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Introduction

When Katharine Archibald asked me to fill in for her because she could not be with you today, I saw this as a golden opportunity. For those of you who know me, you know that my focus in ethical culture is in the international arena at The United Nations through our affiliate organization The National Service Conference of The American Ethical Union.

I have wanted to speak with fellow ethical culturalists about some discoveries I made recently in the history of our movement. What Felix Adler, our founder, did almost one hundred years ago continues today to bring excitement and energizing collaboration with some of us members of civil society who work at the United Nations. I want to know whether your response in this local Society is a "so what" response or whether you can be as excited as I am about a very special part of our religious experience in ethical culture - that experience that says because we are social in nature and thus, our social natures require us to work toward social transformation of all human well-being throughout the world.

Felix Adler had an idea to bring together others like himself who were concerned about relationships among the races, so teamed up with an organizer whose name was Gustav Spiller. He also had the help of W.E.Dubois. This Conference was called The Universal Races Congress (URC) and took place at The University of London, July 26-29th, 1911. Over 2000 persons attended the Conference and it still is on the records as an early initiative to heal the artificial ethnic divisions. He believed that light should be shed upon those assumptions that divided people so that more could rid themselves of these assumptions. He believed that if we just spent more time together, many of our differences could be healed today.

And so at the UN, great numbers of persons all over the world continue to do this. By these meetings, lives are changed, solutions are realized and best practices are shared.

I brought along a newsletter and other informational materials about The National Service Conference if you are might be interested in hearing more about such meetings most of which occur because of The United Nations. I will also spend a few minutes at the end of our talk to describe three national ethical action projects that we passed last year at our national Assembly. All of these projects are vehicles for us to engage with the larger world in peacebuilding, democratic processes and interfaith cooperation. "Community is where community happens," said Martin Buber.

Here we are in ethical culture with some of us just as impassioned about the same issues as Adler. While I didn't start a religion as he did, I have taken a long walk from the time I was about 9, when I first experienced agony because of racism in America generated by our sad history with slavery. I also encountered true nobility in those men and women, black and white, who were addressing it with a some danger to their safety. Anyone who witnessed racism in the 40's was changed forever. It was a time when the seeds of civil rights were once again being addressed.

My story is too long to tell though I remember and continue to honor my first mentor, a graduate student whose name was Dick Oppensem. He came from Ghana to get his doctorate in economics in Ohio where I grew up. He spoke to our Council on Human Rights in Zanesville, Ohio, at an interfaith interracial community supper that the Council sponsored.

At the time I met him, I was 14. He encouraged me to ask questions and spoke patiently as we processed them. He never offered easy solutions. We became pen pals.

Once he came to visit me when I was in college outside Chicago, and no, he would not go to a nearby restaurant with me because it was not safe to walk on the streets together in 1956. He did go back to Ghana and wrote a letter or two, but long after we lost contact with each other, I never forgot his influence on me. He encouraged me to choose early in life to become part of the change instead part of the problem. But he modeled another truth for me, that in Felix Adler's words, "We live in order to finish an, as yet, unfinished universe, unfinished so far as the human,...is concerned. (p. 70. Life and Destiny) Whatever time that change takes to come, I do not grow discouraged when I think of so many who have come before and so many who will come after.

Maybe that is one reason, religions get founded, to extend our sense of destinies beyond an individual lifetime. Adler knew his engagement in international issues would certainly last beyond his lifetime. More than that, he understood social change as a spiritual event, a process that gives us ethicists a sense of purpose that is universal at the same time, human-centered.

That Adler would engage in international affairs was no accident. Having experienced a multicultural German American upbringing, he understood that if his religion was to be universal it must encompass more than his own provincial progressive Jewish sensibility. He developed his ethical approach in the face of a corrupt city struggling to adapt to massive immigration accompanied by brutal poverty and pestilence. Witnessing traumatic dislocation of entire cultures, he came to believe that the international scene was holding back the realization of America's destiny. Today, we may say the inverse is true. Today, our country needs to learn from the best practices of others to heal from the economic imperialism our national government has chosen. The ethical approach we find in Adler's reasoning may help us do this. What he did was to identify the underlying limited assumptions and to seek correctives. He also argued for those needed actions to achieve a better outcome for the greatest numbers of people.

In terms of outcome, Adler felt that peace was the inevitable outcome of what he called the proper organization of humanity. I will discuss this in more detail later.

Adler's efforts to change racism is a good case in point. He started with anti-Semitism during the Russian pogroms of the late 19th century. In an address called "Larger Tolerance" delivered in 1880, he stated, "It is in intellectual culture, in moral culture that we shall find the solution to this race question." Adler held that anti-Semitism was rooted imperialism. So, he did two things. He joined an anti-imperialist movement and quickly rose to leadership. He also delivered many Platform talks to his members. As a result, he set the stage for ethical culture's engagement in American foreign policy. As the ethical culture movement expanded into England, Germany, Austria and Switzerland between 1893-1902, so did his public recognition as a religious leader working for world peace.

One great triumph of the International Union of Ethical Societies now alive in Europe, was the First Universal Races Congress at the University of London, July 26-29, 1911. Adler brought together representatives of both the developed and undeveloped nations in order to discuss the general relations existing between the East and the West with hopes of developing fuller understanding and cooperation between them. In his address "The

Fundamental Principle of Interracial Ethics, and Some Practical Applications of it” delivered during the Fifth Session, he aimed to subordinate the political issues of the day with more comprehensive goals. He believed racism would end when all groups embraced in mutual respect an acceptance of inherent reciprocity . He believed the end goal to strive for was what he called the “ organization of humanity”

...in the concept ‘organization’ are involved two postulates. One is the obligation to promote the utmost differentiation of the types of culture, the utmost variety and richness in the expression the fundamental human facultiesIt has often been said that greed and the lust of dominion are the principal causes of strife among nations. But it is certain that conceit in regard to one’s own type of culture is equally one of the contributing causes of war. ...Even some of the wisest of philosophers have fallen a prey to this delusion, this species of conceit. ...it is certain that pride of culture - i.e., of one’s own specific culture, as superior to every other - is one of the chief elements of danger in the international situation.

The principle of organization is designed to procure a modification in this respect....and there is reason to hope that if a less provincial conception of culture shall have gained ground, it will gradually be extended... At any rate, we must depend for the peace and progress of the world upon...a cross-section, as it were, of the nations, whose convictions and sentiments shall supply the moral force on which international arbitration courts and similar agencies will have to depend.”

The second postulate involved in the principle of organisation is that any particular culture-type is not only stimulated and enriched by the absorption of elements derived from elsewhere, but that the flaws, as well as the excellent features of any type of culture, may be best detected in the effect it produces on other types. Of us, it may be said that we live in our radiations; that the kind of influence we exert upon those with whom we come in contact is the truest measure of the degree of perfection or imperfection inherent in us. And the same is true of the larger collective groups...

The thought I am aiming to express is that the give-and-take relation between the culture-types (and the more numerous and varied they are, the better) not only serves the purpose of enrichment, not only serves to prevent ossification and decay, but also serves to expose the weak points at which radical efforts at recuperation and improvement are requisite. If humanity is ever to become corpus organicum spirituale - and that is the aim - then a conception based on reciprocity of cultural influence, favourable to the greatest possible variety of types, and assuring to the different groups of mankind their integrity as distinct members, in order that they may make manifest the distinctive gifts with which Nature has endowed them, seems unavoidable.

It is daunting to look at Adler’s work in the international arena and realize how right he was on so many issues. We might look around one hundred years later, and observe how many world institutions now exist that address themselves to the humanitarian issues he mentioned. For example, finally there is a growing recognition that a culture of peace is possible, in fact, necessary, if we are to survive.