



ETHICAL VIEWS

January 2024 Vol. 138, No. 5 Newsletter of the Philadelphia Ethical Society

SUNDAY PLATFORMS

The public is welcome to join us *

Sunday, Jan 7, 11 AM (in-person) 2 PM (zoom)

Memorial Sunday

As we ring in the new year, we pause to remember those who are no longer with us. Join Hugh Taft-Morales and members of the Philadelphia Ethical Society as we honor important people in our lives, whether they be family, friends, or luminaries. Share your own memories or come just to listen.

Sunday, Jan 14, 11 AM (zoom only)

Race, Wealth, and Extraction

Kee Tobar, Host

How Is That Legal? podcast



Kee Tobar discusses how systemic racism consistently extracts people of color from due-process procedures. Tobar will focus on two policies: Pennsylvania's Childline Registry and Medicaid Estate Recovery. Both adversely affect BIPOC family legacies and communities, and their ability to

transfer wealth. Tobar, a graduate of Georgetown University Law Center, is an attorney, author, and antiracism practitioner. She previously served as chief diversity and inclusion officer at Community Legal Services of Philadelphia.

Sunday, Jan 21, 11 AM (in-person) 2 PM (zoom)

Beyond War and Silence

Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader

Philadelphia Ethical Society



On April 4, 1967, at New York City's Riverside Church, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered the speech "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence." In it, he condemned the harm done by the war to poor people here and in Vietnam. And he called for its immediate end by nonviolent means. As the current heartbreaking violence in the Middle East leads to both angry shouting and fearful silence, Hugh Taft-Morales looks to King's wisdom for guidance in discussing the crisis without becoming polarized. How can we avoid dehumanizing people and planting the seeds for future killing? How can we speak up constructively?

Sunday, Jan 28, 11 AM (zoom only)

How Poor People Build Community

Amid Barriers to Inclusion

Joan Maya Mazelis,

Associate Professor of Sociology

Rutgers University-Camden



Like most Americans, people in poverty cling tightly to the belief that they should manage their struggles independently. For that reason, they frequently avoid social ties. Yet when these people do seek assistance, they may learn that personal failings alone do not cause

poverty. Mazelis argues that, while there's enormous need to strengthen the increasingly tattered public safety net, people can survive poverty with greater dignity and less loneliness when they come together in community. Mazelis is the author of the book *Surviving Poverty: Creating Sustainable Ties among the Poor*.



Seeing is believing: In the spirit of the season, Hugh briefly suspended his trademark skepticism when he ran into this guy. We hope he asked Santa for peace on Earth. Also, an elevator for our building.

*** 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.)

LETTER FROM THE LEADER

Thinking Outside the Congregation

By Hugh Taft-Morales

As I contemplate the future of Ethical Culture, I'm intrigued by a new report from the Pew Research Center that explores the beliefs and practices of people who identify as "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR). This expanding category—currently 22% of Americans—offers a potentially rich source of new members for Ethical Societies.

SBNRs are younger, on average, than religious Americans. Consequently, they could become sources of new ideas and energy. They are less likely to believe in heaven or hell, a position shared by many Ethical Culture members. In addition, SBNRs are more likely than religious Americans to say they feel "a deep sense of wonder about the universe once a month or more often." Humanists celebrate the ever-present awe of nature and the cycles of the season rather than religious-history events. SBNRs could warm to that.

There are divergences. Notably, many SBNRs accept the possibility of the supernatural. They are much more likely than religious people to believe that "spirits or spiritual energy" inhabit inanimate natural objects, like rivers or trees. And 88% believe in a soul or spirit separate from their physical beings. Many Ethical Humanists, by contrast, are skeptics who emphasize evidence over enchantment, and astrophysics over astrology.

Still, I believe Ethical Humanists and SBNRs have enough in common philosophically to attract them to our movement. The problem lies on the practical side. SBNRs may not want to join with us because they resist being part of anything that resembles a religious organization.

This is the same obstacle I encountered a decade ago, when I read reports that people with no religious affiliation, known as the "Nones," were the country's fastest growing "religious" demographic. At first, I was excited. But as I dug into the details, my enthusiasm dimmed. Most Nones harbored what Robert Putnam—in his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*—described as a skepticism towards communities that encourage commitments and responsibilities. That includes congregations, such as Ethical Societies.

SBNRs seem likely to resist the congregational nature of Ethical Culture. Just 11% are involved in religious communities, compared to 62% of religious Americans. Semantics also could be a problem. Thirty-eight percent of SBNRs say religion does more harm than good; and 42% agree with the statement "religion causes division and intolerance." Ethical Culture, legally, is identified as a religion. So, at the very least, significant education would be required. I held that same view of religion much of my life. It took time to overcome it and commit to our movement.



Most of those who embrace Ethical Culture cherish our congregational life. As a clergy Leader, I've worked to enhance the sense of belonging and support vital to healthy congregations. We should never abandon our efforts to meet regularly and develop deep connections.

Still, I wonder whether, in order to reach people like the SBNRs, our tactics need to evolve. How might we spread our values of honoring worth, nurturing relationships, and building justice to those who may not attend our Sunday programs?

Solutions might include developing a public presence independent of our congregational format. We could consider adding subscription services for those wanting to view our programs and participate in our activities. Perhaps, the American Ethical Union should create an educational nonprofit to attract grants and reach the broader public. What other new ideas should we consider?

I will explore these questions and others in the February issue of *Ethical Views*. Until then, [email](#) me with your thoughts. SBNRs and other potential adherents aren't going to tell us how to make our movement work for them. To revitalize Ethical Culture, it is our job to enlarge our tent to welcome more people who share our values.

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

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

“Presiding This Morning Is [Insert Name Here]”

By Michael Black-Smith

Calling all enthusiasts of elocution, devotees of declaration, and adherents of oration! Have you ever found yourself at a Sunday platform thinking, “Gee, Mike really seems to be enjoying himself as he leads our congregation through the service. I wonder if I could do that?” Or, alternatively, “Gee, Mike really flubbed his simple presiding script today. I wonder if I could do that better?”

In all likelihood, yes you can.
And soon you will have a chance to prove it!

The Philadelphia Ethical Society is unusual in that our Board President regularly plays the master of ceremonies role for our weekly services. I’ve done it for two-and-a-half years. Before me, Bob Bueding did it for a whopping five. But at other Ethical Societies, a larger group of members gets to enjoy the glamor and bright lights in front of the congregation.

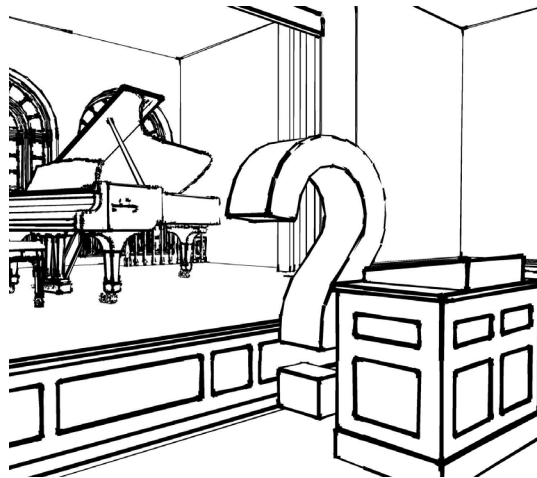
That simple difference profoundly democratizes their services. In much the way that Hugh has expressed discomfort with the title “Leader,” I see no reason that our Sunday ceremonies should conform to an implied hierarchy. Shared leadership is a hallmark of Ethical Culture. It promotes feelings of investment and belonging.

Congregant presidors also make Sunday meetings more welcoming. It’s another way for people to get to know each other, to share a little bit of themselves. A first-time visitor, sitting in the audience, might look up at the presider and think, “In a year’s time, that could be me.”

So, taking a cue from our sister Societies, I’d like to start a Presiders Circle, composed of members willing and eager to assume this responsibility.

“But isn’t the President’s role carved into stone in our Bylaws?” you ask. Certainly, the Bylaws require Presidents to officiate on some occasions. Article V, Section 1 states that “the President shall preside at all meetings of the Membership....”

Our Sunday platforms, however, don’t rise to that level. Section 1 refers to Annual Meetings and Special Meetings, which require a higher degree of rigamarole than our weekly services. Can you imagine running a platform using Robert’s Rules of Order? “I move that we now share expressions of Joys and Concerns with our congregation. Do I have a second for the motion?”



“OK, but how about tradition?” you ask. “The President has always led the service.” That is true. But in this case, I believe the benefits of trying something different outweigh the natural impulse to stick with convention.

Sharing the presider’s role among members would reinforce the message that the Ethical Culture movement is congregational rather than top-down. It would add a freshness to each gathering. And it would reduce the burden on our

Presidents. That, in turn, should lower the bar for members who might be inclined to serve as President but are put off by a regular public-speaking commitment. Personally, I was terrified the first few times I took the podium. Even if you enjoy that kind of thing, doing it week in and week out can be draining.

On weeks when Hugh is not in Philadelphia, our Education Committee arranges presentations by other speakers. The Ending Racism Task Force solicits volunteers to present the weekly Ethical Action report and reflection. In the same way, the Presiders Circle will make sure that we always have someone to do the honors at our Sunday services.

So! Who wants to join me in our merry band of presidors? Come share the gift of your presence with our community. **Contact** me if you’re interested, or even just “presiding-curious.” Let the face of the Philadelphia Ethical Society be multitudes.

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

FROM THE ENDING RACISM TASK FORCE

The Best Weapon Against Racism? Black Joy!

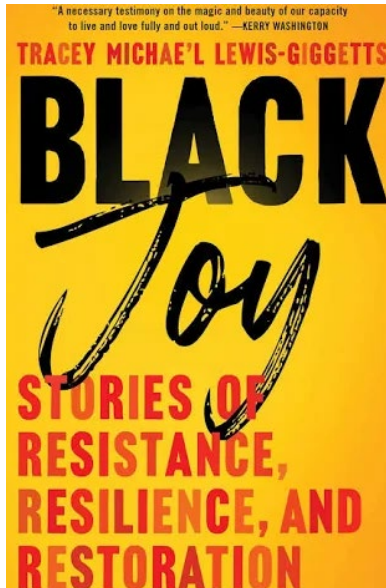
By John Marshall and Erik Younge

"There is no time for despair, no need for self-pity, no need for silence, no need to fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal."

—Toni Morrison

To oppress someone is to rob them of their joy and humanity. Consequently, to revel in joy—full-throated and fully lived—in the midst of pain becomes an act of resistance. It also can build resilience by healing the mind and body. For Black Americans, whose lives conventionally are viewed through a lens of trauma and hardship, seizing joy becomes a way to shift the narrative and restore both individuals and communities.

Black Joy: Stories of Resistance, Resilience, and Restoration (2022) is a remarkable collection of lyrical essays by Tracey Michael Lewis-Giggetts, a podcaster and author. Lewis-Giggetts draws on stories of adversity in her own life and in the lives of her ancestors to frame the pursuit of joy as both critical to survival and as very hard work. It is an interior quest that complements and strengthens the exterior fight to end racism. "White supremacy and our struggle against it isn't the only thing that binds us as Black people," she writes. "Black joy knows its survival lies with our ability to remain free, even on the inside."



Lewis-Giggetts vividly describes the murder of George Floyd, who called out for his dead mother while his neck was being crushed. She imagines the final dream of Breonna Taylor before she was shot. Yet she also evokes the singing and dancing and marriage proposals that took place in the midst of Black Lives Matter marches and protests. Death quails when confronted by life.

But even joy is not unproblematic. Lewis-Giggetts's desire to forget, even briefly, racism's ravages is tempered by the need to prepare for the next racist act. She recounts her inner debate. "If you let go, then you're not ready when the next bad thing is going to happen," she muses. Yet, "I'm doing more damage by living in a constant state of stress."

The author worries that experiencing the full measure of joy leaves her vulnerable because it is transient. Yet, rather than temper her feelings, she chooses to immerse herself in them, accepting that joy will depart but also that it will return.

Lewis-Giggetts also encourages Black readers to reject whiteness as the standard by which they will live. "Every time we decide to be completely and authentically who we are as Black people, we are standing in opposition to those who try to make us believe that our only value is found in our relationship with whiteness," she writes.

The author approaches her subject as both a Black woman and as a mother. The latter perspective is especially moving. Her only "real and lasting weapon" against the generational trauma threatening her child is the restorative power of generational joy. "My daughter will laugh and cry and dance as much as she likes with as much freedom as I can afford her," Lewis-Giggetts writes. "She will know that she can laugh and cry and dance in the sun and in the rain."

For advocates, activists, and allies, there is much in this book to unpack and reflect upon. We can wield these ideas as a weapon to end racist, unjust, unhealthy systems. And we can use them as a tool to forge a humane path toward healing and wellness.

(Lewis-Giggetts's book is part of a growing body of meditations, reporting, and scholarship on this subject. Also check out *The Black Joy Project*, by Kleaver Cruz, which was published last month.)

*Erik Younge and John Marshall
are members of the
Ending Racism Task Force*

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

It's an Election Year. Close Your Eyes. Breathe.

By Leigh Buchanan

I can't remember an election year when I've felt this tense, this early. Already, I'm anticipating the daily gut-wrench of campaign coverage. My body thrums with existential dread. You know how a person unaware of some widely publicized phenomenon is said to be living under a rock? Just tell me where to find that rock. I think I can lift it myself.

Such elevated stress levels exacerbate depression and anxiety. Election stress, specifically, has been linked to increased blood pressure and heart attacks. To help our members stay physically and mentally healthy, I have compiled some advice on holding it together during an election year.

Don't doomscroll. Isn't "doomscroll" a wonderful word? That said, it obviously is unhealthy to scour the online universe for stories predicting the end of justice, democracy, and the planet. Doomscrolling is like constantly probing a sore tooth with your tongue. Yes, it still hurts! You know that it does! Stop making it worse! To avoid that razor-wire-lined rabbit hole, put yourself on a media diet. Maybe 15 minutes of non-hyperbolic news twice a day.

Take political exchanges offline. Avoid textual screaming matches with friends and relatives on social media. Instead, schedule a coffee, phone call, or Zoom conversation. Such exchanges will give you more space to make your cases and hash out disagreements. Even if you don't resolve anything, you may remember that you care about each other and call a truce.

Find something hopeful on which to focus. The U.S. economy appears to have sidestepped recession. Election deniers have generally fared poorly in state contests. Labor is flexing new muscle. Science has racked up big wins in areas ranging from clean energy to Alzheimer's. Superhero movies may be on the way out. Best yet, there are literally thousands of online videos featuring abandoned kittens finding their forever homes.

Don't discuss the election endlessly. I joined the Society during the 2016 primary and soon bonded with two other new members: Lori Broesamle and Srikant Gopal. The three of us began meeting regularly for dinner, drinks, or coffee. Invariably, the conversation turned to politics. We agonized over every development. Hillary or Bernie? Trump couldn't win, could he? Eventually, we set a rule: politics would comprise no more than 25% of any conversation. We mostly stuck to that; and our friendship was healthier for it.



Get involved. Stress is exacerbated by lack of agency. You may feel better if you're doing something. Volunteer to work on an issue you care about or for a candidate you support. Local efforts allow you to have a more visible (and, consequently, satisfying) impact. As the election nears, register voters, encourage people to vote, or become a poll worker. Having your hands on the process can make it feel less remote and chaotic.

Stay healthy. You know the drill. Good food, rest, exercise, meditation. Try listening to "[Weightless](#)," engineered to be the most relaxing song in the world. (I kind of hate it.) Pay particular attention to sleep, which is critical to reducing stress and regulating mood.

During anxious times, my own troubled sleep becomes downright tortured. In the fall of 2020, I suffered from three recurring nightmares. In the first, I woke up the morning after the election and realized I had forgotten to vote. In the second, I made it to the polls at the last minute but was in the wrong city. In the third, I accidentally voted for Donald Trump and ran around maniacally trying to disqualify that ballot and cast a new one. I succeeded... then accidentally voted for Trump again.

Three-hundred-nine days and counting...

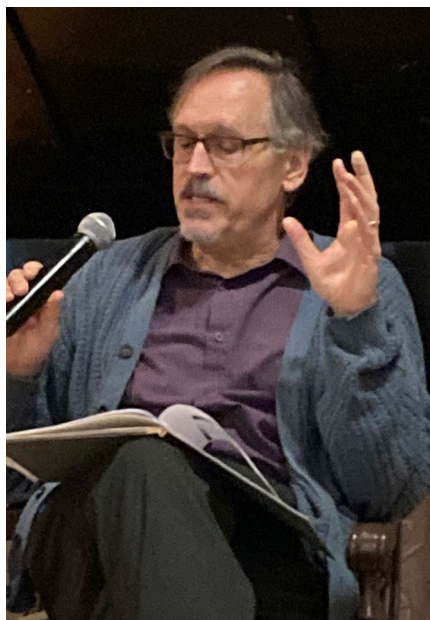
Leigh Buchanan is the editor of Ethical Views

LIGHT AND LAUGHTER

The Ethical Society's annual Winter Solstice ceremony is traditionally a soothing, reflective affair. To celebrate the season of rebirth ushered in by the year's longest night, members read poetry and meditations about the beauty of nature, the resilience of the spirit, and the comfort of loved ones.

That happened this year as well. Then, things got a little wacky. Hugh, in full-on Mister Rogers mode, read the story "Christmas Cracker," by Jeanette Winterson. This raucous, funny, ultimately moving tale of a talking dog, a pure-hearted boy, and a bunch of children who appear to have escaped from a Roald Dahl novel, were a reminder that even the most cherished ritual can benefit from a dash of silliness.

As the company's longest-serving member, Carol Love led the lighting of the candles. Hugh welcomed John Horkel, our newest member. Rollin Wilber and Robert Edwin supplied season-appropriate music (Debussy and Mary Chapin Carpenter, respectively).



Hugh Taft-Morales



Sylvia Metzler



Robert Erwin



Harry Thorn



Mike Black-Smith and Stan Horwitz

The Auditorium was decked out in holiday finery, including several giant wooden snowflakes built by Michael Black-Smith. If some of the trimmings looked a little crooked, blame the eggnog that Mike provided for the decorating crew the night before.

Nick Sanders, Mike Black-Smith and Drew Snyder



UPCOMING EVENTS

Wednesday, Jan 3, 12:30 PM - 1:45 PM (zoom)

Lunch with Hugh

Hugh Taft-Morales hosts an open-ended conversation about whatever you'd like to talk about: winter, New Year's Resolutions, your favorite new movie. Everyone is welcome! Bring your own lunch.



Sunday, Jan 7, 7 PM (in-person)

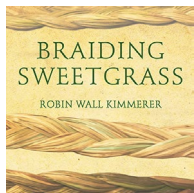
An Introduction to Ethical Humanism



Hugh Taft-Morales offers an informal presentation about the history and philosophy of Ethical Culture and the community on Rittenhouse Square known as the Philadelphia Ethical Society. Come find out what we are all about! Meet in the Leader's Office.

Monday, Jan 8, 5 PM - 6:30 PM (in-person)

Book Discussion Series: *Braiding Sweetgrass*



We will read and discuss Robin Wall Kimmerer's groundbreaking book *Braiding Sweetgrass* to gain a deeper understanding of relationships, sustainability, and our place in the natural world. This meeting will cover the first three sections: "Planting Sweetgrass," "Tending Sweetgrass," and "Picking Sweetgrass." Meet in the Leader's Office.

Tuesday, Jan 9, 12:30 PM - 1:45 PM (in-person)

Weird News Quiz and Lunch with Hugh

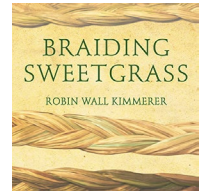


It's early January. Do you need something to laugh about? Society member Leigh Buchanan's annual Weird News Quiz highlights the stuff and nonsense that gets lost in the shadow of important world events. If you do well on this, you may need to rethink your priorities. (This is a repeat of the zoom event on Dec. 28.) Afterward, Hugh Taft-Morales will host an open-ended conversation about whatever you'd like to talk about: winter, New Year's Resolutions, your favorite new movie. Everyone is welcome! Bring your own lunch and meet in the Leader's Office.

Tuesday, Jan 9, 5 PM - 6:30 PM (zoom)

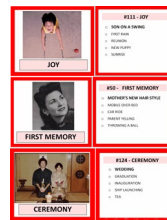
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Wednesday, Jan 10, 1 PM - 2:30 PM (in-person)

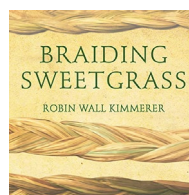
Peeling the Onion



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. Come alone or bring a friend! You can (but don't have to) attend both this event and the one on January 24. Meet in the Leader's Office. Space is limited, so RSVP to [Hugh](#).

Monday, Jan 22, 5 PM - 6:30 PM (in-person)

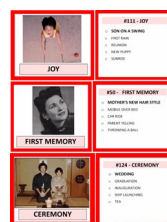
Book Discussion Series: *Braiding Sweetgrass*



We will read and discuss Robin Wall Kimmerer's groundbreaking book *Braiding Sweetgrass* to gain a deeper understanding of relationships, sustainability, and our place in the natural world. This meeting will cover the last three sections: "Braiding Sweetgrass," "Burning Sweetgrass," and "Epilogue: Returning the Gift."

Wednesday, Jan 24, 1 PM - 2:30 PM (in-person)

Peeling the Onion

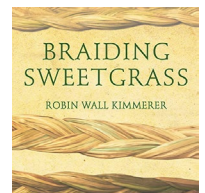


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Tuesday, Jan 9, 5 PM - 6:30 PM (zoom)

Book Discussion Series: *Braiding Sweetgrass*

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SUNDAY SERVICES

11 am

Ethical Views is published monthly except July and August.

Executive Editor: Leigh Buchanan
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Henry Pashkow, Nick Sanders,
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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, Jan 21, 6 PM

Building Committee
Michael Black-Smith
no meeting this month

Camp Linden Committee
Jeffrey Dubb
Wednesday, Jan 24, 6 PM

Education Committee
Betsy Lightbourn
Wednesday, Jan 3, 5:30 PM

Ending Racism Task Force
Sylvia Metzler, Erik Younge
Saturday, Jan 13, 11 AM

Ethical Action Committee
open chair
next meeting TBA

Finance Committee
Nick Sanders
Wednesday, Jan 10, 5 PM

Media Committee
Drew Snyder
Thursday, Jan 18, 6 PM

Social Committee
open chair
next meeting TBA

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

A Plea to Protect Chinatown

Kate Esposito was among those at Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church last month speaking up against construction of a Sixers arena bordering Chinatown. Several Society members attended the packed POWER meeting, where critics of the project urged Councilmember Mark Squilla and others to protect the embattled neighborhood.



A Tree to Protect Free Thought

Freethought Society Founder Margaret Downey presided over the decoration of the Tree of Knowledge, in the Ethical Society lobby. Members draped its boughs with book covers, including one for *The Answer Is Never Magic: A Socratic Dialog on Faith and Religion Between a Skeptic and a Believer*, by Robert S. Porter, also pictured here.

