

# **ETHICAL HUMANISM AS A RELIGIOUS APPROACH**

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# **ETHICAL HUMANISM AS A RELIGIOUS APPROACH**

## **INTRODUCTION**

For some time, I've been advocating a more definite statement of Ethical Culture as a specific Ethical Humanist religion. I believe growth has eluded us not only because of the lack of organizational techniques or publicity, as important as they are, but because we have not articulated a full-service religion; meaning a religion with all the pieces - a world-view, a moral approach, plus intellectual and emotional satisfaction. Believing that Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanism has a life-changing capacity in the way it connects personal living with responsibility for community, I want to be able to present a shared vision that is accepted as a statement of Ethical Culture Religion and that is still an open-ended, evolving approach.

Regardless of how you feel about that opinion, this is an attempt to collect into a consistent whole the divergent ideas that Ethical Culture has lived with through the generations. I want to put the pieces in order to demonstrate confidence that they do hang together. I hope some Leaders agree.

This is not a philosophic piece; it's a workshop offering a step-by-step understanding of Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanist religion. There are plenty of philosophic ideas included but those ideas are presented in a popular fashion. I have used the Concept Map, pieces from Leaders' books and, since I have all the GEP stuff, I have borrowed and stolen from many of the Leaders. So, this is not so original, but it is one person's effort at pulling together the diverse pieces.

This paper is divided into sections. The first section states my case to justify the need for this project and then I progressively go through what I assume are the pieces of Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanism concluding with what this religion offers as advice to both personal and communal living.

## **SECTION ONE**

### **DEED BEFORE CREED**

I start with Deed Before Creed because I believe that the adage keeps us from being direct in presenting our world view. On arriving at our front doors people hear the Deed before Creed idea and too often assume that's the limit of our philosophy. They assume that if they are nice people and vote Democrat, we will not challenge them with the subtlety of our perspective on life. Among other ideas, they never get around to understanding nontheism.

While we are and should be open to people with varied conceptions of

reality, varied ideas of god or gods, varied ideas of ethics and meaning, it is important that people discover quickly that we have a point of view. Be as unusual as you want to be but there is still a foundational perspective in this Movement that is not going away. Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanism has a world view and is a religious approach. While we don't have a creed in the usual use of the term, no Leaders' Creed, we do have an historic understanding of life. Unlike non-creedal Unitarianism we have one approach, life is a relational experience and therefore an ethical experience. As someone has said deed is our creed. We are not dogmatic, but we are creedal. We have beliefs.

How one treats others including the natural world is more important than one's supposed creed but one's conception of the nature of reality makes a difference in ethical choosing. Believing that ethical values are written in the stars rather than developed in the relational experience makes a difference. Individuals following proscribed values miss the relational aspects of ethical choosing, and although they may be doing good deeds, too often others are hurt for the sake of a proscribed value.

Another unfortunate understanding of the Deed before Creed adage legitimates avoidance of the fact that we occupy metaphysical territory. Yes, metaphysics seems to have seen its day and Ethical Culture attempts to be open to varied understandings of the ultimate questions but our understanding of the nature of human reality is situated in the ethical, relational realm and that is sufficient as a foundational stand. As Nel Noddings says, "Taking relation as ontologically basic simply means that we recognize human encounter and affective response as a basic fact of human existence."

We are not dogmatic and as with Eight Commitments of Ethical Culture we don't claim to have the absolute answers, but we do offer our best guesses, our assumptions about life. People join religious groups for help, they want guidance in living, and to be a legitimate religious organization you need a foundational creed that explains the group's perspective on life and offers a rational structure for an individual's idea of right and wrong living.

## **RELIGION**

My next preliminary step is Religion. I think it is necessary that we grab hold of our identity as religion. Rather than avoid, we should celebrate, the unique religious identity of Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanism. While many members, especially the more rationalistic ones, have an understandably negative opinion of religion, we function as a religion and it is important that some humanist group grab full ownership of the Religious Humanism title.

Religion, art and philosophy all arose from the human need to say some things are special, significant but religion is only a tool, a human invention. Everything in human culture was invented by human beings to enhance the human experience and religion, like everything else in human culture, was invented to somehow enhance human life. Of course, each religion emphasizes some particular need or aspect of human nature but primarily religions function as that part of human culture where the big questions are addressed. While it has been abused by the power system of every culture, religion's legitimate purpose is to provide a conscious world view with an approach to living a good life. If done honestly, it is often in conflict with the standard cultural approach.

Religion institutionalizes the natural desire of human beings to have their lives mean something. Religion says there is a higher way of living, a conscious way, a more intense way. You can give life meaning and you ought to. Human beings inhabit a cultural reality and will come to think about life in response to the messages they are receiving from their cultural institutions. As one of those institutions – a religious institution – we have the responsibility to offer our best understanding of the path to meaningful living in the contemporary experience. While there are denominations doing a good job of religion, none is offering our unique nontheistic, humanistic, ethical perspective on life.

### **WHY THE WORLD NEEDS THE RELIGION OF ETHICAL CULTURE/ETHICAL HUMANISM**

Through its uneven history, religion, while holding a central position in every culture as the institution that articulates the society's official world-view, has resisted change. While through the centuries other aspects of human culture evolved, religion persisted in offering traditional, increasingly untenable answers. Since the Enlightenment some religious groups have attempted to save the sense of yonder ultimacy while accepting the legitimacy of human reason and science as windows on truth. For many people that has meant sidelining religion to the artistic periphery, leaving Western humankind the religious options of Eastern Religion, New Age and Nature religion. While millions of people have found their own way to meaningful living without the help of organized religion, traditional religious institutions continue to dominate the meaning or purpose territory of our culture while in actuality the culture, as a whole, offers consuming as the meaning of life.

Our present consumer culture is the actual religious base of our culture and that is the primary enemy of an ethical culture. So many of the social problems that concern us have their source not so much in policy as in the culture's individualistic understanding of human life and in our lifestyles - people don't

take responsibility for the life they create. The world needs a religion that explicitly offers the relational, communal experience as its foundation, a religion that says life is not about being good, but about making the good. The good is what we do.

Humankind needs religion that frames the meaning of life not in individualistic spiritual terms but in the communal relational experience, religion that has made the full break with the supernatural and in the cold light of the human condition offers meaning in involvement, in creating life together, in respecting the diversity in living.

I believe Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanism can be a religious perspective that helps transform humankind's understanding of the meaning of life. Starting from Adler's idealism and evolving through pragmatic humanism, our perspective is a religious challenge to transcendent religion and consumer culture or "populist conformity". While the essential message of the Ethical Culture Movement can be found in the value systems and behavior of many individuals and groups beyond our orbit – the uniqueness of every person, respect for that individuality, commitment to equality, even the understanding of life as a relational experience – there is value and power in presenting our view of life as a full package, a context within which to live, one that speaks to a relationship with nature and a place in the human journey.

That is my case for this project. Now the step-by-step pieces of an Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanist religious approach...

## **SECTION TWO**

### **HUMAN EXPERIENCE**

Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanism starts with individual Human Experience – the individual in relationship. When asked for an Ethical Humanist metaphysic, I often say that the first three of the Eight Commitments encapsulate our understanding of the nature of reality. Rather than connecting to some eternal truth or understanding, we start with what we know and that is each person's personal, subjective experience. It is an ethical experience between individuals of worth.

Each human being arrives into an objective natural experience that remains for each a subjective human experience of relationship. Even in existential loneliness we take our whole relational experience with us. It is the quality of our relationships that causes psychological pain and sense of disconnection. In the natural, relational reality, each person must decide who they are among others in

what they bring to the relationship and that of course is an ethical experience; an experience of choosing how to treat others, including all the individual aspects of life around them. Life is a journey of personal creation and an inter-relational journey of world creation. While each person has a genetic predisposition to certain personality characteristics, that is only the beginning. We actually create ourselves in interaction. That is a learning process in which we are also helping to create the personalities of others.

So, we start our understanding of life by situating ourselves in a relational process that is both personal and objective.

### **NATURALISM**

Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanism accepts that human experience is within the natural experience; everything we know is part of the natural process. We start with natural experience and until we are confronted by evidence to the contrary, we stay there. While it is possible that there is something beyond the natural universe, so far it is either unknowable or actually part of nature. Human beings have created ideas about gods and spiritual forces beyond humans in an effort to explain aspects of human experience but for us there is no supernatural.

The human mind does create marvelous ways of responding to human experience that enhance and expand our appreciation of living. Human consciousness's emotive side can take daily living to sublime levels of connection with the natural experience. A poetic and aesthetic approach allows us to transcend what seems ordinary and add depth, meaning and beauty but all of that remains part of the natural experience.

### **NONTHEISM**

Although the subtlety of our approach to the god question is difficult to get across, if we are going to present a clear religious view, we must be direct about our positive position on the idea of ultimate reality. Ethical Culture has through history made varied attempts to define our version of nontheism: a) we make no statement on the god question, b) it is not the important question, c) we don't make absolute statements. A direct positive position could help to preclude the arguments about god at the point when people first enter our front doors.

While members can hold diverse views on the god issue, our relational understanding of the nature of human reality precludes both atheism and theism. Those are statements about a reality we are unconvinced exists. A realm of absolutes in which truth, beauty or the good reside does not fit our naturalistic, relational understanding of human experience. The god idea is a human idea that attempts to frame feelings and thoughts about the origins of the universe and the

substance of human experience and values. The god idea is an expression of human yearnings and as part of the human experience it must be appreciated as an aspect of human expression. Some still find the unpacking of the idea of god to be useful in understanding human aspirations but we accept that we know only that we are part of a natural process in which each individual strives to express themselves. That said, nontheism is certainly more amenable to atheist than theist because practically we do without god but to the “hard atheist” nontheism says, your absolutist answer to the idea of an absolute god misses the point.

What remains central to our Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanism position is that all these absolutist ideas of both atheist and theist miss the point that life is primarily, ultimately, a relational, ethical experience. That is what is real. Metaphysical abstractions such as God and Truth are poetry.

Avoiding a direct statement on god by saying that our approach to living does not necessitate metaphysical and theological arguments avoids the fact that Adler’s nontheism started something. Adler’s vision of “a universe of spiritual beings interacting in infinite harmony” may not work for us, but he did initiate our nontheistic position with the idea that we replace the god idea with all those beings interrelating.

Our nontheism expresses a pragmatic understanding of the nature of reality. We want people to get past looking for absolute surety behind reality and find their center, their ultimacy in the meaning and purpose they give to life. We are offering a different starting point – the dynamic experience between and among Adler’s universe of spiritual (fellow) beings creating living reality. What we offer is meaning in the doing of life.

## **PRAGMATISM AND PROCESS THOUGHT**

As a religion Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanism is a religious approach to living. So, its intellectual and philosophic aspects are heterogeneous and only part of the larger religious approach. Although we talk about philosophic neutrality, we do occupy a certain space in the spectrum of intellectual thought. Historically the Movement built on or reexamined Adler’s thought in the light of Dewey and Pragmatism. That makes sense. Without taking on Pragmatism as our official philosophy, its emphasis on the relational, subjective nature of reality offers an intellectual foundation for our religion. Pragmatism rejects the meaningfulness of absolutist language and thought, and while accepting the objective nature of reality it finds the subjective human element to be the basis of our collective understanding of reality. Also, Pragmatism’s focus on action as the purpose of philosophic thinking offers a foundation for our emphasis on deed.

Actually, I must include Existentialism as a philosophic approach that also situates us intellectually. While existentialism emphasizes the personal struggle, its appreciation of their individual's role in and responsibility for creating their world offers ways of unpacking what Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanism can mean. Process thought rejects western philosophy's emphasis on things and substances in favor of a view of life as an interrelated flow of experience. There is no dualism between mind and body and all experience, including the organic, takes part in the ongoing process of reality. Reality is not made up of static things interacting, not linear cause and effect; it is an ongoing process that is both mental and physical. Life is a process of participation in events. At each moment everything comes together to create the next moment. This supports Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanism's view of the relational nature of human reality. Ethical living is not just a case of choosing between clear-cut principles and values, not just making periodic significant decisions. Ethical living is the experience of being a presence that affects for better or worst the living of all individuals and the whole. We are all related points in the web of life and presences in the flow. Each is essential to the whole, all part of each other.

Without arguing about the fine points of these philosophies, both Pragmatism, Existentialism and Process Thought offer intellectual foundation for the core ideas of Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanism. Pragmatism's rejection of the philosophic search for Truth and Goodness in favor of finding meaning in participation, Existentialism's emphasis on life as a act of self-creation and Process's understanding of our reality as an interrelated flow of events offer clarity as we try to explain our approach but also a starting point to question that approach.

## **HUMANISM**

All of this leads up to an understanding of why we are Humanist. On one level we are because we have said we are. As the references included in the appendix show, we have been calling ourselves a Humanist movement for some time. Presently there are dozens of groups calling themselves Humanist (most are secular Humanists and some are anti-religious) and Humanism is hard to define because, with all the varied Humanist groups, it is more a perspective than a specific philosophic position.

However, the Encyclopedia Britannica does us a favor by saying, "In recent years the term humanism has often been used to refer to value systems that emphasize the personal worth of each individual but that do not include a belief in God. Modern Humanism, also called Naturalistic Humanism, Scientific Humanism, Ethical Humanism and Democratic Humanism is defined by one of its leading proponents, Corliss Lamont, as "a naturalistic philosophy that rejects all



supernaturalism and relies primarily upon reason and science, democracy and human compassion".

That said, since Adler predates and prepares the way for Religious Humanism, Ethical Humanism can rightfully claim ownership of an understanding of Humanism. It is part of our history and we have been evolving Ethical Culture within Humanism's boundaries. While the humanist perspective is thousands of years old, it is in the Enlightenment that the ideas of reason and freedom became the foundation of a movement that would come to be called Humanism. Twentieth century Humanism began as a religious movement. Enlightenment reason was challenged by the emotionalism of the Romantic Age, and Adler and eventually Religious Humanism are products of Enlightenment values filtered through the Romantic perspective.

My favorite explanation of Humanism comes from Alan Bullock in *The Humanist Tradition in the West*. He explains "As a rough generalization, Western thought has treated humankind and the cosmos in three distinct modes. The first, the supernatural or the transcendental, has focused on God, treating human beings as a part of the Divine creation. A second, the natural or scientific, has focused on Nature and treats humankind as part of the natural order like other organisms. The third, the humanistic, has focused on humankind, and on human experience as the starting point for human beings' knowledge of themselves, of God and of nature."

Although Bullock is talking about the very broad humanist thread through Western literary, artistic, philosophic, political and cultural history, I think his explanation is specific at the same time that it opens the door to a wide range of approaches to the religious center of Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanism. Bullock makes a valuable distinction: rather than an explanation of reality, a philosophy, a life stance, a commitment to science and reason, or a commitment to human fulfillment (although Humanism including Ethical Humanism usually includes all of those), most basically Humanism is an acceptance of the human condition, an acceptance that becomes a way of looking at reality. It is the acceptance that human beings have built a human cultural reality full of thoughts and feelings that filters and reconstructs all our experiences through its evolving culture perspective.

I do not claim that is the definition of Humanism organized humanism would accept, but it is my Ethical Humanist understanding of the essence of the humanist understanding. And although many Ethical Culturalist would assume we fit more closely Bullock's second mode, the nature or scientific approach, we actually start from the human experience. Our foundation is the human relational experience and as part of our religious approach we accept Bullock's scientific mode as part of our way of understanding life.

On the negative side this understanding of Humanism is the acceptance that we are not experiencing pure, uninterpreted reality. We have no choice but to look through human eyes. Human consciousness humanizes natural experience and in the process creates an artificial human world. The cultural experience has shaped human nature and as we approach life we can carry a deeply held but possibly flawed understanding of life. We put a conscious grid on life that is full of ideas that shape our lives. That can become accepted gospel even when it promotes the good of the few to the detriment of the many.

On the positive side, this view of humanism is acceptance that humankind through its collective cultural effort has taken nature to greater heights. Human life has made conscious the striving that is part of all life. It has created gods and science. Part of the grid we place on life is judgment about what is good and what is bad, what helps life and what hurts it. We have humanized the universe as we reconstruct it in our minds to become part of our cultural human world.

As with Naturalism, we see no other possibility than to accept that we live in a humanist reality. And that is wonderful. As the latest product of evolving nature we have created a conscious, relational reality that is at its core ethical. Our religious humanism incorporates the belief in human power, belief in science and reason along with the driving force of the dreams and desires of individual human beings. Our world begins in the feelings and thoughts of all of us.

## **SECTION THREE**

### **ETHICAL HUMANISM**

So, we finally get to Ethical Humanism. When I joined the Movement we were Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanism. Ethical Culture was the name of the historic movement and Ethical Humanism a description of the intellectual evolution of the Movement. Within the very basic interpretation of Humanism offered above we can include our entire history as we define our Ethical Humanist corner of Humanism. Adler's thought was founded in the supersensible and ideal but it was also visionary in its respect for individual worth and for the human basis of his spiritual, ethical universe. Without the idea of the supersensible that is a good description of the humanistic understanding of human life as a struggle of self expression in the interactive ethical, relational, cultural experience of living.

That designation of Ethical Humanism states our place in Humanism. While we accept that we enter life through a human perspective, it is an ethical journey. We are not about searching for absolute Truth but about making the best out of the variety of life in which we live.

To put it in Adlerian terms with a Pragmatist, Process twist: human beings participate in building a world and that process is an act of personal expression. It is an evolving fluid world of attitudes, tastes, judgments, values; including feelings about good and bad and of love and hate. Our choices are creative acts. As each human expresses their deepest feelings and thoughts in action, they create themselves and they help create our human world which is actually the natural world taking conscious form as it is filtered through a universe of spiritual beings interacting in disharmony. It is all interrelated and it depends on the near-infinite number of individuals. The ethical culture we strive for is one in which each of the individuals is encouraged to express what is best in them.

With that said, the pieces of our religious Ethical Humanist worldview fall into place.

### **INTRINSIC WORTH**

First, Intrinsic Worth is, yes, an attribution. We do not have to treat others as individuals who deserve respect but the reason to do so is staring us in the face. We can live in our own world or the real world. First, our reality is made up of individuals, points in the web of life, or connections in the flow of life. They are both dependent and independent. Each has their own reason for being, their own desires, their own sense of good, their own destiny. Worth comes with existence as an individual takes their essential place as part of the whole. In their individuality they belong to themselves and that should be respected. At its core life is a relational experience and that relationship is with beings, things, entities, persons (whatever you want to call them and I would include all, human and non-human) who are in varying degrees our equals in their own individuality. There are not ours to use simply as we wish. Relating to others merely as objects of use to us is control, not relationship.

Second, Intrinsic Worth, besides being an acceptance of the individual character of reality, is a tool for improving our world. In the way we relate to others we help to determine how they feel about themselves and vice versa. The way people are treated determines the atmosphere of community and in that determines what is possible for each. A world of individuals treating each other with respect as coequals is our ideal and a world of personal happiness.

### **ACT SO AS TO ELICIT THE BEST IN OTHERS...**

In that understanding of Worth, Adler's recommendation to "Act so as to Elicit the Best in Others, and thereby Elicit the Best in Yourself" becomes a universal approach to life. Bring out the best becomes the explanation of what it means to be good. We are not expected to be going around searching for everyone's best side. It is a way of living, not specific instructions. It is recognition

of the individual nature of our world and of the nebulous quality of good. Good intention is important but what it does to others is also important. We can have nice feelings and thoughts but we are what we do, how we relate, how we act, what we create. Metaphor: in living we are like potters and the life around us is the clay but it is living clay, it is a heaving collection of personalities. Finding the best in that clay means listening and relating to the clay, thereby being the best we can be. Another metaphor: we can throw food in a pot without concern for the particular item's character or we can search for the best in each and make a meal that expresses the best of all.

The proof that an action is good depends not just on your feelings but on what it does to others – did it bring out the best? If you are treating people as ends in themselves, you respect their unique perspective on life and you want to encourage it, cooperate with it.

Adler is saying, to be good is to act respectfully to the life around you. Good living is not making yourself good but being force that brings the good out of the individual life around you. You become yourself in action and you become a good self in bringing out the best in others. Adler's instructive advice is an approach to living, a theory about the best way of living life. The emphasis is no longer on specific acts or obeying rules but on your approach toward others, how you relate to them. In any relationship you are creating something together and the more you both feel appreciated, the more likely it is that the result will be good. There is no special knowledge or goodness in us that is not developed in our relationships with the rest of life. You are what you do and how you do it.

### **LOVE LIFE IN ALL ITS INDIVIDUAL UNIQUENESS**

But what does that mean in actually living? In the final analysis, what is Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanism's suggestion for an approach to living? Act so... ultimately means – Love Life in All Its Individual Uniqueness.

Human being comes out of the womb into relationship and the immediate issue is do I respect the difference and care for others or do I use them? Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanism believes that is the primary issue in life - this is your world, you can either use it or actually know it and love it. Loving life in general is great, a positive attitude and enjoying the beauty of it all is passable good living, but as I have already said, there is no such thing as general life; that is another abstraction. What is real is living people, things, events, etc. Usually when people say they love life they mean they love their life. Humans are good at creating their own virtual reality. If you are actually loving life, you must be appreciating the differences, and that means getting to know the individuals and not just appreciating the vista. To love what appeals to you, speaks to you, is personal

expression; to accept that we are intertwined with all of life is to start to get beyond ourselves and into real life, the one of difference.

And what does love mean? Religions often say, “love your neighbor” but too many neighbors are nasty unlovable people. So when religion says love your neighbor, obviously they are not talking about warm affection nor romantic love but even when we speak of the general idea of brotherly love, or love for our fellow men and women, there is a common element – appreciation, connection, concern, caring, respect for unique aspect of the other. Ultimately love of neighbor means concern for the other, caring enough to want the best for the other.

Usually, religious love is loving the other as yourself. Felix Adler was saying you should love them for themselves. Adler was telling us that the path to satisfaction, to happiness, is acceptance of difference. Stop trying to make everything you. Find happiness in working with life, not trying to control it for your own interest.

## **PERSONAL LIVING**

Loving life in all its individual uniqueness sounds noble and a bit dreamy.

In personal living and in community it may not be so easy.

PERSONAL LIVING – Human nature is plastic and has evolved through thousands of years of cultural shaping. Each of us becomes a person in that cultural relationship and our culture seems to specialize in creating a neurotic population. For 10,000 years human beings have been living in cultures that place authority above – with God, the ruler, the father, supposed natural law, and the cultural power system. In that understanding what matters is how well each person fits in the static accepted system. In that understanding, relationships become contests of different versions of normative values.

Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanism turns the authority dynamic upside down. Every person has an equal share of authority in our human world and that fact makes being right and good more difficult. Right depends on the needs of many and good is not a sure thing but a quality we bring to our relationships. We have to figure out how to act depending on what we find in the relationship. We can either manipulate and use others for our satisfaction or find satisfaction in loving the actual living presence in front of us. The opposite of love is indifference. Loving means involvement and it changes everything.

Of course, that is our theory; actual living and loving are more complicated. Loving your cheating husband or the natural world that offers us cancer and mosquitoes is difficult but knowing that each and every cheating husband and mosquitoes is for some reason doing what they need to do provides a perspective

that can break through self-absorption. Reality isn't perfect and perfection does not need love, we do. Love is a quality that brings out the best in others and ourselves.

We can work at being happy or we can find happiness in working with life. We can appreciate what is and work to make it better or continually run from what is toward an assumed better. From childhood we should be encouraged to feel our central place in life, feel our place in others' lives, feel their place in our lives, understanding how we determine what is possible for ourselves and for those around us.

The workshops we offer such as Straight Talk, Non-Violent Communication, etc. help get the idea across but how we treat each other within Societies is the best lesson.

## **SOCIAL JUSTICE**

Accepting the relational nature of life, we are confronted with explaining social problems, social and economic injustice within the relational system.

Human beings find it easy to point to others as the source of poverty, hunger, crime, war, etc., but our human world with its inequalities is a production of the collective efforts of individuals. Our public life is also an ethical experience. The gods did not do this to us, we created the cultures that incorporate injustice. The inequality at the core of our cultural system must be addressed in our own life styles. In the past our consent was not sought; we were relatively powerless in a hierarchical system, but now our individual responsibility is enshrined in the democratic process. We cannot merely blame tyrants for the problems, we have a voice in the decision making.

The jargon of economic, political and even ethical theory gets in the way of our natural empathy for others. Principles can be used to justify neglect. As we accept the benefits of our unequal society, we should recognize we are participating in others' oppression. We can use theories as reasons to throw up our hands, but ultimately every human being depends on others to feel injustice and do something. Wallowing in guilt is one approach but a better one is to start taking responsibility by making hard decisions about our lifestyles and about our part in preserving injustice.

Americans have been sold on the idea that as individuals we have to take care of number one and that we deserve a life of pleasure and comfort. That sense of entitlement breaks asunder our connection to others and in that cultural environment even the most caring start thinking that way – higher taxes get in the

way of our environmental trip to Costa Rico. We come to think of happiness as a byproduct of personal satisfaction. Ethical Culture/Ethical Humanist suggests involvement as the route to genuine happiness.