

# *Tradition, Change, and Progress*

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*Tradition, Change, and Progress.* The comforts of tradition give way to the promise of progress through the challenge of change as a known past meets an unknown future in a fleeting present.

I want to focus this morning on that center word, *change*. Nothing profound, just some thoughts, some observations, and some encouragement. But, like so many things, change needs context—the context of what came before and what’s to come after. My basic premise being that no matter where you come from, no matter what your tradition or your past, you can’t get to where you’re going, to where you want to be, you can’t progress without change.

That may seem simplistic to us but the truth is that it scares the bejeezuz out of some folks. So I’ll toss in a bit about fear and courage and, along the way, link it all to Ethical Culture which is, after all, what we’re all about.

Ethical Culture has a wonderful heritage. Born of the past, shaped by the present, and dedicated to the future. We understand that facts are found in and belong to the past, and values, our conceptions of the way things ought to be, belong to the future. And we see that these two, facts and values, meet in the present.

We exist on that continuum, the moving feast between tradition and progress, that instant that is neither past nor future. Steinbeck once described dawn and dusk, that moment when it’s neither light nor dark, as an instant when time stops. And Persian poet Omar Khayyám expressed the fleeting yet unrelenting moment of the present this way in his *Rubáiyát*,

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,  
Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,  
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.

Ah, but there walk among us pious who pretend to lure back time and cancel out line after line of human progress and accomplishment. There are those who take a literalist stance that ignores an enlightened understanding of the world and seeks to perpetuate sameness and forgo progress for the sake of the comfort and security of tradition. Our aim should be to preserve the facts of the past while not perpetuating traditions at odds with them. That’s a very old debate, one that pits facts and observations against our most heart-felt beliefs.

I touched on this conundrum of tradition, progress, and change, when I spoke here this summer, and the puzzle of it has stayed with me for several reasons. One is because that’s the way my mind works. Something just keeps returning and returning till I have to work with it. And if you think that’s scary from your perspective, you should experience it from mine.

Another reason is that change is a pretty big aspect of my life right now, change and uncertainty. As Bonnie mentioned, I am the Leader candidate, with the emphasis on

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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.

*candidate*. That's given me a whole new perspective on the subject of change. And a great deal more empathy and compassion for those who shy away from it and seek refuge in the safe haven of the status quo.

But for a larger perspective, I turn, as I often do, to Ethical Culture founder Felix Adler. He said, exactly a century ago, in 1905, "We cannot adopt the way of living that was satisfactory a hundred years ago. The world in which we live has changed, and we must change with it."

So I want to talk today about the comfort and value of tradition, the lure and benefit of progress, and the difficulty, the threat of change. I'll be saying a bit more about the past than the future because I know more about the past than I do about the future, and I'll be sharing with you some of what others have had to say about change, fear, and courage.

Often, what comes forward from the past into the present is not fact, as it should be, but a timeworn concept of reality, a tradition that's outlived its original purpose and any present usefulness. Those stuck in the past experience a complete disconnect between their concept of the world and what they see and hear around them. There's a difference between those who think things can be as they ideally imagine them to be; --as we do -- and those who believe that things are, actually are, as they wish them to be.

That's what Felix Adler called *the reality producing function of the mind*. You see what's before you and you know the facts of history. Yet, despite them, you produce a reality at odds with your observations of the present as well as the lessons of the past. Critical thinking is suspended in a way that leaves little if any room for a vision of a positive future, and consequently tomorrow is fraught only with danger. That adds a patina of legitimacy and security to those outdated views held so dear.

So, tradition is getting a pretty bad rap these days. Not only because of the false reality that's been perpetuated from it, but because of those who use it as a means to their own ends rather than valuing and building on it in a progressive fashion. But there is comfort and value in tradition, and we should respect it for what it is—the precursor to the present, and the foundation of the future.

One of the most powerful things about tradition is that it is a reliable known. It's dependable, consistent, and comforting. And that makes it sacred to those who rely on it to center, to ground their lives.

That's not necessarily a bad thing. It is wise to seek the wisdom of the past, of tradition. For example, it's a good thing that our judiciary when facing tricky questions of right and wrong in a modern world return to our basic and guiding documents—the constitution and the laws of our land—and take into consideration the opinions their predecessors formed when making the same considerations at a different time and in different circumstances and it is wise for us to do the same in weighing the promise of the future against a known past.

But, as André Gide reminds us, "No progress of humanity is possible unless it shakes off the yoke of authority and tradition." The yoke of tradition. Tradition should be allowed its say, and it is legitimate to consider the past when contemplating the future. But we ought not make a yoke of tradition. The past should inform the present, but not dictate the future.

The adage that a person standing on the shoulders of a giant can see farther than the giant itself applies here. The past is not exactly precursor to the future, unless we make it so, but it does provide a foundation.

One more word on tradition before moving on past the past. At some point in our human history, we took the common sense customs of our ancestors, the understandings of right and wrong that evolved over an unknown number of generations, and transformed them into the dictates of the gods. Then, more recently, when a more thorough understanding of the world weakened those dictates, we mixed in patriotism in the form of nationalism. That's a heady brew that is causing no end of mischief in our world today. It lends tradition a disproportionate strength it doesn't merit on its own.

Today, we are all too often told, that to abandon tradition is to abandon flag and country, that to abandon tradition is to disrespect our parents and elders, and that to abandon tradition is to dishonor those who have defended it in our name. That's a powerful argument against change, against progress—powerful but not sufficient. The past, as Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan said, should have a say, but not a veto, as those who cling to it defiantly would have.

No matter how prevalent a worldview and no matter how powerful the economic or political or even military institution, it persists because it has cultural legitimacy. And that legitimacy comes from the perceptions of people. People give legitimacy and they can take it away. The late futurist Willis Harman said, "A challenge to legitimacy is probably the most powerful force for change to be found in history." A challenge to legitimacy. I stand before you today to challenge the legitimacy of tradition for tradition's sake, and to challenge the false realities fashioned from it and I hope you'll join me in that challenge.

My earlier statement that facts belong to the past, and values to the future, is the crux of my talk. Facts belong to the past and should be contained there. Values belong to the future and motivate us toward our highest ideals. These two meet in the present, in change—the process of one, our aspirations, our values, becoming the other, the facts of the past. Did you follow that? I think I got lost in a time warp there like Hughes Mearns (1875–1965), "As I was going up the stair, I met a man who wasn't there; He wasn't there again today! I wish, I wish he'd stay away." The present is a lot like that and it's easy to get disoriented in the relativity of now, like Einstein asking "What time does Zurich stop at this train?"

Values are our concept of the way things ought to be, of that future, better world we envision and are trying to achieve. Facts, belong to the past and are the starting place for the change that we hope to effect, to make real rather than solely the conceptual values that motivate and guide us. Past and future, fact and value, knowledge and aspiration, meet in the present—in change. Change is the engine of progress, and choice is the fuel of change.

Progressives want to, well, progress toward that ideal and thus embrace change and make the choices necessary to bring it about. Fundamentalist and neo-conservatives want to hold on to the way things were so badly that they reject the progress that has been made, resist the insights of science, fear change of any sort, and cling to a view of a reality long since past.

We long for a better world and are willing to work to bring it about. Others, convinced that any better world lies beyond this one, have convinced themselves that this one hasn't changed—despite all evidence to the contrary. They not only refuse to

envision a world as it could be, they maintain that things are the way they've always been.

As I look at our culture today, I see a society in desperate need of change, of being rebuilt and returned to working order. Perpetuating the comfort, traditions, and myths of the past is definitely in public favor today. While choice, change, and progress are decidedly out of favor.

Whitehead maintained that, "The art of progress is to preserve order amid change and to preserve change amid order." We're having a bit of a problem with the latter part of that. Order has become so ridged that it won't tolerate change – or even allow room for the choices that might fuel it. In the context of tradition and progress, change is the struggle to couple experience with aspiration—to temper our timeless dreams with the reality of the past while still moving forward in an orderly fashion.

Which brings us to the allure of a different, a better future, and the impulse to propel ourselves toward it. That's what I call the Humanist impulse, the impulse to better the world in which we live through our own efforts.

That's a concept, an impulse dear to Ethical Culture. Change begins with choice, and one of the basic commitments of Ethical Culture is to the understanding that ethics also begin with choice. Another of our commitments requires us to shape a more humane world. It is our duty to reach beyond ourselves to decrease suffering and increase creativity in the world. And, of course, the highest aim of Ethical Culture, and of ours personally as Ethical Culturists, is to make the world a better place. None would argue that that constitutes progress.

Yet those who oppose change have a distrust of the new, of the future and an idealized view of the old, of the past. We who embrace change do not want to revise the past, we leave revisionist history to others, but rather we want to reconstruct it, reshape it, and build from it a better world.

Fixed, absolute answers give people comfort, and revised concepts of the past, of facts, are real to those who accept them as truth. A few years ago the Washington Post ran a four-month-long series of articles on people of differing religious convictions. It was entitled, "Moving from uncertainty and despair to spiritual fulfillment." Metaphysical uncertainty, which we embrace, is linked with despair by our society! Not for us. Ethical Culturists are different. We find exciting challenge where others find troubling uncertainty, and we consequently and courageously embrace change. That's very important to our Ethical Culture way of life.

I don't know why we experience exhilaration where others experience fear. I don't fully understand this quickening of wonder I experience at the edge of my own understanding, or how that wonder turns to awe in the face of discovery, or in the bafflement of nature's mysteries. Nor do I understand why others feel a sense of despair in the absence of complete answers.

Maybe we're just wired differently.

But, despite the challenges and resistance, change has become an undeniable and unavoidable part of modern life—a part that involves letting go of the old and embracing the new. But those hampered by a reality of their own construction and disempowered by ridged beliefs and insensitive authorities, they've been robbed of the courage to seek higher ground.

Their deepest fear is not that they are inadequate or not up to the challenge of change. The deepest cultural fear today seems to be that we are powerful beyond measure, able to create the kind of world we envision and are therefore responsible for the kind of world in which we live. It is our capability rather than our inability that most frightens so many.

Now many if not most of us will go to far greater lengths to avoid what we fear than to obtain what we most desire. But Eleanor Roosevelt, who played a very active role in Ethical Culture through the Encampment for Citizenship, held that “The purpose of life is to live it, to reach out eagerly and without fear for newer and richer experience.” I can’t do that -- not without fear I can’t. But, through Ethical Culture, and the support I get from it, I can muster the courage to progress in the face of fear, and to make the choices that engender change.

The winds of tradition are strong and they have been gusting against us—blowing us backward. We must stand up and speak out in defense of change and progress, even if our words are blown back in our face and heard only by us. And when I say “we,” I don’t mean only those of us granted the privilege of the platform, of the pulpit, or the dais. I mean every one of us in every moment and in every aspect of our lives.

And lest you think our way, this still fresh and new way of Ethical Culture is being blown away by the winds of the past, and that common sense is being subsumed by a reconstructed reality, remember the words of Thomas Paine. This is how he opened his most famous work, *Common Sense*:

“Perhaps the sentiments contained in the following pages, are not yet sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favor; a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defense of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason.”

In that fifty-page pamphlet that sold some 500,000 copies, (pretty good even by today’s standards), Paine expressed an optimism born of courage and selflessness. Now Paine was taking a rather longish view of “soon.” But the tumult will subside. Winds, even the force-five winds of tradition, modulate and abate and the voice of reason will be heard. It is common sense that convinces us that common sense will prevail—not on its own, it needs help, it needs us – but it will prevail.

Ours is a life stance that advocates thinking before acting rather than simply reacting based on assimilated standards that are often unrecognized and inevitably unheeded. You see this stance in those in blind pursuit of ends unhampered by the means, by those who feign surprise at the consequences of their actions, consequences that adversely and disproportionately affect the innocent and unprotected, consequences that are tossed off with the arrogant shrug of a powerful majority.

Our essential work of advancing a more ethical culture – one that cares, that aspires to the good, and is based on ethical relationships – depends upon our courage.

If you take anything away from today, let it be this:

Respect the past, welcome the future, embrace change.

Recognize, lean into, and fully experience whatever doubts and fears you may have, while at the same time developing the courage to overcome them and to eagerly pursue progress.

Those are some of the essentials of making the world a better place.

Self-esteem sage Nathaniel Branden said we are not "...a static, finished entity, but a continually evolving creation, an unfolding of our potentialities, expressed in our choices, decisions, thoughts, judgments, responses and actions. ... We always contain within ourselves the possibility of change. We need never be prisoner of yesterday's choices."

Face fear with courage. Accept challenges and make informed choices. Welcome change and a better tomorrow will welcome you.

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