



# ETHICAL VIEWS

December 2024 Vol. 139, No.4 Newsletter of the Philadelphia Ethical Society

## SUNDAY PLATFORMS

The public is welcome to join us \*

### Sunday, December 1, 11 AM

#### *Fiction: Lies That Tell Truth*

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



Near the end of his life, the novelist Abraham Rothberg said that "fiction is a lie that tells the truth." Unlike so many politicians who lie to distort the truth and gain power, fiction only deceives us temporarily, in order to share larger truths. It helps us suspend our disbelief so that we can imagine a world that doesn't exist. Hugh Taft-Morales celebrates

fiction as a door to the imagination. Our annual decoration of the Tree of Knowledge follows.

### Sunday, December 8, 11 AM

#### *Living on the Edge: Precarity*

**Jennifer Morton, Professor of Philosophy  
University of Pennsylvania**



Rapid changes in work, housing, health care, and community have contributed to widespread feelings of instability and insecurity. For many, the future feels precarious. As Hobbes understood, it is times like these when authoritarianism can seem most appealing. Critiquing both authoritarian and liberal solutions,

Morton argues that we need a new approach to rebuilding security and stability that moves beyond inequality. The Presidential Penn Compact Professor of Philosophy at University of Pennsylvania, Morton is the author of *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility*.

### Sunday, December 15, 11 AM

#### *Winter Solstice*

In these dark days of winter, we gather to celebrate our community. Participants will light candles representing the goodness we hope to nurture in others and in ourselves. Readings and music will gird us for the coming cold weather, as we look forward to spring. If you are attending in person and would like to do a reading, please contact [Hugh](#) no later than December 8.

### Sunday, December 22, 11 AM

#### *Embracing Awe: A Humanist Journey into Wonder* **Louise Jett, Ethical Culture Leader**



Wonder is the magical feeling of awe that connects us to the world and to each other. It reignites our curiosity, inspires deeper empathy, and enriches our lives with meaning. Jett invites us to explore the profound role of wonder in everyday life and reminds us to cherish the mysteries of existence. In addition to her role in Ethical Culture, Jett is a creative professional, communication expert, and digital artist.

She works as the Statewide Branding Manager for the State of Illinois.

### Sunday, December 29, 11 AM (zoom only)

#### *Gathering Light In Our Times*

#### **American Ethical Union All-Society Platform**

We acknowledge the dark. But in this heart-centered solstice ceremony, Ethical Culturists from around the country will celebrate the light by bringing out the best in others and in ourselves.

Hugh Taft-Morales hosts this program of many voices. To attend, please register [here](#).



### \* Where They'll Be

*The Philadelphia Ethical Society gathers in-person every Sunday, at 1906 Rittenhouse Square. Platforms are delivered simultaneously in the Auditorium and over zoom. When guest speakers appear on zoom, attendees in the Auditorium can view their presentations on a screen while experiencing the rest of the program in real life. Please continue to check your Weekly Bulletins for updates.*

## LETTER FROM THE LEADER

### Aftermath

*By Hugh Taft-Morales*

As the election dust settles, I've been busy supporting Ethical Society members who are grappling with shock, grief, anger, and fear. Helping others helps me process my own trauma. I am grateful for that.

For months before November 5, fear had been worming its way into my heart. My anxiety cranked up as polls tightened. Like many of you, I was emotionally raw.

On election day, as I monitored one Philadelphia polling spot, my heart felt at once full and broken. Full of hope. Broken by fear. When smiling voters gave me high-fives as they left the polling site, I teared up. Children, holding their parents' hands and giddy with excitement, cheered, "Go Kamala!" I shuddered as my emotions swirled and collided. Evening fell; and news reports triggered flashbacks to 2016. I didn't sleep much that night.

In the morning, I began checking in on the Ethical Society. In the weeks and months to come, I will continue to offer a sympathetic ear, a calm presence, and advice about moving forward. I will emphasize the basics. Maintain your physical health by paying attention to nutrition, exercise, and sleep. Maintain your emotional health by connecting with others.

The power of gathering is one reason people join Ethical Societies. Members expressed gratitude for the post-election support circles we held in-person and on zoom. In those conversations, I reassured participants that there is no set timeline, no single way to deal with political trauma. While we may share some thoughts and feelings, each one of us is experiencing this uniquely. Many cannot yet verbalize what they're going through.

I have not heard from all of you. That's OK. Some people are not yet ready to be with others. Take the time you need to process it all.

After we recover some equanimity, we can ask the question, "Where do we go from here?" Vice President Kamala Harris offered some advice in her concession speech. She urged her supporters to accept the election results and support a peaceful transfer of power. Her grace stands in illuminating contrast to Trump's 2020 debasement of this crucial democratic tradition. If anyone didn't understand the ugliness of his response, now, perhaps, they will.

The Vice President also urged us to keep fighting for our values: "for freedom, for opportunity, for fairness, and the dignity of all people." It's time to roll up our sleeves, not throw up our hands. Harris also pointed to many forums for engagement: the courts, the public square, and—in two years—the voting booth. There will be plenty of opportunities to advance our shared values.

I urge you to identify those most vulnerable under a Trump administration, including asylum seekers, immigrants, women needing reproductive health care, the poor, and people who identify as LGBTQ+. Reach out to members of these communities. Participate in neighborhood and national efforts to reassure and support them.

We can transform anger into action by helping to heal trauma, reduce fear, make positive change, and protect people and institutions under threat. Doing so is good for the world. And, as I know from my experience being here for our congregation during these dark days, it will be good for you individually as well.

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

**These organizations are among the many that now, more than ever, need support:**

Defend immigrants: [United We Dream](#)

Defend LGBTQ+ youth: [Lambda Legal](#)

Defend women: [Planned Parenthood](#)

Defend a free press:  
[Freedom of the Press Foundation](#)

Defend our system of government:  
[Protect Democracy](#)

Defend the environment: [The Sierra Club](#)

Defend the rights of everyone:  
[The American Civil Liberties Union](#)

## BEHIND THE SCENES

### Behind the Scenes

*By Cheryl Desmond*

Nine years. It's been fun. (Mostly.) Every day has been worthwhile. (Mostly.) Seriously, all I ever wanted to do was keep the cash flow positive and the lights on, so that the Society—the members individually and collectively—could continue to do what they do best: bring out the best in themselves and in others. In that regard, I think I've had a successful tenure.

But it turned out to have been so much more than that. It's about the people. I—very much an introvert—found myself getting to know 70 or 80 members, many of whom also became friends. To those of you who dropped by the office occasionally, I may always have seemed busy. (Heck, I always *was* busy.) But I promise I didn't mind. I have so enjoyed getting to know you, picnicking with you, and, yes, occasionally hounding you to pay up on your pledges.

Looking back over nine years, my thoughts turn first to those who are no longer with us. I think of Richard Kiniry, especially. I knew Richard for perhaps five years. During that period, he was a presence and quietly inspired me to do my best. The pandemic and the passage of time took others from us as well, each one missed for their unique addition to the Society.

I've also worked closely with many wonderful and inspiring people who are in it for the long haul. For years, Hugh Taft-Morales has been my constant companion across the hall. Board presidents, first Bob Bueding and now Mike Black-Smith, have been great for the Society and awesome to work with. As finance is "my thing," I've also enjoyed working collegially with Society treasurers Vince Russo and Nick Sanders.

As with anything, there were highs and lows. The day, around four years ago, that I found half the Community Room ceiling had come crashing down to the floor was perhaps the, ahem, lowest. But even that became an opportunity to create a new and improved multiuse space. Mike joked recently that, at the building, we play the game of "where is the water leak coming from, *today*?" That is one of those jokes with way too much foundation in truth. It will continue to challenge the next Administrator.

Some parting thoughts. The Society sorely needs to make the building accessible from street level with an elevator or to move elsewhere. A 1930s building no longer works well for everyone. Please use the upcoming leadership transition as an opportunity to revitalize the membership community. And always bring out the best.



My plans for retirement are, first, to knit and sew baby clothes for the grandson expected in February. And I desperately need to do some major home repairs. When I tire of the quiet, I expect to volunteer for climate-action causes and as an escort at Planned Parenthood. (We simply can't go back.)

I've had a 40-plus-year stretch of formal employment. I want to say, without reservation, thank you for the best job I have ever had!

*Cheryl Desmond is the Office Administrator  
for the Philadelphia Ethical Society.  
Her last day is December 30.*

## FROM THE ENDING RACISM TASK FORCE

### Philly through Black Eyes

By Leigh Buchanan

For many of its Black residents, Philadelphia is a paradox: a hometown that simultaneously celebrates and degrades them. An important hub on the Underground Railroad and home to the country's first abolitionist society, the city once was a historical beacon of freedom that today hosts the nation's largest festival and first major museum dedicated to Black and African culture. At the same time, Philadelphia segregates, under-funds, and sometimes brutalizes its Black communities.

*A Black Philadelphia Reader: African American Writings about the City of Brotherly Love*, edited by Louis J. Parascandola, limns this conflicted relationship through the eyes of our city's finest authors of color. In prose and poetry, they describe their aspirations and humiliations; the sad, funny, or touching details of their lives; and the frustration of loving a city that doesn't always love them back.

Spanning the 18th through 21st centuries, this new book also is a historical primer. It begins with a 1781 petition to the Pennsylvania Assembly by a formerly enslaved man named Cato, contesting the threatened repeal of the law which freed him. The Reverend Richard Allen describes the indignities visited upon Black parishioners at St. George's United Methodist Church that drove him to establish Mother Bethel. In a separate entry, Allen, writing with Absalom Jones, relates how, during the yellow fever epidemic of 1793, they were among those Black Philadelphians enlisted to tend the dead and dying, among false assurances that they likely were immune to the disease.

An excerpt from an 1857 novel by Frank J. Webb depicts the death of a man and his pregnant wife in a race riot conflating several real events—including one in which an anti-abolitionist mob burned down Pennsylvania Hall. Almost 150 years later, the activist Mumia Abu-Jamal, writing from prison, linked that moment of historical violence to more recent brutality by white police who “like foreigners in a dark village...treated their alleged fellow citizens with the vehemence reserved for an enemy.” The psychic scar of the 1985 MOVE bombing slashes across several entries, including a powerful poem by Sonia Sanchez. (“C’mon girl hurry on down to osage st/they’re roasting in the fire/smell the dreadlocks and blk/skins roasting in the fire.”)



The theme of Black-white relations emerges repeatedly. Among the most disturbing examples is from Lorene Cary's 1995 novel, *The Price of a Child*, based on the real-life story of Jane Johnson, who escaped slavery with the help of the Underground Railroad. Even as a free woman in Philly, the protagonist remains an object. At a meeting of the Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, she is pressured to lift her skirts and display her scars. “They filled their eyes with her,” writes Cary. “They rubbed their clean, white fingers against each other impatiently, as men rubbed themselves, absently, when a woman walked by.”

Other Black-white interactions are more nuanced. In an excerpt from Jessie Fauset's (wonderful) 1929 novel *Plum Bun*, a light-skinned mother and daughter enjoy passing as white at places like the Academy of Music and Wanamaker's, only to feel ashamed when they pretend not to see their darker complexioned loved ones. And in the very funny opening chapter to David Bradley's novel about pre-gentrification South Street, a white motorist who has accidentally struck a cat tries to report the accident to the colorfully profane patrons of a local bar, who think he's killed a Black person.

Although tales of violence, bigotry, and injustice are plentiful, many pieces celebrate the closeness of families and friends, and the vibrance of neighborhoods. “Today is one of those days to come home from walking in the world, leave the windows open, start a pot of black beans,” writes Yolanda Wisher, in the poem “5 South 43rd Street, Floor 2.” “Smoke some Alice Coltrane. Cut up some fruit, toenails. Hold on to the moment as if time is taking your blood pressure.”

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

# UPCOMING EVENTS

Unless noted, events take place at the Philadelphia Ethical Society, 1906 Rittenhouse Square.



**Sunday, Dec 1, Noon**

## Tree of Knowledge Ceremony

After the platform, we will join Margaret Downey and the Freethought Society to decorate the Tree of Knowledge, in our lobby. Come celebrate the season by hanging ornaments created from the covers of banned books..



**Sunday, Dec 1, 2 PM - 3:30 PM**

## Exploring Stoicism and Ethical Culture in Modern Society

Our series of discussions in collaboration with Philadelphia Stoa continues. The goal is to help participants master judgment and

achieve inner peace. This session addresses the question:

What does it mean to be a citizen of the world?

We will explore public works, inclusivity, internationalism, cosmopolitanism, and continuous ethical improvement.



**Sunday, Dec 1, 5 PM - 6:30 PM**

## Ethical Culture Happy Hour!

Come for conversation and a brief presentation about our alternative to traditional religion. Hugh Taft-Morales will share his perspective on humanist history, values, and community. Snacks and beverages—alcoholic and non-alcoholic—are provided.

**Thursday, Dec 12, 12:30 PM - 1:45 PM (zoom)**

## Lunch with Hugh

Let's connect online for lunch and conversation about our favorite winter traditions. Join the conversation [here](#).



**Sunday, Dec 15, 12:30 PM**

## Thank You Cheryl!

Come say adieu and thank you to Cheryl Desmond, our wonderful Ethical Society Administrator, who is retiring after nine years. (See Behind the Scenes, Page 3.) We'll offer a fond farewell after our Winter Solstice platform.



**Sunday, Dec 15, 2 PM - 3:30 PM**

## Practical Insights on Mastery of Judgement and Tranquility

Our series of discussions in collaboration with Philadelphia Stoa continues. The goal is to help participants master judgment and achieve inner peace. This session will

tap positive psychology, as we dive into the Stoic "Discipline of Assent," which includes practices that enhance mental acuity, reason, and truthfulness.



**Monday, Dec 16, 12:30 PM - 1:45 PM**

## Lunch with Hugh

Bring your lunch to the Ethical Society for casual conversation. Hugh will read a couple of his favorite holiday poems and prose selections. Meet in the Leader's Office.

**Monday, Dec 30, 5:30 PM-6:45 PM (zoom)**

## Our Annual Weird News Quiz

Join Leigh Buchanan and Hugh Taft-Morales for our annual end-of-the-year Weird News Quiz! What stories deservedly traveled beneath the radar in 2024? If you do well on this, you might want to reexamine your priorities. There will be other games as well. Pour yourself a drink (a clear head doesn't help) and join the fun [here](#).



# In Good We Trust

a podcast about being human  
hosted by Hugh Taft-Morales



## Our Ethical Podcast

Please listen to and share Hugh's podcast, *In Good We Trust*, which promotes thoughtful reflection about the challenges of living an ethical life. If you haven't tuned in, you can catch up [here](#) or from the Philadelphia Ethical Society [home page](#). Record a comment on *Voice Memos* for inclusion in future podcasts.



## 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. Check with chairs for meeting venues.

Email us to learn more at [office@phillyethics.org](mailto:office@phillyethics.org).

**Board of Trustees**  
**Michael Black-Smith**  
**Sunday, Dec 15, 6 PM**

**Building Committee**  
**Michael Black-Smith**  
**Wednesday, Dec 18, 6 PM**

**Camp Linden Committee**  
**Jeffrey Dubb**  
no meeting this month

**Community Committee**  
open chair  
next meeting TBA

**Education Committee**  
**Betsy Lightbourn**  
**Wednesday, Dec 4, 5:30 PM**

**Ending Racism Task Force**  
**Sylvia Metzler, Erik Younge**  
**Saturday, Dec 14, 11 AM**

Ethical Action Committee  
open chair  
next meeting TBA

**Finance Committee**  
**Nick Sanders**  
**Wednesday, Dec 11, 5 PM**

Media Committee  
Drew Snyder  
no meeting this month

For suggestions regarding this newsletter, contact [leighebuchanan@gmail.com](mailto:leighebuchanan@gmail.com).

## Digging

Society members got their hands dirty during a November service weekend at Camp Linden. Chores included mulching leaves, working in the garden, removing invasives, and putting protective sleeves around seedlings to protect them from deer. Among the helpers (left to right): Leonard Weeks, Sharon Wallis, Amy Johnston, John Horkel, and Stan Horwitz. Dan Hoffman, Harry Thorn, Camp Linden Committee member Paul Lucot, and Amy's husband, Cliff, also lent a hand.



## Digging In

Resistance and fermentation. A caterpillar's metamorphosis. Friends and family. New citizenship. Society members and guests described the objects of their gratitude after the Humanist Thanksgiving platform, on November 17. (Robert Steinfort gave thanks for the unusual number of children in the audience.) Afterward, we socialized over plates laden with salad, cold cuts, bread, and desserts. Erik Younge and Tara Swartz were among the roughly 30 people present.