

Embracing Change

Platform address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, January 7, 2007
by **Tony Hileman**, Senior Leader

Good morning, and welcome to 2007. The New Year is always an exciting and invigorating time. A time when we look back on the past and look forward to the future. A time when we assess what was and contemplate what may be. It is also a time for sober assessment of what is.

My talk this morning is on embracing change and I want to lay the groundwork for the importance of that by focusing on our uncommonly fractious and dangerous world. Ours is a disputatious time and even in a season of celebration that is cause for concern—deep concern.

Our nation is at war on many fronts and the clash of ideologies and armies is on the rise. What began as a metaphorical war on terror has for all too long been all too real in Afghanistan and Iraq. Absent a radical change in our ridged ways of thinking, there's a very real chance that armed conflict will increase and spread to other areas, drawing nation after nation into its vortex.

People are dying, and people do not die metaphorically—they die for real. This life—this life that we Ethical Humanists revere as all and enough—this life when cut short is lost to us forever. We know to a person how many of our troops have died, how many young and promising American lives have been snuffed out, and we mourn the loss of each and every one. So, too, do we mourn the loss of the uncounted, the unnamed, the unrecognized—the tens of thousands who have perished as a result of our military actions, and the hundreds of thousands slaughtered by our lack of moral action.

We value life in curious ways, counting some and discounting others. But with the loss of each human life the prospect of peace dies a little bit. The human tragedy is great, but the cultural tragedy may prove even greater, for there's another front to this war, and another victim. That front is ideological and the victim is cultural advancement and I think both are rooted in a fear of change.

This past August, the mayor of Salt Lake City, Rocky Anderson, said America is in the midst of an “incredible moral crisis.” He laid the blame at the feet of George W. Bush, whom he characterized as “the most dangerous President the country's ever had.” That we're in the throes of a moral, an ideological crisis is a fair characterization of the state of our national culture. And Bush and his administration are easy targets of blame—too easy.

The late John Kenneth Galbraith said, “We attribute to politicians what should be attributed to the community they serve.” [*The Culture of Contentment*, 1992] That's us, folks. If you want to know the character of the people of a democratic nation, you need look no further than the character of the leaders they elect. That may sound harsh and it may be an overstatement, but there's more truth to it than can be found in the justifications that precipitated the war we find ourselves in.

As differing absolutist views clash, each buttressed with a sense of divine certainty that engenders and rewards the willingness to kill and die, cultural sensibilities are

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.

numbered, the willingness to cooperate dissipates, civility disintegrates, advancement stalls, and we backslide into increasing hostilities. The trouble with differing absolutist views is that they can't possibly all be right. That's easy to see from the outside, but impossible to grasp from within.

Somebody has to let go of something. Somebody has to accept that that which once was is no longer, somebody has to recognize that what once worked no longer does, everyone has to realize that somebody somewhere is not right and that that somebody is anybody who clings to stasis and rejects change.

This is clearly a time to let go and to welcome, to embrace, change.

Okay, if you're not too depressed by all that, let's lighten up for a while and take a somewhat more optimistic look at things while I get at what I mean by embracing change.

The founder of the Ethical Culture movement, Felix Adler, welcomed the 20th century with an address in January of 1901. Reflecting the more classic culture of his era, he calculated the passage of time literally, exactly. The first year of the Common Era was year one. The end of the first century came at the end of year 100, and the end of the 19th century came on December 31, 1900. In accord with the culture of the day, the 20th century began on New Year's Day in January of 1901.

By the time the 21st century rolled around, things had changed. True to our progressive heritage, we accepted that change, allowed popular culture to have its way, and welcomed the 21st century 99 years later on January 1, 2000, preferring the simplicity of a round number to the challenge of simple arithmetic.

I'm not going to get into what that might say about this new century of ours. If you're really interested in that spate of millennialism that marked the end of the last century, however you calculate it, Stephen Jay Gould wrote an entire book about it. A small book, but a book nonetheless, entitled *Questioning the Millennium*. But however you look at it or question it, the shift from a classic calculation to a popular approach to numbers does emphasize that change itself has become part of our culture.

As Gould points out, [page 31] "We need a concept of gradual alteration to sustain hope that what we have built through struggle might persist and even augment." A concept of gradual alteration that allows us to believe that what we have accomplished can be sustained and furthered.

A lot has been altered over the past century, some not so gradually. A hundred years ago the life expectancy in the United States was 47. In 1906, 8% of homes had a telephone, which isn't too surprising as it was pretty new then. But the bathtub had been around for a long time and only 14% of homes had one, even though 95% of births took place at home.

California, now our most populous state by far, was 21st on the population list of 45 states, and Las Vegas had only 30 inhabitants. The average wage was 22¢ an hour. Only one in five could read and write, only one in seventeen had a high school education, and only one in ten physicians went to college. Maybe that had something to do with the low life expectancy!

Now all those statistics came to me in an email and I didn't verify each and every one. But they speak of an extraordinary pace of change that is likely still accelerating.

Trying to imagine what it may be like in another 100 years challenges the imagination and boggles the mind.

It wasn't all that long ago, in the greater scheme of things, that grandparents, parents, their children, their children's children—generation after generation—lived and died in a little-changed world. Progress was being made, but it was so gradual as to be barely discernable. Gould's "concept of gradual alteration" was yet to emerge. And when it did, it did so with threat rather than hope.

Up until recently, one could argue up until the mid-19th century, Western civilization struggled to create a concept of a static, suddenly-created, never-changing world. Science had long since challenged this stasis, and tradition has been remarkably elastic in accommodating the seemingly incompatible. Contortion and distortion are amazingly flexible, and the old can be bent and stretched until scarcely recognizable. But there comes a point when the elastic snaps. And that's the point where change becomes inevitable.

When new understandings can no longer be crammed into old concepts, change has arrived. And it's often greeted with kicking and screaming rather than with open arms.

In pathology, stasis is the stoppage of the normal flow of a bodily substance, such as the flow of blood through an artery or of intestinal contents through the bowels. So, if you don't let life's blood flow you're constipated. And likewise, if progress doesn't flow a culture becomes plugged up with used up things. Too much of our world today suffers from cultural constipation.

There are those who tenaciously cling to the status quo not just because they fear the outcome, the result of change—though they assuredly do. But also because they see the process of change as simply too daunting. They don't even want to put forth the effort to calculate the beginning, the end, or the length of a century.

Sure, they are afraid of letting go of things past, of things that once provided comfort and security, who isn't? But it's their favoring equanimity over advancement that has them stuck.

In accepting change I'm not advocating rashness, unnecessarily making waves, or behaving like a bull in a china shop. I'm advocating embracing change itself, the process of change. Not change for change's sake. We can easily mistake arbitrary change for progress so caution is a welcome ally. But so is industry and courage.

One can look back over the long or short version of the past century and point to many significant things. But at or near the top would be the absorption of change into our way of life, and books were written about that, too. A prime example is sociologist and futurologist Alvin Toffler's 1970 classic, *Future Shock*, which was an expansion of an article he wrote for that icon of cultural advancement, *Playboy* magazine.

In it Toffler argued that the enormous change our society was undergoing at the time would overwhelm people, and that the accelerated rate of change would leave us disoriented and disconnected or, in the phrase he coined, "future shocked." He also coined the term "information overload" as either a cause or symptom of future shock, I don't really remember which.

Anyway, I disagree with his premise that change will overwhelm us, and I'll tell you why.

My grandfather was a pretty bright and savvy guy, who understood the technology of the early twentieth century. He was superintendent of roads in Union County, Illinois, through the teens, twenties, and thirties. This was a pretty cushy job, especially in a small town during the Depression. It paid well and allowed him to pamper my mother, the youngest of his six children by ten years. This art of spoiling the youngest is a time honored tradition in our family, one my mother put to good use in raising me. But I digress.

Having risen through the ranks, old Joe knew his way around the machines needed to build and maintain roads, and was easily tough enough to tame them and the men who ran them. Even near retirement, I am told, he could be seen atop a grader or at the controls of a power shovel whenever the occasion called for it, which was whenever he wanted to show the members of one of his crews how it was supposed to be done.

That must have been some sight as I recall him as a short man who drove his late-twenties Buick, a massive automobile he loved and refused to get rid of, by looking through rather than over the steering wheel—he had to hike himself up to peered over the dash and under the top of the wheel

During the flush of post-war prosperity, when the change Toffler would write about a couple of decades later was just getting a grip on our nation, my parents bought a Wilcox-Gay Record-O-Phone. This was a console model nearly as large as my grandfather's Buick. It had a slide-out turntable with two arms, one for playing 78-rpm records and one for recording them—hence the Record-O-Phone.

It also had an AM radio and a public address system, though why anyone would want a PA system in their living room remains a mystery. But it did lend dual purpose to the microphone whose primary use was cutting wax records like the still existing version of my sister and me singing *I'm Looking Over A Four-leaf Clover* that you will never, ever hear.

It had two knobs, on-off/volume and tuning, and four buttons, radio, record player, recorder, and the superfluous PA. My grandfather, the master of men and machine, would not touch it. The complexity overwhelmed him. It wasn't a machine and he didn't know how it worked, didn't understand the technology behind it, so he shied away from it, opting instead to marvel at his grandchildren's operation of it. Sound familiar? Remind you of watching someone who can barely walk use cell phone, pre-schoolers at the helm of a computer, or first-graders learning to spell by text messaging?

The point is this: Toffler and my grandfather were approaching change the same way; if you couldn't understand it, didn't know what was driving it, if you didn't know where it came from or where it was going, it would overwhelm you. Not necessarily so.

Few of us have any idea of the technology, let alone the science, that drives a computer or a cell phone—mother boards and towers. That they work at all is a mystery to us, yet we use them and expect them to work like the lights—throw a switch, push a button, and magic happens. If it doesn't no more lifting the hood and tinkering with it. A bigger hammer doesn't make things go anymore. We've come to accept the result of change only because we subliminally embrace the process of change itself. And that's what I want to get at—rendering the subliminal conscious.

We often tend to think of change in terms of replacing one thing with another, in terms of cause and effect. Those are important considerations, to be sure. But what I want to focus you on is change itself, embracing the process of change. And I want to make a

connection to our chosen lifstance as I think that to embrace change is to embrace Ethical Culture, to embrace Ethical Humanism, to embrace ethical religion.

Let me go back to some of Adler's observations from that earlier era. He believed, and here I quote, "in combining the social and the individual ideal, but not by ranging them side by side, and pursuing alternately now one and then the other. I believe," he went on to say, "in synthesizing the individual and the social ideal, and just in this synthesis is contained the fuller ethical ideal, which to my way of thinking, marks the next great step forward on the road of ethical progress which humankind is destined to take."

Destined, destined to take. He saw change and progress as inevitable. This was in an era less dangerous but far more challenging than ours. At the turn of the last century ours was a nation still nursing the open wound of the civil war, the scars of which are still evident, and a world struggling with scientific dispute of old mythologies. We were, in short facing the challenges of change.

We had yet to be tempered by two world wars, a depression, and the human catastrophes of the past century. So it was a time that allowed an awakened social consciousness to flourish optimistically and idealistically.

Adler completed his thought on advancement and change by saying, "The new insight consists in grasping the great truth that social service is not only a means, but indeed an indispensable means of self-development."

We have been tempered since then, and the naturalism and rationalism that never captured Adler's attention has come to dominate ours. So I would add that we've since come to see that it is an equally great truth that self-development is not only a means but an indispensable means to social service, to social justice, and to social advancement.

It's a two-way street, a process, a process of change. And only by accepting the process within ourselves can we come to grips with the change that surrounds our lives.

There's a saying, actually it's on an old tee shirt of mine stashed away among the things I've outgrown. It says, "Life is a journey, not a destination." Likewise, the process of change is a journey not dependent on where you begin or where you end.

Change is essential and inevitable, essential to progress and historically inevitable. A certain resistance to it in favor of comfort and stability is beneficial. It checks the rashness I spoke of earlier and counters our prodigal tendencies.

But reasoned resistance is not what our national and global cultures consist of today. And if we're to change that, we have to do more than think globally and act locally. We need to think universally and act personally. We need to expand our concepts, our thinking.

Change like that, personal change like that, is what gradually alters the world. And if we want to do that we have to divert our focus away from what we're giving up. That only makes us hang on tighter. Yet at the same time, too great a stress on where we're going can, and likely will, create difference and tension resulting in stasis. That's where we are, some of us not wanting to change at all and others of us disagreeing on where we want to go.

Visions, directions, need to be broader than particular aims or specific destinations. To say we want to do better and be better is enough! It allows us to gently accept the

necessity for change, and to embrace lovingly the process of change. Embracing change overcomes difference and allows peace into our lives and into our culture.

And that brings me back to where I started this morning, that ours is not a world at peace. Dwight David Eisenhower was quoted from this very stage yesterday, in a wedding ceremony of all things—one of the most tender and moving I have ever seen. Eisenhower, who knew something of war, said, “I think that people want peace so much that one of these days government had better get out of their way and let them have it.” That day has yet to come, but the time for it has.

And if we want it to happen, we have to get out of our own way. Peace is not external, it comes from within. If we can change in that way, if we can become peaceful ourselves, our world will find peace. If we can change, if we can embrace change, so can our world.

There is a sea of difference between war and peace, which is more than just the absence of war. Kathy Kelly was recipient of the American Ethical Union’s 2006 Elliot-Black award, named after two of my predecessors as Leader of this Society. The founder of Voices for Creative Non-Violence, a campaign of resistance to end the Iraq war and the so called “global war on terror,” she addressed us from this Platform just last fall.

Earlier this month she wrote from Amman, Jordan, of our shared “concern for future generations who will not only have to live with the consequences of this violence, but who will also live on a planet spoiled by global warming, in no small part because we spent our resources on war instead of on developing clean energy sources.” The price of war is indeed great.

Speaking of her efforts to change that, Kelly said, “Although we have paltry financial means compared to the weapons makers who wield so much influence on Capitol Hill, we do have resources. We have our bodies. We have our determination. We have our compassion for Iraqi people and for U.S. soldiers. ... These are the grains of sand that will stop the cogs of war from turning.”

Let those grains of sand do more than halt the machinery of war. Let them also be the seeds of peace—an enduring peace that erases war and death-counts from the headlines of our newspapers and newscasts, and relegates them to increasingly obscure chapters in history books.

I want to close with an “invocation” from Felix Alder. At least that’s what he called it when he first delivered it [in December of 1923]. But, as invocations are generally offered at the beginning of a gathering such as ours, I suppose this becomes a benediction today. Either way, it is inspiring and appropriate to the end or to the beginning of a gathering, at the end of a trying year, or at the beginning of a more hopeful one.

I took liberties with the first part. In the end I quote directly

Identify yourself with humanity—with all who live and all who have lived. Carry the past into the present. Consider yourself a disciple of history so as to come into intimate contact with those great moments in which humanity put forth a living effort—when humanity embraced change—so that you may be inspired and encouraged by their efforts.

Consider the needs of humankind today and embrace the change needed to fulfill them. Dedicate yourself to that greater good, to promoting the progress of humanity, and

in so doing the progress of your self. Dedicate yourself to promoting your own development, and in so doing the progress of humanity.

Conceive of the various lines of progress in science, in art, in technology and the like—conceive of these lines, seemingly separate and parallel, as converging toward a single point, a supreme end. In other words, conceive of progress abstractly, and embrace change spiritually.

“And of that end the simplest expression is that a state of things shall exist ... in which the law of the jungle, of life subsisting on life, shall be replaced by life enhancing other life.”

That enhancement comes through change. And change comes about best when embraced. It is through change, through embracing change, that we can do our piece to promote a future of peace and establish at last a world where each of us enhances the life of others.

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