

This Blessed Land of Freedom

Platform address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, June 24, 2007
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On October 11, 1873, Felix Adler foreshadowed his founding of this Society and this Ethical Movement in an address to his father's congregation at Temple Emanu-El. In that address he laid before the congregation a vision and a challenge. In recounting the challenges of that era and comparing them to our own, I want to share with you what Adler has inspired in me and invite you share it as we take up the challenge of the future together.

The summer solstice this week brought with it those rare days that James Russell Lowell spoke of in saying. "What is so rare as a day in June? Then, if ever, come perfect days." Days when nature is rich and verdant, long fresh days and cool nights, the air filled with a sense of renewal, of freshness, of newness. Thank you for sharing this June day with us. I hope you bring the attitude of this season of renewal with you this morning as we take a look at the past and a look at the present and even peer into the future through the lens of Ethical Culture.

Dr. Samuel Adler assumed leadership of Temple Emanu-El in 1856, when Felix was five years old. He came to this country from Germany with his young family and a well-deserved reputation as one of the great philosophical and theological leaders of the Reform Jewish movement.

When he was recruited to lead Temple Emanu-El, it was located at 43rd Street and 5th Avenue. It now sits just across Central Park at 65th and 5th, housed in a great building designed by the same architect responsible for this magnificent building. The ironies that intersect the lives of father and son are many.

Both were dedicated to betterment. Samuel's tenure at Temple Emanu-El was marked by a radical modification of the congregation's liturgy, theology, and practices. Radical, but not quite radical enough for his firebrand son.

Young Felix was captivated by his father's progressive initiatives and became enamored with change, finding it inspiring. And he found the freedom embodied in the American constitution and way of life just as intoxicating. This was a heady combination that animated something within him—something that's still very much alive within us.

His was a passion born of reverence for rational religion and respect for freedom and justice. Perhaps only in one emerging from the historical context Adler did can such a passion ignite. But it still burns brightly within the movement he founded and especially within its adherents—you and me. We share his passion, or at least I do.

By the time Felix Adler returned from the completion of his studies in Germany, he was charged with a revolutionary spirit. He more than longed for an accelerated pace of change, he hungered for it. And he tried to affect it in the only religious context he knew—Reform Judaism.

In that pivotal address of 1873, he urged those present to join him in his efforts to amplify reform to a revolutionary magnitude. "A heavy responsibility is placed upon

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.

your shoulders,” he said, and also “a glorious prerogative—to be the founders of a new epoch.”

Nothing less than a new epoch was his vision. And he added to that vision this challenge: “In the sight of history you will have to answer for future generations will demand an account of what you do or leave undone today. Shall it be said that we were weighed in the balance and found wanting?”

“No, not for this have we lived through the long night of darkness, to melt like the hoar frost before the first genial sunbeam, leaving no trace behind.”

He begged indulgence of his youthful fervor—he was 22 at the time—in saying “It is the knowledge of what we have been, the knowledge of what we may yet be, that gives wings to my words, and bids me speak.” In those words is the essence of his developing ethical idealism and the harbinger of Ethical Culture.

That is what bade him speak.

And speak he did, saying, “The same indomitable spirit that has thus far guided us, it shall arise again; and if we read the signs aright, shall lead in this blessed land of freedom to new and greater triumphs.”

Those are stirring words, as fitting and inspiring today as they were then.

The title of that 1873 address was *The Judaism of the Future* because that’s the context in which it was delivered. It could just as correctly have been called the *religion* of the future because that’s what he was describing, that’s what he went on to found, and that’s what still describes Ethical Culture today.

And, unfortunately, that’s not the only thing that’s the same today.

Adler was referring to the plight of the Jewish people when he spoke of *a long night of darkness*. But this blessed land of freedom—this blessed land of his and of ours—is also experiencing dark times. And I believe the principles of Ethical Culture can light the way out of the darkness our country is lost in.

There are, unfortunately, many comparisons to be made between the challenges we face today and the ones Felix Adler faced at the time of our Society’s founding. I want to focus on just three—albeit it three big ones—that go largely unaddressed today: War, immigration, and the disregarding of science, which today manifests itself in a disregard for our environment.

Adler came of age during this country’s civil war. A country torn apart by a concept alien to the rational mind and repugnant to the compassionate heart—that one human being should lay claim to ownership of another.

Today we find this blessed land of ours mired in a senseless, seemingly endless war, a war that is just plain wrong. People are dying—innocently and valiantly—in an optional war based on a false premise, sustained by fear. When the people best able to judge the effects and effectiveness of war—the noble women and men our nation has placed in harm’s way—when those on the ground speak out against it, questioning whether it is right and just and working, maybe those in command should listen.

It is to their voice that we add our conviction. That you don’t bring out the best in another by killing them. That ends everything in an unspeakable violation of worth and dignity. It was John Adams who said, “Great is the guilt of an unnecessary war.” That is not our individual guilt, but it is our national shame.

Cindy Sheehan lost her son, Casey, to this war. In her indignation she became the face and voice of resistance, and she suffered mightily because of it. The futility finally became too much for her and in her Memorial Day resignation as the symbol of the American anti-war movement, she said:

“The most devastating conclusion that I reached ... was that [my son] Casey did indeed die for nothing. His precious lifeblood drained out in a country far away from his family who loves him, killed by his own country which is beholden to and run by a war machine...”

Trying to spread peace and justice while focused on hate and revenge hasn't worked, isn't working, and will not work. People are dying needlessly in that futile effort.

Ethical Culture has a role to play and work to do in this area.

Our conception of immigration has gone from that of the mixing bowl of Adler's time to that of a salad bowl as we've come to value diversity. But the attitude of homogeneity persists. In the company of a burgeoning diversity—valued and otherwise—those we have placed in positions of power and authority attempt to impose a regressive sense of sameness on us and on others.

That is internally inconsistent and externally revolting, a manifestation of oxymoronic behavior driven by an arrogance and certitude rejected by the founders of this blessed land of freedom and reviled by its citizens today.

Last month a group of New York City religious leaders pledged to help families facing deportation because of unjust immigration laws, saying they might even eventually create a “sanctuary” for them. That prompted *Newsday* to ask if I might like to respond to the question, “Should faith groups be involved in immigration issues?” Here's my response that appeared in *Newsday's Faith Q&A* column earlier this month.

“Balancing ethical considerations with social customs and legislation is complex. It's even more challenging when weighing the rights of others against those of national privilege.

“The selective enforcement of immigration regulations—granting immunity to ‘illegal employers’ while holding their employees hostage to the letter of the law—has ceded the moral high ground to those who oppose this injustice. There are times when non-violent protest and civil disobedience are not only warranted but are required if we are to be true to our honestly held convictions. This is one of those times.

“Since the clarification of the Social Gospel a century ago—an effort centered right here in New York City—these considerations have properly been taken out of the realm of scripture and dogma and been pursued in the broader field of social discourse. However, they're all too often subject to political compromises that go further than people of goodwill can accept.

“The politically expedient must never be allowed to trump the morally possible. The sanctity of national boundaries is secondary to the sacredness of the human rights and civil liberties we stand for. This is a time for people of social conscience to take unified action.”

Ethical Culture has a role to play and work to do in this area.

The advancements of science, especially those of Charles Darwin, awakened philosophic and theological thinkers in the nineteenth century. Those of vision, like Samuel and Felix Adler, understood that any religion of the future must be and stay consistent with the discoveries of science. Yet not all did, and not all do. There exists today a gap between faith and reason, between science and the supernatural, that persists in astounding places.

It's hard to believe that there are today those who seek the leadership of this blessed land of freedom who do not fully accept evolution as anything more than another "theory," a word they use to demean science. Just this month the following appeared in *Pique*, the newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York, under the headline, "What the hell is wrong with us?"

I quote: On May 3, in the first Republican "debate" ... moderator Chris Matthews asked a lineup of ten men, "How many of you don't believe in evolution?" Three men who want to be President of the United States in the 21st century—former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas, and Representative Tom Tancredo of Colorado—raised their hands. And no one laughed.

That does not speak or bode well for us. Especially in light of what this ignorance or ignorance of science leads to today and how that is so at odds with our Ethical Humanism.

Our philosophically natural worldview and our acceptance of the findings of science place humanity within the context of nature, a part of rather than apart from it. In other words, we do not see ourselves as having dominion over nature nor do we stand above the environment.

This leads to a developed Humanist ecological concern. We consider it an ethical duty to protect nature's integrity, diversity, and beauty in a secure, sustainable manner. Unsustainable policies that ravage the environment—usually for the short-term gain of affluent groups—find us in strong and vigorous opposition.

That opposition says that Ethical Culture has a role to play and work to do in this area.

We face many of the same tensions that Adler did. Progressives see the world as problematic but capable of improvement. We look for the tensions and try to ease them. In this context, life is understood within the rhythm of experience.

The principles we have derived from our collective experience are guides to what has been successful in the past. But life is a dialog between the present and the ideal. And the ideal is the conception of the perfection of present possibilities.

Our task is to engage the frustrations of progress in a way that illuminates the ideal; in a way that expresses our Ethical Culture convictions. Our motivation to ease the tensions of the world springs from that deep well, from our religious core in which ethics is central. That makes us unique among religions, among the culturally concerned, and among the socially active. And so long as we remain true to that which motivates us—true to our ethical center—we will retain our unique and precious voice.

There is always the danger that we will become caught in the tensions, in the gap between what is and what might be—and lose sight of that. And that's why we gather here on Sundays and at other times to remind ourselves of who we are, of why we care, of why we're willing to sacrifice so that others might benefit.

Our participation, our involvement in this congregation serves as a constant reminder of the center, the core of our compassionate concern without which our efforts are reduced. I have asked you to join, to work together, to take up these or perhaps other challenges, in the same spirit that has enlivened the Ethical Movement since its founding.

We face many of the same challenges Felix Adler did. But many others that existed then have been eased and their cause taken up by others. We have some of the same challenges, but we have all of the same potential as we did in 1876. And we have that potential because of what lies at our center, what lies within.

The blessedness of this blessed land of freedom is not to be found in its plains of abundance or its mountains of majesty. The sacredness, the holiness that Adler spoke of is not in here, not in this building—though this hall is indeed holy ground when we gather here to seek the highest.

The blessedness, our blessedness, is in not in out there, but in here, in our heart, in our care, in our quest that others may enjoy what we enjoy, that they may have what we have.

The message of Ethical Culture remains, as it has been, one of social ethics and responsibility. The supreme moral axiom of *Act so as to elicit the best in others and thereby in thyself* is as much inwardly-directed as it is outwardly-directed. And this reciprocity between self and other gives balance and purpose to our lives.

We have work to do. It may be in one of the three areas I mentioned—war, immigration, the environment—or it may be in something else. But whatever work we take up together, it springs from that deep well of ethical idealism.

We call ourselves Ethical not because we in every instance are—not because we've realized Felix Adler's founding dream. We call ourselves Ethical because we in every instance aspire to the ethical, to the right, to the dream. We have work to do.

We call ourselves Ethical because we remain dedicated to the ever increasing knowledge and practice and love of what's right. We call ourselves Ethical not because we have achieved the dream, but because we dare dream the dream—the dream of a blessed land of freedom existing harmoniously with other such lands in a world of peace. We have work to do.

We have work to do, and there will come a time when we, too, will be judged by future generations who will demand an account of what we do or leave undone. That same burden that Felix Adler placed before the congregants of Temple Emanu-El rests upon our shoulders today. That same challenge faces us. And the same choice to either rise to and above it or be found wanting is also before us.

We are today closer to Felix Adler's dream, but—as is the nature of our ethical faith—we're a long way from ours. We have work to do, a lot of work to do. And it is to that work that we must continually dedicate and re-dedicate ourselves. It is that challenge to which we must arise yet again.

And if we're too damn old to do the heavy lifting of social reform ourselves, we must inspire those who can.

The fire of betterment still burns in our belly. And we—challenged as we may be—are not too feeble to fan the flames of the torch of freedom.

Howard Zinn, a true friend of Ethical Humanism, said "Truth has a power of its own. ... That age-old lesson—that everything we do matters—is the meaning of the people's

struggle here in United States and everywhere. A poem can inspire a movement. A pamphlet can spark a revolution. Civil disobedience can arouse people and provoke us to think.

When we organize with one another, when we get involved, when we stand up and speak out together, we can create a power no government can suppress.

We live in a beautiful country. But [those] who have no respect for human life, freedom, or justice have taken it over. It is now up to all of us to take it back."

What Zinn is reminding us is that the laboratory of Ethical Culture is in our personal relationships. It is there that we discover, perfect, and eventually master the skills and understandings we apply to ever widening circles of relationships until we weave a web of global diversity, compassion, cooperation, and enduring peace.

We are heirs and custodians of Felix Adler's passion, and of the movement he ignited. We, too, will be held to account if we allow it to melt into nothingness, leaving his legacy behind. But that we will not do.

The religion of the future; the flame that warms others; the flame that brightens the way; the flame of Ethical Culture of which we are the trusted guardians:

We will again see it light a promising future for all!

The same spirit that Felix Adler instilled in this movement, the same passion that inspired us, the same vision that has guided us, shall once again lead us to new and greater triumphs in this blessed land of freedom.

We have work to do.



A member of the American Ethical Union
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