



JOURNEY TO THE SACRED

Writing
TO AWAKEN

LESSON 2: THE ROLE OF DISGUST

Now that we have identified one sacred thing (or person) in our lives, it is time to look at where our ideas about sacredness come from. It is important to acknowledge that our cultural notions about what makes something sacred have fluctuated greatly over time. In my last book, "Ethical Wisdom," there is a reference to this shifting appraisal of sacredness versus profanity that may help you clarify your own thoughts:

"It's interesting to note that in ages past, good and evil were mixed up with sacred and profane in very different ways than they are today. Among the Australian Aborigines, for example, religion wasn't about God - or any deity - but about the distinction between sacred and profane. The sacred could be good or evil, and the profane could be either as well. This is the view that I subscribe to.

Otherwise, we get manmade laws and rules pretending to do the work of God and punishing people for being human. The wise know that sacredness exists in the lowliest places (compassion among prisoners and prostitutes) and that profanity proliferates at the heart of what we consider sacrosanct (priests who rape).

Redefining sacredness and profanity allows us to see *aux yeux ouverts*, widening our ethical shutter, seeing things for what they are, instead of being fooled by facades of goodness or greatness. Hitler's favorite moviemaker, Leni Riefenstahl, made Nazism look like heaven with her beautiful 1936 film *Olympia*. The surface is sublime and stirring, the underside a nightmare. That's the problem with the sublime. By definition, the sublime involves tremendous heights. But whatever we look up to has the power to dominate us."

We have inherited an oppositional, black-and-white, heaven-and-hell way of

thinking about sacredness. We're raised to believe that the opposite of sacred is profane, but what do these terms actually mean? As the passage above illustrates, we are easily duped by surfaces, euphemisms, and reputations, into believing that things are sacred (such as priests) and profane (such as prostitutes), when the truth may be much more complex and thought-provoking. Moral illusion is a powerful force; we can dress wolfish things in sheep's clothing and pass them off as innocent (think of nation-building that is actually, on the ground, murder and mayhem for local populations). If you read "Ethical Wisdom," you will learn that our brains are hard-wired for five kinds of moral choices, one category of which involves questions of purity and sacredness. You will also find out that what prompted our hunger for sacredness in the first place was the moral emotion of disgust.

Our disgust response got its start as a survival tool to keep us safe in a dangerous environment. The gag reflex, which began as a detection device against contaminated food, eventually spread beyond nutritional issues to include symbolic disgust against contaminating forces in human interaction. This is, in fact, the basis of human morality and our emotional gag reflex against things that offend our sense of purity, goodness, sacredness, and beauty. Sometimes, our response is accurate, as when we recoil from cruelty or the corruption of innocents. At other times, our disgust is reactionary, knee-jerk, and dangerous, as in racism, sexism, and us versus them nationalism. Simply believing that something is sacred does not make it so; and just because feelings of purity and goodness are stirred up in us does not mean that our responses are accurate. When we begin to realize how this disgust response operates and why it evolved to protect us against physical and moral pollution – we begin to grasp the complexity and unreliability of our ideas about sacredness.

I would like you to write about what you find disgusting: morally, aesthetically, sexually, socially, politically, religiously, and so on. Where does your gag reflex lie? If possible, choose one particular topic (be it abortion, same sex marriage, bigotry, or nationalism) that punches your disgust button especially hard, and write about how this response evolved in you. Where did it come from, what does it mean, and how convinced you are of your own rightness – and why. Only by investigating what we find disgusting can we truly understand our own moral architecture and peculiar, sometimes erroneous, twists of logic and feeling.