



# The Ethical Humanist

## Newsletter of the Boston Ethical Community

Ethical Society of Boston  
MEMBER OF THE AMERICAN ETHICAL UNION

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September-October 2016

### **BEC Philanthropy Initiative Underway**

Members to vote on grant budget  
increase on September 18

*Brian King*

Over the past year, we have developed our new grantmaking program and the process has been very exciting. From the original conception at a board workshop in December and presentation to the members in January to the development of the request for proposals and getting the word out to local nonprofits last spring, and most recently the review of proposals that is now proceeding, it has far exceeded our original expectations.

We received 25 proposals by the July 31 deadline, all of which were for good causes and worthy of being funded. Based on criteria the grant committee had developed, we narrowed the field to a handful of finalists. Pairs of committee members made (or soon will make) site visits to each of the finalists. The final funding decisions will be made in

September, and the grantees will be notified by the end of the month.

Our original plan for this year was to treat it as an experiment or a learning process. We set a budget of \$10,000 assuming one or two small grants to get started, figuring we could expand to the \$20,000 range next year after we had some experience under our belt.

After reviewing the large number of excellent proposals we received, the grant committee is reevaluating that assumption. We don't feel we should turn people away — in effect asking them to apply next year after we increase our budget — when the needed money is just idling in our accounts, and the stock market is near an all-time high.

Therefore, the grant committee has asked the board to increase their budget for the upcoming year so they can consider making up to \$25,000 in grants this year. The board has decided that the membership should have adequate notice of a budget

increase of this size, so we have decided to have a special members' meeting on Sunday, September 18 at our usual time of 10:30 a.m. to kick off our season of programs.

At that time, the grant committee will be asking for a specific budget, which we currently estimate to be in the \$15,000-\$25,000 range based on the various proposals under consideration as finalists. The committee will meet beforehand to determine a final budget proposal. Since we have promised to notify the grantees before the end of September, this necessitates a special meeting.

The vote will only be for the specific budget amount. The grant committee strongly feels that establishing a rigorous process is important if we want this program to succeed. Only the committee members who have reviewed all the proposals and agreed to the rules and procedures set in place for evaluation are involved in the final decision of awarding individual grants.

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## The Way It Is (?)

Marvin Miller

### Life, Purpose, Good

We distinguish living organisms from non-living entities by observing that living organisms act, via internal physical and chemical processes, in the interests of their continued existence and of the future of their species — in other words, with purpose. Purpose is different from intent — for purpose, consciousness isn't necessary and usually isn't present.

Since the lifespan of a living organism is limited, living organisms act to perpetuate their species by reproduction. Humans, however, are more complex than other kinds of life, and we can act to continue the existence of our species in ways other than reproduction. We are aware of the environment that sustains us and of the dangers that need to be avoided, such as nuclear war. Actions to avoid those dangers are consistent with our purpose as living organisms.

The concept "good" is meaningless in the absence of purpose. No one ever talks about what's good for a raindrop or a cloud — that wouldn't make any sense. "Good" is relevant only for living organisms. What's good

for an organism is what helps in fulfilling its purposes, and what's bad is what impedes that fulfillment. An organism needs a life-sustaining environment that includes adequate nutrients. It also needs to maintain the functionality of its body. Deprivation of nutrients and injury are bad.

There's no such thing as universal good. What's intended and expected to be good can have bad side-effects. Sometimes these can

***“But even too much moderation is sometimes not good. Sometimes strong action is necessary for survival.”***

end up being worse than what the intended good was intended to overcome. A medicine intended to relieve pain can sometimes lead to addiction. Surgery can result in complications harmful to the patient.

What's good for the owl is bad for the mouse. The slowest zebra is caught by the lion. What's bad for the zebra can be good for the zebra species — future zebras inherit the speed of the survivors. Death is the ultimate bad for an organism, but without it there would soon be no room or sustenance for its species.

Ecology-minded forest managers have introduced predators to keep the deer population within the carrying capacity of the forest.

Pleasure is good — it makes us feel good. We like sweet foods that give us energy. Pleasure leads us to do things that are good for us. But too much of a good thing can be bad — too much sugar can rot our teeth and lead to obesity. The old Greek philosophers who said that moderation is good and deficiency and excess are bad had a valid point. But even too much moderation is sometimes not good. Sometimes strong action is necessary for survival.

We often hear "better" used as a synonym for "more". More is better when we have too little, but it's worse when we have too much. People are curious — we seek information. But now there is practically an infinity of information available to us. Information flooding in upon us deprives us of something good — quiet time to think. A society of non-thinkers isn't a good society.

Everyone and everything is a mixture of good and bad. Our task is to try to maximize the good in ourselves and in the world.

## Report on the 2016 AEU Assembly

Michael Bleiweiss

This past July, I attended the annual Assembly of our parent organization, the American Ethical Union (AEU), held this year in St. Louis, MO. As usual, it was four very intense days of workshops, meetings, speeches, and networking. This is a report on the major actions taken there and some items that we might find useful here in Boston.

The core reason for the Assemblies is the business meeting, where we vote on ethical action resolutions, elect board members, and pass the budget for the coming year. This year's budget totaled \$404,126. Some \$44,000 of that is projected to come from an initiative called "100 by 100," where 100 people donate \$100 per month for three years. We also passed resolutions calling for:

- all workers to receive a living wage
- the SEC to require companies to disclose their political spending in their annual reports
- a constitutional amendment stating that corporations are not people and money is not speech.
- members to work to end systemic racial discrimination

A fifth resolution opposing the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) treaty was submitted by BEC, but did not pass. For the full text of the resolutions, you can go to:

<http://aeu.org/2016/08/2016-ethical-resolutions-now-we-must-walk-the-walk>

As always, there were also many workshops on organizational development, ethical action, and Ethical Culture philosophy and practice. This year's focus was on racial discrimination and Black Lives Matter. I attended the following workshops:

*Intersectionality: Connecting the Dots:*

This focused on how people can be subjected to multiple types of discrimination due to being part of more than one oppressed group (e.g., an older black woman).

*Tips from the Trenches:*

This year it covered various Societies' Ethical Action activities, the role of the Society president, and rules regarding political activism by religious organizations.

The Ethical Action activities included participating in programs to help the homeless, food pantries, and a secular alternative to the cub/boy scouts called Navigators.

*Shutting Things Down so We Can Open Them Up:*

This was a workshop on non-violent civil disobedience given by Democracy Spring. This replaced the usual keynote address.

*Faith, Family, and Humanism:*

Attendees and the moderator discussed the definitions and roles in people's lives of faith, family, religion, and humanism.

*Standing Alone, Working Together: The Unaffiliated Activist:*

This covered how to work with organizations on various issues without necessarily joining them.

*On-Line Tools to Attract New People:*

This presented information on using the internet and social media for publicizing one's Society and its activities.

Other workshops that I was not able to attend were:

- The Experience of Ethical Culture for People of Color
- Inspiring the Community
- Investing in Community
- Aging in Community
- Faith, Family, Humanism

The day before the Assembly attendees visited a local food bank and did "salvage" of food donated by supermarkets.

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## Campaign 2016

Andrea Perrault

The usual excitement of a presidential campaign has been eclipsed in 2016 by its seeming interminable length, its raucousness, and general meanness. Clearly, systemic change is needed in our political system: extremely long campaign cycles, primaries in states that are not reflective of the broader U.S. population, constant money raising, and arcane policies and practices of the parties (such as super delegates) have diminished U.S. politics.

In addition, the inability of the media to provide useful information or analysis on policy issues, preferring instead to report only on candidates' diatribes toward one another, has made this political season seem unpleasant and ineffective in building a more educated electorate. The overriding emotion arising from this reality appears to be hatred. The verbal invective of some candidates has fed into corresponding distrust, distaste, and anger in the population. Collaboration, conciliation, and cooperation within the parties have vanished.

A central question arising from our present state of politics is this: How did we get here? Politics often, like many other

fields, keeps those involved in it in a bubble, completely oblivious to those who are not in the business of it. Politicians are often guided and guarded by "handlers" whose jobs require that they keep the candidates focused on only one task – winning. And the politicians and the handlers seem to live for the fight to win – through long campaigns and lots of money. This year, their single-minded focus blinded them to the interests of the larger population. But change happened.

***A central question arising from our present state of politics is this: How did we get here?***

Cultural change usually takes a long time to occur, and during the two-term Bush presidency, the U.S. seemed to go backward in time as we became mired in useless foreign wars and economic instability. But with the Obama presidency, we appeared to get the change that many wanted to see — a President who seemed to think he could make change happen at a faster rate (wasn't that indeed the reason he won the Nobel Peace Prize before he had governed?). Since his re-election, many have criticized Obama for failing to get anything done with an obstinate and mean Congress. He had to rely on

executive orders to make the changes he wanted to see and to assure any progressive legacy. But a most important change that he represents is that he opened the door to political power to "others". This opening was an often unspoken consequence. Perhaps it should have been expected that in the 2016 presidential race, "others" — the non-white, non-male, and non-political would step up to the plate, looking to follow his lead.

Obama is a legal scholar, an impassioned speaker, and a keen student of national and international affairs. He was very young when he sought the presidency. His ascent to the office empowered others to want to achieve the

same goal: Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz were young, Hispanic Senators wanting to bring their heritage to prominence as Barak Obama had brought his. Ben Carson and Carly Fiorina saw the door to political power opening for them, too. Indeed, seventeen candidates on the Republican side were jockeying for position. But they all were not accomplished community organizers, nor as politically astute as Obama. Plus, among the many competitors was a "huge" (non-Republican?) opponent – Donald Trump. Donald Trump was an unexpected "other" who had

mastered marketing and media techniques — a businessman with a showman's swagger and a media presence that all Americans knew. He certainly changed the political scene; the sixteen GOP rivals were not up to the task of beating his strategy of mowing them down with invective and insults. And to the astonishment of many, he is the Republican nominee. Was he inevitable?

The Democrats also benefited from opening doors to "otherness". Hillary Clinton had been pounding on the glass ceiling for decades. Would America ever elect a woman for President? A different kind of "otherness" interrupted her pursuit of power. A non-Democrat, independent Bernie Sanders, captured the imagination of a population that was frustrated by politics as usual. The "Feel the Bern" movement exploded onto the scene with an intensity that rivaled that of the Trump followers. In a hard fought race, Hillary Clinton is the Democratic nominee — Bernie Sanders will stay independent, and work to elect Clinton and continue to advocate for the changes his movement had sought.

As the race begins with the two nominees, many are concerned that this is so not the change we wanted. Insults and invective are still Trump's stock in trade, in spite of his constantly changing campaign staff's efforts to calm the waters. And on the

Democratic side, the past haunts Hillary Clinton, from the economic legacy of Bill Clinton to the present questions about the Clinton Foundation and the ever-present e-mail controversy. These realities may fuel the campaigns of the Libertarian and Green parties.

In the long run, the 2016 Presidential election has "opened doors" for new voices to political power. This should be a good thing. Hopefully, if the public stays active and engaged in making change, we will see shorter campaigns with less divisiveness, more inclusion, and less emphasis on money in our political system. This vision won't happen without a fully mobilized electorate; people need to be active in making the changes that they want to see, or the political and media machines will still dominate. However, if we can succeed, the Obama legacy will be a positive one.

**Michael Bleiweiss, AEU**  
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Friday evening, we attended the play "Black and Blue," written by Lee Patton Chiles and performed by Gitana Productions. It related the events in Ferguson, MO that led up to the shooting of Michael Brown and the resulting Black Lives Matter protests.

The Sunday platform was held at the St. Louis Society and given by their Leader Kate Lovelady. The subject was

"Bending the Arc of History toward Justice."

The Elliott-Black Award is given to a person who has devoted his/her life to advancing humanist values, often at personal risk. This year's award was given to Millennial Activists United — a youth-led movement to end racial injustice and police brutality. Two of their founders, Brittany Ferrell and Ashley Yates accepted the award.

**Brian King, Philanthropy**  
(continued from page 1)

At the September 18 meeting, the board and the grant committee will make presentations on the grant process that we used. We can speak only in general terms about the grant proposals we have reviewed. Please understand that we will not be able to speak about specific proposals until the grants have been awarded at the end of September. Rest assured that you will hear plenty of details about the grantees and their programs that you will be supporting at that time and throughout out the rest of the year.

We all hope that this program will be successful and that in future years we can better coordinate the budgeting process to avoid the requirement of special meetings. In the meantime, please understand that this is a learning process for all of us. Take it as a good sign that this program has exceeded our original expectations.

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## Sunday Programs in September 2016

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September 18

### Special Meeting of the Membership

We kick off this year's season with a business meeting for our members to consider an expansion of our new grant making program. This special meeting is required because we promised our grantees a decision by the end of September. See page 1 for more information.

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September 25



**Pam Wilmot, Executive Director, Common Cause Massachusetts**

*Voting and Democracy: Current Issues in Massachusetts and the Nation*

Voting is a linchpin in our democracy, yet not all eligible voters are registered, and voter turnout remains low in many demographics. What are some reforms being considered to address these problems?

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October 2



**Charles Derber, Professor of Sociology, Boston College**

*A United Front: Universalizing Resistance - The Role of the Left in Electoral Politics and the Upcoming Presidential Election*

Professor Derber will present an analysis of what role the U.S. left should play in electoral politics, and how social movements need to think about elections to stop proto-fascist populism and build in a new democratic and sustainable world. His latest book, *Bully Nation*, will be available for purchase.

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October 9

### Semiannual Members' Meeting

Members will take up BEC business matters and discuss future projects.

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October 16



### Boston Book Festival: One City, One Story

Each year, the Boston Book Festival celebrates a local author, and distributes a notable short story by the author. In the past three years, the Boston Ethical Community has held a discussion about the story during the week-end of the Festival. This year's selection is "The Faery Handbag" by Kelly Link.

BEC will distribute copies of the story in weeks leading up to our discussion, or you can access copies at local bookstores.

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October 23

### To be announced

*Please check the website.*

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October 30



**Prof. Nathan H. Lents, John Jay College and Macaulay Honors College, The City University of New York**

*From Reciprocity to Empathy: The Evolutionary Value of Morality*

In order to "activate" human morality and thus promote a more ethical society, it is necessary to understand the biological origin of moral behaviors and how they benefit individuals, not just societies as a whole.

**Pam Wilmot of Common Cause Massachusetts to Open Fall Lecture Series**

*Fred Hewett*

BEC is proud to announce that Pam Wilmot, Executive Director of Common Cause Massachusetts, will be the leadoff speaker in our fall lecture series on September 25, 2016.

Pam was our Humanist of the Year in 2009. She will be



speaking about current issues in democracy and voting reform, both in Massachusetts and nationally.

This promises to be a great talk, and we look forward to welcoming Pam back to BEC.

**Officers for 2016-2017**

|                |                   |                |
|----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| 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**

Pamela Dritt, Fred Hewett, Martha Werman

|                  |                    |                |
|------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Discussion Group | Carolyn Nalbandian | (617) 916-2229 |
| Program Comm.    | Andrea Perrault    | (781) 593-5794 |
| Caring Committee | Marline Miller     | (617) 244-1471 |
| Ethical Action   | Michael Bleiweiss  | (978) 689-2874 |
| Newsletter       | Fred Hewett        | (617) 945-0396 |
|                  | Martha Werman      | (617) 497-7888 |
| Music            | Ingrid Kisiuk      | (617) 332-7109 |
| Officiant        | Katrina Scott      | (617) 965-3067 |
| Publicity        | John Lampert       | (617) 923-8550 |
| Website          | Fred Hewett        | (617) 945-0396 |

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| ~ Program Schedule for September 2016 ~                                  |   |
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| <b>September 18</b>  | Season Kickoff and Special Meeting of the Membership<br><i>See page 1</i>   |
| <b>September 25</b>  | Pam Wilmot, Executive Director, Common Cause Massachusetts<br><i>Voting and Democracy: Current Issues in Massachusetts and the Nation</i> |
| <b>October 2</b>   | Charles Derber, Professor of Sociology, Boston College<br><i>A United Front: Universalizing Resistance</i>                                |
| <b>October 9</b>   | Semi-annual Members' Meeting  |
| <b>October 16</b>  | Boston Book Festival: One City, One Story<br><i>"The Faery Handbag" by Kelly Link</i>   |
| <b>October 23</b>  | To be determined<br><i>Please check the website</i>   |
| <b>October 30</b>  | Nathan Lents, The City University of New York<br><i>From Reciprocity to Empathy: The Evolutionary Value of Morality</i>                   |
| <b>Sunday Meetings are held at 10:30 AM at 33 Garden St in Cambridge</b> |   |

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