

To Live an Ethical Life, Hugh Taft-Morales

In my last Leader's column, written for our September newsletter, I focused on historian Timothy Snyder's warnings in *On Tyranny*. He warns us about the potential of tyranny growing here in the United States: authoritarian rumblings, control of information, invasion of privacy, militarism, and more. Reading Snyder's books and scanning daily news headlines, I continue to be struck by how hard it is to keep real democracy alive.

This month I am looking at a more internal struggle: as a single human being, I continue to be struck by how hard it is *to live an ethical life*. We could long debate what it means to live "an ethical life," but I know generally what it means for me. It means being a better listener, being more aware, being more respectful to people and more compassionate to sentient beings. It means honoring the worth of people, growing ethical relationships, and building social justice in coalition with others. It means living closer to my values and ethical ideals. And it means a lot of hard work.

During these turbulent times, each of us must decide how much we will work in the civic world to assure that, as Lincoln said, "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." It is not unreasonable to worry. There are certainly disturbing signs that money-interests are in control of public policy and that too few Americans take citizenship seriously. Without more enlightened, engaged citizens, our future is uncertain.

But an Ethical Society is not a political action committee, a political party, or an advocacy organization. Of course, we believe in deed before creed. And traditionally Ethical Culture has emphasized engaging in the democratic process – as did our founder Felix Adler, and his allies in civic activism, including Jane Addams and John Dewey.

But first and foremost we offer congregational support and humanist inspiration to people trying to *live more ethical lives*. I believe that my main vocational role in our non-theist home at 1906 S. Rittenhouse Square is to help create a supportive environment for members and friends of the Society struggling to do this. It's why Adler began Ethical Culture. To live ever more ethical lives – lives where we bring out the best in others and thus in ourselves – is a challenging and noble commitment. And it is a life-long project.

Those of you who know me well know that I am no zealot. A zealot is uncompromising and fanatical in pursuing their religious, political or ethical ideals. I am, if anything, too ready to compromise, too easy going, too willing to be soft on people and overlook proper procedures and systems. Maybe these are weaknesses so intertwined with my strengths that they are hard to correct. I compromise because I am flexible. I am easy going because I don't want to sweat the small stuff. I am soft on people because sometimes we can be very fragile creatures.

Tomorrow, even before I submit this column, I'll speak as part of a lunchtime discussion series at the Impact Hub in Baltimore. The topic is "the fragility of goodness." It's based on talk I gave here in Philly on May 1st of last year. [You can watch it at

www.youtube.com/watch?v=r17-qOqk5cg] It goes into greater detail about how hard it is to care deeply about so much in a world that can be capricious and cruel.

Our fragility about “caring too much” may seem a bit overdone, or sentimental, or precious. For those of us lucky enough to be assured of food and shelter for the foreseeable future, our ethical, emotional fragility is bearable. For those *without* the basic necessities to live, their very existence is fragile – every day hundreds of thousands are broken and risk physical death.

The more fortunate amongst us – physically comfortable enough to be able to wrestle with our conscience over how best to help others – are not caught up in the rising tide of misery. We stand on relatively solid ground. Felix Adler wrote, “We stand, as it were, on the shore, and see multitudes of our fellow beings struggling in the water, stretching forth their arms, sinking, drowning, and we are powerless to assist them.”

If we are to live an ethical life, however, we cannot allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by such suffering. We must be courageous enough to acknowledge a sea of suffering, and strong enough to help those we can.

In my role as an Ethical Culture Leader, I want try to live an ethical life together, in community. Whether at the Ethical Society, or in my neighborhood, local school, or town hall, I want to nurture ethical relationships and mutual support in this noble effort to live ethical lives.

Civic activism is important. The historically unprecedented economic inequality before us cannot remain. But we can best fulfill our duties as citizens of the world’s longest surviving democracy if we are supported by a community and inspired by our ideals. We cannot allow our fragility to stop us from living a more ethical life. But, as I concluded my last column, the choice is ours.