



## Reverence

*The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.*

As the winter solstice nears and the nights here in the north are growing longer, I notice how the many lights, both shimmering and ordinary, beckon my gaze. How festive twinkling bulbs and flickering candles make the simplest places a little bit enchanted. How the inner spaces glowing into the darkness outside issue their invitations to come in, and the stars in the sky shine brighter in the cold. In this season of shortened daylight, my heart turns toward the luminous, far and near.

To call it reverence is not quite right, but close. Perhaps as close as the English language gets to naming that overarching wonder and awe, admiration and longing, that beckons us out of our separate shadows and into relationship with the sacred sparks within all being. What Albert Schweitzer called “reverence for life.”

Is it reverence that stirs when we sing “Silent Night” by candlelight? Was it reverence, in the ancient story two millennia ago, that brought shepherds and kings to their knees before a poor and homeless baby born in a barn? What awe, awakened by a bright star in the vast night sky, beckoned the travelers to the child’s side, a more distant admiration deemed not enough? All were called in close to witness the infant’s small, new life. How could they not bow to see the humble child whose light so powerfully drew them near?

Mary Oliver, in a different time and place, wrote, “*And someone’s face, whom you love, will be as a star/ both intimate and ultimate, / and you will be both heart-shaken and respectful.*”

We humans have countless defenses against the heart-shaking risks of proximity and love, of reverence and the relationship from which it grows. There is propriety, practicality or plain old

pride. Individualism and independence. Cynicism and skepticism. Autonomy and analysis. Freedom or fatalism. Denial, disengagement or difference. Each of these — and more — can hold us many paces out from true encounter with the holy spark inside ourselves and others.

Reverence does not depend on a belief in God. But it does run into barriers with those who believe only in themselves — and others like them. How can we experience reverence if we are unwilling to humbly draw near, to cross the differences and distances that divide us today?

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century William Ellery Channing, whose praise of human goodness gave shape to our emerging American Unitarianism, said, “I do and I must reverence human nature.” But that reverence began with a close up, clear-eyed view of both our best and worst possibilities.

“I shut my eyes on none of [humanity’s] weakness and crimes,” he wrote. “But injured, trampled on, and scorned as our nature is, I still turn to it with intense sympathy and strong hope. And I thank God that my own lot is bound up with that of the human race.” For Channing, reverence was a call into relationship with humanity’s goodness and its failures too. Perhaps this was also what the ancient travelers following the star to Bethlehem discovered — the sympathy and hope that rises when our own lot is bound up with the whole human condition, both beautiful and broken. It is the promise of the Beloved Community as well.

Of course, being bound into relationship with all of humanity may arouse our fear. Who has not known the inner quaking that comes from love’s heart-shaken way of exposing us to loss and disappointment? Are we willing to choose it anyway?

So the angels commanded the shepherds to “Fear not.” Which is another way of saying, come closer. Draw near.

Perhaps this is the season’s call to reverence: to see the lights shining around, above and within us all as invitations to come closer. To be guided across unknown distances — into relationship with a new life often found in the most unexpected places. To reverently pay homage to our human goodness *and* our frailty, born in the humble hay of every day, waiting for us to draw near. How else will we be blessed by love’s light, intimate and ultimate, in this season of lengthening nights?

*By Associate Minister Karen Hering on behalf of this month’s theme team:  
Ahmed Anzaldúa, Drew Danielson,  
Janne Eller-Isaacs, Rob Eller-Isaacs  
and KP Hong*

### Reverence Theme Resources

#### BOOKS

*Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* by Paul Woodruff

*What Does It Mean to be Human: Reverence for Life Reaffirmed* by Responses from Around the World, ed. Frederick Franck, Janis Roze, and Richard Connolly

*Doors in the Air*, a children’s book, by David Weale and Pierre Pratt

#### POETRY

*Behind My Eyes* by Li-Young Lee

#### MOVIES

*Harold and Maude* (1971)

*The Music of Strangers: Yo-Yo Ma & the Silk Road Ensemble* (2017)

*In the Light of Reverence* (clip from 2016 PBS feature: <https://to.pbs.org/35aWV6e>)