

BE NICE, BUT. . . – May 2007

— By Richard L. Kiniry

I occasionally wonder if our open attitude toward morality is too casual to be of much use. After all we are the Ethical Society and we find a lot wrong with our world, and we talk about making the world better and acting to bring out the best in others, but what about our personal behavior? Many religious groups psychologically abuse their members in an effort to keep them on the straight and narrow. That is not the case with the more liberal religious groups; personal behavior is often considered just that, personal. At times it can seem that for liberal religion being ethical has become the same as being nice. Well, actually there is some truth there — being nice and being ethical have much in common. If you are a person who takes other people's interest into consideration you are probably being both nice and ethical.

Does that mean we should change our name to the Nice Society of Philadelphia? Not so fast. Although we don't talk about personal ethics often, I hope we all know that ethical behavior means more than just being nice. Most people if asked would say being ethical means doing the right thing, assuming we all have the same idea of right. The belief that there is only one right action in any situation is too simplistic. Without being totally relativistic we would say finding the right depends on the situation, on the intention, and on the consequences. But primarily being ethical is a process of character and integrity.

Being nice is a socially useful habit and doesn't require much thought. Being friendly, helpful, and cooperative qualifies you for the title of nice, but being ethical may require more thoughtful, possibly objectionable, behavior. Which of course doesn't mean that being nice doesn't have ethical force. The simple act of being nice is an under-appreciated first step in bringing out the best in most people.

Ethical Humanism's golden rule for judging ethical behavior is our adage: when you act to bring out the best in others, you are bringing out the best in yourself. I cannot count the number of ways I have dissected that saying of Felix Adler's as I have attempted to make it sensible to newcomers. Basically the idea is, you ought to realize that your life is not an individual event. You should awaken to the fact that your life is a relationship and caring for the pieces of your relationship is caring for yourself. What you sow, you will reap. Bringing out the best in the human parts of your relationship with life means you accept those people as part of you while accepting that they are different and distinct. Life works better when all the parts are working at their best. Ethics doesn't mean following rules, or just being nice, it means putting yourself into the lives of others as a force for the good. And the good becomes the fulfillment and happiness of all those parts. The way you treat the rest of life isn't just the moral part of your life, it is your life, it is who you are.

That isn't easy to comprehend, at least for me, but it explains why we don't do much preaching about personal ethical behavior. We don't offer moral principles that can be measured, we offer an attitude toward life as an ethical guide. And since every relationship is unique, each of us has to do it our own way. But while we are at it, may I ask, how are you doing at caring about the uniqueness of others? You have a moral responsibility to be a positive force for good in the lives of those around you. That doesn't mean you receive a pass by performing noble good deeds. Besides good deeds you are responsible for your day-to-day presence in the lives of others. Do you limit yourself to telling the world what is best or do you attempt to bring out the best?