

**“Albert Schweitzer’s Religious Philosophy of Reverence for Life
Part IV: The Will-to-Live”**

Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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Quotation for Order of Service

“I ask knowledge what it can tell me of life. Knowledge replies that what it can tell is little, yet immense. Whence this universe came, or whither it is bound, or how it happens to be at all, knowledge cannot tell me. Only this: that the will-to-live is everywhere, even as in me. I do not need science to tell me this, but science cannot tell me anything more important. Profound and marvelous as chemistry is, for example, it is like all science in the fact that it can lead me only to the mystery of life, which is essentially in me, however near or far away it may be observed.”

(Albert Schweitzer, “The Ethics of Reverence for Life”)

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

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

I'm in the middle of a sermon series on the religious philosophy of Albert Schweitzer, which he named Reverence for Life. The basis of Reverence for Life is reflection on the nature of the "will-to-live," which I will be speaking about this morning. Our responsive reading consists of statements by Schweitzer on the nature of the will-to-live.

MINISTER: The most immediate fact of human consciousness is the assertion: "I am life which wills to live, in the midst of life which wills to live."

CONGREGATION: It is as will-to-live in the midst of will-to-live that humans conceive themselves during every moment they spend meditating upon themselves and the world around them.

MINISTER: The essential nature of the will-to-live is found in this, that it is determined to live itself out.

CONGREGATION: It bears in itself the impulse to realize itself to the highest possible degree of perfection.

MINISTER: In delicate blossoms, in the manifold wondrous forms of the jellyfish, in a blade of grass, in the crystal; everywhere it strives to reach that perfection which is implicit in its own nature.

CONGREGATION: Imaginative power, determined by ideals, is at work in all that is.

MINISTER: The impulse toward perfection is innate in us – beings, as we are, endowed with freedom and capable of reflective purposive action – in such a way that we naturally aspire to raise ourselves and every portion of existence affected by our influence to the highest material and spiritual degree of value.

CONGREGATION: We do not know how this aspiration came to be in us and how it has developed itself in us.

MINISTER: It is an intrinsic part of our being.

CONGREGATION: We must follow it if we will not be untrue to the secret will-to-live which is rooted in us.

(Albert Schweitzer, statements from: “The Ethics of Reverence for Life” and Civilization and Ethics; adjusted for gender)

Reading

My reading this morning is a transcription of a radio interview with Albert Schweitzer given in Africa in 1953 when Schweitzer was 78 years old. This part of the interview has to do with the conflict between reason and emotion and how Schweitzer approached this conflict in his philosophy.

ALBERT SCHWEITZER IN AN INTERVIEW OVER RADIO BRAZZAVILLE, 1953

I was always, even as a boy, engrossed in the philosophical problem of the relation between emotion and reason. Certain truths originate in feeling, others in the mind. Those truths that we derive from our emotions are of a moral kind – compassion, kindness, forgiveness, love for our neighbor. Reason, on the other hand, teaches us the truths that come from reflection.

But with the great spirits of our world – the Hebrew prophets, Christ, Zoroaster, the Buddha, and others – feeling is always paramount. In them emotion holds its ground against reason, and all of us have an inner assurance that the truth of emotion that these great spiritual figures reveal to us is the most profound and the most important truth.

The problem presented itself to me in these terms: must we really be condemned to live in this dualism of emotional and rational truths? Since my particular preoccupation was with problems of morality, I have always been struck by finding myself forced to recognize that the morality elaborated by philosophy, both ancient and modern, has been meager indeed when compared to the morality of the great religions and ethical geniuses who have taught us that the supreme and only truth capable of satisfying man’s spirit is love.

I reached a point where I asked myself this question: does the mind, in its striving for a morality that can guide us in life, lag so far behind the

morality that emotion reveals because it is not sufficiently profound to be able to conceive what the great teachers, in obedience to feeling, have made known to us?

This led me to devote myself entirely to the search for a fundamental principle of morality. Others before me have done the same. Throughout history there been philosophers who have believed intuitively that reason must eventually succeed in discovering the true and profound nature of the good. I have tried to carry their work further. In so doing, I was brought to the point where I had to consider the question of what the fundamental ideal of existence is. What is the mind's point of departure when it sets itself to the task of reflecting on humanity and on the world in which we live? This point of departure, I said to myself, is not any knowledge of the world that we have acquired. We do not have – and we will never have – true knowledge of the world; such knowledge will always remain a mystery to us.

The point of departure naturally offered for meditation between ourselves and the world is the simple evidence that we are life that wishes to live and are animated by a will to live in the midst of other lives animated by the same will. Simply by considering the act of thinking, our consciousness tells us this. True knowledge of the world consists in our being penetrated by a sense of the mystery of existence and of life.

If we proceed on the basis of this knowledge, it is no longer isolated reason that devotes itself to thought, but our whole being, that unity of emotion and reflection that constitutes the individual.

(Excerpted from The Schweitzer Album: A Portrait in Words and Pictures by Erica Anderson, p. 153)

“THE WILL-TO-LIVE”

Summary from two weeks ago

Today's sermon is part four in a sermon series on Albert Schweitzer's religious philosophy of Reverence for Life. This series is aimed at providing you with an opportunity to consider and weigh your own religious philosophy or world-and-life view in the light of one of the great thinkers

and humanitarians of the twentieth century. As we've now had a two-week break in this series, it might be helpful to briefly summarize what has been covered thus far.

Six weeks ago, in part one of this series, I spoke about the *person* of Albert Schweitzer, describing him as a ground-breaking thinker in the fields of both theology and philosophy, as well as an outstanding organist and a biographer of the great contrapuntal composer, Johann Sebastian Bach.

And a person, who in mid-life, because he wanted to serve humanity in a more direct way, left the academic world to become a physician, eventually founding and maintaining a medical hospital in Lambarene, Gabon, and bringing modern medicine to one of the most disease-ridden places on our planet.

It was there in the quiet of the African rain forests that Schweitzer came forth with a new religious philosophy that he named "Reverence for Life." Because of the influence of this religious philosophy, as well as his medical work, he became famous as a great humanitarian, a player on the world stage, an advocate for nuclear disarmament, and recognized with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952.

In my second sermon, titled "The Sanctuary of Thought," I spoke about the importance of rational thought and reason for Schweitzer, and the importance of the Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers for him. Schweitzer said:

Nothing but what is born of thought and addresses itself to thought can be a spiritual power affecting the whole of mankind.

(The Decay and Restoration of Civilization, p. 86)

All deep religious feeling becomes thoughtful, all truly profound thinking becomes religious.

("Liberal Christianity," Le Monde Religieux, p. 41)

Then two weeks ago in part three of this series, in a sermon titled "The Struggle for Truth," I addressed the question of what Schweitzer believed could be discovered through thought that would be serviceable for a religious philosophy of life.

When thought broods on the elemental questions of life – What am I in the world? What is my purpose in it? What may I hope for in this world? What meaning and what value is to be ascribed to my life – what conclusions does it come to? Can rational thought, addressing itself to the universe, surveying the heavens, digging deep into the earth, studying the minute particles of matter or the waves of energy ... can it discover a purpose and meaning in which our lives will find a value?

In other words, can we build a life-view upon a world-view? Can we find a satisfying foundation for our life by exploration and examination of the universe and its processes?

Schweitzer's answer is a resounding "NO!" He writes:

She [Nature] is wonderfully creative force, and at the same time senselessly destructive force. We face her absolutely perplexed. What is full of meaning within the meaningless, the meaningless within what is full of meaning: that is the essential nature of the universe.

(Civilization and Ethics, pp. 204-205; inclusive language added)

For Schweitzer, we cannot find a satisfying life-view by studying world-process because world-process will not support what we are looking for. It will wipe out in an instant what we have taken a lifetime to build. And it seems to care to little or nothing for our notion of goodness, justice, or mercy.

Oh, how we wish it were otherwise! How we wish that world-process would confirm our aspirations for life and being! But honesty, says Schweitzer, does not permit such a conclusion.

Neither world- and life-affirmation nor ethics can be founded on what our knowledge of the world can tell us about the world. In the world we can discover nothing of any purposive evolution in which our activities can acquire a meaning. Nor is the ethical to be discovered in any form in the world-process.

(Civilization and Ethics, pp. xiv-xv)

So, says Schweitzer, we must resign ourselves from building our life-view upon a world-view. "...we must make up our minds to renounce completely the optimistic-ethical interpretation of the world." (Civilization and Ethics, pp. xiv-xv)

It will be very hard to do this. But do this we must. Give it up. Let it go. Don't demand that the world should confirm your ideals for it or your notion of goodness, for either you will end by fudging the facts or by turning against the world and seeking escape into another reality. So cut the cord between world-view and life-view. That is what Schweitzer believes is necessary.

An interesting psychology fact

But now a kind of interesting thing turns up when we make this cut. We discover the interesting psychological fact that the reason world-process disappoints us is because it does not conform to or confirm our inner standards for it. So, reflects Schweitzer, we don't have to despair. The inner impulse which drove us out into the world seeking confirmation of itself is itself sufficient.

Let's consider this – let's consider our interior reality. Let's look to ourselves the searcher and see if we can base a philosophy of life upon our inner impulse. Let's begin our meditation, our reflection, our thought process here.

The will-to-live

And what is our deepest impulse? Says Schweitzer:

...if we ask, "What is the immediate fact of my consciousness? What do I self-consciously know of myself, making abstractions of all else, from childhood to old age? To what do I always return?" we find the simple fact of consciousness is this, I will to live. Through every stage of life, this is the one thing I know about myself. I do not say, "I am life;" for life continues to be a mystery too great to understand. I only know that I cling to it. I fear its cessation – death. I dread its diminution – pain. I seek its enlargement – joy.

("The Ethics of Reverence for Life," p. 227-228)

Or again, these words from Schweitzer (printed in your Order of Service):

I ask knowledge what it can tell me of life. Knowledge replies that what it can tell is little, yet immense. Whence this universe came, or whither it is bound, or how it happens to be at all, knowledge cannot tell me. Only this: that the will-to-live is everywhere, even as in me. I do not need science to tell me this, but science cannot tell me anything more important.

(Albert Schweitzer, "The Ethics of Reverence for Life")

So let's explore this will-to-live. What is contained in it? And is there enough here upon which to build a life-view, a religious philosophy? That is, is there something here that is both available to reason and of such value that it elicits our reverence and awe?

Descartes' philosophical starting point

Before going forward to explore the nature of the will-to-live as a starting point for a religious philosophy, let me compare this starting point to another starting point for a philosophy of life, namely, that of the famous 16th century French mathematician and philosopher, Rene Descartes (1595-1650).

In seeking a sure base of knowledge, Descartes proposed to doubt all, even that there was anything such as reality outside his perception of it, and in submitting everything to systematic doubt he concluded that there was one thing he could not doubt and that was the fact of his doubting. This, then, became the basis upon which he build his philosophy, declaring: I think (or I doubt); therefore I am.

Last Sunday, our guest speaker, The Rev. Liz Stevens, mentioned how at a cocktail party someone once offered Descartes a drink, to which he answered, "I think not," and he immediately disappeared.

Schweitzer also believed that the foundation of Descartes' philosophy was not very stable or serviceable. Some of the harshest words I have ever come across by Schweitzer are reserved for Descartes' philosophical starting point, to wit:

Descartes built an artificial structure by presuming that man[kind] knows nothing, and doubts all, whether outside himself or within. And in order to end doubt he fell back on the fact of consciousness: *I think*. Surely, however, that is the stupidest primary assumption in all philosophy! Who can establish the fact that he thinks, except in relation to thinking *something*? And what that something is, is the important matter. When I seek the first fact of consciousness, it is not to know if I think, but to get hold of myself. Descartes would have a man [person] think once, just long enough to establish the certainty of being, and then give over any further need of meditation. Yet meditation is the very thing I must not cease. I *must* ascertain whether my thoughts are in harmony with my will-to-live.

(“The Ethics of Reverence for Life,” Christendom, Vol. I, Winter, 1936, p. 228)

So this is where thought starts for Schweitzer. It meditates on the will-to-live.

And what does it discover?

For Schweitzer, there are three aspects to the will-to-live:

- 1) the will-to-survive;
- 2) the will-to-self-development, or will-to-self-realization;
- 3) the will-to-solidarity, or the will-to-relatedness, or the will-to-love.

All of these are contained in the will-to-live. Let me briefly look at these.

The will-to-survive

First, the will-to-live most obviously contains the will-to-survive, which from the moment of birth is that strong and instinctive desire within us to preserve and maintain our existence.

Even in old age the will-to-survive is surprisingly strong. A physician, Dr. Joseph Richardson, tells this story:

It has been a matter of surprise to thinking men [persons] in all ages of the world, that the approach of death be shrunk from by old people almost as shudderingly as by those in youth, or in the prime of life.

Such, however, as everyday experience teaches us, is not infrequently the case, and a large majority of mankind hold the same view as that entertained by the aged but witty Frenchwoman, who sent for her physician, on one occasion, and, in reply to her catalogue of ills, was met by the exclamation, "What would you have, Madame? I cannot make you young again!" "I know that, Doctor," answered she, "What I want you to do is to *help me to grow old a while longer.*"

(Joseph R. Richardson, M.D., "Old Age and How to Meet It," from Fifty Years and Beyond, Rev. S. G. Lathrop)

Nor does the fact of suicide in any way disprove the innate power of the will-to-survive within us, but rather demonstrates how very powerful that drive is, and the magnitude of the force needed to negate it ... for we choose to leave life only in deep despair, profound tiredness of spirit, great mental chaos, or after coming to believe that the craving desire for life must be killed in order to obtain a higher existence.

Even in times of great despair, when one might perhaps be thinking of leaving life, if a sudden danger should arise to threaten our life, instinctively we react to preserve it.

The will-to-survive is an incredibly powerful force within us. Nevertheless, as human beings we do have a degree of freedom, and to an extent can override even this most basic impulse within us.

...when it begins to think, the will-to-live realizes that it is free. It is free to choose whether or not to live. This fact is of particular significance for us in this modern age, when there are abundant possibilities for abandoning life, painlessly and without agony....

But if we entertain such a possibility, we do so by ignoring the melody of the will-to-live, which compels us to face the mystery, the value, the high trust committed to us in life. We may not understand it, but we begin to appreciate its great value.

("The Ethics of Reverence for Life," Christendom, Vol. I, Winter, 1936, p. 227-228)

And here, then, is where Schweitzer's religious philosophy of Reverence for Life begins, namely, by consciously affirming the will-to-survive that is

within us. What is given as impulse and inclination needs to become deepened through a mental and spiritual act.

This, in the first instance, is “reverence for life.” By affirming our will-to-survive we are being true to ourselves. The natural fact is raised to the level of a spiritual fact.

The will-to-self-development

A second aspect of the will-to-live that Schweitzer identifies, he names the will-to-self-development or the will-to-self-realization.

The urge to maintain and preserve our life is strong within us, but that is not the aim or purpose of life, but only a necessary condition or prerequisite for *something more*. And the something more we seek is full life.

Thus, for Schweitzer the will-to-live contains, in addition to the will-to-survive, the desire for fulfillment, for perfection, for greater wholeness. We want to develop our skills, enlarge our powers, and explore the myriad possibilities of our being.

Deep within us there is a restlessness that propels us forward: a desire to climb higher, explore further, think deeper, connect more widely and abundantly. We want to develop our powers in every way possible: physically, mentally, spiritually.

For Schweitzer, “The essential nature of the will-to-live is determination to live itself out.” This is an impulse that is found in all things ... but “In us beings who can move about freely and are capable of pre-considered, purposive activity, the craving for perfection is given in such a way that we aim at raising to their highest material and spiritual value both ourselves and every existing thing which is open to our influence.”

(Civilization and Ethics, pp. 213-214)

Again, for Schweitzer, we don’t know how this striving originated with us, or exactly how it has developed, but we must act upon it if we would be true to ourselves. Thus, the natural fact is raised to a spiritual fact.

The will-to-solidarity or relatedness

And, then, finally, a third aspect of the will-to-live that Schweitzer identifies is what he calls the will-to-solidarity, or the will-to-relatedness, or the will-to-love.

In a way, this third aspect could be considered a part of our will-to-self-development or self-realization, but it is so important for his religious philosophy that it is better to give it its own designation.

Our self-development and self-realization does not take place apart from other life. And because we are part of other life, and connected with other life, our own life is incomplete until we are concerned about other life.

Here's how Schweitzer describes this third aspect of the will-to-live, and here is where I will leave it for today:

As we know life in ourselves, we want to understand life in the universe, in order to enter into harmony with it. Physically we are always trying to do this. But that is not the primary matter; for the great issue is that we shall achieve a spiritual harmony....

Though humans are egotists, they are never completely so. They *must* always have some interest in life about them. If for no other reason, they must do so in order to make their own lives more perfect....

The important thing is that we are part of life. We are born of other lives; we possess the capacities to bring still other lives into existence. In the same way, if we look into a microscope we see cell producing cell. So nature compels us to recognize the fact of mutual dependence, each life necessarily helping the other lives which are linked to it. 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, pp. 225 and 237, text adjusted for gender)

Thus, for Schweitzer, we are not pure egoists, but side by side with our will-to-survive and our will-for-self-realization there is a will-to-solidarity, a will-to-relatedness, a will-to-love.

And, again, what is given in natural impulse and inclination is to be repeated consciously. In so doing we raise natural fact to spiritual fact, which is the religious philosophy of Reverence for Life.

What does this mean for our life? What ethic results from that? That is what I plan to address next Sunday under the title, “The Ethics of Reverence for Life.”

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.

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 9, 2008. The sermon, “The Will-To-Live,” is the fourth 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.)