

V. Practice Reverence for Life

Affirmation:

*I celebrate the miracle of creation by beholding it reverently.
May my every thought and action be one of love, wisdom, and respect.*

In Buddhist mythology, the term “hungry ghost” is used to describe a wandering soul who is extremely hungry and thirsty but whose throat is too narrow for food or drink to pass through. Understand, this is not a physical condition. This is a dilemma of a person whose heart is closed. Whose soul is disabled, unable to receive and respect the miracle of creation. Psychologically speaking, hungry ghosts long to be loved but may not have the capacity to receive it. As Thich Nhat Hahn suggests: “They may understand in principle that there is beauty in life, but they are not capable of touching it.”

Are you able to touch the beauty of life? What does the miracle of creation mean to you? What experiences, if any, in your day do you consciously create so that you can behold the wonder of this planet, nature, and people or animals close to you?

There are millions of hungry ghosts who awaken each day and wander dreamlike for spiritual sustenance. The greatest dis-ease people face today is the hunger for a deeper meaning to life. We all need something to believe in, something that proves to us that life is meaningful. Unfortunately, we are led to believe that our job, money, or the items we purchase; even some of our recreational activities can satisfy our thirst for life, or our need to be accepted. We acquire such beliefs from the media, corporate images, pop heroes and stars, or simply from friends striving with the same hunger. Recently, I read something troubling that underscores the point: the wave of crime among inner city youth who kill each other just for the victim’s \$150 name brand shoes. It is sad to know that the value of a life, its apparent meaning, is determined by desperation for a certain image or standard of living.

Today’s ecological crisis of the natural environment and the crisis of personal meaning offer us the opportunity to fundamentally redefine our relationship to each other and the planet. This is the great awakening of our time: that we are inseparable from each other and the world. To practice *Reverence for Life*, as this Principle of the Sanctuary Path suggests, is to learn new ways to *touch the sacredness of life*, and thus, to quench this deep hunger for meaning. Reverence, indeed, is how *you* can *sustain* the sacred.

As a couple, we have devoted our life to walking the path of reverence, testing our every human belief, value, and actions against its backdrop. In fact, we knew it would be impossible, moreover hypocritical, to take our message of sanctuary to the world if we had not so thoroughly understood and tested the application of reverence in our marriage, family, friendships, business, and bond with Nature on our land. We have learned that merely to *try* to live an attitude of reverence in itself creates the stepping-stones of consciousness that eventually become the path.

Our path of reverence is supported by our philosophical view of the world. In the early 1980’s, we discovered the ancient French word, *cortese*. It was used sparingly in the cultures of northern Italy and southern France about the time of St. Francis. The most obvious English translation is “courtesy.” But courtesy today has a more superficial meaning than it did long ago. The original use of the word *cortese* was to describe nobility of character and conduct, that is, the recognition of rights, duties, gifts, and privileges as they exist in a reciprocal relationship filled with generosity and respect.

We encourage you to search inward for that essential *feeling, philosophy, or belief system* that can drive your life and give it meaning. Such a philosophy cannot be purchased in the marketplace, and it is not available with a job promotion or a change in mate. It is most easily accessed through mentors or exemplars, present or past, which can support your worldview. We have found, for example, both Gandhi and St. Francis to be guiding lights. But it was St. Francis who opened the door for us.

Enthralled by the beauty and mystery of Creation, Francis believed and showed that love of God, love of man, and love of nature were not only compatible with one another but the natural, divinely purposed state of humanity. The well-known biographer of St. Francis, Romano Guardini, describes Francis's noble behavior toward humans, animals, and nature as a "deep, inner sweetness, giving it a bell-like character of clarity and beauty." The *cortesian philosophy* had a profound effect on Francis, and he acted as one who regarded "La cortesia è una delle proprietà di Dio" — "Courtesy is one of the properties of God," Francis proclaimed, "who of His courtesy, gives His sun and rain to the just and the unjust: and courtesy is the sister of charity by which hatred is extinguished and love is cherished."

Ancient French dictionaries use the word *reverence* to sum up the quality of character *cortese* suggests. Modern English dictionaries describe reverence as "a feeling or attitude of deep respect, love, and awe, as for something sacred." And hereby, we believe, is the potential for a worldview that asks you to establish a covenant with life based upon a deep and personal sense of integrity and reciprocity between humans, and humans and nature. What we are talking about, then, in this one word, *Cortesia*, is something deeply perennial in its philosophy and deeply personal in its practice. We are talking about a heartfelt feeling and a mental attitude of deep respect, courtesy, honor, love, compassion, humility, gratitude, charity, and awe and wonder. The revered theologian and philosopher, Thomas Berry, perhaps best summarizes the need to consider a view of life such as *Cortesia* offers: "We have lost our sense of courtesy toward the earth and its inhabitants, our sense of gratitude, our willingness to recognize the sacred character of habitat, our capacity for the awesome, for the numinous quality of every earthly reality."

We believe a *covenant of reverence*, and for us it is captured by the word *Cortesia*, is the true new shore of consciousness or deep meaning to life that each of us desires to experience, whether it be in sanctuary or amidst our worldly duties. In his book, *A Sacred Place to Dwell*, Henryk Skolimowski states: "Reverence is a principle of *understanding* — of the beauty of the world. It is also a principle of appropriate *behavior* in the universe conceived as sanctuary." What Dr. Skolimowski suggests is that we celebrate the miracle of creation by beholding it reverently, for, to put it in Albert Schweitzer's terms, "reverence for life means the re-enchantment of the world."

Do you have a sense of enchantment with the world, a feeling that life is so special that it simply cannot be squandered, neither your own or another's? Or do you feel you have been dealt an unfair hand; that life seems to be filled with struggle and disappointment?

The Sanctuary Path attempts to elevate your view towards life. It strives to open up your heart and throat each step of the way so that the voice of the world pours out of you. Yes, pours out of *you*. If you are content to see life in a diminished way, you will be forever thirsty for peace of mind. You will be unable to drink in the power of your own sacredness that exists as a compassionate fount for the world.

Reverence, by its sheer nature, embraces many of the positive qualities and values about life that people aspire to in their heart of hearts. You cannot ask the question, "How can I live on Earth today so that my life and all other life is served well?", without calling into play reverence. A recognition of the

sacredness of life demands reverent behavior, a covenant of reverence. It suggests that the solution to your search for meaning lies within yourself, and at best in your relationship to God.

Sometimes, I have a sense that the work I am doing — inspiring people like you to embrace sanctuary in your life and to live with Cortesian reverence — is like weaving a huge tapestry, or at least conducting a monstrous repair job to the existing Web of Life. I receive inspiration from Rumi's quip: "Get yourself a huge foolish project, like Noah." In any case, I am driven by an overarching vision, itself a kind of ark of safety and peace. My vision includes a beautiful green space that opens the heart to nature, animals, children at play, partners, families, the elderly, disadvantaged, and disabled embracing each other, and friends sharing heartfelt conversation. It is a space in which cultures can take pride in their heritage and sacred geography, and business and politics can work to enhance the quality of life without sacrificing nature or diminishing human worth. It is a space in which technology rises above greed and complication, serving to save this planet in simple, commonsense, and innovative ways for future generations. Lastly, it is a space in which people can develop their human capacity to create beauty, offer healing, give freely of their compassion, and thank God.

You might consider that your search for sanctuary, beyond its benefit of peace in your life, is really one of envisioning a more hopeful world like that described above. But you need not go on an extended pilgrimage away from your present state of affairs. "We are always making a home for the heart," Thomas Moore reminds us, "and always looking for the house of divinity."

What better place to look for your deepest soul qualities than in occasional sanctuary. This is where peace sculpts a reverent outlook and turns an apparently insensitive, chaotic world into one that holds hope. It takes time and perception, involvement and love to be part of a place and to draw sustenance from being an integral part of its special character. This same commitment is what deepens relationships, be it with the small critters in your garden, dear friends, or a total stranger. Reverence, you will find, is the chalice that holds the nourishment of your wonder, healing, and celebration of life. It is a worthy step on the Sanctuary Path that leads to and from the world.

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Excerpts from forthcoming book: **Islands of Grace: Creating Sanctuary in Daily Life**. By Dr. Christopher Forrest McDowell and Tricia Clark-McDowell