

Founder's Day

New York Society for Ethical Culture
Sunday, May 18, 2008

A Founder's Day Message to Ethical Culture

From **Howard B. Radest**, Ethical Culture Leader,
former Director [Headmaster] of the Ethical Culture Fieldston School

Ethical Culture Then & Now

Platform address by **Tony Hileman**, Senior Leader

Closing Words

From **Arthur Dobrin**, Leader Emeritus of the Ethical Humanist Society of Long Island

“Once an organization loses its spirit of pioneering and rests on its early work, its progress stops.”

–Thomas J. Watson

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I am grateful for Tony's invitation. It gives me a way speaking once again to this special moment in the Ethical Culture story. And it brings back memories—by now, more than 55 years of memories.

Once before, in addressing our students at another Founders Day as I was ending my assignment in the Ethical Culture Fieldston School, I asked for an act of imagination. Today, I welcome you to join in imagining the life of this meetinghouse, the voices it has heard, the people it has known, the causes it has celebrated.

I recall the record of the dedication of this our home almost a century ago in 1910, and six years after the school house next door was opened. That calendar, all by itself, tells of our priorities—to serve others, to teach others and thereby to serve and teach ourselves. Here, those men and women who built this place said, was a home for clear thinking, for moral idealism, for the celebration of a community, a place where young and old, rich and poor, believer and non-believer, Jew and Christian and Muslim and Buddhist and all the rest, would gather to dedicate themselves, whatever their differences, to the common task of making a good world and nurturing a good people. This place captured our dream in stone and wood and glass. But it was and is more, much more, than these.

I think of how much this place has heard...the tragic angry sounds of war...in 1914 and 1917, in 1939 and 1941, in 1950, in 1965, and, sadly, in 1991 and now again in our time.

This place has heard people of color...the meetings that among others led to the founding of the NAACP in 1909, the reports of the horrors of the lynch mob, the insights of E.B. Dubois and Walter White and Roy Wilkins, the excitement of 1954 and *Brown v. Board of Education*, the memorial for Goodman and Chaney¹ in the '60s.

It has been a place that celebrated human dignity, a place for defending against those who would tear down human rights and civil liberties—the Palmer hysteria in 1919², the fear and disgrace of the McCarthy years in '50 and '51 and '52, and, sadly, once again, now using the excuse of terror, these past seven years..

It has been a place for quiet themes as when we have celebrated learning, enjoyed humor and music, and even the silences of reflection. It has been a place of sadness, too, as we have recalled the memories of those who had died.

Finally, I think of the motto of this meeting house, the motto engraved in our assembly room, "The Place Where People Meet To Seek The Highest Is Holy Ground." I am reminded by those words that I am a member of a moral community and that brings

¹ Andrew Goodman and James Chaney, civil rights workers who along with Michael Schwerner were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi in 1964.

² Named for Alexander Mitchell Palmer, United States Attorney General, the Palmer Raids were a crackdown on suspected radical leftists and foreigners conducted under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover of the Bureau of Investigation, forerunner of the FBI.

me to the biggest memory of all, that you and I are an act of faith and hope in the decencies of men and women when around us indecencies are all too visible.

This place tells us about what and who went before, who took the risks, made the mistakes, and who achieved and succeeded. Without that, without them, we would not, could not be here. It recalls us to our commitments, insisting that we are, each in his or her moment, also a founder, a son or daughter of history who can, who does, make history. It nourishes us as it was nourished by the lives and voices that are no more. And, it will live its way into tomorrow only as we find our own voices, and give to it our own lives.

Ethical Culture Then & Now

Founder's Day address³ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, May 18, 2008
by **Tony Hileman**, Senior Leader

“You and I are an act of faith and hope in the decencies of men and women when around us indecencies are all too visible.”

Howard Radest's greeting reminds us that we are dedicated to the task of nurturing good people who are in turn dedicated to the task of making a good world. It is not *Professor Radest's* bias as an educator that leads him to stress the role of learning in that endeavor. Central to our aim of improvement is the unending quest for broader knowledge of the external world and a deeper understanding of our inner lives.

The title of my address this morning, *Ethical Culture Then & Now*, more than implies that over the 132 years since its founding Ethical Culture has changed. It has not only adapted to the ever changing world around it, but it has advanced philosophically as well. But the basic ethical tenets upon which it rests—its foundation if you will—remains steady and solid.

Founder's Day is a day on which we look back on, and remind ourselves of, the original intent of the Ethical Movement. It is also a day on which it is reasonable to compare the intent then with the outcome now. Hence, *Ethical Culture Then & Now*.

In looking back to the *then* of Ethical Culture I turned to the words not only of the founder of the Ethical Movement, Felix Adler, whose portrait stands on the stage beside me, but also those of the first generation of Leaders he personally and intensely trained. I relied mostly on the words of Alfred W. “Al” Martin, a prolific writer of clear and elegant expression, abilities he attributed directly to “the quickening influence” of his mentor.

Ethical Culture, or Ethical Humanism as we've come to know and call it—we now use the terms interchangeably—is a progressive religious understanding of Humanism in which ethics is central. Al Martin spoke profoundly of the centrality of ethics in *Aspects of Religion*, a book published in 1926 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of our founding. It was a collection of essays and Martin's was entitled *Distinctive Features of the Ethical Movement*.

“Foremost among the distinctive features of the Ethical Movement” he said, “is the supremacy it assigns to the ethical end. ... To it all other ends—scientific, aesthetic, economic, social—must be made tributary. And by the ethical end is meant the formation of right relations between personalities—right personal relations, as between husband and wife, parents and children, nation and nation. The creating of right relations is valued above all else because the supreme good of life is to be found in the *act* of creating harmonious relations.”

The relationship between nation and nation, the way nation states behave toward one another, is but a reflection of our relations person to person. So the act of forming our relationships with each other, of creating harmonious personal relations, is serious ethical business.

³ 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.

Ethics is central to our enterprise and it is that centrality of ethics that compels and propels us forward, demanding that we continually examine, refine, and advance this precious treasure of ours. In that process it is inevitable that we go down some dead-end roads mistaken for the path to the future but that go nowhere. Being mistaken, realizing it, and correcting it is all part of the progressive religious life.

As the Ethical Movement is a part of the religious tapestry of America, I want to begin by taking a look at the religious landscape in the late nineteenth century. And then, in the context of those surrounding circumstances, I want to do the same for the founding expression of Ethical Culture and the current understanding of Ethical Humanism.

Along the way I'll highlight some of the differences and similarities of our movement then and now by taking a look at two of its founding tenets. In doing so I hope to stay with the *then* and the *now* and avoid any prognostications about the future. But there will be some closing words on our potential from another of my colleagues.

So that's the outline of what I want to cover this morning.

In the year of our founding, 1876, there appeared in The Galaxy, "A Magazine of Entertaining Reading" that was absorbed into the Atlantic Monthly a couple of years later, a somewhat rambling article by one Titus Munson Coan, an admirer and defender of Henry David Thoreau.

It touched on the idyllic life in mythical Arcadia and the Humanist spirit of a young America. It dwelt upon those who "believe not what is proven or probable but what they like, what they wish to believe" and also on the "moderns" struggling with the revelations of science, particularly Darwin's exposition of evolution by means of natural selection. Entitled *Reforming the World*, it had a somewhat haughty tenor. This is how it began:

"It is a weary old phrase, and one which we children of wisdom are tired of hearing, that of reforming the world; since the world is not reformed, or likely to be. And it is a phrase which implies, with most of us wise people, a tendency toward folly on the part of those who use it.

"But we will think about reform, however much or little we may say: how many moderns have the modern enthusiasm about the improvement of the state of men!"

Against that backdrop of religious tumult and tepid optimism stood just such a modern man, the founder of Ethical Culture, Felix Adler: Religious and social reformer, educator, philosopher, and visionary. He saw an improved state for humanity and he created ways for us to pursue it. He saw a better world and he urged us toward it. And he saw the reciprocity between the moral improvement of the individual and the formation of an ethical culture through right relations—through the ever increasing knowledge and love and practice of the right.

This mission, this formation of a new religion, was undertaken intentionally and with high yet humble aims. Again, the words of Al Martin.

"The group of men and women who met on that memorable Sunday morning, May 15, 1876, were in search of something wherewith to consecrate their lives." They were people, "With a religious nature but without a religious home; dissatisfied with the religious institutions and forms of their day and place, yet conscious of the need of coming into vital touch with something transcendently holy."

He went on to clarify the religious impulse of which he spoke in saying, “The Ethical Movement originated not in the attempt to find a substitute for religion in philanthropic activities and moral reforms. On the contrary, it started with a great hope in the heart of Professor Adler and his followers—the hope of finding a satisfying religion. Not in despair of religion, not in opposition to religion, but in the hope of finding a new and satisfying religion.”

As he alluded, the realm of religion in America in 1876 was a chaotic one. The full impact of the discoveries of Charles Darwin was turning it into a boiling cauldron as young Felix was coming of age. Published in 1859, when Adler was eight years old, *On the Origin of Species* shook religion like nothing ever had. Not Galileo, not the Enlightenment, not any of the philosophic advancements or scientific revelations before or since had quite the same impact. It sent religions and religious people reeling in three directions.

The first was the agnostic response that there are things about the universe and ourselves, about its and our origin and destiny, that we do not know and likely will not know. This is the position that Darwin himself reluctantly arrived at as the only intellectually defensible one. It is also the conclusion of Felix Adler, though he came to it without reluctance and with no sense of despair. In fact quite the opposite, and here I quote, “Unqualified admission of the incompetence of the human intellect to resolve the world riddle is the determining factor in the more profound humility which characterizes the religion of ethical experience.”

The second religious reaction to Darwin was one of utter and complete rejection, a turning of the back on the validity of science, its findings, and anything at odds with conventional religious tenets, beliefs, and teachings. Staying with, as Coan said, “not what is proven or probable but what they ... wish to believe”

Before Darwin there was a kind of uneasy peace between science and religion. That came to a screeching halt when Christian fundamentalism was born in response to evolution. The conflict between the inerrancy of scripture and the increasing soundness of science has raged unabated ever since.

But there was a third response, that of the religious creative, the *modern*, who sought to keep the religious impulse aligned with scientific findings. This is the response that gave rise to Ethical Culture.

Felix Adler stood athwart the fundamentalist thrust of religion and said, Stop, there’s a better way. On the very first anniversary of his founding of the Ethical Movement, he stood once again in Standard Hall and delivered his *First Anniversary Discourse*.

“It is May, the gladdest season of the year. Life is in the breezes, life in the vernal glory of the fields, life in the earth and in the skies. ... A year has now passed since we began our work, and for many months we have met in this hall week after week. We have reached the first resting place upon our journey, and it behooves us to look back once more upon the path we have traveled, and forward into the yet untried future that awaits us.

“What was it that induced us to enter upon so perilous and for many reasons so uncertain an enterprise? We felt a great need. Religion which ought to stand for the highest truth had ceased to be true to us. We saw it at war with the highest intelligence of the day: religion and conscience also seemed no longer inseparably connected, as they should be.”

Religious compatibility with the highest intelligence of the day was a common theme of Adler's and he stated it in various ways throughout his long and distinguished career—or I should say careers, plural, as he played many roles in many different contexts over the course of his life. But this insistence of ongoing adjustment was a constant argument of his, one I want to use as illustration of the forward thrust of the movement he founded.

Adler came from the Reform Judaic tradition at a time when the dominant religious force in Europe and America was Reformed Christianity—a product of the 16th century Protestant Reformation in Europe. And while he certainly moved away from the tradition of his birth he did so respectfully and with an honest and successful effort to retain the best of it as well as the best of other religious traditions and philosophic thinking.

But pause for a moment on the juxtaposition of *reform* and *reformed*. One is ongoing and inquisitive, the other finished, fixed and certain. And there in lies the tale.

One looked at the highest intelligence of the day and said, “No way, we reformed once and no further shaping is needed or allowed.” While those of the ongoing persuasion responded by asking, “How must we adjust our thinking to accommodate this new understanding?”

And there you have the sharp contrast between fundamentalism and progressivism as it stood at the time of our founding, and as it stands today. Even in a progressive society, some things don't change.

We're all well acquainted with the economic, social, and political advancements that have taken place over the past 132 years. Our lives are filled with things that we take for granted today but that existed only in the imaginations of a creative few then, and there's an equally long list of things that even they could not envision.

But for all that change, much has lamentably remained the same. Ours is once again a nation divided by war, torn by political dissention and downfall, and deeply, deeply divided religiously.

More importantly, many of the same social conditions this movement addressed in its formative years—education for the many, care for the afflicted, social justice and civil liberties for all—while improved, at least in our country, these remain lacking in critical aspects here at home and are nonexistent or regressing in a growing number of foreign lands.

The *then* and the *now* both changed and stayed the same. And the same can be said of Ethical Culture. I'd like to focus on just two illustrations of that in examining the foundational tenets of the Ethical Manifold—an expression of our infinite interrelatedness—and of our supreme moral axiom, “Act so as to elicit the best in others and thereby in thyself.”

The first, the Ethical Manifold, we have retained but reformulated in a philosophic advancement past the vaguely transcendental sense with which it was imbued early on to the naturalist stance of today. The second, the moral axiom we strayed from not so much in going down a dead-end road but in shifting emphasis from its meaning to its effect.

Adler touched on both in saying, “The moral end to be realized ... is, ‘So act upon another as to evoke in him, and conjointly in oneself, in the same movement and countermovement, the consciousness of the interlacedness of life with life, the reciprocal, universal, infinite interrelatedness.’”

Here we find one of his many versions of the supreme moral axiom, one that is well suited to our purpose this morning, as well as a succinct and revealing articulation of the Ethical Manifold.

Adler's concept of the Ethical Manifold went past the natural but stopped short of the supernatural in an area he described as supersensible. In his words, "The difference between 'supersensible' and 'supernatural' is capital. I do not encourage relapse into supernaturalism. The supernatural is the opposite of the supersensible. It is an attempt to represent in natural or sensible guise what is supposed to be beyond the senses; and the naturalistic representation of the supersensible is then taken not metaphysically but literally."

In founding this movement, Adler did not directly confront the teachings of conventional religion on the creedal matters of origin and destiny, though he personally rejected them. What he did is move past them, set them aside as unnecessary.

As John Dewey noted, "Old ideas give way slowly; for they are more than abstract logical forms and categories. They are habits, predispositions, deeply engrained attitudes of aversion and preference." And in speaking of the questions those ideas and habits were formed to answer, he said, "We do not solve them: we get over them. Old questions are solved by disappearing, evaporating, while new questions corresponding to the changed attitude of endeavor and preference take their place."

Adler felt a great respect for, though never a wholehearted embrace of, the thinking of Ralph Waldo Emerson. He named his first son Waldo and was for a number of year's president of the Free Religious Association of which Emerson was a founding member. But he eventually resigned his position and moved on, favoring his concept of the supersensible over that of the transcendental.

That is what we have subsequently done, moved on. Adler placed the Ethical Manifold—the concept of our interconnectedness and interdependence—in a supersensible realm that was emotionally necessary and fulfilling to him, but never philosophically satisfying to his followers.

When Howard Radest entered the movement in 1951, Adler's quasi transcendental views were already part of our progressive history. As he observed in his dissertation on Ethical Culture and Adler's views, he was "struck by the fact that nearly all of those I met and worked with were more likely to be philosophic naturalists than Kantian or neo-Kantian idealists."

And so we were, and so we are. The completion of that transition was confirmed by the National Leaders Council, then called the Fraternity of Leaders, in 1966 in a statement presented to the 4th World Congress of the International Humanist and Ethical Union of which our movement was a founding member in 1952. The statement, delivered in Paris, was drafted by one of my predecessors as Senior Leader of this Society, Ed Ericson. It began with the simple declarative statement, "Ethical Culture is a Humanist movement."

The abstract understanding that we are, indeed, interconnected and interdependent had gone from the realm of the supersensible and become firmly rooted in our natural understandings, loosing none of its animating vitality along the way.

But just as we were progressing philosophically, we wandered in our interpretation of the founding moral axiom and the idea of deed before creed. Here's what happened.

This is a bit less involved and a whole lot less complicated than the first illustration. Let me begin with the observation that “deed above creed” was never meant to imply that Ethical Culture does not rest on a foundation of ethical postulates, and that our deeds are a religious expression of those beliefs.

Combine that with a drift from the depth of wisdom inherent in “Act so as to elicit the best in others and thereby in thyself” and you have the makings of an identity crisis. We’ve all too often succumbed to a simplistic, tit-for-tat interpretation that says, “If I aim and act to bring out your best I am in that act *being* my best.” That is not at all what Adler intended in saying “Act upon another as to evoke in him, and conjointly in oneself, in the same movement and countermovement...”

It is not a tit-for-tat exchange. It is a reciprocal process, an upward ethical spiral in which by eliciting your best I am conjointly, in the same movement and countermovement, *eliciting* my best. Neither of us are *being* our best but, ideally, both of us our *becoming* our best. That links it to the Ethical Manifold as an expression of our interrelatedness.

That is what was intended and that is what we are slowly coming to realize and appreciate again but along the way we drifted to a mistaken understanding that we are what we do and that what we believe doesn’t much matter. It’s the other way around. What we do is an expression of who we are and what we believe. Our accomplishments in the realm of social betterment are legion, but we are more than a social agency—more than what we do.

This is not a new phenomena, it was present in our movement at least as far back as 1926. I began with Al Martin’s words from that year and I would like to end with them. This is a compilation of his closing points.

“The outstanding characteristic of the Ethical Movement that differentiates it from social schemes and ‘betterment’ enterprises is that it begins where those leave off. They halt at securing to the oppressed the material wherewithal of well-being; the Ethical Movement pushes beyond this (to the) improvement of character. The Ethical Movement maintains that even under existing conditions, bad as they are, we *must* find out how the moral life *can* be lived.

“The various social (agencies) of our time concentrate attention on external readjustments and rearrangements of society. The Ethical Movement focuses attention on internal improvements assured that all social morality rests at last on a basis of private morality.

“Thus the Ethical Movement is devoted not so much to any ‘betterment’ as to the *best*. We need the vision of the best to give inspiration. Hence, at bottom, (the aim of) the Ethical Movement is not to do the work of charity organizations, but to sustain and develop the *spirit* behind all true charity work.

“Above and beyond all its undertakings broods the supreme and all-inclusive aim—the ever increasing knowledge, love and practice of the right.”

Those are powerful and stirring words that speak to the significance of our founder and to the significance of what he founded.

Felix Adler charted a new religious path and built a better way that has not grown old with the passage of time nor weakened under the weight of scientific and philosophic advances. He knew that a reasoned religion was more persuasive and inspirational than

an angry one. He cherished the wisdom of his religious ancestors while not submitting to their authority.

But even more important than any of the particular ideas that Adler advanced was his belief in the power of ideas themselves. The ideas that he propagated in the nineteenth century became the wisdom of the twentieth century and are accepted as common sense in the twenty-first.

That is the potential and progress of powerful ideas, that is Ethical Culture then and now.

Closing Words

From **Arthur Dobrin**, Leader Emeritus of the Ethical Humanist Society of Long Island
May 18, 2008

I start with this: let's say there were no Ethical Culture and an Adler arrived on the scene today. Would he find it necessary to create a new movement? What shape would that movement take? Would there be congregations/societies? Who would be included within its ambit? How would it measure its success?

I think that several of the major reasons for the founding for Ethical Culture no longer exist. The idea of ethics without God is commonplace. Many social problems today are addressed by government or Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). (Of course many aren't, but new NGOs pop up as fast as a website can be created.) Joining together across denominational lines is taken for granted. The religiously liberal can find a home in nearly every denomination. Atheists, non-theists, naturalists, etc. are no longer marginalized (although they may not be so public if they intend to run for high public office). Transcendentalist idealists can find less ambiguous homes than ours has to offer.

What's left? I'm not sure.

One way to look at this is that Ethical Culture has succeeded. The world has shifted in our direction in ways that Adler couldn't have anticipated. There is an Ethical Movement (without so being called) that exists far beyond our numbers. Has the child outgrown the parent?

I love the Ethical Movement. I have no other community in which other humanists come together to celebrate life's joys and success, its set-backs and its failures. We recognize our responsibilities in this world on a personal and social level and we willingly take on the obligation to make the world a better place.

[What's left?] Maybe that's it.

NEW YORK SOCIETY FOR
ETHICAL CULTURE 

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