

VALUES 2022

Most New Year's Resolutions are about goals—losing weight, reading more books, etc.—but since values underlie the goals chosen, I'm going to describe, evaluate, and walk you through some values clarification.

Values are part of meaning. Meaning refers to the significance, intent, or sense of a value. When we say something has meaning for us, we are talking about our intent to BE something or DO something and HOW it matters to us. We put our thoughts, feelings, and actions into the context of our life story. We get our values from family, friends, the wider society, FUSW, and formative experiences. Values clarification exercises (which were once widely used in Unitarian Universalist religious education) are no longer talked about. Sarita, my wife, had Sid Simon, one of the originators of values clarification, for a high school teacher—but that was a few years ago. It had been useful to me and my clients, so I missed its benefits. But in looking around, I discovered values clarification had gained traction by being subjected to research and accepted into a new form of psychotherapy.

Values guide our decisions. Years ago, Sarita and I visited a Southern city famous for its architecture and hospitality. We enjoyed an international arts festival there, but the night before we left there was to be a huge fireworks display at a former plantation nearby. We wanted to see fireworks, but not at a plantation, with sanitized slave quarters and grassy cotton fields. That implicit collusion with racism would violate our values.

Values clarification lists seven criteria (Sidney B. Simon, MEETING YOURSELF HALFWAY, pgs. 36-37) as a guide to determine how we live out what we say we value. Choose any conviction you have and ask yourself the following:

- 1) Was my decision made freely, without external coercion?
- 2) Do I cherish the position I have taken?
- 3) Did I carefully consider the pros and cons and consequences of my decision?

- 4) Did I make my decision after examining all possible options?
- 5) Have I practically applied and acted on my convictions?
- 6) Have I publically affirmed what I believe?
- 7) Have I acted on these beliefs repeatedly, in a pattern of commitment?

(I will repeat this list, slowly.)

Values can extensively change our lives. When, in the context of the Vietnam War draft I applied for conscientious objector status, my decision was made freely. The self-interested, small-town beliefs in Fremont, Nebraska politics were vehemently against it but I cherished that decision as respecting the lives of oppressed peoples. I carefully considered the pros and cons and consequences of conscientious objection, and I examined all possible options first, which meant foreclosing success in electoral politics. I acted on my convictions by applying for C.O. status and attending anti-war demonstrations and being arrested at a draft board demonstration. When I later applied for a fellowship to prepare for the ministry, the fellowship committee welcomed my public affirmation and certification as a Conscientious Objector as indicating that I was not simply avoiding the draft in preparing for the ministry.

There is a difference between a goal, which is some end-state we wish to achieve, and a value, which is an ongoing process. A value is a stable, general belief about what is desirable. Values describe a life's direction, convey what is important, and are all about what a person wants to be and do in his or her life. One values clarification exercise is uses the metaphor of playing basketball (Seth Fontane Pennock and Hugo Alberts, *PositivePsychology.com*, USING THE TOOLS, pgs. 18-19). Suppose you play a close game—setting up a play, defending your basket, dribbling down the court and making a great layup--and, just before the end, score the winning shot. Your team wins, 44 to 42. Might you value the teamwork, the companionship, and glorious physical agility you expressed? But suppose the score-keeper came to you before the game and said: "I can just put up the score now, 44 to 42, and everyone can go home." Why would you accept that offer, or why not? Take a moment to think about it. Think about the

importance of a great score vs. the experience of playing the game. How is it true, if it is, that “It isn’t about winning or losing, it is about how you play the game?”

However, fear or greed can skew values. I know of a town where four high school aged women were drugged and raped by four high school-aged men, in four different incidents. One of the young women went to the county district attorney and revealed her recollections which, although necessarily hazy, identified an assailant. She confronted him in a call from the D.A.’s office, on a recorded line, and he guiltily apologized for his behavior. The D.A. apparently did nothing. I do not know why nothing was done but one of the young men was from a famous and moneyed political dynasty. Of course, this seems appalling. Perhaps some accommodation was reached behind the scenes. Little was done to ease the distress of four young women. Where in all of this was the value of “integrity?”

Maybe this is simply bargaining with whatever your school of thought calls conscience--the superego, the punitive conscience, or the anti-libidinal ego. That part of the psyche that has internalized rules we then apply to our lives. Sure, that could be part of it, but a larger part of values clarification is affirmation of our intent to be part of the implicit social contract in the Golden Rule. Almost everyone wants to be socially acceptable.

The usefulness of values clarification is that value questions offer a way for us to make sense of our lives. Because I value “community,” I am your parish minister. I value the way our community empathizes when we are hurt, supports us to stand up for justice or the environment, and challenges us when we are disorderly. Values offer a standard to which I can measure my actions. If I consciously value “empathy,” I can ask myself whether responding angrily to someone lives out that value. Perhaps not, or perhaps that is all that would catch their attention or perhaps responding angrily to someone abusing another person fulfills the value of “empathy.” Context matters. In the second year into preparation for the ministry, one student decided that he preferred to attend law school. Another peer angrily reacted to him by saying how this fellow was

unintelligent and unsophisticated and had bad breath anyway, so he was never going to be a good minister. I was appalled, and thought it was cruel; I wished the law school student well but did not confront the nasty guy. I wish I had. Values questions focus us on the purpose of our lives and what we do. They imply I could look back over my life and assess my integrity.

There is an elaborate exercise that uses these criteria, but I will take us through a simple exercise that we can do on Zoom: Since most of us on this Zoom meeting have wallets or handbags or desk items or cell phone photos handy, make an inventory of, say, five things that say something about you. They might be photos, mementos, scraps of paper with sayings, lists, or reminders, art works, etc. (I will give you a 60 second pause to do some sorting and considering.) Ask yourself, aside from ID cards, what do those things say about you personally? Are they items from your past you don't really need or want? Are they presently useful or meaningful? Are they dedicated to the future, as a list of things you will do, or books you want to read? There are no right or wrong answers, but your sense of these things from this perspective says a lot about your life.

Take a minute, focus on a point in front of you or close your eyes, and breathe slowly and deeply. Just for a minute, let your mind roam over the meanings you see in these items or photos and the conclusions you have drawn about your values. How did it feel—was it affirming or discouraging, hopeful or doubtful—to think of the importance an item had for you? (pause)

In conclusion, it takes courage and patience to clarify your values. Courage, because you may find you are not living up to your own expectations and that hurts. Courage also, because you might then ask yourself to affirm your values publicly or act on your convictions, which can be hard, scary work. But it also takes patience, because nobody is perfect with values, nobody can fully live out a value without mistakes, and you may need to humbly accept your imperfections. You may need to humbly accept that others are, likewise, not perfect in their living out of values. The courage and patience of facing your values may give you a way to live with fewer illusions about yourself and others. We are all trying to

be the best we can and an imperfect world does not allow us perfection but it does allow us to accept who we are in a community of others as imperfect but as loving as they can be.