



# Ethical ction Report

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## **Welcome to the Ethical Action Report 2.0**

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*Editor's Note: In the past two issues of the EAR we have promoted what is planned to be the largest climate march in history; it will take place on **Sunday, September 21** in New York City. **Please attend!** For more reasons to attend as well as more information go to the AEU home page, click on the box titled "**People's Climate March in NYC**" in the events section of the home page.*

*Ethical Action Update from the Ethical Society Mid Rivers, Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader, Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia and Baltimore Ethical Society*

Part of my very enjoyable August visit to the Ethical Society of Mid Rivers was a conversation with Dee Meyer, their Ethical Action coordinator. She shared with me some of the projects Ethical Culturists have chosen to help support those in need in the St. Charles, Missouri area.

Their highway clean-up crew that helps keep "Highway N south of Route 40" clean and neat intrigued me the most because, while I have seen the roadside signs indicating such groups, I have never met anyone who was actually involved! Every few months, 3-4 members in bright work vests and gloves walk the grassy

areas searching for elusive trash. In exchange for a relatively pleasant walk, the Society gets to advertise their good deed on a major thoroughfare.

Each winter holiday season, Mid Rivers members help out with a program sponsored by the local newspaper, the Post-Dispatch. They are matched with a family without resources to buy family gifts for Christmas. Last year they raised \$300 that was used to buy items the family needed as well as presents for the children. Mid Rivers also contributes financial resources year round through KIVA, the micro-loan organizations I know a number of Ethical Societies support. Their investment has grown and continues to help individual worthy people in third world countries set up businesses of their own.

Throughout the year the Ethical Society takes monthly trips to help stock a food pantry at Fish Of St. Charles County, an organization that provides meals to the homeless, working poor, seniors, and women suffering from domestic abuse. Members donate non-perishable food and small household items that are often needed when women try to build new homes away from their abusers.

What seems to be the most meaningful project to Mid Rivers members is their support of Youth in Need ([www.youthinneed.org](http://www.youthinneed.org)) a center that helps children in St. Charles County with food, tutoring and other supports. Ethical Society members bring meals for the twelve young people and three staff members and share time and companionship. Many of these young people are in very difficult situations and battle bad habits of a tough life. Dee shared with me how moved she was by the story of one 19-year-old. He told her how his mother, a lifelong smoker, was fighting a losing battle with cancer. When Dee asked if this would help him quit smoking himself, his mumbled and dismissive response gave her pause. She was reminded that the odds are stacked against these kids.

In addition to these on-going commitments, Mid Rivers members also do good deeds spontaneously. They bring old shoes to “George the Shoeman” who was gathering a collection for delivery to Africa. In the past they have helped out with blood drives and anti-war rallies. They have spread milkweed plants in members’ gardens to both beautify the neighborhood and provide habitat for monarch butterflies as urban sprawl and pesticides encroach on their breeding areas.

There are challenges that Dee must negotiate in coordinating these activities. It’s easy for members to join the projects she coordinates, but she also wants them to lead new and varied efforts. Some have shared their desire that Society members have “their own signature program” independent of other groups. But such projects – like starting their own soup kitchen – can be very demanding. And it’s always tricky to strike the right balance between enough and too little ethical action. Dee wants to encourage participation but not overwhelm members who have families, work, and/or prior ethical action commitments.

Overall the Society is very active and clearly this is rewarding for Dee! How’s your society doing? Share news with the rest of the movement through the Ethical Action Report!

## ***Actual Democracy, Roger Duronio, Ethical Culture Society of Bergen County***

*Editor’s note: Roger is also a member of The Association for the Advancement of Actual Democracy and, under the pseudonym Publius, he is a consulting advocate for its message.*

The American Ethical Union's summer edition of Dialogue shares some reflections offered at the 2014 Assembly platform by Leaders Kate Lovelady and Randy Best, and Leader-in-Training Paulo Riberio. The theme, “Revitalizing Democracy,” aligns with goals promoted by the Association for the Advancement of Actual Democracy (AAAD). AAAD advocates that people should vote directly on the laws under which they will have to live. It claims that representational government may no longer be needed, and that the people can assume the responsibility for legislation.

This idea is far from new. It’s reflected by the words of Pericles in *Thucydides*, Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, Thomas Paine in *Common Sense*, Jefferson in a letter to John Taylor, J.S. Mill in *Representative Government*, and Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy*. They all promote full citizen

participation in government as the “best possible” form of democracy. In an ideal world, all of these writers would choose actual democracy. All but Pericles, however, conceded that actual democracy is logistically impossible: the full population could no longer fit under the tree in the Agora or in the Forum or on the small square of a New England town. Representative democracy - which Rousseau called “elected aristocracy” - was the practical compromise.

Actual democracy is now possible. We now sit under the electronic tree of stationary-orbit communication satellites and share nearly instantaneous communication through the internet, telephone, television, and radio. We can join in open, raucous, serious and not-so-serious debate, and conclude with direct voting on laws.

After all, today we vote directly on who we think are the best entertainers. We vote through a multitude of television shows: American Idol, The Voice, X-Factor, and America Has Talent. If we can vote for our choice in entertainers we can vote on our choice of the laws. AAAD believes “actual democracy” will, at least, revitalize our democracy and help it become “a more perfect Union.” It could make our democracy a government “of the people, for the people, and by the people.”

The Association for the Advancement of Actual Democracy has a beginning website at [www.assosactualdemocracy.com](http://www.assosactualdemocracy.com). If our objectives coincide with some of yours we would be pleased to work with you in advocating our common objectives in any way we reasonably can. Please write to me, Publius, at [aad.publius@gmail.com](mailto:aad.publius@gmail.com).

### ***Ethical Relationship in Action, Kate LaClair, Chair, Ethical Action Committee, Baltimore Ethical Society***

A few weeks ago I attended the AEU Lay Leadership Summer School 2014. It was truly a life-changing experience. I had the opportunity to experience living in a community where every person engages in the work of living in ethical relationship. Being part of this process, and challenging myself to live my core values from moment to moment simultaneously with others, opened my eyes to the depth of its possibilities, and provided the space to begin to work through its challenges.

We were a group of 30 strangers from all different backgrounds and areas of the country, all at different stages of life, and in just a few days we created an environment that felt like a home. This experience allowed me to see in concrete and present terms how an active practice of ethical relationship changes the world one person, one community, at a time. This is the work of Ethical Culture, and as such, should be at the center of everything we do in our Societies.

I began to think about how I could more intentionally nurture ethical relationship at my home Society, Baltimore. As a neuroscience researcher with a personal interest in the processes that allow us to actually make change in our lives, I have learned that creating a structure is very helpful in maintaining intention and allowing it to be put into practice. Much as structure helps us initiate personal habits such as a daily exercise routine, it is perhaps even more important in groups to help each individual focus on common goals. Without a strong supporting structure, even the best intentions crumble as we flow back into the ease of the familiar. We need to build reminders into our system or workflow to focus on the areas that we agree are most important so ourselves and our communities can grow.

As Baltimore Ethical Society Ethical Action Committee Chair, I have started a discussion with my committee on implementing this kind of intention to ethical relationship in our work. We have discussed building a *behavioral covenant*, an agreement as to how we interact with each other. This covenant will always remain open for discussion and evolution as we move forward: stability with flexibility.

I practiced building such a behavioral covenant in Summer School with small group “practice committees.” We began by discussing what things were most important to each of us in a group setting. For some of us it was achieving goals efficiently. For some it was having a feeling of being heard respectfully. For others still

it was being able to share one's expertise to contribute to the group. Through discussion we came to an explicit consensus about how we would choose to operate in relationship within the group.

While it might sound trivial or unnecessary or obvious, I believe this explicit behavioral covenant allowed us to navigate the difficult tasks and tight time constraints while balancing the task at hand and the relationships between individuals in the room. When more task-oriented individuals in the group would fall into old habits of talking over others or making a decision before consulting the rest of the group, we could remind each other of our covenant and step back to hear each other. When more relationship-oriented individuals got in side-conversations, or went off on tangents, we could call upon the agreement to respect each other's time and the task at hand.

Having this behavioral structure set up and agreed upon in advance made expectations clear and diffused confrontations about differing expectations and styles before they began. This is of immense practical importance in our Societies where the bulk of the work is done in various committees with many diverse personalities. Our leaders at the Lay Leadership Summer School, Mary Herman, Paulo Ribeiro, Diane Kirschner, Jan Broughton, Hugh Taft-Morales and Bart Worden, taught me through practice how important behavioral covenants are to the continual health and vitality of a group. I believe that they can be applied to any committee and also, with thorough discussion, to entire Societies.

As Jone Johnson Lewis, current Leader at the Brooklyn Society puts it, in Ethical Culture our community not only guides us on a path of ethical living, *it is* the path itself. My recent experiences have given me a broader understanding of the meaning of my Society focus, Ethical Action. Each of us has the capacity and responsibility to be leaders in our Societies in some unique way, just as we recognize our ability to make change in the world. As we begin this new season, I welcome a discussion on how we can create more intentional expressions of ethical relationship in all the aspects of our Societies, as part of our continual journey toward living out our ideals.

In Gratitude and Fellowship, Kate LaClair.

### ***At a Loss for Words: The Death of Michael Brown, Hugh Taft-Morales, Editor***

Having just returned from St. Louis the day before, I found watching the coverage of Michael Brown's August 25th memorial service particularly frustrating. The sadness, pain, and anger that overflowed in the Friendly Temple Missionary Baptist Church clashed with the warmth of a brilliantly sunny St. Louis summer day. It was bitterly ironic that this service was held in a church on a boulevard named after our national hero of nonviolent civil rights activism, Dr. Martin Luther King. But most of all, it was frustrating for me because at a time when I yearned to speak out I felt at a loss for words.

Obviously my frustration is insignificant when compared to the anguish of those who loved the 18 year-old they called "Mike Mike." When he died on the hard pavement of Ferguson, Mo., many hopes and dreams of his family died with him. He had finished high school and planned to continue his education. Now it is the rest of us that have to glean what education we can from this tragedy.

Obviously we do not know all that occurred that day. It's important that we seek the truth and not rush to judgment about the particulars. But we already know that in the big picture we have a long way to go before we achieve racial and social justice in this country. I have been blessed to see my youngest son live to 19 years-old. Michael Brown's family was not so lucky.

Of course there was some bad luck involved. But as Washington Post columnist Eugene Robinson wrote, Mike Mike probably made some mistakes: "He was walking in the middle of the street rather than on the sidewalk, according to witnesses, and he was carrying a box of cigars that he apparently took from a convenience store." Robinson - who has written about, and suffered over, the deaths of countless young black men - muses that it would not have been unusual for Brown to have responded to the initial encounter with the police officer with a "puffed-up attitude." But none of this, Robinson reminds us, is a capital offence. (See "[When youthful mistakes turn deadly](http://www.washingtonpost.com/eugene-robinson)" at [www.washingtonpost.com/eugene-robinson](http://www.washingtonpost.com/eugene-robinson))

Michael Brown had no police record or history of violence – it was said that he dropped off the football team because he didn't want to hurt others. He had finished high school and was going to continue his education. But in a racially tense situation, Michael was probably judged to be more of a threat than he was not because of the content of his character, but because of the color of his skin.

My colleague Amanda Poppei, Leader of the Washington Ethical Society (WES) - and editorial helper with me on the Ethical Action Report - wrote a couple of weeks ago about the obvious historical context for what happened in Ferguson. The “history of violence against black youth and black men” is a scar that seems to be ripped open time and time again. It was ripped open in the life of at least one other attendee of Michael Brown's memorial. Ron Davis lost his 17 year-old son, Jordan, in 2012 when he was shot at a Florida gas station in an altercation about loud music. In this case it was not a police officer, but a stand-your-ground law that seemed to be the flaw in the criminal justice system that contributed to the suffering of another community of color.

I hope Ethical Action Report readers will excuse this insufficient editorial response to the suffering of the families and communities of Ferguson. Personally, I have committed myself to continue working more broadly on criminal justice reform, and for now will direct my frustration in that direction. I have a criminal justice reform summit planned in Philadelphia in two weeks (more on that in the next issue of the EAR).

I hope each of you finds ways to turn our loss for words into concrete actions. In doing so, let's remember to do so in ways that are both effective and positive. As Amanda reminded the WES community, “We have to work against systemic racism and all the oppressions that intersect with it, and work for understanding, for relationship, for fairness, for safety, for compassion. I am sure that this work is part of who we are as a humanist community--that Ethical Culture, with its insistence on the inherent worth of every person, has a key part to play in our country's long and slow march toward reconciliation. This is my work, and your work. This is America's work.”

### ***September 9<sup>th</sup> – Culture of Peace Forum, Martha Gallahue, Leader, NES***

*National Ethical Service* reminds us to watch the high level forum on the Culture of Peace by going to <http://webtv.un.org/> on September 9, 2014. The program will include a General Debate within the General Assembly on the status of Culture of Peace and an afternoon program focusing on women's leadership and education for global citizenship.

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

*With many thanks to Dee Meyer, Roger Duronio, Kate LaClair and Martha Gallahue for contributing text and ideas to this month's EAR, and to Amanda Poppei for her editorial assistance. Let's continue the dialogue in our national movement – submit comments, articles and suggestions for future EAR editions!*

*Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader, Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia and Baltimore Ethical Society.*

### **The Ethical Action Report 2.0**

As Ethical Societies around the country continue 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 October edition - coming to you in "Dialogue" and titled 'Ethical Action Features.'***

- 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 400-800 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. All final copy has to be sent to me no later than the 25<sup>th</sup> of September.

Sincerely,

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

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