



The Ethical Humanist

Newsletter of the Boston Ethical Community

Ethical Society of Boston
MEMBER OF THE AMERICAN ETHICAL UNION

Volume 61, No. 2

60th Anniversary 1955 - 2015

November 2015

Months of Tragic Violence

Andrea Perrault

Over the past several years, I've contributed an article to our newsletter about social and political events that dominated the news since we last convened. This year, it seems that the news is filled with the tragic – mass shootings keep occurring, and we seem unable to counter the NRA in finding a small measure of change in public policy to curtail gun violence. Police killings of black men are alarmingly reflective of serious trouble in our society, as is some seemingly resultant unprovoked violence targeted at police officers. Gun violence has erupted in so many communities, including those in Massachusetts. Daytime shootings have disturbed what once were seen as peaceful areas.

Matching gunfire with gunfire cannot become the hallmark of our society; ending such violence and rebuilding a truly civil society is essential. But

how? We look to our political leaders to lead the charge. But those who seek to be our national leaders are not inspiring confidence. With Donald Trump leading in polls for the Republican nomination, I'm convinced that public interest or willingness to engage in serious political dialogue has collapsed. It's likely that we've been oversaturated in the past few years with ads, mailings, and phone calls by people who want our votes, but who do not propose policies that will lead to positive solutions of our problems. Name-calling and scapegoating have become the norm. Money dominates the political scene. No wonder the summer was dominated by voices that are new to the political arena; the old voices have achieved nothing. Yet the new voices bring little substance to the political dialogue.

We must rely on other voices: the Black Lives Matter movement is important and must work to effect change in the criminal justice system and in society at large.

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Book Review

Peter Singer's *A Life You Can Save*

Peter Denison

Peter Singer is a well known philosopher at Princeton University, whose moral system is built on Utilitarianism. Starting out with the proposition that all human lives are of equal value he holds that everyone whose income is above the average income of everybody should give away all of that surplus to help those who have less. He quotes Jesus who told a rich young man to sell all he had and give it to the poor. He does not quote Kant whose categorical imperative states that one should act in such a way that one can will that that act be a universal principle. The problem that would arise is if everybody did sell, who would be left to buy the stuff? Obviously chaos. Singer admits that even he does not give away that much. (I have read previously that he does give away 20% of his income.)

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The Way It Is (?)

Marvin Miller

Ethical

Societies divide their populations into classes — groups of people who have power, prestige, privilege, and property to a greater or lesser extent. Many different bases have been, and are, used for such classification — caste, race, sex, ancestry, birthplace, religion, language, for a few examples. People in different classes regard and treat each other differently. Such differences conflict with the humanistic ethic, which calls on us to regard and treat others as our equals.

Sex is not usually thought of as a class distinction, but in most places in the world women do not have all the rights that men have, e.g. rights to educational and employment opportunities, to political participation, and even to decide what goes on inside their own bodies. In some places, female fetuses are aborted because they are female.

Racism assigns people with particular physical characteristics to inferior status, placing them in a lower class than those with different appearances.

In the Bible, the stories of Abraham and Jacob, and the tenth commandment, refer to a society in which some people had servants and others were servants. In England some people have

titles of nobility which give them higher status than others. The revolutionaries who created our country banned such titles in the Constitution. But inequalities of income and wealth have created a society here that is as much divided by class as is Britain.

There are various ways of classifying people economically. The Federal government has an official poverty line based on income, calling people with less than a specified income "poor" and qualifying them for some anti-poverty benefits. But, since the 1930's, the poverty line is based on the cost of food. The price of other necessities, such as housing and health care, has gone up much faster than that of food, so people who aren't "poor" can still be homeless.

Politicians often talk about the middle class. Conservatives also often use the term "class warfare", by which they mean informing those who are not in the ruling class that class warfare is being waged against them by the ruling class.

In one way of thinking about class, the poor are those who don't have enough purchasing power for their current needs, the middle class are those who have enough for these but are insecure about having enough for their future needs,

and the rich are those who have enough for current and future needs and for whom additional wealth means greater power in competition with others of their class. That's why, for the rich, too much is never enough.

People in Boston Ethical think of ourselves as middle class. But when we use this term, we may subconsciously think of a distribution like the normal distribution, with most individuals in the middle and few at either end. The income and wealth distributions are very far from normal. Imagine a chart of wealth distribution on an eight inch wide sheet of paper. Zero wealth is at the left side of the sheet. Bill Gates's wealth, which has been estimated at eighty billion dollars, is at the right edge. Donald Trump's claimed ten billion is one inch from the left edge. A million dollars is 0.0001 inch from the left edge. To those in the Gates, Walton, or Koch class, the wealth of almost everyone is microscopic.

Purchasing power is political power — the power to offer campaign money to a preferred candidate. A society with grossly unequal political power cannot honestly be called democratic. Progress toward democracy requires reduction in disparities of economic class.

Andrea Perrault *continued*
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Killings of black men in too many communities across the country are now witnessed by bystanders' cameras – the realities of such violence can no longer be secret.

The Boston Police Department will adopt a pilot program of putting cameras on officers; the New York City Police Department is implementing new policies on documenting all types of violent confrontations. Attorney General Loretta Lynch is being vocal on behalf of the U.S. Department of Justice on local cases where such violence is in question – keeping the spotlight on these cases is important.

As citizens, we must support the efforts to confront violence in all avenues. Our voices must be heard in public forums, in letters to newspapers, and in social media. Only by massive public outcry will any change be effected.

Peter Denison *continued*
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He then asks why people don't give. Some reasons or excuses are to question how much one person's gift can help. Many studies show that if there is one child with a name starving or in need of a life saving operation, many people are moved to give. An article describing thousands of children who need the same

kind of help elicits a much weaker response, and even mentioning a second child means less is given. The feeling seems to be that there is so great a need that one's donation is just a drop in the bucket. Singer reasonably points out the fallacy in that argument. Whether one gives for one named child, or for someone whom one will never know, there is one child who will live, one set of parents who will be grateful. Except that the child's name is unknown, there really is no difference.

He also deals with the question, will one's donation really help the child, or will it be wasted in inefficiency and/or corruption? Singer takes that question seriously. Charities now have statistics on how much of the donation goes to expenses. But a charity has to do enough research to know what is the best way to help, and should spend some money on research. One organization that he mentions is Oxfam. In some Third World villages just building simple toilets will prevent a lot of pollution and save many lives.

Many people comment on the billions our government sends in foreign aid, and those countries often show no benefit. But that aid is mainly military and food aid often is tied to buying food from our country. Cheap grain coming in to one of those countries will undersell the local farmers, putting them out of business, and thus

undermining the country's economy. An independent NGO can do more good for less money because it doesn't have to be tied to our country's foreign policy. Singer's researches have shown that even small donations if everybody gave, could solve the problems of world hunger, poverty, and the diseases which no longer affect developed countries.

How much should people give? Singer has backed away from the absolutism presented in the opening paragraph. He believes that a lower amount of giving can accomplish his goals. He comes up with a graduated table similar to those on our IRS forms. Based on income he says nothing on our first \$50,000, 5% of earnings up to \$100,005. In condensed form he writes "5% of the first \$148,000, 12% of the next \$235,000, 15% of the next \$217,000, 20% of the next \$1.3 million, 25% of the next \$8.8 million, and 33.33% of the remainder." He speaks approvingly of super rich men like Bill Gates who give away more than half of their fortunes. Not all tax deductible charities can count in the above figures. Donations to orchestras, colleges, libraries, are nice, but they don't help the hungry and sick. Nor do more than a small percentage of one's contributions to one's church or even to the Boston Ethical Community. Singer's challenge calls for a response from all of us.

Sunday Programs in November 2015

November 1



Faye George and Winston Bolton

When the Heart Speaks Its Mind: a Poetry Reading & Discussion

The program will include readings by Boston Ethical Community members Faye George from her book *World of Hard Use*, poems on the theme of work and workers; and by Winston F. Bolton from his book *Among Ruins*. Their poems offer the thoughtful reflections of maturity on a life lived through a major part of the last century on identity, love, war, aging, etc.

November 8

Michael Bleiweiss, Vice President, Boston Ethical Community



Colloquy

Colloquy provides an opportunity for self-reflection and contemplation within a nurturing, group environment. Participants use

readings, music, and quiet sharing to reflect on a selected theme.

It was created at the Ethical Humanist Society of Long Island by Arthur Dobrin, Leader Emeritus. Each Colloquy discussion centers on a particular theme selected from Arthur Dobrin's book, *Spelling God with Two O's*. Groups consider such topics as awareness, serenity, character, transitions and friendship.

November 15



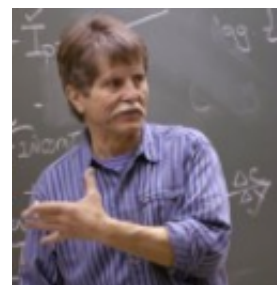
Tiziana Dearing, Boston College School of Social Work

Building a New Cultural Narrative for Social Justice

This talk is an invitation to reflect on the emergence of a new “cultural narrative,” to use a term from New York Times blogger Andrew Revkin, around poverty, marginalization and social justice. Is there, in fact, a new narrative emerging? Do we need it? How can we combine a range of ethical, legal and religious traditions in shaping this narrative, and how can it advance social change?

November 22

John Miller, Professor of Economics, Wheaton College



The Trans-Pacific Partnership

We welcome back Professor Miller, who will give a presentation on the Trans-Pacific Partnership. This trade agreement is hailed by some as a landmark free trade agreement that will bring prosperity to all, and critiqued by others as a disaster in terms of human rights and the environment.

November 29

Thanksgiving Breakfast

Join members and friends of the community as we observe the Thanksgiving holiday together.

Information About the Society

Officers for 2014-2015

President	Brian King	(781) 581-6104
Vice President	Michael Bleiweiss	(978) 689-2874
Treasurer	Terry Goldzier	(617) 232-7704
Secretary	Andrea Perrault	(781) 593-5794

Other Board Members

Donald Aharonian, Peter Ames,
Cathy Haskell, Fred Hewett, Martha Werman

Archivist	Brian King	(781) 581-6104
Caring Committee	Marline Miller	(617) 244-1471
Ethical Action	Michael Bleiweiss	(978) 689-2874
Membership		
Music	Ingrid Kisliuk Izabella Mazhbits	(617) 332-7109 (617) 731-1089
Newsletter	Fred Hewett Martha Werman	(617) 945-0396 (617) 497-7888
Officiant	Katrina Scott	(617) 965-3067
Program Comm.	Andrea Perrault	(781) 593-5794
Publicity	John Lampert	(617) 923-8550
Finance Committee		
Sunday Bulletin		
Website	Fred Hewett	(617) 945-0396

E-mail newsletter@bostonethical.org for all print and e-mail newsletter requests (subscriptions, changes and cancellations)

Website: bostonethical.org

Facebook: [facebook.com/bostonethical](https://www.facebook.com/bostonethical)

Twitter: twitter.com/bostonethical

The Ethical Movement

Ethical Culture is a humanistic religious and educational movement working to create a better world through ethical actions. We are dedicated to the ideal that the highest value is human worth and that our relationships to each other are of greatest ethical concern. Our commitment is to the worth and dignity of the individual and to treating each human being so as to bring out the best in him or her. Members join together in ethical societies to assist each other in developing ethical ideas and ideals...to celebrate life's joys and support each other through life's crises.

Hospitality and Refreshment Schedule

Sunday attendees are asked to contribute some food item to the refreshment table, according to the first letter of their last name.

Week 1	Sunday, November 1	A - F
Week 2	Sunday, November 8	G - K
Week 3	Sunday, November 15	L - R
Week 4	Sunday, November 22	S - Z

~ Program Schedule for November 2015 ~	
November 1	Faye George and Winston Bolton <i>A Poetry Reading and Discussion</i>
November 8	Michael Bleiweiss, Boston Ethical Community <i>An Ethical Humanist Colloquy</i>
November 15	Tiziana Dearing, Boston College School of Social Work <i>On Building a New "Cultural Narrative" for Social Justice</i>
November 22	John Miller, Economics Professor, Wheaton College <i>The Trans-Pacific Partnership</i>
November 29	Thanksgiving Breakfast <i>Join us to celebrate the holiday as a community</i>
Sunday Meetings are held at 10:30 AM at 33 Garden St in Cambridge	

<p>THE ETHICAL HUMANIST Newsletter of the Boston Ethical Community (617) 739-9050 newsletter@bostonethical.org www.bostonethical.org</p>	<p>Ethical Society of Boston Post Office Box 38-1934 Cambridge, MA 02238 Return Service Requested</p>
<p>Non-Profit Org. US Postage Paid Lawrence, MA Permit No. 28</p>	