



ETHICAL CULTURE

M O N T H L Y

VOLUME 28 NUMBER 10

Visit our web site: www.essexethical.org

JUNE-AUGUST 2009

SUNDAY MORNING PLATFORMS

June 7 Leader Boe Meyerson, "Adler's Conception of Spirituality"

The concept of spirituality is traditionally defined as that which is neither physical nor worldly but nonetheless capable of providing the means (both emotional and intellectual) needed to live an inspired and meaningful life. The traditional sources of such guidance are God or God's emissaries. Yet this understanding of the word would not be applicable to non-theistic religions such as Ethical Culture or Taoism.

Actually, the word "spiritual" or "spirit" derives from the Latin word *spiritus* meaning breath, courage, or vigor. It refers to the animating and life sustaining (e.g. "inspire") character of air and breath. The original Latin (*spiritus*) has no supernatural connotations. Those were added later



by Christianity and other religions.

When we thus understand the true origins and meanings of the term, Humanists can readily embrace it as a concept supporting an ideal of an inspired and vigorous life striving for that which is meaningful, engaging, challenging, and above all else worth living.

On June 7th my platform address will describe the ways in which our founder, Felix Adler, understood "Ethical Culture" and its dedication to the ethical way of life to be an inspired and inspiring life.

Boe is the Leader of the Ethical Culture Society of Essex County. She is also the Humanist Chaplain at Columbia University.

June 14 Season Finale: Brunch, discussion about the year's highlights and low lights — and songs to send us on our way for the summer.



From the past 12 months — clockwise from left: the Future of Health Care discussion, December 2008; Iraq Peace Rally, March 2009; and Solidarity Singers mark Pete Seeger's 90th birthday, May 2009.



This is the last newsletter until we see you again in the Fall. Have a great Summer!

Platforms begin at 11 a.m. All are welcome. Platforms are subject to change without notice. For information, contact the Society office, 973-763-1905.

EVENTS/ FUNDRAISERS

Folk Friday June 12

Come one, come all! June 12th is Folk Friday with friends Lucky, Dusty, Rusty & Tio Pete at the Ethical Culture Society, 516 Prospect St., Maplewood, at 7:30 p.m. Sing-along with friends and family.

Call to confirm (973) 763-1905 or e-mail: lnovemsky@comcast.net. No admission fee — bring a song and/or a light snack.



Annual Day in the Country June 27

Our annual Day in the Country at Boe's Place is at 12 noon, June 27th. And yes, the lake is still there, too. This has become a highlight of the summer season. Boe is the host extraordinaire, opening her home and her heart to as many as will come. The food is always
(continued on next page)

REGISTER NOW!

June 11-14, 2009

**American Ethical Union
94th Annual Assembly**

Hosted by: Ethical Society Mid Rivers. *Where:* Comfort Inn Airport & Conference Center, St. Louis, Missouri. *Please visit the website to view the Assembly Programming and to Register:*

www.regonline.com/aeu

or www.aeu.org

For information, call the AEU at

212-873-6500

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 EIGHTH 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



Attention members! Please submit your email addresses to ethicalessex@netscape.com to receive newsletter and other special event notices.

wonderful, and the camaraderie is great. Eat, drink, swim, paddle, hike, and chat. \$25 per person. No charge for children. Rain date is Sunday, June 28th. Call the office or Jeanine Rosh to reserve.

For information, call Nancy Bohn at (973) 762-0513 or Jeanine Rosh at (973) 258-9395.

A SPECIAL NOTE

Fund Raising adds a good portion of our funds to keep the Society going.

Thanks to all who opened their homes for a dinner, sponsored a Musical event, gave precious time to work at the Garage Sale or any other fundraiser.

— Nancy

LEADER'S ARTICLE

What Is Religion?

One of the etymological roots of the word "religion" is to be found in the Latin word *religare* meaning "to bind together or



to bind back." Another root of the term "religion" is the Greek word *alegein* meaning "to pay heed to" or obey.

Both of these meanings carry with them conceptions of a close and very hierarchic relationship. One thinks of a serf being bound to the soil or a slave to his master. But alternative connotations are also possible as when one is bound in holy matrimony. Nevertheless the implication, especially from the Greek origin, is definitely hierarchic. The one who is bound is not the equal of the one who binds.

Religions vary significantly with respect to the human role assigned to ecclesiastic authority. The Roman Catholic Church would be one end of a continuum of religious organizations representing the highest level of divinely delegated authority to do God's work on earth. The keys of the Kingdom of Heaven were given to St. Peter and thereby to each succeeding Pope. At the opposite extreme would be the Quakers who are virtually clergy free. I believe Ethical Culture would come

right after the Quakers insofar as Ethical Culture clergy do not function autonomously but rather in cooperation with the Society's Board of Directors.

There is one sense, however, in which Ethical Culture differs radically from conventional monotheistic religions. That is that Ethical Culturists/Humanists are bound to ethical principles and not to a divine being. In fact we ourselves have a role in creating and interpreting those principles. We are not bound to a god or gods but rather to each other through our ethical ideals.

— Boe

FROM THE UN

World Day of Social Justice and the Economic Crisis

Adam Smith, the guru of the free marketers, had it right in 1759. In his first book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he stated that "prudence is a virtue for individuals," but "humanity, justice, generosity and public spirit are the qualities most useful to others." The extraordinarily timely World Day of Social Justice recently established by the UN builds on the same fundamental idea that economic success depends on the well-being of people.

The followers of Adam Smith have ignored all these qualities. The market gurus who have distorted their prophet's message to claim that the market can heal all ills should have heeded what their prophet actually wrote. Adam Smith stressed the need for regulation of financial activities. Capitalism's success has increasingly come within the control of institutions that curtail its side effects and excesses, while providing the tools of a civilized society, which exist outside the market system.

The global financial meltdown affecting the rich countries is even more drastically hurting the poorer countries. Each day millions of the marginally poor are falling into unemployment, food scarcity and poverty — a global tsunami that politicians are warning could create political and social havoc both within and outside the borders of their countries. Any solution will require worldwide cooperation in a nexus of laws, business and trade. The present crisis has highlighted the inad-

equacy of the growth imperative and unregulated markets from the model of rational decision makers.

Many thinkers believe that this model of capitalism is bankrupt. Humorist Art Buchwald commented, "An economist is a man who knows a hundred ways to make love, but doesn't know any women." Even Allen Greenspan, a free marketer and former head of the Federal Reserve has admitted that he was wrong about deregulation. Billionaire Bill Gates, speaking at the Economic Summit at Davos, stated that unfettered capitalism cannot solve broad social problems.

On the UN's World Day of Social Justice, speakers proposed that an economic system needs to be just in order to function and to take into account the social and economic rights embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Articles 22 to 27 spell out rights to water, sanitation, food, housing and education — all outside the market driven model of economics.

Classical economics calls the negative effects of market activities "externalities". Attention to these crippling consequences are what is driving Bill Gates, when he speaks of a kinder "creative capitalism" that can create wealth through responding to these needs. Growth and prosperity should be judged by the well-being of people.

In the last 20 years, in the US, family income has risen only very modestly, but income inequality has mushroomed into a gap greater than any since the twenties. In 1975 the top 1% earned 8% of all the income in the US. But by 2005, that top sliver of the population earned almost 20% of the total income in the country. The top 10% of the population collects 44% of total income and the top 20% collects a walloping 60%. Here in the US we are increasingly a top-heavy economy.

In the world's population in 1980, the median income of the richest 10% was 70 times that of the poorest 10%. But in 2000 the gap widened to 122 times. It is no joke when we say that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.

Prior to the present financial crisis there were already warnings that the observed trends in income inequality might not be sustainable. The grossness of the inequality gap and the environmental damage from the emphasis on growth has undermined the stability of the system. Inadequate wages for workers and their families are causing them to rely more on debt.

There are numerous reasons for growth of inequality--deregulation, the decline of unions, stagnation in the minimum wage, and growing emphasis on technology. President Obama's top economic advisor Lawrence Summer has described the trend of increasing inequality as if each family in the bottom 80% of the income distribution was sending a \$10,000 check every year to the top 1% of earners.

Nobel Prizewinner in economics Amartya Sen, has proposed that instead of measuring only the GDP (gross domestic product) as an indicator of a country's well-being, it should be measured by a persons capabilities — "what people are actually able to do and be." One such measure, used by the UN, is the Human Development Index (HDI) which is a composite of income, longevity and education.

By this measure the US ranks eighth to Australia's third. Australia's annual income per head is \$9000 less than America's income. Nevertheless it ranks higher because Australians are better educated and live longer. The essential message of the World Day of Social Justice is that we need a global

economic system that shifts from a narrow preoccupation with markets to a broader perspective on the well-being of people.

[by Phyllis Ehrenfeld, President National Service Conference of the American Ethical Union and Representative to the UN; and Dr. Sylvain Ehrenfeld, International Humanist Ethical Union Representative to the UN]

COME AND HAVE SOME FUN:

Every Monday around 1:00 p.m. Roe, Gus and I go to the Foodbank of NJ, at Hillside, to volunteer for a couple of hours. It is lots of fun and we actually do some work as well.

I am sure we will try to do it through the summer: no vacation for hunger!

If you want to come with us/car-pool, or just come join us, you can call me, Anja, at 973-763-2211.

Thanks and have a great summer,

— Anja Moen

"THE SPIRITUALITY OF PARENTING"

"We want our children to be gracious and grateful, we want them to have courage in difficult times, we want them to have a sense of joy and purpose. That's what it means to nurture their spiritual life." The spiritual life, Rabbi Sandy Sasso says, begins not in abstractions, but in concrete everyday experiences. And children need our questions as much as our answers.

To become a parent in reality is to enter a state of extreme vulnerability. "To become a father," the French theologian Louis Evely aptly put it, "is to experience an infinite dependency on an infinitely small, frail being, dependent on us and therefore omnipotent over our heart."

Raising a new human being in this world is a monumental spiritual task, yet we so rarely call it that. This does

ETHICAL CULTURE SOCIETY OF ESSEX COUNTY

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(continued from pg. 3)

not become easier when, at some point, our offspring become little theologians and philosophers. They begin to ask huge questions about life and the universe — basic questions about how we got here and where God lives and why people die and why people hurt each other and what it means to be good and to be happy. These questions are the building blocks of religion and ethics. We refine them all of our lives, but at heart they remain the same. What changes is our ability to articulate and act on them.

As parents, we want to support this part of our children's natures. With other mundane aspects of parenting — like how to help them sleep, or how to feed them, or how to teach them to read — we know that we need help. We seek maps, books, and counselors. But when it comes to these personal, existential questions of meaning, we often feel that we should intuitively have the answers.

The spirituality of parenting is often a source of anxiety. It provokes a feeling of inadequacy. This is heightened in our age by the fact that so many of us are less connected to specific religious traditions and institutions than the generations that preceded us. And many of us inherit a mix of spiritual

practices in our own histories, marriages and extended families.

More than a few who are deeply rooted in a particular tradition stressed that even they need guidance on how to teach and model a vocabulary of words and practice for exploring religion and meaning and ethics as they share ordinary life with the children they love.

Rabbi Sandy Sasso encourages us to begin with what we know, and also to let our children lead us on a new journey of questioning and learning. We can seek out maps and books and counselors on this part of their development too, and we should. She also urges parents to explore the place they come from, the communities or traditions in their family and background, even if they have left it behind at another stage in life. Don't let those who modeled the worst of your faith, she adds, define that faith for you. Understand yourself as an ancestor to the next generation, as part of tradition's unfolding story.

Most of all, we should attend to our children's musings about life's wonders and injustices, their grief at the death of a pet or a loved one, their response to a homeless person encountered on the street. It is all right not to have answers for their large moral and existen-

tial questions. Unlike adults, children are not afraid of mystery. But they do need us to help them develop vocabularies and ways of living to keep those questions alive and growing. They need to hear how we think about large questions of meaning, and about what experience has taught us. They need to hear our questions and our stories. Stories are the vocabulary of theology for children. They also crave and will use ritual and routine, and we can form these from daily life and commonplace experiences.

Children can make the essence of religion come alive. They may ultimately teach us far more than we teach them. "Children open windows for us," Sandy Sasso says, "or can crawl through windows that we can't crawl through, and they open part of our life that maybe has been dormant for a long time." The rest is mystery, and our children will help us embrace that more joyfully too. •

Rabbi Sasso's books for children are written from a perspective of deep faith, but they are nonsectarian treasures endorsed by spiritual leaders from many traditions. This article was excerpted from: <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2009/spiritualityofparenting/lists.shtml>