



Bishop's Reflection

REVERENCE FOR LIFE

BY THE RT. REV. PAUL-GORDON CHANDLER

One of my heroes is Albert Schweitzer, the great 20th century German-French theologian, humanitarian, and medical doctor in Central Africa, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952. Reflecting on human existence, out of his life experience, Schweitzer wrote, “By having reverence for life we enter into a spiritual relation with the world.”



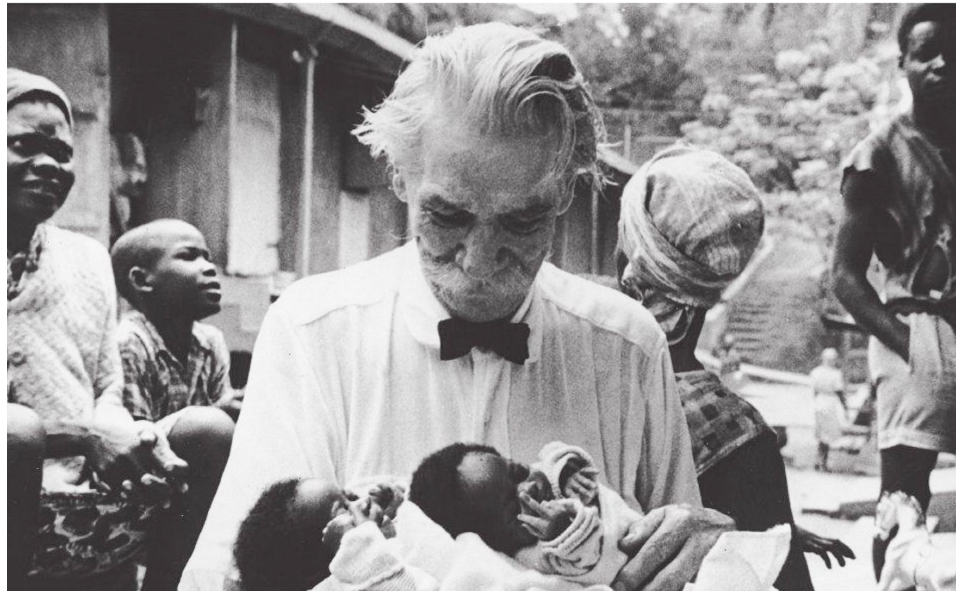
One of the most vivid memories I have as a child growing up in West Africa is of a walking excursion in a “jungle park” in the country of Gambia. It was not a large park, only about 3 square miles. However, it was filled with wild animals on the loose - leopards, pythons, crocodiles, hippos, monkeys and what we soon came to see as the dreaded chimpanzees. I recall that the path we were walking on came to a fork, and there was a sign with symbols to describe the level of danger of each respective path. Yet, we didn’t know how to read the symbols, for we had not properly studied the key guide to the symbols at the entrance of the park. My father decided we should take the one on the left, unbeknownst to us it was the path for “higher risk.” Together with my parents and my two little sisters we confidently and naively marched toward our fate. A little less than a mile up

we saw a group of large chimpanzees blocking the path. My father decided we should turn back, only to notice that chimpanzees were now also blocking our return. Trapped by chimpanzees, they now started moving toward us. For 30 minutes or so, I experienced some of the most frightening moments of my life, as these chimpanzees hassled us, from taking apart our packs to attempting to rip my father’s Nikon camera from his neck, to putting their hands in our pockets and poking us, to just making the scariest looking chimpanzee facial expressions imaginable. Eventually a warden came to our rescue, seeing that all blood had been drained from our faces. That frightening experience happened only because we didn’t properly read the signpost. Ironically, the symbol on the other path meant the “family trail.”

The ancient book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Bible was a “guidebook for survival” for the Hebrew people. Deuteronomy in effect provides a signpost toward living life in its fullest dimension. Over and over again, the Hebrews are presented two possibilities – the way of life or the way of death – of wellness or hardship. And they are urged to “choose life.”

This of course echoes Jesus’ teachings, that there are two roads from which to choose; one is wide, leading to destruction, and one is narrow, leading to “life.” Jesus in effect summarizes his entire purpose by saying, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

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One of my favorite writers, the novelist and Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner, who recently passed away, wrote, “Most of the time we think of life as a neutral kind of thing. We are born into it one fine day, given life, and in itself life is neither good nor bad except as we make it so by the way we live it...the common view is that life itself...does not care one way or another anymore than the ocean cares whether we swim in it or drown in it... The Christian faith flatly contradicts it...the life-giving power that life itself comes from is not indifferent...It wants us to swim.”

Jesus teaches us that God’s stated intention for us, each of us, is that we should flourish. If the word “God” means anything, it means life-giver. As followers of Christ, we are to have a predisposition toward life – living it fully and respecting it in all its forms. This is in many ways our “raison d’être” – our reason for being – leading us to promote human life, wholeness, peace, reconciliation, and healing in every manner possible – toward enhancing God’s beautiful Creation. Put another way, we lament and deplore and condemn all that promotes death, destruction and degradation.

In the book of Deuteronomy, the ancient Hebrews were given many guidelines of how be truly life-giving. These guidelines related to how they were to treat all of God’s Creation, not just other human beings, but animals and all of nature. It influenced their view of preserving and protecting the environment – choosing life for themselves and for all living things.

There were two things that affected the great humanitarian Albert Schweitzer as a young child, and laid the foundation of his life’s worldview. First, on family trip to France, he saw a statue of a famous military general in a town square. However, what caught his eye was at the base; there was another figure – an African slave in chains. He described the face as having a thoughtful expression of sadness and sorrow – and it made an indelible impression on him at that young age. And starting as a child, he prayed every night for the suffering of the world.

Secondly, he recalls his childhood friends killing birds just for sport, and this produced in him the unshakeable conviction that we have no right to inflict unnecessary suffering on any

living creature. As a child, after his mother would pray with him when putting him to bed, he prayed his own secret prayer, asking God to protect all living things.

Many years later, in what was called Equatorial Africa (today it is the country Gabon), as a medical doctor, it all came together for him in his thinking. Here is what he wrote: “On the sandbank to our left, four hippopotamuses and their young plodded along in the same direction. Just then, in my great tiredness and discouragement, the phrase ‘Reverence for Life’ struck me like a flash... A person is ethical only when life as such is sacred to him and when they devote themselves helpfully to all life that is in need of help... It is the ethic of Jesus... If a man loses his reverence for any part of life, he will lose his reverence for all of life. By practicing reverence for life we become good, deep, and alive.”

This experience changed his entire view of all of God’s Creation, writing, “I can do no other than be reverent before everything that is called life. I can do no other than to have compassion for all that is called life.” He went on to profoundly reflect:



“Affirmation of life is the spiritual act by which man ceases to live unreflectively and begins to devote himself to his life with reverence in order to raise it to its true value. To affirm life is to deepen, to make more inward, and to exalt the will... The stronger the reverence for natural life, the stronger grows also that for spiritual life.”

The question of course is, “Where do we find this kind of life?” It seems to me that Jesus points the way upon the Mount of Beatitudes, overlooking the Sea of Galilee, in his *Sermon on the Mount*. I don’t think it is by accident that Jesus is high up on a hill when sharing his transformational insights about experiencing life in its fullest dimension. It is almost as if Jesus is

offering the large crowds a view from above of the two paths that one can take – seeing the sacred in all of life, or not. Jesus, up on a mountain, is giving his listeners then and now, a divine perspective on how we should live.

Jesus tells us that taking God’s path, starts in the heart; later summarizing all he has been trying to say in those familiar words, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment.”

Loving God. We have heard those words so often that we can almost take them for granted. Yet, in truly loving God, everything we are, desire and do, aligns with God’s way for us to live – and it relates to everything else that has life on the earth as well. This is why the 5th century North African bishop, St. Augustine of Hippo, wrote, “Love God and do as you please.”

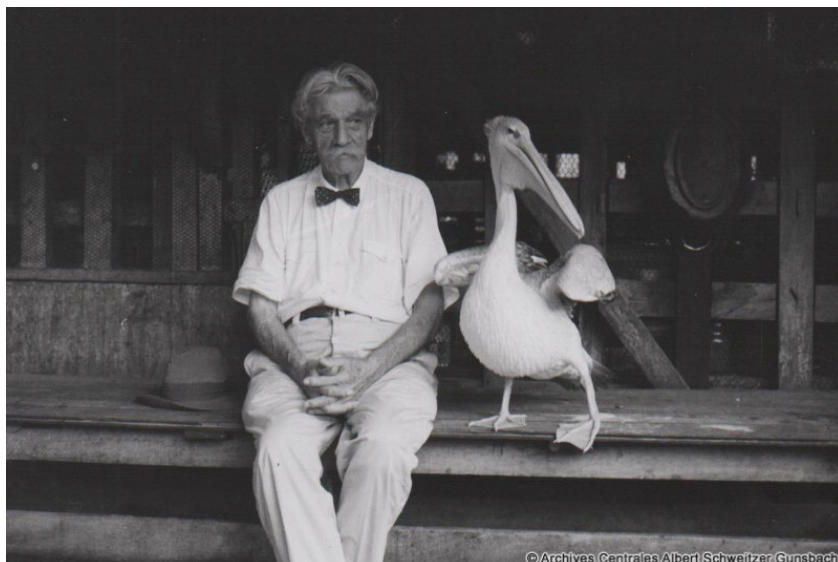
The invitation Jesus offers us is to seek the living God above all else – for only life’s Creator has the keys to enable us to know life in its fullness.

I close with moving words written on a life lived in harmony with our Creator by the late British writer and Christian mystic Malcolm Muggeridge, who was deeply influential in my own life.

In a talk at my alma mater, Muggeridge said;

“We can become new men and women in a new world...It happens, as it has happened innumerable times, it goes on happening. The testimony to this effect is overwhelming. Suddenly caught up in the wonder of God’s love, flooding the universe, made aware of the stupendous creativity which animates all life of our own participation in it; every colour brighter, every meaning clearer, every shape more shapely, every note more musical, every word written and spoken more explicit. Above all else, every human face, all human companionship, all human encounters, recognizably a family affair. The animals too, flying, prowling, burrowing, all their diverse cries and grunts...and the majestic hilltops, the gaunt rocks giving their blessed shade, and the rivers faithfully making their ways to the sea; all irradiated with this same new glory. What other fulfillment is there that could possibly compare with this? What going to the moon or exploration of the universe? What victory or defeat? What revolution or counter-revolution...A fulfillment that transcends all human fulfilling, and yet accessible to all humans. And thus fortified we can laugh...and need not despair.”

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