

# Dialogue

The Voices of Ethical Culture



November 2003

American  
Ethical  
Union

## “LET THIS SEASON BE DEDICATED...”

Lisel Burns, Leader, Brooklyn

“Ain't nobody want to plant the corn, (but) everybody want to raid the barn,” goes “Raid the Barn,” the reggae song (by Anthony B.) that my Bahamian nephew played repeatedly during our August family vacation in the New Hampshire mountains. Out of the rapid, Jamaican-accented phrases, why did those two lines jump out at me? My nephew insisted that the song attracted him only because of “the tone and the beat” and “definitely not for the message of the lyrics.”

Since childhood, I have had a hunger for message in music and art. And like any good proverb offering community insight on a big question, those reggae lines asked a big question with no doctrinal beliefs attached. As the lyrics rushed on, I was asking myself, “What will I be planting in my several organizational fields this coming year?”

In some group efforts (say, my community household or block association), I am a fairly passive community member, happy to pay extra to work less, ready to eat at harvest time, but “too busy” most days to take the mop to a dusty floor, much less show up for planting. Here, however, in my extended family, at the Brooklyn society and in a few other places where I have decided to engage my hopes for humanity and the planet, you can often find me taking a turn seeding or weeding long rows in the earth, or sitting in a meeting, figuring how to pay the farm bills this month.

As we move further into the fall, our respective secular, religious and ethical heritages play out around us in many different levels of observance. Each religious tradition and its holy days or practices sound their respective moral calls, with interpretation of and accountability to those calls largely left to individuals by membership, folk culture or family memory.

Wherever we stand on that continuum, we too could start the Jewish New Year by answering the Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur reflective call to pay our debts, regret our sins of speech, attitude, action and inaction, then approach our neighbors to make right those relations.

In November, the Islamic tra-

dition or our own ethical urging may call us to join Ramadan's 30-day fasting and remembrance. All through the year, Hindu and Buddhist wisdom traditions teach nonviolence and ask us to wage peace in our hearts, no matter how the world rages about us. And in December, the Christian year begins with the celebration of the birth of a compassionate man whose life is believed by the faithful to have begun in a lonely stable below a bright star.



I consider the richness of religious and ethical tradition a positive force in my cultural life and a powerful source of ethical insight and positive jihad, or inner moral struggle. The traditional religions have their place, and many of their members join our critique of the challenges to ethical living now being played out on television screens, on the internet, and in the marketplace.

I view Ethical Culture as a community where one's theology is personal business but where ethical living is a chosen responsibility to keep faith in humanity's capacity for goodness. Whether people root their action on theological or naturalistic grounds is secondary to this aim.

I am cheered to see the rise of ethical questions and calls for moral reckoning in the marketplace, schoolhouse, and workplace these days. In the Ethical Movement we offer an opportunity to explore the ethical questions of the ages and to place ultimate worth in something beyond our own limited self interest. Our challenge in the Ethical Movement is to secure a clear enough identity for ourselves upon which we can build our own message and send our insights out into the larger culture through the lives of our members and the people and places they influence.

Let this season be dedicated to our own planting of seeds and flourishing as mutual-support communities whose members also take care to fulfill their chosen obligations to others and add their energies to the well-being of the human family everywhere.

### NEWLY ELECTED AEU OFFICERS

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# Dialogue

## Newsletter of The American Ethical Union

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Click on Latest News and follow the links.

**Dialogue** welcomes letters and original articles  
on subjects of interest to AEU members.

Email to [editor@aeu.org](mailto:editor@aeu.org).

or mail or fax to the AEU office.

Submissions deadline for the January issue is December 3.

## AEU CALENDAR

### BOARD MEETINGS

November 7 & 8, January 10, 2004,  
March 13, and May 8



### Y.E.S. CONFERENCE

*November 7 to 9*

Frost Valley Center, NY

Driving directions:

[www.frostvalley.org](http://www.frostvalley.org)

### RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CONFERENCE

*November 14 to 16*

Stony Point Center

Stony Point, NY

Driving directions:

[Horeb.pcusa.org/spc/location.htm](http://Horeb.pcusa.org/spc/location.htm)

## AN ETHICAL CULTURE THANKSGIVING CEREMONY

*For Two Readers*

*Lois Kellerman, AEU Leader*

As we gather together to celebrate another harvest, may freedom ring from every heart, and in this place may we find peace.

*Daily we work, but today we set aside our labors and rest.*

Daily we go our separate ways, but today we gather together.

*Daily we count our lives in hours, in the value of the marketplace.*

But today we stand in the spaces between time's beat and think of what is good, what is lasting, what is true.

*(The candles are lit.)*

*We light candles of understanding against the shadows of our times.*

This is a sign of our joining together with all those who have sought goodness, sometimes at great risk and sacrifice, throughout the ages.

*We break bread and share simple joys. We raise our cups in celebration of life.*

**All: PEACE!**

*Each person present is invited to share:*

"This year I am thankful for...."

# From the UN

*Sylvain and Phyllis Ehrenfeld, Bergen*

*Delegates to the UN From the IHEU and the AEU's National Service Conference*

The US occupation of Iraq, with a token participation of forces from other countries, is turning from a precarious undertaking to an ongoing disaster. The tragic bombing of the UN complex and the mosque in the holy city of Najaf, the sabotage of the oil pipelines, the daily killing of soldiers, and more, are producing a crisis for both Bush's policy and the Iraqi people. Postwar Iraq is becoming a magnet for terrorists. The chaos continues to feed a preexisting antagonism to the US as a Western power occupying Arab land.

These events demonstrate the limits of power, especially when used without worldwide support. The bombing of the UN complex, resulting in the death of civilian workers and the UN chief representative in Iraq, Sergio de Mello, was a tragic event that forebodes worse to come. De Mello exhibited the best qualities of an international civil servant. He was often spoken of as a successor to Kofi Annan. A resourceful and dynamic diplomat, he provided leadership in the world's most troublesome spots, Lebanon, Kosovo, Rwanda, and the Congo. Most recently, he led a transitional administration that prepared East Timor for full independence after a bloody war with Indonesia. In many places UN workers are in the front lines. Over 250 have died on the job since 1992. But the Baghdad bombing was

the worst blow yet.

The UN was not able to provide its own security, since its credibility depends on its independence and international character. Relying on US forces for security would only have reinforced the impression that the UN is a tool of American power. Now the US is seeking international help with money and troops from other countries, including Moslem countries. But broader international support will not happen until the US relents on its Lone Ranger approach. Ironically, these recent events are strengthening the pivotal role of the UN as the only institution providing legitimacy in the world's eyes. Thus the struggle between unilateralism and multilateralism continues. A possible solution could be a strong political role for the UN, and a strong multilaterally sponsored force including participation by regional Moslem countries under a UN mandate. These forces must be impartial enough to be respected by the local population. Terrorist groups will continue to resist. But the best hope for peace and reconstruction is the desire of ordinary Iraqis to control their own destiny and resume a normal life. This will require great political skill and money. Very little commensurate with the need has been forthcoming.

In a recent press conference, Secretary General Kofi Annan called for a

rethinking of the international institutions that did not function well during the Iraqi debate and created a serious problem for the UN. He urged world leaders attending the usual September General Assembly meeting to discuss the structure of the Security Council as well as the rules for preventive action or war. He asked — who decides? Under which circumstances? When is humanitarian intervention desirable? Underlying these difficult issues is a fundamental problem for the world body to resolve. How is it possible to balance differing national interests and every country's desire for sovereignty, with the overriding demand for collective action?

In the meantime, the situation worsens as soldiers die and thousands protest the American occupation. The American public could accept the idea of stopping a cruel dictator and liberating a suffering people, but they are not going to endure public humiliation and rejection by the Iraqi people they came to help. What is happening now is continual loss, not only of American lives, but the erosion of America's international prestige as a source of commitment to democratic principles and human rights. Americans see themselves as liberators, not bullies. To be effective in this role, our leadership must retreat from dominance and pursue partnership towards a world at peace.

## **AEU LAY LEADERSHIP SUMMER SCHOOL**

*July 24 to July 31, 2004*

**in the beautiful Smoky Mountains of Highlands, North Carolina.**

An intense week of EC history and philosophy, organizational development theory and practice, sharing of personal journeys, creative celebrations, building relationships across the movement, and loads of fun.

Brochures will be at your society by early December. Registrations will be due by February 15, 2004

## THE HUMANIST INSTITUTE

### *Is Humanist Leadership Right for You?*

Now is the time. Are you ready? Join future colleagues from the American Humanist Association, American Rationalist Association, Council for Secular Humanism, American Ethical Union, Society for Humanistic Judaism, Unitarian-Universalist, as well as others from teaching, social work, business, medicine, and the law, as a member of the Thirteenth Class of the Humanist Institute.

Come earn a Certificate. Let the Humanist Institute prepare you for local, regional or national leadership of a community, congregation or chapter-based organization. In the process, you'll learn specialized skills required for spokespersons, educators and counselors.

Humanist Institute is accepting applications immediately for this 3-year, 3 sessions-a-year program that begins the weekend of April 16th through the 18th, 2004, at the New York Society For Ethical Culture in New York City. The August session is also in New York City, and the



December session is in Washington, D.C.

For more information, including scholarship opportunities, please contact:

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## AFTER 122 YEARS OF WANDERING

*Dick Carney, Chicago*

It was "standing-room only" on Sunday morning, September 14, for the commemoration and opening of the new auditorium and patio garden at the Ethical Humanist Society of Greater Chicago, where nearly 200 people poured into the airy new spaces under the soaring cupola.

Society President Susan Burck welcomed the packed crowd and served as host of the dedication program, which began with a reading of Felix Adler's "City of Gold." Howard Radest, AEU Leader, professor of philosophy, and long-time friend of the Chicago society, began with a short intergenerational talk on the life and work of renowned social worker Jane Addams,

whose legacy of influence has endured for generations. Dr. Radest said that we must not be afraid to raise our voices against programs and policies we feel are wrong, and to encourage our young people to do so as well.

Following the talks, including that of administrator Dorothy Lockhart on the history of the society, musicians led the assembled group out of the auditorium to a vast table of hors d'oeuvres in the reception hall. The festive event concluded with a leisurely afternoon of schmoozing and circle dancing.

It was hard to imagine that only a couple of decades ago the Chicago So-

ciety seemed caught in the jaws of irreversible decline. At that time, Sunday meetings took place in a roach and rodent infested park district house in Evanston. This significant building expansion will benefit everyone including the burgeoning Golden Rule Sunday School, which will have more space for its exciting new programs. All rooms have been freshly painted and outfitted with improved lighting and flooring.

Our century-old nomadic wandering from place to place has concluded. Thanks to the generosity of two extraordinary member/benefactors, Faith and Gordon Greiner, a whole new era has begun.

## OUR STATUS AS A RELIGION

Several people have asked for a stronger and clearer statement of our status as a religion, and after consulting with other leaders, it was my assessment that an article that included several leaders' views, past and present, would be the best approach. I think it lends depth and credibility to our claim, which some others (like the State of Texas) would like to deny.

*Jone Johnson Lewis, Chair, National Leaders' Council*

*The article is available on the AEU web site at [www.aeu.org/religion.html](http://www.aeu.org/religion.html) and will be published in the January issue of Dialogue. -Ed.*

## IN MEMORIAM



**R. Lester Mondale,** 99, of Fredericktown, Missouri died on August 19, 2003. Mondale was the last living signer of Humanist Manifesto I. He was also the only

person to sign all three manifestos. After being raised a Methodist, Mondale became a Unitarian minister and later an Ethical Culture leader. He was active with the American Humanist Association, the American Ethical Union, and served as president of the Fellowship of Religious Humanists in the 60's and 70's. He authored a number of books and, in retirement, stayed busy with gardening and carpentry chores on his farm. Among his survivors is a brother, Walter Mondale, former vice president of the United States.

Rev. Joseph Ben-David of the Church of Humanism writes: "Lester was indeed one of the wisest and most sensitive personalities in the humanist movement.

Although fully dedicated to the proposition that humanism is predicated on a naturalistic, non-theist philosophy, at one point he wrote: "Perhaps someday someone will come up with a God that will be the real thing."

Following are excerpts of a speech that he delivered at the 10th World Congress of the International Humanist and Ethical Union in Buffalo, N.Y. on August 1, 1988:

In our culture, every office desk's position, every college examination, every

party gown, every summer residence, and every dinner check is a poignant reminder to the beholder of where he or she stands. Ordinarily, these reveal how far from the economic, social, or political top one stands. Keeping these reminders ever loudly before us is the all but holy mission of the billions of advertising dollars annually devoted to creating dissatisfaction, inferiority, and a specious superiority.

Since the beginnings of recorded time, a few rare persons -- the Buddhas, Tolstoys, Gandhis, Schweitzers -- have reacted with gut, as well as ethical, revulsion to egos forever contesting and denigrating egos.... They have protested the idea that the jungle is the natural order of intermingling psyches. We humans were created, they have said, for a more healthful, secure, sustaining, joyously abundant mingling, one with another. We are better suited by head and heart and gut for a more finely sensitive order of coexistence....

Is there any reason why anyone under the humanist aegis should not be an exemplar of empathy? ... I envision humanism as the expression of a down-to-earth code ... to be aspired to, to be incorporated to the fullest possible extent, by individuals in everyday living.

I cannot conceive of any more valid profession of, any more valid identification with, the cause of empathy than a humanist profession and identification. What group or assemblage is better qualified in the present era, more obli-

gated, to take over from the revelationists and be the advocate of the empathetic?

I want to think of humanism not only as incorporating, as it does, the ideal of the Renaissance man and woman and not only as the very incarnation of power and courage in any battle for personal and civil liberty, but also as an embodiment of an ideal personhood -- a personalized and more than merely ethical standard by which one can and should measure not others but one's own daily performance.

Called upon to be the helping hand and heart, I will -- to paraphrase my minister father and his doing the Christian thing -- do the humanist thing, be a humanist. In measuring my performance, I will face up to some questions, such as: Is mine the discernment that sees beyond someone's show of hostility or of overbearing superiority to the early hurts and repressions that may well have driven this person to express him or herself in such a self-defeating, alienating manner? ...Empathy, let us not overlook, includes tenderness: the tenderness of the mother for the infant at her breast and that tenderness extended to include the self-regard and the hopes and dreams of young and old -- feelings that come as near to the sacred as anything one of humanist persuasion can conceive.

Asked, "Are you a Christian?" my father's typical response was, "I'm trying to be." Similarly with humanism: Am I a humanist? I must answer, "That's what I'm trying, doing my damndest, to be!"

## TO TELL THE TRUTH

*Judith Eckerson  
Former Leader  
Northern Virginia*

One thing has come to me over the past few months of being a handicapped person. The truth is the only way. When someone asks me how I feel, I need to be as accurate as possible because my life may depend on it. When people ask me if I want to do something, I need to carefully consider my answer because their efforts and time as well as mine may be involved. I need to tell

the truth all the time.

You may wonder what my relation to the truth has been in the past. The answer was that sometimes I have not been truthful when it seemed that someone was not being honest with me, when it seemed that the truth was not as important as being pleasant, when it was too complicated, when it was too conflicted, when it was threatening to be an argument.

Like many people, I thought that it was a choice I could make to be untruthful -- or not to say anything. Like many people, I wrestled with how "white" was my lie. When

I was spending a lot of time testifying in court, of course, I gave time considering why I should tell the truth, especially when the opposition was not doing so. I decided that it was not because I had made a promise to god, but because I believed in the greater social order, that I should be bound to the truth when I had sworn to it.

But I thought about it.

Now I don't have to think about whether to tell the truth. I only have to think about what is the truth. Not that it's any easier to know the truth. But it's a different point of view.

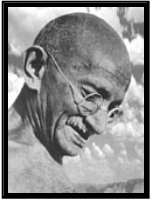
I don't have to worry about keeping my job any more. I don't have to worry about pleasing the largest number of people.

But I have to worry about what is the truth. I have to try to say the truth. Depending on other people means telling them what I think is true, rather than being quiet. Asking for help means speaking out loud. Talking is not optional -- it is essential. Which means that I have new ethical problems every day.

As long as we live in the social world, maybe we all have ethical choices to make.

# GANDHI'S CHALLENGES

*Mark Lindley, Boston*



**GANDHI** is the closest we have to a worldwide model of a good person of the last several centuries. Einstein said "generations to come" would "scarce believe that such a man ever in flesh and blood walked on this earth". One challenge is to describe his moral failings and mistakes without appearing to be just sniping at the giant who invented beautiful political techniques and used them to take away the greatest colony from the greatest empire in history.

**Self-Discipline:** Basic was Gandhi's challenge, first of all to himself, to exercise strong self-discipline. He dressed very simply and shaved his head. He didn't go to concerts or the theatre. One day every week he refrained from speaking. He did physical work a couple of hours every day. His eating was disciplined: not only was he a vegetarian, but also on each day he would take only five articles of food, and none after sunset. He and his wife took, at the age of 36 or 37, a vow of chastity, and kept it. And, with the consent of their four children (but contrary to her wish) he declined to keep any money or material property for them to inherit.

Gandhi thrived on all that discipline, but it was rather puritanical. It seems to me a saving grace that in his later years he would advise his friends not to overdo it but instead to know themselves and to tailor accordingly their undertakings in self-discipline.

One reason why he declined to live like an upper-middle-class person, which he could readily have done, is that it would have alienated him from the millions of poverty-stricken people in India whom he wished to serve and to lead. At a time when there happened to be a famine in Orissa, he was asked, "May not... some artists be able to see truth in and through beauty?" Notice the intelligence of his answer:

"Some may, but to the millions we cannot give the training to acquire a perception of beauty in such a way as to see Truth in it. Show them Truth first, and they will see beauty afterwards. Orissa haunts me in my waking hours and in my dreams. Whatever can be useful to those starving millions is beautiful to my mind. Let us give today first the vital things of life, and all the graces and ornaments of life will follow."

Yet that very beautiful concern doesn't

justify Gandhi's opposition to the use of contraceptives on the grounds that the self-discipline of chastity is the only acceptable kind of birth control.

**Freedom:** Another Gandhian challenge is to prefer moral freedom to authoritarianism. His rationale was Hindu. He called the soul divine and believed (at least until his last years) that it is immortal: that when your body dies your soul will carry on in a different, newborn body. As a Hindu he also believed (he often said so) that the world has an inherent moral order: the cosmos is coherent, and fairness and duty make it so. This cosmic moral order determines, according to the doctrine of inherited karma, that every soul inhabits an animal or human being with a certain natural or social station befitting the moral level attained in its most recent previous incarnation. Yet since humans in general are spiritually higher than animals, all currently human souls are morally sensible: it's the human hallmark of their divinity and the most telling difference between humans and brutes. And thus anyone who is doing something unfair or is otherwise neglecting a duty can be persuaded by a clear-pure, persistent, and loving-moral appeal, to do the right thing instead. But, only pure moral authority can, according to Gandhi, make such an effective appeal to a human soul; any would-be authority based on brute force will fall short because its moral impurity vitiates the appeal.

**Non-Violence:** Having touched upon self-discipline and freedom, I should point out that Gandhi's concept of nonviolence was more sophisticated than many realize. In his childhood he had known some Jain monks who were so absolutely nonviolent that to avoid killing a mosquito or a worm they would wear veils over their mouths and not walk outdoors at night. Gandhi rejected that mentality, saying: "The emphasis laid on the sacredness of sub-human life in Jainism is understandable. But that can never mean that one is to be kind to this (sub-human) life in preference to human life.... To benefit by others' killing (of sub-human creatures) and delude oneself into the belief that one is being very religious and non-violent is sheer self-deception.... In life it is impossible to eschew violence completely. The question arises, where is one to draw the line...?"

Unlike the anarchists, he never objected to the functioning of government and of the

police. He merely refused police protection for himself and declined to file complaints against people who threatened him or, on two famous occasions in South Africa, attacked him viciously.

As for the elaborateness of Gandhi's use of nonviolence: he wouldn't just stage a political protest and let it go at that. In his most telling campaigns he would integrate a carefully chosen, well organized and disciplined public gesture of protest with media coverage. The campaign would include amicable communication with the antagonists; he never made secret plans for a surprise; the "surprise" would be gradual to prompt the antagonists to reconsider their way of life. After his cohorts had shown their mettle, he would negotiate, he would warm up the friendship, he would settle for rather less than had been demanded (a relief to the other side), and he would tell his own people that if they went on behaving well, then their original demands, and more, would in time be met in a natural and amicable way. The modern term for this invention is "win-win".

**Civilization:** Gandhi said, "Civilization, in the real sense of the term, consists not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary restriction of wants. This alone promotes real happiness and contentment."

The idea is challenging to us because it undermines a basic precept of capitalism — that more overall is always better, which we have got in the habit of regarding as vital to our interests. According to Gandhi, the civilized person is not the one who would like to eat and drink magnificently, have a lot of sexual partners, or shoes or whatever, but finds it necessary to settle for less; instead it is the one who has considered these matters thoughtfully and has come to prefer what is reasonable and sensible.

I think most of us should accept, warmly and gladly, more healthy aesthetic and healthy sensuous satisfaction than Gandhi himself did; it gives us vitality. Still we should pay serious attention to part of his challenge of self-discipline. We should take seriously his alternative to the consumerist, "more-is-better" concept of civilization, which dominates the modern culture of the United States.

*Abridged from a talk given by Prof. Mark Lindley at a conference on Moral Philosophy recently held in Finland.*

**With this issue of Dialogue we begin a serialization of the book ETHICS AS A RELIGION by DAVID SAVILLE MUZZEY, which was published in 1951. The following is Chapter 1, titled "Introductory." It is reprinted in full with editorial changes only as to gender use. Future chapters will appear from time to time, abridged, to give AEU members an opportunity to become readily familiar with (or reacquainted with) the thought of this esteemed historian, teacher, author, and Ethical Culture leader.**

This book is frankly a piece of propaganda. Its purpose is to recommend to the reader a type of religion differing in important respects from the doctrines on which the faith of the churches and the synagogues is built. Not that Ethical Culture is a novelty. All through the centuries of Christendom there have been advocates of a religious reform which should shift the emphasis from dogma to ethics, from creed to deed, from supernatural revelation to human responsibility, from a theocentric to an anthropocentric philosophy of life. In line with this tradition, and seeking to fortify it, is the Ethical Culture movement. And because it puts forth the claim to be a religion, it is incumbent on its adherents to explain to those who contest this claim the principles on which the claim rests. The question is constantly asked of the leaders and members of the movement, What does Ethical Culture stand for? Therefore we give here a brief statement of the basic principles of the movement, which will be developed in more detail in the chapters which follow.

First, Ethical Culture is a creedless religion. The bond of union among its members is a common devotion to the cultivation of moral excellence as the chief duty of man. Contrary to the widely accepted teaching that right conduct depends as a corollary on correct religious belief, we hold that it is the conscientious striving for righteousness in thought and action that has constantly refined and humanized the dogmas of the creeds: in a word, that it is not the church that makes good people, but good people who make the church.

Second, Ethical Culture insists that men and women have the capacity as well as the duty to lead righteous lives. Its postulate of the infinite and induplicable worth of every human being necessarily involves the belief that it is within the power of every human being to choose at every step between a right and a wrong course of action. It utterly rejects the will-paralyzing doctrine of the corruption of man through Adam's fall. That man sins against his fellow men is evident enough; but that he is compelled to do so by his very nature is an insult to his dignity. If he has in him proclivities to evil, it is no less true that he has promptings to good. All that we know of good and evil is furnished by human actions. Ethical religion distinguishes sharply between a person's value to society (which may be nil) and his or her worth as an individual with latent capacities for moral improvement.

Third, since the attainment of ethical stature is the chief end of life, the development of these latent capacities in one's self and in others is the serious task of the adherents of ethical religion.



***There have been advocates of a religious reform which should shift the emphasis from dogma to ethics, from creed to deed, from supernatural revelation to human responsibility, from a theocentric to an anthropocentric philosophy of life. In line with this tradition, and seeking to fortify it, is the Ethical Culture movement. And because it puts forth the claim to be a religion, it is incumbent on its adherents to explain to those who contest the claim the principles on which it rests.***

And the method which it prescribes for the accomplishment of this task differs from the two rules of conduct most generally recommended: namely, the categorical imperative of Kant and the Golden Rule of the Gospel. The former bids us so to act that our conduct could be taken as the universal norm; the latter bids us to do to others as we would have them do to us. But neither counsel is quite satisfying. For no sane person would presume to set up his or her own conduct as a pattern to be followed. Nor should our treatment of others be based on what might be expected from them under different circumstances. This is unrealistic and even suggests something in the nature of a bargain. The rule: So act in all your relationships, in the family, in business, in politics, in the professions, as to elicit the best in others, and in so doing you will enhance your own worth. This is the very sum and substance of the ethical imperative.

Fourth, ethical religion neither affirms nor denies the truth of certain propositions which are generally accepted by the churches, such as the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and rewards and punishments in a future life. It respects the convictions of the individual, but seeks no conformity of belief in philosophical or theological matters. It recognizes that such beliefs may be instrumental to the supreme end of the cultivation of ethical character; but it distinguishes between

belief in propositions which transcend human reason and propositions which offend human reason. It insists upon intellectual integrity as the hallmark of man's dignity, and totally rejects such insults to human reason as Tertuffian's "Credo quid absurdum."

Fifth and finally, ethical religion offers a platform on which people of good will of every clime and race can unite. In the agonized world of today the peoples of every freedom-loving nation are seeking through united effort to put an end to the rule of strife and slaughter. But all the work of statesmen and diplomats will avail nothing unless it is inspired by a "common faith" in the power of each person to shape his or her destiny. This power comes from religion. But the religious world is sorely divided. In our own country more than two hundred creeds and sects exist in rivalry. The great religious systems of the East can no longer be dismissed in Calvin's scornful phrase as "a vast welter of error." Nor will they yield to Christianity. But Buddhist, Taoist, Mohammedan, Parsi, and Hindu could all unite on the broad basis of ethical religion. For its appeal is to aspirations and obligations which are native to the heart of man.

## A CONVERSATION WITH A CRITIC OF ETHICAL CULTURE

Joe Chuman, Leader, Bergen



**CRITIC:** Ethical Culture claims to be a religion, but since you do not affirm a belief in a Supreme Being, wouldn't you be more honest to

promote yourselves as a pseudo-religion?

**JOE CHUMAN:** Your question reveals a narrowness in your understanding of religion. If Ethical Culture is a pseudo-religion, then so is Hinayana Buddhism, Taoism and Zen, all of which are consensually understood as religions yet eschew a concept of a Supreme Being. Moreover, "religion" is a very broad term, whose meaning is

subject to historical reworking and expansion. In the modern era, religion no longer requires,

even in the West, an affirmation of a transcendental realm. Religion can be defined in functional terms. If values and ideals serve to focus life, lift individuals beyond their self-interest and animate life with meaning and purpose, such beliefs may be construed as religious ones. The liberal Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich, identified religion with one's "ultimate concerns." Ethical Culture is assuredly a religion in this sense.

**CRITIC:** Don't Ethical Culturists want their religion on the cheap? Judaism, Christianity and Islam, for example, come with thick arrays of practices, teachings and commandments to be observed and obeyed. They demand rigor. Ethical Culture, on the other hand, is too voluntaristic and leaves too much up to individuals themselves. The religiously or morally lazy person seems not to have to do too much at all in order to be an Ethical Culturist.

**CHUMAN:** As long as we live in a free society, all religious compliance will be voluntary. The rich traditions of the historical religions do not of themselves ensure that their followers will be devout. There are "good" Christians, and there are indifferent ones. Ethical Culture looks to the entire history of the human experience to mine its gold and extract its inspiration for the moral life. At its best, Ethical Culture requires questioning and reflection on one's actions, keen attentiveness to the

personalities and needs of others, a guiding respect for reason in one's beliefs and the courage to engage in the often trying demands of human relations and social action. A philosophy so lived requires tremendous rigor. No "religion lite" here.

**CRITIC:** Ethical Culture claims ethics is independent of theology. Don't people have to believe in God in order to be moral?

**CHUMAN:** It is a long-standing canard that people must believe in God, especially a God that rewards and punishes, in order to be moral, with the implication that humanists, agnostics and atheists are immoral. We see no empirical evidence for

*Ethical Culture's intuition about the supreme importance of recognizing, respecting, and eliciting the dignity of human beings is the most important idea in the world.*

this. An absence of belief in a God would not inhibit people from giving to charity or loving their children, nor would it transform warm-hearted individuals into misanthropes. Likewise, we would argue that if one acts morally because he or she seeks divine reward or to avoid punishment, the distinctive moral dimension is drained from one's behavior. Thus understood, morality is reduced to a cost-benefit calculation — hardly morality at all.

On the social level, we would concur that a people comprising a group or a nation needs to affirm overarching beliefs in order to sustain unity. But we deny that these beliefs need to be religious ones, and certainly not in the theistic sense. The societies of Western Europe are arguably post-theistic, yet sustain themselves as national entities.

**CRITIC:** Isn't your humanism, which exalts and worships human beings instead of God, committing hubris and idolatry? Isn't this the type of identity with the divine that undercuts humility and allows for monsters such as Nazism and Stalinism?

**CHUMAN:** Humanism doesn't worship human beings. It reverences ethical ideals, which we human beings yearn for but recognize we can never reach. The eternal gap between the actual and the ideal throws us back on our limitations and frailties, as well as a sense of tragedy in life, and sustains a healthy sense of humil-

ity before nature, which remains to a great extent mysterious and infinitely more powerful than we are.

**CRITIC:** If Ethical Culture promotes the value of universal humanity, why doesn't it have more appeal?

**CHUMAN:** More accurately, Ethical Culture recognizes the tension between the universal and the particular when it comes to a matter of personal identity. We affirm that particular identities — group identities, ethnic and otherwise — do have real, enriching value for people, and a "human-being-in-general" exists only as an abstraction. On the other hand, if one's identity is formed only by the parochial group, and he or she does not feel the pull of the humanity of those outside the group, the stage is set for

intolerance at best, and xenophobia, even genocide, at worst.

Ethical Culture puts great stock in the universal pole, but admittedly not all people are so moved and enchanted. A principled commitment to universalism, as we understand and articulate it, is in fact a particular belief, appealing to a relatively narrow range of people defined by education, maybe even class, and assuredly temperament. In short, we are not, nor can we be, all things to all people.

**CRITIC:** Are you hopeful about the future of Ethical Culture?

**CHUMAN:** I remain convinced that Ethical Culture's intuition about the supreme importance of recognizing, respecting, and eliciting the dignity of human beings is the most important idea in the world. It is the end to which we mortals must dedicate ourselves to fulfill the promise of our humanity in the most profound sense. We also live in a time when that humanity is deeply threatened. Wars in which millions of people are summarily killed, the emergence of intolerant, irrational fundamentalisms, the threat to basic liberties and human rights, and the subordination of human dignity to the vulgarities of the unbridled market make Ethical Culture urgent.

I am hopeful about the future of Ethical Culture, not only because its guiding intuitions are valid, but because they are necessary.

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October 1, 2002 – September 30, 2003

*We thank the following for their contributions and pledges:*

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In honor of **Baruch Spinoza**  
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In honor of **Schlesinger 50<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary**  
Renee Schlesinger

Susan Sontag called him "simply the biggest, widest, most commanding talent in the history of American photography". Just one of his original platinum prints helped shape no less a photographer than Walker Evans. He was the first photographer ever given a major retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. His name was Paul Strand, and Ethical Culture can rightly say that it launched his career.

Born in 1890 to assimilated German Jews familiar with Ethical Culture, Strand entered the Ethical Culture School (ECS) in 1904. In 1907 he joined Lewis Hine's camera club as an extra curricular activity. Hine took the club to an exhibit of photographs at Alfred Stieglitz's Fifth Avenue gallery; it was at this show, Strand later recollected, that he decided to become "an artist in photography." He later took a formal course with Hine that taught him darkroom techniques and field work. Strand also profited from exposure to ECS's art appreciation teacher, Charles Caffin, a critic and author, who in 1900 wrote the first book on photography as an art form. Not a bad pair of mentors.

Strand graduated from ECS in 1909, and within ten years had produced images unlike any seen before in American photography. His portraits of marginal Americans went beyond Hine, who had shown immigrants and child laborers in specific milieus that furthered his documentary purposes.

Strand managed to capture the person-

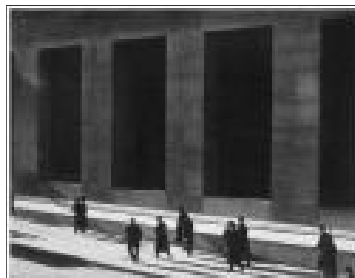
*From the Archives*  
**Paul Strand**  
**Nurturing Genius**

*Dr. Marc A. Bernstein, AEU Archivist*

ality and life story of his subjects without background. One of his figures, entitled simply "Portrait, Five Points Square," shows a middle-aged man dressed in an overcoat and hat. His face is unshaven, and his tired eyes, pouches beneath them, are locked in vacant gaze. He is not ruminating like so many of Hine's Ellis Island immigrants, but seems incapable of thought, almost catatonic. And yet, he does not evoke our pity. Like so many of Strand's subjects, he retains an elemental dignity in spite of, or perhaps because of, the woe written on his face.



The year before Strand did this portrait, he shot what may be his most



celebrated photograph. Entitled "Wall Street," it captures a small number of people on their way to work during the early morning rush hour. Strand casts his figures against the recently completed J.P. Morgan building, whose giant black

windows, ominous and impersonal sentinels, dwarf the walkers completely. The political message -- of a financial system that renders human beings small and inconsequential -- is potent though never explicit.

During the same period that he produced both unforgettable portraiture and "Wall Street," Strand did abstractions inspired by Cezanne, Braque and Picasso. Strand assembled crockery and fruit in different configurations in sunlight, then shot the whole with film that darkened the colors of the fruits and rendered them unreal. As the sun moved, each composition achieved different effects, the interplay of mass, light and shadow, not the almost unidentifiable subject matter, making them work as art. These were not the first abstractions in American photography, but they were the best conceived and executed.

Such an innovator must have had innate talent before he arrived at ECS, but the school had a curriculum in which manual arts like photography were expected to stir the imagination, and it boasted teachers knowledgeable enough to nurture the gifted. Few such schools existed at the turn of the century, so it should not surprise us that a number of distinguished photographers, Strand foremost among them, should have developed in its rich soil.

**MARIO CUOMO ON RELIGION**

In a recent PBS program on the World Trade Center, former Governor Mario Cuomo said the following concerning the memorial that is being planned:

I would like to see some depiction of all the religions — list them all: atheism, Ethical Humanism, Catholicism, etc. etc. -- all of them. And you notice that each of those religions, these value systems, have two principles they share in common: tzedakah and tikkun olam, and the two principles started with monotheism and the Jews. Tzedakah means generally that we must treat one another as brother and sister. We should show one another respect and dignity because we are like things; we are human beings in a world that has nothing else like us, and we ought to treat each other with love, charity, use your own words. And the second principle is, "Well, what do you do with this relationship?" Well, we don't know exactly how we got here and why we are here, etc. etc.; that's for minds larger than our own. But we do know that we are like kinds, and we should work together to make this as good an experience as possible: tikkun olam — "let us repair the universe." Now, Islam believes that, and Buddhism that has no god believes it. Every Ethical Humanist I ever met believes it. Those two principles: We're supposed to love one another and we're supposed to work together to make the experience better. That's all the religion you need, really, to make a success of this planet, and I'd like to see that in 9/11 somewhere. I'd like to see that captured somewhere.

# AEU NEWS & HAPPENINGS

*Gleaned from oral reports, newsletters, and Stan Wayne's AEU "Clipping Service"*

**AUSTIN TX** John Hartman, Executive Director of the AEU, visited during August... Book Discussion, "Why God Won't Go Away." ESA collects donations of non-perishable foods, used printer cartridges, and checks, which are transported by members to the Capital Area Food Bank.

**BALTIMORE** A picnic started the season... Recently: "Heritage Day", a celebration of 50 years as a Society.

**BERGEN NJ** The society has created a television commercial for viewing on the Bravo network; it is scheduled for two shows and random slots.... 50th anniversary of Bergen will be celebrated at a dinner in November. Many enjoyed a Community Weekend Away in Warwick NY in early June at a resort. The Ehrenfelds report China and India, this year, cut the number of people living on one dollar a day in half; Botswana has 91% of its children attending school. South Africa has doubled the number of people who have access to safe water.

The UN's role is one of setting achievable targets; and some countries are reaching those goals.

**BOSTON** Marvin Miller: "Ethics motivates us to try to make our individual actions and those of our social institutions conform more closely to the principles we profess"... Sundays: "Roadmap to a Middle East Peace?" Debra De Lee, Director, American Peace Now "The Ethics of Unemployment," Prof. Ellen Frank, economist.

**BROOKLYN** Calendar includes a Non-violent Communication Workshop; Brooklyn Women's Chorus; a Life Reflections Group. Sundays: "Waging Peace", Lisel Burns—a series of 3 Sundays.

**CHICAGO** Grand Opening of a spacious, new auditorium — [*See page 4.*]

**LONG ISLAND** Leader Anne Klaeyesen is conducting a series of workshops entitled "Discover the Leader Within," focusing on how we interact in small groups, in the society, and in life. Leader Emeritus Arthur Dobrin gave a three week course on the "The Mind of the Fanatic"... David Kaczynski (brother of the Unabomber) recently spoke about the "Death Penalty

and the Question of Justice." A public discussion of "Clean Money Clean Elections" campaign finance reform was recently held at the society.

**NEW YORK** A letter to the newsletter editor: "One remark (at a summer program) that we should value our freedoms because of the many who died to maintain them — started me thinking: Is dying for one's beliefs a validation of those beliefs? We should believe in our values because we have given thought to what they are. It isn't the death of soldiers that makes a cause just; it is the just cause that ennobles those who fight for it."

**NORTHERN VIRGINIA** President Jerry Ziskind on NoVES' 20th Anniversary: "We are now an established organization more than double our original size of 30. We have an outstanding Leader. We have strong lay leadership. This year we will provide our community with a variety of programs, platforms, festivals, social events, and classes that will enrich the lives of our membership."

**NORTHERN WESTCHESTER NY** Leader, Bob Berson describes his summer of caring for an increasingly forgetful elderly aunt. He is her only relative and she was the fairy godmother of his youth. The Book Club meets at members' homes. This month's book — "Atonement" by Ian McEwan.

**PHILADELPHIA** President Fishman is excited about the quality of music on Sundays [*It was GREAT at the Assembly —ed.*]; "Our speakers were continually exceptional;" "our attendance at all functions was way up;" "some of our members served as tutors to the students at the Robert Morris Charter School." Ethical Forum Series—Three topics for Fall and Winter: Feminism; Israel/Palestine; Hunger Project. School for Ethics: Defining a Good Life; Economic Justice; History of Ethics.

**QUEENS** I am happy to report that we will be meeting this year at the Garden School at 33-16 79 Street in Jackson Heights, Queens. We will have good space for our Sunday Platform meetings and classrooms for the children's Sunday school....With care and commitment, our members have built the Society into a sup-

portive community which provides the insights, growth and friendships to help us achieve our goals. Having seen how well we overcame the difficulties of the move, I know we can meet any challenge. —*Tom Raffaele, President* The space is a step up from where we have been these last few years — and even more importantly, it is located in a richly diverse neighborhood, where we will be able to explore many of our expectations about the growth and nature of Ethical community. —*David Reis, Leader*

**ST. LOUIS** Sundays: "Snatching Victory Out of the Jaws of Defeat: The Supreme Court and the Future of Affirmative Action" —Tim Wise (Nationally known for his work for social justice; was active with Mandela) "An Armed Culture of Fear" — Don Johnson "Starlight in LA: The Natural History of An American City" — Jennifer Price. Wednesday Evening Gatherings— Randy Best, Leader Intern: "Felix Adler and the Development of the Ethical Ideal." "Drumming Again" and "Relationship Secrets and Traps: A workshop for Singles"

**SUFFOLK NY** The society meets this year at the School for Dance in Smithtown NY. Saturday night discussions are held at members' homes. Beginning this year, members may speak at the start of meetings to commemorate important events in their personal lives. [*Not unlike Quaker meetings and some of our other Societies.*]

**WASHINGTON DC** The 60th Anniversary theme will be monthly reviews of personal convictions as they are grounded in Ethical Culture thinking; humanistic understanding; the world's great philosophies and religions and the ethical wisdom of Moses, Buddha, Confucius, etc. "Deepening Circles"— an exciting new program of membership groups of eight to ten members and a trained facilitator. Groups will share news of events in their personal lives and explore general topics. The society has hired an architect for conceptual drawings of an enhanced meeting-house which would include a circular structure connecting its two buildings, creating a larger lobby, accessible lavatories on two levels, an elevator, and a new staircase to the lower floor.



It is not enough to say we believe in people or that we hold that ethics is the common ground for a human life worth living. When we use the word "ethics," we mean that it is the way people treat each other, how we see ourselves and others; how we relate one to one, group to group. It means the struggle to liberate ourselves and others from fear, mistrust, bigotry; from lust for wealth and power. It means a hunger for a life with freedom and equality for all; a respect and eager desire to know and understand one another.

When we say that we believe in people and that ethics is the heart of the religious problem, it is because we feel deeply the suffering of life, that so many millions die without ever having lived, dying without ever having learned to think or to enjoy the life of the mind or the experience of discovering something for one's self. We mean failure to grow in the appreciation of the beauty in nature and in the works of humankind; never ever having had the experience of creating beauty.

For no matter how great the achievements in science and the arts, nothing will matter, nothing will survive, and nothing will be fulfilled of the human potential unless we move toward a more ethical condition in which everyone's worth and potential is respected and protected and furthered.

*Algernon Black (1900-1993)*  
*Ethical Culture Leader*

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*The Voices of Ethical Culture*

