

Imagination and My Ethical Culture, Hugh Taft-Morales

Sometimes it's hard to see the water you're swimming in. Having worked as an Ethical Culture Leader for almost five years, I swim in humanist seas enriched by many springs. For me the most consistent and powerful spring is the legacy of Felix Adler. For this reason, over the course of the spring I will speak on Adler more often – in my platforms and my columns. That begins here.

Adler left us with a fundamental ethical challenge, one that inspires me every day. He saw a broken world full of suffering and despair where individuals were treated as if they had no worth. He saw growing numbers of people abandoning theistic faiths and belief in the supernatural. These two factors posed a fundamental question: Where could the growing ranks of godless men and women gather to find inspiration honor the worth of all and to build a better world? From 1876 on he could answer, the New York Society for Ethical Culture. Our life is enriched by Adler's vision and hard work.

There are other good sources for humanist inspiration, of course: the birth of democracy in Greece; the beauty and human dignity in renaissance art; the courage of enlightenment scientists risking persecution to speak the truth; defenders of democracy demanding rights for all; and the decency of those who choose compassionate deed over dogmatic creed. From doctors without borders facing West African ebola and Haitian cholera, to protestors out on the streets today honoring the lives and dignity of BOTH young black men and officers in blue, hope floods into my life without having to imagine the existence of a better world in heaven above.

I can, however, imagine a better world in my mind, here and now. Imagination is a wonderful tool - a gift biology gave to the human race. I can imagine Felix Adler's yearning for "something more" than the broken world around him – a yearning so strong that it led him to postulate something he called an "ethical manifold," a cumbersome term mired in an antiquated metaphysical idealism. But I interpret Adler's "ethical manifold" more as a metaphor representing a system of interrelations between people where they are at their ethical best. Imagine, Adler challenged us, an "infinite system of interdependence in which men [and women] as ethical units have their place." (EPL 125) Imagine a world where we all help each other bring out our ethical best.

There are times when Adler sounds as if this manifold is "out there," an external objective reality like Plato's forms or the gods of theists. But in *my* Ethical Culture, any such inspirational concept is primarily a human construction. More importantly, it's a human choice.

At times, Adler understood this existential truth even though he couldn't shake the use of some religious vocabulary, such as term "divine." As quoted by his son-in-law and biographer Horace Friess, "I affirm that there verily is a divine life, a best beyond the best I can think or imagine, in which all that is best in me and best in those who are dear to me, is contained and continues." (EPL as quoted in Friess, p. 231)

My Ethical Culture is rooted in Adler's affirmation. As a product of free will, such an affirmation needs no "discovery" of some pre-existing objective truth. It is our joy and challenge to create. In *An Ethical Philosophy of Life* Adler explains, "I do not find worth in others, I attribute it to them – I create the ethical manifold. I need an idea of the whole in order to act rightly...." (EPL p. 121)

The wholeness and unity I discover only in my imagination is a powerful part of my commitment to Ethical Culture. When I find others who choose to imagine this too, then the hard work begins. Then we have to figure out how to act in concrete ways to make this fractured world more whole? The devil - which I spell with no "d" - is surely in the details. But I handle the details better when inspired by my humanist faith.

Some people don't like the term "faith," perhaps because to them it implies irrationality or perhaps it is simply too tarred with the brush of unpleasant religious upbringings. Fair enough. But as a secular child of the sixties who saw before me a broken world, I - like Adler - yearned for something that would inspire me to live better. I'm glad I found an Ethical Culture that has evolved to include the existential side of Adler while letting go of idealist metaphysics. If that's too much philosophical jargon to end on, then I will conclude with John Lennon's over-quoted yet appropriate ode to imagination: "You may say I'm a dreamer. But I'm not the only one. I hope some day you'll join us. And the world will live as one."