



Reflections from...

Denise Bissonnette



Denise Bissonnette is an internationally renowned writer, trainer and keynote speaker. For over two decades, she has inspired people and organizations throughout North America to look beyond traditional concepts of career development and to craft livelihoods rooted in the individual "genius" of each person. Her work is a rich tapestry of her talents as a poet, writer, storyteller, teacher and career developer.

Embracing an Ethic of Reverence in Life and Work

In my mind the true purpose of any noble aspiration is to put our hearts on tiptoe. It should inspire us to aim and stretch towards a high enough vision so that, even in the very attempt reach it, we are made deeper, stronger, wiser, or in some way better. It is in this vein that I invite you to join me in a rather bodacious aspiration and the ambitious challenge it poses: *To treat all paths we are on, and all those with whom we come into contact, with the spirit of reverence, embracing this posture as an ethic in the life we live and the work we do.*

While you have managed to suspend your doubts long enough to arrive at this second paragraph, I know what you may be thinking: In the push and pull of everyday pressures, on an ordinary day, in a regular workplace, where is there room for a quality as lofty as "reverence"? Dependability, sure. Diligence, why not? Devotion, maybe. But reverence, really? Let's give it a spin, take her for a test drive.

How would the world be different if we treated one another with sublime respect, as if each of us was a person of immeasurable worth, deserving of the greatest care? Not just a client in whom we see the making of a 'successful outcome' to fulfill the requirements of a contract, or a consumer to whom we respond according to a pre-determined plan. Not a customer from whom we hope to make a profit, or even a long-time patron to whom we are in the comfortable habit of providing a satisfying level of services. What if, instead, we perceived each person not as an obligation, or a target upon whom we aim even the best of our intentions, but as an honored guest, someone whose presence represents a gift or a privilege, deserving of the spirit of reverence?

While we typically relegate the quality of reverence to a religious or spiritual context, I will never forget reading a story that Matthew Fox shared in his brilliant book, *The Reinvention of Work*, about a medical conference he attended in San Francisco in the 1990's. The

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organizers invited renowned doctors from around the country to come and speak about the one area of the body in which they specialized: the liver, the kneecap, the iris, the lungs. Each was to speak on a) What we know from science about that part of the body, and b) What still remains a mystery. In the end, what the conference succeeded in doing for everyone in attendance was to restore a sense of reverence for the miracle and mysteries of the human body. In my mind, this was an inspired idea and an amazing feat. The question has remained with me to this day, how do we, in whatever roles we are playing and whatever paths we are walking, restore our own sense of reverence?

Imagine being treated by a doctor who kept the untold mysteries of the human body in the forefront of her mind, considering each body, *your body*, as a sacred temple. How about a teacher who rather than approaching the class by taking the dreaded "head count", is repeatedly humbled by the opportunity to contribute to your ongoing comprehension of the subject, never forgetting that the human mind itself is a miracle? Imagine standing before a judge who regards you from deep within the credo that every person's dignity is innate and inviolate, regardless of your rap sheet or the charges being held against you? Who would you rather receive vocational guidance from, the job developer anxious to place you in a job in order to reach her monthly quota, or the one whose heart is set on helping people respond to their unique and particular calling in the world? The difference in all of these situations is not merely one of surface behavior, but of the quality of reverence, infusing that work with radical respect for those they serve.

Before you begin to wonder what I have been sipping, I am going to invite some heavy-hitters to assist me in presenting the case for not just "making room" for reverence in our daily life and work, but for treating reverence as the very *nature* of the work we are here to do, regardless of the field we are in, both in and outside of the workplace. While at first blush this may seem a lovely notion in the abstract, I suspect that you, like me, can readily conjure up images of people or situations in your own life which evoke quite the opposite of a "spirit of reverence" – perhaps aversion, disdain or even contempt. It is with these situations in mind, that I ask you to consider the words of those whose wisdom is hard-earned and worthy of our attention.

"Reverence for Life is the highest court of appeal. It is what affords me my fundamental principle of Morality. Reverence is the beginning and foundation of all Ethics and of Morality, because through Reverence you cannot avoid compassion and a sense of responsibility for everything that is called Life." - Albert Schweitzer in *Civilization and Ethics*

"Our aim must be towards reverential thinking, which is to recognize that every human being has intrinsic value. It means to recognize love and a brotherhood of all beings as an essential and indispensable modality. Reverential thinking is not a luxury, but a condition of our very sanity and grace." - Henryk Skolomowski in *The Participatory Mind*

"We teach children how to measure and how to weigh. How is it that we fail to teach them how to revere, how to sense wonder and awe? ... Reverence is a salute of the

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soul, an awareness of the inherent value of all beings. . . Only by attuning our own yearning to the lonely holiness of the world, will we aid humanity in ways more powerful than by any other service we render. – Abraham J. Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*

"We will recover our sense of wonder and our sense of the sacred only if we appreciate the universe beyond ourselves as a revelatory experience of that luminous presence whence all things come into being. Indeed the universe itself is a primary sacred reality. We become sacred by participating at a more sublime dimension of the world about us. Perceived at this level, we are all, each one of us, creatures of something divine, unknowable, and worthy of reverence." - Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*

"I honestly think in order to be a writer, you have to learn to be reverent. If not, why are you writing? Why are you here? Let's think of reverence as awe, as presence in and openness to the world. The alternative is that we stultify, we shut down... This is our goal as writers, (and as human beings); to help others have this sense of meaning and -- please forgive me -- wonder, of seeing things anew, things that can catch us off guard, that break in on our small, bordered worlds and open us to the larger realities." - Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*

"To comprehend the sacred in the ten thousand things of the world is the single greatest spiritual challenge of the 21st century." - Matthew Fox, *The Courageous Mystic*

"We would do better by our children to bequeath the spirit of reverence than all the riches in the world." - Plato, *Dialogues*

"Pursue some path, however narrow or crooked, in which you can walk with love and reverence. The way of reverence is the only way." - Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

The Work of Reverence: A Four-fold Path

How do we begin to embrace an ethic of reverence in our everyday life and work? Surely there are many paths in this pursuit, and much guidance to be garnered from great sages and philosophers both ancient and contemporary, including those referenced above. It is only as an aspiring apprentice of Reverence that I humbly offer suggestions on what I see as a starting place to begin the real work of reverence. I purposely chose the term "work" rather than the more popular term "practice" because I believe that bringing a spirit of reverence to our everyday realities in a real and enduring way will require nothing less than the effort and diligence that we associate with the word "Work". We *practice* things that we have to some degree become adept at, but we *work* at something for which we have yet to earn even basic competency. Personally, with the aspiration of "embracing reverence as an ethic", I would prefer to start on Level One, you know, Reverence for Beginners. Should you care to join me, here is a primer for what I see as a four-fold path: To Believe, to Behold, to Bow, and to Bless. Rinse and repeat.

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1. Daring to Believe

As with any heartfelt pursuit, reverence must begin with and be fueled by some emotional investment in its possibility and potential. We have to believe that the world and all those we come into contact with are worthy of our reverence before we can devote ourselves in earnest to embracing it as an ethic. In addition, we need to believe that such an attitude can enable change, influence our relationships, and enhance our everyday experience. For each of us, our understanding of reverence is as individual and distinctive as our interpretations of love or of forgiveness, based on our unique experiences. It follows that the beliefs and intentions we hold regarding this quality will vary accordingly. As a first step, I think it is a worthwhile endeavor, as with all aspirations, to identify the intentions and beliefs that underpin and support it. Here is my take, which you are free to use as a catalyst for forming your own.

A spirit of reverence means to intentionally remember and return to what we know to be true and meaningful in life, beneath and beyond our surface experience of the world, with the intent of staying close to what we believe to be sacred.

Reverence enables us to cut through assumptions and conclusions, reminding us that every person is worthy and deserving of dignity, even when we disagree with or fail to understand their opinions or actions. Here a sense of superiority is tempered by humility and judgment with discernment, bringing the true meaning of “humanity” back to the world of human services.

Reverence enables us to burst through the pretense that we are all strangers, bringing us into the circle of kinship and connection. With a restored sense of interdependence, we take responsibility for how our actions and non-actions affect others, now and into the future. We are reminded to treat everything we touch (including the planet) with great care, replacing indifference with a sense of devotion.

Reverence restores an appetite for amazement, replacing weariness with wonder, and apathy with awe. Through it we are inspired rather than intimidated by the great mysteries, and drawn to rather than daunted by the incomprehensible. We recognize and honor the sacred running in, through, and underneath all things. Through the lens of reverence, wherever we are is holy ground, every bush is a burning bush, and each of our lives is potentially the “magical mystery tour” to be savored and celebrated.

Can we even begin to fathom what might flow from such a perspective? What would education be like if reverence for and celebration of life were the essence of our culture? How about religion, economics, or politics? How would our relationship to the environment change if we regarded the planet as sacred? What if reverence was the spirit of leadership at the helm of every business and organization, dare I say, nation? I contend that it represents a leap of consciousness that could transform everything, including our attempts at world peace. More to the point is how an ethic of reverence would affect the quality of our everyday relationships – in the workplace, the market, the classroom, not to mention, at our own kitchen tables? This is the bigger question, of course, because it represents the piece of

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the puzzle for which each one of us is accountable, and for which we are collectively responsible.

Once we believe in the viability and potency of embracing reverence as a necessary ethic or moral standard, what we see and perceive will vastly change – bringing us to the second step in the work of reverence: the readiness to behold.

2. Readiness to Behold

I love the word “Behold” because it implies more than simply seeing something, it implies a way of looking or listening from a deeper and more generous place from within ourselves. It is a stance of tender regard, entailing openness and anticipation. If we wish to “be held” by a sacred and wondrous world, and who doesn’t, perhaps we might begin by “beholding” the world as a place of sacredness and wonder.

How we experience life depends on how we meet the world, which is more a matter of the mind than of the physical senses. It is the mind that determines whether we see others as pawns on the great chess board of our lives, or as fellow pilgrims on a sacred journey. The mind decides whether we see the planet as inert or alive, work as drudgery or privilege, and life as mundane or miraculous. When we meet things looking for the wisdom or vibrancy they hold, we listen and engage on a deeper level. Delving below the surface that is appraised by the strategic mind, we become receptive to the sublime, not just “bent on moving things along”, but “being moved by one another” in the process. Beholding the world through the lens of reverence puts a radically different spin on everything.

The indigenous people of South America have a saying, “To be fully human, one must make room in one’s heart for the wonders of the universe.” Imagine measuring the depths of one’s humanity not by the value of their portfolio or the extent of their accomplishments, but by their capacity for wonder. The great 20th century philosopher, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, wrote extensively on the virtue of wonder, extolling it as “the beginning of all wisdom.” He writes “Wonder is the act in which the mind confronts the universe, an act that goes beyond knowledge. What we lack is not a road to believe, but the will to wonder.”

Think about the last time you were stopped in your tracks by something that totally captured one of your senses: hearing KD Lang belt out “Hallelujah”, spotting a robin’s nest just outside the window, biting into a chocolate soufflé, catching sight of a shooting star or a breaching whale, witnessing a baby’s first steps, or discovering the newest trick on your Smart Phone. Indeed, whatever image or memory came into mind, it was probably something exceptional – something you were not expecting that commanded your undivided attention. Which begs the question, how many other forms of wonder escape us daily simply because we have come to expect them and take them for granted? How much of our humanity is sacrificed by having become numbed to and unmoved by the many splendors of the world simply because we have fallen out of the habit of attending to them?

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The choice of where we put our attention is our most powerful freedom. Before we can revere something, we have to actually notice it and acknowledge it. Reverence is an impulse we can choose to cultivate, an emotional muscle made stronger through the quality of our attention. Asleep to the glories of the world, we are immune to the enchantment they hold. Fortunately for us, waking up requires no magic spell or princely kiss, no special equipment or personal trainers. What we need is the strength of character to seek the sacred in our everyday lives and the will and the willingness to behold it. Attending to the mundane and ordinary in this way, even the smallest things may open us to unexpected epiphanies. Imagine - wonderment at the water cooler, prophecy from a plumber, the gospel according to the grocer, the miracle of grass growing through concrete, the revelation of a righteous rain. No corner of the universe exempt from sacredness – such is the promise and signature of reverence.

3. Willingness to Bow

It was an amazing moment in our history to witness the reverence and homage paid to the late Nelson Mandela, from leaders around the globe, of every faith tradition and political perspective, televised world-wide. As I watched, I could not help but think of this great outpouring of love to be a reminder of how Nelson Mandela himself urged each of us to live, with reverence and respect towards one another. To honor him in the deepest way, we would, as a world community, embrace the spirit of the beautiful Hindu tradition of folding both hands together in front of the chest and with a slight bow, uttering the word, “Namaste”, meaning, “I honor the divine spirit in you, which is also in me.” Namaste - all around, on the house. That is what I hear him say.

The spirit of “Namaste” is rare in our culture. Aside from religious customs, saluting in the military, or partaking of the deferential bowing as portrayed in the drawing rooms of Downton Abbey in the Western world, we are more accustomed to and comfortable with “taking a bow” than we are of bowing to one another. It is not so much the intent of this article to encourage readers to take up with Hindu custom, as it is to inspire the heart and spirit of this sensibility, with or without a physical bow.

One of my earliest encounters with the custom of bowing was as a student of Aikido, an ancient Japanese martial art. As I suspect is true in most dojos, we were taught to bow as we entered the dojo and as we departed, as a way of showing respect for not only the teaching and the practice, but the lineage that shaped it. In addition, it was symbolic of “emptying oneself” so that one could fully receive what was being offered. Partners on the mat also exchanged bows, before and after each practice. For me, this simple gesture of mutual respect helped allay feelings of self-consciousness regarding my abilities, reminding me that Aikido was not an exercise of the ego, but “the way of harmonious spirit”, to use the direct translation. Participants in the early days of my job development training may recall how the principles of Aikido came to bear in my relations with employers. In response to their objections, I learned to replace defensiveness with a willingness to honor and respect their concerns, thereby finding common ground from which to

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have a more meaningful exchange. I found that words like “Thank you for your question. Please help me understand more”, was bow enough to radically change the conversation.

There are many ways to bow. As a case in point, I recently learned of the teachings of the great Indian sage Shantideva who lived in the 8th century. Having spent his life devoted to the qualities of compassion and equality, he proposed that if by raising even one hand in a gesture of reverence to anyone or anything, all the Buddhas clap, rejoice and rain down blessings. Although he lived in a culture where it was customary to fold the hands and bow, he taught that even one hand could make a difference. In a practical sense, raising a hand in reverence means that we must put down the weapons. It would be difficult, would it not, to harm or manipulate someone when you are bowing to them? By taking a mental bow, or raising even one hand in reverence, we would have to put down our weapons and surrender our hostility.

In an interview in the 1980’s with the marvelous Mary Oliver, she summarized what she thought she had learned from life, and what she never fails to express exquisitely through her prose and poetry. She said, “I’ve learned there are three lessons in life. First, pay attention. Second, be astonished. Third, share your astonishment. That’s it... towards all things we must be willing to bow. When that follows, everything changes.”

The willingness to bow entails respect and humility. It is a gesture of praise, of modesty, and, minimally, kind regard. Whether with applause, a slight nod of the head, a tender wink, a handshake in earnest, a warm smile, a genuine compliment, or an expression of sincere thanks – there are many to extend the spirit of a bow. As Rumi suggests, “There are many ways to kneel and kiss the ground.” And as we mentally and emotionally rise from a bow, what is there to do really, but extend a blessing?

4. Desire to Bless

I recently ended a workshop by gathering the participants in a circle and asking them to put in a word what they wished for one another as they returned to their work the following day. Words like “hope”, “courage”, “strength”, “peace”, and “joy” rang out and hovered in the air, invoking a powerful stillness that I dared not disturb when we completed the circle. Finally, I broke the silence saying, “This room is full of blessing. Can you feel it?”

We need to rethink the whole notion of what it means to bless and be blessed. Contrary to popular opinion, it is not the sole prerogative or exclusive domain of ministers, priest, and rabbis. Not only are we capable of blessing the people around us, I think we are the bestowers and the recipients of blessings every day, simply by our presence in the human circle. I also believe that blessing is the most natural response, indeed, our knee-jerk reaction, to reverence. If reverence is a cause, the impulse to bow and to bless is its effect.

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In essence, to bless is to put reverence into action. It's what led St. Francis to move snails to the side of the road so that they would not be trodden underfoot. It's what gives us the wherewithal to respond with kindness to the plaintive cries of an overtired child. To bless is to give the benefit of the doubt to the client or customer who would, in a less sympathetic moment, have been on the receiving end of our scorn. When extended in the spirit of reverence, what are expressions of well wishes, appreciation, sympathy, apology, praise, commiseration, condolences, or congratulation, if not blessings?

I recently heard Matthew Fox speak about the Jewish term "mitzvah", which means a good and just deed that goes out in the world. He referenced a Jewish saying that "Happiness itself is a mitzvah", that we bless people simply by being happy. What a cool concept! If happiness is a blessing, what about respect, wonder, and all the other qualities inspired by reverence? What if we don't have to worry so much about *doing* anything in particular, but simply bringing those qualities to bear as the quality and nature of our life and work? Wouldn't the quality of our presence, if imbued with the intention of being supportive, helpful, compassionate, or fair, be blessing enough?

Surely we have all been in the company of someone whose very presence served to calm us, affirm us, or offer some shelter in a storm. Maybe it was a nurse, a teacher's assistant, a police officer, a neighbor, or a stranger on an airplane. Think back to a time when someone looked at you with wider eyes and a larger heart – seeing not just the anxious patient, the reckless driver, the terrified applicant, or the frustrated passenger, but the human being whose dignity and worth remained pure and intact, regardless of the circumstances. Their real gift to you, of course, was in helping you to restore your own sense of dignity and worth. Without the benefit of holy water, burning sage, or the hum of murmured prayer in an ancient language, you knew you had been blessed.

Whether by granting permission, conferring best wishes, or affirming the sanctity of a difficult decision, we have the power to provide people refuge from an indifferent world. The quality of our presence can be bread enough to feed those hungry for connection, or force enough to be the wind beneath the wings of their fledgling confidence. In the end, that is the purpose of embracing reverence as an ethic in our lives and work – so that wherever we go and whatever we do, we leave behind us and impart before us a spirit of blessing. Would we have it any other way? In the celebrated words of Rabbi Abraham Heschel, "If not us, who? If not now, when?"

With my deepest bow, Denise.

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POETIC REFLECTION 

Reverence 101

By Denise Bissonnette

Ignore our pleas for new-fangled things that dazzle,
for turns of events that excite,
for changes in circumstances that kowtow to our fickle whims.
Clearly, we do not know for which we pray.
School us, instead, in the work of reverence.

Awaken us to the great inheritance to which we were born –
a universe of unending wonder.
Knock some sense into our senses,
so they no longer settle for surface perceptions,
but are on a dogged hunt for the holy,
are bent on gathering new evidence of grace,
forever foraging for the fingerprints of Love.

Mentor us in the art of appreciation,
so we may savor not only the sweetness in life,
but its sorrows and sadness too.
Make us receptive to the ongoing sermons of the human heart –
The liturgies of both love and loss,
The testament of laughter and of tears.

Ready us for revelation in the everyday -
In birdsong, in beauty, and in the very act of breathing.
Where the horizon beckons like a prophet of possibility
And even the lone poppy amidst the daisies is a preacher.

Teach us to believe in the holiness of the world,
to behold the sacred in all things,
to re-enter the human circle and bow before one another,
and to leave a blessing, to *be* a blessing, wherever we go.

Rouse us from our slumber so when the day's roll-call is taken,
We are on our feet, hands raised high, breathlessly exclaiming:
"Here. We are here. By the grace of God, we are here."

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THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER



"While the world is not comprehensible, it is embraceable."

- Martin Buber

"The road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action."

- Robert Green Ingersoll

"If the doors of perception were cleansed
everything would appear to man as it is, infinite."

- William Blake

"The moment one gives close attention to anything,
even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome,
indescribably magnified world in itself."

- Henry Miller

"Normally we do not so much look at things as overlook them."

- Alan Watts

"The heart of all spirituality is this: To remember who you are,
what you love, and what you find sacred."

- Wayne Muller

"We are put here for a little space
that we may learn to bear the beams of love."

- William Blake

"This is the work of reverence: to solve our darkness by blossoming
and to solve our loneliness by loving everything."

- Mark Nepo

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Reflections on Reverence: Past and Present

1. What were you raised to revere? As a child, what did you consider sacred?
2. What customs, traditions, and/or rituals do you practice which you consider sacred?
 - In your daily, personal life?
 - In your home and among your family?
 - In the circle of your friends, close community or tribe?
 - In your school or workplace?
 - In your church, temple, or place of worship?
 - As a citizen of your city, country or nation?
3. What places in the world renew your sense of wonder and/or evoke a sense of reverence?
4. As the musician reveres his instrument, the poet her pen, and the cowboy his hat, what possessions do you own that you treat like holy relics? (As I look around the room where I write, I would include the felted purse my daughter made for me in the third grade, a paper mache box with the remnants of ashes of a beloved friend, a string of pearls from my mom, and the ribboned tambourine with which I danced down the aisle as a middle-aged bride.)
5. What activities do you engage in that take you out of the ordinary realm of experience and into a more holy or sublime state? (I'm not just talking about the yogi or the whirling dervish here, but this could include the pianist, the gardener, the fisherman, or the baker at one with their work.)
6. What experiences have you had in your life that you would describe as awe-inspiring or transcendent? What moments or events in your life have you experienced which you would describe as "holy"? (While these often include the birth of a baby, the passing of a loved one, or a sacred ceremony like a wedding, it is not uncommon to hear athletes, performers, and travelers describe their experiences using similar terms.)
7. Before what or whom do you feel the impulse to bow, kneel, or in some way exhibit deference and/or high regard? (Beyond the typical list of revered writers, philosophers, activists, and spiritual leaders, my list would include my reverence for "the world of words", the California Redwood forest, a 200 year old California Cypress Tree that I refer to as "Father Tree", catching a glimpse of the Milky Way or the Northern Lights, and hearing Loreena McKennitt sing.)

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8. Taking a look at how you spend your time and invest your money, what does your calendar and your bank book say about what you worship?

Embracing an Ethic of Reverence: Into the Future

1. What changes do you think you would see in your workplace if the quality of reverence was embraced as an ethic?
2. How would you approach your customers or clientele differently if you saw each one as an honored guest? How would you be treated differently as a customer or client in the world if you were to be treated as an honored guest?
3. What beliefs do you hold regarding the role of reverence and its potential to influence the world in general, and your life experience, in particular?
4. What immediate impact would a "readiness to behold and savor the sacred in your everyday world" have in your life? How could you put this into immediate practice in a practical way?
5. What does a "willingness to bow" mean to you? In what ways can you practice this step with the people in your life, in and outside of work, with or without having to take a physical bow?
6. Whose presence in your life do you consider a true blessing? In whose life do you think you are considered a blessing?
7. What are the myriad ways in which you can begin to bless people with the power of your presence and by embracing the ethic of reverence?
8. What part can you begin to play in restoring "humanity" in the human service sector?