



ETHICAL VIEWS



December 2021 Vol. 136, No. 4 Newsletter of the Philadelphia Ethical Society

SUNDAY PLATFORMS

The public is welcome to join us

Sunday, December 5, 11 AM

The Voices of Women

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

Every month for the last year, Hugh read a book by a woman novelist. These writers offer compelling insights into their own external and interior lives and distinct perspectives on the wider world around them. Yet their work too often is marginalized in our still male-centric society. Come

hear what Hugh learned from immersing himself in the works of such diverse authors as Toni Morrison, Louisa May Alcott, Zora Neale Hurston, Virginia Woolf, Isabel Allende, Octavia Butler, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ursula K. Le Guin, Geraldine Brooks, Barbara Chase-Riboud, and Julie Schumacher.

Toni Morrison

Virginia Woolf

Louisa May Alcott

Zora Neale Hurston

Isabel Allende

Octavia Butler

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Ursula K. Le Guin

Geraldine Brooks

Barbara Chase-Riboud

Julie Schumacher

Sunday, December 12, 11 AM

Dissent Gave Birth to the United States

Ralph Young, Historian, Temple University

In his research and teaching, Ralph Young has focused on the history of American dissent from the perspective of dissenters and protest movements. He will explain how dissent birthed the United States, was ensconced in the First Amendment to the Constitution, and became a defining characteristic

of this nation. Young's publications include *Dissent in America*; *Dissent: The History of an American Idea*; and *Make Art Not War*. He is the recipient of six major teaching awards including the Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching and Temple University's highest honor, The Great Teacher Award.

Sunday, December 19, 11 AM

Winter Solstice Celebration

Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader

Come celebrate the Winter Solstice with spoken word and music! This year we'll feature Solstice celebrations from around the world and through history. Email **Hugh** if you would like to do a reading during the program.



Sunday, December 26

Happy Holidays!

There will be no platform this morning.



IN THIS ISSUE . . .

All the world's a stage! Our new community life coordinator talks about her life in the theater. The Ending Racism Task Force presents a play. And Hugh is back, live, at the lectern (albeit for a very small audience).

TO ZOOM OR NOT TO ZOOM

Although we remain largely Zoom-bound, some small meetings this month may take place in-person. Check with Hugh or your committee chair.

Join us just prior to each session at www.tiny.cc/phillyethics



By Hugh Taft-Morales

THERE'S A FAMILY OF JOKES that shares a common punchline: "Make me one with everything." Whether it's the Dali Lama ordering in a pizzeria or a Buddhist monk at a hot dog stand, the humor comes from the confusion between a mundane request for dietary excess and a profound human yearning.

To be one with everything is to exist in a state of intimate and expansive unity with the universe. Often, it is framed as the quintessential spiritual goal. From the 19th century Hindu mystic Ramakrishna to the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson, people have heralded such oneness as the peak of spiritual consciousness. Emerson represented this experience by imagining that he was a "transparent eyeball" taking in the vastness of the universe and "Universal Being." He concluded, "I am part or parcel of God."

The French writer Romain Rolland, who studied eastern mysticism, described the experience of such unity as an "oceanic feeling." His friend Sigmund Freud, however, took a more critical view. Freud painted the desire for such states of consciousness as "primitive," a regression to infancy prior to individuation, before we become capable of appreciating the needs and desires of others. For an infant, such a desire is understandable. For a mature human, Freud implied, it signifies narcissism, inadequacy, and weakness. Freudian disdain for those who want to be one with everything is evident in western culture. Today we mock self-absorbed spiritual seekers as hedonists who need to grow up and get a real job.

But I wonder if humanism—without forfeiting its

admirable dedication to reason and evidence—should provide *more* opportunities for people to feel at one with everything. That is what Ed Ericson suggests in his book *The Humanist Way*. In Chapter 5, Ericson explores the humanism of the evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley, who "soars into a full-blown nature mysticism" in a quest for "cosmic piety." He also discusses "peak experiences," which the psychologist Abraham Maslow defined as "moments of highest happiness and fulfillment" that appear to render meaning from life. Ericson admits that such moments are "rare and fleeting." Still, humans seek them through myriad avenues: art, meditation, asceticism, drugs, and, unfortunately, losing oneself in irrational mass movements.



Today, when irrationality seems to be running amok, I was struck by a warning from Ericson: "If a rational and reasonable faith is not available to human beings—if what is offered is not spiritually adequate—civilization will be turned toward a new dark age of superstition and mind control."

Is this where we have found ourselves? Are mass irrationality and the cynical media manipulation that feeds it a consequence of religion's failure to adequately fulfill the human yearning for oneness? Has our desire for

unity been corrupted into brutal tribalism? How can we offer humanists opportunities to feel at one with everything without turning it into a joke?

Let me know what you think. I'll be returning to this theme in future Leader's columns.

Hugh Taft-Morales is the leader of the Philadelphia Ethical Society.

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NEW FACES

Reva Stover Brings the Fun

REVA STOVER, OUR NEW COMMUNITY life coordinator, has led a life of plays and protests. Born in Orlando, Florida, Reva moved here last year to teach theater to children in underfunded elementary schools. Since then, she's had several plays produced, run an education program for a theater in Vermont, and launched a company that uses art, education, and community to create safe spaces for marginalized people. "Bringing people together is my expertise," says Reva, who will be doing just that for the Philadelphia Ethical Society.

What would you like members to know about you?

I have been doing theater my entire life. I consider myself a storyteller, and a large part of my storytelling is in line with Ethical Culture. Plays that I write or direct and roles that I perform affirm the value of human life regardless of the qualifications of that life. I try to tell underrepresented stories and provide a space for the unheard to speak.

Can you give us an example?

I just had the great good fortune that a play I wrote—*Hungry for Paint*—was produced by Little Yellow House Studio. It asks the audience to examine their role in the political system and how we all disenfranchise each other by not listening, by taking on the attributes of our oppressors. It tries to push us toward community instead of individualism.

How does your passion for the arts connect with your new role at the Ethical Society?

The arts are one of our most powerful tools for bringing together people with seemingly unlike minds. We all love art—theater or music or dance—and it is a very human trait to want to engage with it. I want to use creative thinking and creative opportunities to bring together our community.

Tell me about your experience as an activist.

My parents were very engaged activists. My whole family would go to protests together when I was little. In college I started going to protests for women's rights issues: then political rallies, pro-choice rallies, anti-racism rallies.

Over 2020 I was extremely active running goods and

services for the unhoused campaign off of Benjamin Franklin Parkway as well as actively engaging in Black Lives Matter and queer liberation protests. I live a very intersectional life, so it is not one specific issue that has galvanized me. There is a whole world of people that needs that support.

What is your top priority for the Ethical Society?

I want the community to have more fun. It is clear you care about each other. But I want you to laugh together and have memories that are built around the Society. That is why we are all here together as this little family. I think having those fun moments will help us to build our membership.

I know you've only had a short time to interact with our community. But what has most surprised you?

Everyone is so nice, all the time. I'm like, how are you doing that? You are human people in the middle of a pandemic. And yet you are all still so kind.



The play's the thing: Reva Stover wants Society members to have more good times together.

THIS IS US Two Small—But Joyful—Returns

“LIVE FROM RITTENHOUSE SQUARE, IT’S our Sunday platform!” Those were the exultant words of Michael Black-Smith who, on November 7, stood at the Ethical Society lectern, presiding in-person for the first time since becoming president in September. Three masked members sat a more-than-discreet distance apart in the auditorium, which was furnished with enough empty chairs to hold 30 times their number. At a long table near the stage, Drew Snyder toggled between managing in-room acoustics and the Zoom netherworld, where more than 40 members had tuned in for Leader Hugh’s presentation on the challenge for humanists of public prayer.

The last time members gathered “where we meet to seek the highest” was 20 months ago. Normalcy creeps back slowly as the Board juggles the competing demands of safety and community. But for those present, this first hybrid platform felt like a milestone.

Before the platform, Drew and Hugh agreed on signals to slow down or stop Hugh’s presentation in the event of technical difficulties. “Is my voice loud enough?” asked Hugh. “Or,” he added, pumping up the volume, “do I need to be more projective, like I normally do?” (The goal, they decided, was “not too boomy.”)

On-screen, two new members—Ruth and Barry Dubinsky—introduced themselves. The talkback was lively. Meanwhile, in the auditorium, radiators occasionally clanked; and sunlight and shadows chased each other across the room. Rollin’s music filled the space at a slightly haunted digital remove.



Ready for his close-up: *Hugh Taft-Morales and Drew Snyder master the new world of hybrid platforms.*

In the end, that first hybrid event was largely hitch-less. Things went even better two weeks later at the Humanist Thanksgiving platform. Ten members joined Hugh, Drew, and Mike in the building, while the Zoom congregation participated remotely. During the platform apple cider mulled in the kitchen upstairs; and by 12:30 everyone was enjoying warm drinks on the chilly sidewalk. Hugh brought treats from Donut Run, a store near his Maryland home. A passer-by joined the group, mistaking it for an AA meeting.

Hugh was glad to be back in the saddle, even if the physical stable was largely empty. “It felt good,” he said of that first

platform. “My adrenalin was running. It’s exciting to be one step closer to being in person with everybody.”



Socially distant, ethically aligned: *Attendees at our first (limited) in-person platform included (left to right) Christian Hayden, Michael Black-Smith, Drew Snyder, Nick Sanders, and Hugh Taft-Morales.*



Reasons to be thankful: *Members and friends reconnected over cider and donuts after the Humanist Thanksgiving platform.*

FROM THE ENDING RACISM TASK FORCE

Love and Hate in the Time of Covid - A Play

By Sylvia Metzler

Time: A Sunday evening in early December 2021. Place: A man cave in the home of Chris and Angie.

Chris: Hey honey, don't you think we should start planning for the holidays? Like do we send cards? Shall we host a Solstice dinner?

Angie: For heaven's sake, Chris. Can't you wait till the game is over?

Chris: The Birds are worse than ever today. Stop torturing yourself!

Angie: You can never tell. There's still time for Hurts to pull it off. But...a dinner? What about Covid?

Chris: Things are better for now. So, let's plan a small family Solstice dinner. And I'd like to invite my Aunt Pat.

Angie: Are you out of your mind? I'll bet she's not vaccinated. And with her fascist opinions on everything she'll start a war!

Chris: You can be pretty obnoxious yourself when you get on your soapbox.

Angie: *My soapbox?* You mean my efforts to defund the police who torture and murder Black folks? I thought you were working on your own damn racism!

Chris: There you go! I hate it when you get so holier than thou. Forget it. Forget the holidays. Watch your damn game. Although how someone as woke as you can stand the NFL with its "race norming" and treatment of Kaepernick is beyond me. I'm going to bed.

Time: The next morning. Place: Chris and Angie's kitchen.

Angie: I made pancakes. Do you want to join me?

Chris: Pancakes? Maybe a little humble pie is what you need. Anyway, I already ate.

Angie: Well, come have coffee then. I want to talk.

Chris: What about? How racist I am?

Angie: I was just listening to NPR. Do you know how many guns and bullets are being bought now?

Chris: What's that got to do with us? With anything?

Angie: I was thinking about how mad we were—are—with each other. But also about how we love each other. And about how easily violence can escalate. I'm glad we don't have guns.

Chris: Were you thinking of shooting me? Or Aunt Pat?

Angie: Not you. But, yes.... Your Aunt Pat when she drives around with that confederate flag on her truck and campaigns for school-board candidates who want to eliminate Black history and feminism studies from our classrooms.

Chris: I didn't know you were that hateful. What happened to your Ethical Humanism?

Angie: I know. That's why I made you pancakes. I'm not happy with myself either this morning. I say I follow Martin Luther King and his non-violent philosophy. But I often feel a murderous rage. So do many others: on the left and the right. I'm really scared that all this anger and hate, combined with all those guns, will lead to terrible violence.

Chris: Are you afraid of your own anger and hatred? Cause you scare me sometimes.

Angie: I didn't sleep much last night. I kept thinking that if I don't want to see a civil war then I need to start dialing down my own behavior. But I don't want to lose my righteous anger over racism and other injustices. I'll need your help with that.

Chris: OK. Let's start with Aunt Pat. We'll invite her for Solstice dinner on the condition that she take that confederate flag off her truck. And if she says anything hateful, I'll take her outside and practice "calling her in." Speaking of outside, let's eat outside for Covid protection.

Angie: Agreed. And Chris.... I'm sorry I was so hateful last night. If you and I can't do better, how can we ever expect to have peace in the world?

Sylvia Metzler is a member of the Ending Racism Task Force of the Philadelphia Ethical Society

by Henry Pashkow

WHEN I GOT TO BE editor of *Ethical Views* in 2017, I had big ideas about what I could do in that position. First, I planned to write articles that would inform and enlighten readers. After all, what editors aren't convinced of the importance of their own thoughts? And I wanted to persuade our members to write about difficult ethical decisions they'd faced. As a way of connecting with others that ranked pretty high, in my estimation. Building ethical relationships is a primary goal of Ethical Culture. I was going to be the guy who got others to build those relationships.

But this self-absorbed approach didn't seem to fit the mission of our Ethical Society. This is the story of how I was chastened and, as a result, changed for the better.

Freshly installed, I asked if I could write my own stuff and was told to go for it. Was there a word limit? Nobody knew of one. So, I wrote a 1,000-word piece that rambled all over the place. You may be surprised they let me get away with it. I was. After it was published, I waited for the response. Dead silence.

OK, so maybe my own words wouldn't move multitudes. But I could still be the great forger of ethical relationships by getting others to open up. I reassured people that they wouldn't have to describe situations where they made the right choices. We all make mistakes and learn from them. Sharing that learning process is a good way of connecting. And if you feel vulnerable, well, vulnerability will transform you. You can't be in the presence of anyone willing to

open up and be vulnerable and not be affected by it. I believe all that to be true. But I talked about it from a soapbox.

I got some good submissions. Then, over time, they slowed to a trickle. I more directly targeted people I knew could write. Still, very little response.

But here's where it gets interesting. In the course of trying to figure all this out—what I should be trying to accomplish—I conferred with the good people I worked with: Bob, Nick, Betsy, Cheryl, Hugh, and our great layout person, Celeste. They helped me understand the role *Ethical Views* plays in our Society, which is primarily a *role of service*. It is there to do the jobs our community needs it to do, not what the editor thinks it should do. That's less glamorous than what I had envisioned, but more important. Also, in the process of seeking insights and advice from these other members, I was strengthening my own ethical relationships, living the purpose of Ethical Culture.

Ethical Views is a compendium of many things that comprise the face of Ethical Culture. It is also the organ through which our Society presents itself to members and readers. The editorship is no small responsibility. Little by little, I saw this responsibility in light of what I should expect of myself and others, not only as editor but also in all my work as an Ethical Humanist. That's where the change in me began. It continues to this day

Henry Pashkow is former editor, now copy editor, of *Ethical Views*



On the picket line: Workers at the Wyndham Hotel in the Historic District, represented by UNITE HERE Local 274, voted to authorize a one-day strike on November 22, the day of the Philadelphia Marathon. These workers—predominantly Black, brown, and immigrant women—are fighting for their dignity by demanding a minimum wage of \$22 an hour, a workload that respects their bodies, and stricter limits on what management can ask them to accomplish in a single day. Kate Esposito and Leader Hugh joined the picket line. John McCormick was there earlier in the day.



UPCOMING EVENTS

Warm up your unmute finger and join us for these events at www.tiny.cc/phillyethics



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Sunday, December 5, 2:45 PM

Tree of Knowledge program

Join Margaret Downey and Hugh Taft-Morales for our annual Tree of Knowledge event. This year we're hosting Phill Zuckerman, whose books include *What It Means to Be Moral*, *The Nonreligious*, and *Living the Secular Life*. He is also executive director of Humanist Global Charity. Gary Stockdale, a two-time Emmy-nominated composer, songwriter, and singer, will perform. *The event is on Zoom, but you can call in at 929-205-6099 (Meeting ID: 849 4108 9132).*



Sunday, December 5, 7 PM

Introduction to Ethical Humanism

This month Hugh will explore Ethical Humanism through a Zoom tour of the American Ethical Union (AEU) website. The AEU is the federating organization of Ethical Culture responsible for training leaders, facilitating networking among Ethical Societies, and acting as the national face of our movement. Come find out more about our unique brand of humanism.

Monday, December 6, 7 PM

Fall Ethical Culture book discussion

***The Humanist Way* by Ed Ericson (Chapter 9, Afterward, and Appendix)**

The final discussion of Ed Ericson's book will introduce some modern leaders, including Al Black, Matthew Ies Spetter, Judith Espenscheid, Don Montagna, Lois Kellerman, Michael Franch, and Judy Toth. We'll also discuss Ericson's 1967 testimony before the Armed Services Committee. Join Hugh on Zoom. *If you'd prefer to participate in this discussion with members of other Ethical Societies on December 12 at 2 PM or on December 16 at 5:30 PM, please email Hugh for those Zoom links.*

Tuesday, December 7, 11 AM

Discussion series: *On Good Behavior (Winning and Losing)*

Are there ethical ways to win and lose? Do adults engaged in high-stakes contests maintain the "good sport" habits we are taught growing up? How do

victorious and defeated candidates and political partisans respond to the results of elections? Though the sports analogies that dominate our national culture are about competition, we must grow ever more cooperative and civically engaged to create an ethical culture. Join Hugh on Zoom. *Additional opportunities to discuss this topic are on December 4 at 10:30 AM and December 20 at 5:30 PM. Email Hugh for those Zoom links.*

Saturday, December 18, 4-6:30 PM

HumanLight Celebration

Join humanists from around the country on Zoom for this 20th anniversary celebration of HumanLight, a secular opportunity to commemorate the



holiday season. There will be a candle-lighting for compassion, reason, and hope, along with music, readings, and other entertainment. The American Ethical Union is a co-host.

Tuesday, December 21, 5:30-7 PM

Fiction book discussion: *Dear Committee Members* by Julie Schumacher

The New Yorker called this work "a comic aria of crankiness, disillusionment, and futility, which unfolds in the form of letters of recommendation from Jason Fitger, a beleaguered English professor at the aptly named Payne University." Join Hugh on Zoom to discuss this winner of the Thurber Prize for American Humor.



Tuesday, December 28, 5:30 PM

Weird News Quiz and other fun!

Join Leigh Buchanan and Hugh Taft-Morales on Zoom for another end-of-the-year "weird news" quiz and other fun. Grab your favorite beverage, bring your friends and your sense of humor. End the year with a laugh—or at least a wry smile.

For information or to RSVP, please email Hugh Taft-Morales at LeaderHugh@phillyethics.org



SUNDAY SERVICES

11 AM

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 of the committees, which meet on the dates shown. Members and interested others are welcome to attend. Email us to learn more at office@phillyethics.org. Join all meetings at www.tiny.cc/phillyethics

Board of Trustees
Michael Black-Smith
Sunday, Dec. 19, 6 PM

Building Committee
Michael Black-Smith
No meeting in December

Camp Linden Committee
Jeffrey Dubb
Tuesday, Dec. 7, 5 PM

Communications Committee
Drew Snyder
Wednesday, Dec. 15, 6 PM

Education Committee
Betsy Lightbourn
Wednesday, Dec. 1, 3 PM

Ending Racism Task Force
Sylvia Metzler
Saturday, Dec. 18, 11 AM

Ethical Action Committee
Denise Marx
Thursday, Dec. 16, 3 PM

Finance Committee
Nick Sanders
Wednesday, Dec. 8, 5 PM

For suggestions regarding this newsletter, contact Leigh Buchanan
leighebuchanan@gmail.com

Where's That?

Every month we challenge readers to identify a sign, scene, or architectural detail within a three-block radius of the Philadelphia Ethical Society. We'll collect all the right answers and pull one out of a hat. The winner receives a \$10 gift card for the online store of Uncle Bobbie's Coffee & Books, a Black-owned business in Philly.

Respond to
leighebuchanan@gmail.com

Bob Bueding won last month's contest. He identified the back windows of our own Ethical Society, looking towards the back of the stage from Manning Street.

