



## Let's Talk About Values

By Stephen M. Perle, DC, MS

We are in the thick of the hunt for a new president of the United States. It seems as if every political campaign talks about values. But what do they mean by the word *values*? I was in a meeting with faculty from many departments at the University of Bridgeport and someone starting talking about conservative values. I asked what he meant and he gave me a vague answer: "Good old-fashioned American values." This was a bit humorous, as he was an immigrant from a Soviet Bloc country. However, no amount of questioning resulted in a better description from this professor, except for saying that one of those values was honesty. Surely conservatives don't have an exclusive on honesty and liberals on dishonesty. It was Richard Nixon and his conservative associates who lied about Watergate, right?

I asked if anyone had a good understanding of what is meant by values - conservative or otherwise. The philosophy professor in the group said conservatism is a political theory and can be summarized as "less government is best." However, this did not fit the context of the comment any more than when one of the political candidates talks about values. Then a professor in the business school talked about the Rokeach Value Survey.<sup>1</sup> Those in marketing try to understand the values of potential customers so they can better target product advertisements. The ads will try to make the product seem as if it fits with the potential customer's values.

Rokeach developed two lists of 18 values.<sup>2</sup> The survey is completed by ranking, within each list, the values from 1 to 18 (most to least important). The entire Rokeach Value Survey can be found on the Web, so I won't reproduce it here.

One of the lists has a variety of end-states of existence (terminal values). These are things one would desire out of life - the goals we might set to accomplish throughout our lives. Many of the terminal values fit along the continuum of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The terminal values can be very personal or more global.

Some of the personally directed terminal values are having a comfortable life (a prosperous life), an exciting life (a stimulating, active life), a sense of accomplishment (lasting contribution) or salvation (a saved,

eternal life). These are all self-directed and thus, lower on Maslow's hierarchy.

The more global terminal values include world peace (free of war and conflict), a world of beauty (beauty of nature and the arts) and equality (brotherhood, equal opportunity for all). I believe Maslow would expect that these more global terminal values would be highly rated from a self-actualized person who has met their personal needs. They are more altruistic and in that vein, more in line with what generally motivates people to enter into health care - the desire to help others with their suffering.

The second list of values is made of instrumental values. These are the means by which one achieves the terminal values and, as such, they are all really personal. Some of these values are what in ethics might be called *virtues*. Virtues are personality traits that guide one to moral behaviors. They are the characteristics of a person who is virtuous or has high moral character. A few of these virtues are being honest (sincere, truthful), courageous (standing up for your beliefs), helpful (working for the welfare of others) and intellectual (intelligent, reflective).

I have only presented a few of the human values Rokeach researched, but I think it can be seen that these have little in common with what politicians talk about when they mention the word *values*. Enumerating them as Rokeach has done probably would mean that a politician could not use them while campaigning. The politician's intentional ambiguity about the word allows the voter to infer that the politician means the same thing they do, even if they really do not.

Socrates wrote, "The unexamined life is not worth living." One way to examine your life is to get both lists of values (terminal and instrumental) and rank them from 1 to 18. See what you believe is most important and least important. You might surprise yourself when you have to actually think in these terms of what are the most important values to you. It also might make choosing which politician to vote for easier when you know what your values are.

### *References*

1. Rokeach Value Survey. Available at [www.oregonvos.net/~jflory/205/val\\_sur.htm](http://www.oregonvos.net/~jflory/205/val_sur.htm).
2. Rokeach M. *The Nature of Human Value*. New York: Free Press, 1973.

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