

Excerpts from two talks by Hugh on “membership” + “growth”

FROM talk given in Philadelphia on 5/21/12:

The Meaning of Membership

Today I’m going to talk about “the meaning of membership,” both membership in general and membership in the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia.

This is a very expansive subject. First of all, the meaning of membership varies depending on the type of group in question. There is a big difference between being a member of a family, a club, a neighborhood association, a church, a tribe, a nation, or a species. Some memberships are formal but superficial – like being a member of Price Club. Some are informal but fundamental – like being a member of the human race.

THREE TYPES OF MEMBERSHIP RELATIONSHIP

I’m going to focus primarily on three categories of membership. They’re based on three different types of relationships: clientele relationships, cooperative relationships, and identity relationships. These aren’t neat or distinct categories of relationships - clientele, cooperative, identity - but they’re useful to explore what it means to be a member of the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia.

I’ll begin by discussing the type of relationship between the individual and the group called a *clientele relationship*. Here the individual is a customer of the group. The main concern of a customer is often represented by the question, “What do I get?” It’s a fair question in some contexts.

Usually, in exchange for some fee, or for past loyalty or future commitment, the customer gets access to “the privileges of membership” – such as special products at reduced prices. Sometimes extras are included, some swell swag like tote bags or coffee mugs.

One clientele organization I joined was the American Automobile Association - triple A. I was a “loyal customer” for decades – it said so right on my card! I valued what AAA offered. You only have to be stuck once on a dark, deserted rural road to appreciate reliable roadside assistance. I loved getting free “TripTiks” too – the little flip charts that guided me around the country’s highways, with detailed directions, warnings about road repair, and helpful tourist information. Discounts on tickets and other purchases were icing on the cake. What a deal!

Clientele relationships are all well and good to a degree. But one problem with them is that they can create “consumer myopia,” or at least it did in my case with AAA. I only saw what was right in front of me - I only saw what I got directly in return. Since I was pleased with what I got for the price, I didn’t think harder about what my membership fees were buying.

But then, I began reading about the unintended consequences of AAA membership. As it turns out, AAA is what its name implies – the American *Automobile* Association. It’s not the American Travelers Association, or the American Environmentally Conscious Vacation-Goer Association! No. AAA is about making the world easier for automobile use!

As a result, AAA often follows the lead of the auto industry-dominated American Highway Users Alliance - called by some a pro-pavement power. This group spends millions of dollars a year lobbying *against* policies that I support. It’s been reported that the Alliance and AAA opposes both EPA restrictions on smog, soot, and tailpipe emissions, and expansion of bike lanes which I suppose get in the way of extra-wide SUVs and Hummers! A 2001 article by Michael Rivlin in *OnEarth* said that AAA even attacked the 1990 Clean Air Act, saying the law served to “threaten the personal mobility of millions of Americans.”

Well, I am all for personal mobility. But I began to realize that clientele relationships are often too narrowly defined, by both the seller and the consumer. It doesn’t have to be this way. I changed how I

approached the products and services available through AAA. I didn't want to define myself purely as a consumer of goods - I also wanted to be a responsible member of the planet earth.

So I cut up my AAA card and wrote them to tell them why. Now, still wary of being stranded on the side of the road, I am a card-carrying member of a small but progressive and green automobile group, the *Better World Club*. And while AAA can still boast membership of around 50 million – and as a result offers a few more privileges – I'm glad I am, in this tiny way, supporting a “better world.” Being a client in the narrow sense of only seeing what goods and services and swag I get does not bring out the best in me, or in the group that's handing out the swag!

A second paradigm of membership is that of the *cooperative*. While the term “co-op” is used to describe a wide variety of organizations – and there's some overlap with clientele groups – most cooperatives imply some sense of “shared responsibility and governance.” This was the case, for example, when I was part of the Washington Ethical Society Sunday School Co-op.

Being a member of the Sunday School implied an obligation to be involved. You're not merely receiving a certain product - you're shaping the very product itself. You're no longer thinking only of yourself, but of the higher purpose for which the group exists. By being a member of the WES Sunday School, I was helping nurture ethical, engaged future citizens.

In addition to clientele membership and cooperative membership, a third type of membership is one based on a sense of *identity*. Unlike clientele relationships based on more superficial exchanges of goods, a membership of identity is not just about what you do, but *who you are*.

A membership of identity is closer to a cooperative relationship than a clientele relationship, but usually it represents something even deeper. It's often wrapped up in emotions, a sense of belonging, or the very essence of the person. If you insult the Better World Club or the Takoma Park Food Co-op, for example, I won't get too worked up because they are of the clientele or cooperative model. But insult my family and my reaction will be more intense - being a member of a family is a relationship of identity.

THE IMPORTANCE + PARADOX OF JOINING IN AMERICA

To better understand the meaning of membership I will look through the lens of history and examine what it means to be a member of the United States. In the 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville, the most astute observer of early American culture, pointed out how important membership was to our citizens. What de Tocqueville noticed as uniquely American was our penchant for joining. He wrote,

Americans of all ages, all stations of life and all types of disposition are forever forming associations... There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand types-religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute."

He added that Americans created groups for almost any purpose - to hold a celebration, found a church, build a school, distribute books. He said,

"...if they want to proclaim a truth or propagate some feeling ...they form an association. In every case, at the head of any new undertaking, where in France you would find the government ... in the United States you are sure to find an association."

As I spoke about in January at our first Great Thinkers evening, Benjamin Franklin promoted many such associations here in Philadelphia.

There are two important points I want to make about this national characteristic. First, it's an important reason why the United States flourished. A century and a half of mother England's benign neglect taught the colonies that if they wanted to get something done, they had to do it themselves. Unlike in semi-feudal Europe, there were few lords and nobles around to care paternalistically for their vassals. And second, this joining craze was both predictably and paradoxically mixed up with American individualism.

De Tocqueville noted that Americans were highly individualistic, but they also desired to join various groups. While at first glance these two characteristics may seem to clash, they also support each other. In old Europe, you might be a member of many groups – your town, your nation, your trade guild, and so on. But you were *born* into these groups. They defined you, but you didn't *choose* them. And there was little social or economic mobility, so you didn't change groups very easily.

In the new American colonies, most people – at least most white men – *chose* to come to America. They usually chose their trade, their town, their religious affiliation, and so on. Each choice to join one group or another was in fact an expression of individualism. The fact that colonists and citizens of that the United States could combine such individualism and willingness to work together in groups is admired by historians and contributes to our remarkable success as individuals and as a nation.

But things have changed for many reasons as chronicled by writers like Robert Putman in *Bowling Alone*. In this groundbreaking book, Putman notes that today individualism often trumps collectivism. Americans no longer join groups with deep connections as much as in the past, and this contributes to poorer mental health and a decay of civil society. He offers statistics pointing out that people who don't join any groups have a higher mortality rate than those who join even a single association.

Joseph M. Schwartz, President of the Maryland Psychiatric Society, in a review of *Bowling Alone* concurs with Putman. In fact, he cites Putnam in trying to explain why membership is declining in his own association of mental health professionals!

In his review, Schwartz also blames the clientele paradigm of membership for the decline of memberships with meaning in America. As capitalism got better and better at turning us into “educated consumers,” the clientele relationship began to dominate the meaning of membership. Schwartz writes,

Attempts by organized psychiatry to woo members by focusing on tangible membership benefits have not been successful. People are motivated by self-interest, but they realize that often the cost of membership in a society exceeds the monetary value of any tangible benefits. Members who join merely to receive tangible benefits tend not to participate further than just paying dues.

Schwartz then comments on an important issue for any small religious, educational or activist organization. Schwartz writes,

Active members, on the other hand, seem to recognize the intangible benefits of membership including the maintenance of our professional identity, the representation of our profession to others, and the camaraderie and fellowship that comes from belonging and participating.

In other words, cooperative relationships and identity relationships are the types of relationships that best nurture flourishing and meaningful membership.

MEMBERSHIP AND RELIGIOUS CONSUMERISM

Let me now turn to the main part of my talk today: membership in the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia. In my work over the years at five Ethical Societies, one common question was: “How can we do better at attracting people ‘shopping around’ for a progressive religious community?” But this question implies a consumer approach to religion that makes me a bit uncomfortable. The metaphor of “shopping around” implies a clientele relationship, and this can be problematic.

On the other hand, of course it's useful on occasion for a small organization like us to use a consumer model - to discuss marketing, advertising, and branding. Years ago in a workshop I made a breakthrough when I began to repeat the presenter's mantra: “Marketing is not a dirty word!” If we really care about our mission as an organization, we should do all we can to spread it, right?

That's why I am so grateful to Betsy Lightbourn for her press relations and public relations savvy, to Nick for his website maintenance and improvements, to Janice for the snazzy newsletter, and to all of you who get the word out about us.

But, we have to remember not to let that approach morph into over-reliance on a clientele model of membership. I don't want us to repeat a scenario laid out in a Sunday *Doonsbury* cartoon about a young couple "church shopping" and meeting the laid back ex-hippy Reverend Sloan.

The Reverend asks, "So what would you like to know about the Little Church of Walden, folks? Don't hold back—I know how difficult it can be to choose a church."

The husband asks, "Well, what's your basic approach here, Reverend? Is it traditional gospel?"

"In a way," the Reverend answers. "I like to describe it as 12-Step Christianity. Basically, I believe that we're all recovering sinners. My ministry is about overcoming denial. It's about re-commitment, about redemption. It's all in the brochure there."

The wife interrupts: "Wait a minute. Sinners? Redemption? Doesn't that all imply ... guilt?"

"Well, yes," admits the Rev. Sloan. "I do rely on the occasional disincentive to keep the flock from going astray. Guilt's part of that."

The husband shakes his head. "I dunno. There's so much negativity in the world as it is."

"That's right," agrees his wife. "We're looking for a church that's supportive, a place where we can feel good about ourselves. I'm not sure the guilt thing works for us."

Looking at the brochure, the husband says, "On the other hand, you do offer racquetball."

The wife replies, "So did the Unitarians, honey. Let's shop around some more."

If we over-emphasize the clientele relationship, it can reinforce the "me-centered" messages ever more dominant in our culture. Modern American capitalism has hyped the clientele relationship at the expense of important cooperative attitudes and the identity of belonging. It overshadows the vision offered by President Kennedy decades ago: "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country!"

A big part of membership as identity involves a deep sense of belonging, of inclusion, of being part of a community. It's human nature to want to belong. For many here at the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia, it's the most important part of their membership. They often say, "I like being a part of a warm, welcoming group of like-minded people." This is great!

But here's the challenge: if you're not careful, what can feel like a sense of inclusion to those in the group, can seem like exclusion to those outside of the group. How do we nurture a sense of belonging while remaining open and welcoming to visitors and friends? To flourish, all groups have to master the art of balancing what the group stands for with an open invitation to all.

In pondering this challenge, I'm reminded of the words of poet Edwin Markham: "He drew a circle that shut me out—heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But Love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle that took him in." Maybe that's simplistic, but there's much Ethical Humanism in it. Our tradition, thank goodness, doesn't call people heretics. We strive to bring out the best in everyone, ourselves included. It's not easy. People often draw circles that exclude others labeled as different or deviant. Let's take a minute to explore the uglier aspects of boundary making.

INCLUDING WITHOUT EXCLUDING

Let's take the Boy Scouts of America - not individuals troops, but the national organization. Their website says that their mission is to provide "a program for young people that builds character, trains them in the responsibilities of participating citizenship, and develops personal fitness." An admirable mission, but of course we all know the Boy Scouts draw a smaller circle. Ten years ago they fought in court and won a decision in *Boy Scouts of America v. Dale*. The court ruled that because the Boy Scouts constituted a private organization they could choose their own membership criteria.

For Scoutmaster James Dale, despite years of meritorious service, being gay put him outside the circle. For our friend Margaret Downey, founder of the Freethought Society, her Scout son was pushed outside the circle when he said he was an atheist. Her court suit was dismissed because of the Dale ruling. Now some cabal high up the chain of command in the Boy Scouts of America could continue to say that gay atheist scouts can't benefit from a program that builds character, trains citizens, and develops fitness.

We may be boundary-drawing creatures, but clearly we can express this in healthy and ugly ways. When membership in a private association combines with law it can be devastating. Take the role of Neighborhood Associations. Antero Pietila, author of *Not in My Neighborhood*, discussed how boundaries were drawn on city maps to exclude blacks and Jews from moving into Christian and white areas. This was done through neighborhood associations and by redlining – drawing redlines on maps around areas that were subsequently denied mortgages, loans or other services. Membership in many neighborhood associations restricted owners from selling to non-whites.

Obviously this is antithetical to how we approach membership here. We want the process of joining to be open, ethical and representative of our values, not secretive or demeaning. So we avoid some problematic issues involved in joining other groups. Let's briefly look at what membership is NOT about here at the Ethical Society.

First of all, unlike if you want to become a citizen of the United States, if you want to be a member here you don't have to mention god or pledge to fight our enemies. Those applying for national citizenship must promise to "bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law...so help me God."

Secondly, joining the Ethical Humanist Society doesn't involve weird, embarrassing, or painful rituals, unlike joining a college fraternity. Believe it or not, I pledged to a fraternity during my freshman year in college. Zeta Psi! It seemed like a good idea at the time, but after being told I had to make a paddle for my frat "big brother", I quit. "We won't actually use the paddle on you," they assured. But I couldn't get the paddle scene from National Lampoon's *Animal House* out of my head: "Thank you sir, may I have another."

Thirdly, and more subtly, joining the Ethical Society doesn't mean you have to treat other members like family - although some do, I might add, but you don't *have* to. Of course we care for each other and help each other through ups and downs in life, like many healthy families. But it takes time to grow connections that are as personal and deep as blood relations. And, frankly, some members are too busy juggling their own extended family obligations to even think of comparing membership here to being part of a biological family. And, one other difference is that you don't choose your family – you choose to join the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia. That's important.

And fourth, joining the Ethical Society is not like joining a casual club. I don't think it should be taken lightly. I got into a bit of hot water with my wife when I said, "You know joining an Ethical Society is not like joining a book club." Well, being a loyal member of her book club for twenty years, she did not take kindly to such disrespect. So, I repeat, joining the Ethical Society is not the same as joining a "casual" club – like a lightly-taken club one could leave without any real regret.

This is why we have a process for membership – to encourage reflection and commitment. For anyone considering joining, we encourage you to attend Sunday morning platforms and maybe some get-to-know-you socials. We urge you to read about us on our website or in our literature. We encourage you to speak with Board members or me. We ask for a written application that is followed by a Board vote admitting

new members. We have a small ritual welcoming new members to our community which shows that we mutually commit to support our personal and ethical growth.

So today we welcomed all those who joined the Society since I came on board as Leader. In doing so, we welcome all of the longer time members again into membership. It's exciting that membership can mean many things to many of our members. Some appreciate the sense of belonging and community. Others appreciate the stimulating talks and classes. Others like the opportunities for ethical action. These are all important to us in different degrees.

I want to conclude with some words about what being a part of Ethical Humanism and the Society here in Philadelphia means to me. Of course it's a bit different for me, being your Leader. I've been hired to be your professional clergy – a very distinct role. During my leadership training, I learned what all aspiring ministers of all denominations learn in training: you cannot be just like any other member of your congregation, you have a special job.

But like each of you, I feel a very strong sense of belonging here at the Society in Philadelphia and in Ethical Culture. And for me, this carries a strong sense of “sharing.”

When I first joined the Washington Ethical Society, I appreciated the shared benefits – talks, classes, service opportunities. I also enjoyed shared accomplishment when I helped out by cleaning up after a society event or working with other members at a homeless shelter. I appreciated the shared commitment, responsibility, and sacrifice.

There grew within me a sense of shared identity. I won't go as far as my son Sean who got an Ethical Culture logo tattoo on his ankle, but if someone says to me, “So, tell me about yourself,” I am proud to reply, “I'm an Ethical Humanist.” In admitting this, I surprise myself. I've never been much of a joiner, especially as an adult. I'm skeptical of “group think” and protective of my private space and time alone.

But, I was drawn intensely to the mission of Ethical Humanism and to living it here in Philadelphia: to honor the worth of all through ethical relationships and social justice, and to nurture within all people the capacity to bring out their best. Balancing dedication to this mission with growing appreciation for a caring community enriches my life.

On an organizational level, this was brought home to me when serving as Board president of the Washington Ethical Society. When trying to navigate a profound leadership and physical plant transformation, we hired a wonderful consultant from the UUA, Stefan Jonasson. Stefan shared how important it was to strike a balance between emphasizing community and emphasizing mission.

If community is over-emphasized, rigid boundaries can grow between those in the circle and the rest of the world. We can end up attracting people who are only just like us. This, he warned, can kill a congregation – diversity is important. It enriches us and stimulates growth. We must nurture a healthy and somewhat porous boundary between the group and the outside world. Like the walls of a biological cell, it has to be porous enough to let nutrients flow in and waste flow out. It is what is required of any organism to grow.

For the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia to grow, the meaning of membership must include a deep sense of identity that is ever expanding. We must offer cooperative relationships that express our values openly to the world. And we can discuss the clientele relationship in terms of product and services, as long as it is kept in perspective.

While membership in the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia involves all three types of relationships – clientele, cooperative, and identity – at our heart remains the importance of working together, sharing responsibility, and belonging to a group that is welcoming, inclusive, and warm. It's not about “bowling alone.” In welcoming each other here each Sunday, we remind ourselves that we are not about “joining alone.” We are, in Ethical Culture, together! If you are a visitor and you like what goes on here, I urge you to seek membership. If you are already a member, I urge you to expand and deepen your relationship. I look forward to exploring with all of you the meaning of membership.

FROM talk given in Philadelphia on 5/18/14:

Growing Ethical Community

...My talk today starts by looking for growth within each of us, and moves outward to this Ethical Society to our neighborhood and city. Growing ethical community is about being safe, welcoming, and inclusive, from the inside out. We have to first feel in our own hearts and minds safe, welcomed and included. If we don't, it's hard to be welcoming and inclusive towards others. When we flourish as individuals we are better ambassadors for our cause, better representatives of our values, and better builders of community.

(I) It begins with each of us

If you have come to be a part of this community - to help us grow ethical community - make sure you take care of yourself too. Take time to follow the advice etched in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, often ascribed to Socrates: "Know thyself." Appreciate your desires, hopes, limitations, and talents. If you came here hurting, wounded, lonely, or seeking meaning, pay attention to that. Listen to heart. Turn to those you trust – be that a partner or parent, a son or daughter, a doctor or therapist. We can't offer what they offer. We're not your mother or father, in your psyche or in some humanistic heaven above. We are not engaged in group therapy. But we are your community. If the world has left you feeling chilled, you might find warmth by our community hearth. You are welcome here.

We are, of course, only human. We won't always succeed in being the best we can be. We are flawed creatures with feet of clay, and as a result we may sometimes feel hurt or overlooked in life at the Ethical Humanist Society. But together, patiently, we can grow ethical community in our hearts, our building, and our city.

(II) Being a Host in our Community Home

However each of us manages it, growing a sense of ethical community in our hearts will, make us better hosts here in our community home. When I feel good myself, when I feel connected to, and nourished by, my surroundings, I bring out my best - I have an extra bounce in my step when greeting newcomers at our door. When I feel integrally part of this community, I'm a better host.

But being a great host takes more than that. The other day during Saturday afternoon "downtime" at home I was - as is my habit - relaxing in front of the TV watching sports, comfortably attired, no shoes, cold beverage in hand. I get a call that some friends are coming soon for dinner. I look around – the house is a mess, there's no food or beer in the fridge, and I need a shower. In some ways I would rather just sit there, lazy and comfortable.

But, encouraged by Maureen who is an excellent hostess, I rally. Striving to be a relatively good host, I haul my arse off the sofa, move piles of half opened mail and newspapers out of sight, sweep up the bird food scattered on the floor, run to the store, and take a shower. I do... so that when friends arrive, they feel welcome. I do... so there's a meal prepared, a cool drink to pour, and a spirit of hospitality in the air. It tells my guests, I'm glad you're here. I'm happy we're sharing this time together.

That's how I think about hosting here at 1906 Rittenhouse. We have to get off our collective community couch – as comfy as it is. Coordinating a community to host can require a committee, some meetings, some lists of tasks, and a way to assure they get done. Why do we want to do this? Because we want our visitors to know that we are glad they are here, and we are happy to share this time together. Because we believe that everyone who walks in our door is of inherent worth. We do so because Ethical Humanism is about creating community that is safe, welcoming and inclusive.

(III) Helping Outsiders Feel Included – seeing through the eyes of others

There are many things we can do to help newcomers feel included and less like outsiders. We can start by seeing things through their eyes. Here's a simple example: let's get some attractive signs better indicating the location of our restrooms? To an insider this may seem unnecessary. But to a newcomer it can mean more. It shows that we have gotten up off our couch and straightened up a bit. It says, "we members know where the toilets are, and now you do too." Signs put visitors on a more equal footing as regulars. They don't have to say, in so many words, "Excuse me, I'm new here. Where can I pee?"

Another simple thing that helps newcomers feel included is to all wear nametags. I know some members don't like wearing them. Maybe they don't look good. Maybe we just want to be a bit more anonymous. I understand that, and we'll try to be flexible. But let's also understand what nametags can mean to our guests. Nametags say you are welcome here. Even though our members might know each other's names, we don't want you to feel excluded because you don't. We want to know your name. And we want you to know ours. It helps us know one another.

Another simple thing is to try to avoid a lot of shoptalk, a lot of acronyms, coded language. If you're a longtime member you might understand the meaning of this made up announcement: "If you are interested in helping with the service auction, Camp Linden, or serving on an AEU committee please see Nick, Leonard, or Temma in the Collier Room after our Spring Festival but before coffee hour." If you are a newcomer, it will seem like jargon. What is a service auction? Is it at the Camp? What's an AEU? And who are these people, and exactly when and where do I meet them? I admit that sometimes I am guilty of "in-speak," and I'll try to do better.

I need to work harder at using inclusive language that communicates what really matters about Ethical Culture to more and more people from a wider and wider range of backgrounds. I feel privileged to be a part of a great humanist tradition, and I want to offer it to as many people as possible.

Feeling a part of any community is often wrapped up with privilege. One has privileged power when one understands the community story, accepted patterns of behavior, common expressions and language. Membership does have its privileges. The more any one of us gets to know life here at 1906 Rittenhouse, the easier it is to feel included and comfortable. You are now *in the club*. You know. You belong. The more comfortable we get here, the easier it is to forget what it was like to be a newcomer.

Sometimes seeing through someone else's eyes is uncomfortable, especially when the experience exposes us to some inconvenient truths, some painful realities. Let's take something very concrete. Like many old buildings in this city, we are not fully accessible. If you use a wheelchair, or a cane, you may only feel partially welcome. You probably feel welcomed only on the first floor. From the perspective of a long-term member who sacrificed to fund and construct our wheelchair ramp offering access to this floor, but this floor alone, the wheelchair ramp was a good thing to do, a worthwhile compromise between doing nothing and what was beyond our reach financially. To someone in a wheelchair, it can feel like a limitation, because it is.

"Gee," some may say, "it's like we can't win." It can feel this way because the more we see through the eyes of others, the more we understand what takes to be safer, more welcoming, and more inclusive. This is a challenge. And it is a great opportunity.

(IV) Being Present and Listening Deeply

A lot of being a good host, and of being a community that is safe, welcoming and inclusive, is about being present to newcomers and *listening deeply*. Deep listening is not just about hearing the words and understanding what they mean on the surface. Deep listening is also about reading body language, exchanging appropriate and friendly gestures, and being both relaxed and attentive.

As I was saying earlier, when I'm hosting people at my house, I'm a better host when not feeling hassled by a lot of tasks or distractions. If the meal is prepared, and my cell phone turned off, I can be present to my guests.

The same goes for Sunday morning here. I try to arrive by 9AM each Sunday from Washington so that I can practice my talk, tune my guitar, photocopy any handouts, and straighten my tie *before* people arrive. That way I can greet people in a relaxed mood. I can act interested, because *I am* interested - in who they are, and what they seek.

Helping others feel safe, welcomed and included requires tact as well. Some small organizations overdue the “welcome” by circling newcomers like sharks in a feeding frenzy. I don’t want to come on too strong with newcomers because it can feel invasive. I try to read the body language and eye contact. Sometimes newcomers walk swiftly by me with a nod and it seems they don’t want lots of interpersonal contact. Maybe they are feeling uncomfortable, or just want to observe and not interact. I want to make sure they feel *invited to* interact, but not forced. Some people, especially social extroverts, feel safe and welcome in many environments. But for others, feeling safe enough to feel welcomed and seek inclusion takes some time. We must respect that.

Some may just want information. How can we know? Just ask them: “Is there anything you would like to know about our community and Ethical Humanism?” Or just say, “Let me know if I can help you with anything.”

Should they seem eager for conversation, we can invite them to share something about themselves. How did you hear about us? What are you looking for? Ethical Humanism, at its very core, is about relationships. Open, respectful, and compassionate conversations help grow relationships. This has deep roots in Ethical Humanist history.

Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House settlement house in the immigrant rich Chicago a century ago, was a lecturer at the Chicago Ethical Society. She spoke about listening deeply to others. She practiced listening to understand (rather than to persuade). Visitors at Hull House were treated as honored guests full of wisdom. Addams wanted to include the marginalized, like elderly women speaking about life in the old country. She said, “Whenever I heard the high eager voices of old women, I was irresistibly interested and left anything I might be doing in order to listen to them” (LRW 9).

Addams understood that the best way to build understanding, interconnectedness, and community was by sharing each other’s story. She saw the value of what she called “sympathetic knowledge” – the understanding that grows best through personal acquaintance and friendship. It’s not always easy to build such healthy, open and respectful relationships. While we may be naturally social creatures, we’re not naturally endowed with social skills. We can all become better at growing ethical community.

This is why I’m considering offering some courses in communication and relationship building next year. This is why I taught some of these skills as part of the Coming-of-Age program I ran at the Washington Ethical Society. This is why I am trying similar exercises at the conference next weekend for members of Future Ethical Societies (otherwise known as FES). The young adults will meet with me, organizer Christian Hayden, Kim McKay and Morgan Andrews, a facilitator from Theater of the Oppressed, to explore growing ethical community.

In speaking to Christian about this platform, he shared with me some words that reflect my thinking and that I want to share with you. He said:

We inhabit a beautiful city but a city plagued with many ills nonetheless, the most striking and visible being poverty. Poverty most insidious aspect is how it breaks down the potential for relationships between those who experience it and those who don't. It is us, our community, our philosophy, which pose a unique opportunity to address this very real and crippling manifestation of oppression. With that thought we have to address the oppressor within ourselves, ask our ourselves how have we accepted the divisions in our society as fact and immovable? What stops us from achieving the dialectical relationship between our community and others, ourselves and others?

Christian finds one answer in Paulo Freire – it is dialogue. Dialogue that allows us to move forward toward real community. In Freire’s words, “dialogue requires an intense faith in man, faith in his power to make

and remake, to create and recreate, faith in his vocation to be more fully human."

Are we ready to do what Christian urges us to - to enter dialogue that shakes us, moves us, and connects us more fully, to each other? Are we ready to move from dialogue to action – to follow Felix Adler's urging that we elicit the best in others so as to elicit the best in ourselves? That kind of humanist faith-in-action if you will becomes a deep investment in the simultaneous realization of the humanity of ourselves and others. It ties our destiny to the destiny of others. It points us toward true ethical community.

(V) Building relationships and growing community across differences

Nurturing healthy relationships and growing ethical community is even harder to do when differences get in the way. Differences are of course also wonderful things. Greater diversity brings us valuable resources and perspectives. But when the differences we have to navigate include those seared into our culture by abusive or harmful power relationships, it can require some hard work.

We often struggle to grow relationships across differences laced with power implications. It's easier to grow relationships across trivial differences. This is partially why building community in a homogeneous group is easier than in a multicultural group. We don't always know how to approach differences of power. If we think the other is more powerful, we might avoid, challenge, or seek favor from them. If we think the other is less powerful, we might paternalistically ignore, control or appropriate the other's differences.

This is a challenge for everyone, but for Ethical Humanists especially. Navigating differences of economic privilege, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion and ability, while at the same time trying change the world for the better – that's challenging!

It reminds me of a critical moment in the Occupy Philadelphia movement a couple of years ago. In October of 2011, activists occupied Dilworth Plaza demanding an end to gross economic inequality and the control of government by moneyed interests. Quakers and other progressive faiths and activist groups were supporting the 300+ occupiers. But mistrust of difference in the form of insidious racism raised its ugly head.

As our own Ethical Society member Aissia Richardson explained, Occupy did not welcome people of color en masse as equal participants in sharing power. She and her mother Linda witnessed unmerited exclusion as well as doubts about the credibility and competency of people of color. They themselves did not feel welcomed and the agenda of Occupy did not make room for discussion of public and private divestment in low-income communities all over Philadelphia.

On November 13th, 2011, when Jesse Jackson Sr. visited Occupy, he shared how Occupy must negotiate differences more effectively and build broader alliances. He discussed a deep division between on the one hand the main group of occupiers and on the other hand the base for civil rights style activism in Philadelphia – historically black churches. Some of the pastors who accompanied Jackson to Occupy told me that while they wished a better bridge could be built, they were frustrated with lack of real connection. Jackson said that many leaders in African-American communities saw Occupy as a "white hippy and derelict movement." And some Occupy leaders said that the black church and activists of color didn't get involved.

In the short, pressure-filled and chaotic time prior to Occupy's eviction from Dilworth Plaza on November 30th, this difference was left unresolved. It's a tough difference that Ethical Culture's been trying to negotiate for a century. I have spoken about it often, but today will offer a somewhat humorous example of my attempted navigating of this difference.

This past Earth Day, April 22, I spent the morning celebrating with The House of Umoja, an organization and community on the 1400 block of North Frazier Street in West Philly. Founded by Queen Mother Falaka Fattah decades ago as a center helping steer young people away from violence and toward constructive lifestyles, the House of Umoja is described on their website as a kind of "urban Boy's Town."

Having met some organizers at a Peace Day planning meeting, I volunteered to offer a craft project and lead a sing-along at their Earth Day event. I imagined the sing-along as a casual thing. I thought I could bring the songbook, *Rise Up Singing* – a favorite resource for old folkies like me. I knew some environmental songs I could play, and maybe some Pete Seeger. Kumbaya and all that.

When I arrived, the feel was – perhaps predictably in retrospect – different. It was not like most other Earth Day events I had attended in my Brickenstock sandals and t-shirt. For starters, a DJ from the radio station “Old School 100.3” was firing up the crowd. [Who listen’s to 100.3?] Categorized as an “urban oldies” station for over a year, the first song WRNB played to announce its new identity was "Atomic Dog" by George Clinton. The stage speakers blasted Motown, disco, and funk down North Frazier Street. Next, an impromptu parade followed an African drum pair to the microphone.

Then it was my turn, and I was not leading a simple sing-along to a small group of children – something I felt confident doing regardless of whatever the audience. Instead I was, up on stage, all mic’ed up and feeling *very, very white!* I have done stuff like this enough to know that sometimes you just have to play the hand you’ve got, so I enthusiastically broke into that somewhat cutesie folk sing-along, “The Garden Song.” I followed that with “Common Thread,” which, while having admirably multicultural message, still lacked the soulful funky flavor that might have received a more enthusiastic reception. Live and learn.

I was thankful that my hosts on Frazier Streets – Angie, Leslie, Ashak, and the Peace Day Kids – were so welcoming. My difference really didn’t matter much. From the moment I arrived I felt welcomed and included. Some of you may remember Ashak and the Peace Day kids. They have attended the last two Peace Day sing-alongs out on Rittenhouse. They have shared the Universal Greeting with us, and we all shared it together this past Earth Day. It goes like this (repeat after me if you are comfortable, and interpret the term “higher power” in whatever humanist way you choose):

I offer you peace. I offer you friendship. I offer you love. I hear your needs. I see your beauty. I feel your feelings. My wisdom comes from a higher source. And I salute that source in you. We must work together in peace. To save our environment. Peace!

We shared that same greeting on Frazier Street this Earth Day. It helped me feel included. I appreciate how the greeting is accessible for many people, even for a humanist like me who doesn’t rely on god-concepts. I translate “the higher source” in the greeting to mean, for me, the best in each of us and in our community. It means to me the ethical communities I find in my life that are more than the sum of the parts. It means growing, inclusive, and ethical communities. It means this ethical community right here.

...I hope we’ll continue to build more ethical community here in the city by meeting and partnering with many progressive forces. As we open our doors wider we will be able to walk out into the world with more purpose and confidence. We will carry with us the motto above our stage: "The Place Where We Seek The Highest Is Holy Ground." I like how Aissia interpreted this phrase. She suggests that as Ethical Humanists we seek the highest in ourselves. So, wherever we go, that is holy ground – wherever we go our values come too. We can never be satisfied with the status quo but always seek the highest.

As we open our doors wider more diverse and vibrant progressive humanists will find a safe, welcoming, and inclusive community. It will take work – we have to get off our comfy collective community couch now and then to be good hosts. It’s why I am here – I hope it is why, in part, you are here with me.