a rule, there are in everyone all sorts of good ideas, ready like tinder to catch fire.

MINISTER: But much of this tinder catches fire, or catches it successfully, only when it meets some flame or spark from outside, that is, from some other person.

CONGREGATION: Often, too, our own light goes out, and is rekindled into flame again by some experience we go through with a fellow human.

MINISTER: Thus, each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flames within us.

CONGREGATION: If we had before us now, those who have thus been a blessing to us, and could tell them how it came about,

MINISTER: They would be amazed to learn what had passed over from their lives into ours.

CONGREGATION: So, too, none of us knows what effect our life produces, or what we give to others.

MINISTER: That is hidden from us, and must remain so, though we are sometimes allowed to see some little fraction of it so that we may not lose courage.

CONGREGATION: The way in which power works is a mystery.
(Albert Schweitzer, Memoirs of Childhood and Youth, adapted)

Reading

This morning, as I begin this sermon series on the religious philosophy of Albert Schweitzer, I will be acquainting you with a little biographical material about him. One of the ways we know about his early life is from a slim, beautiful volume titled, Memoirs of Childhood and Youth.

The origin of this little volume is worth mentioning. In May of 1923, Schweitzer, then forty-eight years of age, was crisscrossing Switzerland in a series of speaking engagements. One day he had a two-hour layover in Zurich and decided to visit a friend, a well-known Zurich psychoanalyst by the name of Dr. Oscar Pfister. Dr. Pfister had Schweitzer stretch out on a couch to rest his weary body, but at the same time made him narrate, just as they came into his mind, events and memories from his childhood and youth. Pfister wanted to use these stories for an article in a young people's magazine.

Shortly thereafter, Dr. Pfister sent Schweitzer a copy of what he had taken down in shorthand during those two hours. Schweitzer wrote back asking him not to complete the article, but instead, one afternoon, wrote down as an epilogue, some of the thoughts that stirred in him as he remembered the persons and events from his youth. The result is one of the small classics about childhood.

I read a part of those memoirs, taken in shorthand by Dr. Pfister, that has to do with Schweitzer's early schooling at the village school at his home in Gunsbach:

All my life I have been glad that I began in the village school. It was a good thing for me that in the process of learning I had to measure myself with the village boys, and thus make it quite clear to myself that they had at least as much in their heads as I had in mine. I was never a victim of that ignorance with afflicts so many

of the boys who go straight to a Gymnasium, and there tell each other that the children of the educated classes have more in them than the lads who go to school in darned stockings and wooden clogs. Even today if I meet any of my old schoolfellows in the village or on a farm, I at once remember vividly the points in which I did not reach their level. One was better at mental arithmetic; another made fewer mistakes in his diction; a third never forgot a date; another was always top in geography; another – I mean you, Fritz Schoppeler – wrote almost better than the school-master. Even today they still stand in my mind for the subjects in which they were at that time superior to me.

When nine years old I began going to the Realschule (a “modern side” school in which no Greek is taught) at Munster, and had every morning and evening a walk of nearly two miles over the hills. This walk it was my delight to take by myself, without any of the other boys who also went to school at Munster, so as to indulge my thoughts. How with these walks I did enjoy autumn, winter, spring, and summer! When it was decided I should go to the Gymnasium at Mulhausen, in Upper Alsace, I cried over my lot in secret for hours together. I felt as if I were being torn away from Nature.

To the enthusiasm roused in me by the beauties of nature as I learnt to know them on my walks to and from Munster, I tried to give expression in poetry, but I never got further than the first two or three rimes. Once or twice, too, I tried to sketch the hill with the old castle on it which rose on the other side of the valley, but that, too, was a failure. After that I devoted myself to the enjoyment of beauty simply through the eyes without trying to reproduce it in any way, and since then I have never again tried either to draw it or to poetize about it. Only in musical improvisation have I ever felt myself – as I do still – to have any creative ability.

And then with regard to creative ability in music, let me read this part from his Memoirs:

Before I went to school my father had already begun to teach me some music by means of an old square piano. But I did not play much from notes: my delight was to improvise, and to reproduce songs and hymn-tunes with an accompaniment of my own invention. So now when in the singing-lesson the teacher continually played the hymn-tune with one finger and no accompaniment, I found it far from pleasing, and during the interval I asked her why she did not play it properly with the harmony. Then in my enthusiasm I sat down at the harmonium and played it straight away to her out of my head, but with harmony in several parts. Then she became very friendly with me, and used to look at me in a new and unusual way, but went on herself always picking out the tunes with one finger only. Then it occurred to me that I could do something which she could not, and I was ashamed of having made a show before her of my ability, which I had till then taken as something which I possessed as a matter of course.

But for the rest I was a quiet and dreamy scholar, who found it no little trouble to learn to read and write.

(Memoirs of Childhood and Youth, tr. C. T. Champion, pp. 21, 22; 13)

“REVERENCE FOR LIFE’: AN INTRODUCTION”

There’s a Unitarian Universalist adult education curriculum titled, “Building Your Own Theology” that some of you may have taken here at QUUF, as I understand it has been offered several times in the past. It’s not a class, however, that I have ever taken or led, but the project of “building your own theology” is one I have been working at over a lifetime, but particularly when I was a student in my twenties.

The figure who influenced my theology the most – and led it in a very different direction from where it had started and where it was going – was a man by the name of Albert Schweitzer. I first encountered his work near the end of my seminary career, and his studies on the historical Jesus and the development of the early Christianity were the first to make historical sense for me of that period, answering a number of questions that had arisen in my mind.

Basically, Schweitzer’s thesis was that the teaching and activity both of Jesus and the early Christian church was best understood in the context of “late-Jewish apocalyptic eschatology.” That is to say, it’s a setting in which there was a vivid expectation of the end of the age brought about abruptly and cataclysmically by the power of God, and then – since “apocalypse” doesn’t only mean the end of something but also the beginning of something new – the coming of a new age, the Kingdom of God upon earth, in which God would rule righteously through his Messiah. Thus, one was called to repent and to prepare for this coming Kingdom by living its ethic, an ethic of love and compassion, taught by Jesus, who would be shown be the Messiah ruling for God when that Kingdom arrived.

Last year, just about this time – January 28 – I gave a sermon titled, “In Quest of the Historical Jesus,” in which I laid out this thesis in some detail, as well as competing theses. (It’s on our website at quuf.org under archived sermons, if you are interested in reading it.)

So that was the first influence of Schweitzer on my thinking, his historical studies of Jesus and of early Christianity. But then I followed Schweitzer’s thinking further into the development of his own theology, or his “religious philosophy” as I prefer to call it, which he named, “Reverence for Life.”

After I received my seminary divinity degree, I continued my seminary studies toward a Master’s of Theology degree – which I came within an inch of finishing, but never quite completed because I got a job I wanted – with a dissertation toward that degree on Schweitzer’s religious philosophy titled, “The Religious Philosophy of Albert Schweitzer.”

That study, as you might by now suspect, was far more than an academic exercise for me. Indeed, I was trying to build my own religious philosophy. And Schweitzer’s was the one that fit for me, and the one I wanted to carefully examine and test.

Thus, what I thought I would do for my annual late winter/early spring sermon series this year is to take you through the building of a theology, the building of a religious philosophy, in this case, that of Albert Schweitzer's Religious Philosophy of "Reverence for Life."

There are three main reasons why I do this:

First, hopefully, in this series, by exploring a given religious philosophy – in this case, that of Schweitzer – you will be aided in reflecting on your own theology, your own religious philosophy, your own world-and-life view – pick your term. For Schweitzer it was essential to address life in the broadest and deepest way, to keep before us the most basic and elemental questions of our existence: Who I am? How am I related? What is good? How should I live? Hopefully, in this series, you will have a chance to reflect on those elemental questions, comparing your understanding with that of Schweitzer.

Secondly, you may find, as I did, that there is something valuable and even inspirational about Schweitzer's religious philosophy that can be useful in your own life. What Schweitzer was seeking was a universal ethic founded upon thought. It was an ethic, much ahead of its time, that relates to the environmental concerns of our time, an ethic that did not have simply to do with the relations of human to human, but of our relation to all life forms and our relation to the earth itself.

And, then thirdly, at a more personal level, I am interested for myself in returning to the ideas that I spent so much time on thirty-five years ago in order to see how they hold up. Since the time of those studies I've headed out into other directions, such as Jungian psychology, world mythology, and modern poetry. So this will be a return for me to the place where as an adult I first formulated my own world-and-life view in a serious way.

Biographical notes on Schweitzer

So let me begin this series by introducing you a little to Albert Schweitzer, especially his early life, as a way of setting the stage for the unfolding of his religious philosophy.

Particularly, in Schweitzer's case, I think some personal history is important because his religious philosophy was meant to go far beyond theory; it was to be much more than a mental exercise. His approach was to relate directly to living: something that came out of concrete, living experience and something that returned to concrete, living experience.

Schweitzer felt that religious philosophy and life were of one piece, and that one's life was part of the religious philosophical argument. Not that we can always live up to our ideals, but at least we should be able to see that the two are related. Thus, Schweitzer felt that a life – and his life – was also an argument for his religious philosophy. He is saying, as it were, "If you want to know if my religious philosophy has validity, then watch how I live; watch what my religious philosophy means for my everyday life."

Schweitzer's academic achievements

Albert Schweitzer was certainly one of the remarkable figures of the twentieth century, one whose life was accomplished in so many ways that, if you were to try to imitate, it could certainly wipe you out.

Schweitzer was born in 1875 in the Alsace region of western Europe, a buffer land that has traded back and forth between Germany and France. It was under German control in 1875 when Schweitzer was born, but then French after WW I, as it is today. Schweitzer died at the age of 90 in Gabon, Africa, at the hospital, which he founded there.

As a student and scholar, Schweitzer received doctoral degrees in three different fields: theology, philosophy, and music, the music degree being an honorary one. Not only did he receive doctoral degrees in each of these fields, but he made important, even ground-breaking, contributions in all three of these fields.

In theology, his study of the historical Jesus, particularly in his book, The Quest for the Historical Jesus, challenged opinions on both conservative and liberal fronts, and permanently changed the direction of future studies of the historical Jesus.

In philosophy, he produced a volume, written in properly obscure philosophical code language on the renowned philosopher Immanuel Kant, and then later in life wrote books on The Decay and Restoration of Civilization and Civilization and Ethics.

In the field of music, Schweitzer's inquiry into the life and work of the master, Johann Sebastian Bach, produced, first, a two-volume study of Bach in French, and then a couple of years later, a new and expanded study of Bach in German. (Schweitzer felt he had to speak to these audiences in different ways.) These volumes disputed the then prevailing notion of Bach as a pure classicist and presented him instead as a painter and poet in sound.

In addition, Schweitzer authored a pamphlet on organ building, as well as spending numerous hours of his life trying to rescue organs headed for the refuse pile.

And he was an outstanding organist in his own right. Throughout his life gave concerts in a number of European countries to raise money for his hospital.

Thus, by the tender age of 30, when most scholars would be at the beginning of their academic careers, Schweitzer had already achieved more in three disciplines than most can hope to achieve in a lifetime in one field.

Then came the bombshell. On October 13 – a Friday – 1905, at the age of 30, Schweitzer dropped a fistful of letters into a Paris postal box telling his family and friends of his plan to begin the study of medicine. He wanted to become a physician so that he could to bring medical aid to one of the most disease-ridden areas on the globe, the sweltering rain forests of Equatorial Africa.

The ensuing protest from family and friends regarding their brilliant young scholar's waste of academic gifts and training is quite understandable. What friends and family were unaware of, however, is that Schweitzer, at the age of 21, had secretly vowed to himself that he would work until age thirty in the academic disciplines, devoting himself thereafter to humanity in some direct form of service. In his autobiography titled, Out of My Life and Thought, Schweitzer speaks of his decision:

While at the university and enjoying the happiness of being able to study and even to produce some results in science and art, I could not help thinking continually of others who were denied that happiness by their material circumstances or their health. Then one brilliant summer morning at Gunsbach [Schweitzer's home in Alsace], during the Whitsuntide holidays [Pentecost] – it was in 1896 – there came to me, as I awoke, the thought that I must not accept this happiness as a matter of course, but must give something in return for it. Proceeding to think the matter out at once with calm deliberation, while the birds were singing outside, I settled with myself before I got up, that I would consider myself justified in living till I was thirty for science and art, in order to devote myself from that time forward to the direct service of humanity.”

(Out of My Life and Thought, p. 70)

The determination and discipline of Schweitzer is incredible, and, so it is, that eight exhausting years later, we find Schweitzer, at the age of 38, laboring in Equatorial Africa as a medical doctor at a French mission in Lambarene, Gabon. It was there that he was to formulate his religious philosophy of Reverence for Life, which I will begin to elucidate next week.

Schweitzer's "cast of mind"

For this week, let me touch on one thing, namely, the cast of mind that enabled Schweitzer to make breakthroughs in so many areas.

It wasn't just sheer brilliance, I think, though there can be no doubt that Schweitzer's mind was of a very high caliber with a quick wit, an encyclopedic memory, and a fine way of expressing himself. But his talent, his genius, is not found in the sheer brilliance of his mind and its capacity to make very quick logical connections. Indeed, as I read to you earlier from his own account, there were a number of other grade-school students that were superior to him in various areas. And, particularly, in the early years of his life, he struggled in school, and always had to work at his studies.

His talent, is seen, rather, in what I call, his "attitude of mind," a mind that took nothing for granted, but looked at a thing freshly as if seeing it for the first time, an attitude of mind that trusted its own experience and would not be thrown off by the opinions of others.

This combined with a tremendous ability to totally concentrate for long periods of time enabled Schweitzer to quickly perceive the essence of a matter, to see a subject in its wholeness, and to know almost intuitively what part was important for him

(On genius, see Albert Schweitzer: A Biography, Second Edition, by James Brabazon, p. 74)

Also, Schweitzer had a drive, a discipline, a will power, or a stubborn streak – call it what you will – that was quite astonishing. If he made up his mind to do something, he almost always did it. As a young man, sometimes to keep himself awake as he studied and worked, he sat with his feet in a bowl of cold water. (Brabazon, p. 78)

And, at that time as a student, he smoked ceaselessly, “anything and everything that came his way.” But then on Dec.31, 1899, at the turn of the century, because he thought he detected a weakening of memory, he quit cold turkey, and never smoked again for the remaining 66 years of his life. (Brabazon, p. 78)

But what I want to particularly bring forward at this time is his capacity to stay true to his encounter with life, his own experience, and not to be thrown off his thought or feeling because it was not what his peers or parents thought or because it was not in concert with current opinion. This was something that was with him for his youth and remained with him through his whole life.

One of these experiences was an egalitarian sense. As the son of a Lutheran pastor, he was somewhat better off materially than the typical boys of the village, and would sometimes be taunted by them as being a “spring of the gentry.” This remark cut him to the quick, and he did everything in his power not to be of a different station.

In his autobiographical, Memoirs of Childhood and Youth, from which I read earlier, he recounts some occasions in which he would resist being put into a higher station:

That same winter my mother took me to Strassburg to visit an elderly relative, and she wished to use the visit as an opportunity for buying me a cap. In a fine big shop they tried several on me, and at last my mother and the shop-woman agreed on a handsome sailor’s cap which I was to take for my own. But they had reckoned without their host. The cap displeased me altogether, because no village boy wore a sailor’s cap. When they went on pressing me to take this one or that one from among all those they had tried on me, I got into such a passion that everybody in the shop ran up to us.

“Well, what sort of cap *do* you want, you stupid lad?” the shop-woman shouted at me. “I won’t have one your new-fashioned ones; I’ll have one like what the village boys wear.” So a shop-girl was sent out, and she brought me from the unsaleable stock a brown cap that one could pull down over one’s ears. Beaming with joy, I put it on, while my poor mother had to put up with some cutting remarks and some contemptuous glances on account of her young duffer. It hurt me that she had been put to shame before the townspeople on my account, but she did not scold me; it seemed as if she suspected that there was some real reason behind it all.

This stern contest lasted all the time I was at the village school, and poisoned not only my life but that of my father too. I would only wear fingerless gloves, because the village boys wore no others, and on weekdays I would go out only in wooden clogs, because the village boys wore their leather boots only on Sundays. Every time a visitor came the contest was started afresh, for it was my duty to present myself dressed “suitably to my station in life.” Indoors, indeed, I yielded in every way, but when it was a case of going out to pay a visit dressed as “spring of the gentry,” I was again the intolerable creature who provoked his father, and the courageous hero who put up with boxes on the ear and let himself be shut up in the cellar. And it was a real grief to me to be so perverse with my parents. My sister Louise, who was a year older than I, had some understanding of what my ideas really were, and she was quite sympathetic.

The village boys never knew what I went through on their account; they accepted without emotion all my efforts not to be in any way different from them, and then, whenever the slightest dispute arose between us, they stabbed me with the dreadful word, “spring of the gentry.”

(Memoirs of Childhood and Youth, pp. 10-11)

So that’s a little about the man, and about the boy that would become the man.

A recommended biography

I would suggest, if you are interested in further exploration of Schweitzer’s life that you read the biography of British author James Brabazon, simply titled Albert Schweitzer: A Biography, edition two. This is the most widely-researched and finely-balanced of the biographies on Schweitzer.

Brabazon did not personally know Schweitzer, whereas the earlier biographies were of persons who had met him and were a little too much under Schweitzer’s personal spell ... though I remember speaking with James Brabazon at a Schweitzer conference – this was now about thirty years ago in 1978 or 1979 – and he said to me that the more he studied Schweitzer and got to know him, the better he had liked him, whereas now, as was doing the biography of another person, he was having the opposite experience; that is, the more he got to know his subject, the less he tended to like his subject.

Incidentally, Brabazon felt compelled to do a second edition of Schweitzer’s biography, published in 2000, twenty-five years later than the first, because a large, unknown correspondence between Schweitzer and his wife, Helene, had been found, quite by accident, by their only child, Rhena, who had no idea these letters existed. These letters revealed a whole different side to Schweitzer related to an inner being that he had kept hidden from the world, or, as Brabazon puts it, “the turbulent feelings of a passionate, sensitive, contradictory man, searching for his path in life.” (Brabazon, p. 143)

Anyway, if you are interested to read about Schweitzer’s life, Brabazon’s biography is the one I would recommend.

Next week I will begin exploring the content of Albert Schweitzer's religious philosophy of "Reverence for Life," beginning with "The Sanctuary of Thought."

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 February 3, 2008. The sermon, "Reverence for Life: An Introduction," is the first 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.)