



# ETHICAL CULTURE

M O N T H L Y

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DECEMBER 2007

## LEADER'S MESSAGE

### A Dark Side of One of the World's Great Religions

As many of you know, I am a secular Jew. My grandparents were orthodox and my parents basically observed the high holy days. I rarely saw the inside of a synagogue and had no religious education to speak of. I would go to temple only when there was a family bar or bat mitzvah. As a young adult, for intellectual reasons, I abandoned any religious identification with Judaism but happily retained my identification with Jewish history and culture. I also retained a great love of the ethical teachings in the Torah and respect for the fact of Judaism being the first great western monotheistic religion. For social and cultural reasons and to honor my parents and for the sheer enjoyment, I continued to attend all the family's religious feasts.



Although I knew that in early Judaism there were extraordinarily harsh punishments for religious offenses, on the whole, I saw Judaism as less harsh than many other religions. This was based on its promotion of a high level of rigorous intellectual disputation on biblical interpretation and other religious texts within the rabbinic tradition. I also had and continue to have a great appreciation for the early Hassidic tradition which flourished in Eastern Europe. Martin Buber collected and translated many stories about the great Hassidic masters (rabbis). These tales were filled with immense wisdom, kindness, humanity, humor and gentleness. Through my reading of them I

developed a much deeper appreciation of my heritage.

It was then quite shocking for me to read an article appearing on the front page of the New York Times recently. It described brutal and violent treatment in the Israeli town of Ramat Beit Shemesh B of a woman on a public bus. "On October 21, five ultra-Orthodox Jews assaulted a woman and an Israeli soldier on a bus bound for Beit Shemesh. The men demanded that the woman sit in the back of the bus; when she refused and asked the soldier to sit next to her, they beat them both. When the police came, dozens of ultra-Orthodox men attacked them while the assailants escaped."

In another incident, a businessman from the US started a kosher pizza parlor in the same town of Shemesh B. Although he had several customers among the ultra-Orthodox, it was the Hassids who turned violent. After a short while, some of them began to throw tomatoes, hot oil and gasoline at the restaurant. When he approached their rabbi later, the rabbi told him, "You might end up dead." "His sin was to sit men and women in the same restaurant." Needless to say, he closed the place.

It is difficult to say how shocked and pained I was to learn of these heirs of a great and noble and gentle Hassidic tradition behaving so brutally.

But I will not end on this sad note. Rather I will tell you an ancient Hassidic tale which exemplifies the best of this once great tradition. (Forgive me if I told it to you before.) A famous and wise Hassidic Rabbi was walking in the street on the Sabbath. He saw a young man smoking. He approached him

gently and said, "Surely your parents have been neglectful in not telling you that it is against God's commandment to smoke on the Sabbath. The young man said, "No, they told me all about that." Then the Rabbi said, "Surely they may have failed to explain that by resting on the Sabbath (making fire is work), as God did after creating the world, we thereby give to ourselves the same reward that God gave himself." The young man replied, "Yea I know about all that. Look, Rabbi, I like to smoke and I do not care if it is against the law. I will do what I want." To which the Rabbi replied, "Young man, you have a remarkably strong will and great commitment. If you ever dedicate yourself to God, you will be the greatest of our religious leaders."

### Please Note Course Date Changes

Courses given by Boe Meyerson, Essex Ethical Society Leader and Humanist Chaplain at Columbia University, have had their dates changed as follows:

#### *Ethical Decision Making*

Dates changed to Thursdays, November 15 and 29 at 7:30 p.m. Texts will be two readings from *Discovering Philosophy* by Matthew Lipman, Appleton-Century Crofts, 1969; Kant, *The Moral Person and the Moral Law*, pp. 104-119; and Mill, *The Practice of Freedom*, pp. 120-132.

#### *Non-Violent Communication*

An exploration of non-escalating ways of dealing with disagreements. Text will be Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication*. Dates changed to Thursdays, December 13 and 20 at 7:30 p.m.

# Ethical Culture Society of Essex County



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#### Editor's note

The newsletter invites you to submit articles, announcements, commentary, etc. for publication. ITEMS MUST BE RECEIVED BY THE FIRST OF THE MONTH FOR INCLUSION IN THE FOLLOWING MONTH'S EDITION. Items should be no more than 150 words, preferably submitted via email to the editor (gilman.howard@gmail.com). Items can also be delivered to: Editor, Ethical Society Newsletter, 516 Prospect St., Maplewood, NJ 07040. Please call the office, 973-763-1905, and leave word especially if your item is time-sensitive.

Editor reserves right to edit for length, clarity and content. Opinions offered in this publication are those of the authors.

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Our web site: [www.essexethical.org](http://www.essexethical.org)

**...act so  
as to elicit  
the best  
in others  
and in  
ourselves**

Attention members! Please submit your email addresses to [ethicalessex@netscape.com](mailto:ethicalessex@netscape.com) to receive the newsletter and other special event notices.



## President's Letter

Our "Warrior Project" maintains its constancy. Since Dr. Edward Tick, its founder, addressed our Society in October, an Ethical Culture group has met spontaneously almost every week to support and be part of this project. Our country's warriors have returned home traumatized by the Vietnam, Iraq and other miscellaneous wars, and Dr. Tick has discovered ways to help them heal. We have copies of Dr. Tick's book, *War and the Soul*. Please call the office and leave your phone number to order a copy (the cost is \$19.95). Of course, you don't have to purchase the book in order to join our group.

We will be meeting next on Sunday, December 2nd at 1:00 p.m., immediately following the Platform, together with the Social Action Committee. We will present a summary of the project's goal and activities. Ed Tick will have returned from Vietnam by then (his 8th trip with veterans seeking reconciliation and healing) with an updated report of his visit there and to Walter Reed Hospital. I hope you can attend.

— Betty Levin, President

## Compassion in the Face of Sorrow

News from Rangoon in September juxtaposed the gentlest of traditions and the harshest of regimes. But as often happens when religion enters the headlines, the spiritual and intellectual content of Burmese Buddhism was only briefly touched upon and yielded to a predictable flow of interviews with people who've been tortured, imprisoned and dispossessed — while part of the reality, it does not help us understand what brought those monks onto the streets and what Buddhism means to the people there.

Buddhism has been at the heart of Burmese culture and governance for two millennia. Yet simply to call Burma a Buddhist nation obscures the syncretistic nature of Burmese spirituality, which always mingled Buddhist insights with animist and tribal practices. Astrology and numerology decisively influenced the actions of both military rulers and student protesters in the 1988 uprising, which led to the massacre of thousands.

At the same time, these protests led to a new embrace of Buddhist ritual on the part of the military regime, which had tried to make an historic break between Burmese culture and Buddhist governance. A Western sensibility catches on this fact and dismisses it as cynical. But even the most hollow religious ritual of the ruling generals has been a testament to the enduring centrality of Buddhism in Burmese life. The recent history of Burma is that of a people who have sought to "re-armor" their society from below — without and in spite of their political leaders.

This conversation has been a reminder that when seeing other peoples and cultures, especially where religion is involved with its intricate ties to human identity, we cannot rely on the ingrained instincts of our eyes, ears, and minds.

The Theravada Buddhism that so defines Burmese culture is intensely focused on mental discipline — drawing ever deeper into the Buddhist straight embrace of reality, its wise acknowledgement of the fact of suffering, and of the transience of all earthly forms. A Burmese spiritual teacher counsels that even "the four sublime states of mature emotion" — of which compassion is a key — have "near enemies." Sorrow is a near enemy of compassion; anger is a near enemy of righteous indignation. Outrage and sorrow, of course, are common and valid human reactions to the news flow of tragic stories. But untempered sorrow and outrage can lead us to a sense of helplessness that becomes apathy, or to actions that simply perpetuate cycles of violence.

It is proposed that we ponder this as human beings, as world citizens. How can we hold on to compassion in the face of what is happening in Burma — letting it lead us towards deeper understanding and a renewable, informed activism over time? In this way, perhaps, as the headlines from Burma wane, it need not also disappear from the world's imagination.

*From: Public radio's "Burma — Buddhism and Power" (Interview with Ingrid Jordt on Speaking of Faith, hosted by Krista Tippett)*

## UPCOMING FUND RAISING EVENTS



**Greek Dinner** Nancy and Dick Bohn will host an evening of delightful Greek delicacies, a dinner at their home, December 8 at 7 p.m. There's room for 8, so reserve ASAP.

**January** Pat Thompson will host a dinner at her home, sometime in January, on a date to be announced shortly. Hearty winter fare, with warm company. See the Sunday bulletin for details and a date.



**Concert News** We are putting together a "Stirling Duo" event for early in 2008 — our own Mary Babiarz and Joe Gluck — back by popular demand. Keep watching and reading for exciting details.

**How About A Strollers Musical?** Stephen Sondheim's "Anyone Can Whistle", an absurdist social satire about insanity and conformity (among a dozen other things). Any opportunity to experience his genius is an event not to be missed. Add to that lunch and camaraderie and you've got a fun afternoon. Matinee Sunday February 24 or March 2.



**Poetry** Sylvia Kramer will be on hand later in the year to pick our poetic brains — and open our hearts to the moment. A rare experience. Stay tuned for specifics.

**Game Night** Trivial Pursuits (or a reasonable facsimile) is alive and well and waiting at Jeanine Rosh's for a date to be announced. It's a fun raiser. Yes, we CAN find a game that includes musical questions NOT geared to 14-year-olds. It's a promise.

**Winter/Spring Dinners** We have a tentative volunteer (a great cook) for a "Dinner at my Place" fundraiser. Details to follow.

**White Elephant NEWS FLASH** Unless we can come up with a chairperson for this event AND a sizeable number of volunteers, there will be NO WHITE ELEPHANT event. Thus, our greatest fundraiser, and recycling promoter, is about to become history. The bottom line is, with help, we can move mountains, or should I say, elephants. Any takers? Call Nancy Bohn or Jeanine Rosh.

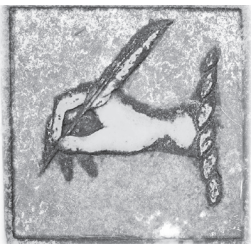
— Jeanine Rosh

**A parting thought** by Ivan Scheier

Once, volunteering was for dreamers  
We were — and some still are — pioneers  
in compassionate enterprise

It was the way we got good things done before there  
were big budgets or bureaucracies

Once, volunteering was a legacy, an inheritance from  
family, friends or faith



An unselfconscious way of living out  
basic values

Volunteer was just the way we  
were, a private matter of public  
consequence.

Once, volunteering was a power

We didn't react to friends, we caused  
them

We didn't supplement staff, we  
created them

Politicians didn't use us, we used  
them

And we made dreams happen

Once volunteering was for dreamers

May it soon be so again

**Platforms** (continued from page 4)

**Dec. 30 Dr. Stephen J. Levine** "The Keys to Longevity." Just in time for the New Year, chiropractor Dr. Stephen Levine will outline three specific changes you can make immediately to "literally stop the clock." While we can't control our genetic inheritance, he teaches that we can do something about our lifestyle. He will present an interactive workshop teaching what he sees as the secrets to staying young and vital, so we too can hope to join the world's fastest growing age group — the centenarians.



Dr. Levine is with the South Orange Chiropractic Center. He received his Doctor of Chiropractic Degree from Pennsylvania College. He is a certified chiropractic sports physician and has a diploma in pain management. In 1992, he served as a member of the medical staff of the Garden State Games and fulfilled the same role for the 1995, 1996 and 1999 New York City marathons. He is also the team chiropractor for the Seton Hall University Men's basketball team.

# ETHICAL CULTURE SOCIETY OF ESSEX COUNTY

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### SUNDAY MORNING PLATFORMS

November, 2007

Platforms begin at 11 a.m. All are welcome. Platforms are subject to change without notice. For information about our Sunday School, 11 a.m.–12:15 p.m., and our Youth of Ethical Societies (YES), contact the Society office, 973-763-1905.

**Dec 2: Boe Meyerson** “*Communication and Conflict*.” Boe will explore how we can deal with serious conflict in ways that can better reach resolution. She will be sharing her views of Marshall Rosenberg’s well-received book, *Nonviolent Communication*.

**Dec 9: John Fouts Gardenhire** “*Life Lessons from a Black Father*.” John Gardenhire will share the lessons he gleaned from his father, growing up in Mud Town, the black ghetto in Topeka, Kansas. For those concerned about the absence of the fathers in so many black families, he offers wisdom from one very capable man, who provided his three children with the personal and social skills he knew they would need to be successful in their private and their public lives.

John Fouts Gardenhire is a Maplewood resident. After graduating from the University of Kansas, he taught English at Lane Community College from 1969 to 1999. In addition to his latest book, *Life Lessons from My Father*, he has published a number of others, among them *Understanding Sentence Analysis*, *Reading Analytically*, *Thought*,

*Tillie’s Big Day*, and *The Gardenhires’ Christmas Cookbook*. He learned much of his cooking during summers spent with his Aunt Bert, who was cook to Theodore Geisel (Dr. Seuss).

**Dec 16: Joe Gluck interviews Robert Wagner** on *life, love and music*. Joe Gluck will interview Robert Wagner, principal bassoonist with the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, asking him questions on such topics as music, politics in music, the gay community and the arts, the NJSO and the bassoon.

Mr. Wagner has been a member of the Orchestra since 1979. He is on the faculty at Princeton University as well as Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University. Mr. Wagner serves on the boards of the American Symphony Orchestra League and ArtPride New Jersey. He is a resident of Maplewood, NJ, where he teaches privately.

Joe Gluck, a former member of the St. Louis and Detroit Symphonies, recently retired after many years as a violinist of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra. Joe serves as the concertmaster of the Summit (New Jersey) Orchestra. As The Stirling Duo, with his wife, Mary, they perform about 40 concerts a year as a violin/piano duo (mostly lecture/recitals). They also are Co-Direc-

tors of a year-around amateur chamber music workshop. Joe is also the founder and conductor of The Stirling Chamber Orchestra.

**Dec 23: Dr. Janet Larson** “*Update on Afghanistan*.” Dr. Larson will give a slide presentation based on her research



and a visit to Afghanistan last summer to learn what Afghans are doing to help their country recover from decades of war. Her

conclusion: Despite what we hear, there is still a chance to achieve peace in the country. She met with leaders of all aspects of Afghan society, including a number of “peace warriors”, as well as ordinary folk, street children, van drivers, and shop owners, and many Americans, including military personnel, and a member of the Blackwater security firm. Her illustrations range from vintage postcards of old Kabul, to shots of the people she met in the “new” Afghanistan.

Dr. Janet Larson is an experienced journalist, a full-time member of the Rutgers Newark English and Women’s Studies faculties since 1978, and director of the English Masters’ Program. Her strong interest in global affairs and human rights is reflected in her teaching and her journalism.

(continued on page 3)