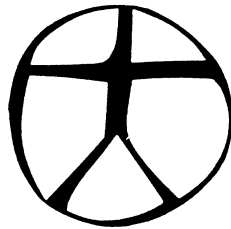


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The world was made By Dreamers Jone Johnson



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Centering thoughts:

From Algernon Black, 20th century Ethical Culture leader:

Dreams are among
our most precious possessions.
We hold that dreams
are not just for the night alone,
but they are the stuff of daylight,
outreachings of a better self,
of a better tomorrow.
Where our dreams meet,
we may find one another,
and a new life may be born.
We cannot free people,
but we can remove obstacles
to their freedom
and help them free themselves.
We cannot make people want to live,
but we can help remove

the barriers to their living
the conditions that kill the love of life.
We cannot make people love one another,
but we can bring them together,
break down the walls
and believe and try.

And this from Langston Hughes:
Hold fast to dreams
for if dreams die
life is a broken-winged bird
that cannot fly.
Hold fast to dreams
for when dreams go
life is a barren field
frozen with snow.

Robert F. Kennedy: "Some people look at things as they are and ask, 'Why?' I look at things that never were, and ask 'Why not?'"

Platform Address

Felix Adler – founder of the first Ethical Culture Society, and through that, founder of the Ethical Movement – was an idealist. Now, there’s a technical, philosophical meaning to that term, idealist, which also fits Adler’s ideas. But today I’m referring to the sense of idealism in the way we usually mean it: committed to ideals, to “the highest.”

Felix Adler, as a young boy, came with his family to New York from Germany. His father was the rabbi of the leading Reform temple in New York City. It was from his father that Felix probably got his speaking skills. Felix Adler appeared to most people as a man quite small in stature, not at all impressive in his looks – but those who heard him speak were inspired to a kind of awe, almost reverence. But it was not just his skill and ability as a speaker, in technique of public address, that impressed his audiences. It was also the content of what he said, the analysis he presented, the challenges to action.

As a young man, Felix often accompanied his mother on her rounds to the poor and sick of New York. This time in American history was one of rapid industrialization, in which increasingly immigrants and people moving from the farms were coming to the cities, to find that the jobs were numerous but not very dependable. There were no public social services, no “safety net,” and the poverty was often devastating.

It was through this experience, of seeing the realities of city life first-hand and close-up, that Adler developed much of the groundwork for his ethical idealism. His work studying philosophy, religion, and preparing for the rabbinate in Germany helped him to develop some ideas for solutions to the challenges he’d faced in his New York youth.

While Adler was exposed in his studies to a variety of religions, he felt strongly that people in America were part of a tradition that was primarily developed out of Jewish and Christian roots. And he proposed, at the beginning of his career, to follow an ethical idealism that was separate from the Judaism in which he’d grown up, and yet was not Christianity. This ethical idealism was to be a response to the problems of his age, as he saw both Judaism and Christianity as responses to problems of earlier ages. And these were not just problems, they were, in Adler’s conception, deep pains, he called them spiritual pains.

Adler saw that Jewish people historically responded to the deep and central pain of oppression. The Jewish story told of a primary experience as an oppressed people often not allowed their land, their religious beliefs and practices, their freedom. The response was not an analysis of Why? they were oppressed. The response was one which attempted to transcend this oppression with the concept of justice, of human rights.

For Adler, the contribution of the Jewish religion was the concept of justice, of rights, of respect for the rights of others. The Hebrew prophets called the people to a vision, a dream of a world in which rights were respected, in which justice was the fundamental reality. And this meant that their God, their fundamental reality, was expressed as a God of justice.

This sense of justice was rooted in the idea that every individual was holy, that somehow there was a contract, or covenant, between individuals and God. And that contract, according to the prophets, was an ideal of a land where “justice will roll down like waters and peace like an everflowing stream.”

For mercy follows justice. To see another human being – another *holy* being – suffer evokes a response in us.

This holiness of every person, which we sense in ourselves, which we sense in others, is what we might call human worth. Adler defended the reality of this individual worth by pointing to the real human experience of oppression, of seeing the suffering of another, and our natural reaction of that deep spiritual pain.

The Jews, or Hebrews, lived in a community of others. It was the community that was oppressed, although the expression of oppression was against the individuals within that community. But even in oppression, there was a community of identity, of belonging.

The task that this gives to the individual is to work for justice for the community, to seek mercy for those who are suffering. The social task is to build, within the community, that consciousness and those institutions which will embody justice and mercy.

The Christians, both building on Judaism and integrating Greek and Roman ideas, were responding to a different pain. The early Christians struggled to build communities, because they did not find themselves born into Christian communities. The Christian experience was – and perhaps still is in many circles – one of homelessness. I think of the haunting gospel song, “This world is not my home.” To Christians, this world was alien, it was not the real home. According to Adler, Christians then were forced, almost, to turn inwards to find their sense of belonging.

I look at western history, and find this a profound insight. A medieval Christian might belong to a social community, and have ties to people within the religious institutions. But that

social community, that village or city, was conceived of as unreal, not the true home. And those priests and others were only connecting with the individual as a representative of the Church, not as other human beings. I would add that this sense of homelessness becomes even more radical in Protestant times. Now even the Church is removed. It is the individual and the great God who are really all that populate the *real* world.

Adler’s conclusion is that the great spiritual pain for Christianity was this separation, this rootlessness – to use a modern term, this alienation from the world. The ideal, then, of Christianity is not justice, not even mercy. It is purification of the self. The only social task is to help others purify themselves. Society need not be changed, as it is not real. Only individuals.

Adler then moves to an analysis of the spiritual pain of our age. And I say “our age” because I recognize the pains he identified as relevant and descriptive of our lives today. Listen to these three pains, and see if they ring true to you. For I believe we are still in times of deep spiritual pain, facing issues which seem to penetrate us to the inner core.

The first of these pains is results from our search for knowledge, truth, and science. Copernicus taught humanity that we are not the center of the universe, so perhaps the universe was not created for our benefit. The idea of natural evolution forces us to realize that we are perhaps not a lot different than the oyster in the context of the Universe – an idea expressed earlier by the Scottish philosopher David Hume. Adler adds, “If Hume were living today, with what more drastic emphasis would he propound this depressing conclusion.” And Adler said, “never has the Lilliputian disparity between [humanity] and the magnitude of [our] world, the immensities of space, come home with such

crushing force as it has come to our own generation.” We feel small, insignificant, and perhaps meaningless in this context.

Adler thought the situation more drastic than in Hume’s day – we might say the same about our time’s situation being more drastic than in the days of Felix Adler.

In one change: – it looks as if, from an evolutionary perspective, our purpose in life is to get our DNA to reproduce, through our children or through close family relatives. Much of human behavior, even most of what we call ethics, can be explained in terms of an inner, nonconscious, biological drive. What if our feelings of love, and empathy, not to mention aggression and anger, are just tricks our brains have developed through evolution to fool us into acting in ways that work to ensure our children’s children will survive and reproduce? Pretty sobering.

Science today teaches that the universe is not endless, but it is immensely larger than Felix Adler imagined. It becomes more and more difficult to accept such doctrines as heaven as literally true, doctrines that have brought solace in the midst of the sense of homelessness, of the inevitability of our own mortality.

Joseph Campbell tells an ironic story about this: Let’s look at the Church doctrine that Jesus and Mary were assumed bodily into heaven. If heaven is just outside the natural universe, as the Church has sometimes taught, then those bodies had to fly from Earth to the edge of the universe at somewhere below the speed of light. Even if we assume the speed of light, that means that Jesus and Mary are not yet outside our own galaxy! So much for the sense of comfort in the religious stories.

It was hard enough in the 19th century for westerners to face the idea that we were descended from apes – we would now say we had “common ancestors.” My generation doesn’t find it so sobering to be “a monkey’s uncle,” an expression that’s in my memory but not in my daily vocabulary. But, work in microphysics and chemistry demonstrates that we are not only continuous with the animals and other life – we are made of exactly the same atoms as all matter, even non-living matter, just mixed up differently.

In mathematics, in physics, 20th century findings teach us that the universe is unpredictable and makes far less sense than our great-grandparents ever imagined.

Humanity seems to become more and more insignificant, the more we learn.

The second pain of modern humanity which Adler describes is that we must witness the suffering of human beings, but not just those close to us. We witness the suffering and deaths of millions of human beings. How much more of that pain has the 20th century brought to us, from the gas chambers of Europe, to the killing fields of Cambodia, and more recently to the war of neighbors against each other in Bosnia and Croatia, not to mention the continuing violence in the Middle East. Closer to home: we see people who are sleeping in the parks – I find it even more wrenching at this cold time of year. We see, or hear of, children gunned down at random. We see the suffering that fear brings on the faces as we watch the news and as we drive through the cities. *And we know that we cannot, each of us alone, do much at all to help these people.* Even if we can help one, or two, or three, or dozens, there are millions. The pain isn’t just that we see suffering, it is that the suffering is so out of control, we cannot see how to end it.

For most of my childhood and teen years, and for my older son's childhood, the threat of nuclear holocaust was very real. I can remember the horror of those nuclear emergency drills, learning where we would go into the halls when we were going to be bombed by the Russians – and there were years I *knew* it was going to happen any day. We were taught how to hold our hands, to protect our necks from being broken when the school building fell on top of us. When, not if, was the message many of us heard in those drills.

The pain wasn't just that we ourselves would die in a horrible way. It wasn't even that we would die, away from our homes and families, and perhaps if we didn't die we would lose each other forever in an evacuation. It was also that we could visualize that our own suffering would be multiplied by millions. It wasn't just me kneeling in front of those lockers with my hands locked over my neck. We were three rows deep, lining a long hallway – hundreds of children I knew personally, all practicing how we were going to die. And there were other hallways in our school, three floors of hallways like that. And, because the practice alarm was city-wide, I could picture all the other schools and office buildings going through these drills together, and I could visualize the reality of all the individuals who would die.

I am relieved that we don't have that threat as real, and as near, as it was, although with nuclear arms still stored, and some in parts of the old Soviet Union that are not too stable, I still have a corner of my mind for that memory, that concern. But my younger son, Jakob, simply does not have the level of fear, of deep and piercing pain, at the thought that humankind will destroy itself in a few hours exchange of nuclear armaments between two great powers.

There is the threat of chemical warfare, of biological warfare, and the holocaust those could bring to the world – the news in recent weeks has highlighted this possibility once more. And we have a new fear, that we may create through our small, trivial, everyday habits and actions, and our dependency upon conveniences unknown before in human history, an environmental holocaust, one that may come slowly, and be just as devastating. This is the *new* consciousness of the pain of millions suffering.

Adler described it this way: “We stand, as it were, on the shore, and see multitudes of our fellow beings struggling in the water, stretching forth their arms, sinking, drowning, and we are powerless to assist them.”

The third pain Adler called the “intolerable strain of the divided conscience.” We want to be whole people, we want to be ethical people. But how do we do that in the kinds of lives we really lead? We may be able to be ethical one-on-one in our lives, and that is an important starting point. But how do we apply that to our larger human connections? How do we feel, those of us here today, about how we might apply our ethical principles in the political realm, when we see the results of the last election – or almost any election? How do we apply our ethical principles and values to our workplaces, when we live in some real terror that we may be given the choice of keeping our jobs, or behaving as we are told?

Anthony de Mello, a Jesuit monk who was also a Zen Buddhist, told this story of two job applicants.

Enter first applicant.

"You understand that this is a simple test we are giving you before we offer you the job you have applied for?"

"Yes."

"Well, what is two plus two?"

"Four."

Enter second job applicant.

"Are you ready for the test?"

"Yes."

"Well, what is two plus two?"

"Whatever the boss says it is."

The second applicant got the job.

De Mello also told another story, relevant to this pain of divided conscience – how we are torn between what we feel we must do, and what we feel we ought to do. I retell it here in my own words:

I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw the name of the shop: THE VALUES SHOP.

The saleswoman was very polite. What type of values did I wish to purchase, high or low? The highest values possible, of course. No halfway measures for me, no rationalizations. She waved me on to another side of the store.

The salesman there pointed to the price tag. "The price is very high," he said. "What is it?" I asked, determined to live by the highest values, no matter what the cost. "Your security," he answered.

I came away saddened and confused. I still need the safety of that security, of halfway ethics, of something short of the highest values.

When we make the choice between values and security, it is a painful choice. We want it both

ways, and we cannot have it both ways. This is the third spiritual pain.

Adler's analysis of the pains of his era – what he called the modern world – made me think carefully. If history changes the pains, then perhaps we face others. But I could not find any others which are relevant today, which do not fit under those three:

- the pain of knowing how insignificant we really are, in the cosmic perspective;
- the pain of knowing that millions and millions of human beings suffer, that other life suffers, that we may destroy the very foundation that supports all life – and that the suffering is just too much for any one of us, or any few of us, to stop;
- the pain of knowing that we do not always know what to do, that even when we do, we cannot always find it in ourselves to do it.

We face a similar crisis today in our cities as in Adler's day. Adler, other 19th century Ethical Society activists, Jane Addams in Chicago, and many, many others, instituted reforms which addressed the horrible inequities and sufferings in the cities of their day. Many of these reforms became part of our social institutions, and of government. But today, many of these solutions, when they are implemented and carried through, seem inadequate in the face of newer problems like the criminal network associated with illegal drugs. Other solutions were never fully implemented, and so were never allowed to work. Others are being systematically dismantled.

One reform of those early activists, for instance, was to treat juvenile offenders differently than adults. This reform was based on the idea that juveniles in adult prisons will learn more sophisticated criminal techniques. It was also based on the idea that most young offenders will not be offenders as adults no matter what the

crimes they've committed – and the data to back up this idea is still there, still accurate, and people just don't want to look at it. In the treatment of juvenile criminals, in the reinstatement of the death penalty, our nation is moving more towards retribution, not the justice of honoring individuals, not the justice that also requires mercy.

We are not back to some of the incredible horrors of Felix Adler's New York in 1875 – but in some ways the situation may be worse. Now, the energy for reform is often gone. The hope that we might be able to solve our urban problems, not to mention the environmental crisis, is difficult to find. Some problems have been lessened – some worsened. We are still, I think, in the same social crisis.

But Adler didn't just describe the three pains of our modern world. He also described what he saw as – in his words – the “spiritual ideals” that would allow us to address these needs, these deep pains.

The pain of insignificance Adler said was answered by the affirmation of human worth, the recognition that every human being is unique, and is essential to the wholeness of the universe. This sense, if we can instill it in people, can defeat the depression, the self-contempt, and some of the pain of our limited existence.

The pain of witnessing suffering that we cannot end, Adler said, was answered in three ways. First, if we can find ways that improve the conditions that allow people to do these things to one another, we can make more progress against the suffering than if we only address the suffering directly. I would not suggest that we fail to respond directly to the urgent and real needs of people who are in distress, but if that is all we do, we cannot reduce the overall suffering fast enough. If we can identify the worst conditions

– those conditions that are most likely to produce people who are willing to hurt other people – those conditions should have a priority to change.

Second, in the face of suffering, we must continue to affirm the worth of every human being, the worthwhileness of human life. If we continue to affirm uniqueness and worth, we will be far less likely to choose solutions that seem efficient, but that ultimately produce more suffering than we are trying to cure. If we continue to affirm our own worth, and that of others near to us and farther from us, we continue to affirm the basis on which we act to alleviate the suffering.

The third pain, that of divided conscience, Adler says makes it important to develop social ethics, an ethics of how we live in groups, of how groups behave towards individuals, towards each other. If we only see society as individual actors, or only social institutions, each perspective misses half the picture.

Classic religious social reform has often failed to address these issues, concerned mostly with individual salvation. If only people, as individuals, could become more “good,” they would not be so poor. Some kinds of humanist ethics also ultimately fail to address these issues, when rooted only in so-called rational self-interest. Both are systems of personal salvation. These approaches will help protect some people and save some, but will miss the broader forces which produce the social problems, independent of the individual moral goodness or badness of the victims.

Further, the divided conscience means that we need a community of ethical searching. We need others for support of our searching, and we need others to help challenge us to continued commitment and development. Ethical societies

are centrally concerned with the cultivation of ethical behavior. This behavior begins with self-respect, with valuing our own selves. It continues with the way we conduct our most intimate relationships, with our life partners, our children, our parents, our friends, and our local communities. It also includes how we conduct ourselves as part of larger communities, as part of “the public,” as citizens of a city, a state, a country, the world.

Ethical societies, by being a community that supports many aspects of our lives, are concerned with human individuals as inherently related, inseparable parts of smaller and larger social units, and at the same time, as individuals. By starting with the recognition of our social existence, we are able to end with a recognition that it is individuals who do all the acting – and that our ethical imperatives must be addressed first of all to ourselves. “*I will act* so as to elicit the best in others, and thereby in myself.” For there is no one else’s behavior any of us can directly change, except through our own ethical action. We can inspire others to change. We cannot change them. And certainly not by telling them what to do.

To do this most effectively, we join a group that includes others committed to this kind of ethical action. We change each other, as we learn to act ourselves.

All this is a kind of practical idealism. I believe that the world was built by dreamers, by idealists, by pragmatic idealists.

In order to achieve the kind of ethical action Adler describes, I believe we need a kind of analysis that involves both reason and compassion, one that is then linked to action as we test our analysis to see how it is applied, and then we readjust.

The analysis that we need for our action – as grounding for our action, as well as for re-analyzing after that action, as part of the experimental nature of ethical action – the analysis is in three parts:

First, we must have an idea of what the world is really like. Adler’s analysis of the three spiritual pains is a masterful example of analysis. To really look at the world as it is takes courage, and it takes a kind of discipline to avoid slipping into despair. To avoid despair, we to recognize and affirm that what we do matters. We need to recognize and affirm human worth and uniqueness. And we then need to go beyond looking at just what is.

We must look for what might be, what could be, what is potential. This is what makes this an idealism, for it takes seriously not just what is, but what potentially might be. There are two ways that we look at what might be, not just what is:

First, we need to recognize what is really possible, if we are to have any change. And only by recognizing possibilities, potentials, can we set a course for any future that we may want that is different than what we have. Being able to discern possibility is a talent that can be nurtured. It is not, as a classical idealist might want, a way of looking at what is “really real.” That would lead us to the mistaken conclusion that there is just one potential path to follow.

Instead, we can acknowledge this discovery of potential as a human creative act. By looking for possible alternatives to what is – by looking for what Bobby Kennedy called “what never was,” we create the potentials, we create the possibilities. We build those possibilities through our dreaming.

And the second function of this creative act of

discovering potentials is that we must examine some of the consequences of what might happen – and this means considering negative as well as positive potentials. Easy solution people fail to do this, far too often. Too many people in California who are illegal immigrants and drawing tax money for support services? Pass a draconian measure, as Californians did a few years ago, that has foreseeable consequences that are utterly dire – but those foreseeable consequences were not foreseen by too many, until too late. And then add more quick fixes on top of the first, so that *no* one's objectives are met.

Steps one and two of an idealistic analysis are to see the world as it is and as it might be. The third step is to see the pathways that might connect them. Beginnings and ends are important – it is also important to see the means, and to select means that can work. This may be the most difficult, and seeing means that can work does not always mean that they will work. For we are limited in our creative powers of discovering, or inventing, possibilities and paths, and we will sometimes, even often fail.

But it is still essential. It is still worthwhile. The work that Adler inspired in his idealism helped generations, helped thousands and perhaps millions to change their lives for the better. Consider Jane Addams, and her dreams and commitment to building a world from those dreams. What would Chicago be like – what would the nation be like – without the creations she dreamed into existence?

Every great change in the world, every social change for the betterment of humanity, begins with a dream, with an idea of something that is not, never was, and yet might be. It cannot end with the dream. It requires more than a dream to build a world. The world was not built by dreams, but it was built upon dreams, and it was

built by dreamers along with builders and shapers and critics and artists.

In the words of Anaïs Nin: “Dreams pass into the reality of action. From the action stems the dream again; and this interdependence produces the highest form of living.”

The practical message of ethical idealism is this: the world was built by dreamers, so it is time to wake up and dream.