



Ethical ction Report

A publication of the American Ethical Union (AEU)

Number 14-11

November 2014

Welcome to the Ethical Action Report 2.0

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Considering the Ethical Implications of Holiday Gift Giving
Susan Rose, Dean, Leadership Training

The history of why we give gifts during the winter holiday season is interesting and complex. How do we approach this custom of gift giving with our current knowledge and understanding? Do our concerns for the well-being of our planet and the well-being of our fellow beings have an impact on our gift giving practices?

Gift giving has the intention of expressing love or friendliness between people. Yet it often turns into a stressful, expensive, high consumption practice that doesn't necessarily fulfill the gift giver's intentions. Many people who are concerned about conserving the resources of our planet, and often of their pocketbooks, are looking at this annual tradition with new eyes, with new questions. In Ethical Culture we are used to questioning what is accepted as the norm for most people and I urge you to consider doing the same around gift giving.

I ask you to consider what is your intention in giving a gift in any situation. Very often gift giving is seen as an obligation that can't be avoided. Years ago I worked in an office where gifts were exchanged only because it was expected. I didn't want to take on the practices of the whole office so I spoke to my co-worker. We had exchanged presents for several years and I doubt either of us actually appreciated the gifts we received. So that year I spoke to her and said I was thinking

about the two of us agreeing to not exchange presents. The smile on her face let me know that that was probably the best present I could have given her. Small and simple.

For my son's first winter holiday season his dad and I decided not to get him anything special for the holidays. When we thought about it we realized that he had received so many things in his 3 months of life and that when we needed something else for him we could go to the thrift store, make something, or even borrow it. The next year we did pretty much the same. As he got older I learned to save some things I had found that I thought he would like for a winter present. As he got older still he started having a list and it got harder to do the thrift store thing. Now, 27 years later, we're moving back in the direction of not doing much gift giving.

I find that the *Compassionate Communication* framework of exploring needs is useful for considering gift giving. What need are you trying to meet by giving a gift to someone? Do you want to fit in? Do you want them to like you? Do you want to show that you know them well and care for them and can pick out something very appropriate?

Are there alternatives to buying something? Can you make something? Can you buy a gift at a thrift store, which has the added value of re-using something? Are there alternatives to giving something material – can you offer help with a difficult chore, or even an easy chore? Perhaps you might offer babysitting, a meal, or a list of books or movies you think they would find enjoyable. You might make a contribution to an organization your friend or loved one supports – maybe even an Ethical Society or the American Ethical Union! If you do buy something, could it be an intangible such as tickets to a concert or show - something you know the recipient will appreciate?

As you think about the upcoming holiday season what ethical considerations will you include in your decision-making process? You might consider observing one of my favorite "holidays" - *Buy Nothing Day*, observed in the US on the day after Thanksgiving. If you do make purchases for presents, please think about the values of the company you are buying from. I crochet many of my gifts and you know I won't be buying any yarn from Hobby Lobby this year.

I wish you a wonderful winter, hoping that it is filled with personal and meaningful connections and experiences. Let us know what you are doing for holiday gift giving.

Editor's note: Send your creative holiday gift giving ideas by November 23rd to HughTM@gmail.com for inclusion in the December [AEU Ethical Action Report!](#)

What to Do When Confronted by Police

Abe Markman, Member, New York Society for Ethical Culture

Editor's note: The increasingly common occurrence of unwarranted police brutality and use of deadly force shows the need for systemic reform. While this is occurring, is there room in our ethical action for programs to educate people at risk about how to act when confronted by police? Abe Markman thinks so. Do you?

The *Lower East Side Call for Justice* was formed in May of 1992 soon after eleven L.A. police officers were caught on camera severely kicking Rodney King after dragging him to the ground. The members of *Call for Justice* wanted to eliminate such blatant abuse and, in particular, wanted to work with youth to help them survive confrontations with the police.

Call for Justice received three city grants to create and update a manual, and to train and pay youth to assist in workshops. The young people performed virtual scenarios of what to do and what not to do when stopped by the police. Over nineteen years we conducted more than 250 workshops mostly with older teens and young adults of color.

The workshops received positive responses. Directors of youth centers, schools, residences, and alternative to incarceration programs often invited us to return for workshops with new groups. One director wrote to us describing how one of his young adults changed his conduct when stopped by the police. Another director was quoted in a well-read downtown newspaper admiring how we engaged the youth in an interactive learning process. When our workshop manual was first published, I was invited to discuss it on *New York One News*. Several organizations wanted copies of it.

Call for Justice members firmly believed that some of the youth recently killed by police would be alive today had they known about our methods. In short, we told the young people not to resist when stopped by the police. They were encouraged to cooperate, even if harassed, verbally abused or physically pushed around. We told them, “Your life may depend on it. You can't win taking on the police by yourself.”

We explained that police misconduct can be best confronted by organizing. We described in detail how huge rallies and non-violent civil disobedience against police brutality in the 1990s changed community attitudes. This led to more juries convicting police officers of abuse of power. We told them that police have fears like anyone else and when provoked they can mistake a candy wrapper or a wallet for a gun and start shooting believing they were saving their own lives.

Our principle technique was asking them questions, like “Have you ever seen a frightened Police Officer?” or “Are you aware that officers when frightened no longer see you as you are, but as a stereotype of yourself intent on harming them?” We discussed how many civilians have biases against the police that cloud our judgment especially when confronted by police.

We encouraged the young people to comment on each other's opinions and attitudes. With our guidance they most often saw the value of avoiding confrontations. Instead they were instructed on how to take safer, more constructive action such as making official complaints and getting free or low cost legal advice and assistance.

During our workshops there was usually one person who said he or she would not put up with the police being nasty. In discussions with their peers, we saw attitudes shift. Most often we saw the youth struggle for a while and then agree to avoid confrontations when stopped. Workshop leaders found satisfaction in seeing participants change right in front of our eyes so they could better protect themselves from harm.

Although recently we disbanded the *Lower East Side Call for Justice* group after twenty years of intense effort, we were pleased with how, in alliance with NYSEC, we achieved an impressive record of success. Along with the workshops, some of the more experienced LES activists worked with some other larger NGOs and interfaith associations to reform the draconian Rockefeller Drug Laws and to eliminate the death penalty in New York. As chair for 17 of those years our work led to my receiving the 2010 NYSEC Community Service Award.

Some of our younger members of *Call for Justice* are continuing the struggle for police reform by joining Bob Gangi's program of research, action, and change. Bob received the AEU's 2012 Elliot/Black Award. Finally, members of *Call for Justice* are all happy to know that other

organizations are now conducting youth workshops similar to ours in other parts of New York City to help save the lives of our young people.

Criminal Justice Reform Summit in Philadelphia

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

On September 7th, the *Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia* in partnership with *Art for Justice* hosted a Criminal Justice Reform Summit. For four hours, leading activists offered workshops intending both to educate and recruit those new to the issue, and to rally the spirits of those already engaged in the struggle to humanize our justice system.

After an opening panel introducing some of our workshop leaders, a keynote talk was given by Harold Wilson, a Pennsylvania death row survivor, wrongly convicted and recently exonerated. Mr. Wilson, who is now physically free but struggling to survive in a world that mistreated him, could attend only thanks to his sponsorship by *Witness to Innocence*.

Following his testimony, approximately 120 attendees split into for workshops:

1) Villanova Professor Jill McCorkel and filmmaker Matt Pillischer discussed educating the public about A Broken System Breaking Men and Women;

2) our key note speaker Harold Wilson teamed up with Tyrone Werts, recently released from a life-sentence by Pennsylvania Governor Rendell and now involved in Temple University's "Inside-Outside" Program, to address Surviving Cruel and Unusual Punishment;

3) a third workshop about Supporting Returning Citizens was offered by J. Jondhi Harrell, founder of Philadelphia's *Center for Returning Citizens*, Pam Superville from the *Mayor's Office of Reintegration Services* (RISE), along with Renaya Furtick Wheelan and Petrena A. Young, Co-Founders of Females Reentering Empowering Each Other (I'M FREE); and,

4) our fourth workshop entitled, Helping Youth Flourish and Stay Out of the System, was offered by Reuben Jones of *Frontline Dads & Focused Deterrence*, Sarah Morris and other members of *Youth Art & Self-Empowerment Project* (YASP), along with Ann Marie Kirk, founder of *Art for Justice*.



Ann Marie was my co-partner in this project, and the art she has been collecting and displaying for years was a great source of inspiration. The Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia hosted an exhibit of art created by inmates, all of whom either claim innocence or admit guilt and are seeking redemption. The artwork expresses deep emotions of sadness, frustration, love, and hope.

Later in the afternoon we showed some clips from a film, *Broken on All Sides*, with the producer/director Matt Pillischer sharing his activist insights. Others opted for the session *Exploring Legislative Solutions: Pushing for reform in Harrisburg and Washington through coalitions and advocacy*, led by Ann Schwartzman, Executive Director, Pennsylvania Prison Society, and Latasha Williams, a researcher for the Pennsylvania Democratic Legislature attending Widener Law School.

The afternoon was topped off by a reception, with food and drink provided by Rhonda Mordy, an *Art for Justice* Board member, as well as opportunities for petition signing, networking, and some poetry and musical entertainment offered by Laura Jimenez and yours truly.

Two months after the event, I seek opportunities to work more with those who came to the summit. At the top of my list is to create a tele-visiting program like that pioneered by the Social Service Board at the New York Society for Ethical Culture (see August 2014 *Ethical Action Report* [/EAR2014081.pdf](#)) I urge all Ethical Societies to continue exploring ways they might best contribute to criminal justice reform. In hope of inspiring such a commitment, I leave you with an excerpt of my opening remarks at our September 7th summit.

I have little personal experience with the criminal justice system, but I have taught a lot of history. Before my work here, I taught U. S. history for 25 years to high school students. Year after year, I'd have to explain to my students why, in a nation that proclaims the sacredness of inalienable rights and the sanctity of equal justice under law, rich and powerful and predominantly white people systemically oppressed and brutalized marginalized people of color. We discussed the fact that if we could have written our history, this is not the story we would have written. But it's the history we've been given.

Year after year, I'd have to explain how in a world plentiful enough to feed, clothe, and educate every child, today nearly 10,000 children a day die of starvation or hunger related diseases.

I'd have to explain why profit-fueled imperialism bled to death hundreds of thousands of innocent victims of wars from the Philippines to Vietnam to Iraq. We discussed the fact that if we could have written our history, this is not the story we would have written. But it's the history we've been given.

*And now in my new life as a humanist minister, I continue trying to explain our history. I try to explain our more recent history documented by a growing list of activists, such as Michelle Alexander who explains in *The New Jim Crow* how the last 30 years knee-jerk tough-on-crime politics and the over-criminalization of drug use pushed the U. S. prison population from 300,000 to over 2 million.*

Fueled by an antiquated oversimplified approach to crime, our retributive model is now a cultural cancer eating away at our social fabric, devastating families and neighborhoods. It is inhumane, racist, classist, and ineffective. Our work is to change the system.

In our work we always must honor the victims of violent crimes – crime that corrodes trust, ends lives, and breaks hearts. But rather than protecting the innocent and caring for victims, we myopically focus on punishment. Rather than lessening crime, our system makes us suffer more. Rather than providing those convicted of crime opportunities for redemption, it contributes to a cycle of abuse. It's the history we've been given.

...[W]e hope this event today gives each and every one of you an opportunity to become more committed to criminal justice reform. Whether you learn something intellectually, or connect with people interpersonally, or find greater strength and courage inside to do what you know is right, let's work together knowing the history we've been given, so we can create the history of the future. The time is now.

Ethical Action Spotlight

With many thanks to Susan Rose and Abe Markman 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 begin their 2014-2015 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 December 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 or send something to me by the 15th of the month. All final copy has to be sent to me no later than the 23rd of November.

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

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To share your views on national legislation with the Secular Coalition for America (SCA) visit: www.secular.org

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