

# *Letting Go*

Platform address<sup>1</sup> to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, December 10, 2006  
By **Tony Hileman**, Senior Leader

In coming here this morning, or in having been out in the cold this past week, I doubt that any of you missed the fact that winter is upon us. And winter can be a kind of morose time of year. It gets dark early. It's still dark when we get up, or at least when most of us get up. Some animals burrow deep into the protection of the earth to hibernate. Other animals, humans among them, form herds or otherwise cling to each other in isolation from the sun.

Throughout most of human history, hunter-gatherers and agrarians alike have hunkered down to wait out the long, cold, gray days of winter. Harvests reaped and stored, festivals of plenty over, the chores of fall and the preparations for winter complete, it was time for rest and renewal in anticipation of the glories of spring and the routines of summer.

Times have changed and the impact of the seasons has lessened. Fewer and fewer of us are tied to the land in the same way our ancestors were. Light and warmth are available at the flip of a switch or the turn of a dial. For most of us the daily routine of our lives is uninterrupted by the seasons.

But one thing hasn't changed. This time of year remains one of introspection and renewal. It is a time when we examine the past in anticipation of the future, a time when we let go of those parts of yesterday that no longer serve a better tomorrow.

The long days of winter are a good time to let go of the past, quietly mourn its passing, and turn toward a brighter future that will come as assuredly as the spring.

At times of reevaluation it's appropriate to examine whether we've misjudged situations or overestimated our own capabilities. That kind of pragmatic analysis often leads to a disappointing lowering of our expectations of others or a painful adjustment of our own aspirations. And this is a good time to let go of those feelings and head into the New Year with a fresh sense of realism. Letting go of dreams is not the same as letting go of ideals, just a pragmatic tempering of how much of the infinite ideal we can approximate in a finite amount of time.

But what I want to talk about this morning is a positive letting go of some things in order to make room for others, about letting go of a constrained and unserviceable past in order to embrace an invigorated future. In the New Year I will be talking more about embracing change, about welcoming an invigorated future. But today I want to talk about and encourage you to let go of the old.

We Ethical Humanists are dedicated to personal fulfillment and cultural advancement. One of the ways of looking at one's own personal growth is as a continual process of letting go.

Mark Twain told a story that I'd like to start off with before going on to the poetry of Robert Service, whom you may know as the writer who penned *The Cremation of Sam McGee*. Hardly a holiday remembrance but it does begin on December 25<sup>th</sup> in the frigid

---

<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.

cold of the arctic. Service was a descriptive writer who said of the arctic blast that did in Sam McGee, “Talk of your cold, though the parkas fold, it stabbed like a driven nail.”

And we all know that Mark Twain was more than a bit of a rascal. This story upholds that reputation. But, like most of his writings, his message is only thinly veiled by humor and comes through clear and sharp. This is from memory but the gist of it’s right.

I once found myself ailing and consulted a physician friend of mine. He told me to get more rest, cut out the spicy foods, and lay off the smoking and drinking. I did and I felt better almost instantly.

When a lady friend of mine was similarly ailing I passed along the same advice. “Well,” she said, “I go to bed when the sun sets, my diet is and always has been bland, and I’ve never smoked or indulged in beverage alcohol.” The poor woman was dead within a week. She was like a sinking ship with no excess baggage to throw overboard!

Letting go of excess baggage, clearing out our lives so we can travel lightly, is what I want to focus on this morning. I want to speak largely from a point of personal perspective, speaking from the well of my own experience in hope that that experience speaks to you.

Deep in the well of ourselves lie the remembrances of our lives. If we can bring the wisdom of those experiences to the surface we’re not only better informed about ourselves and the world in which we live, but we’re able to make more informed considerations and better decisions.

My father shared some traits with Mark Twain and Robert Service. While not nearly as rapsallion as Twain or as irreverent as Service, he was a happy-go-lucky sort who, despite his profession as a carpenter and cabinet maker, never bothered to sandpaper his own rough edges.

When I was a boy, he had only two books that were not directly connected to his trade as a builder. One was the Boy Scout handbook. The other was a small, red volume of poems by Robert Service. I don’t know where he got it or why he kept it, but just that he did influenced me. The small things of parents often have a large impact on their children and I am no exception.

I think knowing that my father appreciated at least one poet, made it okay for me to like not just poetry, but also literature, and the arts in general. But it was the poems themselves, the poems in that little red book, that impacted me most.

Service was born in England to Scottish parents but immigrated to Canada as a young man. He settled in Dawson City in the Yukon Territory at the turn of the last century, then a harsh place in a rough and tumble time. It was in that atmosphere that Service wrote about what he saw, what he experienced, and what he thought. This was on the fly leaf of one of his early works:

I have no doubt at all the Devil grins,  
As seas of ink I spatter,  
Ye gods, forgive my “literary” sins—  
The other kind don’t matter.

It’s significant that he put *literary* in quotes—he never took himself too seriously—and more significant that he capitalized *Devil* but put *gods* in lower case. That should

give you enough insight to Service to receive what I consider his masterpiece, *The Skeptic*, as more than simply cute.

It's just two stanzas in length. Bear in mind my caution about Service's irreverence, and also that I'm going somewhere with this.

Here we go.

My Father Christmas passed away  
When I was barely seven.  
At twenty-one, alack-a-day,  
I lost my hope of heaven.  
Yet not in either lies the curse:  
The hell of it's because  
I don't know which loss hurt the worse—  
My God or Santa Claus

I loved that poem from the first time I read it, which was long before I grasped any but its surface meaning. Over the years it has come to say much more to me.

He capitalized, and thus equated, *Father Christmas*, *God* and *Santa Claus*, putting them all in the same category.

Let me read it again.

My Father Christmas passed away  
When I was barely seven.  
At twenty-one, alack-a-day,  
I lost my hope of heaven.  
Yet not in either lies the curse:  
The hell of it's because  
I don't know which loss hurt the worse—  
My God or Santa Claus

“I don't know which loss hurt the worse—My God or Santa Claus”

As I get deeper into my work in Ethical Culture and with myself, I hear that poem as a letting go—as the slow unclenching of a grip on worn beliefs. That's something that resonates with me and I would imagine with most of us.

My belief in Santa Claus dissolved at about the same time it did for Service, around six or seven. But I was much more precocious than Service when it came to matters of origin and destiny—to a hope of heaven. It was only a year or so after the demise of Santa Claus that I stopped praying to a faraway god.

Maybe it's because these things are easier when you're young—not that twenty-one is old by any stretch of the imagination—but, unlike Service, I don't know which loss hurt the least, as neither the loss of my belief in that faraway god of my childhood or the loss of my reliance on Santa Clause bothered me much at all.

It was Christmas Eve and I think I was six, though perhaps I was seven like Service. Or maybe he was six like me and just said he was seven because it rhymes with heaven. We'll give him poetic license on that one.

Anyway, I was in bed hoping for lots of gifts in the morning—that part hasn't changed—when I got to thinking about the concept of global gift delivery within a tight time frame. When suddenly it wasn't working for me.

Mind you, this was long before UPS or FedEx and guaranteed next-day delivery. Experience had taught me that those presents under the tree in the morning would be real, but experience had also taught me that the Santa concept of how they got there didn't hold up. So I lay wondering how they got there if not by Santa and sleigh.

I kept thinking and I finally worked it out. Of course the beer helped. The beer Dad drank, that is. I grew up in Indianapolis and Sterling, an Indiana beer, was Dad's preferred brew. Not many people drank it but it was Dad's favorite. Every Christmas Eve—after the family's traditional supper of oyster stew and before a reluctant bedtime—my sisters and I would put out for Santa cookies and milk, and a chilled can of Sterling beer.

Yeah, pretty obvious now, but to me then it was a real “gotcha” moment, as enlightening as any revelation ever was. My Dad was Santa Claus. That didn't quite work, either, but from there the pieces fell quickly in place. Not only my dad but parents all over the world participated in this masquerade.

I never lamented the loss of the Santa concept. Instead I was one pleased and proud little boy. I had figured it out. I had penetrated the cultural, pierced the concept, and figured it out.

That was heady stuff. It taught me that to think and to doubt could lead to reasoned explanations of life's mysteries, that we could successfully challenge historic teachings and the culturally acceptable.

I felt so empowered that I turned my inquiry toward larger issues. Flush with success from the Santa Clause exposé, I directed my newfound skepticism toward the god concept. And that's when I learned the difference between a legend lightly perpetuated and the culturally sacred clung to with a desperate fervor that defies reason and rejects rationality. Beliefs so sacrosanct that even to peek into them is heresy.

But emboldened by my new best friend, critical inquiry, and armed with the courage of youth, I forged ahead. I looked at, thought about, and questioned the concept of an omnipotent, omnipresent personal god actively involved in our everyday lives, one who heard and responded to prayers of petition and intercession. I looked, I thought, I questioned, and I came to doubt.

It didn't work for me. I found inconsistencies, claims that didn't add up. I saw understandings justified by authority alone, undermined and co-opted by natural explanations. I developed issues of scale and probability, and it all just quit working for me.

The god concept didn't hold up. So I let it go.

Letting go of god was, for me, as easy as letting go of Santa Clause. Finding alternative explanations was a bit dicier, but the letting go was the same. I didn't have anything to fill the void this time. My Dad was Santa Claus and I loved and respected him, but I knew he didn't create the universe. And he had the nagging, parental habit of ignoring my pleas for things I wanted to have or I wanted to have happen. And, Santa or no, he didn't seem possessed of special powers. Neither did anyone or anything else.

Explanations of our origin and promises of eternal life dissolved, and I let them. I let go, but not completely. I was afraid to. We are often tempted to turn away from knowledge because it's threatening. We're understandably reluctant to let go of

comforting things without having something to replace them. But eventually we have to admit that the old has departed, even if the new has not yet arrived.

I realized pretty quickly that when it came to life's larger questions I was on my own. That was frightening to me. To paraphrase Service, Cold truth stabs through the folds of tradition like a driven nail – and it hurts. And pain is scary. It takes a lot of courage to intentionally step out of step with the dominant culture and I wasn't ready for that yet. So for a long time I more or less avoided the issue. I accepted it but set it aside and just lived life as it came.

For many of those interim years I clung to a desire for a cosmic friend of sorts. I was kind of philosophically lazy in those days, in my young adulthood. I could have used a bit of Dad's beer but Sterling had gone out of business. By the time they quit making it so few people were drinking it hardly anyone noticed. That's the way it is with some things.

And that's the way it was for me. I looked around for my celestial companion, and he wasn't there. Letting go of cherished concepts can cause personal upheaval or cultural chaos, but once they're gone they're hardly missed.

Some things we come to know so slowly that we don't know when it happened and we're startled that it has. And so it was for me. The realization that I didn't just question but that I no longer believed wasn't a sudden flash of revelation but a slow process of letting go.

There comes a point when we realize that what we've held as rational has become rationalization. There comes a point where we uncover in our own thinking a mythology masquerading as rationality.

It's a damn shame to realize that ones cherished beliefs have become excess baggage. We all still have our gods and Santa Clauses, our holy grails and sacred cows. Teasing them out and letting them go is not easy, but it is liberating.

And, yes, I understand that "sacred cow" is not very respectful of a still-active religious observation. We raise, slaughter, and eat cows. Others hold them sacred and allow them to run free in the streets. Both can't be right.

Closer to home, many still sacralize the revelations of ancient prophets as passed down through generations and eventually recorded only centuries later. We've let go of those stories, no longer believing them to be literal but rather holding them to be apocryphal. We let go of their inerrancy but we respectfully retain their import.

When one encounters the limits of one's own assumptions—be they inherited or self-constructed—it is necessary, indeed it is morally incumbent upon us, to examine those assumptions with an open mind, ever ready, ever willing to reverently set them aside, to lay them to rest as no longer adequate to the tests of human experience.

To probe, to questions, to think, to doubt is our moral responsibility. Inquiry is the enemy of the inane and an open mind is an open road to an open future. Moral conscience and human knowledge trump blind loyalty and obsolete traditions.

We need to lift the veneer off old ideas to see what's beneath them. Even when the surface is worn a sound structure may be discovered and used as foundation for new and improved constructs better suited to today's living.

But if what we find is decayed, crumbling with age, well, nothing seems to last forever. It's sad to see the beautiful, the cherished, the loved grow old and useless. But

sadness, regret, even anger cannot restore what once was but is no longer. Some things have just disappeared. Let them go.

That's what Felix Adler did in founding Ethical Culture. In his own words, "Among those [involved at the founding], there was manifest a desire to separate the grain from the chaff, but also to preserve the grain, and not only to preserve but to plant it anew in the expectation of reaping a richer harvest."

There was much chaff in what Adler considered a "decaying theology," and that was let go, tossed overboard as excess baggage. But there was also much grain to be planted, tended, and harvested. That continual cycle was Adler's life work. And, as cultural progressives, it is ours.

We are cultural progressives and we are progressing, that has been and, with our courage, will continue to be the course of human history. Given that record—in view of what lies behind us and considering the forces of regressions at work in our culture today—we do not have the option not to press forward, not to let go, not to move on.

A mind change of profound proportions can take place in no more than the time it takes to look deeply into the well of our own experience with the willingness to admit and accept what is there—and what is not. Letting go of what is not is an act of maturity, of intellectual and emotional maturity. It is also an act of courage.

Millions are only tenuously connected to the leap-of-faith religion of their birth. Think what would happen to our culture if they turned to what they already know! The most potent agent for social change is awareness of what we already know but have not yet admitted. That recognition, that acceptance, is a turning point in anyone's life. And it requires letting go.

Not having excess baggage is one thing. Having it and not recognizing it as such—thinking it's still necessary—is quite another. And worse yet is recognizing it and continuing to carry it around.

I see the struggle of letting go in so many today. Some face and overcome it when they encounter Ethical Humanism, recognizing it as the settlement rather than the instigator of the struggle. Others battle it for years without ever wholly resolving it; it becomes a perpetual dilemma, a lingering crisis.

I had never taken much of a leap of faith, certainly not as grand a leap as others, so it wasn't much of an effort to jump back and take up residence on this side of the faith/reason or theism/naturalism divide.

We have each in one way or another faced the choice between divine faith and human reason. For most of us here human reason has had its way and divine faith has gone its way. I do not want to take from others the things they find comforting and necessary. But I do want them to know and understand that there is comfort to be found in other ways. I want them to know that taking responsibility for our own beliefs, our own answers, our own view of the world, is empowering rather than overpowering.

I believe if more people realized the comfort to be found in the Humanist way they would more readily let go of other ways.

I wanted to end with something that dramatically drives home a profound moral point. I looked for and searched for that something, but I didn't find it. It wasn't working for me. So I let it go. But rather than just abandon the profound and quit talking, I opted for the practical. I want to leave you with a thought and a suggestion.

Change is important in our lives and we all want to be agents of betterment. Letting go is an important step in change, in moving forward. But the first step toward change is the recognition that change is necessary.

With that in mind, I invite you to join me in these waning days of the year in letting go of that which no longer works, in bidding a fond farewell to that which needs changing, in ridding ourselves of excess baggage so that we might go into the New Year lighter and less encumbered, prepared and eager to welcome the future and to embrace change.

NEW YORK SOCIETY FOR  
**ETHICAL  
CULTURE** 

A member of the American Ethical Union  
and the International Humanist & Ethical Union

2 West 64<sup>th</sup> Street • New York, New York 10023  
212.874.5210 • [www.NYSEC.org](http://www.NYSEC.org)