

The Old, the New, and the Now

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I want to speak about *The Old, the New, and the Now* because whenever I look at the past, at the old, I inevitably get interested in the future, the new—especially at this time of year. It's a time-honored annual ritual to ask at the beginning of each New Year, "What can we do now with the old so that we may make way for the new?"

The outlook that we can take our collective experience and advancements and reshape them into an improved future for ourselves and for those to come after us probably applies to everyone here this morning. But it certainly does not apply to everyone in our community, our nation, or our world. Some cling emotionally to the old and now search only for new ways of perpetuating it.

And that's why I chose *The Old, the New, and the Now* as my topic this morning.

Good morning! 2008! It's hard to believe that we're this far into this "new" millennium, isn't it? I don't know about you, but I just can't get my mind around the twentieth century belonging to the "old." I still think of "the nineties" as the Gay Nineties of the nineteenth century, not the waning decade of the twentieth. It's odd how a period I didn't live through can seem more real at times than one I did.

That little dissociation of time is but one of the irrationalities that have taken up residence within me and that I don't seem to be able to get rid of. I don't have problems with the cognitive part of the time continuum. I never put the wrong date on a check or appointment, even at this time of year. But that's different. That's about now, and now is comparatively easy to get and keep straight. It's the old and the new—where we have been and where we are going—that are troublesomely difficult to keep track of.

I sometimes get that "lost in time" feeling when considering the old, the new, and the now—when asking how can we make way for new and better ways, new and better ways of being and new and better ways of doing. Taking the old and reshaping it into the new is tricky business.

But a better world is not difficult to envision, not given the situation now in this age of rampant consumerism. Boy, talk about the "me" generation. Whatever happened to old fashioned concepts like capitalism? Yes, capitalism.

The field of economics arose from the field of ethics. And capitalism contains the potential of the creation of wealth by the few for the benefit and enjoyment of the many. Talk about an idea that sounds quaint, like one that belongs to a bygone era—to the Gay Nineties rather than the third millennium. That and other altruistic attitudes have dissipated, been lost in the swirl of a consumer culture that admires the accumulation of wealth by the few at the expense of the many.

The idea that those who can have a moral duty to help those who can't has lost currency. Like so many of the ingredients of the glue that used to bind us together, it's simply melted away.

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.

That's what I see when I look at now. Welcome to the 2,008th year of the Common Era. That's not a very cheery welcome to the New Year, and I could go on with my dismal analysis of the now. There's material enough in that for a whole series of lectures.

But if you wanted to hear about the depravity of life and how unworthy we are to live it Sunday morning would likely find you in the pews of another place.

But there's a brighter picture to be painted. Latent in the now is the experience of the old and the potential of the new. The avarice of today is not what I choose to learn from when I look at the old, at the past. And it's certainly not what I see when I imagine the new, when I look toward the future.

Yes, yes, I know, powerful people and muscular nations have been financially exploiting others since the economic systems that made that exploitation possible were devised. The strong have preyed on the weak since the struggle for survival began.

And, yes, I also know that to think that selfish urges—mutated survival impulses—are going to evaporate from the human spirit anytime soon is naïve. But that doesn't make the effort toward that ideal foolish. In fact, it can be argued—and I do—that any and all other motives pale in its shadow.

I oppose greed and the interests of self to the exclusion and detriment of others be it in the realm of business, government, religion, or—and especially—in our own private lives. And I oppose the systems that facilitate it: Closed systems that posture as democratic but operate behind closed doors—ignoring the will of the governed, the very people who trusted and elected them. The necessary discretion of an open process need not don the mantle of opaque secrecy that characterizes totalitarian systems.

And those broad strokes only partially cover the challenges we face today—challenges we face as individuals, as a community, as a nation, and as a world longing for peace and justice.

But let me get back on track: The old, the new, and the now. The now of the long nights of winter.

This is a time of year that lends itself to deep contemplations. I think those contemplations were likely the origin of the “New Year's resolution.” Not the casual, “I'm going to lose weight and get in shape” that crosses our mind as we push our bloated selves back from the groaning board. But a serious look at ourselves and our world—an honest if unavoidably biased assessment of what we are and what we would like to be.

How many make New Year's resolutions? Are you formal about it? I mean, do you write them down and share them with others? I used to do that. I'd divide myself up into sectors, examine each, and then set my personal improvement goals for the year.

Those goals became increasingly incremental as I became increasingly aware of my own capability and resolve—or lack thereof—in meeting them. Still, my annual assessments became more and more detailed with quarterly aims that I reviewed monthly.

Is anyone else that compulsive about it? Oh, come on. I'll bet there are several of you that are or have been. At least one of you should have the gumption to raise your hand. No? I'm all alone up here? Well, take heart friends. I don't do that any more. And I'll tell you why.

Somewhere along the way in that overly-systemized process I began to include others in my resolutions. After all, this annual effort was about how I want change myself so why shouldn't it include how I want to change others?

You can see where this is going, can't you?

Going straight at yourself or another and saying CHANGE doesn't work. We are emotional as well as intellectual beings. A head can't tell a heart what to feel, but it's amazing the things a heart can tell a mind.

In the context of my life the horns of this dilemma pierced my world some fifteen to eighteen years ago. About the time I first began flirting with Ethical Humanism. And that's no coincidence.

It was the insights of Ethical Culture that allowed me to change the way I think about change itself, and that shed light on the emotional tangle of my passions and their expression.

And that's kind of what I want to get at this morning. We are at the same time emotional and rational creatures. How do we separate the two, or do we even want to? The trick to that question lies in first identifying what is rational and what is emotional. Let me give you a couple of examples.

I used to fear dentists. Not a paralyzing fear, I still went and still do go regularly, but an irrational fear nonetheless. And I didn't even have the comfort that it was a shared fear as mine was not for all the "normal" reasons. It was because I knew, I just knew, that the needle was going to break off in my mouth.

That's not a rational fear. Ask any dentist and she or he will tell you they have never, never had that happen. I even had one dentist tie a needle in a knot right before my very eyes in order to convince me I had nothing to worry about. It didn't work.

I don't know where that fear come from, but I know it was totally unresponsive to reason. I don't know where that fear came from, and I don't know where it went. It just melted away and I now dislike going to the dentist for all the rational reasons.

So I am not against irrationality. You only have to hark back to my compulsive resolution years to know that. Irrationality can actually be fun at times, if it's recognized for what it is.

I met my wife, Betty, when she was 22. The vision of her from that first meeting is etched in my mind so firmly that when I look at her today that's what I see. Not the lovely mature woman who I've spent nearly four decades of my life with, but the youthful twenty-two-year-old that I met and fell in love with in 1969. That's not rational but I'm stickin' to it! It's fun. It's satisfying. It's comforting. But it's not rational.

I could give endless other examples of my own irrationality, some not as pleasant as the harmless deception of a frivolous memory or as harmless as a fear that doesn't really interfere with my life. So I'm not protesting irrationality in myself or others. It is part of us.

What gets my attention is irrationality masquerading as rationality. And what I am opposed to is the demand that I accept another's masqueraded irrationality as reality. I don't, I won't, and neither should you.

In looking at the old and the new, and moving the now along that continuum, we see some constantly recurring difficulties: The divisiveness of difference, be it of ethnicity, culture, or gender, but particularly of ideology. The disparity of wealth and power that results in an inequality of justice. There are others, to be sure, but these two are particularly troublesome today and have been relatively constant throughout modern history.

I spoke of the latter earlier—the shift from the creation of capital to the accumulation of wealth that characterizes our age.

The other, clashes of ideology, was addressed by Lisa Miller in a piece in the current issue of Newsweek magazine. In her article, *Moderates Storm the Religious Battlefield*, she cites examples of the extremism at the poles of the religious debate.

On the one end she quotes from the Rev. Timothy Keller, pastor of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church that rents this hall for their early morning worship service every Sunday. At the other end of the spectrum she mentions names more familiar to us: Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins.

There are many others on both sides she didn't mention. Or maybe they got edited out, Newsweek gave her but a single page for a singularly important issue.

She credits Keller with building a five-thousand-member, ultra-conservative mega-congregation in a liberal metropolis where most—especially the urbane, affluent crowd that he attracts—describe themselves as seekers or skeptics. Impressive, but not as impressive as what she says about the others.

Harris, Hitchens, and Dawkins have brought a the consideration of faith into a public conversation heretofore dominated by the “loud and intransigent rhetoric” of right-wing religious fundamentalists. She considers the rhetoric of Harris, Hitchens, and Dawkins to be just as “loud and intransigent.” But she also notes that since their bringing their argument to the bestseller list nonbelief as measured by pollsters has tripled.

Let me say that again: Nonbelief has tripled in our nation in this new millennium. Here's the direct reference. “The number of people who felt comfortable enough to tell Gallop pollsters that they didn't believe in God inched up to six percent this year from 2 percent in 2001.”

I'd hardly call a threefold increase “inching up”. A four percent shift may not seem like much until you consider the definitiveness of the question, the courage it takes to answer it honestly, and that that four-percent increase translates to twelve million people. There are today 6% sixteen million people in the United States of America with the courage to say to themselves and to others, to stand up and say to the vast majority “I don't share your view of the world.”

Consider also that in 2001 96% of Americans told pollsters they believe in God. Now, seven years later, only 86% say they believe in God. Compare that to the 6% who say they don't. It leaves a faith gap of eight percent. 86% believe. Six percent don't believe. And eight percent are undecided. That's a big number that can make a big difference in our public choices.

But statistical relevance was not Lisa Miller's thesis. As interesting as the numbers are, something closer to our hearts was her focus: Rational, civil discourse. Here's how she ended her piece:

“What's dangerous about the world today is not belief in God—or secularism or unbelief—but ruthless certainty. If 2008 is the year when we can begin, in private and in public, to concede that we don't know all the answers, then let us say amen.”

To which I say, amen. She eloquently emphasizes the dangers of orthodoxy, of fundamentalism, that demand adherence or consequence—sometimes even death. And she powerfully points out, in her own way, that the God question is an emotional question, toward which agnosticism is the only intellectually defensible posture.

We don't have all the answers and as Ethical Humanists we don't pretend to. To say something beyond the realm of the natural doesn't exist is as indefensible as saying it does. However, and here's what the article was getting at, to say that something supernatural does exist and then to pretend that we know something of it is less defensible than the obverse—to assume it doesn't exist and to rely on an approach dependant on things we do know something about.

In the article, Timothy Keller holds that it is difficult to justify your beliefs to those who do not share them. I agree, though I would take it a step further and say it is nearly impossible.

Supernatural beliefs are emotionally and not rationally held, and are not subject to sway by reason. And a rationally held position is impervious to emotional petition. Just as it is impossible to lure a Humanist across the theistic divide through emotional appeal, it is impossible to reason someone out of a position they didn't come to thorough reason in the first place. Emotional positions, like irrational fears, either dissolve on their own or they don't. And as long as they're in place they will not be swayed by fact or reason.

We aren't going to change each other in this respect, and I for one don't even want to. I just want to set aside issues of difference and focus on issues of commonality. For whether it's wife or universe that we look at, we should be able to come to agreement on what's actually there, whether we see it the same way or not.

Setting belief aside creates the space for the kind of civil discourse so lacking and so desperately needed today. That's a dialog Ethical Culture has been encouraging for 131 years. That's why Felix Adler, in founding this precious movement in 1876, flung its doors wide open in welcome of diverse views. His passionate belief was in people, in life itself. And he was fervent in his insistence that our purpose is to bring like and unlike together in the uniting and abiding belief that together we can make a difference.

And bring them together he did. And make a difference he did, they have, and we can. And while important, that difference, those social goods this movement has affected, are byproducts of how we affect each other.

This house was erected as a sanctuary where we may greet each other with open minds and open hearts—a place where commonality trumps difference. If we reanimate that mission, and take that message into the increasingly welcoming arena of public opinion, who knows what good could be wrought?

By setting aside the unimportant and irresolvable issues of origin and destiny—of the ultimate old and new—we are freed to focus, rationally and compassionately, on the more important issues we face now. Issues of the equitable distribution of the benefits and opportunities of wealth, issues of universal justice, issues of a sustainable ecosystem, and other issues that our peaceful coexistence—and even our very existence—depend upon.

I think if we use this time of renewal and resolution to rededicate ourselves to working toward those ends with those unlike ourselves as well as those we more closely resemble in thought and appearance, the world will be a better place. Not over one night, no matter how long that night may be. But gradually, just as the days lengthen and warm slowly.

My self-examinations and resolutions have gone from annual to ongoing. Not continual, they are triggered by circumstances and opportunities, but ongoing

nonetheless. And my look toward the future has likewise gone from a periodic glimpse to a rolling forecast.

So if we are to examine ourselves and resolve anything in this New Year, let it be this: That at this time next year what we will be looking back on is the gradual shift in our own attitudes toward ourselves, toward the past, the present, and the future.

Let us resolve to continually look at the errors and lessons of the old benevolently, to examine the challenges and opportunities of the now realistically, and to formulate the potential of the new hopefully. Let us look at ourselves kindly, and at others with an open heart.

Ethical Culture is dedicated to life itself, not to where it came from or where may go when ended. Much of the old is compatible with the now and useful to the new. Changed circumstances do not negate the power of past thinking, but they do demand a continual reformation of its articulation, and its application.

The days now are long and dark, but not as dark as days of old. There is now a light that points toward the new.

I close with these words from an early Ethical Culture Leader, Percival Chubb:

"The old light burns low; but, ere it sinks and fails, we kindle from it the crescent flame of a new light. And so, once more, we renew the sacred light of life from year to year, from generation to generation and from age to age."

Those are old words that we can now take forward into a new year.

Thank you.



A member of the American Ethical Union
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