



ETHICAL VIEWS



September 2022 Vol. 137, No. 1 Newsletter of the Philadelphia Ethical Society

SUNDAY PLATFORMS

The public is welcome to join us



Sunday, September 4, 11 AM
John Lovejoy Elliott and a Ministry to Man (And Woman)
Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader Philadelphia Ethical Society

This week we return to the archives with a platform, on Zoom, first presented on September 4, 2016.

Felix Adler, the founder of Ethical Culture, chose as his first lieutenant John Lovejoy Elliott: a man best known for building caring relationships and friendships that served the marginalized of New York City and other urban centers. Elliott's focus on developing the skills and confidence of young people was legendary. As we strive to become more inclusive and attract a future generation to Ethical Culture, what can we learn from one of our most beloved leaders?

Sunday, September 11, 11 AM
Understanding Gun Culture
Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader

As a society with more weapons than people, the United States clearly has a "gun culture." Does that explain the plague of mass shootings, crime-related killings, accidents, and suicides by bullet? Causes proffered for this epidemic include mental illness, toxic masculinity, economic desperation, and profiteering by weapons manufacturers, as well as new stressors created by the pandemic. Hugh describes his efforts to understand this phenomenon from the outside: a necessary step if we are to transform a culture of guns into a culture of ethics.

Sunday, September 18, 11 AM

Religious Freedom and the Separation of Church and State

Sarah Barringer Gordon
University of Pennsylvania

Are we heading toward a theocracy and Christian nationalist state? Sarah Barringer Gordon, the Arlin M. Adams professor of constitutional law and a professor of history, is renowned for her work on the ways that religious liberty developed over the course of American history. A frequent media commentator, she is the author of *The Spirit of the Law: Religious Voices and the Constitution in Modern America*. Her work-in-progress, *Freedom's Holy Light: Disestablishment in America, 1776-1876*, is about the historical relationship among religion, politics and the law.



Sunday, September 25, 11 AM
Rape and Murder: "Me Too" in Italian Art

Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader

While enjoying the aesthetic brilliance of Italian Renaissance and Baroque art this summer, Hugh was struck by the many representations of violence between men and women. In light of the Supreme Court's attack on women's bodily integrity, we must understand the dynamics that fuel this violence: both the oppression of women and the backlash it creates. Hugh seeks insights from four Renaissance artworks: Bernini's *The Rape of Proserpina* ([shown](#)) and *Apollo and Daphne*, Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, and Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith and Holofernes*.



► Where They'll Be

As a general rule, we'll run hybrid platforms when Hugh is the speaker. Platforms with guest speakers will remain on [Zoom](#). In-person attendees should be up-to-date on vaccinations/boosters, wear masks, and maintain six feet of separation. Please, read your emails and check the website before you come.

IN THIS ISSUE . . .

How secular humanism flourished in Italy;
Black theater thrives in Philly; one member's
energetic crusade to register voters.

On the banner: Renaissance humanist Francesco Petrarca
(Petrarch) 1304-1374. (National Trust Image)

FROM THE LEADER Reflections on Sites Secular and Sacred

By Hugh Taft-Morales

THIS SUMMER, I HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF EXPLORING PARTS of Italy where Renaissance humanism took root. While I traveled overseas with my wife, Maureen, in pursuit of rest and relaxation, I was also curious how a land so steeped in Catholicism birthed a civic, secular humanism.

Few places better represent the juxtaposition of the religious and the secular than Siena. In this Tuscan city I visited the Cathedral, a grand and dizzying display of almost limitless dramatic detail. Dominated by Siena's traditional motif of black and white stripes, the interior was packed with mosaics and frescos teaching religious and moral lessons to the faithful. Its visual opulence overwhelmed me. As I snapped photo after photo, I knew they could not capture my experience of awe: one that promulgators of piety clearly intended to evoke.

A short walk from the Cathedral is the Piazza del Campo, the public heart of a city proud of its tradition of secular government. Dominating the Piazza is the Palazzo Pubblico where a government of the people managed affairs of state. The Palazzo's early Renaissance architecture was simpler than that of the medieval Cathedral. Civic leaders of Siena thought that while churches could bubble over with opulence, buildings dedicated to civic affairs should reflect simplicity, balance, and rationality.

The Palazzo Pubblico is centered on the diameter of a semi-circular plaza. The effect is of a theater, with the Palazzo serving as backdrop to the stage. This was not by chance. Humanist city leaders cleared the surrounding buildings to showcase the seat of civic life.

The Piazza's crowning feature is the 334-foot-tall Torre del Mangia. When completed in 1348, it was among the highest secular towers in Europe. Precisely the same height as the Cathedral, it signified that secular government had power equal to the church. This was

quite a claim in a land so dominated by the Vatican. The tower was meant to represent the legislative branch of the Sienese government, which—like ours—divided power among legislative, judicial, and executive branches, with elected representatives first amongst equals.

Given the rise of intolerant theocracy in the United States, I admire Siena's efforts to balance clerical power with civic responsibility. During its "golden age" (1260–1350), power shifted from authoritarian rulers to term-limited elected officials, establishing broader representation than nearly anywhere else in Europe.

Yet, as I gazed at the tower, I resisted glorifying this early symbol of civic secularism. While an important step in the separation of church and state, secular and civic humanism has too often been used to justify ruthless individualism, capitalism, and colonization. Whatever virtues Siena advanced, its bankers and powerbrokers also propped up oppressive hierarchy and imperialism.

Inside the Palazzo Pubblico is Ambrogio Lorenzetti's painting *The Allegory of Good and Bad Government*.

It depicts six virtues represented by crowned, stately female figures: Peace, Fortitude, Prudence, Magnanimity, Temperance, and Justice. As we digest the depravity revealed by the January 6th committee, we must demand that public servants respect those virtues. And we must resist the so-called leaders who violate sacred democratic values and defile our own secular house of governance to accrue more personal power.

My time in Italy fortified me for the struggle to realize a more ethical democracy. For that I am grateful.

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



Secular simplicity:
Hugh at the Torre del Mangia

FROM THE PRESIDENT Metaphorical Rakes and Real Funds

By Michael Black-Smith

HAPPY (ALMOST) AUTUMN, FELLOW ETHICAL SOCIETY MEMBERS!

Some among our membership may thrive in the muggy months, lounging on their porches in tank tops with cold drinks beading condensation at their sides. I am not one of them. Give me a sweater and a hot toddy any day! I feel relieved when the prevailing seasonal scent turns from sunscreen to leaf piles. Rejuvenated, I take a deep gulp of the crisp, sharp air, and anticipate, with pleasure, tackling some invigorating Society “yard work.” (And I promise this isn’t the kind of Tom-Sawyer-style “reverse psychology” my parents once used to make me grab the rake.)

In my role as Society President, I view maintaining a safe response to the pandemic as my top priority. Beyond that, the “leaf-clogged gutter” I’ve got my eye on is continued progress on Our Path Forward: the plan that our Board created in its 2020-2021 term. Considerable care and energy went into Our Path Forward, which is meant to shore up our Society and make it more robust. If we don’t stay focused on this plan, we risk losing not only the investment of time and thought that went into creating it, but also the rich rewards its achievement will produce for our humanist community.

Happily, our efforts will soon receive a long-anticipated boost. We’re about to unbox our shiny, new, contractor-grade leaf blower! (If you think I’m belaboring this fall cleanup metaphor, wait until December when I imagine us attacking organizational snowbanks with procedural plows.) Specifically, we are getting a significant infusion of funds.

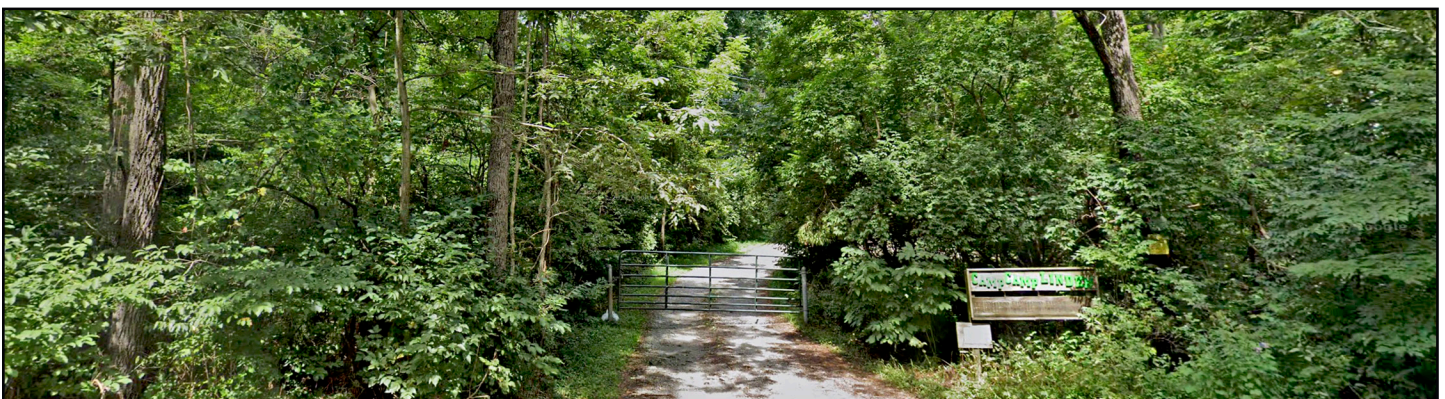
In 2019 we began to negotiate an agreement with the Brandywine Conservancy, which protects natural and cultural resources in Pennsylvania and Delaware. In exchange for our agreement never to develop the piece of pristine watershed that we own along the Brandywine River—home to our Camp Linden—the Conservancy will pay us what we might have made by putting it on the chopping block for condo developers. After delays related to COVID and the successful resolution of a frivolous lawsuit against us, that agreement finally goes into effect this fall. We will be rewarded for being good stewards of the environment: a double win.

It is my and the Board’s intent and hope that our members have significant input into the best way to use this “stewardship fund” amounting to over \$500,000. I will make the case that the strategies suggested and action steps called for in Our Path Forward are—in fact—our best path forward. They strive to

- Ensure PES is a well-run organization.
- Ensure PES’s building meets our needs.
- Ensure PES fosters a vibrant community.
- Ensure Camp Linden’s visibility and support within PES.

So, grab your sturdiest work gloves and let’s earn that congregational mug of hot cocoa! Please contact me if you’d like to know more about Our Path Forward, the conservation easement, or how to get involved

Michael Black-Smith is President of the Philadelphia Ethical Society.



Conserve and protect: The Society will receive funds for preserving Camp Linden as a pristine environment.

FROM THE ENDING RACISM TASK FORCE

All the City's a Stage for Black Theater

By Leigh Buchanan

PHILADELPHIA'S STAGES ARE BURSTING WITH BLACK talent. As curtains once more rise around the city, close to half the productions announced on theater web sites are by and about people of color.

Theater is the ideal environment for people respectfully to listen and to learn. Audiences share space with live actors, whose humanity is not blunted by the scrim of print or screens. Plays are stories; and storytelling is the most powerful way to build empathy. Audiences of all races are at once caught up by and implicated in the Black lives unfolding before them.

In *Fairview*, whose run at the Wilma ended in June, a character breaks the fourth wall to make explicit that connection. "But if I could ask the folks who call themselves white to come up here, do you think they would?" asks Keisha, the teenage daughter of a middle-class Black family. "Could I ask them to come up in here, so that we could go down there?.... To switch for a while?.... Look out from where I am. And let me and my family go out to where you've always been?.... If I asked, would they do it?"

Like some other Ethical Society members, I was inspired to return to the theater by our (sadly former) Community Life Director, Reva Stover, who is ubiquitous in Philly's drama scene. Crawling from my pandemic hole, I saw two first-rate productions in the course of a few weeks. *Fabulation: or the Re-Education of Undine*, at The Lantern, chronicled the comic misadventures of a glamorous Black entrepreneur compelled to return to her working-class childhood home. *Reverie*, at the Azuka, related the visit by a bereaved father to the man he believes was his dead son's lover. (Both *Reverie* and *Fairview* are by the destined-for-stardom James IJames, a Black Philly playwright and freshly minted Pulitzer winner.)

Eager for more, I trolled the web sites of local theaters and was both surprised and encouraged by the

abundance of plays written and performed by Black artists. Of the 47 productions listed on the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 schedules of 10 prominent Philly theaters in mid-June, 22 were stories of people of color. (That includes work by and about Latino and Asian people.) I found comparable results in other big theater cities: Boston, Chicago, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Atlanta, and Louisville, KY.

I passed on New York as unrepresentative. But this year's historically diverse Tonys—which included Best New Musical honors for *A Strange Loop*, about a Black, gay theater artist—speak volumes.

OF THE 47 PRODUCTIONS LISTED ON THE SCHEDULES OF 10 PROMINENT PHILLY THEATERS IN MID-JUNE, 22 WERE STORIES OF PEOPLE OF COLOR.

Theater is a great way to teach history. Philly productions recount, among other things, the experiences of woman pioneers in the first U.S. all-Black settlement (*Flyin' West*); and the story of an artist and his muse enduring the 1964 Harlem race riots (*Wine in the Wilderness*). There are plays about individual struggle, among them *The Royale*, about a boxer's quest for

the heavyweight title in 1905, when the sport was segregated; and *A Hit Dog Will Holler*, depicting the trauma heaped on two Black women, an activist and a social media influencer. Comedies include *Clyde's*, set at a truck stop staffed by the formerly incarcerated; and *The Ever Present*, by local up-and-comer R. Eric Thomas, who unfolds his fantastical events in a South Philly vacant lot.

One more advantage theater holds over books, film, and other media: the opportunity to interact. Many Philadelphia theaters offer post-show talk-backs and Q&As with performers, playwrights, and directors. Often, artists mingle with audiences in lobbies. White theatergoers may not accept Keisha's challenge to change places with Black characters. But they can learn from the artists who imagine and embody them.

Leigh Buchanan is a member of the Ending Racism Task Force and the Philadelphia Ethical Society..

ADVENTURES IN VOLUNTEERING She Wants YOU to Register!

By Kate Esposito

I'M A LIFELONG DEMOCRAT, the daughter of a union guy who knows which party is responsible for civil rights, Social Security, and Medicare. In eighth grade I rode in a parade, in a convertible with Hubert Humphrey signs plastered on it. At 18, I registered to vote. Since then, I've voted in every election.

The first campaign I worked on was in San Francisco. I went door-to-door for Diane Walker, a progressive candidate for the Board of Supervisors. (She won.) When cutbacks threatened to close our neighborhood library, I organized a crowd of over 100 people to convince then-Mayor Diane Feinstein to keep the library open. (She did.)

In 2008 I was working for a mental-health program in Trenton, New Jersey, my hometown. Many of our clients did not pay much attention to politics. I registered dozens of them to vote; and on the day before the election a co-worker and I drove 15 folks to vote early. When Obama won, they were so excited. "Oh my god! I voted for the first Black President!" They presented me with a framed copy of the *Daily News* announcing Obama's victory, and they all signed it.

People were so energized by that historic election! I stood outside a local Shop Rite with voter registration forms, and passers-by would grab the clipboard from me, saying, "Let me register!" More than 60 signed up in two days.

In 2008 and 2012 I went door-to-door for Obama on Election Day. The campaign folks would put a few of us in a car and send us off to neighborhoods with maps. In 2012 I went out with two wonderful Black women. It was pretty cold, and one of the women, Frankie, had a hood, so she gave me her hat. We exchanged numbers, and when Obama won, we had a little victory party over the phone, jumping up and down and screaming.

In 2016 I did non-partisan voter registration with POWER. We had a table at the student union at Philadelphia Community College. It was a great spot because so many students were eligible for the first time. We talked to them about student loans,

environmental issues, civil rights, and mass incarceration. In a week we registered 100 new voters.

When the results came in that year, I felt sick. Here I was, asking all these young people to turn out for their first-ever election, and then: The Disaster! The overwhelming majority registered as Democrats. Would they ever vote again? It still haunts me.

I have tried registering voters in lots of places. Festivals at Penn's Landing.

Outside an Aldi and a Forman Mills. There's a kids' naturalization event at the Betsy Ross House every July 4. It's a very moving ceremony—and a great place to engage new voters. Their parents take the oath the day before.

I make a lot of phone calls; and I write a lot of postcards. I work with the campaigns, with POWER, with the hospitality union Unite Here, and with the progressive advocacy group Indivisible.

Obstacles that range from gerrymandering to Supreme Court decisions like *Citizens United* and *Shelby County v. Holder* are dismantling democracy. So many people are being disenfranchised that they throw up their hands and say, "Why bother? Nothing changes." But so much has changed since 2016. Complacency must be defeated. Especially here in Pennsylvania, this year voting is crucial. We can't win if we don't fight. If we are to right this Ship of State, it's all hands on deck



Need a pen? Kate Esposito (from left), Basheemah Brown from POWER, and Henry Pashkow register voters in front of the Society.

Kate Esposito is a member of the Philadelphia Ethical Society.

GOOD TIMES AND GOOD FRIENDS AT CAMP LINDEN

ON A BLUE-SKY-PERFECT JULY DAY MORE THAN TWO dozen members and friends of the Philadelphia Ethical Society made the pilgrimage to Camp Linden for the annual cookout and picnic. A small crowd quickly coalesced around grillmeister Dan Hoffman, while arrivals filled out nametags at the behest of community maven Ruth Dubinsky.

With Hugh and his guitar absent, Camp Program Director Sharon Wallis suggested alternative activities, such as investigating leaves, bugs, and flowers through a digital microscope. A few members wandered down to the pool for a swim. Others displayed unexpected proficiency at the game ladder

toss. A ginger cat (Orangey) and a pit bull puppy (Lady) made many friends.

And, yes, the conversation sometimes veered toward politics and pandemics. But with people laughing, roosters crowing, and a light breeze murmuring in the trees, for that one afternoon life felt pretty good.



Welcome to Camp Linden!
Sharon Wallis and Leonard Weeks hosted.



Burger or dog?
Dan Hoffman presided over the grill.



Name tag queen: Ruth Dubinsky ensured no one was a stranger.



Say cheese: Carol Love photographed the festivities.



Getting her game on: Lelah Marie played ladder toss.



UPCOMING EVENTS

Some in-person events may migrate to Zoom, for obvious reasons. Know before you go, people.



Sunday, September 11, 1-2 PM (Zoom); 5- 6:30 PM (in-person)

Reflections from My Summer in Italy

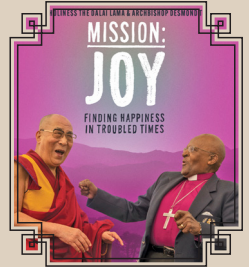
Hugh will share sights seen and insights gleaned during his summer sojourn in Italy. To attend in person, please RSVP so he knows how much wine to buy. For [Zoom](#) attendees it's BYOB.



Friday, September 16, 6:30-8:30 PM

Documentary: *Mission: Joy*

This film is a deeply moving testament to the friendship between the Dalai Lama and the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It explores their dialogue about how to live with joy in troubled times. Hugh will facilitate a conversation after the film. Free at the Ethical Society building.



Sunday, September 11, 7 PM

Introduction to Ethical Humanism

Hugh hosts the first session of this program's season, focusing on the Renaissance roots of humanism. For Society members only. In-person and on [Zoom](#). Please RSVP to Hugh via [email](#).

PEACE DAY PHILLY ACTIVITIES

The following five events are part of the International Day of Peace (celebrated from September 15-21). This year's theme—chosen by the United Nations—is “End Racism. Build Peace.” For more information and additional activities, many on Zoom, go to www.peacedayphilly.org/events.



Thursday, September 15, 6:30-7:30 PM

Short Documentary:

Hello Sunshine

Hello Sunshine shines a light on people living in the Kensington section of Philly and efforts to support them. After the screening, filmmaker Joe Quint and Roz Pichardo—the featured activist—will hold a discussion. Free at the Ethical Society building.



Friday, September 16, 11AM-2PM

Football Not Firearms

Join Hugh for this march and rally beginning and ending at Fairhill Square (4th and Lehigh). There will be words from youth, police officers, and public officials.



Enjoy music, free food, and a free football giveaway. Come support this effort to strengthen community relationships and build peace! [Email Hugh](#) for more information.



Sunday, September 18, 4-5:30 PM

Benefit Jazz Concert:

The Larry McKenna Quartet



This performance will raise money for programs serving refugees in Philadelphia. Come enjoy terrific jazz and help those building new lives here. Pay what you will at the Ethical Society Building.



Wednesday, September 21, 11:30-12:30 PM

Peace Day Program

Gather on the north apron of City Hall for this event. There will be special guests, art, reflections on the theme “End Racism. Build Peace,” and songs by Hugh.



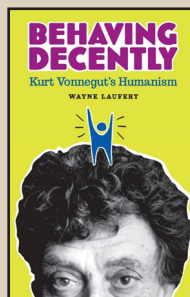
Date and Time TBA

October book discussion: *Behaving*

***Decently: Kurt Vonnegut's Humanism*, by Wayne**

Laufert

Join Hugh for a discussion of this new Humanist Press book by a former newspaper reporter and editor who is also a member of the Baltimore Ethical Society. Let Hugh know ASAP if you are interested so we can schedule this event. In-person and on [Zoom](#).





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 at the times shown. Members and interested others are welcome to attend. Most meetings are on Zoom. Email us to learn more at office@phillyethics.org.

Board of Trustees

Michael Black-Smith

Sunday, Sept. 25, 6 PM

Building Committee

Michael Black-Smith

No meeting this month

Camp Linden Committee

Jeffrey Dubb

Wednesday, Sept. 28, 5 PM

Community Committee

Ruth Dubinsky

Sunday, Sept. 4, 12:30 PM

Education Committee

Betsy Lightbourn

Wednesday, Sept. 7, 3 PM

Ending Racism Task Force

Sylvia Metzler/Erik Younge

Saturday, Sept. 17, 11 AM

Ethical Action Committee

Open chair

Next meeting TBA

Finance Committee

Nick Sanders

Wednesday, Sept. 14, 5 PM

Media Committee

Drew Snyder

Wednesday, Sept. 21, 6 PM

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



Justice on trial: In the final *Ethical Lens* installment of last season, professor of constitutional law and author Kim Roosevelt spoke with Hugh about the influence of political and ethical issues on the law.

HUMANIST HUMOR

"Saying that you are moral because you believe in a god is like saying you are an economist because you play Monopoly."

~ Robert W. Cox,
political scientist