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**CONSOLATIONS OF ETHICAL RELIGION**

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Leader

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For many years an Adjunct Associate Professor at the Peace Studies Institute of Manhattan College he is a social psychologist; was Chairman of the Department of Ethics of the three Ethical Culture Schools and co-directed the Leaders Training Institute with Prof. Horace Friess and Dr. Howard Radest.

Dr. Spetter studied at the Social Studies Seminarium of the Amsterdam City University in his native country, the Netherlands and received his Doctoral Degree from the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York. Founder of the Riverdale Mental Health Clinic in 1960, he serves both on its Board and its Professional Advisory Council.

He is a Clinical Member of the American Association for Family Therapy; serves as a Family Therapist and is a member of the American Psychological Association.

He was a co-author of *Bio Ethics and Human Rights* (Eds. Bandman, Little Brown, NY) and of *A Lively Connection* (Ed. Neuhaus, Ethica Press NY).

During World War II Dr. Spetter served in a sector of the Dutch Resistance. Arrested in 1943, he was a prisoner of the Nazis at the Buchenwald and Auschwitz and later functioned as a witness for the U.S. Prosecution at the International War Criminal Trials in Nuremberg, Germany. (Gen. Telford Taylor) He was awarded the Resistance Cross by the Government of the Netherlands.

A Member of the Board of the International Humanist and Ethical Union since 1957 he delivered keynote addresses at the Congresses of the IHEU in Oslo, Amsterdam, and Hanover. He is an Alternate Delegate for the IHEU at the United Nations Non-Governmental Organizations.

Recent addresses were the Brown Lecture at Manhattan College

on: *The Holocaust and the Sanctity of Life* and at the Free University in Amsterdam on: *To Rescue the Human Spirit*.

Among Dr. Spetter's many publications are: *The Courage to Stand Alone* (NY 1960); *Man, the Reluctant Brother* (NY 1967); *Symbolism, Ritual and Man* (Rekenschap, Utrecht, Holland, 1968); *De Dag Ligt Nog Voor Ons* (Stockum, The Hague, Holland 1969); *Bruder Wider Willen* (Barth Verlag, Munich, Germany 1969); *To Deny The Night* (NY 1970); *Humanists Say "Yes" to Life*. Humetisk Forb. Norge, (Oslo, 1980); a chapter in *Building a World Community* (Ed. Kurtz Prometheus, Buffalo, NY 1990). *Sounds of the Heart* (Columbia Press, NY, 1992); *Coping With Our Darker Hours* (NYSEC, NY, 1994); *Daring to Live* (At the 50th Anniversary of the end of World War II) (NYSEC, NY 1995).

*They change, and we, who pass like foam,  
Like dust blown through the streets of Rome,  
Change ever; too; we have no home.*

*Only a beauty, only a power,  
Sad in the fruit, bright in the flower,  
Endlessly erring for its hour.*

*But gathering, as we stray, a sense  
Of Life, so lovely and intense,  
It lingers, when we wander hence.*

*That those who follow feel behind.  
Their backs, when all before is blind,  
Our joy, a rampart to their mind.*

*John Masefield<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> In: *An Anthology of Famous English and American Poetry*. Benet and Aiken, editors. Random, Modern Library, NY. 1945.

## CONSOLATIONS OF ETHICAL RELIGION

Dr. Matthew Ies Spetter

Sunday Meeting, November 26, 2000

### TO CONSOLE IS TO ACT

Last September Bill and Judith Moyers presented a report on “End-of-Life” issues in *Today's America*. It was a report about how millions of Americans try to balance medical intervention with their hope to help, those they love, to die with some comfort and dignity.

What are the consolations we can offer one another? Compassionate commitment is confronted with the fact that four-out-of-five of us will not die at home, as most of us want, but instead amidst strangers in a hospital. At the most crucial time of anyone's life such consoling care seems a lost cause.

How do we change the way we die in America? We die in America so that those in extreme need of emotional support and consolation, will know that they matter as persons, not just sick bodies?

The Moyers' did a most valuable job with their report and posed numerous ethical questions of how to offer solace and assistance.

Fortunately about 20 new organizations have arisen who together with the movement “Partnership for Caring” of Washington, DC, are actively involved with these issues, which the Hospice Movement undertook as well almost 30 years ago. The values and priorities of these organizations are of crucial importance for us in the Ethical Humanist Movement, involved as we are with safe guarding the worth of the person, especially at times of helplessness and defenselessness.

Frankly, I do not think that we have been involved enough. Trying

to build a life-philosophy we may often be too naturalistic, too pragmatic—too preoccupied seeing responses to the immediate cultural problems. Thereby too little addressing what is most human in us, namely the passionate understanding of our fellow man, the emotional closeness of soul with soul.

Of course to be as rational as one can, to use reason, is crucial to us. But when we want to address ethics, we need to touch upon other layers as well. The layers of motivation, of the heart.

I do not mean to point fingers. But in our eagerness to deal with the world's issues, we may touch our emotional grounds insufficiently.

In our hasty, accelerated culture there is little patience for those who have to deal with the emotional vacuum of deep grieving. We are inclined to want to help those affected get “*over it.*” After tragic accidents, airplane crashes, people today are urged to seek—what is called “*closure,*” as if that were women in the group said: “*I had been barely able to speak or become audible,*” after the loss of a young son.<sup>2</sup>

There are times for many of us when deciding to continue our lives, after a profound loss, feels almost as if one were betraying the love of the one who mattered so much. The mother struggled with such emotion. It takes time to be able to become aware that the highest tribute to the love we once shared, consists of picking up the treasured thread of life, which the other bestowed upon us. In Dr. Kuebler-Ross' work group that was the aim of those who “*worked through*” their pain. To so loyally serve in life is a returning to the roots of our love. Is this not the heart of hard won consolation?

I will conclude with a few lines from a poem by the British poet John Masefield. It is about the consolations he saw in the ever changing and returning of the impulse in our existence.

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2 Elisabeth Kuebler-Ross. *Working It Through*. Mc Millan. NY. 1995.

## *The Passing Strange*

*For all things change, the darkness changes,  
The wandering spirits change their ranges,  
The corn is gathered to the granges.*

*The corn is sown again, it grows;  
The stars burn out, the darkness goes.  
The rhythms change, they do not close.*

*emotional closeness of soul with a soul*”—the encouragement we can find in each other’s compassionate understanding.

Consolations for living have to be self-created and self-learned. It takes a life-time to do this. When we have dealt with the temptation of self-pity, we are in the process of changing ourselves and so, hopefully, we have become richer and more fully human.

Compassion and consolation are ethical activities. They are not presented to us as a rare gift. They are products of engagement into life. Whatever we have to pass through. Consolation is a process of dealing with grief, a central human task. There are guideposts to be discovered, awareness of promptings that come from the few people who care enough to stay close to us as we go through that process.

The Swiss psychiatrist, Dr. Elisabeth Kuebler-Ross wrote a much discussed book a few years ago. The title was *Working It Through*. In it she gave numerous examples of people who participated in her work group. Their question was: “*What comfort is possible, when hope is in doubt?*” The issue was to focus on the emotional transition from sorrowing, being wounded, to some perspective for living. In the process of building an emotional ground of consolation bonds of affection became possible between the participants. For many it was a first hesitating step towards some healing, even though as a possible. In fact those who have suffered a great loss, whose inner security may have vanished, need to deal with the intense trauma of a new unsettled world. Their lives need restructuring, which is an emotional not a scientific labor. It

certainly cannot be manipulated. To grasp the meaning of that inner labor—would that not be a worthy area for us to pursue in our religious humanist communities?

To be consoled with what we have to see ourselves through requires that we are recognized in our often besieged sense of humanity.

I was greatly touched by a recent newspaper story about a meeting of people who hope to get some compensation from the Swiss government for their suffering during World War II. They all had valid claims.

But when they were called upon by the judge to state their case, they did not speak and often weep—about money or financial loss. One after the other spoke about the horrors they had witnessed and suffered. Most of them were very old people. They wanted a last opportunity to tell the world to recognize their human dignity, their worth as men and women ripped out of ordinary lives by overwhelming cruelties. They ached for the consolation to be heard.

It reminded me so much of what Shakespeare tried to tell us in the figure of *Hamlet*. Hamlet had to speak of his affliction of the soul. He needed consolation to the world for the indignity he had suffered; he needed his fate to be revealed.

When his best friend Horatio wants to die with him Hamlet says:

*Oh, good Horatio, what a wounded name  
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,  
Absent thee from felicity a while,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,  
To tell my story...*

Pain and affliction do not exist in a void. They exist in the realities of this earth—in the hearts of people such as we.

Consolation therefore is not something soft, or mere sympathy. It

is about sharing the precarious journey we pass through. Such sharing takes exactly what Shakespeare prescribed: “...*absent thee from felicity a while, to tell my story...*”–which is the same story for each of us.

To console is to act. It comes from the Latin word “*consolitare*” which means, to go out to alleviate grief. It is not bemoaning suffering, but doing something about it by self-involvement. It is the opposite of indifference.

## COPING

How can that apply in practice? I learned about a nursing home in the Mid-west where patients died rather rapidly after admission. As a result there was an atmosphere of sad apathy, both in the patients and in the personnel. Something had gone out of the of the caring for the largely ill and helpless patients. As so many people died so often it was as if the light went out in that institution. More and more of the nurses and aids left

*For fear of losing you I hold you tight to my breast.  
What magic has snared the world's treasure into  
These slender arms of mine?*<sup>3</sup>

Any of us who has lost a child and one's partner knows that on that inner most level there is no consolation. Tagore persisted in his life and work by reaching for healing by the human realities of trust and love. He built a school, held outdoors. There was no curriculum only, what he called, “*clarity of mind*” as the purpose of education. From his own schooling days he remembered that his poetic insights had been stunted by regimentation. His consolation lay in having the children of his school find what he called “*a heightened sense of life,*” in relationship to each other and to nature. That is how he tried to reconnect his own life, whatever his sorrow. It needed no super-natural emphasis, no other-worldly promises. In the growing life of the children that came to his extra

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3 In: *The Crescent Moon*, as quoted in Peter T. Richardson, *Four Spiritualities*. Davis-Black, Palo Alto. CA 1997.

ordinary school he celebrated the lives of his wife and child and to allow consolation to begin takes immense courage. The return to a full life requires equal courage when you see a person have that courage you feel a sense of respect, of awe almost and it brings one hope.

I quote this so utterly human response because through this statement sounds an essential “yes” to life, in whatever we stage have to encounter it. It is what I called before “*the religion affirms this mutuality as I increasingly feel appreciative and grateful, for understanding my life, whatever my vulnerability.*”

Of course, the author of this letter remains anonymous, but its humane credo greatly humbled me, as I trust it will you.

Faith for living, derived from the experience in a person’s existence is not a metaphor, but the emotional ground upon which we stand. To have such faith, as speaks from that letter, requires courage. It is the response which says “*and yet*” even though neither doubt nor vulnerability can be eliminated. Courage, obligation, genuine affection for life, are the building stones.

## THE RETURNING

I am reminded of the great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. In the same year in which he received the Nobel Prize, both his wife and little daughter died. He wrote some truly heart breaking poetry in that period.

In one poem he relates this dialogue between the mother and the baby:

*Where did I come from, where did you  
Pick me up, the baby asked its mother.  
She answered half crying, half laughing, and  
Clasping the baby to her breast:*

*You were always hidden in my heart,  
As its desire.*

*As I gaze at your face, mystery overwhelms me;*

the employment. They too became depressed. It was at that moment that someone in the management stepped-in. The place was painted, new furniture was placed in the rooms—new programs to engage the patients were developed. Personnel were instructed on how to affirm the dignity of the patients, how to change their own attitudes toward the sick. Slowly, a radical change in the culture of that nursing home was achieved. Patients started to live longer; workers extended their contracts. The human need to function as connected to each other was stressed forcefully. As the patients became aware of the change, their sense of self-worth increased. There was more kindness, more patience, more willingness to really hear the patients out not as pitifully weakened, aged people, but as men and women with their own valuable identity. The very institution passed through a process of restoration. “*The light that had gone out in that nursing home, came back on,*” said the person who told me, of this.

The reality of impaired health, aging and loneliness, could not be done away with. But the way they were dealt with could. The humane, the community of a human spirit had been rescued. It is exactly this kind of process we hope to realize in Humanist religion.

All of us accumulate grief in a life time. Most of it can not be resolved easily. Psychiatrists speak about “*postponed mourning.*” In order to continue with one’s life the pain is postponed, the dynamics of consolation held back.

I remember a student of mine, an outstanding student. Suddenly in November she failed to hand in her papers. When I asked her about such a sudden change she burst out in tears:

November was the month her mother had committed suicide, four years earlier. Repressed grief now almost paralyzed her. She had outlined a future career, planned her marriage. Now, everything was on hold. The complexity of the loss was almost too much to bear. She felt like a helpless, motherless child. Her grief unresolved. Many of us have such accumulated areas that when untouched can overwhelm us.

And yet, think of a Mozart or Bach, lives full of grief and loss. They were hurt just as much when sorrows entered their lives. But somehow they distilled from it the oratorios, the requiem; consolations that even today can fill us with courage and hope. What they left us was the sadness of living transfigured in the face of the inevitable.

Whatever our ultimate beliefs we can find consolations by wanting to respond to life. By choosing what we want to use our lives for. By shaping ourselves, by extending our ability to love, we limit the power of death over us. That is not symbolism. It is reality.

This is important because if we want to become more fully human ourselves, we need more spontaneous empathy and closeness with those in need. We hope to reach out to.

One cannot pursue a primarily intellectual approach only. We cannot have an impact for the better by discussing the life of others from a sanitary distance.

Rather we need to address how we cope with our lives; by clear awareness of our inner life. That is what the people who ran that nursing home had to do. A tough self-discipline.

Let me make this concrete.

Shortly after my topic on consolation was announced I received a letter from someone who wrote to say she felt that matters such as these should be more often spoken of in the Ethical Culture Society.

She gave me permission to quote her. She wrote:

*I have received abundant consolations in my life. Coming from a Protestant background I have felt more attuned to Adler's 'deed before creed.' It has helped me maintain strong and loving relationships with my adult children.*

*A deep consolation, when I was able after my divorce to live without rancorous recriminations and be ever closer to my children. Their maturity and responsible lives gave me joy and gratitude.*

*In my work in the 'helping professions' so called—I have found consolations in responding to grief, anxiety and social stresses, with all that I could bring to it as a professional person. Learning to reach out, to listen with care.*

*When serious illness overcame me I found consolation when support-staff, nurses and even secretaries and technicians gave of themselves in trying to make me feel as-well-as possible. To be greeted as a friend when seeking treatments was deeply consoling and thereby encouraging. To me, Ethical*

It will not dry the tears, if they are genuine tears. But it will help maintain the hope of being part and partner in the ongoing life for those who still stay behind and thus tie us together, the living and the dead.

It is in this aspect of fulfillment that may reside the roots of consolation. A sacred continuity, of gratitude for the opportunities to work for—a just world; for sheltering the children of tomorrow. A world that has banished war, persecution, hunger and cruelty. It's these life-directed challenges that hallow our existence so that when our day is done, we have at least loyally given of ourselves, we have tried.

Of course we mourn when a person we love is taken from us. There is so much for which there are no words. It is a solitary labor to deal with our grief.

But our hope does not lie in heavenly expectations, but in restoring and reconnecting with others, so that slowly we may heal ourselves and taste the sweetness of life again to whatever extent possible beyond the veil of our sense of loss and pain.

In the end a caring life is a religious life in Humanist terms because it helps us to deal with the hours of loneliness and despair. To help one another grow by a truly caring relationship is to help us care for ourselves as well. It is this which enlarges our consciousness for living with some trust, some humility and a rebuilding of the passion that can repair what is wounded and so to sustain as much courage as we can muster when we have to learn to stand by our self.

We often quote from Felix Adler. But do not forget that anything he distilled in the words we may quote, had first to be suffered through in his own life. He had to traverse all the trying and often disturbing depths, anxieties and doubts himself before he could come to the formulations we now often find so meaningful. Not by looking at how others ought to live, but by how he himself was dealing with the stages of his own development. A great deal of that was brought at immense inner travail, pain, uncertainty and disappointments. Nothing of lasting value is gained without the impact of our ambivalences, our groping for strength and self-understanding. This is why I chose to speak with you about consolation.

Solace, no emotional balance is achieved by neglect of the closeness of our psyche, our soul to those whose life we touch.

You may have seen an article in the *New York Times* a few days ago by a physician Richard M. Cohen, who spoke of his labor in coping with colon cancer. He wrote:

*Too often the cry that life is not fair goes up in a moment of crisis...as if life and death are negotiable and some force in the universe will respond to reason...coping is difficult, even painful at times...for me coping has become almost a way of life...my basis*

*for being. I keep close watch on myself. I only chose not to be a victim...who I am is in my head...that is my identity. I will be fine.*

In short: he would bank on his own consolations, rather than wait for miraculous interventions. His own consciousness would have to do.

## CONSOLATIONS HERE AND NOW

It is here that there is a fundamental difference between a Humanist concept of consolation and that of traditional religion. The Christian, Hebrew, and Islamic faiths pose a concept which we find in classical Greece as well. This theology holds that the human psyche, the soul, is separate from our physical reality, our bodies.

Therefore, when we die the body disintegrates, becomes dust, but the soul returns to the heavenly eternal realm. In that realm there will be either a welcoming reception, or the terrible punishments of hell and damnation. The human spirit dissipates—the celestial spirit of the gods is what persists in the universe.

Consolation therefore lies in the hope that beyond this world a loving shepherd will “*restore my soul*” and as the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm says it so beautifully “*...to make me to lie down in green pastures...*”—further that “*...though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil...*” Thus: the soul will be safe forever.

The Humanist concept of consolation is not based on such hopes. In Ethical religion we leave the issue of an existence after death or not to the individual. We do not speculate about

Our lives are finite. We have but little time. But when we make our obligations real, our readiness for what binds us in our humaneness, our availability to each other—it is then that we build the shared consent which gives our finite destiny meaning.

For in the discovery of our moral struggles, our moral needs, we

create the conditions for some of life's fulfillments. That is true for every family; for every commitment to better relationships that nurture "*the depths of the heart.*"<sup>4</sup>

In short: it is the impact of how we live our lives in the daily encounters that may set the high value of our existence, the quality of how we share our lives with one another. It is this influence which may offer the seed of consolation. It is the dynamic of our actions that may reach beyond our few years to be a sustaining power after we have died. Handed on to those who knew us, who knew our loves, our falling and getting up again—maybe the power of what we worked for and sometimes even achieved to a degree.

It is, this human heritage in which lies the consolation that may sustain the hearts of those who truly miss us. What lives in us, as the heritage that was passed on to us, which may reach beyond our death to console those who sorrow.

It is inevitably related to what is required of us in our families, our work and our communities.

Related, to the knowledge of what our obligation is towards those we share our lives with, both on the intimate scale and on the larger social scale.

You, no doubt remember a song we often sang here which said:

*No one is an island,*

*No one stands alone*

*Each one's joy is joy to me*

*Each one's grief is my own*

## IMPACT OF OUR LIFE

It is only by acting upon that central idea of obligation towards one another that we overcome isolation. It is in the actuality of

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<sup>4</sup> I follow here some of the concepts forwarded by Simone Weill, in her book, *The Need for Roots*. Putnam, NY. 1952.

relationship, the interrelated actuality between men and women—both in our sexuality and in our shared labor—in all of this we recognize and give account of ourselves for better or for worse. In every genuine, loving embrace we are present to each other. It is this which is the sacrament of our union.<sup>5</sup>

Once we grasp what we are obligated to, we rise beyond the mere facts of our existence and can touch upon the inner dominion of the human soul. That is where Humanist religion has its reality. It is because we have no knowledge, no data, beyond the grave to go on.

To those of Humanist inclination the essential question is what consolations we can help build in the here and now? We concentrate on making life warm and caring for one another in life's immediacy. Most of us would agree with the British philosopher, Bertrand Russell, who on his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday was asked what message he had for the young. His answer was "*Spend your life on something that will outlast it. A good life, is a life inspired by love and guided by understanding.*"

Not just the accumulation of knowledge but the intimacy of understanding which love makes possible. Beyond what our intellect can measure and our eyes can see, lies yet another dimension. It is the dimension of the inner eye as it were, of insight of ethical aspiration about what is required of us as we navigate through the years allotted to us.

The western way to seek solace is obviously not the only way.

The Buddhist concept of consolation does not speculate about life beyond the grave, or the idea of physical resurrection. It distinguishes between the unique person who is born and will die, and also a second dimension, which is not temporary, nor mortal. That second dimension is the ongoing, embracing all of creation, therefore related, compassionate to all that exists. Therefore, while the sadness of loss is most real, there remains a bond between

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5 Lillian Rose, *Love's Work*. Schocken. NY. 1996.

those who died and those who stay behind. Each person who works at the quality of that bond; each person who makes love and decency real, serves not in his own life only. He helps to maintain also the sustaining values of the world; helps to nurture the good life for all generation and so has an immortal impact.<sup>6</sup>

The private, unique existence need be comes to an end. But each one can serve the continuity, the cohesion of what is best and so can help make life on earth better, from generation to generation—"better," that is, for all that exists in creation. That obligation concerns all. It is not enough to say: "*he died*," much truer "*he lived*." Thus is established the worth of each life, a social immortality of a community of souls, in which our work, our thoughts, our loves matter.

This, obviously, is close to what matters in Humanist religion. We see ourselves as the co-creators of our lives, of whatever hope is justified by what work we commit ourselves to—our ethical norms.

This sense of the ongoing, the unbroken bond because of what we try to perform here on earth was beautifully expressed in a poem by the British poet George Eliot.

*Oh May I Join the Choir Invisible*  
*Oh may I join the choir invisible*  
*Of those immortal dead who live again*  
*In minds made better by their presence: live*  
*In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn*  
*For miserable aims that end with self,*  
*In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars*  
*And with their mild persistence urge man's*  
*Search to vaster issues.*

*So to live is heaven:*  
*To make undying music in the world,*  
*Breathing a beauteous order that controls*

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6 Ashley Montagu, *Immortality*, (Lectures at the Butterick Foundation, Brooklyn, NY. Grove Press, Princeton. 1954).

*With growing sway the growing life of man.  
So we inherit that sweet purity,  
For which we struggled failed and agonized  
Laboriously tracing what must be,  
And what may yet be better  
And shaped it forth  
Divinely human, raising worship so  
To higher reverence more mixed with love*

*This is life to come...  
For us who strive to follow. May I reach  
That purest heaven, be to other souls  
The cup of strength in some great agony  
Enkindle generous ardour, feed pure love,  
Beget the smiles that have no cruelty—  
Be the sweet presence of a good diffused,  
And in diffusion ever more intense.  
So shall I join the choir invisible  
Whose music is the gladness of the world.<sup>7</sup>*

To have been part of that “gladness,” to have been part of “the music” in our lives, what a terrific concept of consolation.

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<sup>7</sup> As quoted in: Montagu. Op. cit. pp. 67-68.