

The Value of Values

Sunday morning address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, October 1, 2006
By **Tony Hileman**, Senior Leader

Let me open with a couple of preamble of two quotes addressing the value of values. The first is by physicist David Bohm and is from his book *On Dialog*.

“A society is a link of relationships among people and institutions, so that we can live together. But it only works if we have a culture—which implies that we share meaning; i.e., significance, purpose and value. Otherwise it falls apart.”

The second is by one of my favorite Humanist figures, the Unitarian minister, John Dietrich. “All the virtues and all the values; all there is of goodness and justice, kindness and courtesy is of our own creation and we must sustain them, or otherwise they will go out of existence.”

Goodness, kindness, justice, courtesy, society, our ability to live together all fall apart and go out of existence without values. That certainly establishes that values have value, but it doesn't quite get at what that value is.

That's our mission this morning.

Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selflessness, Service, Honor, Integrity, Courage. Faith, Hope, and Charity. Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude, Wisdom. Truth, Justice, and the American way.

There's no shortage of litanies of virtues and values. Why are there so many? Why does nearly every entity of almost any sort feel compelled to examine and compile such an inventory? Why do individuals keep such lists? Why are values so important to us?

“The Ethical Society is a fellowship of people who seek clarification on the values of life...” That's from the American Ethical Union's Web site. The AEU is the federation of all Ethical Societies and, with input and assistance from the governance of those societies and the National Leaders Council, presents and represents Ethical Culture in a variety of ways.

We are people who seek clarification on values. We seek clarity of life's values because we value them, and that is not circular.

Values are not facts, as hard as we try to make them so. Facts are properties of a given thing and tell us how that thing is or how it happens. Statements of value, on the other hand, are concepts that express how we believe things ought to be. Facts are from the past, and they exist in experience and observation. Values belong to the future, in how things should be. Not how things are, were, or are necessarily going to be but how they ought to become.

A value is not a property of a thing, but rather a concept of what that thing ought to be, which is often different than it is. Facts lie in the past, values in the future, in our ideals. We are this morning gathered at the corner of 64th and Central Park West. But we exist at the intersection of past and future, at the junction of fact and value.

Most people acquire their primary set of values in infancy or childhood from a variety of unquestioned authority sources—parents and elders; teachers and religious leaders,

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

which come potently packaged for some; social mores and cultural norms codified in the laws of the land; sacred scripture and academic texts—some of these values are directly imprinted on us by those authorities, others seep in thorough social osmosis and saturate our thinking in barely realized ways.

Recognizing these and then examining them, holding them up against our life's experience, is necessary if we are to reaffirm those values we accept and improve or rid ourselves of those we don't. Otherwise, those nasty old things are like something unwanted stuck to your finger. No matter how hard you shake your hand it just won't go away.

It takes determination and perseverance and courage to shake free of the false facts of the past and fully claim life as our own. In the words of John Dewey, "Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received [so] that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it."

Whenever we are faced with a problem, or a decision, we rely on a value judgment to solve it, to guide us in what ought to be done. Some of the values or judgments that come into play in decision making are based on our valuing survival, health, knowledge or wisdom; the order of tranquility and the progress of our culture; the mastery and protection of our environment; and the well being and fulfillment of the individual.

Conversely, we hold that a thing ought not be if it threatens our survival or health, when it inflicts pain and suffering, when it suppresses learning and expression, when it causes turmoil in our community—be that interpersonal or global—when it harms the environment, or when it prevents the full realization of our potential.

I first became aware of the deep importance, the value of values in our everyday lives, when Betty and I moved to Lausanne, Switzerland in the 1970s. I was astounded to see that the busses and trolleys ran primarily on trust: You bought a ticket but you didn't have to show it to anyone. Oh, there were random checks but not enough to really enforce payment. The fare was something like 80 centimes and the fine ten francs. Do the math, if you don't get caught more than once in every eleven times it's more economical to ride without a ticket, to cheat.

Yet few did. I talked with more than one of my fellow Americans and expatriates from other countries who faithfully bought tickets after having ridden for free for quite a while without getting caught. Why? I wondered, so I asked. What I learned surprised me. It wasn't guilt. It wasn't fear of being caught. It was honor. They recognized that they were being trusted, and they realized that with trust comes obligation.

In preparing for this morning, I relied heavily on John T. Goldthwait's descriptively if not creatively entitled book, *Values*. Goldthwait speaks of works of fiction that carry a social message and presents an outline for considering them that I think proves useful in other arenas as well. This is what he said:

"It is a most useful tool for understanding a book to ask the following questions:

1. Is there an underlining value assertion (or more than one) implicitly expressed in this book?
2. If so, what is it?
3. What is the fairest and most exact statement of it?

4. Ought I to believe it? Do I believe it already? Or do I believe something in conflict with it?

“And from that point, let the discussion begin.”

Recognize that a value judgment is in play, determine what it is and understand it thoroughly enough to be able to state it clearly, weigh it and compare it to the values you already have, and only then should you venture to discuss it. That’s a pretty high standard, but one I think reasonable when considering one’s values and their application to daily living.

So, let the discussion begin.

We’ll be here a long time if we don’t start out with a working definition of what values are.

Values are our judgments concerning the relative worth of things; they help us form our opinions as to whether, and to what degree, a person or thing is as we think it should be; and they are our own personal constructs of how the world ought to work. Collectively, our values comprise our worldview. Again, our values are our judgments about how things should be; our opinions as to how behavior ought to be conducted; and the relative worth of these shoulds and oughts, each to the others.

It can be said that facts represent our knowledge while values express our wisdom, our aspirations and even our expectations, and rest on our accumulated understandings and experience. Not to digress into semantics, but I came across this exchange while cruising the Internet: “Ok,” it was asked, “explain the difference between facts and truths.” The reply came, “Facts are what educated people accept as truth. Truths are what fundamentalists are asked to accept as fact.” Make of that what you will.

Note that I started my definition with “values are judgments.” As such, they are therefore personal and somewhat subjective. Belonging to the future as they do, all values or value-claiming statements are matters of prognostication. And because they represent opinions they can neither be proven nor disproven. I want to stress that. No matter how many people ascribe to them, no matter how universal they may appear or be purported to be, they are our judgments. Informed by truth, certainly, but not, in and of themselves, fact—even though, for all practical purposes, we may accept them and treat them as such.

Something as simple and seemingly unquestionable as “we should be nice to each other” can be argued. “Nice guys finish last” was certainly a battle cry of the eighties if it’s not today. But no matter how vigorously defended or disputed it is neither proven nor disproven. The argument that “Nice guys finish last” is a judgment that values finishing first more than being nice.

Even when overwhelming majorities universally agree on a given value, on a given concept of or for the future, that does not prove it to be true, right or good, it does not make it fact. Conversely, values can be presented as fact and shown not to be, they can be shown to be unreasonable, impractical or even unworkable; all manner of bedevilmments can befall them, but that still does not prove the value judgment itself to be false, because it isn’t about that.

So, for the sake of our discussion this morning, get comfortable with the concept of values as personal or collective judgments or opinions as to how the world ought to be. And remember, as values exist only in the future they are not facts and can neither be

proven or disproven. So you're on safe ground with what you believe, so long as you're consistent. And consistency is a mighty qualifier.

Values, not being about fact, have no realm for us to turn to to establish them as true or false. Arguments in favor of one value judgment or another have force only to the extent that they are validly constructed. But validity isn't the same thing as truth. If your premise is true and your logic solid, then your conclusion will be true. However, you can apply bulletproof logic to an absurd premise and your conclusion will be likewise absurd—you will never arrive at truth if you begin from a false premise. Just as magic is the realm of illusionists and the slight-of-hand, *Truth* drawn from absurdity is the stuff of charlatans and slight-of-logic artists.

Like any worldview or paradigm, be it religious, political or secular, our own beliefs are in many ways comprehensible only to us, only from the inside, through our personal experience of living by our values.

One of our aims this morning is to get inside our values, inside our need for values and how we came by our values. And in the process I hope to encourage you to more readily express and discuss your values with others, to get inside and let others in there with you. We learn from others and by sharing that which we ourselves have learned. By sharing what it's like we can learn from each other's struggles as well as our own.

Goldthwait addressed the importance of values to us as individuals, as a community, and as a culture when he said, "It is the nature and purpose of values and beliefs to affect our situation in the world of fact, and indeed to impact the world of fact for the better of all."

Sounds kind of like something an Ethical Culturist might say, doesn't it? Certainly the founder of our movement, Felix Adler, said many similar things in many different ways. And I think Adler would have applauded Goldthwait's saying, "Our values are the scope of our creativity, our reaffirming or our reshaping of the facts, as we carry out the rest of our lives."

But to impact our world of fact, our minds have to function, we have to work at it. As Mikhail Gorbachev said, "We can't do it for the world till we do it for ourselves."

And that leads us to another part of our consideration. How do we come by our values? How do we establish and develop them? How do we form our opinions of how things ought to be?

There's been no shortage in our lives of paradigms to draw from, or of interpreters of those views. We have each been exposed to numerous religious beliefs or philosophies. Some have chosen their "shoulds" from among these, either as strict adherents to traditional tenets or by forming an amalgamation that suits their own personal views. Others have forged their own "oughts" based on inner rather than external guidance. Some, perhaps most of us, are somewhere in the middle.

There's also no shortage of areas of oughts. There are moral oughts of obligation; like buying a bus ticket in Switzerland, aesthetic oughts of art and beauty; and religious oughts of truth and goodness. There are prudential oughts of self-interest; oughts of tradition, etiquette, and manners; and ethical oughts of right and wrong. And then there are our own views of how the world ought be and how we should act toward one another. But where did that personal view come from, how did we develop it and is it really ours?

For our values to be real to us, to be really ours, we need to realize and experience them in the deepest, most profound ways, to absorb them completely and apply them consistently in our daily lives. We need to claim them as ours, as precious, as having substance and influence. Only by doing so can our values become strong enough to support the weight of our lives.

Courage, the ability to face our own fears, including the fear of death; Compassion, the capacity to care for other's as one's self; Love, Joy, or Happiness; Reverence, that shared sense of awe and wonder at our very existence. These are cardinal virtues. And what we consider virtue is derived from our sense of values.

If there are cardinal values, values to which all or vastly most can subscribe, and I hope and believe that there are, these would be among them: Peace, Fairness, Freedom, Unity, Tolerance, Responsibility, and Respect for life. From these we can easily derive simple behavioral guides: Don't lie, don't cheat, don't steal, or don't hit.

I came across this quote on the web from the movie, *Hitch*, with Will Smith. "You should never lie, cheat, steal or drink. But if you must lie, lie in the arms of the one you love. If you must cheat, cheat death. If you must steal, steal away from bad company. And if you must drink, drink in the moments that take your breath away!" To which I would add, accompany those moments with good wine.

Examples of how our values are engrained in us and in our culture abound. Going back to our Swiss experience, Lausanne is built on a hill, a steep bank that rises up from Lac Lemond. One afternoon as Betty and I were strolling downhill, a middle-aged, out of breath woman heading uphill rushed past us exclaiming, *J'ai oublié de payer!* I forgot to pay! I forgot to pay! And huffed and puffed her way into a small café to settle her forgotten bill.

We don't often see that here. It's difficult enough for most of us to return cash when we've been given too much in change, let alone return to do so after we've made good our getaway. But the impulse to be true to our values is there within us.

It is natural for us to want our principles to fit into a coherent system brought together by some unifying concept. For us that concept is Ethical Culture that tells us it is not the *things* in the world that matter most to us, but rather the *practices* we involve ourselves in with regard to those things.

One of the joys of my work is meeting with those who have decided to marry, to commit their lives to each other. They're often people who have known each other for years and have already been living together for a considerable time. So I ask, "Why now?" The general response is for them to look at each other in puzzlement, shrug, and say, "It just seems like it's time."

I accept that, but I heard a better way of expressing "It's time" yesterday. "We recognized we have no conflict of values." That's a rare and beautiful thing, given the myriad of values and the importance of them in our lives. We tend to take our values for granted, until there's a conflict, internal or external. Sharing values without conflict is no guarantee of a long and successful marriage, but it is the basis for a respectful one.

And brought into our daily lives, the values we share in common, even though others may be in conflict, serve as the basis for respect and tranquility. And because those we share far outnumber those we don't, we find those attributes and more here at the Ethical Society. It's why we enjoy being with each other.

But as much as we revere the joy of Ethical Humanism, we should be mindful of the caution of Zen teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, “No single tradition monopolizes truth. We must glean the best values of all traditions and work together to remove the tension between traditions in order to give peace a chance.”

He speaks of the reconstruction of the spiritual ideal that was Felix Adler’s life work –work that continues here today.

Facts belong to the past, and values to the future. They meet in the present. We shape the future by claiming our values as our own through examination, understanding, and clarification so that we might consistently put them into action in our daily lives.

In a sermon delivered eighty years ago, John Dietrich characterized Humanism as, “the attempt to conserve all the human values that humanity in its age-long struggle has built up, and in addition create such new values as will add to the significance of life on this planet.”

Our values represent the scope of our creativity as we carry out our lives. It is through our values that we make the world a better place. It is through our values that we increase the meaning of life. And it is through our values that we give peace a chance.

That’s the value of values.



A member of the American Ethical Union
and the International Humanist & Ethical Union

2 West 64th Street • New York, New York 10023
212.874.5210 • www.NYSEC.org