

# *Appreciating Inherent Worth: From Momentary Sparks to the Fire of Commitment*

Platform address<sup>1</sup> to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, July 8, 2007  
by: **Hugh Taft-Morales**

In the whirlwind of our busy lives, it is a special moment when we experience another person as unique and of inherent worth: the quick glance into a stranger's eyes, the extra pause and embrace of a loved one going off to work or school, the spontaneous appreciation of a colleague. The brief moments of recognition of another's humanity offer us a form of transcendence that seems both personal and universal. They happen to us, and to most of the six and a half billion other people on the planet, everyday. How are we to make sense of these experiences? What form do these flashes of connection take? Are they of the head or of the heart or both? Like sparks, they seem to shine bright and then fade. How can we use these moments to ignite and sustain the fire of commitment to build a better world? How can Ethical Culture help us appreciate other people in a way that nurtures ethical and spiritual living?

I have been writing this talk for months. My opinion of it has gone up and down. One moment I am excited about having something important to share, the next worried that I am stating the obvious. Then, a couple of days ago, I had a brainstorm and realized, of course, inherent worth - the idea that *every individual has worth, deserves respect, is endowed with integrity* - is vital and important...and it is obvious.

It reminded me of this Zen Buddhist monk who taught an aspiring monk what was important and obvious. His student, tired of focusing so much on breathing properly in meditation, complained, "Why over and over again about the breath? Can't we move on to what is more important, to true enlightenment?" The Zen master took the student over to a large basin of water, grabbed his neck, and thrust the young man's head underwater. The student went from surprised, to panicked, and as his lungs began to burst he struggled to free himself, but the master held firm. Finally he let the gasping student up. "So," the master said, "do you still think breathing is not important?"

I believe that faith in the inherent worth of every person, like breathing, is necessary for us to survive. Given the violence, greed, fear and malice that grip our world, if we don't do better at what is obvious, our future is in question. We need to learn to breathe better. Please, take a deep breathe with me.

I hope that my talk is not as unpleasant as the student's experience, but I do hope it helps remind us of the importance of the obvious.

Faith in the inherent worth of others was the foundation on which Felix Adler built the Ethical Culture movement. 131 years into this project, Ethical Culture finds itself at a crucial moment. Now, more than ever, we must clarify and reemphasize our purpose, our faith, as individuals and as a community. Examining our roots will help – and Adler, for better or worse, is one huge root! Some of his thoughts are outdated and perhaps misguided. But there are parts of his writings that inspire me, and reinforce my basic beliefs, such as his defense of absolute freedom of conscience, his advocacy for ethical action, and his reverence every person's inherent worth.

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<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.

So, here's my plan for today. I will begin with (I) how a moral insight crystallized my appreciation of inherent worth, and, (II) some the historical roots of inherent worth. After (III) a brief excursion into the metaphor of light, I will examine (IV) reasons why we do not consistently appreciate inherent worth. I will conclude with (V) how we can strengthen faith in inherent worth so that we live more ethical lives.

### (I) A MORAL INSIGHT

This spring I left high school teaching after twenty-five years. One topic I enjoyed discussing with my students was an essay by a 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Josiah Royce called "The Moral Insight". It makes a simple claim: that every person in the world is a center of consciousness with as rich an experience as our own, deserving of profound respect. As I read some of it, I warn those non-theists here today that Royce was a Christian, and he uses a biblical writing style. Being a committed humanist and a non-theist, I urge you to view the vocabulary as I do – as philosophical poetry that's trying to express common sense, a shared insight central to many traditions. See it as a step toward greater theological tolerance here at the Ethical Society. Both this tolerance, and Royce's message, can strengthen Ethical Culture.

Royce urges us to consider our brothers and sisters in the human race: "Take whatever thou knowest of desire and of striving, of burning love and of fierce hatred, realize as fully as thou canst what that means, and then with clear certainty add: Such as that is for me, so is it for him, nothing less."

Royce distinguishes this insight from emotion. He says, "What we now ask of thee is no sentiment, no gush of pity, no tremulous weakness of sympathy, but a calm, clear insight.... Pain is pain, joy is joy, everywhere even as in thee."

Pain is pain, joy is joy, everywhere – in every one as it is in you.

Think of this for a moment. Turn inwards. Consider your own life, your own consciousness, your history, memories, hopes, pains, and joys, and the richness of it all – your first kiss, the birth of a child, the death of a parent. Contemplate the vast universe of experience that constitutes your life. Now appreciate that this is true for everyone in this room. Every person here today has pain like you, joy like you – hurts, hopes, memories, mysteries, and love.

When I really think about this "obvious fact", it strikes me as miraculous. When I look at each and every one of you, when I think that everyone I see on the street today, is, in this basic respect, like me, I am humbled. When I consider the six billion people in the world, and I contemplate that each embodies this richness of human experience, I am in awe.

Royce says that this insight ends the illusion of selfishness: "Pain is pain, joy is joy, everywhere even as in thee. The result of thy insight will be inevitable. The illusion vanishing, the glorious prospect opens before thy vision. Seeing the oneness of this life everywhere, the equal reality of all its moments, thou wilt be ready to treat it all with...reverence...."

Royce thought that the "greatest aim" of life was to produce the moral insight in as many people as possible. I see the moral insight as an intellectual gateway to appreciation of inherent worth. Like many humanist perspectives, Ethical Culture connects with the moral insight and inherent worth through a tradition that reaches back to the Enlightenment. So, a little history.

## (II) HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS

The Enlightenment figure most connected to Ethical Culture and the concept of inherent worth is Immanuel Kant. Kant believed that every human being should be treated as “an end in itself, never as a means.” In other words, we should not use people as a means to achieve our own goals. Human beings are not tools to be used when needed and discarded. People are worthy of respect for simply being human.

Before I ever studied Kant, inherent worth shone out to me in the ideals of Jefferson and the American Revolution. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness....”

I find the term “unalienable” intriguing and important. The Enlightenment’s emphasis on the individual includes an assumption that fundamental to the person, inherent in their very existence, is a “right-bearing quality”. This quality is wrapped up in the very essence of being human and cannot be stripped away, or made alien to them – it is un-alienable. Their very identity implies a sacredness, an inherent worth.

And what does it mean for this truth to be “self-evident”? For me, it means that it has an intellectual authority that stands on its own, that “proves itself” to reason. It is as clear to me as  $2 + 2 = 4$ . I don’t offer evidence to support this mathematical truth or to defend inherent worth. Perhaps it is the one single leap of faith necessary in Ethical Culture: to believe that every one has inherent worth.

Unfortunately, as my wife Maureen reminds me, given the current state of the world, seeing how people often treat each other, it is clear that many do not see this as self-evident.

But it is self-evident to me. It strikes me like a flash of light.

## (III) THE METAPHOR OF LIGHT AND HOW IT FADES

There are moments in my life when the inherent worth of another person jumps into my awareness with a simple glance. Walking down the street by a homeless woman, I am wrapped up in my self, hurrying to a meeting, and our eyes meet, and, flash, she becomes more than a bundle of rags, a person of inherent worth. Her humanity is like a sudden spark of light, a warm flame, striking me with a profound and humbling power.

Metaphors of light are used to describe truth in many faiths and philosophies – such as those that proclaim that they have seen the light of god. But unlike theism, humanism uses light to represent qualities innate to human beings, rather than as shining from some supernatural force or God. It reminds me of the Quaker belief that all of us have a divine “inner light”.

The humanist use of the metaphor of light flows out of the Enlightenment embrace of the “light of reason.” It reaches back centuries to Stoic philosophy that celebrated the “spark of divine reason” within all humans. John Locke called reason “the candle of the lord”.

It is from this tradition that Felix Adler emerges. The light within humans is natural human qualities of reasonableness and goodness. He had faith that the light within can be brightened so that it shines out and encourages the light in others to shine brighter. He writes, “The simile that may be used is that of a ray of light which has the effect of kindling other rays, unlike but complementary to itself. Each ethical unit, each member of

the infinite universe, is to be regarded as a center from which such a ray emanates, touching other centers, and awakening there the light intrinsic in them.”

It was Adler’s hope that this light of recognition of the “infinity of beings” like ourselves would spread like a wild fire, from person to person to person. Unfortunately, as happens in most cases of light, it fades with time.

Josiah Royce was poignantly aware of the transitory nature of the moral insight: “The realization of one’s neighbor, in the full sense of the word realization, is indeed the resolution to treat him as if he were real, that is, to treat him unselfishly.” “It is as impossible to escape seeing through the illusion at the moment of insight. We see the reality of our neighbor, that is, we determine to treat him as we do ourselves.”

“But this resolution expresses and belongs to the moment of insight. Passion may cloud the insight in the very next moment. It always does cloud the insight after no very long time.... ... we go back to daily action, and we feel the heat of hereditary passions, and we straightway forget what we have seen. Our neighbor becomes obscured. He is once more a foreign power. He is unreal. We are again deluded and selfish. This conflict goes on and will go on as long as we live after the manner of men. Moments of insight, with their accompanying resolutions; long stretches of delusion and selfishness: That is our life.”

#### (IV) REASONS FOR FADING LIGHT

Why do these sparks of insight so often fade? Why do the embers of our fire of commitment to treat others as “real” grow cold?

A) For one, people can be annoying. Plain and simple. A real test of our faith comes when someone is being obnoxious, or worse, evil. The messiness of human nature can get in the way of our best intentions. I have always been amused at my father saying to me one day when he was particularly frustrated with his administrative duties, “I love humanity! It’s people I can’t stand.”

Felix Adler, like my father, and like most of us, experienced the unattractive feature of human beings. Adler writes, “The first and most obvious of these is the existence of repulsive traits in human beings, such as sly cunning, deceit, falsehood, grossness, (and) cruelty...”

B) A second reason for not honoring inherent worth consistently is that we often do not understand how to relate to people different from us. Inherent worth gets tangled up in our human clumsiness with differences. It is easier to treat people as unreal when they have different looks, language, or customs. As Audre Lorde writes,

“...we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals.”

So while we may experience the spark of connection with others, often the differences begin to extinguish this spark.

C) A third reason that our appreciation for worth fades is simply because “we are human”. This is something that a humanist must understand! We are flawed, inconsistent, easily blinded by our passions, impatient, distractible, and limited.

D) A fourth reason for losing sight of inherent worth is we are afraid. When acknowledging others as centers of consciousness just as real as we are, we open ourselves to a deeper appreciation for their suffering. “Pain is pain...everywhere even as in thee.” Take note of your painful moments and imagine that six billion times over – for every person alive - this isn’t easy!

In the *Reconstruction of the Spiritual Ideal*, Adler writes of how hard it is to bear the suffering of others. This pain, Adler says, “... is due to the fate of those innumerable fellow beings who perish by the wayside, while mankind slowly and awkwardly tries to achieve progress – I mean those many thousands who are dying unhelped in hospitals, I mean the victims of the foul conditions that exist in the slums, I mean the millions of young lives that were cut short during the late war. We stand, as it were, on the shore, and see multitudes of our fellow beings struggling in the water, stretching forth their arms, sinking, drowning, and we are powerless to assist them.”

Adler explains that we can be overwhelmed by our openness to the suffering of others. It often “builds a prison around us.”

I felt my prison going up around me last month right where you sit when Richard reminded me of the fact that 30,000 children 5 yrs or younger die everyday from malnutrition or poverty - 1 child twelve and under dies every second! These numbers and the suffering they represent are almost inconceivable, and when we get close to conceiving them, they are often almost unbearable.

E) And a fifth reason why we often are blind to inherent worth is that we drift apart, we become alienated.

Capitalism and bureaucracy can treat people like numbers. Modern society is so fast-paced, it feels that we are too busy for each other. Our machines, possessions, and paperwork occupy our time more than people. It is the cause and the symptom of treating people cheaply. The spark of inherent worth fades - cut off from the oxygen of relationships, the sparks are extinguished.

#### (V) BRINGING BACK THE LIGHT OF MORAL INSIGHT

So, given the fact that as humans we are often annoying, clumsy regarding differences, inconsistent and flawed, afraid of opening ourselves to other’s pain, and alienated, how can we, as today’s platform theme asks, ...use moments of moral insight to ignite and sustain the fire of commitment to build a better world?

How can we transform these sparks of insight into a roaring fire in our community hearth here at our Ethical Societies?

I’ll begin with some answers from the head, two rational approaches recommended by Felix Adler. Then I will touch on habit, then heart, then community. So, here some solutions using mind, habit, heart, community. See if any might be useful in your life.

#### A) HEAD

One rational approach to dealing with the reality that we can all act like jerks is to view the inherent worth of another, their goodness, as ideal, or as an ever present potential. We can accept that on a day-to-day level, people may not always reflect inherent worth – that we can act like jerks – and yet be comforted by the belief that we have latent goodness just waiting to be released. Adler writes of this new perspective:

“We shall learn to see and know the human beings with whom we come in contact from a new point of view, regarding them as masks behind which Divinity lurks, as revealers of hidden spiritual possibilities. We shall attribute a certain greatness and sacredness to them; and the cheapness that now often marks our estimate of those with whom we are familiar, vulgarizing human intercourse, will disappear.”

Adler, in *The Religion of Duty*, uses the metaphor of a gold mine under a field to represent the goodness of humanity beneath our surface.

“The spiritual nature is like a rich mine, the upper layers of which only have been worked. Below, in the dark unexplored region lies the brightest, the most precious gold. The distinctions between one individual and another are like the boundaries that mark off field from field on the surface above the mine. Beneath, regardless of these external demarcations, lie the veins of gold. To bring to light that hidden gold – not to develop self as a thing apart, not to help others as if they were separable from ourselves, but to develop the spiritual nature which is common to our fellow-beings and ourselves, that is the true aim.”

We only need mine the gold – the potential worth.

A second rational approach is to appreciate the difference between “worth” and “value”. One of Adler’s key arguments is that there are two ways to view people. For most of civilization, humans have been seen in terms of their value. They are judged by the marketplace according to how well they facilitate the projects of others. If I want a house built, the value of a carpenter is determined by how much I will pay them. Their value is contingent upon how much I value them. Worth, however, is not contingent upon other people. It is not determined by the marketplace, but is inherent, wrapped up in the very identity of the individual.

I find this distinction particularly useful in clarifying the concept of inherent worth, especially when dealing with differences. Worth respects the unique aspects of every individual, and does not seek an all-encompassing yet exclusive expression of “true human nature”, but is, in fact, a part of appreciating the unique inherent worth of every individual. It may be central to the challenge offered by Audre Lorde: to create new patterns of thinking so we do not continue to see ourselves as “normal” and others as different, deviant, or less than fully human.

These rational approaches to reinforcing worth can be supported by habit, community, and heart.

## B) HABIT

To handle our inconsistent reverence of inherent worth we might consider simply making it a habit - reminding ourselves on a regular basis. We need to practice appreciation. I have always been impressed with one of the pillars of Islam, praying five times a day in the direction of Mecca. How that must reinforce faith! Positive Psychology, practiced by a number of you, stresses the importance of cultivating a habit of appreciation and gratitude - in our head when we wake up, or in a journal before we go to sleep. If we direct this appreciation towards others, regularly appreciating their worth, it will obviously affect our head and our hearts. Perhaps in response to the question, “How can I better appreciate the inherent worth of others?,” the answer is, “Just do it! ...over and over again.” So, what’s your ritual, what’s your reminder?

## C) COMMUNITY

We can also turn to the power of community to reinforce inherent worth. For example, community can help us face the fear that acknowledging inherent worth opens us to the pain in others. Being open to others, and being open to our selves, can bring pain. But in our connections with others this suffering can bring a sense of connection and rebirth. Adler writes: “Every kind of spiritual suffering means a partial dying. How can this be helped? By resurrecting in others; by fixing our thought upon the fact that the same life that is in us is in others, and by fanning the flame of that life in them. Two wonderful effects will presently follow. In virtue of our power to identify ourselves with others, we shall live in them, ascend with them.... And in virtue of our efforts to produce this stimulating effect upon them, this enhancing of their spiritual vitality, we shall presently find that we ourselves are becoming transformed, that we ourselves are experiencing a rebirth.”

Being with another can make pain meaningful, and then, at least, bearable.

A solution to the alienation that undermines our faith is also that of community – it helps to believe in inherent worth together! Publicly honoring inherent worth both eases suffering inherent in caring about vulnerable beings, but also is a part of the establishment of truth. Pragmatism points out that truth is a social act. Communities form the social context for establishing consensus on what we call “self-evident.” As Adler writes: “The most evident propositions, such as two and two make four, would not appear certain were it not that, the moment they are stated, all rational persons assent to them.”

Community offers the social context for intellectual agreement about inherent worth and collective rituals that remind us of it on a regular basis, a supportive environment, friendship, and love.

## D) HEART

I will offer another way to support inherent worth that may seem off limits to Josiah Royce. I want to address the importance of supporting inherent worth by feeling it in your heart. “What!”, Royce might scream, “But the Moral Insight is no sentiment, no gush of pity, no tremulous weakness of sympathy, but a calm, clear insight.”

And as I said earlier, I am greatly impressed with the importance of rational insight in appreciating inherent worth. Royce correctly points out that sympathy can fade, and that it is not enough to build an ethical life just with emotion. And I think that inherent worth is intellectually convincing, rational, a first principle accepted like one does mathematical truths and logic.

But, for me, rational arguments alone do not sustain an appreciation for the worth of others. And, I do not believe that all insight is strictly rational. Much insight is emotional. Depending on the moment, sometimes our heart must remind our head, and other times our head must remind our heart. So we must support the rational moral insight with emotional intelligence and sympathy. Learning about emotions, (a little therapy perhaps!), teaching emotional intelligence to our children, and offering them the care and attention necessary to nurture a warm and loving heart, can support the moral insight.

The heart can also embrace inherent worth in aesthetic experiences. We can honor worth if we express it artistically. Paint, write, and sing about inherent worth. Certainly this is how traditional religions nurture their values – look at the beauty of places of

worship, the stained glass, the calligraphy, the poetry and harmony of song, all-powerful avenues into the heart that can support inherent worth.

#### E) CHOICE

Finally, in addition to using our head, habit, community and heart, one other method of reinforcing appreciating inherent worth is, simply, individual choice. Human freedom and human responsibility require that we choose what to believe. Despite all the evidence, despite the self-evident nature of an insight, it is up to us to either accept or deny the evidence or the experience of self-evident truth. How can inherent worth be enhanced, honored, and nurtured? We must choose it. In Adler's words, we attribute inherent worth to others. We accept it's "self-evident" nature, and we declare it self-evident. This is an act of faith – not a supernatural faith, but a natural faith – built on the moral insight of the mind, supported by our hearts, our habits, and our community. It allows us to take the spark of recognition of the inherent worth of others and light a fire of commitment to make a better world. This, in a way, is a form of transcendence beyond the brief moments of insight in our individual lives.

We value inherent worth in Ethical Culture. Let us continue to struggle to honor inherent worth – to understand it, reinforce it, feel it, express it artistically, support it in community, and choose it. This may all be obvious, but, like breathing, we won't survive without it. It is so incredibly important, for Ethical Culture, and for the world.



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