



ETHICAL VIEWS

December 2023 Vol. 138, No. 4 Newsletter of the Philadelphia Ethical Society

SUNDAY PLATFORMS

The public is welcome to join us *

Sunday, Dec 3, 11 AM (in-person) 2 PM (zoom)

Statues Like Us

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



For thousands of years, humans have created statues in their own image. Artists have carved marble, forged metal, and sculpted clay to depict people as beautiful, heroic, or infamous. What purposes do these sculptures serve as cultural symbols and historical markers? How do they make life meaningful? Hugh draws on insights from his conversations with sculptor Zenos Frudakis to shed light on this very human

activity. Frudakis will be present for the 11 AM platform. (Our annual Tree of Knowledge decoration ceremony will follow the in-person platform. See Upcoming Events for details.)

Sunday, Dec 10, 11 AM (zoom only)

Bob Dylan: Prophet Without God

**Jeffrey Green, Political Scientist
University of Pennsylvania**



Bob Dylan isn't just a brilliant songwriter but also a modern-day prophet. So argues Jeffrey Green in his forthcoming book, *Bob Dylan: Prophet Without God*. Dylan is not a conventional prophet of salvation, explains Green, the director of Penn's Andrea Mitchell Center for the Study of Democracy. But he speaks to ideals that have animated earlier prophets, including social justice, individual freedom, and adherence to God.

The songwriter breaks from tradition by testifying to the conflicts among those ideals.



Sunday, Dec 17, 11 AM (in-person) 2 PM (zoom)
Winter Solstice

Come celebrate community as we gather to light candles and kindle hope for brighter days ahead. Please contact [Hugh](#) to recommend readings and/or to volunteer to be a reader.

There are no scheduled platforms for Sunday, Dec. 24 or Sunday, Dec. 31.

We wish you all happy holidays and a hopeful 2024.



An early Thanksgiving: Among those sharing food following Hugh's Dec. 19 platform about gratitude were (from left) Nick Sanders, Drew Snyder and Terry Ullman.

* **Where They'll Be**

As a general rule, on Sundays when Hugh is the speaker, the 11 AM platform will be in-person only.

Hugh will offer the address a second time, live, on [zoom](#) only, at 2 PM that afternoon. (This is Hugh's personal zoom link.)

Guest speakers will appear on [zoom](#) only. (This is the Society's zoom link.)

In-person attendees should be up-to-date on vaccinations.

Check your emails and our website to make sure you know how to join us.

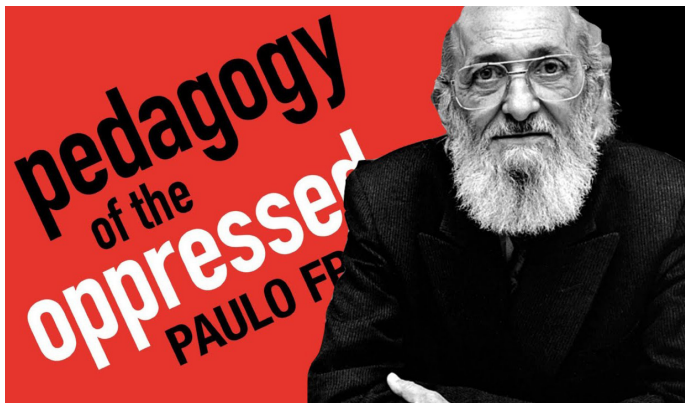
LETTER FROM THE LEADER

An Ethical Education for Modern Times

By Hugh Taft-Morales

As the new American Ethical Union Board (AEU) seeks to revitalize our wonderful alternative to traditional religion, I've volunteered to serve on an ad hoc ethical education team. This group, comprising roughly half a dozen Leaders and members from several Societies, is tasked with evaluating and clarifying the current state of education in Ethical Culture and identifying a creative path forward. We hope to lay a foundation that will develop ethical education for modern times. (As I write this, our team has not yet dived into the work. I'll report on our progress in 2024.)

Other than some antiquated views about women, Felix Adler had, for his era, a modern perspective on education. He combatted harmful and inaccurate stereotypes of children, who for centuries had been treated as "little adults." The perception of children as mere empty receptacles for the wisdom of their elders produced a teacher-centric system dominated by didactic lectures and repetitious exercises. A more modern iteration of that system is the "banking concept" of education, described by Paulo Freire in his groundbreaking 1970 book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.



Adler also rejected the notion—a corollary to the widespread conception of human nature as essentially evil—that children were unruly and selfish animals in need of discipline. He embraced Rousseau's contention that humans are inherently good and, consequently, that children should be protected and cherished. From there developed the understanding that children are natural learners, who flourish when treated with respect.

Adler's beliefs likely were influenced by his own childhood in a Reform Jewish community, where learning and goodness trumped discipline and sin. During Adler's graduate work in Germany, he was exposed to the

progressive teachings of educational philosopher Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. Pestalozzi called on teachers to respect children's individual interests and needs and to treat them as active participants in their own learning. Pestalozzi also believed learning should take place in the context of the larger world, a position shared by philosopher and psychologist John Dewey. Adler conferred often with Dewey, agreeing on the Jeffersonian ideal of integrating politics and education. In this way, the classroom would prepare people to participate in democracy.

That philosophical history will inform my work on the AEU team. Ethical Culture needs education fueled by dynamic interchanges among students, their teachers, and their environment. We all benefit when everyone learns from one another in a spirit of mutuality. Furthermore, education should be creative, participatory, and respectful both of individual students and their communities. And it must proceed with awareness of the complex world in which learners will be called upon to act.

Our team, also, is charged with incorporating justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion into everything we do, from meeting formats to final recommendations. Although these terms were not part of the vocabulary of Pestalozzi, Dewey, and Freire, they all believed in expanding education as a means of promoting social equality.

That's the spirit in which our team is embarking on this project. Our schedules are busy; and we all juggle many responsibilities. But by sharing leadership and exchanging creative ideas, we can reasonably expect our work to be productive and joyous. Part of our charge from the AEU was to "have fun." That joy, consequently, is integral to our work.

It would be exciting if our ethical initiative became part of a broader educational revolution. Too many public schools are little more than understaffed warehouses, where young people's natural goodness is stifled by routine, rules, and regulations. As we transform our own approach to education, might we contribute novel approaches to producing that engaged, creative, informed citizenship the world so desperately needs? That would honor both Adler's legacy and our hopes for the future.

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

BEHIND THE SCENES

The Secret Life of 1906 Rittenhouse Square

By Cheryl Desmond

An *Ethical Views* reader recently asked if I might share a bit about who uses the 1906 building when the Society is not holding its platforms and programs. As with so many other congregational communities, that means, “What happens from Sunday afternoon through Saturday night?” The answer: “We rent out space.” And I am not hesitant to tell prospective renters, “Your business is how we keep the lights on.”

But there is more to it than that. The Board-adopted guidelines state that rentals must “*allow individuals and groups with relatively limited resources to meet and enjoy themselves in a comfortable, though basic, no-frills environment.*” In practice, that means the smaller non-profit organizations that do their work in Philadelphia come to us for all sorts of reasons.

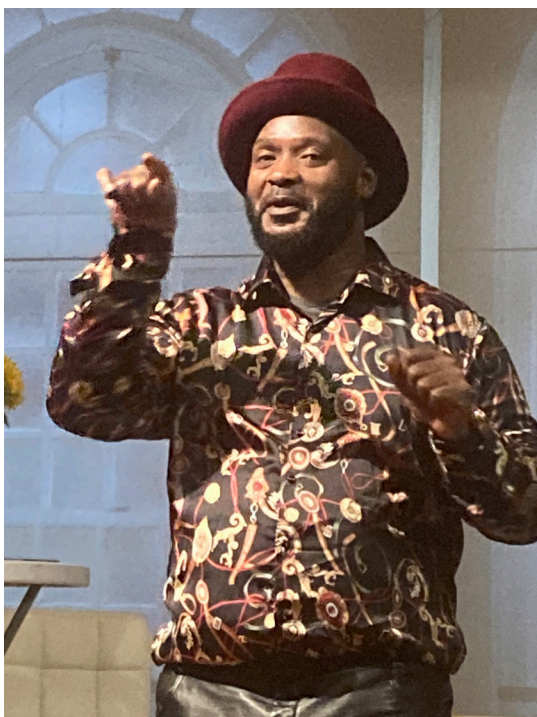
A look at my email inbox will give you some idea. Right now, there is an inquiry about space for a three-day conference from United Stateless, which builds community and advocates for people affected by statelessness. Philadelphia Black Pride would like to return for the second year for a Kwanza party. Opera Philadelphia, also returning, asked about holding a four-session seminar series in the spring. Penn’s Wharton Follicies (OK, not-so-limited resources) wants to screen a film of last year’s event for the team running this year’s event. Not to mention two or three inquiries to hold piano recitals in the Auditorium. We host a lot of piano recitals.

One-time rentals this fall have included a thank-you banquet for volunteers of the refugee-support organization HIAS; a graduation program by JEVS Human Services; and a social evening with a Yale *a cappella* group, hosted by the Yale Club of Philadelphia. We always provide restrooms for exhibitors at Rittenhouse Square’s annual craft fair and art show, for which the organizers make an appropriate donation.

The Working Families Party and the Green Party just had business meetings in the building. And a new group, Adult Children of Alcoholics, is starting a weekly meeting in the Collier Room. I could go on. But you get the idea. Because of our non-profit status, I don’t share much about groups that may have a political agenda. But, generally speaking, they will fit the “relatively limited resources” guideline mentioned above.

Some of my past articles have been about our many regular renters, such as the daily AA meetings, weekly dance clubs, and other special-interest groups and meetups, for whom we remain extremely grateful. We continue to have great long-term tenants on the third and fourth floors. Together with the special-event rentals, I characterize this as a three-legged stool that provides income stability for the Ethical Society.

Cheryl Desmond is the Administrator of the Philadelphia Ethical Society



Recovery recalled: In October, the Ethical Society’s weekend event facilitator, Greg Williams, took the stage in our Auditorium to present his one-person show, *Poor Man’s Anthem*. Greg recounted his life, through early childhood with his beloved grandmother and a troubled adolescence, leading to 30 years of addiction. The production coincided with the 13th anniversary of Greg’s sobriety.

FROM THE ENDING RACISM TASK FORCE

How Racism Affects Holiday Shopping

By Leigh Buchanan

I had planned to write a seasonal article recommending local Black-owned stores for holiday shopping. Such enterprises are at a significant disadvantage compared to white-owned businesses, with deficits in startup capital and profits, as well as higher closure rates. Yet their formation and patronage advance economic justice in several ways. Black business owners possess 12 times more wealth—better yet, *generational* wealth—than Black wage earners, reports NPQ, a news source for non-profits. And when those businesses locate in communities of color, they create good local jobs, encourage economic development, and bolster morale.



Guided by sources that promote such businesses in Philadelphia, I started checking out sites for stores like Trunc, Amazulu Collections, and Harriett's Bookshop. Many incorporated uplifting founder stories and offered culturally distinctive merchandise. As I contemplated my own (meager) gift list, I thought warmly of other consumers around the country who, at this time of year, support racial justice with their wallets.

But my thoughts tend to wander toward the dark side. I wondered: where do consumers with the opposite agenda shop?

The Buy Black Movement's obverse festers online. On mainstream sites like Reddit and Quora, I found numerous posts complaining that campaigns urging people to shop at Black-owned stores are racist: the same objections lobbed at affirmative-action and diversity initiatives. People pose questions like "Is it weird to seek out white-owned businesses?" and "Why is it OK for blacks to have businesses that target blacks but whites can't have businesses that target whites?" Threads on such forums also offer tips for disabling the "search for Black-owned shops near you" button that popped up on Chrome a few years ago.

In terms of merchandise, collectors of racist art and memorabilia have their pick of numerous antique and vintage stores around the country. Among them: an herbal-remedy and Civil War-memorabilia shop in Kennesaw, Georgia, whose displays include a mannequin in Klan robes holding a noose. A Milwaukee antique store that sells Jim Crow-era merchandise depicting Black people in offensive ways. Another antique store—this one in southwest Colorado—is known for replica signs with messages like "Colored Seating in Rear." A vintage store in a small Ohio town offers Black-face statues reminiscent

of minstrelsy. (I pulled these accounts and others from articles written in the last three years. There's no way to tell whether the objectionable items remain.)

Meanwhile, small publishing companies and record labels churn out racist books and music. Here in Pennsylvania, the publishing house Antelope Hill and DNVF Records made the Southern Poverty Law Center's list of hate groups.

Then, of course, there are the myriad businesses that racially profile customers. Roughly 40% of customers have been treated unfairly in a store because of their race, according to a study by Sephora. *The Conversation* recently reported that people of color are so accustomed to discrimination that when they encounter bad service in stores, they may not even notice it.

Such countervailing forces should increase our commitment to patronizing Black-owned businesses, when possible. There are roughly 3,000 such enterprises in the Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington area (not all of them retail), according to the Brookings Institution. If the number of Black-owned businesses reflected the Black population in our region, then there would be more than 30,000.

Giving your problematical relative a gift card from a bookstore like Uncle Bobbie's, Harriett's, or Hakim's this season may seem excessively confrontational. I understand why you wouldn't want to do it. But consider: maybe that person will visit the store's site (a gift is a gift) and be exposed to new ideas in the process. And, if not, at least the store will get the money.

*Leigh Buchanan is a member of the
Ending Racism Task Force*

NEW MEMBER PROFILE

Welcome Carolyn Prue!

Where did you grow up?

I was raised by my mother, in Toronto. We didn't have much money. But because I went to Catholic schools, I got a good education. I didn't go to university right after high school, though, because I was singing in bands.

You were a professional singer?

I sang in hotel bars, traveling around Ontario and parts east. They would hire a small band to play six nights a week, doing mostly cover tunes from the pop charts.

How long did you do that?

About three years. But I realized I was not going to be a singing sensation. So, I got a job as a computer operator at an IBM data center. Despite my lack of a university degree, they hired me on the basis of an aptitude test and because I was willing to work all three shifts.

Gradually, I was promoted to customer support, then software sales. That was when I started to feel the difference with the other employees and customers, who had multiple college degrees. Over time, I earned a BA at the University of Toronto, studying English literature, and the French and Italian languages.

We'll be talking to your husband, Paul Starita, who is also a member next month. How did the two of you meet?

It was a blind date, in Toronto, in 1985. The night I met him I had just returned from Mexico and was feeling quite queasy, not at all like making small talk with a new man. Surprisingly, he asked me out again. We got married 10 months later.

You stayed in Canada?

We lived in Toronto until 1999, then in Victoria for 15 years. We had a beautiful home by the ocean. But by 2014, Paul felt the tug of family; and we moved to the U.S. to be closer to his kids and grandkids. Our preferred location was Manhattan. But it was too expensive for Paul to have a woodworking shop nearby. Since he had one daughter in Philadelphia and two others in Maryland, Philadelphia seemed like the logical compromise.

Do you do any activism or volunteer work?

In Canada, I was on the board of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria for seven years—the final two as president. Before we joined the Ethical Society, we went to St. Mark's, where I made soup for their soup kitchen and baked for their lunch program for people experiencing homelessness.

How did you start painting?

In my 40s, my vocal cords aged out, so I couldn't sing anymore. I missed having a creative outlet and didn't want to just be a consumer of the arts. For about a decade, I quilted. But I was drawn to realism; and it's hard to achieve that in fabric. I mostly paint in oil these days, though I have worked in egg tempera and watercolor. After we moved here, I went through the post-Baccalaureate and then the MFA program at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.



What do you do for fun?

I've had the theater bug since high school. Last summer, we saw three Broadway productions in two days: *& Juliet*, *Shucked*, and *The Doctor*. We used to travel a lot and are trying to get back into it. Other than that, I like to read, exercise, cook, and bake.

What is your favorite spot in Philly?

Sitting in Rittenhouse Square, reading a book. I love that that's my front yard. I walk in the city or along the Schuylkill for an hour or longer every day. And I am fascinated by Philadelphia's architecture.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Warmth and Ritual in December

By Leigh Buchanan

On a Sunday in December 2015, I walked for the first time into 1906 Rittenhouse Square. By happenstance, the platform that morning was the Winter Solstice celebration. My first exposure to Ethical Culture, consequently, involved gorgeous music, fragrant boughs, and flickering candles. Better yet, the readings—performed by my soon-to-be-fellow members—were from literature, rather than scripture. As someone for whom Christmas has always been inextricable from Dickens, the experience was a ritualistic slam dunk.

(*A Christmas Carol*, by the way, was partly inspired by Dickens' visits to charity schools that educated impoverished children, like the fictional Tiny Tim. Our preeminent Christmas yarn has a humanist subtext.)

As a non-theist organization, the Ethical Society does not commemorate events in religious history. Rather, we honor the resilience of nature and the rebirth of hope and light. Yet, many of us cannot help but respond emotionally to the symbols and ceremonies associated with conventional Judeo-Christian celebrations. Even if our reactions are not based in belief, they are triggered by memories, aesthetics, and a deep understanding—sown in us over many decades—of what this time of year is supposed to mean.

During the pandemic, many of those comforting visual and aural cues disappeared. But now, once again, the Ethical Society building, in December, radiates a gentle, seasonal warmth. The Tree of Knowledge dominates our foyer, laminated covers of freethought, humanist, and skeptic books dangling from its branches. The decoration ceremony is at once evocative of family rituals—children gravely weighing where to hang a favorite ornament—and an act of defiance against those who would extinguish the free expression of ideas. The tree itself is a remnant of pagan traditions associated with longevity and fertility. When it greets us—a warm splash of

color in an otherwise drab space—we are reminded not just where we are but also when we are. The spirit of the season stirs within us.

Our Solstice celebration, which honors a celestial rather than a heavenly occurrence, is meant to fortify the congregation against imminent cold and darkness. The hushed lighting of candles at its culmination leaves me strangely nostalgic for something I never believed in. My family's menorah was green brass: the candle holders arrayed before a Torah scroll and crown. I loved it not for what it represented but as an object, because I thought it was beautiful. Every night, when we gathered to light the candles, was a rare moment of communion for our ordinarily fractious family. Flame touches wick; and I remember.

The Tree of Knowledge was conceived by Margaret Downey, a secular activist and founder of the Freethought Society. In her October platform about a secular Day of the Dead, Downey observed that ritualized behavior is both universal and, possibly, rooted in evolutionary biology. "Rituals give people a sense of control and confidence in a world that is impersonal and confusing," said Downey. "Anthropologists and psychologists agree that rituals promote cooperation, and a sense of belonging."

I look forward to seeing all of you at the Ethical Society's December rituals: the Solstice platform and Tree of Knowledge decoration ceremony. And, if we get any meaningful snowfall, I invite you to join me in my own, personal winter ritual: a photography tour of the snowpeople of Rittenhouse Square.

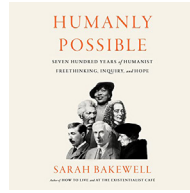


UPCOMING EVENTS

Saturday, Dec 2, 10:30 AM - 12 PM (zoom)

Book Discussion Series: *Humanly Possible*

We continue our discussion of *Humanly Possible: Seven Hundred Years of Humanist Freethinking, Inquiry, and Hope*, by Sarah Bakewell. Hugh will lead the discussion of chapters 9 and 10.



Sunday, Dec 3, 12 PM (in-person)

Tree of Knowledge Ceremony



Following the weekly platform, members are invited to gather for our annual Tree of Knowledge decoration event. Decorations made from the covers of banned or controversial books will be available to hang. Margaret Downey, the Freethought Society founder and president, will create ornaments on-site for people who bring two color copies of the front covers of their favorite books.



Sunday, Dec 3, 7 PM (in-person)

An Introduction to Ethical Humanism

Hugh offers a casual presentation and conversation about the history, philosophy, and current manifestations of Ethical Culture, at the Philadelphia Ethical Society building.

Monday, Dec 4, 1 PM - 2:30 PM (in-person)

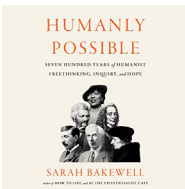
Peeling the Onion



Get to know other Ethical Society members and some of our Philadelphia neighbors through this fun activity. Peeling the Onion lets participants share stories from their lives, creating opportunities for conversations and new friendships. Space is limited. RSVP to [Hugh](#).

Monday, Dec 4, 5 PM - 6:30 PM (in-person)

Book Discussion Series: *Humanly Possible*



We continue our discussion of *Humanly Possible: Seven Hundred Years of Humanist Freethinking, Inquiry, and Hope*, by Sarah Bakewell. Hugh will lead the discussion of chapters 9 and 10. Meet in the Leader's Office.

Friday, Dec 13, 12:30 PM - 1:45 PM (zoom)

Lunch with Hugh

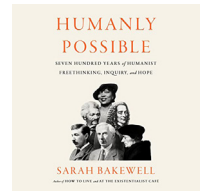
Join Hugh and other members for casual conversation on [zoom](#). Bring your own lunch!



Saturday, Dec 16, 10:30 AM - 12 PM (zoom)

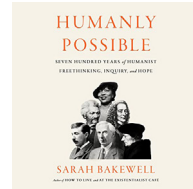
Book Discussion Series: *Humanly Possible*

We conclude our discussion of *Humanly Possible: Seven Hundred Years of Humanist Freethinking, Inquiry, and Hope*, by Sarah Bakewell. Hugh will lead the discussion of chapters 11 and 12.



Monday, Dec 18, 5 PM - 6:30 PM (in-person)

Book Discussion Series: *Humanly Possible*



We conclude our discussion of *Humanly Possible: Seven Hundred Years of Humanist Freethinking, Inquiry, and Hope*, by Sarah Bakewell. Hugh will lead the discussion of chapters 11 and 12. Meet in the Leader's Office.



Tuesday, Dec 19, 12:30 PM - 1:45 PM (in-person)

Lunch with Hugh

Join Hugh and other members for casual conversation in the Leader's Office. Bring your own lunch!

Thursday, Dec 28, 6 PM - 7:15 PM (zoom)

Our Annual Weird News Quiz

Join Leigh Buchanan and Hugh Taft-Morales for our end-of-the-year weird news quiz and other fun! If you've been conscientiously keeping up with world events, it won't do you one bit of good in this game, which highlights the strange stuff that goes on under the radar. Bring your friends, family, and beverage of choice for some silliness to see out the old and prepare for the new.



Back in the house: After four months away, musical member Robert Edwin Steinfert returned to the Ethical Society building for our Sunday program on Nov. 5. He led Society members in the song "River," by Bill Staines.



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. Email us to learn more at office@phillyethics.org.

Board of Trustees
Michael Black-Smith
Sunday, Dec 17, 6 PM

Building Committee
Michael Black-Smith
Wednesday, Dec 20, 7 PM

Camp Linden Committee
Jeffrey Dubb
no meeting this month

Education Committee
Betsy Lightbourn
Wednesday, Dec 6, 5:30 PM

Ending Racism Task Force
Sylvia Metzler, Erik Younge
Saturday, Dec 9, 11 AM

Ethical Action Committee
open chair
next meeting TBA

Finance Committee
Nick Sanders
Wednesday, Dec 13, 5 PM

Media Committee
Drew Snyder
no meeting this month

Social Committee
open chair
next meeting TBA

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

In the Basement

Hugh joined the Rev. John Gardner and other volunteers to serve healthy food at the Open Hearts Café, held in the basement of the Church of the Holy Trinity, on Rittenhouse Square. On the day Hugh visited, about 80 people experiencing homelessness turned up for a meal. Many also requested items from Trinity's clothing closet. Open Hearts Café will run into the new year. If you want to help out, reserve your spot [here](#).



On the Roof

Mike Black-Smith and Sally Redlener checked out the rooftop fire stairs—cleaned up and refurbished by Mike—during a Building Committee walk-through of 1906 Rittenhouse. The upper floors, which are rarely seen by members, house *The American Poetry Review*, Loomis McAfee Architects, and the SRF Philadelphia Meditation Group. Doin' Great, the creative agency producing Hugh's podcast, is our newest tenant!

