

The problem of

Values and Beliefs in Our Time

WE LIVE in a time in which values and beliefs have become highly problematic. There are many reasons for this. One is the experience of disillusionment regarding the validity of some of our ideals of humanity's progress, which the cruelties and wars of our century meant for many of us. Another is the discovery of the relative position of many values in different cultures which modern anthropology disclosed. Another reason is the skepticism with which science on the one hand, and psychoanalysis on the other have taught us to look at the religious teachings and moral traditions which we inherited from our forefathers.

The difficulties which we experience in our own thinking are further increased, when we find ourselves in the role of educators of youth. This role is, as we all know, more challenged and more challenging than it ever was. For similar reasons which invalidated our own beliefs, youths are weary of authority, they dislike and distrust it. Many studies show that, in Europe as well as in America, the youths of this generation prefer to consult their peers rather than adults and to put more store by peer acceptance than by adult approval.

In working with youths as well as with parents and teachers, I find that successful leadership of the older generation depends on certain basic requirements. First and foremost are: kindness, honesty, understanding and competence. These represent the responses to some main needs in the person we want to educate, the need for love, for trust, the willingness to cooperate and the interest to learn.

Developing Adequate Values

The problem of developing an adequate set of values in ourselves as well as in those entrusted to us is a double one.

To begin with, we do not get, as people in previous times did, a ready-made set of values, with which we can unquestionably identify. Although there still are many divergent groups of people who try to go on living by the religious and moral traditions of the past, which they were taught, an ever increasing number feel that they have to think

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things through for themselves. They want to get to a new unbiased understanding of human existence. Yet when attempting this, most people find that they are not really equipped to do this job in an adequate manner. They do not have the training to think about principles of living in a logical and systematic way. Nor do they know all the facts that they should be informed about, to reach any kind of valid conclusions.

In fact the more they learn about the subject, they discover—and this is the second problem—how limited their freedom of choice is. The reasons for these limitations are manifold.

One is that at the time when we begin to think consciously and deliberately about our values and beliefs, we have already been influenced and formed in many directions. We have picked up from or have been taught or even been indoctrinated by our environment. That includes our family, our neighbors, friends and the whole subculture in which we grow up. From at least about four years of age on, children begin to form opinions on values. From five years on, they are known to identify with prejudices of their environment. After that time, it becomes increasingly difficult for an individual to think about values without bias. Besides being brought up within the confines of some subculture, an individual's situation of life may be such that he cannot possibly free himself. He may be economically too dependent, too restricted in social opportunities, too much hampered by poor education, to be able to work on his development as a person.

Other reasons lie in personality factors. Some people are more adaptive than creative, and adhere to some group's opinions so as to be accepted and to belong. They feel securer in this com-

plete identification with a group. Some people lack the flexibility to completely adopt new ideas. They prefer to stick by what they always believed in. This inflexibility becomes particularly marked in certain types of neuroses. Persons who suffer from serious emotional predicaments, are rarely in the position of making free decisions about directions they want to take in life.

Personal aptitudes, abilities and gifts or lack of them also have an influence on a person's value system. The mechanically gifted individual is more inclined to value technical progress than the artist, who favors the aesthetic.

Assuming a person is free enough, courageous enough and informed enough to try to set up his own set of values, what are some of the choices he will have to make?

Values Under Scrutiny

There are certain values rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which remain essentially unchanged despite any modern skepticism or ethical reorientation. The high value of love in its many aspects and facets, including giving of one's self, kindness, generosity, empathy, and extending to tolerance and understanding has remained our greatest heritage.

The values connected with what Erich Fromm called the "authoritarian conscience" have become suspect, if not even discredited. The feeling of our youths, that the claims of authority have become dubious and that certainly authority should not be set up and maintained for authority's sake is shared by many thoughtful people of our time. The value of blind obedience has become completely invalid and even the value of conformity, which up until recently was

generally undisputed, is scorned by those who want to see an individual's personality maximally developed.

One of the central educational problems of our time is how the individual can be helped to develop most adequately as a human being. How the growing child and adolescent can be guided to discipline themselves and to accept responsibility without the pressure of threats and punishment; how they can be helped to bring out and to work at their best potential; to accomplish this is the goal of the modern educator.

In fact, the development of an individual's best potential is possibly that new value concept which many thinkers of our time would put at the top of a value rank order. Since Carl Jung's, Karen Horney's and Erich Fromm's first formulations, this concept has found increasing acceptance and validation in the work of Carl Rogers, Rollo May, Abraham Maslow, Victor Frankl, myself and others.

Requirements for Self-Realization

The question of how to find and how to realize one's best potential is however not easily answered. Many people seem to find it difficult to clarify for themselves what they want to live for. And many others encounter nearly insurmountable hindrances on their way. Those who are able to do what they feel is their "task of life," as V. Frankl calls it, are indeed lucky.

For clarifying one's own best potential and for understanding one's own inner self, a person needs to meet two requirements. A person needs to be honest with himself and must know how to go about understanding himself.

Honesty was always regarded as a high value in our Western Civilization. However, in spite of the great acclaim, it always received up until recently this quality was not applied in quite the rigorous way in which we have learned to apply it now. It is only since Freud's teachings about the unconscious that we have learned to detect certain dishonesties which we use in interpreting our own motivations.

In wanting very much to behave in such a way that we can morally approve of ourselves, we often bring sacrifices and do what we think to be good deeds. It is one of Freud's merits to have debunked many of those martyrs and heroes that were analyzed, as people who sacrificed themselves not for beliefs, but for the secondary gains of praise and fame.

In our time, we appraise motives with caution and with the help of analytic exploration.

Besides the new honesty with which we see ourselves, we also have learned to esteem the new knowledge which modern scientific development has brought to us. This applies to the psychological penetration into the depth of the human mind, and it also applies to the knowledge about the universe, which we obtained from modern physics. While this leaves questions about the universe open to speculation, it has certainly made us aware of creativity as one of its main factors.

The respect of knowledge and the acquisition of more knowledge for the understanding of our human existence within the laws of the universe seems to many a high value of our time.

In one of his recent books, Erich Fromm calls boredom one of the main problems of the meaningless life of our

(Continued on page 541)

It is gratifying to know that a colleague is interested enough in a presentation to raise questions in regard to the hypotheses therein stated. It is also provocative to note that we seem to be in a *vis-à-vis* relationship, namely, the college professor raising the question as to whether a practicing administrator is presenting a theory that implies a lack of responsibility.

I readily admit that I disagree with some of Dr. McNeil's concepts:

1. Supervisors are *not* appointed "with the authority to rate, to promote, and to fire teachers." In fact, in the District in which I work, consultants (supervisors) do not consider their roles as having any relationship to the above functions.

2. Supervisors and consultants are not hired for the purpose of rewarding or punishing, but they are professional peers selected for the purpose of consultation with other personnel.

3. Principals do not promote or fire but have the responsibility to report their perceptions of teachers to the superintendent. Hiring and firing are responsibilities reserved for the Board of Trustees on recommendation from the Superintendent.

4. I believe that the highest form of responsibility in administration is to communicate one's observations, understandings and perceptions. Dr. McNeil's proposal suggests a controlling function of administration rather than a creative function.

I agree that this is a very difficult concept for most people to understand and equally as difficult, I am sure, to present. So much of our culture has been built on "doing something to someone" that it is difficult to grasp a concept that is based on "being something with someone."

It is indeed a pleasure to continue to communicate ideas with you.

Sincerely,

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Values and Beliefs—Buhler

(Continued from page 522)

time. Victor Frankl speaks of an "existential vacuum" as of that existence in which people give no ultimate purpose or meaning to their lives.

The opposite tendency of the person who tries to develop his best potentials, is that of self-fulfillment. This person has given his existence a purpose and feels neither empty nor bored. He has enthusiasm and belief in what he is doing. And he feels that in giving 'is best, he is fulfilling himself.

Role of Psychology

The analytic exploration of our motives and the clarification of our best potentials are not easy to accomplish without psychological guidance. The growing awareness of this fact has recently led many responsible leaders among educators and ministers to organize "self-discovery" groups under psychological direction. These are groups of grown-ups as well as of adolescents who are interested in learning to understand themselves and the workings of their motivation. They also want to be aware of their own inclinations and best potentials, so as to be equipped to set up proper goals and values for themselves. Thus psychology seems to play an important role for adequate self-development of the person of our time.

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