

Living in Covenant and Community

Sunday morning address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, September 10, 2006
by **Tony Hileman**, Senior Leader

Living in Covenant and Community. That pretty much describes for me what we do or aspire to do here at the New York Society for Ethical Culture. But it's not my description. Several years ago at a Unitarian Universalist general assembly, I believe in Cleveland, I asked Bill Murry, then dean of Meadville Lombard, the Unitarian seminary, what he meant by "religious Humanism."

I open with this because Ethical Culture is a Humanist movement. It wasn't founded as such but it has been so for sixty or more years. And the Humanism we embraced found its voice in 1933 when a progressive group of Unitarian leaders drafted and released the first Humanist Manifesto.

That statement was clear in its intent to replace old attitudes of supplication with new ones of realization. It encouraged both, and here I quote, "... a heightened sense of personal life" and "a cooperative effort to promote social well-being." Sounds decidedly Ethical Culture-ish, doesn't it?

Since 1933 what is now known as Humanist Manifesto I has sparked many discussions and controversies, among them the distinction, if any, between a "secular" and a "religious" Humanist. This to me is a nonsense question. Humanism is secular by its very nature. The use of *secular* as some sort of modifier was adopted by those so opposed to what even they consider an outmoded construct of religion that they reject the use of the word in any context. That's just silly. Still, it's not the only silly thing important and real to large groups of people.

Anyway, when I asked Bill what he meant by the term he responded, "A religious Humanist is one who practices his or her Humanism in covenant and community with others." In covenant and community with others.

That description resonated so strongly with me that it changed the way I viewed the work I was doing at the American Humanist Association. A change of perspective that eventually led to me consider and accept Ethical Culture Leadership. That's what brought me here, to the kind of approach and environment he spoke of. For I know of no better context in which live in covenant and community than Ethical Culture.

Covenant can have a kind of "churchy" ring to it, but it needn't. While it is often used in and associated with that context, covenant means agreement, the way two or more people have decided to be together with each other.

But it conveys more than its dictionary definition, which is precisely why I chose it. The dictionary says a covenant is a binding agreement. Flavor that with the churchy gravitas it has accumulated and rather than the legalistic "binding agreement" you have the communitarian *agreement that binds*—an agreement that brings us and bonds us together.

Within our intentionally formed community here at Ethical Culture, covenant is more than simple agreement. It is agreement born of dedication and devotion. It is agreement with high principle and purpose; sacred agreement dedicated to our search for the

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.

highest, and devoted to the ethical ideal of perfected living. It is agreement that binds us in community.

And so I chose covenant in reflection of the significance of our agreements with each other. Open and acknowledged agreements openly and cooperatively arrived at that reflect the way we have chosen to be together with each other, with others, and with the world. Or at least that says to us and others how we aspire to be among ourselves and with them, and how we wish to be in the world.

We will inevitably fall short of the ideal of perfected living, that's the nature of ideals, of dreams. Yet our dreams are an index of our potential, and our successive approximation of our dreams is the measure of our lives.

And so we come together in Ethical Culture, in covenant and community, so that we might live better, more fulfilled and more fulfilling lives.

In our quest of a context in which we can freely speak of, experience, and expand the profound and overwhelming potential of life, we have chosen to express our Humanism and our humanity in covenant and community with others; to deepen our experiences of and with each other through compassion and cooperation.

It's almost impossible to speak of covenant and community separately, at least within an Ethical Culture context. But I'm going to try, at least briefly. What I'm not going to try is to enumerate our covenants into a creed, a dogma, or a Decalogue. What they are or how many there are is not as important as that they are and how we arrive at them.

Now I don't want to skip over or slight the importance of our covenants, our agreements with each other, by not naming some of them. So let me give a few examples in a decidedly non-comprehensive list.

We have a covenant of mutual support and support of the Ethical Society and its aspirations. That's what it means to be a part of pretty much anything—to support it.

We are a stable community and that's reflected in our agreement that we do things one way, the same way, always, unless we do them differently. It's an expression of our progressive nature that we create a certain sense of stability, of security, of dependability that we take out from time, examine, and adapt to other changes that have transpired within or around us.

We have a covenant of sharing, exploration, and growth; individual and collective, internal and external.

We have a covenant to do our very best to balance responsibility with authority and authority with responsibility. That's difficult for Ethical Culturists. As a group we tend not to trust authority, unless it's our own. The more orthodox among us absolutely reject the authority of others, while accepting their own authority absolutely. That's something we have to get past through trust and respect.

The absence of these things creates a vacuum, and ambition always expands to fill a vacuum. We've seen that in our national culture. We keep our Ethical Culture strong by accenting with awareness our covenants of trust, respect, and responsibility.

That not only safeguards our aspirations from being hijacked by the strong personalities or personal agenda of a few, but it brings out the best in the rest of us. And that's what we're dedicated to.

We have behavioral covenants that set boundaries that help us all get along better, especially with those who have difficulty doing so in other contexts. We have group covenants, agreements that enable personal growth while fostering our mission. And we have covenants with the larger community, covenants that direct us toward the greater good for all.

I could go on but I think you get the picture. However, before moving on to community, I want to leave you with a small assignment, one I hope you take up with others. Fill out that list. Add to it the covenants you feel you entered into or those that you feel we need to enter into, and discuss them with others here at the Society. That can be a challenging and rewarding experience.

Whatever our covenants, and there are many, we develop them because we're human, because we have needs, and because we depend on each other to fill those needs. And that's as good a segue as any into community. So I'll leave you with the task of fleshing out and prioritizing our covenants as you see them and move on to community because that's what our covenants are for, so we can deepen and strengthen our sense of community.

Let's first get past the mundane general usage of that overworked word—community. The word community has been so used and worn that it's almost devoid of any substantive meaning today. It doesn't convey much even if expressed in a different way, *we're all in this together*, or *it takes a village*. Well, with all due respect, of course we are and of course it does, but what does that mean? That's what we're here for, to deepen and expand our sense of what it means to be part of a community, a part of an active integrated whole, a part of something larger than ourselves.

Community means more than proximity. It's not about how close you live to each other, but how you live with each other. A good number of years ago, or a “goodly number” as my grandmother would say, Betty and I were visiting friends in Grant County, Kentucky. Now just that they lived in a county and not a city, town, or village, tells you something. Grant County, Kentucky, is, or was in the seventies, rural and agrarian.

There had been a storm just a few days before our visit and as we were driving around the countryside—there's plenty of countryside in Grant County, Kentucky—we saw a lot of pickup trucks around a barn and a lot of people at work on its roof. Our friend Alan explained that the roof had been damaged in the storm and that those were people from around the county who had come to help repair it.

Grant County, Kentucky is a place where pretty much everyone knows pretty much everyone else and a fair amount about who they are, what they do, what they're like, and what they need. People wave from porches and say hello on the streets and in the stores. They pay attention when they ask, “How are you?” We grew up and lived in Indianapolis at the time. Indy was hardly a mighty metropolis but still we found all that closeness, well, potentially stifling. So I asked, “What do you do if you want to be left alone around here.”

It was Alan's friend, Billy Joe—I kid you not, Billy Joe—who said, “You just get yourself a place on a hill somewhere,” and there are plenty of hills in Grant County, Kentucky, “and when ever someone gets too close you fire off a shotgun. Before long word gets around that the crazy guy up on the hill will shoot if you get too close and people leave you alone.”

That seemed pretty drastic but I didn't question its effectiveness. I chewed on that most of the afternoon and that evening after dinner while we were sitting on the porch waving at those driving by—there aren't plenty people driving by in Grant County, Kentucky—I asked, “That crazy guy up on the hill, what happens if his roof blows off.”

“Oh,” I was told, “people will still come around and help fix it. That's just the way they are.” That's community.

New York is hardly small-town America. It's been a goodly long time since there was anything rural or agrarian about it. We don't wave, we don't send our children out into the street to play, and we seldom call on others to fix the barn roof after a storm. But there are similarities. We are no less human in our yearnings than those kind and generous folks in Grant County, Kentucky. We need and depend on each other in different but no less necessary ways.

And so, rather than being connected through the accident of proximity or birth, we come here, to the intentional community of the New York Society for Ethical Culture, seeking the intimacy and support of others, and to experience once again a deep and familial sense of what community means.

This is a place where we come to make and renew acquaintances; acquaintances who become our companions, people we do things with. Companions who become our friends; friends we share our life and our dreams with. And one day we find that these acquaintances, these companions, these friends, have become the relatives and next-door neighbors of times and ways past. They're the ones we've chosen to share life's ups and downs with; our highs and lows and evens.

Community is where we come to celebrate, to feel good, as well as to seek solace. This is a place to be when you need to be with others, people to turn to when you're feeling low, when hope fades. It is also a place to be when seeking the highest. This is sacred ground. This is our home. This is a place where we welcome and treat each other as family. A place where we welcome all who come through our doors as guests—guests in our home. This is a place where we come to live in covenant and community.

We are not unique in our quest. The yearning for community in its deepest sense is universal. Things have clearly not been going right in our world of late. But whatever our differences—competitive, nationalistic, ideologic—we all have the same human desire for freedom and fulfillment, for meaning and purpose, for happiness, and for love. And that longing leads naturally to a quest for community. No matter how battered and bruised our world may be the desire for harmony and respect, for better ways of being together, for community, is nearly impossible to destroy.

It used to be that tribes and clans could indulge in a bit of relatively harmless hissing and spitting and then wander off into other sections of a vast and open land. Those days, indeed those millennia, are gone. We can no longer deal with our differences by avoiding each other. That's an attempt that is polarizing people and nations. It won't work. The world has become too small in too many ways.

We're here, we're together, living next to and on top of each other, and, if we're to survive, we have to find ways of accommodating one another, of getting along. And that's what we practice by living in covenant and community.

So how do we go about it, how do we know when we've got it, and why bother with it is the first place?

How do we openly form these covenants and how do we live them within our Ethical Society—our family—and with others? Well, cooperation begins with communication. We can't arrive at acknowledged agreements openly if we don't talk and listen to one another. That's an art that has been lost along with so much else over the past few generations. Call it the price of progress if you will, but it's a price we need not pay; it's a loss we can recover.

We need to begin by sitting together with those like us in order that we may do so with those unlike us. We need to talk and listen deeply. Conversation of this depth takes time, it takes imagination, it takes courage, and it takes faith in each other.

It takes conversation and it takes cooperation. Life works best when it works cooperatively rather than competitively. It was David Sarnoff, whose family has long and close ties to the Ethical Culture Fieldston School, who said, "Competition brings out the best in products and the worst in people." We need to re-learn, and we need to do it quickly, how to live and work together cooperatively.

When we listen to others non-judgmentally about what is important to them and why, and when we muster the courage to talk openly to others about what's meaningful to us and why, the world begins to change. Big things happen when small groups talk to each other. Deep connections are formed in conversation; connections that bind us and that overcome the difficulties of difference; connections that make us brave.

How do we tell when we've got it, when we're living in covenant and community? Well, certainly the lack of rancor and the absence of a whole lot of other things so prevalent in our small-ess society today. But there are just as many healthy signs. Such as how we remember and care for each other. Not just those here this morning or active in the Society or movement today, but all those, from Felix Adler, his father, Samuel, and his greatest influence, Emmanuel Kant, on down through the ages, through those who belong to the New York Society for Ethical Culture today, and extending into the future, to those who will lead tomorrow if we are successful in our task today.

And our task is to create a sense of community, to practice and master it here, so that it may radiate back out into the world through us. That's why we do it, so we can be agents of change and make a difference. Just look at the world of 1876 and the attitude of Felix Adler in founding our Ethical Humanist movement. We, too, can change the world for the better and that change begins with how we are together, how we are with each other here, this morning, in this hall.

If you believe, as I do, that the world needs changing, we have to relearn the simple arts of talking and listening. The only true currency in a nearly bankrupt world is the honesty we share with each other.

Oneness, togetherness was for one brief shining moment global. Let us come together and bring that sense back to the world. Compassion can triumph over violence and peace prevail over war.

Ethical Culture has the power, the power of ideas, ideas that have changed the world and have the power to do so again. Ideas with the power to change the world.

Wisdom often comes slowly, often arriving later in life. But we're still young at heart and we can still make a difference. With our help, with our hands, and with our voice we can impact the future for the better. If we approach our task with imagination, courage, and perseverance, our Ethical Culture can impact the global culture.

That takes character and that takes courage, the kind of character and courage that are fostered in an Ethical Humanist community. Let it be said by historians looking back on our senselessly violent era that the cowardice of a few was met with the courage of the many. That it was the time in humanity's history when revenge was cast aside in favor of cooperation, when difference was no longer divisive but was woven into the rich tapestry of existence.

The covenants we make and keep, the community we deepen and nurture, is important. We take that sense back out into the world, into the larger community where, if openly shared with respect and courage and honesty, it has a profound impact.

With our help, with our hands, with covenant and community, the world can be made a better place.

Together we can do that which we cannot do alone.

In covenant and community we can repair our storm damaged world the same way the good people of Grant County, Kentucky, repaired that barn roof.



A member of the American Ethical Union
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2 West 64th Street • New York, New York 10023
212.874.5210 • www.NYSEC.org