



# Ethical Action Report

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## Welcome to the Ethical Action Report 2.0

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### **In this Report:**

***Books: A Gift Giving Humanist Tradition?* Hugh Taft-Morales**

***Ethical Friends of Children.* Linda Napoli,  
Ethical Humanist Society of Long Island**

**What's "Effective" Ethical Action? Hugh Taft-Morales**

**In the cold winter months... Hugh Taft-Morales**

**Deepening our commitment - Hugh Taft-Morales**

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### ***Books: A Gift Giving Humanist Tradition?* Hugh Taft-Morales**

In *Ethical Action Reports* published during past holiday seasons, articles have advocated alternatives to the crazed consumerism all around us, such as "Buy Nothing Day" suggested by Ethical Culture Leader Susan Rose. (See *November 2012 AEU Ethical Action Report*) Some articles have asked you to consider something other than new gift exchanges such as giving gifts of time (coupons for companionship), gifts of creative expression (your poetry, art or music) and gifts to a third party in honor of a friend (donations to a good cause in their name). This holiday time the *Ethical Action Report* recommends a gift close to the heart of Ethical Culture: books!

If you are going to buy a gift, doesn't it make sense to give something that honors humanism? Humanism was built on books - books of faith and skepticism, science and art. The rediscovered texts of Aristotle lit the fires of the Renaissance. The Enlightenment was powered by the writings of Hobbes, Rousseau, Locke and Diderot. My personal favorite genre is non-fiction accounts of the crossroads of science, commerce, and political power captured in three of my favorites that I recommend to you: *Galileo's Daughter: A Historical Memoir of Science, Faith and Love* by Dava Sobel; *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World* by Matthew Stewart; and Andrea Wulf's fascinating *Chasing Venus: The Race to Measure the Heavens*.

Ethical Humanism itself arose from an environment filled with books. The walls of Felix Adler's childhood home were lined with volume after volume. His father Samuel, a Rabbi and scholar, found that his happiest

hours were those spent in his library, well stocked with books about a wide range of disciplines. He encouraged his son Felix to read voraciously, which he did, leading him to develop both an encyclopedic mind and a rational alternative to traditional religion that we call our own: Ethical Culture.

So how about giving books about Ethical Culture to your friends? Try Howard Radest's *Toward Common Ground: The Story of the Ethical Societies in the United States*, or Ed Ericson's, *The Humanist Way. Ethics as Religion*, by David Muzzy, is probably the most historically complete. Felix Adler's son-in-law, Horace Friess offers the most intimate portrait of our founder in *Felix Adler and Ethical Culture*. And for a more challenging read, there is always Felix Adler's *An Ethical Philosophy of Life*.

While some of you might legitimately want to avoid the corporate giants that have squeezed out community book stores, if you are an *Amazon* user, consider ordering these books through *Amazon* links on Ethical Society web pages, such as the one set up by the Baltimore Ethical Society. It costs no more for you, but returns a portion of the profits to the Ethical Society. Set up such a link on your own Ethical Society's website and use the proceeds to buy books for a lending library at your Society.

The Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia has its own book giving tradition. For years members, led by Temma Fishman, have delivered dictionaries to local elementary schools, and offered enthusiastic third graders short interactive workshops on how to use the dictionaries. Last year it was at **Duckrey Elementary** students learned about some of what dictionaries had to offer and enjoyed the pages about planets, presidents, continents, countries, and states. Some students particularly liked the sign language page, and they were all amazed at the longest word in the English language, a scientific term of over 1,000 letters! (FYI, it begins with the letters, Methionylglutaminylarginyltyrosy....)

This year, in my work as the Leader in Philadelphia, I hope to explore another creative and progressive way area residents give books: the **Books through Bars** program. Linked in spirit to Ethical Culture's national focus on reforming the justice system, *Books through Bars* is an all-volunteer nonprofit that distributes free books and educational materials to incarcerated people in seven eastern states. Each year they send over 8,000 book packages. Their motto is, "Our work changes hearts, minds and lives." Their mission declares their belief that mass incarceration is not the answer to the issues that lead people to commit crimes. Many Ethical Culturists agree with their claim that the answer is not imprisonment - it is knowledge and opportunity!

My favorite holiday book giving tradition of all involves **Hope House**. For ten years a small D. C. based non-profit has set up shop at my children's school holiday celebration. They bring hundreds of children's books that people can choose to sponsor and pay for. Then Hope House distributes them to prison inmates and facilitates the tape recording of them reading the book to their children. When the recording is completed, the book and the taped story are mailed home to the inmate's child. Over almost a decade Hope House has sent nearly 10,000 books home to children with parents in prison. For many parents it is the first story they have ever read to their child.

I try to imagine what it would have been like to be separated from my children because of a bad decision in my life. I am sure I would feel an ache deep inside that would knot up in my chest each night knowing that I would not be able to read my children a bedtime story. Our prison system does little to nurture a sense of self-esteem in the minds and hearts of incarcerated people. We seem only to reinforce an identity of criminality. Why not encourage those in jail to develop a greater sense of identity as a parent? Why not encourage deeper relationships with their children so that, should they be released, they would be more motivated to stay out of jail? And what about the children? Don't they deserve a chance to connect with their parent in a positive, loving fashion?

So year after year at my children's school, I would spend some time picking out books to donate to Hope House. I would write a check. It may be a drop in the bucket for our efforts to rethink how we treat our prison population, but few gifts have meant as much to me as these books that I help get into the hands of incarcerated parents. (You can find out more about Hope House, especially their new program, Camp Hope, at <http://www.hopehousedc.org> )

Books have the power to liberate, to empower, to inspire. We offer here just a few creative ways to include books in your holiday giving. Please share with the Ethical Action Report how books figure in your holiday generosity. What other creative ways might they reflect both the generosity of the season and the values of humanism and Ethical Culture? Write me at [HughTM@gmail.com](mailto:HughTM@gmail.com) and let me know!

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***Ethical Friends of Children.* Linda Napoli,  
Ethical Humanist Society of Long Island**

For the past century, members of Ethical Societies throughout the movement have stepped up to do what they can to ease the way for other people in their community. In 1985, at the Long Island Society, two of our members, Harry Allen and Emily Lewis, did just that.

Like many of our Societies, we are located in a fairly affluent neighborhood, but are not far from pockets of poverty. Harry and Emily acted on their need to aid the poor and homeless in these areas when they formed a group called Friends for the Homeless in one of our basement rooms.

The community outreach started with collections of clothing from Society members and their families and friends. Social agencies were contacted and the flow of people in need began. As time went on the focus shifted as more and more mothers came in to get items they desperately needed for their children.

Harry and Emily moved to Massachusetts a number of years ago, but their legacy of caring lives on as an important part of our Society's social action.

Ably run by Jim LoPresti with the assistance of Pat Spencer and the help of a number of dedicated volunteers, the group's name has changed to Ethical Friends of Children and is now known all over Long Island for its good work. The program has expanded to include not only winter and summer clothing, but diapers, formula, blankets, cribs, car seats, books and toys.

Now we receive and distribute donations from churches, stores and other groups as well as individuals. Jim says, "The gratitude of our clients is unbounded and we often have mothers eventually re-donate items they have received after their children no longer need them."

This year, to meet the ongoing need, our members are being asked to bring a package of diapers or cans of formula every first Sunday of the month. Over the past three decades, this group has helped thousands of mothers and children who had almost nowhere else to turn. Ethical Friends of Children has truly lived up to Felix Adler's call.

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**What's "Effective" Ethical Action? Hugh Taft-Morales**

Occasional Ethical Action Reports, all available on line at AEU.org, have discussed what makes for appropriate and effective ethical action projects in the context of Ethical Culture. For example, the *September 2012 EAR* discussed "What Ethical Action Best Represents Ethical Culture." It was suggested, for example, that projects should promote inherent worth, develop everyone's potential, nurture ethical relationships, and transform society.

In "Is this Ethical Action" from December of last year, the *EAR* asked whether public education efforts are an optimal expression of deed before creed, or whether more concrete efforts should be taken, such as the direct donation of goods to the underserved. It also asked whether the defense of atheists as a "marginalized population" is an important ethical action or of secondary concern.

This month I ask, “What makes an ethical action or social justice project ‘effective?’” Recently some Ethical Culture Leaders brainstormed what “effective” means in this context. As *EAR* editor, I selected the following characteristics for your consideration. I look forward to your additional contributions, as well as your critique of this list:

An ethical action project is most “effective” if it:

- 1) Gets to the roots of problems by offering systemic solutions and empowers others.
- 2) Is more than talk.
- 3) Inspires people so they continue with such activism outside of their Ethical Culture lives.
- 4) Is sustainable.
- 5) Creates new, deep connections between individuals and groups.
- 6) Establishes Ethical Culture as the way of living.
- 7) Is inclusive and doesn’t create “others” and “enemies”

Finally, some Ethical Societies are involved with, or are considering involvement with, various “Community Organizing” models. These might include those organized by the *Industrial Area Foundation* (IAF) or *People Improving Communities through Organizing* (PICO) coalitions. These groups vary regarding size and degree of interfaith emphasis on theism. They are often some of the most effective groups, especially in urban settings. Is your Ethical Society involved in such a coalition? From your perspective, how is it working out?

Please share with other Ethical Societies through this Ethical Action Report. Thanks for helping continue our purposeful examination of how best to walk the walk and live according to deed before creed.

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## **In the cold winter months... Hugh Taft-Morales**

What does your society do to help those in need during the cold winter months? The Essex Culture Society of Essex County and the New York Society for Ethical Culture collect coats for distribution to the South Orange Settlement House and other organizations. Share what you do in the Ethical Action Report by emailing Hugh at [HughTM@gmail.com](mailto:HughTM@gmail.com).

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## **Deepening our commitment - Hugh Taft-Morales**

To live up to the high ideals of Ethical Culture, it is important to honor deed before creed. But committing to living more ethically – in our personal relationships and in our ethical action projects – isn’t easy. Gaining inspiration, knowledge and skills, however, can help. Consider attending Lay Leadership Summer School next year as a way to grow more fully into the best you can be. Your EAR editor joins five other sterling staff members in the beautiful hills of North Carolina from July 12-19<sup>th</sup>. Put it on your calendar now and look for registration material available in the new year!

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## **The Ethical Action Report 2.0**

As Ethical Societies around the country begin their 2013-2014 program season, the EAR is evolving to try to be more useful to you and to generate more constructive, engaged dialogue about “deed before creed” throughout the movement. We hope this new format offers stimulating ideas and practical hints that make ethical action more effective and rewarding at your societies and in your lives.

## **EAR 2.0 hopes to offer:**

- More in-depth analysis of particular social justice issues.
- Stories of ethical action projects that worked well at one of our societies and might enliven your home society.
- Discussion of ways to frame Ethical Culture's commitment to Ethical Action
- Excerpts from recent Ethical Culture platform addresses or statements from around the movement about civic, social, or ethical issues.

### ***Join the fun! Offer your thoughts and news items for the February edition.***

- Write about an issue with which you are familiar due to your professional life or private interest.
- Share news about an interesting ethical action project at your society, current or from the past.
- Write a "letter to the EAR editor" addressing any articles in this or future issues, or about other issues relating to our commitment to action.
- Do a historical reflection on an Ethical Action moment from Ethical Culture's history.

The pieces can range from 250-1000 words, and if you submit them early, the editorial volunteers can help polish your offering. Feel free to float your idea by me at [HughTM@gmail.com](mailto:HughTM@gmail.com) or send something to me by the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month prior to publication. All final copy has to be sent to me no later than the 25<sup>th</sup> of the month.

Sincerely, Hugh  
Hugh Taft-Morales - Ethical Culture Leader and *Ethical Action Report* Editor

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### ***Ethical Action Spotlight***

***Thanks to Linda Napoli for her contributions.***

***The growing support for the Ethical Action Report around the movement is inspiring. Keep sending me your ideas for future submissions - let's share our Ethical Action successes and challenges with others in the movement!***

In each edition of the EAR 2.0, I hope to offer a brief description of one successful ethical action project undertaken in Ethical Culture. (You could also share hints about what to avoid in such projects if you wish, since mistakes can teach us a lot!) Please contact me ASAP if you would be willing to share your good work with other Ethical Culturists. [HughTM@gmail.com](mailto:HughTM@gmail.com)

<p>American Ethical Union 2 West 64<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY 10023 <a href="http://www.aeu.org">www.aeu.org</a> Tel: 212-873-6500 <a href="mailto:report@aeu.org">report@aeu.org</a> Fax: 212-624-0203</p>
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**To share your views on national legislation with the Secular Coalition for America (SCA) go to:**  
[www.secular.org](http://www.secular.org)

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