

Where From Here?

Platform address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, February 3, 2008
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As many of you know, I will be leaving the New York Society for Ethical Culture at the end of this coming September. So it is natural that my thoughts gravitate to the “what next?” in my life—to the “where from here?” of it all.

And any of you who have read the Society’s newsletter, *Ethical Outlook*, also know that I have been writing about and inviting others into conversation on my concerns over the challenges facing Humanism, the Ethical Culture movement, and the New York Society.

My pondering expanded from there to our national difficulties—how could they not in this time of intense electioneering—and from there to the state of our world.

The promise and peril of each of these will, or has the potential to, impact the future direction of humanity. Each of these is discovering mistaken assumptions lurking within its thinking. Each is at what *The New Yorker’s* Malcolm Gladwell called a “tipping point.” And, it can be argued, each has had a recent history of “one step forward, two steps back.”

International relations and world politics are less defined and more divided. The international reputation and influence of our own country have nosedived, and our economy—and the financial viability of tens of millions—hangs by a thread. And measured by any standard the health and vigor of the Ethical Humanist movement is considerably less than it has been or, in my opinion, should be.

As catastrophic as these could be if left unaddressed, the promise each offers is far greater than the threats it faces.

I want to take a closer look at these—the global, the national, and the communal—to see if there’s a common thread connecting the challenges each faces. And, more importantly, to seek a common course to betterment. Perhaps not a common solution, that might be too much to hope for—even for an avowed optimist like myself. But at least a common approach that might, in the long run, result in equanimity in our world, in our nation, and in ourselves.

We live in a world wracked by ideological extremism both religious and political, a world divided by insolence, intolerance, and instability, a world characterized by tyranny, totalitarianism, and terrorism.

We in this country live in comparative freedom and safety, and enjoy an imperfect but enviable degree of liberty. But peoples around the world are oppressed, defrauded, and brutalized.

We are divided in so many ways. The rich and colorful tapestry of humanity that inspires so many of us is reviled by those who seek to impose a sameness on all of us. It goes without saying that the sameness they seek is one in which we all become like them—think like them, act like them, dress like them, believe like them.

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.

The thing that should unite us—a respect for the worth and dignity of others, especially those unlike ourselves—instead divides us. And the things that should be divided—things like ideology and government, things like faith and force—are being united. Nowhere is this dichotomy more intense than in the field of theology.

It is said that the two most divisive things in our world today are religion and nationalism. Religion that preaches compassion and togetherness but that all too often practices the opposite. Nationalism, itself a result of the coming together of people in search of security, often in flight from religious persecution, but that all too often find oppression and war instead of peace.

Religion and nationalism can be divisive enough on their own. But put them together and they become divisiveness squared.

President Jimmy Carter addressed the issue of a creeping theocracy in our nation in his forward to Jim Wallis' latest book whose very title, *The Great Awakening*, echoing previous great religions awakenings in our country, provokes debate—the debate being: Are we in one – a great awakening – and if so is it the third, the fourth, the fifth?

Wallis, though evangelical, does recognize the third great religious awakening shunned and denied by so many of his ideological mates—the one in the latter part of the nineteenth century that gave rise to the Ethical movement, the Social Gospel, and religious fundamentalism, among other things.

That separates him from the crowd who continues to deny reality, scientific and otherwise. Those who look fact straight in the eye and say it isn't so—who say “I don't believe it so it isn't so.” and turn away from reality, turn away from the world, and turn away from each other.

That attitude is so prevalent in our supposedly enlightened and modern society that three men who seek the highest office of our land, who put themselves forth as worthy to lead us—Mike Huckabee, Sam Brownback and Tom Tancredo, a governor, senator and congressman respectively—do not accept evolution as scientifically sound.

In a presidential debate they raised their hands in proclamation of their creationist opposition. That is astounding in and of itself. But what's more amazing is that no one laughed. I'm just glad that the question of a flat versus round earth didn't come up.

Anyway, in his forward President Carter said, “Public opinion polls show that, uniquely among citizens of Western democracies, we Americans exemplify a strong and undeviating commitment to our multiple religious faiths. At the same time,” he went on, “there has been a fairly recent violation of the time-honored premise that, as Thomas Jefferson proclaimed, a wall of separation should be maintained between church and state.”

Those commitments are indeed strong, which makes deviating from them so difficult for so many. And if their teachings crumble, then what? In other words, they would ask, Where from here?

And there have been recent and egregious breeches of the wall of separation of which Jefferson spoke. And if that wall should crumble, then what? In other words, we would ask, Where from here?

I of course don't agree with the solutions President Carter espouses and Jim Wallis expounds in his book. But their arguments merit our attention for they are, for good or for ill, the arguments of the majority—even if a dwindling majority.

Our entire country is in the midst of a crisis of faith. Some because they question it. Others because we question it. Which has us all asking, Where from here?

On page one of his book, Wallis makes the statement, "Faith is being applied to social justice in ways that we might have never imagined just a few short years ago." True, but only true in the narrow timeframe of recent history. Take it back a century and it becomes déjà vu all over again.

This is from *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, a 1907 book written by Baptist minister Walter Rauschenbusch who preached right here in New York's Hell's Kitchen.

"All the characteristic conditions of American life will henceforth combine to make the social struggle here more intense than anywhere else. ... It is realized by friend and foe that religion can play, and must play, a momentous part in this irrepressible conflict."

Creed and dogma do not belong in the public arena, but conscience and courage do. As New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia said, "There is no Republican or Democratic way to clean streets." Likewise, there's no liberal or conservative, no religious or secular, no foreign or domestic way to address social ills.

And that's what Rauschenbusch was talking about in a time when people of conscience banded together and stood shoulder to shoulder against social ills. People who were no less diverse in thought that we are today, but who saw that social ills don't discriminate based on thought or belief. And neither did they and neither should we.

Wallis does cite these other "great awakenings" of reconstructed stirrings of conscience in our nation. But he wrongly attributes them in saying "Revival is always about what God can do through us."

I would posit that revival and progress are always about what we can do together. Some with whom we join hands in our desire for social reform are inspired by such a religious faith, just as we are inspired by the demonstrated human capacity to do wonderful things.

But, however inspired, our cooperative efforts toward common ideals are furthered through our own efforts. If some see the hand of providence at work, I have no quarrel with that. So long as our hands work together to rectify social ills. And if we approach each other with open hearts rather than closed minds we shall rectify those ills.

Seven years later in his *Theology for the Social Gospel*, Rauschenbusch identified seven such social ills: Religious bigotry, the combination of graft and political power, the corruption of justice, the mob spirit (being 'the social group gone mad') and mob action, militarism, and class contempt. "Every student of history will recognize" he said, "that these sum up constitutional forces in the Kingdom of Evil."

The "kingdom of evil" is an interesting concept that keeps coming back to haunt us. But, as Ethical Humanists, we don't place much store in evil, let alone the kingdom or axis thereof. But Rauschenbusch's litany of transgressions casts an eerie shadow over our national identity today.

Certainly there's religious bigotry aplenty in our land, a bigotry that makes those who do not share a theistic believe the most reviled and discriminated group in America today.

Class contempt is rampant and is reflected not only in bigotry but in our tax laws, in our educational system, in immigration policies, in physical and mental health care, in mandatory sentencing, in unaddressed poverty, and the list goes on.

Want more corruption of justice? Look at the Department of Justice itself, at the political appointment and removal of judges, and the like.

Graft and political power? The list is long and is complemented by the equally long list of those leaving congress prematurely so as to represent special interest groups to the congress of the United States they swore to serve. If you need further evidence of graft and political power, look no further than Halliburton and Blackwater.

Which brings us to militarism: Afghanistan, Iraq, and if the popular press is to be believed, the other nations in our sights. When country singers come up with lyrics like “We’ll put a boot in your ass, it’s the American way” they aren’t singing about my country.

That’s just the beginning of mob spirit and mob action. Pretty much all of the above is a reflection of social groups gone mad.

In a recent op-ed piece calling for the impeachment of President George W. Bush, George McGovern asked, “How could a once-admired, great nation fall into such a quagmire of killing, immorality, and lawlessness?” Answering his own question, he said, “The basic strategy of the administration has been to encourage a climate of fear.”

A close friend of mine, one of the first people I met when exploring Ethical Culture at the Washington, DC, Society, is usually a pretty calm guy. But the same state of affairs that riles McGovern has riled him. At 84 he is a couple of years younger than McGovern but he can be just as plain spoken. This year he ended his annual letter with these words.

“I can’t close without commenting on the state of the nation that I find endangered by seven years of the Bush administration—as well as the self-centered, short-sighted actions of the congress, bought off by the contributions of special interest groups. Until now, I have never felt such a lack of trust, almost fear, of the federal government.”

It’s no wonder that a government that has used fear as a political tool should itself be feared. It’s no surprise, but it is a sad state of affairs. The largest system we are directly a part of, our national system, has become an emotional system, a system of fear. And emotional systems operate and react differently than rational systems.

Fundamentalist religions brand each other as evil. Our nation has adopted that same rigid attitude in branding other nations and peoples as evil. In neither case is much attention been paid to they themselves being or representing or exemplifying good. While evil is captivating, good has fallen out of fashion and been left by the wayside.

I’m not here to beat up on George W. Bush, really I’m not. I am here to lament our beat up nation and to ask, Where from here?

As I mentioned before, as philosophic naturalists, we don’t place much stock in evil, focusing instead on right and wrong behavior. But there’s been a deep divide etched between the two and our dialog—such as it is—about right and wrong has taken on many of the dogmatic characteristics of the good v. evil finger pointing.

And Ethical Humanism has suffered for it. There is an inverse relationship between the lack of peace globally and our desire for it personally. And peace between individuals and within small systems often comes at the expense of justice. We grow weary of a disputations culture that argues and wars, that has become polarized and paralyzed. In consequence we go to injudicious lengths to be peaceful among ourselves. That’s not always the best course.

Our national system is an emotional system, one of fear. The reaction to that is more complex but no less emotional and no less profound—a mixture of sorrow and compassion that fuels a desire for peace and security. We are caught in a highly emotional syndrome of fear and peace. And the justice that can eradicate fear, stabilize security, and ensure peace is no where to be found.

Fairness can be just as difficult to maintain as peace, but it is a necessary component. A peace that does not contain a balanced sense of justice weakens and becomes subject to narrow agenda and personal interest. And systems—be they large or small; global, national, communal, or interpersonal—decline when driven by a self-interested class, no matter how well-intentioned they may be.

I'm not advocating tough love or rough justice, but I am suggesting a better balance between peace and justice. The fate of a system revolves around its concept of virtue, and the consequent adherence to that concept. Ethics is central not only to Ethical Culture but to national and global wellbeing.

Though chafed, bruised, and all but abandoned, the conjoined causes of liberty and justice still beckon from afar. Peace is desired and required, but peace without justice inevitably tends toward tyranny. And self-interest at the expense justice erodes peace, which soon collapses. That's what we have seen throughout history, and that's what we are seeing on all levels today.

The fundamentalist “be like me or be gone” attitude that permeates our world today, the self-interest that characterizes our nation; these trump compassion, bludgeon fairness, and tip the scales of justice. Is it any wonder that in a world where peace is scarce that our overwhelming desire for it in our communal and personal lives leads likewise to the suppression of justice?

And that's where things start to connect for me, in an absent, warped, or unreasoned sense of justice that has diminished hope. We have become saddened and feel helpless against the juggernauts of power. What we need, what our nation needs, what our world needs is an attitude adjustment, a global mind shift, that in and of itself would constitute the first step toward a solution.

A forceful approach to change has failed. It is time we return to the proven practice of cooperation. While there remains a chasm between us on matters such as our human potential—on what might be and how we might go about achieving it—there is enough commonality of opinion to build a bridge across those differences.

Changes of conscience have brought about wonderful things, and brought an end to terrible things. It is truly wonderful to see what can happen to a world when vast numbers of people change their minds. Think what a common realization of the necessity of justice would mean?

Think of how that might impact poverty and the inequity of the global economy, the HIV/AIDS crisis, sex trafficking, genocide, preemptive warfare—all indications of an eroded sense of justice. All of these evidence an imbalance of fairness in which power and prejudice play all too great a role. But think how they might look to us when viewed from the high apex of justice.

Politics has failed to address let alone rectify the deficiency of justice. In fact it can be argued that, in our country at least, that politics is responsible for its lack. Diplomacy seems impotent to restore it in the international arena. It is in circumstances like these

that social movements have emerged in the past. Spurred by social issues, people of strong and undeviating conscience have rallied to face social ills with moral courage.

We have seen our quest for peace end in war, the braying of faith dissolve into a hushed disillusionment, and humanity's optimism turn to disappointment. It is time for justice. It is time for reason. And it is time for hope.

For too long the narrow agenda of fundamental ideology has dominated public discourse. For too long fear has dictated national policy. For too long greed has ruled commerce. Our moral center lies somewhere other than political centrism. That's not courage, that opportunism.

Hope and change are possible in every realm: The personal, the communal, the national, the global. Individuals, congregations, nations, and our world can heal. Justice can be restored. And that's where we must go from here—toward that universal healing, toward a revived sense of justice.

Let me close with something that I think illustrates what I'm talking about. Not too long ago I was standing at the curb waiting for a light to change at Columbus Circle when a woman pushed a stroller up beside me. In it was a small toddler—or a big baby, I'm really no good at all at judging or describing these things, but it was a very small person.

He—I think—was wearing a blue insulated and hooded jacket or jumper. It was a blustery winter day, so he raised his little pink hand raised and gripped the side of the hood to keep it from blowing back. I was surprised one so small could be so self-reliant. I thought to myself, "That kid's a New Yorker." Many babies would just sit passively and then cry for help when the chill of nature assailed them. Not this kid, he raised his hand and did something about it.

We have the same choice. These are turbulent times. We can allow ourselves to remain exposed to the ravages of a harsh cultural climate and then sit and wail about it. Or we can lift a hand and do something about it.

How many are for the latter. How many want to raise your hands? Come on, raise your hands.

Yes! The world, our nation, this movement, this Society—all can be better. We can change them, or at least protect them, ourselves, and others from needless damage and suffering, simply by lifting a hand and lending a hand.

Lift a hand and lend a hand, and lift your voice and lend your voice to the growing number of likeminded people speaking out against injustice. The subtext to Malcolm Gladwell's book that I mentioned before, *The Tipping Point*, indeed the subtitle, is *How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*.

Indeed, they do. Throughout human history there have been few if any large things that cannot be dissected into small, sometimes almost infinitesimal parts—nearly invisible acts of moral courage.

We must act not because we are afraid of what may happen if we don't—as justified as that fear may be let it not be our motivation. Rather let us stand up out of hope for what can be if we do. Let us lift a hand and lend a hand to a better future for all.

We need a new paradigm, one in which narrow thinking and agenda are rejected in favor of a broader more respectful appreciation for all of humanity; one in which fear is appeased and peace and justice are allowed to flourish.

We long for and we can have a nation and a world in which, to paraphrase De Tocqueville, democratic principles permeate laws and customs, where all ranks and classes are intermixed, where minds as well as fortunes are brought more closely together, and where the self-interested have lost their power, privilege, and leisure.

Where from here? Toward the restoration of justice.

Looking imaginatively toward an unknown future from the solid ground of the known past, and acting with moral courage and resolve, we can restore justice to our public and private lives—for our selves, for our community, for our nation, and for our world.

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