

Acceptance & Remarks
Albert Schweitzer Award
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"Reverence for Life" and how to be "Wise Selfish" at UNCW and Beyond

Members of the Freshman Class of the Honors Scholars, Chancellor Sederberg, Dr. Bruce, and Distinguished Guests,

I am deeply humbled and grateful to be with you all here at UNCW today. Although truly, when I was first approached by Mimi Cunningham about being nominated, I couldn't imagine why anyone could suggest me for an award named in honor of one of the world's great humanitarians—it seemed preposterous! If you want to know the truth, I even wondered why anyone in Wilmington could imagine naming an award for Albert Schweitzer.

But after reading about Albert Schweitzer, I can at least now answer the second riddle. I have come to understand why there is an Albert Schweitzer award here, in Wilmington and particularly at UNCW: because Albert Schweitzer's life provides inspiration and guideposts for all of us, especially those of us who are still learners, whether we are 18 or 80, and whether we are in college or not.

Thus, I'd like to share some of what I've learned about Albert Schweitzer—his life and the ethical principal he discovered, which he named "Reverence for Life" and which Schweitzer himself considered to be his greatest contribution. I have come to believe that it is as relevant to you as freshman college students here in Wilmington today as it was to the Nobel Prize Committee in Oslo more than half a century ago.

So, first a quick recap of Schweitzer's life. He was born in 1875 in Alsace-Lorraine (then part of Germany); the son of a Lutheran minister, in a village whose one church was used by both Lutheran and Catholic congregations. Beginning at age 10, he learned to play the organ. When he was your age, he studied theology at the University of Strasberg; he completed a PhD in theology at age 24 and became known as a musical scholar as well as organist and theologian. At the age of 30, he went back to school, this time to medical school; after seven years, during which he married, he became a doctor, and then raised the funds necessary to open a hospital in equatorial Africa (now Gabon). And there he lived, for the remainder of his life, running his hospital.

There are several themes that stood out to me as I read about Schweitzer's life.

First, he was INTENSE, PASSIONATE & HAD GREAT ENERGY

Though he was not a particularly good student in his youth, he developed a true passion for learning as a young adult. He didn't just become an organist—he wrote a 2-volume treasure on

Bach's organ music; he surveyed players and guilders and published pamphlets on organ building.

Second, he had A HIGHLY DEVELOPED SENSE OF EMPATHY, PRIVILEGE and PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

From boyhood, he was aware of and sensitive to the suffering and deprivations of others. One story is that he wrestled a schoolmate to the ground. When the boy said, "If I could eat broth every day like you, I'd be strong, too," young Albert took to dressing in the manner of a peasant boy, and refused his daily bowl of broth, beginning already to act in personal atonement for his privileged status in the world.

As an adult, his sense of responsibility was in no sense diminished. He wrote:

I will not enumerate all the crimes that have been committed under the pretext of justice. People robbed native inhabitants of their land, made slaves of them, let loose the scum of mankind upon them. . . We must make atonement for all the terrible crimes we read of in the newspapers. We must make atonement for the still worse ones, which we do not read about in the papers, crimes that are shrouded in the silence of the jungle night.

Third, he ACTED ON HIS BELIEFS.

He undertook what to most of his friends, family and colleagues must have seemed to be extreme sacrifices in order to help his fellow man. He said, "My new occupation [medical missionary] would be not to talk about the gospel of love, but to put it into practice." If Schweitzer were alive today, I guarantee, he'd be in West Africa, helping to combat Ebola's devastating effects.

Fourth, he DEVELOPED A WORLD-VIEW OR PHILOSOPHY THAT WAS FUNDAMENTALLY HUMANITARIAN in the broadest sense.

Schweitzer was an intellectual and a spiritual seeker. It was in Gabon, in 1915, at age 40, after years of studying Protestant theology as well as Eastern religious traditions, that "Reverence for Life" came to Schweitzer, in a way that he himself described as a spiritual revelation. He had concluded that systematic, logical thought can only take us so far and no further. He came to believe that the rationalism of the Age of Enlightenment was doomed to failure; as became evidenced by the ethical neutrality of biological determinism that subsequent thinkers, such as Darwin, observed and described. Similarly, though he counted himself a Christian, he searched for a philosophy of life that everyone could subscribe to. Schweitzer said that there is yet a deeper truth than science or than any particular religion—this truth is a life-affirming recognition: each of us wills to live in the midst of others who will to live. And so he sought to articulate a philosophy, and a guide to behaving ethically among our fellow beings in the world.

So what is Schweitzer's Reverence for Life? For Schweitzer, "Reverence for Life" was an affirmation of life which leads one beyond self—to a reverence for all who will to live; so that everything which maintains, nourishes, and ennobles life is good and positive—and all else is evil and negative. He called this philosophy of life "ethical mysticism".

And here's the more interesting question: What does "Reverence for Life" have to do with me and with you today, more than a century removed from an Alsatian doctor/philosopher and an ocean away from Africa and Europe?

I have some thoughts from my life . . .

Reverence for Life means recognizing the interconnectedness of Nature, and acting in ways that honor that connection and protect all life on the planet.

"The Sixth Extinction" written by Elizabeth Kolbert describes the five mass extinction events that have occurred on earth. The most famous of course, is the Cretaceous Extinction, 65 million years ago, which wiped out not only the dinosaurs, but about 75 percent of all plants and animals. She argues that what we humans are doing—our use of the planet, our hunting, our destruction of habitat—has ushered in a "Sixth Extinction" that will soon eclipse the loss of diversity during the Cretaceous era. In my own work for the North Carolina Coastal Land Trust, I have been an observer of the loss of species and of efforts to recover species and restore habitat. Whooping cranes, Venus flytraps, red cockaded woodpeckers—I hope all these creatures survive—but I know that their future is at risk from you and me and our kind. I believe it no accident that Schweitzer's epiphany came to him when he was outdoors on a sunlit day on an African river, not at a desk in a library.

Reverence for life also means honoring the dignity of one; of the gifts of each person's unique individuality.

In choosing to become a physician—rather than say, a theologian, an attorney or a statesman—Schweitzer dedicated his life to taking care of individuals, founding a hospital in a place where the need for medical care was dire. While we can't all be doctors or nurses, we can all act in ways that honor each person's dignity, each person's choices, each person's right to exist, no matter how different they are from us in culture or values. Each of us has dozens of choices each day where we can honor, or not honor, the dignity of others. If the choice is to help or to ignore, choose to help. To be tolerant or to be prejudiced, choose to be tolerant. Some of these choices sound easy; they are not. In college especially, when each of us seeks new friendships and relationships, new clubs, societies and teams---some complete with their own rituals or even hazing---it can be hard to speak the truth, when those around you are intolerant, or worse yet, actively hurtful. Social media makes it even easier to follow the crowd, rather than stand against the tide, but I can tell you, you'll never regret the latter choice.

Reverence for life means continuing to learn, to being open to new experiences, ideas and to making education a priority in our society.

I was amazed that Schweitzer entered medical school at age 30. Can you imagine the reaction of your friends, (not to mention your parents!) if, having already obtained a PhD, you decided to then go to medical school? They must have thought he was nuts! And then to top it off, he solicited them all for money to help him open a hospital in Africa—as a fund-raiser, I admire his chutzpa! Clearly, Schweitzer valued learning—he knew it was valuable in itself, as evidenced by his study of theology and music, and the fact that he traveled to Paris and other places to study. But he also knew that learning had practical value. He knew that the study of medicine would

allow him to save lives. Students come to me all the time and tell me they want to save the environment. Good for you, I say! But I also advise them to learn something useful—chemistry, law, biology—learn some skill that you can apply to your goal of saving the environment.

Reverence for life means taking care of yourself and nurturing your relationships.

You guys are honors students, so I'm guessing that most of you spend a lot of time studying, and you're pretty serious about that. And that's good. This is the way I was at your age, too. But I have learned, truly, that it's not just about work. If you keep your nose to the grindstone, you're going to ruin your face.

Practice self-care. Listen to your inner voice; don't be talked into doing what you don't want to do, just to please someone else. Enjoy life. As you grow older, you will experience tragedy, suffering, loss and pain—many of you may have already had these experiences. So store up good experiences. Take time to be with and create great experiences with your parents, your partner, your family, and your friends. As you get older, you'll find that it's the relationships that give value to your life, not your accomplishments. Here's my favorite quote from Edward Abbey. I'm honestly not sure that Schweitzer would agree with this, but I'm going to put it out there for you (and I'm paraphrasing, too, because Abbey didn't grow up at the coast:)

Do not burn yourselves out. Be as I am – a reluctant enthusiast...a part-time crusader, a half-hearted fanatic. Surf the waves. Paddle the creeks. Hoist the sails. Feel the sand under your feet. Peel and eat the shrimp.

Reverence for life means being open to the spiritual.

This is really an extension of the prior bit of advice, that is, of taking care of yourself, though it may seem counter intuitive at first. Meditate. Pray. Walk on the beach. Find strength and a sense of community in like-minded seekers, wherever they are. You may find them in a cathedral made of masonry, or a cathedral made of trees, or no cathedral at all. Spirituality will help you know when you've gotten off track, when you've lost your center, because it provides a point of reference beyond yourself. Prayer is talking to your higher power; mediation is listening. Spirituality, and the silence and peacefulness with which it is associated, is also a great tonic for our overly materialistic, commercial, plugged-in culture.

Reverence for Life will help you create a better life for yourself and those around you.

Here's the best news in all this. If you truly adopt Reverence for Life; that is, practice compassion, you will be a happier, more peaceful person; your family will be happier and more peaceful, and ultimately your community will be, too. The Dali Lama talks about being "wise selfish". Being wise selfish means taking a broader view and recognizing that our own long-term individual interest lies in the welfare of everyone. To take an example from the headlines, being wise selfish means recognizing that helping west African nations deal with the Ebola virus will ultimately provide benefits for us in the US.

Finally, reverence for life means seeking out people who also have reverence for life.

And this insight, finally, has provided me the answer to the first riddle about the Albert Schweitzer Award, which was, "Why me?" I think the answer is that I have had the great good

fortune (or been blessed—I choose to believe the latter) to be surrounded by other individuals who have Reverence for Life--though none of us actually call it that.

If you have a life partner with these values (as I do; thank you, Jim), it is much easier to impart “Reverence for Life” values to your children. If your friends have “Reverence for Life,” you will always have a store of hope and encouragement. If you seek colleagues with “Reverence for Life” (as I do at the Coastal Land Trust), the business or institution you lead will inspire trust, and it will attract supporters and volunteers who also have great values. And remember, this is not just a lesson from the nonprofit sector; Google’s Manifesto is “Don’t be evil” —which is not such bad shorthand for “Reverence for Life”.

Schweitzer didn’t just become a doctor, he founded a hospital; that is, he created an institution that brought together people who shared common values, who had passion, and who acted on their passion to help others. To me, that is the essence of “Reverence for Life”.

So I wish to close by expressing my gratitude to my parents, my partner, my children, my friends, my colleagues, and all of you who share a “Reverence for Life”. And, to the extent that the North Carolina Coastal Land Trust has carried out Dr. Schweitzer’s interest in protecting nature, and the plants and animals who live in the world in all their beauty and abundance, I am honored to accept this generous award.