

# Founding Address

**Felix Adler, May 15, 1876**

## **New York Society for Ethical Culture**

*Note: Language has not been modernized. Only a few typographic changes were made.*

For a long time the conviction has been dimly felt in the community that, without prejudice to existing institutions, the legal day of weekly rest might be employed to advantage for purposes affecting the general good. During the past few years this conviction has steadily gained in force and urgency, until lately a number of gentlemen have been impelled to give it shape and practical effect.

Conceiving that in so laudable an enterprise they may justly hope for the sympathy and co-operation of the friends of progress, they have invited you to join in their deliberations this evening, and upon me devolves the task of stating, as frankly and plainly as may be, the end we have in view and the means by which its achievement will be attempted. At such a time, when we are about to set forth on a path hitherto untried and likely to lead our lives in a new direction, it appears eminently desirable and proper that we should, in the first place, briefly review the public and private life of the day, in order to determine whether the essential elements that make up the happiness of states and individuals are all duly provided, and if not, where the need lies and how it can best be supplied.

On the face of it, our age exhibits certain distinct traits in which it excels all of its predecessors. Eulogies on the nineteenth century are familiar to our ears, and orators delight to descant upon all the glorious things, which it has achieved. Its railways, its printing presses, its increased comforts and refined luxuries—all these are undeniable facts, and yet it is true none the less, that great and unexpected evils have followed in the train of our successes, and that the moral improvement of the nations and their individual components has not kept pace with the march of intellect and the advance of industry. Before the assaults of criticism many ancient strongholds of faith have given way, and doubt is fast spreading even into circles where its expression is forbidden. Morality, long accustomed to the watchful tutelage of faith, finds this connection loosened or severed, while no new protector has arisen to champion her rights, no new instruments been created to enforce her lessons among the people. As a consequence we behold a general laxness in regard to obligations the most sacred and dear. An anxious unrest, a fierce craving desire for gain has taken possession of the commercial world, and in instances no longer rare the most precious and permanent goods of human life have been madly sacrificed in the interests of momentary enrichment.

Far be it from me, indeed, to disparage the importance of commerce or to slight its just claims as an agent in the service of humanity. In a country of such recent civilization as ours, whose almost limitless treasures of material wealth invite the risks of capital and the industry of labor, it is but natural that material interests should absorb the attention of the people to a degree elsewhere unknown. But all the more on this account it is necessary to provide a powerful check

and counterpoise, lest the pursuit of gain be enhanced to an importance never rightfully its own, lest, in proportion as we enhance our comfort and well-being, comfort and well-being become the main objects of existence, and life's grander motives and meanings be forgotten. We have already transgressed the limit of safety, and the present disorders of our time are but precursors of other and imminent dangers. The rudder of our ship has ceased to move obedient to the helm. We are drifting on the seething tide of business, each one absorbed in holding his own in the giddy race of competition, each one engrossed in immediate cares and seldom disturbed by thoughts of larger concerns and ampler interests. Even our domestic life has lost much of its former warmth and geniality. The happy spirits of unaffected content and simple endearment are sadly leaving our low-burnt hearth-fires. Ragged and careworn the merchant returns to his home in the evening. He finds his children weary. His own mind is distracted. In these troublous times business cares not infrequently dog him even into the seclusion of the family circle. How, then, is he to discover that tranquil leisure, that serenity of soul which he needs to be a true father to his little ones. He cannot form their characters; he cannot justly estimate their needs. Perforce he leaves their educations in part to the wife—and modern wives have their own troubles and are often but little fitted to undertake so arduous a task—in part he must abandon it to strangers. It has been said that the modern world is divided between the hot and hasty pursuit of affairs in the hours of labor, and the no less eager chase of pleasure in the hours of leisure. But even our pleasures are calculated and business like. We measure our enjoyments by the sum expended. Our salons are often little better than bazaars of fashion. We wander about festive halls, chewing artificial phrases, which we neither believe nor desire to be believed. We breathe a stale and insipid perfume from which the spirit of joy has fled. The brief exhilaration of the dance, the physical stimulus of wine and of food, the nervous excitement of a game of hazard, perhaps these make up the sum total of enjoyment in by far the majority of our so-called parties of pleasure. Surely, of all things melancholy in American life, American mirth is the most melancholy! And were it not for Music—that divine comforter which sometimes wins us to higher flights of emotion and speaks in its own wordless language of an ideal beauty and harmony far transcending the prosy aspirations to which we confess—our life would be utterly blank and colorless. We should be like the bees that build, they know not why, and hive honey whose sweetness they never enjoy. There is a great and crying evil in modern society. It is want of purpose. It is that narrowness of vision, which shuts out the wider vistas of the soul. It is the absence of those sublime emotions, which, wherever they arise, do not fall to exalt and consecrate existence. True, the void and hollowness of which we speak is covered over by a fair exterior. Men distill a subtle sort of intoxication from the ceaseless flow and shifting changes of affairs, and the deeper they quaff the more potent for awhile is the efficacy of the charm. But there comes a time of rude awakening. A great crisis sweeps over the land. The sinews of trade are relaxed; the springs of wealth are sealed. Old houses, whose foundations seemed as lasting as the hills, give way before the storm. Reverse follows reverse. The man whose energies were hitherto expended in the accumulation of wealth finds himself ruined by the wayside. His business has proved a failure. Is his life, too, therefore a failure? Is there no other object for which he can still live and labor? Nor need we turn to such seasons of unusual disaster in order to exhibit the instability and insufficiency of the common motives of life. There are accidents to which we all are alike exposed and which none, however favored by fortune, can hope to avoid. Blight comes upon our affections. The dearest objects of our solicitude are taken from us. Our home is darkened with the deep darkness of the shadow of death. In such hours, what is to keep our heart from freezing in chill despair, to keep our head high and our step firm, if it be not the

deep-seated, long and carefully matured conviction, that man was set into the world to perform a great and unselfish work, independent of his comfort, independent even of his happiness, and that in its performance alone he can find his true solace, his lasting reward? To arouse such courage, to build up and buttress such a conviction, would not this be a loyal and much-needed service?

Where the roots of private virtue are diseased, the fruit of public probity cannot but be corrupt.

When on the 30th of April 1789, General Washington was for the first time inducted into the presidential office in this city of New York, he declared, "the national policy would be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality." And he appealed to the wisdom and integrity of those first legislators whom the country had chosen under its new constitution, as a pledge and safeguard of the Republic's future welfare. Could he return to us now in this season of jubilation, how sadly altered would he find the condition of our affairs! There is not a morning's journal that reaches us that is not besmirched with tales of theft and perjury. The very names that ought to be held up as luminaries of honor have become bywords of villainy, and the foul stench of corruption fills our public offices. See how the Nation, in this the festal epoch of her marriage to Liberty, stands blackened with the crimes of her first dignitaries, and hides her head in shame before the nations! And for what have these miserable men bartered away their honor and that of the people? For the same unhallowed and unreasoning desire of rapid gain, which has brought such heavy disaster upon the commercial world: to support the extravagance of their households; to deepen, perhaps, the potations of a carousel! Statesmen and Philanthropists are busy suggesting remedies for the cure of these great evils. But the renovation of our Civil Service, the reform of our Primaries, and whatever other measures may be devised, they all depend in the last instance upon the fidelity of those to whom their execution must be entrusted. They will all fail unless the root of the evil be attacked, unless the conscience of men be aroused, the confusion of right and wrong checked, and the loftier purposes of our being again brought powerfully home to the hearts of the people.

I have spoken of our private needs and of the larger claims of the public well-being. But another question now presents itself, fraught with deeper and tenderer meanings even than these. The children, the heirs of all the great future, what shall we do for them? Into this world of sinfulness and sorrow, with its thousand fold snares and sore temptations, shall we let their white souls go forth without even an effort to keep them stainless? Do you not struggle and toil and trouble, that you may leave them, when you die, some little store of earthly good, something to make their life easier, perhaps, than yours has been—that you may turn to your long sleep, knowing that your children shall not want bread? And for that which is far more precious than bread shall we make no provision? When your bodies have long been mouldering in the grave, they will live, men and women, fighting the world's battles and bearing the world's burdens like yourselves. Would you not feel the benign assurance that they will be true men and noble women? That the fair name that you transmit to them will ever be clean in their keeping? That they will be strong even in adversity, because they believe in the destiny of mankind and in the dignity of man? And what efforts do we make to attain this end? We teach them to repeat some scattered verses of the Bible, some doctrine which at their time of life they can but half comprehend at best; and then at thirteen or fourteen, at the very age when doubt begins to arise in the young heart, when in its inefficient groping towards the light, youth stands most in need of friendly help and counsel we

send them out to shift for themselves. Is it with such an armor that we can equip them for the hard hand-to-hand fight of after-life? Or do you conceive a magic charm, a talismanic power to guard from evil, to reside in these empty words which you teach your children's lips to spell?

Already complaints are multiplying on every hand that that most gracious quality of all that adorns the age of childhood—the quality of reverence—is fast fading from our schools and households; that the old-time respect for father and mother is diminished, and grown rarer and more uncertain. Twenty years ago, what high prophecies did we not hear of the future of the generation that was growing up! What inspiring promises of the full bloom into which the still closed petals of their life would one day open! Have the young men of the present day fulfilled these pledges? Has the passive reverence of the child developed into the active aspiration of the man? Do you find them in the higher walks of their professions—I say take them as a whole, and set aside a few brilliant exceptions—have they illustrated the sterling qualities of the race they sprang from, the dearer virtues of our common humanity? We have sown the seeds of long neglect. We are but reaping the bitter Sodom fruit of dead hopes and fair promises turned to ashes. And now I need not appeal to your business instincts to show that any change, if it is to come—and a change must come—can be brought about only, first, by united effort; secondly, by applying that great principle which has been the secret of the enormous progress of industry and commerce in the past century—the salutary principle of division of labor.

You do not build your own houses, nor make your own garments, nor bake your own bread, simply because you know that if you were to attempt all these things they would all be more or less ill done. But you go to the builder to build your house, to the baker to bake your bread, because you know that in limitation there is power, that limitation and combinations are the essentials of success. On this account you limit your own energies to some one of the many callings which society has marked out, and by combination with your fellows, are certain that in proportion as your own part is well performed, you may command the best services in every department in exchange for what you offer. What is true of material wants is also pertinent in the case of intellectual needs. If you desire information on some point of law, you are not likely to ponder over the ponderous tomes of legal writers in order to obtain the knowledge you seek, by your own unaided efforts. But you apply to some one in the profession in whose abilities you see reason to confide. The same holds good in every department of knowledge. In every case you turn to the specialist, trusting that, if from any source at all, you will obtain from him the best of what you need. Nor is it otherwise in education. For though you possess a sufficient knowledge of the branches taught in our schools, yet you are well aware that it is one thing to know, and quite another to impart knowledge. And so again you step aside in your own persons to entrust the office of training your children in the arts and sciences to an instructor, to a specialist. And if all this be true, then it follows that, if the moral elevation of ourselves, the moral training of our children, be also an object worth achieving, ay, if it be the highest object of our life on earth, then we dare not trust for its accomplishment to the sparse and meager hours which the busy world leaves us. Then, here as elsewhere, society must set apart some who shall be specialists in this, who shall throw all the energy of temper, all the ardor of aspiration, all the force of heart and intellect, into this difficult but ever glorious work.

The past speaks to us in a thousand voices, warning and comforting, animating and stirring to action. What its great thinkers have thought and written on the deepest problems of life, shall we

not hear and enjoy? The future calls upon us to prepare its way. Dare we fail to answer its solemn summons?

And now for all these purposes we propose to unite our efforts in association, and to set apart one day of the seven as a day of weekly reunion—a day of ease, that shall come to repair the wasted energies of body and mind, and whereon, in the enjoyment of perfect tranquility, the finer relations of our being may find time to acquaint us with their sweet and friendly influences. What that day shall be it is not for us to determine. The usages of American society have long since settled that practically it is, and for the present at least can be, only the Sunday. This is the sole day of respite whereon the great machine of business pauses in its operations, and leaves you to direct your thoughts to other than immediate cares. In the ancient synagogue the Monday and Thursday, in the early church the Wednesday and Friday, were set apart for purposes of higher instruction, over and above the stated Sabbath meetings. If the Monday, the Thursday, the Wednesday, or the Friday had in our community been eliminated from the week of labor, we should accept any one of them with the same willingness. The name of the day is immaterial. It is the opportunity it offers with which alone we are here concerned. And how others see fit to spend the day is foreign to our consideration, and whatever mischievous construction may be placed upon our work will quickly be dispelled, depend upon it, by the character and testimony of the work itself. The young men, at all events, can desist from labor upon no other day than the Sunday. Heads of firms may, if they see fit, incur the risk of taking an exceptional position in the business community; but the young men, who depend upon others for patronage and employment cannot in this matter select their own course, and if they attempt it will be met by innumerable and insuperable obstacles at every step. But it has been urged by some that the Sunday should be devoted to the intimate intercourse of the domestic circle, from which our merchants are so often debarred at other times. This is an honorable motive, surely, which we are bound to respect. But is it, indeed, believed that a single hour spent in serious contemplation will at all unduly infringe upon the time proper to the home circle? Rather will it give a higher tone to all our occupations, and lend a newer and fresher zest even to those enjoyments, which we need and seek.

The exercises of our meeting are to be simple and devoid of all ceremonial and formalism. They are to consist of a lecture mainly, and, as a pleasing and grateful auxiliary, of music to elevate the heart and give rest to the feelings. The object of the lectures shall be twofold: First, to illustrate the history of human aspirations, its monitions and its examples; to trace the origin of many of those errors of the past whose poisonous tendrils still cling to the life of the present, but also to exhibit its pure and bright examples, and so to enrich the little sphere of our earthly existence by showing the grander connections in which it everywhere stands with the large life of the race. For, as the taste is refined in viewing some work of ideal beauty—some statue vivid with divine suggestion, some painting glowing with the painter's genius—so, in the contemplation of large thoughts do we ourselves enlarge, and the soul for a time takes on the grandeur and excellency of whatever it truly admires. Secondly, it will be the object of the lecturers to set forth a standard of duty, to discuss our practical duties in the practical present, to make clear the responsibilities which our nature as moral beings imposes upon us in view of the political and social evils of our age, and also to dwell upon those high and tender consolations which the modern view of life does not fail to offer us even in the midst of anguish and affliction. Do not fear, friends, that a priestly office after a new fashion will be thus introduced.

The office of the public teacher is an unenviable and thankless one. Few are there that will leave the secure seclusion of the scholar's life, the peaceful walks of literature and learning, to stand out a target for the criticism of unkind and hostile minds. Moreover, the lecturer is but an instrument in your hands. It is not to him you listen, but to those countless others that speak to you through him in strange tongues, of which he is no more than the humble interpreter. And what he fails to express, what no language that was ever spoken on earth can express—those nameless yearnings of the soul for something better and happier far than aught we know of -- Music will give them utterance and solve and soothe them.

We propose to entirely exclude prayer and every form of ritual. Thus shall we avoid even the appearance of interfering with those to whom prayer and ritual, as a mode of expressing religious sentiment, are dear. And on the other hand we shall be just to those who have ceased to regard them as satisfactory and dispensed with them in their own persons. Freely do I own to this purpose of reconciliation, and candidly do I confess that it is my dearest object to exalt the present movement above the strife of contending sects and parties, and at once to occupy that common ground where we may all meet, believers and unbelievers, for purposes in themselves lofty and unquestioned by any. Surely it is time that beginnings were made in this direction. For more than three thousand years men have quarreled concerning the formulas of their faith. The earth has been drenched with blood shed in this cause, the face of day darkened with the blackness of the crimes perpetrated in its name. There have been no direr wars than religious wars, no bitterer hates than religious hates, no fiendish cruelty like religious cruelty; no baser baseness than religious baseness. It has destroyed the peace of families, turned the father against the son, the brother against the brother. And for what? Are we any nearer to unanimity? On the contrary, diversity within the churches and without has never been so widespread as at present. Sects and factions are multiplying on every hand, and every new schism is but the parent of a dozen others. And it must be so. Let us make up our minds to that.

The freedom of thought is a sacred right of every individual man, and diversity will continue to increase with the progress, refinement, and differentiation of the human intellect. But if difference be inevitable, nay, welcome in thought, there is a sphere in which unanimity and fellowship are above all things needful. Believe or disbelieve as ye list—we shall at all times respect every honest conviction. But be one with us where there is nothing to divide—in action. Diversity in the creed, unanimity in the deed! This is that practical religion from which none dissents. This is that platform broad enough and solid enough to receive the worshipper and the "infidel." This is that common ground where we may all grasp hands as brothers, united in mankind's common cause. The Hebrew prophets said of old, to serve Jehovah is to make your hearts pure and your hands clean from corruption, to help the suffering, to raise the oppressed. Jesus of Nazareth said that he came to comfort the weary and heavy-laden. The Philosopher affirms that the true service of religion is the unselfish service of the common weal. There is no difference among them all. There is no difference in the law. But so long have they quarreled concerning the origin of law that the law itself has fallen more and more into abeyance. For indeed, as it is easier to say, "I do not believe," and have done with it, so also it is easier to say, "I believe," and thus to bribe one's way into heaven, as it were, than to fulfill nobly our human duties with all the daily struggle and sacrifice which they involve. "The proposition is peace!" Peace to the warring sects and their clamors, peace also of heart and mind unto us—that peace

which is the fruition of purest and highest liberty. Let religion unfurl her white flag over the battlegrounds of the past, and turn the fields she had desolated so long into sunny gardens and embowered retreats. Thither let her call the traveler from the dusty high-road of life to breathe a softer, purer air, laden with the fragrance of the flowers of wonderland, and musical with sweet and restful melody. There shall he bathe his spirit in the crystal waters of the well of truth, and thence proceed again upon his journey with fresher vigor and new elasticity.

Ah, why should there be any more the old dividing line between man and his brother-man? Why should the fires of prejudice flare up anew between us? Why should we not maintain this common ground which we have found at last, and hedge it round, and protect it—the stronghold of freedom and of all the humanities for the long years to come? Not since the days of the Reformation has there been a crisis so great as this through which the present age is passing. The world is dark around us and the prospect seems deepening in gloom, and yet there is light ahead. On the volume of the past in starry characters it is written—the starry legend greets us shining through the misty vistas of the future—that the great and noble shall not perish from among the sons of men, that the truth will triumph in the end, and that even the humblest of her servants may in this become the instrument of unending good. We are aiding in laying the foundations of a mighty edifice, whose completion shall not be seen in our day, no, nor in centuries upon centuries after us. But happy are we, indeed, if we can contribute even the least towards so high a consummation. The time calls for action. Up, then, and let us do our part faithfully and well. And oh, friends, our children's children will hold our memories dearer for the work which we begin this hour.

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