

It Is Possible

Winterfest address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, December 17, 2006
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It is possible to be one with the earth and to be one with each other. This is a time of year when we pause to more deeply experience our kinship with each other, with nature, and with the universe. A time when we feel fully our oneness.

We are, all of us, children of the universe in a very real way, conceived of stardust, and part of one natural family. We are made of the same stuff as the stars we wonder at during the long nights of winter. The air we breathe is ancient, breathed by creatures older than humanity, refreshed by plants and trees in the ongoing cycle of life and the seasons.

Winterfest is the oldest and grandest of all celebrations, one tied closely to the cycles of nature and the closeness of humanity. We no longer live closely, tribally. Our interdependence is not as readily apparent as when we were hunter-gatherers. And we are no longer as close to the earth as we were when more of us were agrarian. But we are no less one with nature, we are no less one with each other, and it is possible to be intensely aware of each.

And so we gather at Winterfest to do just that, to reaffirm our oneness.

We know deep inside, in our innermost self, in our gut, that we are one. That is the basis of our ethical religion. The ethical manifold—that we are at the same time one and many—leads us to consider others not as apart from us but as a part of ourselves. We know that to bring out the best in others is to bring out the best in ourselves. That's oneness, and that's Ethical Culture.

In his magnum opus, *An Ethical Philosophy of Life*, the founder of our movement, Felix Adler, said, "I, as an individual, am inextricably linked-up backward and forward with those who came before and those who are to come after. I cannot take myself out of this web. The task laid upon human society as a whole is also laid upon me. I am a conscious thread in the fabric that is weaving, conscious in a general way of the pattern to be woven."

Adler was an idealist who held that spirituality itself is consciousness of our infinite interrelatedness—of our oneness. He also held that "Defining what you mean by spirituality is the first and most important religious question." I hold that that defining, that questioning, that ongoing refining of what it means to be infinitely related, is the most important and sacred of all religious practices.

For it is a practice that not only brings us closer to each other, that increases our love and respect for each other, that deepens our sense of the worth and dignity of each other, but it is a practice that itself keeps us in a state of oneness.

It is a practice that, in the words of Houston Smith, holds us in "Oneness in infinite gratitude toward all things past, oneness in infinite service toward all things present, and oneness in infinite responsibility for all things future."—a thread in the fabric of all that is as well as a weaver of all that will be.

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.

About twenty years ago, the Vietnamese poet and Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, wrote *Being Peace*. That book could just as well have been titled *being love* as that is what he was talking about. We all strive to have love in our lives. But there's a difference in having love in our lives and actually being love ourselves. Having the one may tutor and enable the other, but it's not essential. Even the most cloistered hermit can embody love.

Being love. That is what Nhat Hanh was talking about. That is what Joyce Rupp was talking about. And that is what Felix Adler was talking about in his many references to the ethical or spiritual manifold.

This is a wonderful and appropriate time of year to dwell on that simple concept, as this is a time of both seasonal and a cultural isolation. During winter's darkness, we turn inward seeking our own council, and in times of strife we distance ourselves from others. Seasonal cycles are much older than those of humanity, as old as time its self. They come and they go in a natural, soothing, and welcome pattern that reinforces life and who we are.

The cycles we have created for ourselves, those of happiness and sadness, joy and pain, ignorance and discovery, setbacks and improvements, calm and chaos, have been woven into the fabric of our lives.

In looking back on this past year and further back through my life, I accept those cycles, too. Not as natural as the seasons, though perhaps as inevitable, but as part of the tapestry of existence.

But when I look out at the world today, I am mindful of a cycle of the beauty of peace and the tragedy of strife. It's a cycle that humanity seems trapped in. It seems that whenever we stand atop the vantage of peace we think we can never again descend into the mire of war.

But somehow a separateness sets in, a distancing, an isolation. And within that void unpleasant behaviors arise, behaviors born of our worst rather than of our best. Behaviors accepted first by one or two tolerant intimates, and then exposed to an unsuspecting, unaware, and unprepared community.

Reinforced by the acceptance of the few, aberrant behaviors developed in small groups are put into play in larger groups without consideration or deference for social convention, expectation, or dynamics. Unchallenged, what was once aberrant becomes dominant. And before you know it, it invades our cultural DNA. Peace wanes, war waxes, and the world grows more and more distant, more and more isolated.

But that needn't be so. In this time of darkness, both natural and cultural, it is wonderful that we come together to intentionally share ourselves with each other. In doing so we feel the vibrancy of our history, the comfort of each other, and the warmth of being together. And in this time of winter celebration, we feel a kinship with all who are, all who have been, and all who will be. And we understand that the oneness is possible.

And in speaking of that possibility, of that oneness, our lives themselves are our loudest voices. It's the statements we make through our daily actions that have the power to change the world. It is how we treat each other as individuals that's reflected in our global culture.

There's a thread that connects us all at a deeper level of communication, a level beyond difference, a place as broad as forever and as wide as always. It is on that level

that we find our oneness. It was the saying of Rumi that out beyond the field of wrongdoing, beyond even the field of right-doing, there is another field. “I will meet you there,” he would say.

That field, that other field where Rumi and all others await us, is the field of oneness. We know where it is. It is within each of us and yet is larger than all of us. We can meet there. It is possible.

CLOSING WORDS

Since the origins of humanity the darkness of the longest night has brought both fear and courage. Fear that the warmth of the sun had abandoned us forever. Courage to withstand the harshest of winters in confidence that the days would again lengthen.

Today we fear that faith, hope, and peace have abandoned us. With courage and with love, they, too, can be restored. We believe in each other. We are confident in our capacity to shape a better future. And we are warmed by the brightness of our love.

As the light returns to our lives – and to all our hall – with our arms open wide, we welcome each other, the young and the old, those who came before us and those who are to come after us. As Humanists, we likewise accept new and expanded understandings, and our courage to do so honors but does not bow to tradition. We stand tall and proud in our uniqueness, and we are joined humbly, reverently in our commonness.

We each are only one, but together we are many. We each can do only a little, but we can do something. And if we each do something, the world becomes better and so do we. It is through our own efforts that we come closer and closer still to the ideals that burn so brightly within us in the darkness of the longest night.

These things are possible, and we can make them so, if we only have love.



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