



ETHICAL VIEWS



October 2020 Vol. 135, No. 2 Newsletter of the Philadelphia Ethical Society



Ruth Bader Ginsburg, 1933 - 2020, trailblazing fighter for the rights of women and minorities, has left us. She famously said that dissent speaks to a future age. We look forward to revisiting her words and will honor her enormous legacy.

SUNDAY PLATFORMS

Please turn to page 3 for platform descriptions.

Sunday, October 4, 11:00AM

***Being Mortal*, Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader, Philadelphia Ethical Society**

Sunday, October 11, 11:00AM

***America: What Went Wrong? The Crisis Deepens*, James Steele, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and bestselling author**

Sunday, October 18, 11:00AM

***Film, Emotions, Us, and Them*, Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader, Philadelphia Ethical Society**

Sunday, October 25, 11:00AM

***Poetic Notes on Citizenship* Trapeta B. Mayson, City of Philadelphia Poet Laureate**

Sunday, November 1, 10:30 AM

***Sacred Democracy*, (note the early start time since it is hosted by the Baltimore Ethical Society)**



Remember that clocks fall back on Sunday, November 1.

LEADER'S COLUMN

Resisting Reptilian Political Reactions

For the first time in a while, we have a contested election for Mayor in Takoma Park where I live. Our progressive town of 17,000 folks is politically active and leans hard to the left, especially regarding national politics. Local issues about traffic and budget details don't generate a lot of energy. But this time, I'm getting engaged.



I won't go into detail about why I am backing Roger over the incumbent, though I was disappointed that the present mayor seemed to care more about developers than the concerns of the neighborhood.

Continued on page 5

EDITOR'S NOTE

You'll see our latest installment of Jim Cummings' story on page 2. Jim was an uncommon man, a special man, but in ways a common man, no different from you or me. All too often, in telling the stories of people we cherish, we don't go deep enough to capture the essence of those we revere. We don't catch more than a whisper of the life that lies hidden within the human heart, where our doubts and questions lurk. In so doing, we reduce the full human being to sound-bites and convenient clichés. There are so many people among us, simultaneously common and uncommon, whose story, when well told, can burrow into the soft crevices of the human heart to reveal a fascinating life that is full of questions and conflicts, pondered over but left unanswered. That's how we are trying to tell Jim's story. If we all share our stories with that in mind, we will create a bond between us that is unbreakable.

– Henry Pashkow

Please join our online events at the scheduled times by visiting tiny.cc/phillyethics

A SON PAYS HOMAGE TO HIS FATHER – PART II

By Gaston Cummings,
as told to Sally Redlener and Henry Pashkow

JIM CUMMINGS
JUNE 14, 1920-JULY 29, 2020

Dad was sixteen when he left the orphanage and returned to his mother's home. He worked as a teacher's aide at the orphanage school. They offered him a three-year teacher training program. It sparked his interest in the teaching profession and he enrolled in it. But Dad didn't complete it. He had to contribute to the support of his mother and his siblings. It was 1936, and a War loomed on the horizon, presenting other opportunities.

The Americans had obtained from the United Kingdom a lease on military bases in Trinidad, and better paying jobs opened up as they began to 'refashion' the island according to military needs. Dad got a job with the military; then a better one with the police department. And then a still better job with a company called Carib, back then a small beer distributor, though now a big company. Through every change Dad contributed to the support of the family, still struggling with poverty.

In June, 1940, France fell before the Nazi onslaught. The Germans unleashed their ferocious Luftwaffe upon the British Isles. First the Blitz, a massive air attack against British industrial targets and civilian populations in 1940 and 1941. They bombed the British people mercilessly. The British expected a land invasion. The Germans juggernaut seemed invincible. But the British wouldn't surrender.

By 1942 the Americans and the Russians had joined the Allied side and the tide of war slowly shifted. In 1943 the British military offered island residents an opportunity to serve in the War. Whether motivated by patriotism or simply an offer of better paying jobs, many islanders responded. Dad went, while his brothers and older sister Elsie remained in Trinidad.

Dad joined the British in their interminable struggle against Germany. He worked for the Royal Air Force maintaining and repairing air strips, and then the building of new airfields after so many had been obliterated. Dangerous work that was, for the Germans would bomb the fields and then turn back to make sure they weren't being repaired, and bomb them again. But Dad took the risks. He was there. So was the ugly face of Racism. Dad stood fast. As before, he sent most of his pay to his mother.

When the War ended, Dad returned to Trinidad. He'd met his future wife, my mother Adlyn, in 1939. They'd been keeping in touch and building a bond, leading to marriage in 1949, when I was born, in Trinidad. My sister Maureen was born in 1952, also in Trinidad.

Still very much alive within him was that

unwavering desire to further his education, a seed that had been implanted in him by the nuns at Belmont Orphanage, a seed that had taken root, and flourished. In 1954 Dad went back to England to take advantage of their educational system. Mom joined him in 1955, leaving me and

my sister behind. Elizabeth, my youngest sister, was born in England in 1956.

In 1961 Dad was admitted to the program for obtaining his general certificate at the London Polytechnical School. He worked his day job and took courses at night and got his general certificate in 1962. In 1963 he was admitted to the University School of Economics in 1963 and graduated with his B.S. Degree in Economics in 1965, which led to an opportunity to teach. Racists be damned! Dad was determined.

Next: Dad becomes a teacher.

The thread of this story will be continued in the next issue of this newsletter.



Jim reading at Camp Linden.

SUNDAY PLATFORM DESCRIPTIONS

Sunday, October 4 11:00AM

***Being Mortal*, Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader, PES**

Few books so effectively combine the mundane and the profound as does Atul Gawande's *Being Mortal*. It bemoans the fact that technological society has lost touch with "the art of dying." No human story is complete without the conclusion of our finite time, and yet as authors of our own life we avoid scripting it. We hardly even discuss it. As a result, we deprive ourselves of an opportunity to craft and savor the miraculous wholeness of life. Hugh Taft-Morales explores Gawande's insights about medicine, its limits, and what matters in the end.



Sunday, October 11, 11:00AM

***America: What Went Wrong? The Crisis Deepens*, James Steele, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and bestselling author**

Long before Covid-19 ravaged the economy, millions of middle-class Americans were struggling with stagnant earnings, unaffordable health care and the prospect of an impoverished retirement. This is no accident: in an updated and expanded edition of their *New York Times* #1 bestseller, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporters Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele explain with human stories and statistical findings how specific actions by Washington and Wall Street are systematically dismantling the middle classes. Our guest, James Steele, will discuss those findings with us today.

With his longtime writing partner, Donald L. Barlett, Steele worked as an investigative journalist at *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Time* magazine and *Vanity Fair*, and co-authored nine books with Barlett. In recognition of his contributions to journalism, Temple University in 2016 created the James B. Steele Chair in Journalism Innovation, in the Lew Klein College of Media and Communication. He and his wife live in Fitler Square in Philadelphia.

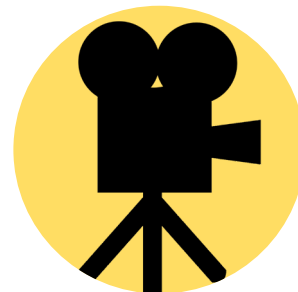
www.barlettandsteele.com



Sunday, October 18, 11:00AM

***Film, Emotions, Us, and Them*, Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader, PES**

Film has the ability to bring people together and to drive them apart. Ken Burn's *The Civil War* portrayed the conflict in a way that highlighted our shared identity as Americans. Bringing people together is partially what led Burns to become a storyteller. At the same time, film can accentuate tribal divisions, such as the Nazi propaganda films of Leni Riefenstahl. In our new pandemic reality, as we burn through our Netflix offerings, how should we understand film? As the election nears, and campaigns hurl manipulative political videos at us, how should we process cinematic efforts that unite us and divide us?



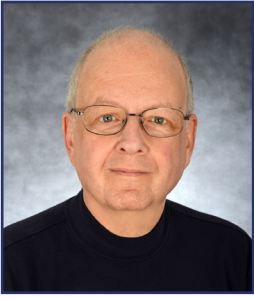
Sunday, October 25, 11:00AM

***Poetic Notes on Citizenship*, Trapeta B. Mayson, City of Philadelphia Poet Laureate**

How does one establish roots and "citizenship" in a new place? What if the new place challenges one's identity and sense of belonging? Join poet and Liberian immigrant, Trapeta B. Mayson as she talks about transitions, displacement, home making and identity. Trapeta will read her poetry and share her experiences as an immigrant living in America. As Philadelphia's current Poet Laureate, Trapeta Mayson reads her poetry widely and works extensively conducting poetry and creative writing workshops with youth and adults. Her work honors the experiences and stories of everyday people. She is a recipient of numerous grants and awards, including a Pew Fellowship and Leeway Transformation Award. She is the author of two books, *She Was Once Herself* and *Mocha Melodies*. Trapeta is a native of Liberia. She is a graduate of Temple University, Bryn Mawr Graduate of Social Work and Social Research and Villanova School of Business. Trapeta uses her art-making in partnership with others to mobilize, build community and create change. Trapetamayson.com



PRESIDENT'S COLUMN Contactless Humanism



We are approaching seven months of quarantine in our strange new world. Yes, it's hard to believe that we have not been physically together since March 15. The one thing I looked forward to was seeing everyone and our guests in person. ZOOM has been great, but it's just not the same. I do have contact with many of our Society family, but I miss seeing you, so I've decided to pick up my membership list and start calling. To fill the void in my heart I'm going to try to reach out. If you're up to it, please call me.

As we all know, the presidential election is right around the corner, and this election is, without a doubt, the most important of our lifetime. I hope you are doing everything you can to get out the vote. I want to take this opportunity to thank Cheryl, our Society administrator, and John McCormick for working on the Reclaim Our Vote campaign.

The American Ethical Union has mailed 70,000 postcards to voters in difficult areas of the country, such as Florida, North Carolina and Texas. Here at PES we have done our part mailing 2,000 postcards. I want to personally thank everyone who's been involved. We need to take our country back.

Please make sure you get a mail-in ballot, complete it, sign it, and mail it as soon as possible. If you prefer to vote in person, make your transportation plans. We need every vote; we can't take anything for granted. Please do your part. If you know anyone who'll need assistance with the voting process, do what you can.

We continue to take care of our home on Rittenhouse Square. Cheryl Desmond spends two days a week in the office as well as working from home.

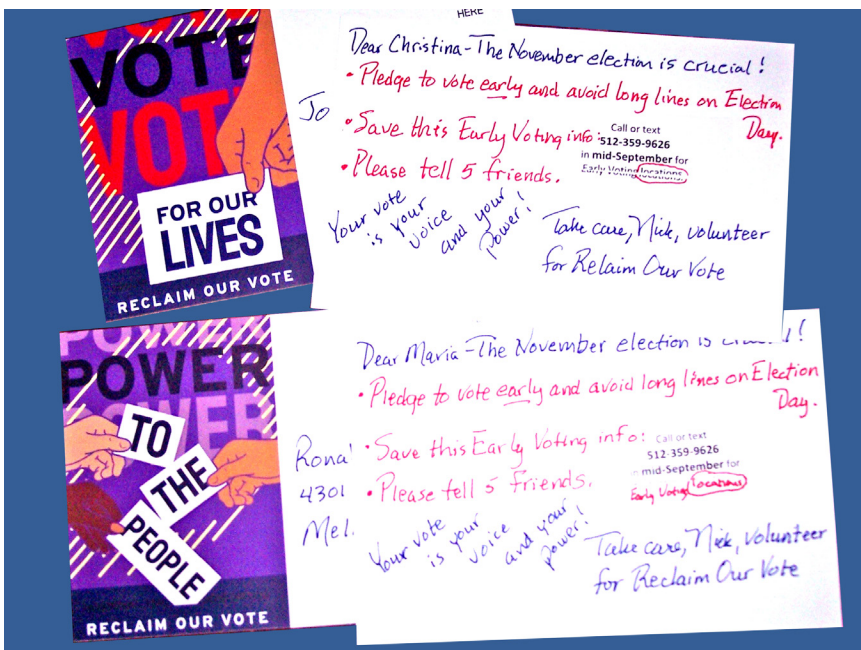
Greg Williams, our building maintenance manager, remains on duty. Greg continues to keep our building secure and clean; he is on site 24/7 to make sure everything stays safe.

As you know, we have several permanent tenants, so we have to keep the utilities and the lights on. We are fortunate to have a beautiful meeting space, but its upkeep in this pandemic has been a drain on our finances.

I wish I could tell you when we'll be back together in person, but only time will tell. For now, we're in a world of ZOOM. Even so, we have excellent programs planned for the new season. "See" you there!

Bob Bueding

bbueding@phillyethics.org



The Reclaim Our Vote (ROV) postcards have an attractive design on half their address side, while allowing volunteers on the flip side of the postcards to create interesting layouts of the standard message required by ROV.

In this photo, you can see how volunteer Nick Sanders has blue-and-red penned the standard ROV encouragements and guidance for a couple of voters to take the opportunity in Texas for early voting.

LEADER'S COLUMN Resisting Reptilian Political Reactions

Continued from page 1

So I ordered a green yard sign emblazoned with “Roger!” I am sharing this with you because I’ve become more aware of the tribalism alive and well in my psyche.

My main exercise these days is walking briskly around the neighborhood, pumping hand weights to simulate the whole-body workout I used to get at my gym. I started counting how many homes displayed campaign signs, both Roger’s green signs and the mayor’s blue signs. It became a little game. Since I live nearer Roger, I was not surprised to find him “winning” these competitions. What I was surprised was what happened inside me.

I began feeling a camaraderie towards “Roger homes” and hostility toward “incumbent homes.” I imagined that I could walk up to homes with green signs, knock on the door, and be greeted (in a socially distanced manner) as a friend with whom I could share a beer. In my imagination, within the homes with blue

signs lurked snarling and mean-spirited people. I imagined asking them rhetorically and righteously, “How could you?”

I’m not proud of this. While I have an opinion about the mayoral race, I shouldn’t be judging the “blue sign homeowners” so harshly. Right next door are blue sign neighbors I like a lot. But, as Jonathan Haidt explained in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided By Politics and Religion*, our “reptilian brain” seizes on “in-group loyalty” and creates tribalism. This runs against my Ethical Culture commitment to treat each person as if they were precious and of inherent worth. It’s a sobering reminder of my own worst instincts.

It helps explain the cultural divide that this fall’s election is exacerbating. Political extremists are demeaning each other with sanctimonious and nasty aggression. It doesn’t help that the “divider

in chief” manipulates our brain stems for his own needs and interests. He is helping bring out our worst in a way that threatens social safety. While I doubt I will go out tomorrow and attack the “blue sign homeowners,” I am reminded how easily we are led down tribal paths.

So, I plan to take some deep breaths and try to follow the advice Stanford professor Robert Sapolsky offers in his 2017 book, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst*. Having studied primates extensively, Sapolsky explains that, “...we are all

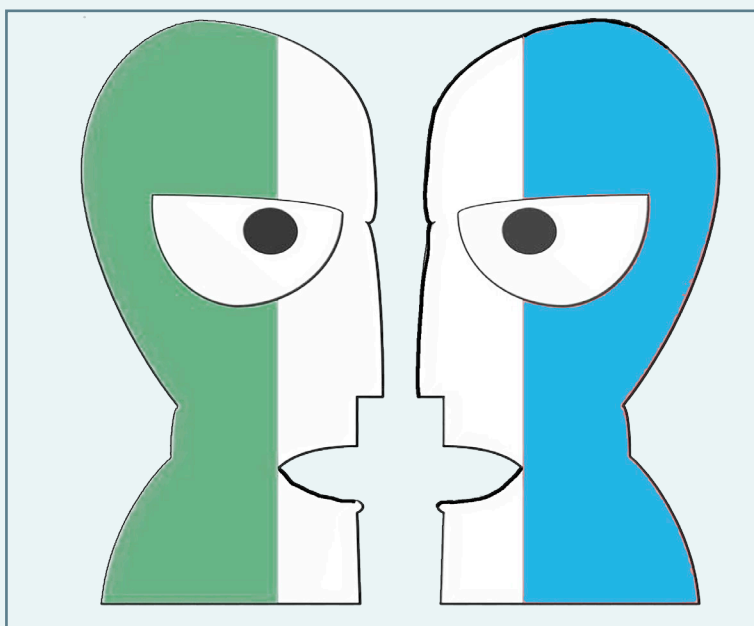
prone to tribalism — that is, instantaneously sizing up strangers to determine if they’re one of us and therefore to be trusted. For humans, this is the process that underlies racism, political polarization, and any number of prejudices.... Primates are hardwired for us/them dichotomies. Our brains detect them in less than 100 milliseconds.”

Though I condemn the tribal polarization of national politics, I sense

this 100-millisecond snap judgment about green sign homes and blue sign homes every day on my walks. Like Sapolsky, I find our condition “depressing as hell.” While exercising I will, however, try to exercise what he says calls “one major advantage over monkeys” – our ability to communicate with others whom we initially judge as opponents. After all, Sapolsky points out, “We do our worst when we’re surrounded by a lot of people who agree with us.”

So, I will reach out beyond my green sign bubble and speak to a blue signer or two in my neighborhood. It may be harder to do something similar regarding the national election, but it could be a way to more fully live my Ethical Culture commitment to bring out the best in others and thus in myself.

– Hugh Taft-Morales



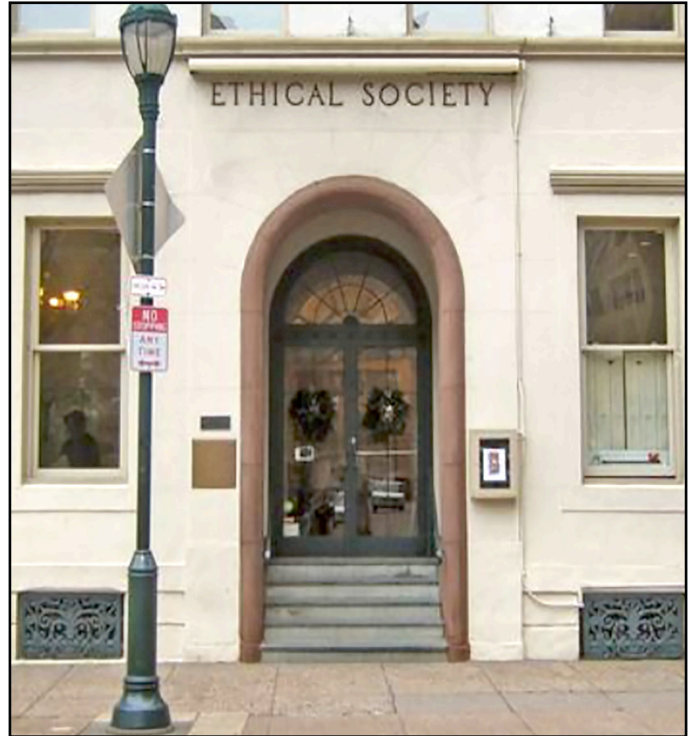
HANDS-ON VOLUNTEER: Michael Black-Smith

Mike writes:

When the glass pane of our smaller message box on the front of our building was found broken a few months ago, fixing it went from being an aesthetic concern to a safety and longevity concern. Broken glass is never a good thing and the box was now more exposed to the elements. I had been eager to get the message box onto my workbench to learn more about its construction.

The box's door is constructed of bronze-wrapped mahogany. After decades of use, the bronze got slightly deformed when tugged on, which opened the mahogany up to more exposure and rot, leading to more stress and deformation of the bronze.

These are pictures of the new replacement mahogany frame set in to the bronze after that had been squared-up. And the new glass pane has been tempered for added strength.



The glass-pane message box to the right of the entrance was damaged a few months ago.



The interior of the mahogany door of the message box with reinforced framing.



The mahogany door with new, tempered glass, and new lock and key.



UPCOMING EVENTS

ALL EVENTS ARE VIA ZOOM.COM
UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

Sunday, October 4, 7:00PM:

Introduction to Ethical Humanism

Hugh Taft-Morales hosts the first Introduction to Ethical Humanism of the 2020-2021 season virtually on ZOOM. Join him for a 30-minute presentation and casual Q&A about this 144-year-old expression of congregational humanism.



A B.Z. (Before-Zoom) era gathering for an Introduction to Ethical Humanism session.

Thursday, October 15, 12:30PM - 1:45PM:

Lunch with Hugh

Join members of the Baltimore and Philadelphia Ethical Societies for a casual conversation with Hugh Taft-Morales. To stir the pot, he'll suggest we share thoughts about Halloween – maybe favorite memories from the past or creative plans for our upcoming pandemic-affected Oct. 31.



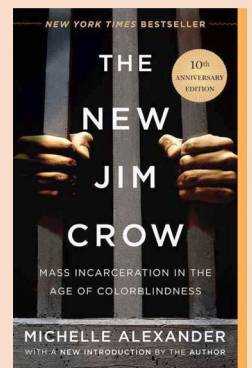
AEU Book discussions

Thanks to the initiative of Jone Lewis, Leader of the Riverdale-Yonkers Society for Ethical Culture, the American Ethical Union is hosting a series of book discussions touching on aspects of race and racism. These educational offerings are intended to help Ethical Culture move further along in our anti-racism work. Go to the [AEU.org](https://www.aeu.org) to register – SPACE IS LIMITED

In October, Hugh Taft-Morales will offer discussions as follows:

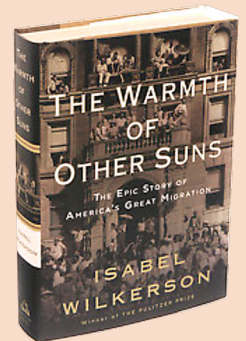
Tuesday, October 6 and 13, 6:00-7:30PM

The New Jim Crow,
Michelle Alexander



Tuesdays, Oct. 20 and 27, 6:00-7:30PM

The Warmth of Other Suns,
Isabel Wilkerson



PES Fall Office Hours

Society Administrator Cheryl will be in the office every Wednesday from 10 AM to 6 PM. Phone calls and in-person appointments are welcome during that time.

Email business will be conducted remotely Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday from 9 to 11 AM.

215-735-3456 office@phillyethics.org

October Birthdays

5 Jeffrey Dubb
12 Leonard Weeks
14 Doris Leicher



“To make life a little better for people less fortunate than you, that’s what I think a meaningful life is. One lives not just for oneself but for one’s community.”

~ Ruth Bader Ginsburg



SUNDAY SERVICES

11:00 A.M.

Ethical Views is published monthly
except July and August.

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PHILADELPHIA ETHICAL SOCIETY COMMITTEES

Our Society is sustained by all of its volunteers who serve on the many committees that fulfill our purpose and guide our decisions. The following generous members serve as chairs.

Building Committee

Michael Black-Smith. Next Meeting TBD

Education Committee

Betsy Lightbourn, Next Meeting Wed., Oct. 11, 4:00 PM

Camp Linden

Jeffrey Dubb, Next Meeting TBD

Ethical Action Committee

Nick Sanders. Next Meeting Mon. Oct. 19, 3:30 - 5:00PM

End Racism Task Force

Sylvia Metzler. Next Meeting Sat. Oct. 17 11:00 AM

Finance Committee

Vincent Russo. Next Meeting Wed. Oct. 14 5:00 PM

Communication Committee

Drew Snyder. TBD



FLOWERS

October 4. From Nick Sanders "For Molly on our 19th Anniversary."

October 11. From Vince Russo "Dedicated to Science."

For suggestions regarding this newsletter, contact
Henry Pashkow
hpashkow@gmail.com

AEU NATIONAL LEADERS COUNCIL ON ZOOM

The American Ethical Union is the federating organization of Ethical Societies. As President of the National Leaders Council, Hugh Taft-Morales attends a variety of AEU meetings and supports a number of AEU initiatives. This particular screen-shot captures an AEU Team Leader meeting.



Participating are: Top row, L to R – Casey Gardonio-Foat (Education Comm Chair); Hugh; John Daken (Membership Comm Chair); Sue Walton (Assembly Coordinator + Board Development Comm Chair); Middle row, L to R – Randy Best (Dean of Leadership); Carolyn Parker (Ethical Action Comm Chair + Assembly Co-Chair); Bart Worden (Executive Director); Richard Koral (Fundraising Chair); bottom row, L to R – Emily Newman (Communications Coordinator); Sonja Kueppers (Board President); Liz Collier (Leadership Comm Chair); and participating by phone, L. Miller (Director of Administration + Assembly Co-Chair).