

HUMAN PARTNERSHIP—OUR SOLID GROUND

Dr. Matthew Ies Spetter
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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).

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Symbolism and Reality

This week behind us has been one of high emotion for us. Who could escape the heartbreak of the commemoration of what happened on the beaches of Normandy, sixty years ago; the tens of thousands of very young men killed when throwing their bodies against the steel and barbed wire of the German fortifications.

Who would not identify with the old soldiers and people from the resistance, who often broke down as they walked among the forest of crosses, of all those, so young, buried there. In the midst of all that awareness of suffering the news came of the death of President Reagan. Whatever one's political judgment of his presidency, who would not feel sincere empathy with his descend into the dark years of Alzheimer's?

What followed at the State funeral became a mixture of personal and national symbolism, an emotional saturation, as it were, of the grieving widow at her husband's casket and the pomp of military precision; the service in the National Cathedral heavy with political utterances and meanings.

The marvelous choral offerings, prayers and music, followed by the truly Hollywood burial ceremonies as the sun set over the Pacific... Yet it was the week as well when we learned of torture by US military personnel in the Baghdad jail, the denial of the Geneva Convention and, most astonishing, reports about debates on different levels of torture in the higher-up echelons of our government and/or our military.

Need we ask why so many around the world have become fearful of American power, even though the actual perpetrators of grotesque brutality are now being prosecuted?

Is violence so deeply institutionalized in our culture that the rock bottom principles of human worth have lost their meaning: so that the endless repetitions of murderousness in our media have hollowed out the essence of what we have held highest as America's place on earth? The issue is not just some misguided individuals; but the loss of identification with others, the denial of a shared culture of humanity, the dread of apprehension where we are heading. We can not simply allow that which binds us in the better symbolism of our land, to become submerged in the swamp of negation which has infected so many other nations at war.

It was that sense of uncertainty about our use of military power which brought millions of people out for anti-war demonstrations. They used to trust us as the benevolent defender of liberty. Now they had to come to terms with the fear that the curse of war would soon cast its threat over their lives as well. Was America becoming just another Empire, bestriding the world for a while before turning to dust like all the others before—leaving humanity's hopes and aspirations once more betrayed? Where was the wisdom of one of our earliest presidents, John Adams, who wrote that if ever America would be so seduced she “would no longer be the ruler of her own spirit”^{vi} If that spirit would be lost, what then of the fate of America and of the world? Behind it all stands the question whether we shall be the defenders of the life-promoting forces in history, the life-connecting forces. The America, committed to human aspiration, not to military messianism.

Terrorism is the method of an ideology. Its followers practice death-seeking as a pathway to their Utopia. It is not new in human history, our resistance needs to be based on the shared perspectives of the essential yearnings of the human heart. That is: America as the land of humane promise not just power. An America not caught in the whirlwind of perpetual mobilization for war but addressing itself to the great social issues of economic

justice and greater equity which are still what stirs the global turmoil because hundreds of millions have nothing to hope for.

We are pouring out our nation's wealth and make daily sacrifice of so many of our precious young soldiers. Yet the only truly potent means of combating the ideology that breeds terrorism is making the great American ideals operative on a world wide scale.

There are hundreds of millions who have never had employment. Their ethnic fury is fed by despondency and captured by religious fanatics. Tribal atrocities whether in Serbia or the Sudan have their roots in centuries of deprivation and exploiting potentates.

What liberating dynamic could America set into motion if our policies would address tumbling standards-of-living; absence of economic opportunity rather than be identified with a supposedly "free market" capitalism, which alienates us ever further from the overwhelming majority of the world.

But this morning I do not speak about political matters, but rather about the emotional aspects of living in a time of war.

Because all of us feel its impact, the President in a recent moment of bravura called out: "Bring them on". But war is the rotten business of slaughter when human lives are ever more freely fed into the abyss. The collective sense of danger unites the national community, yet at the same time it isolates the individual. Our vulnerability is exposed. The daily list of the young dead fills us with anguish, so do the assassinations; the helplessness when Daniel Pearl and Nicholas Berg were beheaded. So, there is a certain sadness even though we continue to live our normal lives as if there were no paradox or denial. When some of us go on vacation and some have to go to war, while the nation goes into a deficit of trillions. An outstanding author of a few decades ago, Walter Lippman, pointed to such times as one in which underneath society a deep demoralization may take place, a mood "when the individual feels isolated...trusts nothing, not even himself, a disintegration, that comes when in such sudden emergency...men find themselves unsupported by clear convictions." (From an

article by James Reston, NYT 3.5.68) My concern is to accentuate the spiritual outreach of human partnership as a response which may help us to hold on to such “clear convictions” as ethical humanism, as an alternative to such inner despondency.

The Linkage of Life

The individual is faced with complex dilemmas. On the one hand he wants to be a responsible good citizen who understands his duties in times of war. When sacrifices are called for he wants to carry his ethical share.

Yet what to choose when the government’s “convictions” are not shared? For example, the President recently compared the war in Iraq with the war against nazism in World War II and his own role as that of a “mission.” But what does it mean when what is considered a personal mission becomes a purpose of state justifying a pre-emptive war? Especially since we have learned from Richard Clarke (the then Head of Counter Intelligence) that war against Iraq was actively considered from the beginning of the present administration. What “clear convictions” (as Lippman put it) can the individual then fall back on? Not to mention the simple desire not to go to war and to take care of ones family as primary ethical duty.

Humanism is not based on naïve optimism. We know that any faith in life has to be struggled for, is often lost and then must be struggles for again and again. But it is the human partnership, the linkage of life-with-life, that is crucial, if we want to prevent despair and isolation. Here is an example. In his recent book, *The Modern Mind*, (HarperCollins, NY, 2003) the British historian Peter Watson tells about the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre’s change of philosophy when during the German occupation, he discovered the powerful impact of his being part of the resistance which lifted his sense of isolation, “I suddenly understood that I was social being” he wrote. “And I became aware of the weight of the world and my ties with all the others and the their ties with me”. Having before been the author of a rather pessimistic philosophy of existentialism, largely adopted from his German

teacher—Heidegger—he wrote a new book which he entitled “Existentialism is a Humanism”. In it he posed a different theme: “Man, he wrote, “has a distant purpose to realize himself, to make choices in order to *be*...in doing so he liberates himself from mere rationality.”ⁱⁱ In short that what matters is to build the human partnerships; to make choices that free in us the ability for commitment to human solidarity.

It is in many ways, I think, an evolution the founder of our movement went through as well. Felix Adler began, deeply influenced by the rationalistic concepts of one of his major teachers; Immanuel Kant. But as his thinking matured he could find no pathway in such abstractions as “The Independence of Ethics”. Ethical influence in people’s lives requires connection, relationship, communality. The word “culture” in ethical culture pointed to process, development of moral purpose in whatever we do, family work, community. Knowing that next to building such connections there will also be shortcomings and conflicted experiences as well. Even such “failures” can teach us, help us, to lift our hopes up again. Human potential for reconstruction, for growth, for finding a spiritual mooring for our efforts, that potential, is as real as our disappointments and setbacks holding on to such faith, reasonable yet hopeful, was what a religion of ethical centrality made possible for those who were seeking such religious ground, for others it would be a life philosophy. He put it this way: “A true vision is that which outruns reality, to a pattern of reality of what may yet be or ought to be (in human relationships and society) and therefore grips that reality (as we find it) and transforms it.”ⁱⁱⁱ Thus the abstract ideal of his earlier years, became active amoral realism committed to build human partnership, whatever our imperfections. Translated for our time that means to hold on to the vision of a saner world than the world of war, we are in again today. To resist helplessness and accommodation to moral emptiness which leads to inner destructiveness. We see examples of moral disintegration in the sick sadism by American soldiers upon prisoners in Iraq. Or the killing of a pregnant Israeli mother together with her four children. Our world cries out for rescue from moral chaos, the dehumanization that is the result of relativism, as if there are no standards at all, no basic human law.

As Franz Kafka projected, in all his writings, it is not hard to nullify human beings as of no value. After all we have lived through, what else is there if there are no binding social values, for human partnership? It is not true that “everything is relative.”

Just as in our private lives there is such a thing as refusing to accept being “used” by others; refusing to allow humiliation of an other; refusing to listen to the coward who spreads gossip; refusing to be silent when the social order allows a permanent underclass to live in poverty and tens of millions without health care. ... The human being has but very little changed biologically, but from earliest time there has also been the quest for life saving ways to safeguard a common ground of kindness, justice, generosity, mutuality.^{iv} None of that is relative and it takes courage to live by it. Courage is what we make of ourself, just as ethics is how we treat one another. Nothing complex or mystical. I forget who said: “If you want to claim a clear mind, you cannot at the same time have a narrow vision”. If the ground of our lives is participation and partnership—not dominance—we are part of that which we can hallow, hold high, sacred if you will, what Spinoza, the early humanist, called “the substance” of existence and our part within it.

I am thinking of something utterly real of that vision in the work of the people who work in the hospice clinics. They have found their life’s truth in assisting those who face terminal illness. Their hospices do not deny approaching death, but rather acceptance of the finitude of life. The patient rooms have lighter colors, the nurses have time and patience to listen, the entire atmosphere is not saturated with impending death, but as much as possible with sharing the continuity of the value of the life of the patient, the unshakable worth. One day when I visited one of our members at the Bronx Hospice, I found one of the volunteers doing the woman’s hair. Both the patient and her volunteer spoke softly; there was a shared smile; a gesture of affection. There was the affirmation of the worth and dignity of the person. Two days later I was called to say that the patient had died, peacefully in her sleep. Hospice doctors had seen to it that her last days were not ones of utter suffering and loneliness. ethical religious affirmation,

indeed!... The reason I say this is because when we involve ourselves with a giving heart we are not only doing what is good, but building the wider human community, which is a stepping stone for more than just ourselves. It is the best of our individuation and partnership. It is a way of making hope real, not merely wishing for it. That applies to the most intimate of relationships between men and women. Whether sexual or not—and it applies to what we are as fellow citizens. It is the kind of development that could give our young perspective beyond the false values that deaden their spirit. It helps us to discern that beyond anxiety or despair we may yet discover the saving grace of the human capacity for love, friendship, work and—at least—some measure of enjoyment and maybe some happiness. That is an emotional freedom we have. Our pathway in life is arduous and yet claiming that freedom we may still enjoy the hours that help us cut through whatever discouragements. Our feet can then move again on a pathway, step by step, and go find our ability to connect and reconnect beyond our doubts or apprehensions.

Pathways to Renewal

And to know that even the most hopeful forward look is shot through with limitations. That is where a community of seekers like ours can make a difference. It engages us in possibility to deepen better insights, and emotions, so that we can – in gratitude –make the best of the place and circumstances in which we find ourselves. That way we will be able to bank on our truer expectations and avoid the self-defeating, self-disturbing, self-imposed “Musts” for perfection.

We live, we suffer, we gain, we love, we loose. But we can aim for renewal if we do not attempt to avoid the truth that we are transitional beings yet capable of sharing and nurturing the lives entrusted to us. Those who wait for a revelation of over-all life purposes will wait in vain. We create life-giving purposes by enriching our human capacities *now*, in our giving *now*, our caring *now*. The hopeful character of a humanist way of life turns out to be good for our physical as well as our emotional life. For it is

breaking out of mere self-concern, defensiveness, and so activates a spirit of defiance and positive commitment.

I am thinking of a young couple – now out West – I knew quite a few years ago. The woman became deeply depressed after her first baby was born with severe handicaps. She spoke about how deficient she felt, how she felt that her husband and her in-laws would think of her as useless, “no good”. She tried to commit suicide. After the event she agreed to therapy and dealing with her compulsion to downgrade herself. Within six months, her psychiatrist noted great progress. The near-death experience led to renewal of her sounder self. She learned to see her handicapped child as the beloved asset it had become in their little family. A year or two later, after an other perfectly sound child had been born, I was asked to officiate at the naming ceremony. Both children were part of the ceremony—it was a celebration of what the four of them were together, their essential partnership. What had turned this wife’s life so drastically around, was that she had regained her orientation upon her here-and-now capacity, confirming indeed that “life is motion and not a safe harbor.” An enhanced sense of life had emerged from what had seemed to be a calamity, not by clever metaphors, but by grasping indeed that it is gratitude for the fact that we are and thereby overcoming the tendency—so many of us have—of concentrating only on things *as* they are. Our lives are not literature or in need of charming stories. Our lives are opportunity and the tough cutting edge of opportunity, for reaching beyond our mere grasp.

In one of Eugene O’Neill’s plays there is a reflection, which has fascinated me. It reads: “...And this is Father’s bedtime story for today: Man is born broken and he lives by mending. The tragic fact is that man is *almost* good enough to win in his inspired moments. Yes, he can rock fate, but he cannot down it, and in that lies the melancholy of our struggles.” (While I am certain of the correctness of this quote, I have not been able to retrace its exact location.)

“Man is born broken and he lives by mending.” *We try to restore but our consent to engage upon the struggle this entails cannot protect us from crucial confrontations with fate.* To live is to be

mending, day by day, but not with the illusion that we can ever overcome the *tasks and trials* of existence.

To live, is also to nourish in ourselves those few “inspired moments”, as O’Neill calls them, those moments when we can embrace life; when we can give ourselves without fearfully holding back. And while our best moments are not always our happiest moments, such living with purpose is what distinguishes human existence from mere vegetation.

To attain the capacity for being a “mending” man or woman we need relentless refocusing and resolve. It is not some quality we can obtain and then confidently draw upon for the rest of our lives, like a savings account. It demands hunger for the shared life, for a partnership beyond the merely convenient, the merely accommodating. Too much in life happens to us suddenly; economic setbacks and other events forced upon us by the merciless character of our business culture—and private setbacks as well: sudden health problems, children or grandchildren suddenly in need of a new or special support. The price of consciousness, as it is so often for love as well, is the possibility of pain. The crucial quality to cultivate is not some “everything will turn out all right”-consolation, but rather overcoming illusion and separation from ourselves. We are our own home, our own destiny.

This brings to mind what is emanating from Washington these days. There is the real world of the Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, warning last week that the current rate of deficit is threatening the very foundations of a free society. And then there is the world illusion with Mr. Bush saying that the worst is behind us. There is the real world of trying to build “Pax Arabia” and there is a world of illusion, Because the regimes in power do not rule by the consent of the people. They are propped up by military cliques who wallow in the enormous armaments supplies we have provided or sold to them so that they can maintain their monopolies. We will not win the Middle East people over until we become the frank supporters of their aspiration to be saved from oppressive rulers and from living in poverty and deprivation.

We must at last become seen as on the side of the people, not the corrupt usurpers who live in often disgusting luxury. When we make that radical change, America will mean hope again for the millions who see none now for their children. When we act in truth, we shall recover what gave us the standing of being promoters of peace and progression and generosity toward the many who now hate us because they perceive only a blustering arrogance.

Our Mutualities

There is a price for consciousness, for integrity, for facing up to reality. False optimism is poison for a nation. It creates the delusion that History and God are working things out on our behalf. It is dangerous because it leads to greater mistrust in our institutions and, in the long run, distrust between human beings.

It is so in m marriages which are in trouble. It is so for individuals and it is for communities. Somehow to keep our direction and sanity in life we have to resist the malignancy of making believe.

That is what O’Neil meant when he said “man is born broken and he lives by mending.” To be a mending person, to be a directed person, means that we are not impotent from acting upon the realities of existence. Life is not inscrutable. The human part of it can be brought down to human dimensions so that we can think and plan and act. Human existence is not just some horrible void. Our lives are limited. We know that we are conditioned by our awareness of death and that our time and our abilities are but brief and few. Confidence for living, of loving and of tenderness and caring—these are not abstract ideas. Our means of resistance against hopelessness, against estrangement. Our knowledge of our finiteness and our knowledge of some hold over our days, are not opposites, they are our *coordinates* as Herman Melville said somewhere. They belong together.

What is coordinated functions in mutuality. The two blades of a scissors stand opposite but serve their purpose when coming

together in coordination. It is this for which we also purpose in ethical religion. To restore, to rebuild, to reconnect life with life. This is a solid ground of sane expectations of existence, the solid ground of a faith worth nourishing and extending. An often halting but real path to healing.

“ ... The Heart in Wonder ... ”

How poignantly does this notion exemplify what Eugene O’Neill meant: “Man is born broken and he lives by mending. We become human only when we consent to be part of each other’s destiny, not in some abstract manner, but by being stimulators of the restorative ability for one another, that healing capacity, person to person, face to face. We are intertwined willingly or not, we hear each other’s voice whether or not we choose to respond, because it is the very voice we listen to in our own hearts.

This intimacy of experience was beautifully expressed by the poet Robert Nathan who wrote:

The heart in wonder, like a lonely wren
Will sing a while, and then be still as long.
He waits an answer ‘ere he sings again,
Who sings for love, and not alone for song.
The bird’s shy pipe will falter in the end,
The heart’s voice sicken if it not be heard,
They seek the absent, the beloved friend,
Song is for lovers, whether heart of bird.
So, if you hear me—*tell* me that you hear,
Lest I grow weary and forget to sing:
As in this sweet green season of the year
The bird-that-hears-no—answer, lifts his wing
And far away, dejected and remote,
Tries other woodlands with his lonely note ...^v

“The heart’s voice sickens if it not be heard”, seeking “the absent, the beloved friend.” Do not all of us know that experience? Have not all of us—sooner or later—come upon moments when people we thought of as near, in fact let our voice trail away. would not or

could not answer that “heart in wonder” about which the poet writes—and so made it necessary for us—in order to survive, in order to stay whole, to “try other woodlands”?

I am reminded of the ancient saying of one of the Zen masters, that only by working to heal ourselves can we hope to do our share in healing the world.

The solid ground of human partnership has to be gained and regained every hour of our life. Solidarity is—alas—not a given.

Most of us have had to deal with traumatic events, when hope was bleak. Often it may feel that what we had to face was insurmountable especially in times of loss of love. At such times a faith for living, trust sufficient to hold on to our self-identification requires a quest for a pathway to reconstruction. A recovery of our partnership in existence, our worth as the person we are, however deep our doubts. It is at such period of suffering that an earlier learned adherence to freedom of choice can help us to overcome separation, isolation, so that we may learn, as it were, to mediate within ourselves between emotional activation or surrender to despair. That way, out of our own resources, we may become able to change sufficiently the outlook upon our lives and upon those to whom we are closest, so that a shared reorientation can take place without compulsion. Is that not what a questing philosophy of life must be able to help us with so that our affinities become more important to us than drifting into separation? This is especially crucial after the loss of a partner in marriage. The sudden alones has to be faced as the utter personal experience. Supernatural abstractions do not help. What does give us some direction is restoring the sense of capacity to engage life still as possibility, a task entirely ours. The biblical dictum is: “Thou shall be holy, for I, thy God, am holy.” As Humanists, however, we cannot seek a model for living in the veneration of deity. Rather do we aim to build it with those concerns which are authentically burning concerns with ourselves. Holiness, the awareness of the sacred in ourselves, lies in what we make real by becoming part and partner in whatever this phase of life requires from us. Not by sentimentalities, but by engaging our ability to love, not

withstanding all the incompleteness in ourself and those we share our days with. That is where holiness is found. In the end what matters is whether we are merely bystanders or participants in human partnership with our knowledge and our caring. Remember Robert Nathan's urgent request: "If you hear me, *tell* me that you hear." Life is partnership, sometimes rather muddled partnership, sometimes confused or even hurtful partnership. And yet if we see ourselves and those with whom we share life not just as means, if we can see them as ends within themselves, we will be able better to love selflessly, we will be able to start understanding what it means to forgive, we will begin to be able to reach for the other's happiness with the words "and yet" upon our lips. In my own life, at least I have found that any affirmation of hope has always to be gained *in spite* of circumstances, both personally and in the world at large. There is nothing utopian in the kind of faith derived from the spiritual discoveries in our own silences and in our person to person relationships; the give and take of daily living.

Consolation and Liberation

Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, after a long life as a researcher of the human psyche said shortly before his death that he had found but one steady strain in the human psychology. He wrote: Consolation is what at bottom all of us are requesting—consolation, even the most virtuous or pious. . . . Consolation is at the core of our feverish searches."^{vi} Such consolation must come from our own managing of the strain of living. It has to be gained in an alertness to the healing aspects of relations; it cannot be gained in isolation. There is something to be quickened and enhanced between people, Santayana wrote that "a good poem must *be*, not mean." So also a good relationship "must be"—without emotional possessiveness. Only then can it grow into a liberating partnership, making the persons involved stronger and capable of facing the reality that we start life alone and that we will end life alone.

What men and women can discover in the intimacy of their minds and their bodies is enough trust to engage upon the "travel" between stations of existence. Supportive, so that the arrival need

not be feared—and yet willing to risk the unprobed by tenderness and caring rather than by impossible demands upon each other. It is only this design of mutual strengthening and liberating which can lead to a sustained commitment, formed by an inner concern rather than by convenience or conformity to outside pressures.

The solid ground of human partnership lies in the recognition of such design which is natural, not contrived. “If you hear me, let me *know* you hear.” As energy and matter are eternally regenerative, so is human life, as long as it is granted to us. None is separated, none is outside of the process. The plants around us give off gasses which make our breathing possible; the bee will carry unknowingly the pollen from plant to plant,—purposing all the while only to carry nectar for its own beehive. It is in so doing, that the humblest of creatures help to round the circle of blossoming and fruition.

In such quiet certainty within us as well which can liberate us from isolation and which in the end can assist us in blessing life, whatever its burdens, whatever its uncertainties and risks. It is this which eternally stirs in us and which in the end prolongs our reach for meaning so that we can find some real consolation and some hope.

- (i) David McCullough, John Adams, Simon&Schuster, New York, 2002
- (ii) Watson, op, cit.
- (iii) Horace L. Friess. Our Part in this World. Crowe Press, N.Y., 1946
- (iv) Helmut Schoeck.ed., Relativism and the Study of Man, Nostrand, Inc., Princeton, 1961
- (v) Robert Nathan Selected Poems Knopf, N.Y., 1941 (page 10)
- (vi) Max Schur, MD in *Freud: Living and Dying*. International University Press, New York, 1972.