

Community Service—Doing for Others

Platform address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, April 6, 2008
by **Tony Hileman**, Senior Leader

Good morning. I want to extend an especially warm welcome to the many visitors with us this morning. As you likely are not well acquainted with us let me open with a bit of background intended to give you insight into why we gather here each Sunday morning.

This is the founding Society of the Ethical Culture movement begun by Felix Adler in 1876. For a third of a century Dr. Adler nurtured this movement in what we today would call a “virtual” way. There was no stone and stained glass home. He held forth weekly on Sunday mornings in several of New York City’s lecture and performance halls—the last being Carnegie Hall—before this magnificent meeting house was dedicated in 1910.

By then there were Societies in major cities in the Eastern and Midwestern United States and in Europe, the school he began had grown and had been in its own building just next door on Central Park West for some seven years, and numerous social agencies were thriving with the help and support of a now mature Ethical Movement.

We needed a real home and this building has been it for nearly a century.

That brief recitation illustrates that Dr. Adler, the son of a prominent reform rabbi, Samuel Adler of Temple Emanu-El, was an extraordinary figure in many respects.

He was a noted religious reformer. Of all the reason-based religions established in this country in the nineteenth century, and there were many, Ethical Culture alone survives and thrives in the twenty-first century.

He was an influential educational progressive not only in his methods but in his approach. He saw education as the necessary bedrock upon which to build a better future for the daughters and sons of a largely immigrant laboring class.

And he was a social activist seeing a strong nexus between self and other. Indeed his concept of our infinite interconnectedness and interdependence led him to present ethical relationships as central to human flourishing and to teach that there is a direct connection, a reciprocity, between individual growth and cultural advancement.

And that’s why we gather each week, and at several opportunities during the week, to deepen that understanding and to nurture our desire and ability to become better members of our chosen community—to become and to be better citizens of our city, of our nation, and of our world.

Which leads us to our theme today. This morning we honor a man for his service to his chosen community. You will be hearing shortly of the particulars of the Society’s Community Service Award and its worthy recipient, restaurateur Mike O’Neal—a man who deserves a large portion of the credit for the largeness of many of us. But first, I want to take just a moment to dwell on service to one’s community—on doing for others.

Community service: One doing for many. The relationship and consequent responsibility of the individual to the community, the nexus and the priority of the two, has teased historians, philosophers, anthropologists, and sociologists, since those

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.

disciplines came into being. And the natural, protective and creative tension between self and society has been around even longer.

The equation of individualism and social responsibility was simpler in humanity's earliest days, indeed in the era when we were just becoming human. The very survival of wandering clusters of hunter-gatherers was dependent upon group cohesion. Expressions of individuality that put that cohesion at risk were frowned upon and dealt with harshly.

Behaviors seen as outside certain well-established and well-understood norms were seen as threatening. The individual adhered to those norms or the individual suffered and perhaps died. Usually because he—and it usually was, for evolutionary reasons, a he was ostracized, abandoned, and left behind to fend for himself in decidedly inhospitable surroundings.

That didn't work out too well for the individualist, who alone was no match for the environment. The individual depended on the group for survival—for the bare necessities of life—and was likely, under threat of an unsavory death, to adhere to social norms and to contribute to the well-being, the survival of the group.

But even in those harsh times and conditions a sense of fairness emerged. Remember, the group depended upon the individual just as much as the individual depended upon the group—The strength of the one is in the many and the strength of the many is in the one. So first-time offenders were not given a death sentence. They were beaten up and shunned for a while, but not abandoned to die.

Primitive culture knew something modern society has all too often forgotten or ignored, that we need each other to survive, and that we should treat each other with fairness. We need each other to survive physically and to thrive emotionally, and that best happens in an atmosphere of fairness—of mutual reliance, trust, and respect.

We become fully ourselves in the same way that we became fully human in the first place, through community. We are social by nature and, as self-aware creatures, we recognize a reciprocal responsibility between ourselves and others.

Fast forward a few millennia through our expanding sense of community—from wandering hunter-gatherer clan to agrarian tribes and villages to industrial peoples in towns, cities, and nations. Our attitude toward the individual has shifted, moderated if not reversed along the way. We still value community, of course, but our broadened sense of what that means has allowed an equal respect for, and protection of, the individual as well.

I'm skipping a lot here but this eventually gave rise to the grand experiment of America: a democratic nation-state dedicated to the unalienable rights of the individual—full recognition that the individual has rights that are so intrinsic that they cannot be separated, that they cannot be alienated, and that they should not be transgressed.

That does not, or was not intended to grant license to individual actions that are harmful to others. However, modern individualism, like the individualism of our ancient ancestors, has all too often gotten out of balance. The consequences are not as dire, at least in most modern cultures and at least not immediately.

As individualism matured, if that be the word, it often hardened into a cultural survival-of-the-fittest stance that says “me first and you're on your own.” That's evident today in corporate greed, in a parsimony of compassion, in a disrespect and abuse of our environment, and in many other ways.

As a result, individuals and cultures alike are suffering, some dramatically. We strive toward the ideal of equality of life for all. That's a far distant aim, to be sure, but in the interim we can do a lot better than we have been.

We are not each equally able in all areas, so we depend on those who are gifted in the areas in which we are lacking. We depend on them to share with us their time, their talent, and, yes, their treasure. And we are likewise called upon to share ours with others.

This echoes the sense of infinite interconnectedness I spoke of earlier. This concept is not unique to Ethical Culture, it is an ancient notion that Ethical Culture has uniquely animated in personal and social action.

The concept appears in ancient Vedic mythology as Indra's Net, a net that stretches out infinitely. At each point where the strands of the net intersect can be found a multifaceted jewel. And since the net itself is infinite in measure, the jewels are infinite in number.

Each jewel glitters like a star of the first magnitude, and if you peer into any one of them you will see the reflection of all the other jewels in the net. Whenever our lives touch, wherever our paths cross, whether in service to another or in search of fulfillment of our own needs, we find the infinite reflection of other human interactions. This ties us, all of us, together in an infinite web of interconnectivity.

The understanding that the global community consists of the reflection of our personal interactions with each other, and that those interactions themselves are a reflection of our history and of our aspirations for the future, add richness and importance to our lives.

That how we behave toward one another matters, that how we make and keep agreements matters, that how we respect another's worth and dignity matters, that how we depend upon and serve others matters—these are the things that we here at the New York Society for Ethical Culture hold to be essential ingredients in the human glue that bonds diverse societies into a single culture.

And so we come to the conclusion that if we don't do for others, we ourselves wither and the others we leave to shift for their selves suffer and perhaps die.

A year after founding this congregation and this movement, Dr. Adler charged it with the responsibility of igniting in others a flame of abiding ethical faith, ethical duty, and ethical responsibility—to produce in others “the will to do one's part in such a manner as to enable (them) to do their part with the greatest possible excellence.”

That's the social application of the ethical essence of Ethical Culture.

And our nation's history is full of instances of people doing just that, of rural and small-town Americans helping each other: Barn-raising after a fire or storm, the taking in of orphans from family and strangers, the caring for the recuperating, the infirm and the aged: These and other acts of community service, of doing for others, have filled the plots of many a black & white film. As idealized as those depictions were, there was an era when we cared for each other in a real and direct way. Because that's what we did, because that's the way we were, because that's who we were.

I believe that's the kind of people we still are. I believe we're small-town connected in a big-world way. We come here each Sunday morning to strengthen that bond. We come here to give life to that ancient impulse toward community. We come here to honor

and strengthen what we stand for. We come here so that we might better understand the essence of community service. We come here to better prepare ourselves to do for others.

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