

## **Leader's Message**

### ***Movement***

**March 2011**

Reconnecting with the meaning of the words that we loosely throw around can be revealing. Ethical Societies, Ethical Culture Societies and Ethical Humanist Societies are all federated into the American Ethical Union, but we describe ourselves as the Ethical Culture Movement. What movement? Movement in the sense we use the word is defined as “a group of people working to advance a shared cause?” I don't see the shared cause. Although physically I have not seen all the Ethical Societies in America, I stay in contact with the Societies, the Leaders and the Administration of the AEU, and I don't experience a group of people working to advance a shared cause. What I do witness is a collection of groups meeting weekly with varying levels of commitment to the philosophy of Felix Adler and his successors. Which is not so bad. Since those groups create thoughtful communities of progressive people concerned with helping to make a better world, we can be proud of what we have accomplished. And if our shared cause is the continued survival of these Ethical Societies, that is a worthy if not a terribly exciting cause. But beyond survival, it is a mystery to me what cause those Societies share.

The lack of movement in the Movement could be that the causes overtook the cause. From the beginning our focus on a better world had individual Societies focusing on diverse social justice causes—housing reform, legal reform, prison reform, gay rights, women's rights, racial justice and anti-war—all good causes, but they have overshadowed and deflected attention from Ethical Religion. When this Movement began, Felix Adler was offering a different approach to living as a new religion—living as a relational, ethical, creative experience without God. But with our focus on social issues, and as other denominations became more socially conscious, Ethical Societies became identified as just another liberal religious group, more humanistic and less traditionally religious, but still another religious community.

Through the years as our philosophic foundation evolved from Adler's Ethical Idealism to Ethical Humanism, the value of Adler's radical understanding of religion has been neglected. He took the spiritual world from the heavens and situated it in the relational experience of human beings. That offered a different approach to religion. It made individuals the center of the creative process. Life is not a process of fitting in or doing well but of taking responsibility for your part of the world around you. Meaning is not found but is created by the way the individual lives. I believe that is the movement part of the Ethical Culture Movement. Ethical Societies may have varied personalities, but the Movement is about a change in the understanding of religion with the message that genuine religion ought to move past dogma and ritual and make central each person's presence in this world. To be part of the Ethical Culture Movement means that besides being a part of an Ethical Society, you believe in the transformation of religion into a guide to better human relations, which for me means a critique of other religions and our own.

















