

# *My Humanist Concept of Sacred*

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Current theory in Physical Cosmology tells us that the Universe literally exploded into existence approximately 13.7 billion years ago. As this same theory predicts that the event emerged out of a single point, it can be presumed for the time being that there was nothing in the way to be savaged by the blast.

About 13.4 billion years ago the first stars and galaxies began to form. Suns are massive nuclear furnaces where matter is subjected to unimaginable extremes of pressure and heat. Throughout the life of stars there are constant eruptions that spew matter out into space and, as most of us know, stars eventually die, many of them going through massive explosions before going cold or possibly collapsing into very dense matter, even black holes. Indeed, at some point in the very distant future our own sun will demise, taking with it any life that may still exist on this planet.

About 3.8 billion years ago the first primitive life forms appeared and the workings of the survival of the fittest were set in motion. It was a microbe eat microbe world back then.

700 million years ago the first primitive animals appear and start their competition to be the next big thing.

About 200 million years ago mammals emerge, but since the dinosaurs won the big thing competition long before that, they remain a secondary trend for some 135 million years.

About 65 million years ago the dinosaurs become extinct, the apparent victims of a random universal catastrophic event. An asteroid or comet collided with the earth, indiscriminately killing, it can be presumed, any kind of life in the vicinity of the impact and altering long term environmental conditions to such a degree that the dinosaurs fail to survive. Mammals begin their pursuit of becoming the next planetary idol.

About 600 thousand years ago homo sapiens arrives and soon after, geologically speaking, these intelligent creatures begin to ponder the world around them and observe that it is a dog eat dog world and that nobody gets out of it alive.

About 170,000 years ago, a supernova explodes in the large Magellanic Cloud, destroying who knows what in the immediate vicinity and sending a brilliant flash of radiation out across the reaches of interstellar space.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of August, 79AD, Mount Vesuvius erupted burying the city of Pompeii and indiscriminately killing everyone, the good the bad, the men, the women, the children.

On August 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of 1883 an eruption of Krakatoa culminates in a series of massive explosions heard as far away as Perth in Australia. The official death toll recorded by Dutch authorities was 36,417. Tsunami waves were experienced by ships as far away as South Africa. So far reaching are the effects that researchers have recently proposed that the blood red sky depicted in Edvard Munch's painting "The Scream" can be attributed to the lingering effects of the explosion. Munch is quoted as saying

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<sup>1</sup> The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

“suddenly the sky turned blood red ... I stood there shaking with fear and felt an endless scream passing through nature.” The painting was made in 1893, a full ten years after the eruption.

In 1987, earth based observers witness a super nova in the Large Magellanic Cloud, 170,000 years after it actually happens.

In October of 2003, a young boy was playing beneath the clay cliffs of Block Island and was suddenly buried under a dump truck sized hunk of clay that broke away. Frantic efforts to save him were to no avail.

On December 26, 2004, a great earthquake shook the floor of the Indian Ocean producing a Tsunami that took the lives of almost 230,000 people.

On August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2005 Hurricane Katrina, one of the most costly and deadly hurricanes in the history of the United States, reached land fall on the Louisiana coast. Almost 2000 people died and an estimated 81.2 billion dollars worth of property damage was done.

My topic today is the concept of sacred and its usefulness, or lack thereof, to humanity in general, and more specifically within the context of our Ethical Humanist religion. Let me immediately add the caveat that this is my concept of sacred. I say “my” because it is a concept I have largely worked out on my own. I will be quoting no authorities today, not because it isn’t useful and even important to build our understandings on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, but because I am trying to reach deeply into my own personal experience of the world through the 52 years I have been here and grapple directly with a concept that I think is key to our human existence and our ability to live with one another. And, since this is my concept of sacred, you are free to accept or reject it as you will. I do not present myself as an authority on the subject, nor do I plan to beat you into submission with any authority higher than my own. Instead, what I hope to do today is to provoke at least a little thought and reflection on your part as to what your own concept of sacred is and how useful it is to you.

Let me start by sharing a definition of sacred provided by Wikipedia:

Adjective

sacred (comparative more sacred, superlative most sacred)

1. Set apart by solemn religious ceremony; especially, in a good sense, made holy; set apart to religious use; consecrated; not profane or common; as, a sacred place; a sacred day; sacred service.
2. Relating to religion, or to the services of religion; not secular; religious; as, sacred history.  
Smit with the love of sacred song. -Milton.
3. Designated or exalted by a divine sanction; possessing the highest title to obedience, honor, reverence, or veneration; entitled to extreme reverence; venerable.  
Such neighbor nearness to our sacred [royal] blood Should nothing privilege him. Shakespeare  
Poet and saint to thee alone were given, The two most sacred names of earth and heaven. -Cowley.
4. Hence, not to be profaned or violated; inviolable.  
Secrets of marriage still are sacred held. -Dryden.

5. Consecrated; dedicated; devoted; -- with to.  
A temple, sacred to the queen of love. -Dryden.
6. (archaic) Solemnly devoted, in a bad sense, as to evil, vengeance, curse, or the like; accursed; baleful.  
But, to destruction sacred and devote. -Milton.

I am very interested in the idea that when we make something sacred, we set it apart as something that is not to be violated. That a place, a thing or even a concept becomes sacred through our collective agreement that it is to be held apart from violation. Let me repeat that, a place, a thing or even a concept becomes sacred through our collective agreement that it is to be held apart from violation.

We humanists have a natural and understandable aversion to words that have been so thoroughly claimed by the dominant religions. We are especially averse to words and concepts when common usage connects them to a belief in any kind of divinity. Almost all of us are refugees from one or even several of those religions, and we are uncomfortable with any concept that might lead us back to what we experienced there.

None the less, there are many words and attendant concepts that hold great power if we can wean them from their supernatural connections, and understand them as purely human constructs that are key to making our limited earthly existence a happy one.

I began this talk by reaching way back to the beginning of time as we know it and then marching you forward through a representative litany of the rumblings and churnings of the Universe. The Universe, as it turns out, regularly produces moments of great violence. The unfolding of matter and energy in time and space brings all kinds of things together in juxtapositions where one or all of them cease to be anything like what they were before.

It seems pretty certain too, that everything that comes into existence will sooner or later go out of existence. I am pretty sure that there is no judgment involved in this unfolding of matter and energy in space and over time. The universe is indifferent to what you and I would perceive as the consequences of these comings and goings. Stuff happens. The universe unfolds.

It is important to understand then that there is no place or thing that you, or I or anyone can wish to set apart from violation that this churning unfolding of the universe cannot easily wipe away in the blink of an eye.

You and I too are relatively indifferent to the plight of lifeless matter along the way. Things come and go according to the physical laws of the universe and that is that. We are even relatively indifferent to the comings and goings of entire evolutionary branches of the distant past. What one of us mourns the fate of the dinosaurs, creatures that were unlucky enough to be a resident of the planet when both it and a comet or an asteroid attempted to occupy the same space at the same time? We are perhaps a little awestruck at the magnitude of the event and its consequences. We worry that something similar could happen to us one day. But really, who cries for dinosaurs? Or for that matter, who imagines that their fate was some kind of divine retribution for their failure to reign in the debauched ways of the Tyrannosaurs or the evil cunning of the Velociraptors?

I think you will agree that even had humanity been present for such events, there is little that we could have done to stop them. Ok, I know we are currently tracking a lot of asteroids hoping to detect, and ultimately deter any that may look as though they will

come too close. Nevertheless, as my extremely partial list of calamities shows, we are unlikely to be able to avoid them all. Sooner or later the universe is going to throw something big at us and there won't be much we can do about it.

We will be violated, as in, "interrupted, disturbed," which is the fourth definition of the transitive verb, violate, to be found in the online version of Webster's dictionary. I have a feeling that very early on humanity noticed that the world was an often brutal place, that they had little control over the calamities that could befall them, and that, even if they managed to avoid those calamities it was inevitable that they would one day feel their strength and vitality slip away. That eventually and inevitably their very beings would be interrupted. The unfolding of our lives after a certain point, 30, maybe 40 years of age for us, can seem a steady and continual chipping away by violations, small and large. As Stephen Sondheim put it in his musical *A Little Night Music*, "Every Day a Little Death."

When you think of it this way, it is not hard to understand why humanity would develop a profound longing for some place beyond the continual and inevitable intrusions of the workings of the world in which they lived, a place that is eternally apart from violation, a heaven. Or that they might imagine a place that was beyond those violations at one time in the distant past, a Garden of Eden. Or even that they would contemplate a place of eternal punishment with violations of the most awful kinds for the damnation of the wicked among them.

It is this line of thinking that really helps me understand how such elaborate fantasies like the concept of heaven, the Garden of Eden and the fires of hell came into being and how so many of us can believe in their literal existence. What one of us doesn't long for a place to be where there is no violation? Please, I want a heaven to go to, it sounds wonderful. And throw in a few virgins while you are at it!

I and most of you don't really believe these places existed or exist as anything more than mythological constructs addressing deep seated existential longings that we all have. And I would suggest that once we start to wean the concept of sacred from the supernatural we can start to examine it for its utility to our earthly existence. I would further suggest that a critical component of the concept of sacred is that we are a species that experiences and understands violation because we are something more than a creature that lives from one day to the next. We experience our world, remember how we were, and entertain dreams about the future. We create words like sacred and violate so that we can share our experiences, fears and desires with one another. And, unfortunately, the violations I think we were most concerned about when we first identified and named the concept are those that we all too readily perpetrate ourselves. It is no accident that eight of the Ten Commandments are proscriptions against actions that violate and that six of those are proscriptions against actions that violate one another. We long ago came to the conclusion that in order to have a civil society we would have to collectively set things apart from our own propensity to violate them. We had to agree that certain things are sacred.

And in case I have been too subtle up until this point, I want to emphatically state that what is sacred and what is violation is purely a human construct, as I was hoping my review of selected universal calamities in the beginning would help me illustrate. The universe, except through and by us or any other intelligent creatures there may be out there, does not make distinctions about what is open to violation and what is not. Mother Nature will as easily wipe away a temple as it will uproot a tree or kill off the dinosaurs.

It is we who make the distinctions because they help us in some way to navigate our lives and our relationships to the rest of life around us.

Now there are all kinds of sacred when we define it simply as that which we agree to hold apart from violation. I would bet that all of us sitting here today have numerous places and or objects that are sacred to us. We give them special reverence because they mean something to us. They help us know who and what we are. And we would be incredibly upset if someone took them or destroyed them or otherwise desecrated them.

Let's explore for a moment the sacred places that are our homes. Have you ever stopped to think about how different it is to be on one side or the other of the threshold of the front door of your home? About how the simple act of crossing from one side to the other substantially changes your frame of mind? We repeat it on a daily basis and each time we do there is a qualitative experience of transition from sanctuary to the bustling and demanding outer world. There is a particular feeling to walking out the door to go to work. There is a particular feeling to walking out the door to run a few errands. There is a particular feeling to coming home from the end of a long day of work and closing the door behind us leaving the energy draining challenges and frustrations of that workday outside.

There is a particular significance to the invitation we offer to an acquaintance or friend to cross that threshold and join us inside of our homes. As visitors we intuitively understand that when we cross a threshold into the home of another we have been granted a privilege and that with it goes a certain amount of trust that we will not violate the sanctity of it. What one of us does not cherish the sanctity of our homes, either consciously or unconsciously? What one of us has not felt, or would not feel violated by the intrusion of the world outside in some uninvited way?

And significantly, we broadly agree that one's home is one's castle and that we are entitled to enjoy it free of violation by others. And, recognizing that there are at least a few for whom this common agreement does not hold, we employ significant security tactics to keep ourselves free of violation and we collectively agree to punish those who do.

It is not only personal places and things that develop a sacred character. We collectively identify things, places and even concepts as sacred. Most of us commonly acknowledge the myriad of churches, synagogues, temples, shrines, etc. that are sacred places and all the sacred relics that fill them. We don't necessarily share the belief in the sacredness of these places and things, but we understand that others do and we tend to respect that and in so doing, we also help to reinforce that sanctity. Somewhat less obvious to some of us would be the sacredness of our cultural institutions. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, MOMA, and my current favorite temple of contemplation, the DIA Art Museum in Beacon, are all places that are sacred, largely because they contain objects that are of profound importance to our collective existence, representing our most important cultural memories and concepts.

We often hear the complaint "Is nothing sacred anymore?" And some of us may even nod our heads in knowing sympathy as we have often experienced the loss of something that had relevance to our own history and sense of being. I have to laugh a little at this though, because everywhere I turn I see evidence of people deciding what is sacred and what is not and an amazing amount of the world is sacred to somebody, and an equally amazing amount of the world is sacred to large numbers of us collectively. It is just that we are constantly churning through the ceaseless production of humanity and deciding what is sacred and what is not. Our ideas about that evolve continuously. And of

course part of that churning is a challenge to the status quo of the past. We are, and should be, always asking the question, is that really worthy of setting apart?

As I stated a minute ago, places and objects are not all that can become sacred. Perhaps some of the most significant as well as some of the most difficult to puzzle out are really more conditions or states of being.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

These rights are not just unalienable, they are sacred and therefore not to be violated. Though, exactly what is meant by the concepts of Life and Liberty or the pursuit of Happiness is open to interpretation. And of course there was some distance to go before these rights were understood to apply to more than just white male property owners.

It is in the realm of such concepts that I think we find the most important and significant instances of the sacred. This is the realm in which we are most likely to find agreement that approaches universal on what is deserving of our reverent respect, though we might have to struggle to bring some around to it.

The sanctity of human life is a concept that a vast majority of humanity clings to, in spite of the difficulty we have in maintaining it or agreeing about when it begins and whether it is right to terminate a nascent one. In my listing of calamities at the beginning of this talk I specifically avoided thinking about the tragedies that are of our own making, largely because I needed to make the point that stuff happens and I did not want to get caught up in the whys and wherefores of human violence. But let's admit the obvious, humanity is capable of incredibly destructive and violative acts as we are all too well reminded of by the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the ongoing Genocide of Darfur, the daily tragedies occurring in Iraq and the almost unbearable tragedy this week at Virginia Tech.

It is our own capacity to violate one another and everything living around us that makes a concept of the sacred incredibly important. It is, I believe, one of the main reasons it came about at all.

So here we are standing in the auditorium of Ethical Culture talking about the concept of sacred and the relevance of it to our lives and our religion. I think we have reached the time to ask the question, what do we Ethical Culturists believe to be sacred? That is, what do we commonly agree to honor, and thereby hold apart from violation? On the outside of our building it says that we are "dedicated to the ever increasing knowledge, and practice and love of the right." Behind me it says "the place where people meet to seek the highest is holy ground." That is an interesting and telling statement. Notice that it is not this place that is holy, but any place where we meet in an effort to seek the very highest. Of course this building has importance as the first home Ethical Culture could call its own. It has achieved a certain level of sacred within the Ethical Culture movement and even to some who are outside of the movement and are familiar with the things that have emanated from this place. But for Ethical Culture, the highest level of sacred is reserved for something else.

The place where people meet to seek the highest is holy ground. The highest what? And why do we want to know and appreciate and love "the right?" It is because our fundamental belief is in the worth and dignity, indeed, the sanctity of every human being. It is because we believe that individuals and peoples are brimming with potential and have the capacity to do the most remarkable things. And finally, it is because we

believe that in order for individuals and peoples to achieve that potential we must learn to conduct ourselves and the affairs of our institutions in such a way that we honor that worth and dignity. We honor it by refraining from unreasonably or selfishly restricting an individual's potential. And even more importantly, we are enjoined to conduct ourselves in a way that moves ourselves and those around us ever closer to the realization of that fullest potential.

Take a look around you, there are no objects and trappings that are intended to channel a higher authority. And while we do indulge in some of the trappings of ceremony, it is relatively sparse and it is clear that we are not here to worship or acquaint ourselves with any higher authority. In Ethical Culture we put at the very center of our faith the ethical treatment of one another and the work we are to do is both the work I am doing right here and now in trying to deepen my understanding of the principles by which I want to guide my life, and the actions I am compelled to take because of that understanding.

One of the fundamental characteristics of human beings, indeed, one of the essential ingredients in our capacity to be ethical human beings, is that we have some degree of free will. That is, we can choose between a set of alternative actions in a way that is at least partly based on an understanding of likely consequences. Put another way, we are not driven purely by instinct. Without this crucial distinction there is no concept of sacred or of an ethical culture. If there is no free will, no capacity to make reasoned and thoughtful choices, then we might as well pack it up and go home.

Ours is not a religion that assumes we are helpless to help ourselves. In fact, our assumption is that in the here and now, we are the only ones who can help ourselves. And how do we go about helping ourselves? We do that by building relationships of integrity that honor and respect the worth and dignity of all involved. That is the fundamental core of Ethical Culture. That is our reason for being.

So, you may ask, how do relationships of integrity get built? I'd like to begin to answer that question by looking at a set of human capacities that appear to me to be essential ones to be possessed and clearly demonstrated if we wish to establish relationships with integrity. Among these are the capacities for courage, honesty, fairness, forgiveness, tolerance, respect, empathy and joy. Together these capacities, or the lack thereof, will determine the integrity of our relationships by setting the level of trust, and consequently, the level of commitment we will have to one another.

Let's think a little about why each one of them is important. When an individual has a capacity for courage, we know they will stand by us under difficult situations and do the right thing by us in those situations. This will be true whether doing right by us means facing an outer peril together with us or the inner peril of our anger because they will tell us something we don't want to hear but need to. We know too that they will have the capacity to do the right thing, regardless of the consequences for themselves. Several of the other capacities are intimately linked, even dependent on the capacity for courage.

When we know an individual is both honest and has courage, then we know we can rely on them to give us as accurate an account of any situation as any individual would be capable of, and that they will endeavor to do so regardless of how it reflects on us or them. We know too that they will have the capacity to admit their mistakes.

The capacity to be fair tells us that an individual can regularly overcome their prejudices no matter what they are and how they arise and that they can consistently resist the temptation to benefit to another's detriment.

An individual's capacity for forgiveness tells us that mistakes can be made, but we know that they will always be reviewed in the light of our intentions and the circumstances that were attendant. It also tells us that there is room for redemption even when the transgression is significant. And who among us has not transgressed significantly at least a few times in our lives?

The capacity for tolerance tells us that there will be room for our differences, without which a diverse group of individuals cannot hope to congregate in relative peace and harmony.

The capacity for respect tells us that we will have worth and dignity in an individual's eyes and that they will honor that worth and dignity even while disagreeing with us or having their faith in us challenged.

An individual's capacity for empathy tells us they are able to understand the world as we see and experience it.

And finally, an individual's capacity for joy lets us know that they can join together with us in optimism and wonderment and with a full appreciation of all that is possible.

Combine these capacities together with a generally shared set of values, add the leavening of the experience of one another over time, and you have the prime content of any relationship with integrity, trust. In my opinion, to come to a place of mutual trust and respect is the mother of all sacred places in Ethical Culture. It is only from this place of trust and respect that we have any hope of helping one another to reach his or her greatest potential. That we have any hope of an Ethical Culture.

It is not easy work to get to this place. To begin with, possessing this set of capacities is not a given. It is something we work on throughout our lives. And even if we have all of these capacities in good measure, it takes time and a lot of willing effort for individuals to come together and create that space of mutual trust and respect. And once achieved it is an exquisite but relatively delicate flowering. Failing even modestly, in any one of those capacities can easily shatter it.

None the less, it is a place of sanctity that is eminently worth trying for, again, and again, and again.

In closing I would like to offer up my own humanist definition of what is sacred.

Sacred is created through an act, or a series of acts of respect and honor. By offering our respect and honor, we set apart a place, an object, or an individual, and in doing so, we hold them apart from violation. This is true whether we do so as an individual or as a people. The significance of the sacred is contained in its power to center us on that which is most important to our lives. When we find a person, a place or a thing worthy of honor, and we honor it, it becomes a shining beacon from which we may obtain our bearings at all times. It helps us to solidify ourselves and move out with confidence. Only by honoring and protecting these beacons can they be of any value to us. For each of us there are numerous individuals, places, things, and concepts which we honor and the fabric of our being, both individual and collective, is woven around them. We are, both individually and collectively, what we hold to be sacred.

When we understand the sacred as being created by an act or a series of acts of respect, then we also understand to what extent the world can become sacred. If we choose to honor everything that impinges on our being, the entire world becomes sacred. If we choose to honor nothing, then the entire world is profane. We must recognize,

however, that whatever we choose not to honor and make sacred, becomes open to violation. And a world in which nothing is honored is a world of anarchy.

I honor and respect the incalculable worth and dignity that is in all of you. May you all have the capacity for courage, honesty, fairness, forgiveness, tolerance, respect, empathy and joy, especially joy, in abundance. And may your lives be deeply infused with all that is sacred to you, and perhaps even a little that is sacred to me.



A member of the American Ethical Union  
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