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The Reverent Educator: The Call to Supporting Students' Spiritually on our Campuses

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In this article, Rud and Garrison describe the traits of reverent educators, and argue for their necessity in these times. Reverent educators exhibit many distinct qualities that define their pedagogy and practice within higher education, showing awe, wonder, and humility before the vastness of the subject matter they teach. The following narrative highlights these qualities and others related to how reverence should be conceptualized and applied to education today.

REVERENCE IN EDUCATION

Reverence arises from a profound understanding of human limitation, frailty, and finitude, prompting awe, wonder, and humility at the incomprehensible mystery. It chastens us to live between extremes of excessive egotism and excessive modesty. In our higher education system, most assume empirical knowledge is supreme and the aesthetic and even ethical considerations are secondary. Reverence enables us to create a moral narrative etched by the character of our conduct. We believe that reverence is a “forgotten virtue”¹ in teaching and learning, and that we would do well in the training and support of educators to recognize the power of this cardinal virtue. In this short paper, we will describe the traits of reverent educator, and argue for their necessity in higher education today.

The classicist Paul Woodruff gives a capsule definition of reverence that suits our purposes: Reverence is “the capacity for a range of feelings and emotions that are linked. It is a sense that there is something larger than a human being, accompanied by capacities for awe, respect, and shame; it is often expressed in, and reinforced by, ceremony.”² We have caveats with this definition. Reverence is often associated with religion, but as Woodruff writes: “Reverence has more to do with politics than religion.”³

Based on Woodruff's assumption, our paper will approach reverence primarily as a *civic virtue*, but we do not by any means wish to slight its religious connotations. Also, reverence does not only mean mute and prim solemnity. Rather, one can express reverence with noisy and intense joy. Ceremonies of reverence invoke feelings of shared veneration and wonder at the kind of higher meanings and values that connect individuals together in even the most diverse communities such as truth, learning, and justice, along with the schools that transmit them across generations. For these reasons, reverence can be conceptualized a virtue that we learn virtues by participating in shared social practices, including rituals and ceremonies.

Reverence is central to the kind of teaching and learning that is missing in today's educational system. Until the recent upsurge in interest in spirituality, reverence has been in retreat in the United States, and especially within our institutions of higher education. If we are to make reverence a part of human life in our communities again, then a good place to practice this virtue is on our campuses. If we want to have a reverent American society equipped to overcome the darkness of recent decades, it is best to emphasize the work that remains for our college-age students to recover, cultivate, and sustain the forgotten virtue of reverence. The self thus enacted is reverential in that it acknowledges limitations and dependencies.⁴ Many of the virtues aside from those associated with the Puritan work ethic seem superfluous when we view higher education instrumentally, as a linear means to a fixed and predetermined end and educational attainment is measured and subject to standards and accountability practices such as are emerging in the wake of the Spellings Report.⁵

REVERENT PEDAGOGY AND PRACTICE

Reverent educators exhibit many distinct qualities that define their pedagogy and practice within higher education. They show awe, wonder, and humility before the vastness of the subject matter they teach. These educators also have deep respect for their students while seeking to earn their respect as well. Reverent educators listen carefully that they may know their students and subject matter better, while recognizing the limits of knowledge in the pursuit of wisdom that lies beyond knowledge. They understand their limits and their need for help from others – especially their students. This sense of appropriate need and limitation arises out of a sense of transcendent values, of being a part of a larger whole that binds us all together in a community across generations. Reverent educators show strong leadership and include others in their deliberations. They understand the importance of ritual and ceremony in establishing classroom and school community. Finally, there is also a sense of humility and silence before the mystery. Let us discuss these traits in more detail.

Awe, Wonder, and Humility: Reverent educators know that the immense inheritance of culture and knowledge they receive and bestow is, at most, only slightly of their making – but that small amount is their contribution to the continuity of meanings made and sustained by humankind across generations. They have a sense for the humanity – departed, present, and yet to be born – in the subject matter taught and the values actualized. They know we live by the grace of the knowledge and wisdom realized by those who have gone before. Reverent educators exemplify the good of their practice.

These educators are never arrogant or presumptuous toward their students for they know that as their students stand to the educator's superior knowledge so, too, do they as educators stand toward the superior wisdom of both the subject matter they teach and of those who preceded them. They are humbled by their sense of limitation, while emboldened to teach and learn actively and joyfully.

Knowledge and Wisdom: Reverent educators not only listen carefully to what the subject matter has to say to them, but they also listen carefully to what their students say to them as well. Educators must not only know their subject matter, but also deepen relationships with their students. To do this successfully, they must accept the risk and vulnerability of openness to possibilities their students suggest, including what they might not know themselves as educators. Good educators must have the moral perception, imagination, and intellectual command of subject matter to readily reconfigure it to better connect to students and to the subject matter. Such joint learning is, perhaps unique to the practice of teaching. Teaching is not just about the transmission of knowledge or even its expansion. Its calling is higher than that; it seeks wisdom beyond knowledge alone by applying knowledge to life, especially the life of students and the larger community, and thereby to express life itself. Reverent listening to both students and subject matter greatly aids this kind of teaching and learning.

Modeling: Educators are leaders, and one of the most important things leaders do is provide fine examples of teaching and learning in community and communion with others. John Dewey observes that in communicating an experience to someone "you will find your own attitude toward your experience changing."⁶ Genuine communication always respects the other with whom you are communicating. This is especially true when what is taught must be reconfigured to connect to the cognitive, emotional, and material conditions of the student. One cannot connect and model until they have listened and learned about what others (e.g. students, parents, churches, business, and such) need, desire, and dream. Part of the Deweyan ideal of a participatory democratic classroom is that everyone learns and grows together. This ideal does not presuppose they are learning the same thing, though they are studying the same subject matter. At the same time, they are also studying each other.

Respect: Reverent teaching involves respect. Woodruff asserts: "Respect is given, not earned."⁷ His reversal of the usual form of this bromide is important. We may respect others, including our students solely based on our common humanity. There is also the sharing of common practices and ideals; at the very least, there are the ideas and values of the subject matter that educators and students must more or less master. Moreover, teaching is a caring profession where educators seek to share their values of self-transcending care, concern, and compassion. This sharing involves listening, as respect should be reciprocal; such mutual respect arises readily out of shared commitments. Promoting mutual respect in the presence of higher values shared by all provides a better classroom climate. For example, everyone shares similar needs for personal recognition and fairness. Mutual respect for these values readily leads to mutual respect for others in the everyday give and take of classroom interaction. Cooperation is better when the ultimate authority lies beyond everyone, educator and student alike, and all agree to submit to it because they feel it is legitimate.

Transcendence: Reverence attends to the call of transcendent values that bind us all – ranging from the voice of the over-indulged university student who appeals to justice when all they want is his or her selfish advantage to the plaintive cry of those who suffer the beatings of academic, emotional, and spiritual bullies. Reverent educators feel that teaching is not just a job – it is their calling. Often we cannot name what we hear, but we can still feel it. Indeed, good educational practice can succeed without consciously knowing “that” something is thus and so. Good practice is secured by simply knowing “how” to do something the right way at the right time even if one cannot give the right reason. An example of transcendence is the eponymous lead character of the film *Forrest Gump*⁸; the comedic and often touching aspect of the character’s ability to do well without being able to articulate or even at times understand his actions make up the core of the film.

Recognizing Limits: Reverent teaching recognizes that, however astute, every individual is limited in judgment. Wise educators must realize that while they know much more than their college students, they cannot make judgments that build a good learning community by themselves; they must listen to their students. A good classroom environment involves shared deliberation about the good, the right, and the customs of conduct all must embody. Good deliberation must be continuous and ongoing if it is to be self-correcting. We must constantly revisit, and sometimes revise, rules about classroom interaction, dialogue, and what constitutes fairness and respect. Democratic deliberation in colleges and universities is not about voting whether or not to learn today; rather, it is about the values and practices of good education, and how each individual fits into the larger academic community.

Such deliberation allows educators to listen to the concerns of the students so that they may make better decisions, but it also reminds them they must listen to the higher meanings and values of teaching, of learning, of subject matter, and of humanity that bind them as much as it does their students. It also protects the educator from *hubris*, overconfidence, arrogance, and improper use of knowledge, power, and control. Reverent teaching accepts the risk and vulnerability of opening oneself to the other; it accepts criticism and remains creatively responsive. Beyond all other considerations, reverent teaching understands the need to listen and respect everyone: students, professors, administrators, custodial staff, secretaries, counselors, and other members of the campus community.

Ritual and Ceremony: A ritual is a familiar and repeated action that an individual or group performs to give structure to their lives. When practicing rituals, objects or actions are accorded meaning. Ceremonies are composed of rituals that mark particularly meaningful occasions, such as a school commencement. Homecoming football games, or the inauguration of a new school leader. Ritual and ceremony provide the space for us to hear and enable reverential teaching.⁸ Yet, these tangible representations of reverence expressed in ritual and ceremony are largely absent or perverted in many institutional cultures. For example, the pep rally described in Bissinger’s *Friday Night Lights*⁹ exhibits no vital connection of athletics to many of the central purposes of school such as academic achievement and growth. Rather, the football players and cheerleaders display themselves for the entertainment and supposed adulation of their classmates, and indeed, the entire community. It is irreverent. The same might be said about our college sports culture today.

Reverent teaching honors shared ceremony and ritual. Ritual helps organize and structure the classroom community around common beliefs, values, and the virtues of classroom practice. The Provost at one of our universities reads at least one faculty member's book a month, and then takes them out to lunch to discuss it. We know of a university president who walked with his wife around campus in the evening talking with students and faculty. Ceremony too, such as a university or college commencement, and the attendant ritual of switching a cap tassel to the left, signal to the participants their incipient place in the greater good of a larger community.

In a true community, one's place is not fixed, but dynamic, and alters as the needs of the community may require. In our individual university teaching, we often expect students to actually teach segments of the class during the semester, while the professor sits with "the rest" of the students, thereby distributing authority and responsibility of the role among all members of the class at least in a limited manner. The practice of reversing the role of professor and student elevates whoever serves as the "professor" by making his thoughts, feelings, and actions a matter of shared concern. While the professor is firmly in charge, he or she creates a ritual that respects everyone so each student is able to participate. This reversal of teaching received respect even amidst disagreements because it involved activities valued and respected by all. Therefore, performing the rituals of reverent teaching invokes feelings of belonging to a greater unity in spite of differences.

Silence and Humility: Though reverent teaching can be active and engaged, it may be more powerfully enacted when listening for and to silence.¹⁰ Katherine Schultz¹¹ discusses the topic of listening to silence in classrooms in ways that are often reverential. She discusses respect for students and urges us, following Dewey, Freire, and other progressive and critical educators, to consider that educators should create openings and opportunities in their talk that accommodate students who might otherwise maintain a subjugated silence. Such open-endedness allows educators to explore subject matter with students, or at least not inhibit the student's exploration. It even allows educators to humbly admit that they do not know the answer to a student's question, or, perhaps, that no one knows given the current state of the subject matter.

Schultz highlights the practice of listening for and recognizing instances that might be called *silence without reverence*. She provides several sad examples of bullying and arrogance, mostly by educators. Below, Woodruff describes a kind of student not mentioned by Schultz in her paper, but one that we are sure she knows all too well. It is a particular kind of arrogant student who silences other students, and sometimes educators:

The worst violator and the one that is most difficult for teachers to handle is the loud student. Confident in his own brilliance, hugely vocal, and often male, the dominant student does not seem to hear what another student, or even the teacher, have to say in discussion, so intent is he on presenting his own views. He speaks as if he has nothing to learn from others...Instead, he takes the class as ground on which he can exercise his power to control a conversation. Other students fall into resentful silence.¹²

Often educators aid and abet such lack of reverence. The tragedy, like that of King Lear¹⁴, arises from a failure to listen carefully and respect the speech as well as the unnatural silence of subordinates. Where this occurs, we often find calamity, sadness, and lack of reverence in the same place. Likewise, good fortune, joy, and reverence often reside together.

Reverence is certainly not a panacea for the concerns and problems of our institutions and our larger society, but it is part of a simple act of paying attention and regard to others that is too often ignored. Sadly, within our higher education system, educators who practice with reverence and connect with students may not be recognized or rewarded by current technocratic promotion and tenure systems, especially at research-based institutions where teaching may not be as valued as research. While reverent educators may be hard to notice, they can have a powerful effect upon their students. To revive reverence, and to bring it to attention in today's colleges and universities, is a small step toward a more spiritual future as we strive to move forward in these times of uncertainty and promise.

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References

¹ Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Hereafter Woodruff.

² Woodruff, 63.

³ Woodruff, 4-5.

⁴ See Arthur Chickering, Jon Dalton, and Liesa Stamm, *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2006), 205: The Quaker practice of listening attentively is discussed in the concept of “clearness committees” where a small group helps a single person to discover wisdom. See also Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 156-157.

⁵ See AAUP Statement on Spellings Commission Report

(<http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/GR/federal/FutureofHigherEd/spellrep.htm>). This report and its aftermath does for higher education what the accountability movement has already done for K-12 education. While the report was not directly implemented, national higher education accrediting agencies have adapted many of its accountability measures. Many readers will have already seen these effects on their campus. For a critique of high-stakes accountability in P-12 education, see Audrey Amrein and David C. Berliner, “High-Stakes Testing, Uncertainty, and Student Learning,” *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 10(18) (2002, March 28) <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v10n18/>.

⁶ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*. *John Dewey: The Middle Works, Volume 9*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1916/1980), 8.

⁷ Woodruff, 180

⁸ / Producers: Wendy Finerman, Steve Tisch, and Steve Starkey / Director: Robert Zemeckis / Writer: Eric Roth / 1994 / Paramount Pictures / US

⁸ See Woodruff, 135: “Ritual is more robust than belief and has more staying power, but wherever there is ritual, there must be the reverence to take that ritual seriously.” The “staying power” of ritual comes from its predictability and familiarity to a community. For instance, Purdue doctoral student Hollie Kulago informed Rud that the members of the Navajo community know why a mentor is appointed to tie the hair of a girl upon puberty. This ritualistic act signals to the community that this young girl is now at an important point in her life and is due respect from members of the community.

⁹ H. G. Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, and a Dream* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1990/2000), 128-129.

¹⁰ See Woodruff, 187: "Reverence declares itself through silence, more deeply and more truly than through speech" and 188: "The silence of a great teacher expresses awe and respect—awe for the enormous subject that is being learned and respect for the students who are learning it under their own power, undiminished by any interference from the teacher." This seeming lack of teaching activity is deceptive, as the educator realizes that she is a facilitator of the learning by the students, and indeed, by listening reverentially in silence, the educator acknowledges that more important things than her uttered words of instruction are occurring in the students' minds.

¹¹ Schultz, "Listening to Silence."

¹² Woodruff, 193.

¹⁴ *King Lear* by William Shakespeare written between 1603-1606