Common Ground: The Earth as Humanist Icon

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How many of us here have conscious memories of the moment Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon? How many of us remember how that felt? Here was science at it's most advanced pulling off a miracle right before our eyes – amazing, exciting. I was in awe!

Yet I also remember, at twelve years old, feeling a bit frightened – the moon looked so cold and barren. These brave men were so far from home. What if they couldn't make it back? What if they were stranded? Humankind seemed so small. I felt so small, humbled.

These astronauts did make it back. And so did a priceless gift: the image of earth. For all the millions of dollars we spent shooting humans and hardware into space, this is one of the most important trophies. Science gave us what we had never had before – a portrait of our home. This portrait offers us a deep sense of interconnectedness.

Back in 1968 Archibald MacLeish predicted that the image would revolutionize the way we understand our selves and our planet. This image, and the reality it represents, can connect us to "something greater" and generate feelings of awe, interconnectedness, and humility. These elements, at the core of many religions, can fuel a transformative and natural spirituality. It has inspired millions, and can be of particular importance to Ethical Culture and religious humanism. We should be sprinkling this image around everywhere, on buttons, posters, and flags! How many of you display somewhere a picture of the earth – on a bag or T-shirt, a bumper sticker, a photo, or a refrigerator magnet? The image of earth is a powerful humanist icon – an enduring and sacred symbol.

I don't want to make too much out of a symbol. I am wary of symbols. Like creeds, they can become over-inflated representations of what really matters: living an ethical life. The best of Ethical Culture is our shared commitment to deed, not idolatry of creed or glorification of symbols.

But we need symbols sometimes. This image of earth can inspire us to change our lives and save our planet. I know that I need this image to become more environmentally ethical – despite my simple efforts my carbon footprint is still much too big! We could all use more environmental inspiration. Rousseau writes, "In my room, my prayers are not so frequent or so fervent, but, at the sight of a beautiful landscape, I feel moved without knowing why." Unfortunately, many of us spend too much time in our room these days – and in our office, our cars, restaurants, and movie theaters.

When I was young, my appreciation of nature was muted by being a city boy addicted to modern amusements, especially TV. On Saturday mornings, cartoons attracted me more than sunshine – it was so easy to get sucked into technology.

Traditional religion didn't do much better than nature in nurturing reverence in me. Growing up in the 60's in a liberal corner of New England, son of a physicist father and a

[1] 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.

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mother who swore like a sailor, the lord's name was either ignored or used in vain. Traditional theism was a joke. But my parents got me into the Trinity Church choir so that I'd develop an ear for music. And music exposed me to religion. We were not a pious choir, but between hymns and spitballs, I began to imagine god as the white, bearded mysterious and powerful man-on-throne. It offered a strange interconnectedness - a "something greater" that enlivened my daydreams and rainy day discussions.

But the "something greater" that mattered most in my early teen years was that "final frontier" that came through my television. Star Trek! Friday evenings I would rush home from choir practice and watch it reverently. The science fiction world of Kirk and Spock was an alluring "something greater" - an endless, black space speckled with stars and star ships! Thankfully, I am here with you now and not at a Trekie convention in Vegas. I realized that Star Trek was fiction, but the program that boldly went where no man had gone before did make me more interested in the real universe around me and the universe inside me.

Luckily, I got out of the city every summer when we would drive up to Canada. In Quebec, far from city lights and any television set, my father and my more scientifically oriented brother would lug out the telescope, open their star charts, and scribble copious notes in their logs. But I'd prefer to lie on my back and simply contemplate the vastness above me – I felt awe, interconnectedness, and humility.

Years later, I looked for this experience within myself and began studying philosophy. This journey held promise through the Greeks. There was both the sparkling magic of Plato's forms and the grounded naturalism of Aristotle. And in rejecting Plato's idealism, while maintaining a sense of awe, Aristotle offered me my first taste of philosophic religious naturalism. He wrote, "(i)n all things of nature there is something of the marvelous."

Things got complicated as I wound my way through the history of Western philosophy. Theistic thinkers found the marvelous in God – they found the "something greatest" for which nothing is greater. And this "greatest thing" known as God was greatest in three ways - in knowledge, in space, and in time.

In knowledge, God was portrayed as omniscient, seeing all…from the creation of the universe and the laws that ran it, to the very concrete and personal inner workings of every mind, whether we are conscious or unconscious - he knows more about me than I do! He knows when you are sleeping, and knows when you're awake. And, most importantly, he knows when you've been bad or good. Sound familiar?

And even more amazing, western philosophy taught me that this God is everywhere, not limited by space. Infinite and not confined by the laws of physics - omnipresent - a reality in this hall and on every dead asteroid hurtling through space millions of light years away.

Best of all, I was told, God is not limited by time! God, neither created nor perishable - eternal as nothing else is. Human souls, created *in time* by the only thing that had always existed, God, transcend this world after death, and, hopefully, go to heaven and live forever more.

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God knows all, is everywhere, forever! Amazing properties! This concept of God is powerful and seductive.

But while it offered “something greater”, it just seemed too fantastic to me. And then in graduate school entered Nietzsche – and God was dead. As an existentialist, Nietzsche told me to give up the myth of God, stand on my own two feet, and face the world alone!

But, for many people, the price paid for the death of God is they feel abandoned, left adrift without a guide. And for some, this is uncomfortable. No longer do they have a familiar God – the all knowing, omnipresent, and eternal – to help them connect with the infinite. In fact, the feel confronted with the very opposite: limitation. They are more clearly aware that we know little, …very little. The small amount of understanding we have compared to all that we could know - all that we believed the deceased God once knew - is infinitesimal.

Second, without a God who is everywhere, we cannot vicariously experience the universe through God. We more clearly understand that in the immensity of space we are nothing but a tiny speck. Even the most traveled person on earth, or the most avid astronomer, has contact with only a miniscule portion of the universe. We are swallowed up by the immensity all around us, and that intimidates. Pascal said, "The silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me...".

And third, unable to believe that we can go to heaven and sit on the right hand of God for all eternity, we are limited in the most profound fashion by time. We have such a short time here together. Life is fleeting. As captured by Omar Khayyam,

Oh, threats of Hell and Hopes of Paradise!
One thing at least is certain--This Life flies….

So, years ago, with a masters in philosophy, what was I left with? On the one hand traditional theism offered a God all knowing, limitless, and eternal but that did not make sense. On the other hand existentialism made sense but offered no connection to something greater. Neither fit me as a workable spiritual paradigm. Neither theism nor existentialism nurtured my humanism, my spirituality, my ethics. Where could I turn for feelings of awe, interconnectedness, and humility?

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Breathe deep…and think of earth.

Even for a city boy like me, the earth offers itself…eventually. Walt Whitman: "The earth is rude, silent, incomprehensible at first, Nature is rude and incomprehensible at first, Be not discouraged, keep on, there are divine things well envelop'd, I swear to you there are divine things more beautiful than words can tell."

So where can we find the divine, awe, reverence in the earth? Let’s start with the scientific facts.
The earth is 7900 miles in diameter,

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Weights 60,000 trillion tons,
Is roughly 93 million miles from the sun,
Is 4.5 billion years old,
And is circling the sun at 66,000 miles per hour…as I speak.
For some these mundane facts inspire awe.
This is a good start.

How about those who actually see "the big picture" – astronauts? Many astronauts have remarkable experiences in space. Some describe them like religious conversions. Their new perspective from outer space fundamentally changes their identity. They are connected more deeply with the "something greater" known as earth. This happened to Apollo 9 astronaut Rusty Schweikart.

When I met Rusty at an education conference in the early eighties, I felt like I already knew him. For years I'd shown my ethics students a video in which he spoke of his experience of seeing the earth from space. When he spoke to me in person the emotional impact of his Apollo 9 space walk was dramatically clear – Rusty had discovered a new mode of thinking. The intensity of his blue eyes punctuated his words:

"When you go around the earth in an hour and a half you begin to recognize that your identity is with that whole thing. And that makes a change. You look down and you can't imagine how many borders and boundaries you cross again and again and again. From where you see it, the earth is a whole...and it is so beautiful. There are no frames. There are no boundaries." "You realize that on that small spot, that little blue and white thing that you can cover with your thumb, is everything that means anything to you. All of history and music and poetry and art and birth and love, tears, joy, games...all of it".

Rusty's story brought me more interconnectedness than any traditional religion. This "something more" was not an unbelievable, all-knowing, infinite, eternal God. It was simply common sense about our common ground. As a humanist I revere this "something more."

Rusty's story not only nurtures awe and interconnectedness, but it also admits our profound human limitations. It contains an essential human paradox: the quest of a finite being to touch the infinite. The human limits of knowledge, space and time are part of the awareness that we share the fate of the earth. Like human beings, the earth is inevitably finite. And it's beauty, like the beauty of a child…or a flower, is wrapped up in its very fragility. Soviet cosmonaut Sigmund Jahn said, "Before I flew, I was already aware of how small and vulnerable our planet is, but only when I saw it from space, in all its ineffable beauty and fragility, did I realize that humankind's most urgent task is to cherish and preserve it for future generations." From the other side of the Cold War, American astronaut James Irwin agreed: "The earth reminded us of a Christmas tree ornament hanging in the blackness of space. That beautiful, warm, living object looked so fragile, so delicate, that if you touched it with a finger it would crumble and fall apart. Seeing this has to change a person…."

Just imagining it is changing me. And it changed Rusty Schweikart. Since his spacewalk he has worked to protect the planet. One of his current projects is working with an organization dedicated to keeping the earth safe from comets and asteroids. This seemed

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far-fetched when I first read about it, a warning sign for my rational, skeptical self – had Rusty-the-converted taken a leap of faith I could not? But a little research showed me that this isn't so crazy. While the probability is low, a rock hurtling through space undetected could strike the planet at any moment setting off unparalleled ecological disaster.

The awareness of the fragility of earth, which parallels our own individual fragility and impermanence, carries with it a profound humility. We are limited to this small rock. Unlike claims of traditional theism, the earth is really our only home. The maverick Bishop Spong says, “Heaven is not our home. This planet earth is.” Some theists disagree. They say that heaven is more our home than earth, and that humans are a special creation of God, fundamentally different than nature. But I think there is a danger here – seeing ourselves as special can easily slip into a narcissistic species-centrism. But in contemplating the earth, humanists need not think of humans as special or separate from nature. Rusty Schweikart never felt that he was picked out especially by God to have his unique experience. The experience humbled him. The image of earth from space reminds us of how small we really are.

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What can we learn from such a simple and humbling lesson? This is not new – I am just trying to give these ideas a different framework.

First, I think we can learn a bit about our over-blown nationalism. From the perspective of space the reality of the planet dwarfs the contingent nature of nation-states. Rusty observed the Sinai peninsula from space: "There you are...hundreds of people killing each other over some imaginary line that you can't see. And you wish you could take one in each hand and say, 'Look. Look at it from this perspective. What's important?'"

America often thinks it is most important. We are a proud nation. Too often our arrogance and faith in Manifest Destiny blinds us to the big picture and the simple truths. In fact, our nation's history of unquestioned growth, success, and expansion has left reverence and humility behind. We think there’s nothing we can't get away with – no problem we can't fix. I was caught up in this when I was young. I believed we could harness technology and travel to another planet when we used this one up! With apologies to Captain Kirk, considering space as a frontier allows for the dangerous myth that we can easily abandon the earth – that the planet can be another consumable good that we can use up and thrown away. Sure, let’s just build another condo and shopping mall on the moon and move there!

A friend once asked me, wouldn’t it have been nice had Neil Armstrong planted on the moon not an American flag, but a UN flag or a flag of planet earth? After all, we all come from a very specific, tiny planet. Why not proclaim to the rest of the galaxy our allegiance to earth? I believe that it would offer us more humility than arrogance. When we think of the earth in the context of space, national egoism melts away.

Even our solar system is tiny. After all, our sun is only one in over 100 billion stars in the Milky Way. How much is 100 billion? Anthony Doerr suggests we think of it this way. Imagine that you take a bucket and pour 1000 marbles into it. Then get 999,999 more buckets and do the same. Then do that whole procedure over 100 times. That’s a whole

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lot of marbles! And that's just one galaxy - there very well may be more galaxies in the universe than there are stars in the Milky Way. If that is not humbling, I don't know what is.

The late Carl Sagan, who in my eyes epitomized scientific and natural religious humility, wrote, "We find that we live on an insignificant planet of a humdrum star, lost in a galaxy tucked away in some forgotten corner of a universe in which there are far more galaxies than people."

We Americans could use a bit more humility, I believe. One American sage, Garrison Keillor, recommends a little religious irony and humility: "Out there in the Milky Way and the world without end, Amen, America was a tiny speck of a country, a nickel tossed into the Grand Canyon, and American Culture the amount of the Pacific Ocean you bring home in your swimsuit."

Do these aesthetic and personal reflections about the earth, so filled with emotion, really offer workable solutions, *realistic, rational* solutions to today's problems? The skeptic and rationalist in me – and maybe in you, and in Ethical Culture – is sometimes wary about emotion. Emotions can deceive – they can convert people to single minded true believers. Sometimes I'm a bit suspicious of the evangelical quality of Rusty Schweikart. There's a reason there aren't many evangelical Ethical Culturists in the world!

Do I want Rusty to grab the hands of today's leaders and bring them up into space? (Maybe – depends on which ones!) Even symbolically, can I trust the motivational power of the beautiful image of the earth? Can a levelheaded humanist and realist promote use of such an emotional icon? Is it rational? Do we even want a humanist icon?

I think so.

First, there is some empirical evidence that this image can enhance global cooperation. In a study sponsored by the Aspen Institute, when individual Americans think about the world from space – even by simply seeing the image of earth – their support for international cooperation and U. S. foreign aid increases.

Second, there is philosophical support for using the earth as an icon. This image - and the awe, interconnectedness, and humility it can nurture - is plenty rational. It is rational in the same way as the emotionally charged words of Jefferson or King are rational. Passion stirs when I interpret the Declaration of Independence to proclaim that human beings are born equal with certain inalienable rights. This is emotional and rationally self-evident. It needs no evidence, for it proves itself to reason. When Martin Luther King Jr., promoted the commandment, "love your neighbor," he was not asking for a sentimental or personal love. He preached a demanding love based on a rational acknowledgement of the intrinsic integrity of every individual. This is the truth behind inherent worth, as promoted by many, including Felix Adler. Rational truth can induce emotional experiences. The image of earth reflects a simple and rational truth, and can nurture positive emotional experience.

There is much humanists can disagree on, but we should stress our common ground. Our heart and our head know that the planet, like every one of us, is not fully autonomous, is

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not independent from all others. The earth and each of us are fundamentally interdependent. But, the planet, like every one of us, is also fundamentally limited by time and space. The universe dwarfs us, and this life flies.

And the earth is a most inclusive icon that humanists should share with everyone. For some theists, such as Astronaut Irwin, I believe, the image of earth reinforces their traditional faith. But it also offers us all room for conversation, a conversation so eagerly embraced today by the likes of E. O. Wilson. When many scientists agree that about fifty plant and animal species are becoming extinct each day, there is a pragmatic urgency at play. We must find more common ground - our time is running short. John F. Kennedy, who artfully blended idealism with pragmatism, said, "If we cannot end our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal." The earth is our most basic common link - it is the common ground we share. And it is on this foundation that humanists, and all humans, must build the future.

Seems like a lot of faith to put into an image, and icon, doesn't it? I know that the picture of earth cannot solve all our problems. I agree with the sobering realism of Michael Collins of Apollo 11: "I am not a naive man. I don't believe that a glance from 100,000 miles out would cause a Prime Minister to scurry back to his parliament with a disarmament plan, but I do think it would plant a seed that ultimately could grow into such concrete action."

As I leave you today, I hope my words have planted some seeds, or spread some fertilizer, perhaps. (You may have plenty of seeds in your garden.) Maybe we can agree with Archibald MacLeish, that to "…see the earth as we now see it, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together, brothers [and sisters] on that bright loveliness in the unending night -- brothers [and sisters] who see now they are truly brothers [and sisters]." (Riders on the Earth, p. xiv)

I urge you, now and then, to think of the image of the earth, breath deep, and remember your place in the universe. Thank you.

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