Reverence Without Theology: Universal Humanism?

by Paul Woodruff

This is an edited transcript of a talk given for HUUmanists at the 2006 General Assembly, along with some of the Q&A that followed. Woodruff is the author of *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, which was the subject of Kendyl Gibbons' article in Volume XXXVI # 2, Summer/Fall 2004.

> Reverence fosters community in many ways, but it also helps support individual ethical decisions. I don't think that there's any way you can understand reverence correctly that will lead to clear black and white answers to ethical questions, though I think some of the answers are pretty clear. Reverence, like most virtues, is basically an adverb. If you want to know how reverence bears on a certain moral decision, ask yourself, could I do this in a reverent fashion? Could I do this reverently? Could I reverently go to war?

Last year I was invited to give a talk on reverence at Brigham Young University, where they were very interested in the topic. I wanted to know a little bit more about the place, so I looked at their website and found a list of words that I wasn't supposed to use on the campus. And one of them I actually did inadvertently use. I was trying to explain a fine point of Greek history and it had something to do with Xerxes and the Scythians, and it seemed easiest to explain this using a three-letter word beginning with a and the verb "whip." Well, they didn't actually kick me off campus, but I was told that this was one of those words that I shouldn't use. I have the impression that there is a word that I should avoid (here), and it too, is a three-letter word. And I'm going to use it anyway, because I can't tell you why I think reverence is so important if I don't I use this word. Reverence fails in the most obvious and damaging way when someone thinks he's God (it's usually a he). That someone thinks he has divine power or divine knowledge or speaks with the voice of God himself. And it's very important for me to be able to say at least that; the word may creep in a few other ways as well.

I care so much about reverence because of how dangerous it is when a human being gets confused about the difference between himself and what he thinks is divine. When a preacher thinks that he speaks with the voice of God, when a leader thinks that he has divine knowledge and doesn't have to listen to other people, when a person who has extraordinary powers at the moment thinks that, like an ancient Greek god, he can get away with anything, he is divine and nobody can stop him.

Now reverence, as I understand it, based on my study of this concept in more than one culture of the ancient world, is a developed capacity for a feeling of inarticulate awe at whatever it is that we recognize as transcending us and our culture. Truth, nature, beauty, justice or perhaps God or life itself. We have by nature the capacity for reverence, and that capacity can be developed or stunted depending on how we grow and in what circumstances we develop. As with other virtues, I think that individual reverence thrives in communities where reverence exists, and where reverence doesn't exist it's very difficult for it to grow.

I believe that reverence is universal in a sense that it is available, that it occurs and that it is honored, in virtually every culture (certainly all the cultures that I have studied to any extent), though not universally admired in any culture. There is no culture

that is thorough-goingly reverent, but there is no culture where it cannot (to some extent) be found, and I have a naturalistic explanation for that fact. I also believe that reverence, as a universal, is something that we can recognize across cultural and religious boundaries; and that we're able to honor reverence across even the most staggering barriers of belief and practice.

Although we human beings may be divided by religious belief and religious practice, we cannot be divided by reverence. And the reason is that, as I said in the beginning, reverence is the capacity developed in a culture for awe, and awe is inarticulate. That is, if you are really struck by awe, you are struck speechless, which is why the concept of the language of reverence is a paradoxical one. If you're struck speechless, then all the codes and creeds that are couched in words, that divide us from one another, become irrelevant. Insofar as we are able to be reverent, we are unable to see the kinds of differences that drive us apart. Reverence can bring us together; theology can drive us apart.

By "theology" I mean talk about the attributes or commands of God understood in a certain way. The being I am *not* talking about is one who is conceived as a person with personal attributes, who is believed to intervene in nature, for example in the creation, and also believed to intervene in human affairs, for example, by answering people's prayers or punishing the wicked. This is what I don't believe in, and what I don't think you have to believe in to be reverent. Indeed talking about theology is a temptation to irreverence. Theology is a rather precarious business ethically, precisely because it does tempt people away from a reverent attitude to that which we don't and cannot understand.

I don't find it possible for me to believe in such a being because of my commitments to nature and to science. For many years I felt, because of this same commitment, that I was missing something. There was something going on in the churches that I remember from my childhood, there was something that was still going on in those places that I missed. I wasn't quite sure what it was, but I knew that it wasn't a belief in a being of this kind. I discovered what it was while I was working on a massive volume, which I hope to finish someday, on ancient Greek humanism. I was interested in humanism because it is the ideological foundation for democracy, and I was interested in democracy.

I was writing a chapter on atheism, which is part of the story of ancient humanism, and exhibit A of ancient Greek atheism is a historian named Thucydides. What he did you may not find it at all unusual, but it was radical for its day. He told a human story without any allusion whatever to intervention by divine beings. Nobody had done that before. Obviously the poets didn't do it, the historians such as Herodotus didn't do it before, and the historians who came right after him didn't do it (they brought the gods back into the human story). It wasn't until the Roman historians came along that this godless approach to human history became dominant. And we just accept it. It doesn't strike us as the least bit unusual that we tell the story of the American Revolution without imagining that God was there fighting alongside the patriots. Some people may believe that, but we don't think that such things are an essential part of history as traditional peoples often have.

So I was trying to write about what it meant and how it affected the way he wrote history not to believe that the gods intervene in our affairs. And I stumbled over the difficulty, pointed out by other scholars, that this same historian, Thucydides, in his

ethical comments, put a very strong emphasis on reverence. So the scholars would say, "Look, if he thinks that reverence is an important virtue, he cannot believe that gods don't intervene because here's what reverence is." The scholars would go on to say what I had been taught by my teachers in college and in graduate school: what ancient peoples (especially the ancient Greeks) meant by reverence was very simple. Basically, they said it's a kind of bribery of the gods: if you want a good crop; if you want to avert the plague or an earthquake, make a sacrifice. Give them a rooster or a goat, or if you're feeling especially wealthy and it's a very important god at the moment, give them a cow and the god is appeased. You buy off the god's anger, and therefore the god either intervenes on your behalf or fails to intervene against you. So the idea that there could be reverence without a belief in divine intervention seemed, to the people who taught me, and to these scholars, just absurd.

Around the same time I was translating a Greek play in which there was, as there often is in a Greek play, a hymn, a choral hymn, to reverence. It began:

Reverence: queen of the gods

And then it went on, not about sacrificing goats and chickens. It went on:

Did you see the king? Did you see what the king just did?

It was about the abuse of political power and military power. Virtually every Greek tragedy has something in it about hubris, as you probably know, and a lot in it about reverence, and these balance each other. Hubris is the vice of arrogance. It is the vice that shows itself most blatantly when a king thinks he's a god and can get away with what gods do in Greek mythology. And reverence is the countervailing virtue. Reverence is the virtue which, if you have it, will prevent you from falling into hubris (of acting as if you are what you are not).

This doesn't have anything to do with buying off the gods. In fact, it has precious little to do with the gods except for reminding you that you are not one of them. All that means is that you are mortal, and that your knowledge is imperfect. That's true even of those human beings, such as oracles, who have a special connection to the gods, because the information they get is often false and ambiguous. The Greeks set things up so that we can't possibly know what the gods are doing, or why.

What I had discovered by studying the classics in this way was that there is this very important ethical concept which you can value without believing in God, and which therefore can be recognized and shared across religious boundaries. It seemed to me as I translated the hymn to reverence, that it carried the same reverence as the hymns that I remembered from my Christian upbringing. The reverence that I find in these hymns, I sense when I visit a mosque or a synagogue. You can find this in lots of places, and the reasons why there's nothing to stop you from finding it in a scientist in his laboratory, or in the adherent of a religion that you find abominable at his prayers, is that reverence taken by itself is not intrinsically tied to anything about beliefs.

This story I'm going to tell has something to do with humanism as well as reverence without theology. The standard pattern of a tragic tale is that great success, victory or long exercise of monarchical power, leads to the swelled-head syndrome—

hubris, and hubris itself leads to blindness (the Greek word is *atê*), which leads to making terrible mistakes, which leads to a disaster. The blindness often takes the form of refusing to accept or listen to advice. You see this in Greek tragedy all the time: the symptom of tyrannical leadership is a failure to take advice, not just from experts but also from ordinary people. These plays were written in a democracy, and their audience thought that ordinary people ought to be listened to as well as experts.

There is a marvelous scene in the *Antigone,* which is very much a play about reverence and tyranny, in which a young man tries to persuade his father to listen to him because he is speaking for the common people who are afraid to speak up to their ruler. He frightens people out of telling him anything that he doesn't already agree with. The boy says, "look, father, they don't dare tell you this, but they all think this, so listen to what I have to say." And the father replies, "Well the king shouldn't have to listen to ordinary people; I mean I know what's right." But if you've read the *Antigone*, you know that the king is wrong and his young son is right and he should've listened. He listened too late and there's a catastrophe in store for him.

As the story is imagined by the poets, somehow the gods are back there behind this pattern, making sure that if you invade their territory by acting like a god, something bad is going to happen to you, through this cycle: hubris, *atê*, error, destruction. Thucydides is unusual and virtually unique in that he understands human history as having the pattern of a tragedy, but that this pattern is sustained, not by gods behind the scene making sure that that's the way it works, but by human nature itself. That works in two ways, as I'm going to illustrate with the case which is right at the center of Thucydides' history.

Although a democracy, Athens was also an imperial state within Greece, and extended its empire by military, economic, and political means over much of Greece. At a certain stage, at the height of its success, Athens decided to take on Syracuse, the biggest and richest city that Athens did not control and just about as big and rich as Athens itself. They obviously weren't driven mad by the gods; they were crazed with their own success. They were so successful that they just didn't believe that this could go wrong. Besides, they had noble (as well as mercenary) motives: by expanding their empire they were adding to the area that could participate in trade under their umbrella. It was good for the economy to be part of their empire; they fostered democracy in the states that belonged to their empire. But this war turned out to be a disaster, and they were terribly defeated. To make matters worse, the Greek states outside the empire became very angry at the tyrannical way in which Athens was carrying on in the empire, and the result was, eventually, the total defeat of Athens. Human nature affected the result two ways: it led to disaster because hubris made the city blind, but also because hubris antagonized other people so much that they mobilized to put down the imperial state.

That story illustrates the way in which a humanist approaches this issue. There's no sense that the gods are behind it; there is a sense that there are rough patterns in human affairs. You can't predict with certainty because the patterns are not absolute, they are not perfectly followed. Human nature for a humanist, is not an *a priori* given. It is something that is studied by empirical science, and consists in generalizations that are roughly true for the most part. The humanist approach to Greek tragedy is that imprecise human nature takes the place of the imprecisely known gods and the same result occurs.

Theology, the alleged knowledge of the gods, is precarious precisely because it tempts people to hubris. The view that you know absolutely something that really can't be known is of course hubristic. Let me go back to reverence and what it is: reverence is a developed capacity for awe at what we take to be transcending us and our culture. That definition actually has teeth. It follows from that definition that it is not reverence but a case of misplaced awe if some human being claims that he or she is a suitable object of reverence, or that something he has made is a suitable object for reverence.

Many people actually revere the American Constitution, but it is a human product; it deserves a lot of respect, but not reverence. We should not be in awe of it, in the sense that awe and reverence go together. It's a fallible human document. It can be changed, it should be changed, it has been changed, it will be changed again. It is not an object for reverence properly understood. In practicing theology people are in danger of trying to command the allegiance due to absolute truth for a made-up story. And from outside it's easy to see that the stories are generally made-up, because they're all different and all have the same kind of authority, namely, they were passed down in tradition or through some book. In itself any one of these stories has no more support than any other. If your attitude towards them is one of awe, it is misplaced, and it's not a true case of reverence at all but something that looks rather like reverence. The ancient Christians had a name for this; they called it idolatry, and I think they were right to think that was irreverent. But I don't think that you have to be a theist to see what is irreverent about idolatry.

I have a general theory of virtue. When I talk about virtues I'm talking about qualities that human beings can develop to condition natural emotions in a way that works best for themselves and the community. For example take courage. I define courage as the ability to do the right thing and not be deterred by fear. Fear is a natural emotion; everybody is subject to it. Fear is very useful. It saves us in lots of dangerous situations. We need to be capable of fear, but we also need to develop habits that allow us to do the things we need to do, and not be deterred by fear from those. So I take it that if somebody does something that is morally abominable out of fear, that is a failure of courage.

Now courage may differ quite a lot across cultures. In an agricultural community, courage requires a kind of steadfastness in the protection of crops over the long haul. In a fishing community, courage requires you to behave rather differently, take much bigger risks. Farmers are rather risk-averse in my experience, and fishermen are not. Fishermen have to take risks; it's a dangerous life. Cultures differ, and for obvious reasons in the way that they develop courage, the way that they develop the ability to do what's right and not be deterred by fear, because different situations make different demands on us.

Courage is a good example of what we do in culture to make a virtue out of emotion. To make a virtue out of emotion we develop a habit that directs that emotion in a good direction. I take it that we are all naturally fitted with the ability to feel awe and deference and related emotions; indeed, this capacity is one of the things that allows us to function as a society, because we can develop respectful and hierarchical relations among ourselves that are important to the survival of the community. Hierarchical relations that are expressed in family life, in the life of larger communities, and, for many of us, in the relationship between human beings and the planet that sustains us.

But if we have the natural capacity for this family of emotions, reverence, deference and so on, we also need the associated virtue. That is, the associated habit of pointing those emotions in the way that is best for us. And the way that is best is to direct awe at what is transcendent and not at what is human. Misplaced awe is terribly dangerous: it can be abused by tyrants. It can be abused by people who want to cling to abusive traditions.

It's very important, really essential to a healthy community, that reverence not be misplaced, that it not be pointed at what is merely human. And that is one reason why I think that reverence is such a powerful ethical notion, despite looking a bit soft and fuzzy. I said at the beginning: reverence is the developed capacity for awe, and that awe is inarticulate. That makes it sound like something we can't define very clearly, and indeed I cannot give a sharp definition of reverence. I can, however, talk about reverence in such a way that will clearly exclude certain behaviors.

Some of these are clear already: reverence protects leaders from the illusions that tempt them to become tyrants. Reverence protects leaders from the illusions that might make them act tyrannically. And in doing that, reverence fosters community because tyranny is fatal in the long run to community, tyranny breaks communities apart; it is a deeply divisive human catastrophe. Reverence protects preachers from the illusions that they speak with the voice of God, illusions that can lead them to foster dogmatic divisions, and dogma breaks religious communities apart.

Reverence fosters community in many ways, but it also helps support individual ethical decisions. I don't think that there's any way you can understand reverence correctly that will lead to clear black and white answers to ethical questions, though I think some of the answers are pretty clear. Reverence, like most virtues, is basically an adverb. If you want to know how reverence bears on a certain moral decision, ask yourself, could I do this in a reverent fashion? Could I do this reverently? Could I reverently go to war? A difficult question; I don't have an answer except that it depends on a lot of circumstances. But obviously it depends on how you are going to be thinking of yourself if you do engage in the war. If you do engage in war are you going to be in danger of confusing yourself with the almighty? Or forgetting your shared humanity (another side of reverence I haven't been talking about) with the people whose lives you affect?

There's a marvelous scene at the end of Sophocles' play, *Philoctetes*. Heracles, the hero, son of Zeus, speaks to Odysseus and the son of Achilles, Neoptolemus. These two men are about to go back to Troy with a weapon of mass destruction which they have just seized from an archer named Philoctetes (who had this magical bow). The weapon will allow them to seize and sack the city of Troy. And just as they are about to leave with this weapon, Heracles says to them, "Remember this when you lay waste the towers of Troy, remember reverence."

When I first read it I thought, why would you want to remind troops who are about to win a great victory about reverence? As I said earlier, we are tempted to lose reverence when we are too successful, too victorious. Victory is morally problematic; victory can lead to moral collapse. One of the things to be aware of, and I think reverent people are always aware of this at a moment of triumph or a moment of victory, is just how important it is not to think that this great success shows how superhuman they actually are. They just won. They're going to go on to make mistakes. They're going to go on being fallible and human. But there's another reason why it's important: one of the

consequences of reverence is treating people in your power, not as you would imagine a nasty Greek god swats at human beings, but as one human being treats another. The most important areas in which reverence is practiced in ancient Greek life are in the treatment of the dead and the treatment of prisoners. No one is more helpless than the dead; it is very easy to abuse them, and, as you probably know if you've read much Greek literature, this a major theme for them. Prisoners are helpless, and in abusing them we are forgetting what is the same about us and them; we fall into a very dangerous illusion about our own superior power.

The guidance I want to give ethically is all summed up in the notion of an adverb. Can you go to war reverently? Can you do it without abusing prisoners? Can you do it without being puffed up by victory into a sense of invincibility? One way to explain reverence is that it is a virtue that is needed (most) in a position of one person's total power over someone else. If you're the nursing aid in a nursing unit for very elderly slightly demented people and you're alone with a patient, you really could get away with anything, and the one hope that this patient has is in your virtue. If you're stopped driving on a lonely road under suspicion of driving while black, you hope that the policeman who stops you has a sense of reverence.

Think about the important ethical issues that are in the news these days. Can you conduct stem cell research in a reverent fashion? I imagine that you probably can, but I don't know enough about how it's done. I can see why this is difficult for people. Can you participate in capital punishment in a reverent fashion? Without arrogating to yourself the power that people normally ascribe to the almighty? Do the people who want capital punishment need to defend themselves against the charge that they're carrying on as if they thought they were divine?

So, though reverence appears to be a softly defined notion, it does have teeth. If we ask ourselves whether we can do certain things in a reverent fashion, we come up against some very hard issues. And therefore this is not just a vague word; this is a word with a very definite meaning. It makes demands on us. It requires us to live in a certain way. I believe that, without some measure of reverence, human communities will collapse. All of us, insofar as we are able to participate in a community, share some measure of reverence, and we speak with the other members of our community some language of reverence. That's really what we do to sustain a sense of sharing reverence, which is at the heart of being a community—we try to speak the languages of reverence.

Because reverence is essentially inarticulate, the languages of reverence are not the normal discursive use of words. Music of course is a language of reverence, and that's why music, when it's reverent, is instantly recognizable as such, whatever words are being sung, or when there are no words at all. There are many, many reverent poets, and they're not necessarily the ones who talk about God. There are some very striking cases of reverent poetry that have nothing to do with theology. The languages of reverence include the languages of civility, physical behaviors: greeting people, shaking hands, recognizing people, waiting your turn in a conversation, not interrupting, all these are part of the civil behavior which is itself a language of reverence, representing a shared reverence for the values of the community. If it's an intellectual discussion in a classroom or in a venue like this, the shared value is the truth, and we show our shared reverence for the truth by respecting each other's attempts to articulate what we believe about the truth.

With that in mind we'll move on to some of your questions:

Question and Answer Session:

Q: Kerry Miller from Wallingford, Pennsylvania. It's difficult to imagine that the verb to revere, which looks like a transitive verb, could exist without a direct object of some sort of divine being. Can you tell us something about the Greek word that you're using, its literal meaning, its grammar, any linguistic hints about how you could be using it in this non-transitive way?

A: Actually there's a cluster of Greek words that refer basically to the same virtue, and they are nouns with no verbal component really: *aidôs* and *hosion*. *Eusebeia* is a noun that's based on a verb and can be used with an object, and I think that the rough distinction is that *sebeia*, without the "eu" in front of it, is used for the respect owed to a ruler, but *eusebeia* for the reverence owed to the gods. But it's interesting that most of the violations of what's meant by this cluster of words have to do, not with any mistreatment of the gods, but with mistreatment of human beings by human beings.

Q: Natalie Brown from Houston. I work with educators, and one of the words that I use often is the word respect. I would like to hear your comments on how you would differentiate reverence and respect.

A: The way I distinguish between them may seem a little bit artificial to you. It's driven by a philosophical distinction, but it comes close to the way that we use the words. I think that respect is fundamentally shared reverence. In a classroom when students and teacher are treating each other respectfully, what lies behind is a shared reverence for the truth that they are trying to understand. And what they're doing is recognizing another person's reverence. Or even better, offering another person an opportunity to show that reverence.

It's very important to me not to agree with those who say that you can't respect somebody until she's earned it. How can you wait? You'll never know whether I deserve your respect if you don't treat me with respect and listen to me. So you can't possibly wait for somebody to prove his/her merits. Respect is offered, like grace if you will. It has to be offered. But I don't think it's offered just to everyone. It has to be offered on certain conditions, and the condition is that you're part of the community. You're teaching in a classroom and there's one student who just will not be part of it; you can't go on offering that student the same respect. You have to get him out of there, because he's not sharing the reverence of the group. It would be false and misleading to pretend that it's there when it isn't. So respect is a very important notion to me, and it's absolutely central to the notion of community. And underlying that is reverence.

Q: Andy Reese, Augusta, Georgia. I know that you and Dr. Ursula Goodenough have written about and extended ideas about shame and outrage, and I wondered if you would say a few words to the group of the importance of those as reverence detectors in a way.

A: I think that shame and outrage are also part of nature's ethical gift to us. I think we are like other primates, liable to be outraged by injustice to ourselves first of all and to other people. Out of that, if suitably cultivated, a sense of justice can grow. Shame is very closely related to reverence. In fact, there are these three words *aidôs*, *hosion* and *eusebeia*. *Aidôs* is sometimes translated as shame.

Shame is a natural human emotion; we feel shame at having our shortcomings exposed to public view. The fear of shame is one of the most powerful human motivators. But an undeveloped sense of shame can simply make you an automaton in the service of the values of the community. You would be ashamed to be found out to be out-of-step in the way you live with the values of community, like Huck Finn being ashamed of helping Jim to escape. So shame too is one of these natural emotions that, in my view, has to be shaped in a certain way by culture in order to work as a virtue. And actually in my view, it's actually part of reverence. Shame and awe are two sides of the same coin.

Q: Jen Lee from Plano, Texas. I'd like to know what kind of things you treat with reverence and awe. Have your experiences of reverence and awe been changed over the years?

A: I'm an amateur musician, very amateur; it's a horrible thing to listen to me, but when I'm able to slow down and play mindfully (one of the things that I've learned from Ursula is the importance of mindfulness to reverence) I find that I have access to the most awe-inspiring beauty. It's not that I'm treating Bach's unaccompanied sonatas in an idolatrist way, because it's not the unaccompanied sonata that I'm in awe of, it's the beauty that Bach tapped into when he wrote that.

So I'm much of a romantic. I encounter what is awe-inspiring in poems, in music, in philosophy, in many of the things that I touch on in my teaching. What do I teach? I find justice, which is a major subject for me, to be awe-inspiring. On many subjects I hope to approach in one way or another what is true or beautiful. Much of what I teach has to do with beautiful literature, and I think that truth and beauty actually come very close together, especially in the ethical realm.