

Founder's Day

New York Society for Ethical Culture
Sunday, May 20, 2007

A Founder's Day Message to Ethical Culture

From **Edward L. Ericson**, Senior Leader Emeritus

Ethical Humanism—Cult or Culture?

Platform address by **Tony Hileman**, Senior Leader

“The Unique personality which is the real life in me, I cannot gain unless I search for the real life, the spiritual quality, in others.”

Felix Adler, 1851–1933

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From **Edward L. Ericson**, Senior Leader Emeritus of the New York Society for Ethical Culture
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I send greetings to the New York Society for Ethical Culture on its 131st anniversary. The birth date of the New York Society also represents the birth of Ethical Culture as an ideal and as a movement.

Founder's Day should remind us that wherever we live, to whatever Society we may belong, we represent one united Ethical movement. This commitment comes down to each one of us individually. We must so act as to advance and safeguard this priceless treasure that we have received from the hands of others. There is no right and decent way to accept this gift and to turn aside from our common task. Our shared imperative shapes what we are called upon to do and to become.

To speak personally, forty-eight years ago I left the ministry of a thriving liberal congregation to accept the leadership of the fledgling Society in Washington, D.C. The church that I had served had doubled in membership during the two years of my ministry. The future was promising both for my congregation and for me. Yet, I left that secure position behind, because I believed then, as I believe now, that Ethical Humanism, as found in the American Ethical Union, represents something entirely original and irreplaceable in the American religious spectrum. That is the choice I made then, and I have never looked back. Without the Ethical movement, there would be a hole in the tapestry of religious thought and life.

Today it is important to remind ourselves of this truth, because at no time in our history have there been more pressures—social, political, and economic pressures—to compromise and disguise our humanism, to retreat into the clichés and pieties of pretended religiosity and to dull the cutting edge of our social conscience and social action. It is said that we must become more like the mainstream to prosper, or even to survive.

To accept such counsel is to receive a sentence of death. We would sully our integrity and dissipate our energies. The conforming majority does not need us. The millions who are left out do need us. They are our natural constituency.

We must give ourselves entirely to the centrality of ethics. It is the alpha and the omega of our humanism, the heart of intellectual and spiritual life. Without ethics in the central place—free from the encumbrances and diversions of myth, ceremonialism, and “spiritual” escapism—Ethical Culture simply ceases to be Ethical Culture.

Albert Schweitzer wrote many years ago that those who attempt to rise above humanism only succeed in falling below it. He also argued effectively that the essence of humanism is ethics.

Felix Adler gave us a fellowship that, in his words, would be without prayer, ritual, or creed. These he saw as divisive. He and those who joined with him lived a pure religion of deed. That is the foundational principle that cannot be compromised, that must not be tintured with lesser aims.

We go out to face the challenges of our time as one Ethical Humanist community, one Ethical family; and woe betide us, if we ever break this united circle.

To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, we have an Ethical Union, if we can keep it.

Keep it we will!

Read by New York Society for Ethical Culture member **Carol Nadell Van Deusen**

Ethical Humanism—Cult or Culture?

Platform address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, May 20, 2007
by **Tony Hileman**, Senior Leader

Ethical Humanism—Cult or Culture? The answer to that compound question is *Yes & No* shaded with *perhaps*. More on that later. But first, let's put some substance to the question, or at least give it context—frame it better.

I use *cult* in reference to our size, not our practice. In that respect we are the opposite of what's generally perceive as a cult. We're non-creedal, direct ourselves outward toward others, we encourage personal development and leadership, and we support each other it those efforts. We are cult-sized, but being small in numbers is not always a cultural disadvantage.

When a single person advances an innovative, ground-breaking idea it is, of course, considered dangerous. That's what happened to Felix Adler and his idea of Ethical Culture. His notions were greeted with caution and those who accepted them were viewed with suspension—as if they might more than just a little bit loony.

At the time his thinking was maturing, Adler was considered a shoe-in to follow his father as head rabbi at Temple Emanu-El here in New York. However, following the completion of his education in Europe, he spoke there just once, on October 11, 1873. That address changed the course of his life and influenced the course of ours—or at least mine. In that address, he advanced a revolutionary religious idea, a reconstructionist idea that took religion out of the realm of the supernatural. And in that single address he went from heir apparent to heir unapparent.

Finding no place for his ideas at Temple Emanu-El, he took a teaching position at Cornell. But his “dangerous attitude” didn't fit there, either, and he left after just two years. To say his ideas were not being well or broadly received would be an understatement. His effort to reconstruct the very concept of religion was and is profoundly revolutionary, and a fearless few were drawn to his leadership.

And when a few, or a few dozen attach themselves to an idea, they are no longer thought of as lunatics. They may still be considered odd but they get attention, and eventually they get respect. That's where Adler and his band of committed followers were on May 15, 1876 when he delivered the Founding Address of Ethical Culture right here in New York City at Standard Hall, a place that no longer exists. But, when they gathered there to seek the highest, it was holy ground.

Eventually, the few active in the founding of the Ethical movement attracted more, but a certain critical mass eluded them as it does us. When a few dozen grow to a few hundred or a few thousand, you've got a cult. That's pretty much as far as our movement ever got. It's where it is today and where it has been for a long, long time. But when the ideas of a cult gain common currency, they become the culture.

Many of Adler's visionary ideas have penetrated our culture, but our religion has not. Is that as it should be? Perhaps. We'll see.

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.

This is the 131st iteration of Founder's Day, a day when we pause to recognize the heritage of our movement and take pride in the role the New York Society for Ethical Culture played in it. It also a time to recognize the unique responsibility we have as our movement's founding Society.

I was moved by Ed Ericson's greeting and by Carol's reading of it. Ours is a Humanist religion of ethical relationships, dedicated to doing what's right—emphasis on doing. My talk this morning accepts and builds on Ed's reasoned optimism toward this Ethical Union of ours.

This is a day when we look back as well as forward. Take some time later to look at the historic photos and such that are on display around this grand building. They're mighty impressive. But if we are up to the challenge Ed Ericson has laid before us, the best is yet to come.

When I began preparing my remarks for today, I went over past talks I've given and things I've written, lifting bits and pieces from them—and from others, too, I'm not above that. I arranged and rearranged them until they began to connect and a pattern, a flow began to emerge that I could go with. Or at least I hope it has because, either way, I went with it.

Somewhere in that process I began to worry that some of you who have heard me speak before might actually remember something I've said and recognize that I'm repeating myself. Then it struck me: Isn't that what Ethical Culture's all about? Taking what's gone before—whether ours or others—and building on it as we move ahead. And isn't that what we're here to ponder, whether that open, welcoming, progressive attitude is still relevant in an increasingly dogmatic and in many ways regressive world?

I think it is.

The more observant among you—those who listen and remember—noticed that I refer to our movement as both Ethical Humanism and as Ethical Culture. I use those designations interchangeably. The Ethical Idealism of Felix Adler still illuminates our movement. But we've come to embrace Humanism with a special emphasis on ethics. Hence, Ethical Humanism.

Ours is a Humanist movement—and so said the National Leaders Council in 1965—though it never was in the eyes of its founder. He was a social progressive and a religious reconstructionist, so I like to think he would have come around to the Humanist perspective as that perspective itself gained definition and mellowed in the years following his death in 1933.

That was the year the first Humanist Manifesto was released. It was over-broad in reach, approaching as it did social, political, and economic issues. And it expressed an unbridled confidence in a triumphal tone which has softened in the intervening decades. But that wasn't what Adler found objectionable in the Humanist lifestance as it emerged in the first part of the twentieth century. There are varying opinions on this, and here's mine.

Adler clung to a mildly transcendental view that he saw as central to his formation of the Ethical Manifold—the concept of unlimited, he said infinite, interrelatedness and interdependence that he held to be the basis of ethics. To quote Ed Ericson, “Felix Adler simply refused to see a philosophically natural basis for ethics.”

But I think his own progressive inclination coupled with the refinement of Humanism itself would have conspired to bring him to the philosophic naturalism of our movement today. Many of the Ethical Culture Leaders Adler had gathered around him in his later years had already seen the advantage and compatibility of Humanism.

Indeed, some signed that first Humanist Manifesto. And had Adler eventually come to the same position, he would have seen that rather than limiting the concept of the Ethical Manifesto—the notion that our ethics arise from within and between us—a naturalist approach actually opens it up, expands and animates it.

That's a conversation we can have in greater depth at another time but, for now, I think it would be good to take a peek at what's conveyed by the *Ethical Humanism* embraced with near unanimity among today's Ethical Culture Leaders. I think it's germane to our consideration this morning.

The tempering of the swaggering Humanism Adler avoided was expressed in two subsequent manifestos, particularly the third issued early in 2003. In the interest of full disclosure, I want to mention that I served on its drafting committee. Humanist Manifesto III begins with a succinct, thirty-word definition of Humanism that pretty much says it all:

“Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.”

That's Humanism in a long sentence or a short paragraph. It isn't creedal in putting aside the supernatural, but does so in much the same way and same vein as did Adler. If you take the time to delve into the entire document, all 634 words of it, you will see that it postulates parallel to other of Adler's positions and that it's imbued throughout with a sense of responsibility and action.

It expresses in positive language our willingness to accept growth, improvement, and progress; our belief in both the capability and necessity for human beings to live ethically; our recognition that personal fulfillment is tied to our social nature, and the goal of more fulfilled living for ourselves and for others.

Felix Adler didn't sign the first Humanist Manifesto, but I think he would have been eager and proud to be associated with the third. Many of our movements most respected leaders accepted the invitation to be among its original signers. Among them are Howard Radest, Joe Chuman, Khoren Arisian, Ed Ericson, Arthur Dobrin, Jone Johnson Lewis, and Curt Collier. All of whom have spoken from this Platform within the last year.

From the opening words of that accepted and supported document, it's easy to see that Ethical Humanism is by its very nature challenging, stressing as it does the inseparable conjoining of ability and responsibility. We Ethical Humanists aim for our fullest possible development in the confident expectation that our reward will be increased responsibility. That takes courage.

This concept that successful living takes courage is as old as the finest tendrils of the roots of Humanism; tendrils that reach back well past the ancient Greek philosophers to the great thinkers of the East. The first of Buddhism's noble truths is, inelegantly translated, “Life is suffering.” More recently, the late Scott Peck offered a somewhat softer but no less dismal interpretation in his 1978 bestseller, *The Road Less Traveled*—an avenue we Ethical Humanists are certainly well acquainted with. His opening line is, “Life is difficult.” Not much more upbeat, is it?

Still, it's significant that, from Buddha to the present, thinkers have dwelt on the burdensome difficulties of life. The religions of death deal with that difficulty by denying it. Denying it with the promise of a better life to come—a blissful eternal life after life.

I like what author Susan Ertz has to say on that: “Millions long for immortality who do not know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon.” We do. We gather here to seek the highest. Anyway, that life-after-life stuff is pretty appealing—if you buy it. Humanists don't. That takes courage.

Humanism has a response to the live-this-life-for-the-next-life approach. It is that this life is all and this life is enough! It is difficult, and successful living does take courage. But rather than deny the realities of life and death we Ethical Humanists animate our lives with a deep sense of purpose, found in life itself—the relationships we forge and nurture with those with whom we share life's challenges and tragedies, its pleasures and rewards. And, yes, we find this life all the more significant for the inevitability and finality of its end.

This Ethical Humanist religion of ours differs from the leap-of-faith religions of our (or any other) age. We reach, but we don't leap. As said Sherwin Wine, the founder of the Society for Humanistic Judaism and no stranger to this Platform, “I am not a person of faith, I am a person of courage—I am a Humanist.”

We could quibble with Sherwin in that we have faith in each other, but his point is clear: It takes courage to face the widespread and extraordinary challenges to our Ethical ideals today. This is on one hand an age of science and democracy, of social change and cultural progress. But it has also become an age of hidebound, regressive attitudes. We find ourselves today in a culture influenced by outdated assumptions that are no longer adequate to today's standards. And look at the consequences.

At a time of conspicuous abundance for a few, many suffer in stark contrast. Unbearable strains are being put on our environment. Political and religious fundamentalism threatens our national and global cultures. Its unabated creep into government has diminished our liberties and the social values we hold dear. Science is once again being threatened and thwarted by these views. So much so that the wall of separation between ideology and government has been damaged and is in danger of collapse

My rant could go on and on—and it will next month when my subject is *This Blessed and of Freedom*— but for now suffice it to say that things are in crisis. Our freedoms have been diminished and our rights weakened. Liberty has been curtailed and our national reputation has been tarnished.

This is not the way it should be—and this is not the way it has to be.

There was a time, quite recently, that all this wasn't so. These and other affronts to reason, to our ideals would have been unimaginable a generation or so ago. Yet we find ourselves faced with them and, along with recognizing this challenge, we must also face the reality that as the threats grow, so must our dedication and resolve. For Ethical Culture has never been more challenged, and it has never been more needed.

And that's where we come in—you and I and the millions of others in our country and around the world who think like we do. Our views are not fashionable. And if you want to be considered a patriotic American, they are not even advisable. With religious belief equated with national patriotism, we teeter on the brink of theocracy.

It is our responsibility to change that. It is our responsibility to make skepticism honorable. It is our responsibility to make rational inquiry admirable. It is our responsibility to make reasoned thinking fashionable once again.

It is our responsibility to do everything we can to shift our culture, to turn it away from divisiveness and to shine the bright light of dignity on diversity. Our aim must be to affect nothing less than a global mind change.

As Ethical Humanists in the pursuit of fuller, more meaningful lives for everyone—and ourselves leading lives that aspire to the greater good of our society and humanity—we can make that happen. We can affect a shift of thought of significant magnitude. The world needs what we have. The global culture cries for a common ideal, a unifying idea. We have that.

Shortly after its founding, our movement played a pivotal role at a pivotal time in American history, a time when liberal religion was indistinguishable from social consciousness. That attitude of personal, social, and cultural betterment still inspires and motivates us today. It was a revolutionary idea when first formulated and espoused by Felix Adler, and it is an ideal that can once again ignite revolution.

In founding the Ethical Culture school just a couple of years after founding this Society and this Movement, Felix Adler said, “The ideal of the school is to develop individuals who will be competent to change their environment to greater conformity with moral ideals.” That can be said of our entire movement. Bringing our environment, our society, our culture closer to the moral ideal of perfected living was and remains our aim.

In placing deed before creed Adler was advocating for deeds born of moral conviction rather than social agenda. Essential as the agenda of social service and action are, they spring from a deeper well and are motivated by a higher calling—that of greater conformity with our ideals. And that’s an impulse that arises from our ethical center, from our moral convictions.

It is that, it is our ethical ideals, it is our Ethical Humanism that our social service and social action are an expressions of. That’s a magnetic, galvanizing, animating idea that has broad appeal.

And yet we remain small.

It is time for this cult nonsense to end. It is time for the ideals of Ethical Humanism to become part of our culture once again. We have the ability to impact culture, and with this ability comes the responsibility to affect change.

Our culture must change and cultural changes come about not as a consequence of momentous events or political impact and cannot be imposed through force of arms. Cultural change comes when vast numbers of people change their mind. So let us not stand idly by as our culture regresses. Let us stand up and shout our Ethical Humanism to all who will listen—and yes, even to those who won’t.

This is from the opening paragraph of Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, published in 1776. That’s a full century before the founding of our movement yet it could have been written with us in mind. And maybe it was—us or something quite similar. Here’s what he said.

“Perhaps these sentiments... are not yet sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favor; a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance

of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defense of custom. But tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason.”

We are in the midst of a formidable fit of fundamentalism, and I know you can never reason a person out of a position or belief not arrived at through reason in the first place. But I am not a patient man, so I can't quite side with Paine and sit back and wait for time to erode what reason cannot—to wait for mythology to collapse beneath its own weight, as it always has and inevitably will.

As is the case with people, the first responsibility of any organization or movement is survival. To survive and thrive is, of course, one of our highest priorities. Given our low numbers and high overhead, that Ethical Culture survives at all is something of a Humanist miracle. Its continued existence is attributable in no small portion to the tenacity—not to say stubbornness—of its adherents. That's you.

We're justifiably proud of a glittering heritage. But we're also prone to over-emphasizing an over-sold past, and in turn diminish if not dismiss a present fraught with the same potential Felix Adler spoke of when founding this movement 131 years ago.

Don't get me wrong, our past is glorious and the accomplishments we speak of were real. Some we were solely responsible for, some we played only a supporting role in, but they are real and they are important. We have a rich and textured history and have always—directly and indirectly—been a part of something larger than ourselves. However, we often take too much credit for that in which we only played a part, and take too little pride in that which we are a part of today.

I'm going to leave the past behind except to illustrate a point. That point being that cults (as defined in numbers) can influence, impact, and become the culture. And those who play even a small part in social development or cultural advancement are significant beyond their numbers.

One thing that is being done to raise the level of awareness and hopefully acceptance of Ethical Culture is the American Ethical Union's co-sponsorship of Jonathan Miller's three-part series, *A Brief History of Disbelief*. It will be airing throughout the summer on over sixty public television stations across the nation, including both channels 13 and 21 locally. This series is really quite well done. It was produced by and for the BBC and we anticipate great exposure, recognition, and response from it. So don't miss it.

But, in addition to promoting it, I bring it up because of its title. I was struck that Miller chose to call the series, *A Brief History of Disbelief*. All too often, agnosticism, which I consider the intellectual threshold of Humanism, is tossed aside as **un**-belief, which it isn't—at least not necessarily.

True, there are a lot of things I don't believe in, that I am a **dis**-believer of. Many of those things you can find in the normative, traditional, leap-of-faith religions that dominate our global culture. In that context, which is the context of Miller's series, I am a dis-believer. But I am not an un-believer.

In a recent essay, Joe Chuman, the longtime leader of the Bergen Ethical Society and one of our movement's preeminent philosophers, had this to say on the subject of un-belief. “Indeed, I believe no less than any so-called ‘believer’ in the premier importance of compassion, of respect, of justice, of social responsibility.”

Indeed I maintain that we believe in these things even more so than those whose espousal of a faith exceeds their practice of it .

Think of the cultural change a global mind-shift on these issues—on compassion, on respect, on justice, and on social responsibility—think of what that would bring about.

Think of how the world would change if compassion were recognized as the basis of ethics—that that same lump in the throat that leads others to supernatural beliefs can just as easily shift to a naturalist focus.

Think of how a recognition that respect for the worth and dignity of others, especially those unlike ourselves, would lessen the likelihood that we might want to maim, kill, or slaughter them—singly or in large numbers as is happening today.

Think of how a universal sense of justice—a shift away from good and evil to less incendiary considerations of right and wrong—think of how that might decompress the anger and hostility that seems to drive so much of our culture today.

And imagine what a shared sense of social responsibility would do for our beleaguered nation and world.

These are reasoned things that reach across the divide of faith, that span our differences and touch everyone. These are things worth working for, these are things worth sacrificing for. These are things Ethical Culture has stood for since its founding. These are things that we have helped bring to the fore of public debate and consciousness time and time again. And these are things that we can popularize once again.

Ethical Culture offers the best platform for ethical reform. It is an approach to life simple in concept and application yet so foreign to traditional thought that it is difficult to communicate. It's not easy to penetrate the hardened shell of resistance that's calcified around cultural thought, preventing the entry of new ideas.

But there are increasing numbers who are beginning to see that the old ways are no longer tenable and rather than offering comfort they are bringing about turmoil. We rise on the crest of a massive swell of like-minded individuals thirsty for better explanations.

Look at the best seller list. There are a growing number of popular books that challenge our culture's dominant assumptions. *The End Of Faith*, *The God Delusion*, and *God Is Not Great*. I'm not overly fond of the strident, often shrill tone of Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens. Of even that of Daniel Dennett's *Breaking The Spell*. Still, I'm glad they're out there addressing those that have for all too long been resistant to new ideas.

Unfortunately, they're all too often addressed with disrespect and that's not our way. While we may not honor the beliefs we respect the believers judging them only on their actions. Indeed, Adler started our movement by saying we were many in creed but one in deed. However, progressive that he was, he became more clear when he placed deed above creed.

That makes us unique among religions. We have our own non-creedal beliefs, to be sure, and there are boundaries to Ethical Culture. But our welcome goes well beyond the boundaries of our beliefs. We welcome others who may have differing but honestly held convictions but are willing to set them aside in the greater, more binding conviction of deed above creed.

Congregationally based and community oriented, Ethical Culture offers those struggling with tradition a home—a place with just enough of the reconstructed old to feel comfortable while gradually letting go of the past and latching on to the future.

So, going back to the theme question, are we cinder or are we tinder? Is Ethical Culture's glow fading, not yet ashes but its flame gone, soon to be a cold and hardened cinder? Or is it tinder, a glowing ember ready to catch fire and warm the world to a truly compassionate ethics?

I say the latter. We remain cult-sized, a band of a committed few. But we seek and hopefully find and reside at the leading edge of human advancement.

Let me punctuate the cryptic answer I gave earlier: Cult or culture? *Yes & No* shaded with *perhaps*.

Yes, we're likely to remain cult-sized by comparison. The leading edge of our culture has never been overly populated. So, Yes, few in number but perhaps not as few as we are now.

We value diversity and find strength and inspiration in it—globally and within our own orbit, within our own Ethical Humanist Societies. But I can't help but wonder what would happen if we focused a bit more on our—and here I speak of the “our” in this room—if we coalesced around our sameness rather than endlessly debating our differences. It seems part and parcel of our orientation to see just how finely we can slice difference.

Others don't see us that way. They see us as different from the dominant culture, but they see in that difference a sameness that is attractive to a growing number of like-minded people of goodwill. We have appeal!

We may have oversold our past to others but we undersell our present to ourselves. Let's quit doing that by returning to who we are, which is more than our affiliation. We are more than members of this, that, or the other Society. We are Ethical Culturists. We are Ethical Humanism itself.

If we can find clear and concise ways of communicating that, ways that resonate in the market place of ideas, there's no doubt in my mind that we will attract others to whom the warmth and care of Ethical Humanism and our community would be a comfort.

We can do that.

Still, *No*, we are not destined to be the culture. But *Yes* our ideas and our ideals are—just as they always have been. Felix Adler's socially progressive notions were revolutionary at the end of the nineteenth century. Yet some are now part of our national culture, accepted and preserved by our secular government. Other of our ideals await broader recognition and acceptance and that's our challenge and our work today.

Not everyone can be on the leading edge. Not everyone wants to be. We do. As progressives, as reconstructionists, we feel it's our duty to be out there probing new and better ways of being together. And with that duty comes the responsibility to influence others toward more successful living.

The field of moral improvement—of the ever increasing knowledge and practice and love of what's right—is pretty much ours alone. It's not crowded out there at the forward reach. In fact, it can be downright lonely at times. While we've been moving in one direction—toward better understandings and formulations of ourselves, I think—others have been moving in different directions. There's a cultural chasm that needs breaching.

It's time we stand up and shout across the abyss, "Yo! Over Here. Take a look at what we've got!" Our ideas are not going to gain common currency if we continue to keep them to ourselves.

We have much work to do. Through our ability and will the world can become a place of mutual care and concern. A world where ethics reigns supreme and where humanity takes responsibility for its own future.

The world needs what we have.

This is our moment.

We are custodians of a priceless treasure.

Keep it, perpetuate it, and advance it we will, if we have the will.

Whether the ideals we hold dear be cult or culture is up to us.

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