Hope Without A Hereafter

Sunday morning address[1] to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, April 16, 2006
by **Tony Hileman,** Senior Leader

Good morning. Isn't this a wonderful, spring day?

Thank you for spending part of it inside with us. I like to think of our Sunday mornings together as a time we take to care for ourselves, and to enjoy and care for each other. A haven amid the pressures of a hectic world that we sometimes feel out of step with. A time set aside to deepen our understanding and appreciation of Ethical Culture, of our community, of our Society—a place where we come to be refreshed and renewed.

I hope that's true for you today, because the sun is shinning, flowers are blooming, the trees are beginning to green; all signs of renewal, all signs of hope. Hope, right here, right now.

This is a time of year when we naturally pause to reflect on renewal. It is a "religious" time of year in that many of the world's religions have constructed rituals around that very concept and celebrate them with, among other things, fasting and feasting—symbolic of the long, barren winter giving way to the lushness of spring. Rituals and all manner of other recognitions celebrated at springtime are part of how traditional religions became traditional.

In addition to ritual, recognition and celebration, conventional religions provide four essential things: They provide community, they provide meaning, they provide identity, and they provide hope. Ours is hardly a conventional religion, being based in natural convictions rather than in supernatural beliefs, but Ethical Culture is a religion—one of ethical relationships—and we likewise meet these criteria.

Last fall I spoke to you of community, and this past winter I addressed meaning. And I will be speaking to identity before we go into our summer season. But today I address hope—*Hope Without A Hereafter.* That I will do and more, for it is difficult to speak of hope without speaking of aspirations. I want to share with you some of mine in the hope of enlisting you in them.

In writing for today, I went searching for quotes on the subject of hope. There are so many that I could string them together and not have to offer a single word of my own, it's all been said so eloquently. I didn't do that, but hopefully you'll excuse me if I do cite the words of others liberally.

Hope Without A Hereafter, or, stated positively, *Hope In The Here-and-now.* The blurb I wrote for our newsletter, Ethical Outlook, began, "Ethical Culturists accept this life as all and enough and find hope in our faith in each other—in our quest for a supreme way of being."

There's three concepts packed into that dense statement. I would guess that the second part, that we have faith in each other, would meet little if any resistance here. Well, it would have to meet some resistance. After all, we are who we are and doubting is part of our way.

[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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My great great-great-uncle Franz Petsch said in his 1899 self-published book, *The Life Experiences Of A Skeptic*, "To think is to doubt." By that standard we think a tremendous amount! We are a skeptical lot.

The last part of my blurb, that our quest is for a supreme way of being, would hopefully face even less resistance. We're pretty much in agreement that we want a better world, that we embrace the ideal of a perfected way of being together.

That leaves the first part. Does anyone, or I guess I should ask does anyone else, struggle with accepting this life as all and enough? I mean, the lure of a hereafter is compelling, as is that of a continuation of life through reincarnation—of being given another and yet another chance at getting life right. There's a strong emotional urge to deny the end of life, and to recognize death as inevitable and to accept it as final is not easy.

Yes, our natural worldview is pretty easy to grasp intellectually, "Okay, this is all there is. This life is all and it is enough." But emotionally?

All that rationality doesn't seem quite enough when you start to muse, on your own behalf or that of a loved one,, "Well, I'm sixty-something. The actuarial tables say having made it this far I've likely got another couple of decades in me. But those same tables when I was born said I'd be pretty near dead by now." That kind of musing riles the emotions, or at least I does mine.

About the time I was born, there were 132 million people in the United States, and only 9 million of them were in their mid-sixties or older—6.8%. The odds were against me but here I am. Today we comprise 12.4 % of the population, nearly double in just a generation. "All and enough" is getting easier to accept, as the "all" has become more, unless of course you're one of those who have already reached the point where "all" is getting less and less every day.

If you are, and if you stop to think about it, you start agreeing with William Oldys in his observations on a fly drinking from his cup:

> Busy, curious, thirsty Fly,
> Gently drink, and drink as I;
> Freely welcome to my Cup,
> Could'st thou sip, and sip it up;
> Make the most of Life you may,
> Life is short and wears away.
>
> Just alike, both mine and thine,
> Hasten quick to their Decline;
> Thine's a Summer, mine's no more,
> Though repeated to threescore;
> Threescore Summers when they're gone,
> Will appear as short as one.

Cute, but kind of dismal, don't you think? Well, it needn't be. At least we're not flies. But maybe in the next life, who knows.

Which brings us to the hereafter. There have been untold mythologies, the product of human need and imagination, constructed to address the questions of origin and destiny, specifically to deal with or to deny the inevitability and finality of death. Some, perhaps most, have been lost to antiquity. Some are benign others are potent—at least in their

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emotional appeal. Some bring contentment others wreak havoc. Some are remembered fondly, tenderly others are best forgotten.

Many of those that remain today battle among themselves over issues of origin because, well, we're here to do so and just how we came to be here is of great interest to them. So they squabble among themselves and collectively battle with our expanded scientific knowledge of ourselves and the universe of which we are a part.

We Ethical Humanists, on the other hand, have come to the conclusion that these questions cannot be reliably answered, and that conclusion has led us to accept the universe as self-existing. While we care deeply about life, we greet questions of origin with a shrug, content that we exist, and thus we set aside arguments that ignore scientific fact in favor of cherished faith.

For many of us, the origin and destiny structures of traditional religions have broken down. They simply no longer work for us. That's true for most if not all of us here today. And millions of others who would otherwise agree with us, cling to a traditional religious identity that doesn't really describe them simply for community. For them the connection, the identity is more cultural than religious.

They are tantalizingly close to our understanding that hope lies not in the length of our life, be it eternal or temporal, but in the quality of our living; not in an afterlife destiny but in a meaningful legacy that we ourselves create, and that other generations will use to make life even better for those who come after them.

As Oldys said, life is short, but it's all we've got. It wears away, but, lived well, it is enough—enough to more closely approximate our ideal of a perfected way of being. To improve ourselves as well as each other, which, given our interrelatedness, is one in the same.

Its' an understanding, Michael Lynberg expressed in *The Path With Heart*, "I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way the world is made. No individual or nation can stand out boasting of being independent. We are interdependent. The hope and salvation of [humankind] lie in our becoming aware of our interdependence, of our responsibility to life and to [each other]."

That's a prosaic expression of the supreme axiom of Ethical Culture, "Act so as to elicit the best in others, and thereby in thyself." "I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be." It is also an expression of the Ethical Manifold that finds a natural spiritual aspect to our interrelatedness. "The hope and salvation of [humankind] lie in our becoming aware of our interdependence, of our responsibility to life and to [each other]."

Our lives, finite as they may be, matter. Recognizing that our lives will someday be over encourages us to focus on living well *now* so that when we ultimately face death it will not be with a sense that it has all been in vain.

Bill Murry, past dean and president of Meadville Lombard, the Unitarian seminary, holds that "An important element of any honest response to death is the acknowledgement that ultimately death is a mystery." He goes on to say, "Death is not the meaning of life; the meaning of life is the satisfaction and struggle and triumph of living. We do not have to be immortal to find joy and fulfillment: It is enough to live with courage and dignity." And, I would add, with hope.

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But my point is not about death, or the fear or prospect thereof. I delve into it only as illustration of the strong emotional motivation to cleave to the "hope," if that be the word, of a hereafter. But before leaving the issue altogether, some inspiration from Oliver Wendell Holmes, Senior, who said, as the advancement of mellowed age and the approach of the inevitable was upon him, "To be seventy years young is something far more cheerful and hopeful than to be forty years old."

Hope.

To hope is to wish for something with expectation of its fulfillment. Not just to wish—I wish I could live perfectly—but to do so with the expectation of fulfillment. That requires a certain assessment of things as they are, of how we wish them to be, and if fulfillment of that wish is a reasonable expectation.

So, given a sober analysis of myself and others, do I hope to attain the ethical ideal of perfect living? No. Do I have a realistic expectation that we can move closer to that ideal? Yes. And that is what I hope for, and that is what I work for.

Faith is a belief that does not rest on logic. A leap of faith is to accept something as true, as real, without the assurance of reason. Acceptance of or belief in a hereafter requires just such a leap of faith. We cannot say with assurance what if anything lies beyond this life—it is a mystery.

We know we are here, and we know we won't experience anything that may come after here until we're no longer here—until we're no longer alive, until we're dead. How can so many believe in something that we have no experience of? Faith. If that doesn't seem to fit a Humanist epistemology it's because it doesn't. We find knowledge in human experience and experimentation as tested by reason. We reach for it, but we don't leap.

Hope and faith are different, radically different. To hope is not to assume that things will be better someday, somehow, somewhere. To hope is to be sustained by the sense that they can be better and that they can become so through our own efforts. That motivates us to act accordingly, to fulfill our own wishes, to make our hopes vibrant and active in our lives.

So, while for many, this is a season of faith, for we who approach life and its challenges from a natural perspective, it is a season of hope. Hope for a better world here rather than in a hereafter.

I have nothing against faith per se, so long as it's not presented as fact and so long as I'm not judged by whether I accept it or not—so long as people are not labeled good or evil based on what they think rather than considered right or wrong in a specific instance based on what they do, how they act. Nor am I categorically dismissing the possibility of a continuation of life in some manner.

I'm just saying that absent convincing evidence or argument, I remain skeptical and do not include such a belief in my lifestance. I find that skepticism healthy and rewarding. It compels me to think and not to accept myself or the universe based on the opinions, revealed truths, or authority of others. I find that a responsible approach to life.

That doesn't make me unique. But it does make me a Humanist, and it does make me an Ethical Culturist. And it also makes me at least a little bit courageous, as is anyone who claims an unconventional lifestance openly—one that does not embrace the dominant thinking of contemporary culture. Progress in the field of religion, social

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advancement, and dedication to a better world are not for the feint of heart. Ethical Culture is indeed challenging.

Ethical Culture is challenging, and Ethical Culture is challenged. Much of what our founding generation longed for, hoped for, has come to pass. There are even those who ask if Ethical Culture's day has come and past, or if, at the very least, our heyday is behind us.

This is where I segue into my aspirations, but I'll get back to hope in the here-and-now, by-and-by.

Compared to life a hundred and thirty years ago, ours is a better world. With all the problems and dangers of the world today, it is better than it was. Justice is not yet secure for all, but it is available to and secure for far greater numbers than it was then. Poverty still haunts many, but in inverse proportion to what it did then. Today, something on the order one in ten struggle below the poverty line in our country. A deplorable number, but a hundred and thirty years ago only one in ten lived above it. Today we see the unseemly concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, but not in the same crass style or brutally exploitative manner of the robber barons.

That view of course shifts if one takes a global perspective, but even so, vast improvement cannot be denied. A survey of the trajectory of history cannot help but leave one with the reasonable expectation of its continuation into the future if we maintain hope—the sense that things can get better—and if we continue to act in accord with that hope.

No, our day lies not in the past but in the future. We have yet to reach our zenith. What we lack is not meaning or mission but focus. I believe the cultural emphasis needs shifting. What has been institutionalized needs to be personalized. That takes some explaining so bear with me.

Securing the greatest good for the greatest number, ensuring a peaceful and sustainable existence for all, making the world a better place requires cooperation. Sometimes that cooperation needs encouraging, as the greater good is almost inevitably in conflict with a narrow sense of the individual good. Emphasis on the narrow.

The aim then is to foster the greatest amount of cooperation among varying interests while resorting to the least amount of coercion. That's a good formula and it's provided the checks and balances necessary for us to get where we are today.

By necessity, we have come to rely on collective institutions, primarily governments and religions, to provide the coercion. Specifically, increasingly sophisticated forms of democratic government, and increasingly archaic religions—each offering the promise of reward on the one hand, and the threat of punishment on the other.

That needs to change and in that change lies the next great opportunity for Ethical Culture. We need to lessen the coercion, which is getting out of hand in its application by both politicians and prelates, while at the same time increasing cooperation which has deteriorated under the force of individual ambition unchecked by a concern for our collective well being.

Affecting a shift of that magnitude is difficult, to be sure. Reversing this downward spiral that has had a good long while to gather momentum will require numbers far greater than ours. But the idea has to be clearly articulated before is can attract adherents. We may be small in number but we are committed.

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By way of example, look what the thirty-four signers of the Humanist Manifesto of 1933 have wrought. Look what Ethical Culture founder Felix Adler and an even smaller cadre of supporters created. We in this hall, few as we are, outnumber them by multiples and I feel a sense of moral obligation to carry on their work in a revitalized fashion.

Ursula Goodenough, a friend of ours from the natural religion orbit, said in her book, *The Sacred Depths of Nature,* "We should be able to figure out, with a great deal of work and good will, how to share the Earth with one another and with other creatures, how to restore and preserve its elegance and grace, and how to commit ourselves to love and joy and laughter and hope."

That is my aspiration, one I want to enlist you in. As your Leader, I don't know if I'm up to that. I question and doubt myself on that score daily. I don't know if I can do it. But I do know that I am what you've got, and I am heartened that you are who I have.

Any forward thrust embraces the concept of starting where you are and working with what you've got—and what we've got is a rich and vibrant heritage, and each other. If what needs doing can be done, and I believe it can, it cannot be done alone. We must do it together. Not just with each other in this room or in this Society or in this movement, but in concert with the burgeoning numbers of like-minded people of good will who may or may not view the here or the hereafter as we do.

This idea, this business of changing culture through individual activity is not new, but it is needed. To be human is not only to adapt to circumstances, as we have throughout our evolutionary history, but to seek, recognize, and to seize the opportunity to alter them, as we've done throughout our cultural history, and as we must continue to do if our forward momentum is to be regained.

By coupling hope with resolve—the hope of a better world coupled with the resolve to make it so—we can live up to our own high standards. Yes, it's comforting to say we have done our best. But personal comfort is not necessarily our aim. Succeeding in that which needs doing is our mission. As Winston Churchill said, "It is no use saying, 'we are doing our best.' You have got to succeed in doing what is necessary." I feel that same sense of urgency, of necessity in reorienting the way we view cooperation, coercion, and cultural progress.

The force of authority, be it military or moral, is not the means through which cooperation is best fostered. If it and unbridled personal ambition are to be tempered, compassion and understanding must increase, a sense of our sameness, our interrelatedness and interdependence, must be nurtured, and respect for our worth and dignity must prevail.

If we can stay focused on those aspects of our ethical religion, hope will not only remain alive in the here-and-now, it will flourish—as will our global culture. We can reverse the downward spiral and once again propel ourselves upward. Hope begins with wishes, and that is my wish. Wishes do not come true by themselves, but reason is rudderless without them.

As Ethical Culturists, we place our hope in the here rather than in the hereafter. That hope is reasoned and that hope is alive. So long as some of us anguish that others of us kill, there is hope. So long as the placement of a ring on a finger is emblematic of our ability to make and keep binding commitments, there is hope. So long as the cry of a child is heard as the promise of the future, there is hope. So long as the want of another brings a lump to our throat, there is hope. Hope without a hereafter.

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