

What's Your Story and Is It Big Enough?

Sunday Address, January 26, 2003, Michael Bogdanffy-Kriegh

Michael Bogdanffy-Kriegh is President of the Society's Board of Trustees

Opening Remarks

All was in suspense: calm, silent, motionless, and at peace: empty, the immensity of the sky. There was as yet neither man nor beast. There were no birds, fish, crabs, trees, rocks, caves, ravines, meadows, or woods: there was only sky. Not yet to be seen was the face of the earth; only sky. Not yet to be seen was the face of the earth; only the peaceful sea and the vast emptiness of sky. Nothing was yet formed into a body, nothing joined to anything else. There was nothing moving, nothing rustling, not a sound in the sky. There was nothing upright; nothing but the peaceful waters of the sea, quiet and alone within its bounds. For nothing as yet existed. In the darkness, in the night, there were immobility and silence, but also, the Creator and the Maker, Tepeu and Gucumatz: those that engender, those that give being, alone in the waters, like an increasing light.

They are enveloped in feathers, green and blue: hence the name, the Feathered Serpent, Gucumatz. Great wisdom is their being. Behold the sky, how it exists! How, also, the Heart of Heaven exists! For such is the name of God. 'Tis thus He is called.

And it was then that the word came. Tepeu and Gucumatz talked together in the darkness, in the night. They consulted, deliberated, meditated, matching words and counsels. And it was then, as they reflected, that they understood that when dawn broke, man should appear. They planned creation: the growth of trees, of lianas, life, humanity. Thus it was arranged-in the darkness, in the night-by the Heart of Heaven, who is called Huracan. The first sign of Huracan is lightning; the second sign is the short flash of lightning; the third sign is the long flash. And these three are the Heart of Heaven.

Together, Tepeu and Gucumatz deliberated, considering life and light: what to do to bring about light and dawn; who should furnish food and sustenance. "Let it thus be done! Be filled!" they said. "Let the waters recede and cease to obstruct! Let the earth appear and harden! Let the dawn illuminate sky and earth; for neither glory nor honor will be ours in all that we shall have created and formed until a human creature exists, the creature with reason endowed!" It was thus that they spoke while the earth was taking form through them. It was thus, truly, that creation took place and the earth came into being. "Earth!" they said; and immediately it was formed. Like a mist, a cloud, a gathering of dust, was this creation when the mountains appeared from the waters. In an instant there were great mountains. Only a marvelous power and magic could have brought about this formation of mountains and valleys with forests of cypresses and pines instantly upon them.

And Gucumatz was then filled with joy. "Welcome, O heart of Heaven! And you, Huracan! And you, short flash, and long flash!" "This that we have created and formed," they replied, "shall be finished."

Thus were first formed the earth, the mountains and the plains. And the watercourses were divided, rivulets running serpentine through the mountains, when the high mountains were unveiled. Just so was the earth created, when it was formed by those who are the Heart of Heaven and Heart of Earth: for so are those called who first made fruitful the sky suspended and the earth from the midst of the waters. Such was its fecundation, when they gave it life while meditating on its composition and completion.

So, What's your story, and is it big enough?

I ask this question because I believe we all enact stories of one kind or another and the stories we enact have profound effects on the way human life unfolds on this planet. I have started off with what I would call a very big and fundamental story, a story of how the universe began according to the Quiche Mayans as transcribed by a Catholic missionary. I will move among stories of varying sizes, shapes and themes as my talk unfolds, and in doing so, I will be making the case that we must pay great attention to the stories we are enacting, that we must become aware of them and that we must steward them in as expansive a way as possible.

Additionally, I will consider, briefly, the structure of the story of Ethical Culture and make some observations about what I have come to suspect is a weakness in our religion, or at least our current pursuit of it. As most of you know, this past October I had the opportunity to present a paper on some work I was involved in years ago under a grant from NASA. While researching the paper, I uncovered some interesting facts about a 420 million year old story involving the moon and one of earth's older creature families, the Nautiloids. Most, if not all of you, unfortunately, are familiar with the beautiful spiral shell of our modern day nautilus and have either seen specimens of the shell, or images of it, split in half, revealing it's exquisite spiral chambered structure with pearly iridescent interior laminations. I say unfortunately because the single biggest threat to the survival of this poorly understood living fossil is our rapacious desire to possess its shell. The shell has become a ubiquitous symbol of the beauty and perfection of nature. It has been so often used in this symbolic role, that it seems to me to have become something of a cliché.

It was some additional research I did to verify the facts of this improbable story that really brought it home to me. I discovered that there have been Nautiloids for some 420 million years. Originally there were 10,000 varieties, though only 5 persist today. I also discovered that the Chambered Nautilus alive today constructs a new chamber every lunar month and that for each day of the lunar month, it lays down a new lamination on the walls of its chamber. If you count the number of laminations in each chamber of the modern nautilus, you will get 29 or 30, the current lunar month being a little more than 29 days long.

All of this is interesting enough, but the astonishing thing is that fossilized Nautili can be dated in this way. This is because the length of the lunar month has been slowly changing over time. This is caused by the drag the moon puts on the earth's rotation through the tidal action of the seas. As a result, the earth slows down approximately 2 seconds every 50,000 years. Additionally, due to the law of conservation of momentum, the moon moves further away as the earth slows down. 420 million years ago the moon was 60% closer to the earth and the earth was turning faster. At that time, a lunar month lasted just 9 or 10 days. And sure enough, when the lamination layers are checked in fossilized Nautilus shells that are 420 million years old, there are 9 or 10. So, for some 420 million years the moon and the nautiloids have been engaged in a beautiful and subtle pas de deux.

I have made much of this relationship, both in my presentation at the World Space Congress and to friends and family members who still have the patience to listen to me. What is remarkable about it to me is its exquisite subtlety, its unimaginable longevity, and its absolute continuity. I have not read an explanation of the "mechanics" of this relationship, but my presumption is that it has something to do with the effects of the gravity of the moon on this creature or its environment, either directly or indirectly. If so, it is remarkable because the force of gravity is not strong. It is, in fact, a relatively weak force requiring massive bodies to propagate much effect at all. More remarkable still is the very nuanced effect this subtle pull has on the construction of the organism, which lays down incredibly thin laminations in precise and beautiful spiral form. It is a profound demonstration of the cosmic story we are all intimately engaged in, whether we realize it or not.

Now, I am sure that the Nautiloid family story has had its ups and downs over time. Members meet a violent end as food for other creatures. Massive destruction occurs from catastrophic events. Habitats change and are no longer friendly. Yet the creature and all its subtle arrangements have persisted over an unimaginably long period of time. The fundamental physical laws persist, as do the conditions for life. That comforts me.

The paper I delivered at the Space Congress reviewed work I did with my mentor on the design of the habitation module of the International Space Station. Our work was unique, both philosophically and creatively, and continues to be so. The approach we took viewed individual, by which we meant humanity, and place, by which we meant wherever humanity happens to dwell, as an intimately entwined and continuous set of relationships where the sum is very much greater than the parts. We argued that one could not be understood apart from the other and that there are basic "proportional" realities that govern this complex of relationships at every level and in every aspect. We further argued that individual's movement into space presented a new dynamic in the relationship between individual and place and was, in fact, an evolutionary step. Finally, we argued, to make this step in an appropriate and beneficial way, we had to understand it in relation to the story, or vision of earth and humanity we wished to enact.

Michael Kalil – my mentor's name was Michael too – developed a mythic story of the seven stages of the unfolding of individual and place. The desire to know, he said, pushed

the universe into vibration and manifestation. Out of this materialized all the stellar matter we are witnessing today. At some point individual became. At first individual was barely separate from inanimate matter and nature, not even knowing a difference between individual and place. Then individual began to understand a difference and geometry and direction were created. Civilizations grew, peoples and cultures clashed. Individual became capable of lifting off the face of the planet into an environment without gravity. Freedom from gravity is freedom from bodily constraints and Michael viewed this as humanity's initial step into pure consciousness.

Although I would argue that nature has intelligence all its own, the critical difference between individual and all the rest of nature, is that individual appears to have some choice in the story or stories it enacts. And the stories we individuals enact, whether conscious or not, inform all of our actions. Our actions inherit the expansiveness or the limitations of this story and the results we obtain proceed directly from our actions.

It is important to realize that we are not necessarily conscious of the stories we enact, and that the first step in taking charge of our stories is to make sure we are conscious of them. Let me give you a relatively simple example of how we transmit or take on stories without even knowing or thinking about it, and how these stories can give an expansive or restrictive dimension to our lives.

A number of years ago I lived in an apartment near enough to Stuyvesant Town to be in the habit of going to the parks among the buildings where I would find a comfortable bench to sit on and read or write in my journal while enjoying my morning coffee. On one occasion I remember observing parents with their children in the playgrounds. One mother and child were playing at a slide. The child tried to walk up the slide rather than slide down and was admonished by mom that one went down slides, not up. Two sets of parent and child were at the swings. Both children wanted to use the older children's swing which one would think they were too small for. One child was redirected to the safer harness swing by mom, while the other was encouraged to try the older children's swing and provided with help. Another mother had an impossibly adventurous child that she allowed to stretch to his limits while always being there to catch him if he should fall. One or two of his antics took my breath away they seemed so likely to end in disaster.

I'll refrain from making judgments about parenting style since I've never had the good fortune to have to work one out for myself and I suspect it is much harder than it looks from a distance. It is, however, easy to see how parents transmit ways of thinking about the world in continuous and subtle ways that might not seem like much at any given moment, but which add up to 14 or more years of ingrained story that goes on to influence the rest of an Individual's life in innumerable ways. We have all been given stories by our parents to enact, some of which we are grateful for and others of which we may spend years in therapy trying to undo!

Cultures do something very similar to what parents do. They pass from one generation to another the significant information of that culture and its orientation to the world at large. One of the chief ways in which this is accomplished is through the mythology of the

culture. Now, it is my feeling that the term myth and religion are in some ways interchangeable, and I want you to make a note of that since we hold ourselves to be a religion, and I promised earlier that I would speak to what I believe may be a weakness in our religion or, at least, our current pursuit of it.

In her book about the rise of religious fundamentalism, *The Battle for God*, Karen Armstrong makes a distinction between modern, democratic, secular society, whose roots are in the industrial and scientific revolution spawned in the West and now dominant around the globe, and traditional society, through their respective attitudes towards Mythos and Logos. Mythos, she defines as an understanding of nature, or the cosmos if you will, that is qualitative, and not linear. That is, it is something to be intuited. An understanding achieved through the recognition of spirit, sacredness and ritual practice. Logos she defines as an understanding that is quantitative, linear, rational and predictable. It is apprehended through the application of a logical thought process that has at its center the idea of cause and effect.

In his book on Sacred Geometry Gary Lawlor talks at length about what a difference a 0 makes. He marks the discovery of zero as a pivotal moment in the ascendance of Logos over Mythos and relates how some historians believe it occurred in seventh and eighth century India where particularly ascetic traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism developed the practice of attempting to reduce mind activity to nothing in an effort to gain unity with the universe. To quote Lawlor:

It is interesting to note that during the century just prior to this time a particular line of thought had begun to develop in India which found its expression in both Hinduism (through Shankhara) and Buddhism (through Narayana). This school laid exclusive emphasis on the goal of the renunciation of the natural world, even to the extent of mortification of the physical body. The goal of this highly ascetic pursuit was the attainment of an utterly impersonal, blank void, a total cessation of movement within consciousness. A description of it attributed to Buddha is “a state of incongnizable, imperishable, selfless absence.”

Before that time, according to Lawlor, the number 1 stood at the center of number systems, with ever diminishing fractional decrements extending on one side, and ever-increasing whole number increments on the other. The number one stood for unity and wholeness and all the fractions descending down, and all the whole numbers ascending up, were incremental unfoldings of this oneness into visible reality. Numbers were vehicles of quantity and quality. Mathematical historians tell us that our scientific and industrial achievements would have been difficult or impossible without the discovery of zero.

Lawlor makes an interesting case that this discovery was pivotal in the draining of meaning from numbers and Mythos from life. If that is true, can you begin to comprehend the impact of the stories a few ascetics were enacting, and there could only have been a few as I don't imagine that extreme asceticism has ever been very popular.

Can you begin to comprehend the impact of their stories on the development of human history?

I can't resist an aside here, I think it is delightfully perverse that our modern computer driven society is utterly dependent on endless strings of ones and zeros, as if some fantastic battle between meaning and no meaning, wholeness and emptiness, right and wrong, good and evil, is being fought out in epic computer battles all around the globe all the time. There's a profound piece of art in that thought somewhere.

Anyway, to come at this from yet another angle, though still a mathematical one, I offer the following quote from a book entitled *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, written by David Bohm, a physicist of the century just past:

It is clear that measure is to be expressed in more detail through proportion or ratio; and "ratio" is the Latin word from which our modern "reason" is derived. In the ancient view, reason is seen as insight into a totality of ratio or proportion, regarded as relevant inwardly to the very nature of things (and not only outwardly as a form of comparison with a standard or unit). Of course, this ratio is not necessarily merely a numerical proportion (though it does, of course, include such proportion). Rather, it is in general a qualitative sort of universal proportion or relationship. (Bohm pp. 20-21)

Here is yet another example of the transition that modern Western civilization has made from more ancient attitudes. The modern point of view has everything to do with quantities that are absolutely identifiable and they are what they are. A table is six feet long; a room is 12 feet wide, a building is 100 feet tall. Measurement did not start out this way. It started out as the size of this in relation to that. What was important was the relationship, not the quantity. What David Bohm is getting at here, is that the ancient view of measurement emphasized relationship and incorporated the full and complete nature of things.

Joseph Campbell identifies four principal functions of mythology in his book *The Way of Zen*:

1. "To waken and maintain in the individual a sense of wonder and participation in the mystery of this finally inscrutable universe, whether understood in Michelangelo's way as an effect of the will of an anthropomorphic creator, or in the way of our modern physical scientists – and many of the leading oriental religious and philosophical systems – as the continuously created dynamic display of an absolutely transcendent, yet universally immanent "mysterium tremendum et fascinans," which is the ground at once of the whole spectacle and of oneself."
2. "to fill every particle and quarter of the current cosmological image with its measure of this mystical import."
3. To validate and maintain "whatever moral system and manner of life customs may be peculiar to the local culture."
4. To conduct "individuals in harmony through the passages of human life"

It is interesting to note that as far as Joseph Campbell is concerned, our scientific theories of the universe are no less mythological than the descriptions that came before them. It is hard to imagine that humanity in a few thousand years, assuming we survive that long, won't look back at our current concept of the structure of the universe and think, how quaint.

It is a universal desire of Humanity to perceive and connect to a cosmic order. This yearning is, at heart, a search for meaning in existence. I would argue that making a connection to that cosmic universal story is essential to living an expansive story and is the place where I think Ethical Culture may be weak, at least as we are practicing it today. As Khoren Arisian, our Senior Leader, which is, for those of you who are new to Ethical Culture, our equivalent to minister or priest, as Khoren put it when I spoke to him about this idea, we need a philosophy of nature. Yes, we do. And I would further argue that it has to be a philosophy that is, as David Bohm suggests, both quantitative and qualitative.

Qualitative manifestations of being, such as belief, desire, compassion, and empathy, reach depths that defy description in any quantitative sense. Belief is a case in point and I'll give you a somewhat mundane example of the power of it. The placebo effect in healing is a well-known phenomenon. It has been shown not only to activate healing upon administration of a medication protocol that has no demonstrable reason to be effective, but also to be a necessary component in activating treatment protocols that do have demonstrable reasons for effectiveness. Similarly, when taking mathematics exams, men and women of comparable ability will perform equally well when told that the exam is gender neutral. It is interesting how such a subtle change in the story being enacted can have such an effect. (All in the mind, 01.21.2002)

So, in short, belief matters, as do all of the qualitative aspects of the human, dare I say, spirit. But the act of belief itself, and the depths to which it can reach, are as yet, inscrutable. Allowing that inscrutability into our lives and understanding that we are intimately entwined in a cosmic fabric that we may never be able to rationally comprehend, and allowing that understanding to support a qualitative sense of universal connection is, in my opinion, essential.

I would further argue that if we desire transformative shifts in behavior for ourselves or for our culture, we cannot live without this understanding. I suggest to you that it is difficult to nearly impossible to bring about a significant change in the behavior of any individual, let alone a whole society, without bringing about a fundamental shift of their worldview. It is this fundamental shift of worldview that produces the significant "aha" moments of our lives. It is the recognition of the "mysterium tremendum et fascinans," that gives us the stance from which to achieve this transformation.

This, by the way, would be my argument in favor of a continuing and vigorous space exploration effort, both manned and unmanned. It is essential to the expansion of our collective imaginations and stories. It is a fundamentally optimistic and awe-inspiring endeavor that humanity needs in the most profound way. What one of us is not deeply

affected by the Apollo mission photograph of the earth rising over the moon if we stop and contemplate it for a while? And don't get me started on the images of the Hubble Space Telescope.

Now, just as “nature abhors a vacuum,” so the Western scientific mind abhors the inscrutable, particularly when it is perceived as taking the form of religious mysticism. It is difficult to use words such as “sacred” and “spiritual” as descriptive of qualities or attitudes important to our daily lives. The realm of the sacred and the spiritual, the realm of mythos, are regarded with great suspicion and they have been banished from any kind of central role in Western society due to their inscrutable character. Ethical Culture is a religion that came into being as a necessary result of the unfolding of a democratic, scientific method oriented, secular society and as such, we reflect both the strengths and the weaknesses of that point of view.

We are strong in functions 3 and 4 of myth and religion, which to remind you are:

- To validate and maintain "whatever moral system and manner of life customs may be peculiar to the local culture." And:
- To conduct "individuals in harmony through the passages of human life"

In fact, not only do we understand the need to validate and maintain a moral system and manner of life customs, but through our eschewal of dogma, and emphasis on continued learning and understanding, we have further understood the danger inherent in that third function of myth, which is that the desire to preserve the security of the status quo becomes unreasonable in the face of new truths.

We are weak, however, in functions one and two, which again to remind you are:

- “To waken and maintain in the individual a sense of wonder and participation in the mystery of this finally inscrutable universe” and,
- “to fill every particle and quarter of the current cosmological image with its measure of this mystical import.”

The thing is, I don't think we have to be weak in these two functions. Nor do we have to get impossibly mystical to address them. We simply have to recognize that when all is said and done this universe, even the very small amount of it we know, is a mysterious, fascinating and, yes, awe inspiring place. And we have to practice this recognition continuously. When have we ever brought someone here to tell us about, for example, the extraordinary impact the Hubble Space Telescope has had on cosmological theory and understanding in just the last couple of years?

And, if we are feeling particularly bold and adventurous, I would suggest that we reclaim the realm of the sacred and spiritual by expanding our definition of them. Try this definition of sacred on for size and see if you like it:

The realm of the sacred is to be understood as a qualitative principle that belongs to all of humanity and is centered on acts of respect for the ratio or relationship of things. Through respect, through the realm of the sacred, we hold things apart from violation. Respecting the ratio or relationship of things means seeking to understand in the fullest way possible, and acting with the highest regard for, the place of everything in the universe of relationships that constitutes our world. For example, we don't get so carried away with the beauty of the Nautilus shell that we wipe the species out by killing massive numbers of living organisms just to have wide distribution of its shell. In this regard, a sense of the sacred can and should permeate all of life and would be encouraged by our newly rediscovered and proclaimed fascination with, and awe of, our ultimately inscrutable universe.

Likewise, the term spirit or spiritual is to be understood as a description of animating characteristics that are inscrutable. That is, they are insufficiently describable through a quantitative analysis of physical reality and are more readily addressed through qualitative expressions. This is, or should be, the role of the arts and humanities and we should embrace this role increasingly in the life of this institution and society. The artful, the qualitative, is in low esteem these days, but there is good reason to bring it back as an integral part of the fabric of our perception and understanding.

At this point I should acknowledge that there is a danger in allowing the qualitative a role alongside the quantitative, or the spiritual a role alongside the material. Humanity in general can become unreasonably and destructively attached to particular beliefs. Witness the fundamentalist spawned terrorism we are experiencing today. As we can easily see throughout history, and particularly throughout recent history, ways of looking at the world have been continuously revised as the boundary of perception has been steadily extended in both the subtle and gross directions relative to the scale of our selves. Concepts of reality are regularly challenged and replaced by new ones that more accurately reflect the conditions revealed through this extended view. It is essential that as the qualitative assumes a roll alongside the quantitative, openness to the challenges offered by new or extended perceptions be maintained. To tenaciously and even violently hold on to old beliefs and ways of being in light of new perceptions is a tendency of humanity that requires steadfast resistance. This by the way is the same thing that renders institutions ineffective, an inability to change with the times because of attachment to the security of what has always been.

This brings me back to the moon and the Nautilus. Thinking about them, I am reminded of the incredible subtlety and richness of life, and the incredible stretch of time and space across which it has acted. The point my mentor was making in starting with a story of the complete universe is that our designs and actions in the here and now fair much better when tied to this huge and profound story of the unfolding of the cosmos and life within it. And by developing a reverent attitude of respect towards this profound story, we create a marvelous stage for the enactment of our own stories, which cannot help but be expanded for the better.

I suspect that most of the stories that are being enacted today are way too limited. And if you need an example of this, just think about George W. Bush's axis of evil and his myopic pursuit of revenge against Saddam Hussein regardless of what the rest of the world thinks. We have a responsibility to take a close look at the stories we are enacting and ask whether they are large enough? By refusing to have our stories bounded by race, belief, ideology, nationality, and even by time, and by grounding them in our awe of the universe, we choose to enact a larger, more hopeful and more positive story of humanity. And I suspect that if there isn't room in it for an appreciation of the dance of the Moon and the Nautilus, it needs to be bigger still.

And so, I come uroboros, tail devouring snake like back to where I began, and I ask you, what's your story, and is it big enough?

Thank you.