

Cultivating Reverence, Restraining Violence
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"The cause of violence is not ignorance. It is self-interest. Only reverence can restrain violence - reverence for human life and the environment." William Sloane Coffin

I had the honor of being present recently at the memorial service here in Vermont for Rev. William Sloane Coffin, that great liberal religious leader who gave his heart and voice to the cause of peace. As I listened to those who loved him speak of his life, what struck me most about the stories they shared, is **how much Bill understood the power of language. He used the power of words with great precision and passion.** He never spoke negatively of anyone, his friends and colleagues emphasized. Our words can harm or they can heal. We need to use them with care, and Bill Coffin actually lived this deep knowledge for us. That is perhaps why he was an inspiration for so many.

In Small Group Ministry we learn and practice the power of speaking and listening. It turns out that we're actually cultivating reverence, often quite unintentionally. Because, in the safety and spirit of the group, when we listen and speak in a meaningful way with others, often others very different than ourselves, we come to the shocking discovery that we are all human. We experience our common humanity. In a sense, we discover that there is no such thing as "self-interest" because we are each very much alike and we are all interconnected.

When we witness the humanness and the mystery of each other's and our own life, we transcend the small "self" and enter the experience of reverence. If Bill Coffin is right, then **when we engage in the art of listening and speaking in our SMG groups, we are part of transforming this aching world from a less violent to a more peaceful place.**

One thing about "reverence" and all the deeper meanings that live in us, is that they are, by definition, hard to articulate. So creating a language of reverence is an inherently challenging activity. And, as Bill Coffin has demonstrated for us with his life, **cultivating reverence and cultivating a way of expressing it are what make for great lives -- like the Rev. William Sloane Coffin's and yours.**

"Let parents bequeath to their children not riches, but the spirit of reverence." Plato