

Leader's Message September 2009

Empathy

by Richard Kiniry

I'm regularly outraged by news reports on the radio but I don't usually consider the reports to be insults to my religion. The values of the Ethical Culture Movement are often challenged or disregarded in the political arena but rarely has one of our core values been specifically attacked as wrong and un-American. In the ordinary course of politics our values are often ignored – respect for other human beings is ignored as the nation goes to war, the poor and disadvantaged are left to wallow in their problems and playing fast and loose with the truth is commonplace in the political arena – but when Sonia Sotomayor was, as I heard on the radio, declared unfit for the Supreme Court because she has shown signs of empathy for people, that was a direct attack on our religious values.

We already knew that some political groups have little empathy for people different from themselves, but to directly attack empathy as a problem makes explicit the underlying difference in approach between them and us. You know how bad things have gotten when empathy is belittled.

Many of those anti-empathy politicians wear their religion on their sleeves and I have to wonder what they are learning in the pews of their religious institutions. Obviously they have some notion that what serves them and their kind must be universally true and good and that Supreme Court Justices ought to think like them and decide cases in conformity with their interests.

So, although we don't need more evidence that in America there is a considerable divide in understanding of what makes a good society, it is useful to have clear evidence that the divide is not just in political terms but also in religious terms. We Ethical Humanist believe that living is not a static experience but a relational one; we accept that those around us are not just stage props but part of us, and the community we build should reflect that empathic understanding.

So much of our public life is shaped to keep people in line rather than reflecting the diversity of needs. Our laws ignore the reality in which many people live, treating us as objects to be restricted rather than as individuals who need respect and empathy. When we as an Ethical Society take stands on social issues, we should realize that empathy, one of our foundational values, demands that we ask who might be hurt by our stand.

I hope Justice Sotomayor does take her empathy into Supreme Court decisions. As a Latina she can see and feel the injustice that is too often written into so many of our laws. Rich, white men wrote our Constitution and then proceeded to rule on the constitutionality of every new law, but that document has evolved only because Justices have found windows of empathy through which to widen the rights of all.

Empathy is one of our sacred values. Besides personally practicing it every day, we should work to make it part of our laws, customs and community life.

