

Value Your Values!

They Drive Your Life

By Robert A. Broenen, Psy.D.
www.findingmypath.com

“VALUES!” That’s a thousand-dollar word that inspirational speakers and writers love to invoke. It’s almost as if we need to hear background music, and display symbols of patriotism, religion and family as we thrill to hearing that hallowed term. “VALUES” get proudly proclaimed grandly in sermons, annual reports and political platforms. They even get cast in bronze or engraved in stone for people to admire, in awe, forever for their lofty grandeur.

But, really. What the heck does the word mean? What, exactly, is a “value?” Well, the mundane truth is a value is simply a tool. Extremely important, but a tool nonetheless. A value can best be described, I believe, as “an instrument for making choices.” Boring? Quite the contrary. You and I use our values *every waking moment* of our lives! Seriously.

THINK ABOUT ANY DAY—any hour, or even *any minute*—in your life. What are you doing in that moment? Why? Why are you not doing *something* else? Or being *somewhere* else? Or with *someone* else? You know why. You are doing what you are doing, where you are doing it, either alone or with other people because you *choose* to. But there’s much more to it than that. You are, every instant, not only choosing to be somewhere and doing something, but also making a *choice to reject all the other choices you could be making!* Now, that’s powerful!

So, why is it that you’re doing-what-you’re-doing? Because you constantly deciding that *whatever-it-is* is important. In other words, it fulfills one (or more, probably) of your **values**.

SO THAT RAISES A QUESTION for each of us: “What, exactly, are *my* values?” It’s ironic. We have them, we use them every instant, just like our muscles—but how often do we consciously think about them? What *are* they? Where did I get them? Are they really *mine*—or did I just pick them up somewhere along the way in my life’s journey? What if they don’t really serve me well? What if they lead me into making less than the best choices?

It might be a good idea, from time to time, for us to review our values. There’s a reason not to want to do it. It takes work. Also, I guess we can be afraid of “opening a can of worms.” Some folks don’t feel they need to critically examine their values, ever. If someone challenges them about any of their choices, they simply respond, “Well, that’s just *me!*”

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But reviewing our values is really not that daunting. How to proceed?

THE FIRST STEP is that you just make a list of all the things that are important to you: activities, people, places, possessions, and so on. You can make the list informally, put it somewhere you can look at from time to time. Add new ones as they occur to you. But there's more. After you list each items, you need to explain to yourself **why!** Why is that item a value to me?

THE NEXT TASK is to put each value to the acid test. Ask yourself a few questions:

- How much do I “*value*” this one? That is, how important is it to me?
- Where is it on my *overall scale* of values? It's great to be able to rank-order your values, to clarify how you choose between several attractive options.
- How do I *feel* about this value? Am I glad I have it?
- How well does it *serve* me, day-to-day? Does it enhance my life?

You may be very pleased with the results. Ideally, this exercise will be a source of great pride to you. It will confirm to you *your own worth* as a person, and help you understand more clearly why your life is good.

THEN AGAIN, you may want to double-check one or more items. Put the spotlight on each one, and query yourself about its contribution to the quality and effectiveness of your life. But then what? How do you “*de-value*” or “*re-value*” something?

There's a way to deal with that. Since we always do (or have) something for a *reason*, we can ask ourselves what the payoff of that thing is. Ask: “What do I *get* out of doing or having that? Once you know the answer to that question, you can ask the next question: “Is there another, probably better, way I can get the same payoff?” For example, let's say that you hang out with a group of people who engage in some kinds of activities that aren't particularly healthy or uplifting, so that you don't consider the experience as really enhancing your life. Well, you could cultivate some other people as friends who may engage in activities that can enrich your life. Anyway, you get the idea.

WHAT ALL THIS SAYS is simply that, if we are going to let our values decide everything for us—*which they do!*—we might as well know what they are and confirm why we have them. That will help us live our lives making more conscious, better choices. It sure beats what Socrates decried when said “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

Dr. Broenen is a licensed psychologist (California PSY13147) and a charter member of the International Positive Psychology Association. He welcomes your inquiries. You can contact him by visiting his website or by e-mailing him at rabroenen@cox.net.