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Values in Proverb and Practice*

As we leave the "fabulous fifties" and enter the "soaring sixties" we find ourselves in a fast changing unstable world which is reflected in unstable values. And this is quite shocking. Take away our money, take away our friends, even take away our loved ones and we still know what to do, how to conduct ourselves, and how to make adjustments. But take away our values, and we are literally lost. On every side are signs that our old values are being taken away, and an increasing number of writers are calling attention to it. Discarding of values is not serious; the worrisome part is that there may be no clear cut new ones taking their place. We seem to be living now pretty much on the tattered odds and ends of old values.

As we conquered the American continent, we were guided by certain ideas of good and bad. It was good to work hard, to produce much, to save your money, to do without. It was good to see an individual prosper through his own efforts, to see him climb above his fellow man. Now our technology is to the point at which hard work by farmers produces for CCC. Hard work in industry produces more than can be sold. Thrift has been replaced with a national policy of living ahead of it not above our income. "You Auto Buy" they tell us when we enter a recession. We have to be encouraged to consume so that we can use all of our production we are encouraged to produce. The individual now is forced to provide for his security through social security. He is organized into professional groupings--whether labor union, educators, civil service, or what--in which where frequently his pay like everyone else's goes up by schedule, depending largely on his length of service and the bargaining ability of his group. We still talk of hard work, thrift, and individualism.

A value as used here means that thing which we hold as good, which we prize or cherish. It's a feeling one has concerning the goodness or badness, the rightness or wrongness of an object or a kind of behavior. We get our values from society in some complex way, and in some complex way society enforces them. Values are guides for action. Our values tell us immediately whether something is right or wrong, whether we ought to do it.

Human beings seldom simply do something. They are almost compelled to make a value judgment of the act. The human mind always goes beyond the immediate situation. It has to seek it's own security, its own sense of well-being separate from the body. You take the family swimming. You don't simply enjoy it. "We ought to do this more often". We use values to set us right with the world, to give us a feeling of personal integrity, to somehow tie our personality together. This compulsion to value is shown in the stories on what's wrong with America, what's wrong with American women and the like. Values are both quides for action, and justification for action. This two-sided nature of a value is the central theme of my discussion. We use it to guide action. We also use it to justify action we have already taken, are taking, and are going to continue to take. Take our values that "made America great"--hard work, thrift and frugality, and the belief in the individual. These have been our guides for action all through modern history. But at one time in our Christianized western society, these values would lead one to sin. To have money was sinful. To buy and sell, producing nothing, was sinful. In those times the merchants were the low class people. To lend money for interest was the worst

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* Discussion by J. K. McDermott, Purdue agricultural economist, at National Home Management Specialist Association meeting, April 29, 1960, Lafayette, Indiana.

sin of all. But over time demands of civilization for capital--for savings over and above consumption--were such that people, usually the merchant, somehow accumulated it. All this was occurring at about the time of the Reformation, and some of the early Protestant leaders begun legitamizing the practices. So we have the Protestant Ethic. Hard work and thrift with their fruits going to the individual became in effect almost a form of worship. At least they were no longer sinful. Although articulated by Protestant leaders and called the Protestant Ethic, this creed has been completely accepted by the entire western World. When Adam Smith in the Wealth of Nations attacked Mercantilism and came out for laissez-faire, he was simply making legitimate the practices that had been carried on for years in violation of law.

This has been a great over simplification of a profound happening in our history. Students of the subject would shudder at such simplicity. But it is close enough to be useful to us when as professional Extension workers we try to understand in some way the conditions of the environment we find ourselves in. Our practices are at almost constant variance--in all directions--from our stated values. And for all we know we may be at such a significant turning point in our history.

We don't have to look on such grandiose scale to see this phenomenon of values in justification of action. A low-income farmer values his independence, his freedom. But if he gets a chance for factory work, he values being able to do things for his family. It's important to see this ever changing aspect, this rationalization aspect, of our values. The list of values we have seen change is quite large. Look for example at the change of the array of values concerning simply the role of women in our society. We now educate them; we allow them to smoke, to bowl, to work when married, to vote--just to list a few. Our fast changing society changes our action and our social organization, and we are constantly in the process of keeping our values up to date. Sometimes we lag behind.

This realignment of values with actions often does not take place so quickly. We see wide divergence of speech and action. We hear the speech condemming big government and praising self reliance at the meeting in which plans are laid to go to Washington for a grant to solve a local problem. We get the value lingering on as a formidable controller of human action. After serving to rationalize a system of behavior, the value then serves to reinforce that mode of behavior, and finally to preserve it. The value gives us stability, a tradition.

Conditions have changed so that our values today, rather than helping us resolve conflicting emotions within ourselves, actually tend to cause conflict. One of the great conflicts is that between the value we place on stability, tradition, and security of expectations and the value we place on efficiency and progress which causes change. We all want a better job, more pay, more things to buy. At the same time we want stable communities, our sons and daughters close to home, the school house where we went to school. This is a conflict we cannot solve satisfactorily. Extension workers stand in greatest conflict between their actions and their values or between different values. Most Extension workers have rural backgrounds and value rural life. Yet they have escaped rural life and they have devoted their careers to helping others escape. They honor research, science, efficiency, and change of practice. They try to make farm homes like city homes. And they are saddened that the old home community is so unlike what it used to be.

Concerning our indecision on values, Roy Buck says, "The American community needs a new sense of mission, a new destiny. The 19th century battles are won. The traditional frontiers no longer provide the spirit of mission and calling... There needs to be opened up a vast new area of value and meaning to human existence... When is work unproductive? Where is thrift false? When is fear of God a tribal ritual? ..Adjustments must not only be made in the economic and social life of the community, but also in its moral, intellectual, and spiritual life." 1/

J. K. Golbraith in The Affluent Society says the same thing in many more words. In our age of scarcity, the emphasis had to be on production. He says it's still on production even though the things we produce are no more significant than four as opposed to two tail lights, or a new car model every year rather than every two years. Pascal in Pensees says "man's unhappiness arises from one thing only, namely that he cannot abide happily in one room...He does not know that what he seeks is the chase and not the capture." William Whyte in The Organization Man discusses the apparent apathy of college seniors in any social or political issues. He says, "Society is not out of joint for them...They do not want to rebel against the status quo because they like it...As they paraphrase what they are now reading about America, they argue that at last we have got it." So what does one strive for? Or believe in? These sentiments are all reflected in an article in the February 22 issue of U. S. News and World Report entitled "What's Wrong--What's Right With Today's America?" Interviews with representatives of science, philosophy, history, and religion produced these statements. "We don't seem to feel the need for striving." "We haven't gotten adjusted yet to a world of abundance." "Men fight better when kicked than when pampered." "The Great majority of people don't want things too easy." "There must be a consecration to a higher ideal."

Do we need a new destiny? If so, what will it be? How will it shape our values? Will leisure emerge as the ideal, not hard work? Will it be gracious living? Or are these too easy? Will our destiny involve other parts of the world where scarcity is still the rule? Perhaps to conquer space? The destiny for America doesn't have to involve everyone. Not everyone was a Horatio Alger. Not every poor boy made good. But enough did, that one could always hope, if not for himself for his son.

In contrast with the United States, today Russia has a destiny, a national objective around which to build values. Russia wants to surpass America at America's own game, production. I don't read Russian but in one series of slides on Russia the same sign or slogan appeared time after time in a number of different situations. The sign said "Beat America."

So far I have addressed myself to those values surrounding economic endeavor. The same uncertainties as to what ought to be are pervasive. Our moral values also seem to be unstable. We are still fully aware that sin is wrong. But sometimes we don't know what is a sin and what is not a sin. A favorite question of teenagers, for example, is how far should one go in boy-girl relations. In an earlier day, one knew exactly how far to go. We've always had people violate the values. But the point is that they always knew it. Today they do not. Some observers think it's more important to know what values one has then to follow them exactly. This problem is real. These are not irresponsible teenagers. Their parents don't know either. We have a friend whose daughter is entering high school this fall. Parents of these teenagers are now in the process of drawing up a code of ethics for these kids. It's interesting that they need a code at all but even more so that the parents are not sure what ought to be in the code.

1/ Buck, Roy C., "The Value Problem in Rural Community Development," in Proceedings of the American Country Life Association, Inc., 1959.

We see these same doubts in other places. Kenneth Boulding in The Organization Revolution raises the very real question of what an individual should do when his conscience is at variance with the code of his organization. The very idea of a code of ethics, for example, indicates a sort of arbitrary set of rules. Professional men won't advertise, although others serving the public go to great lengths to justify advertising as a public information service. Which is more public service--to learn of the value of compact cars or the value of a polio shot. Another question: What should be the conduct of a medical doctor, for example, if he really believed in compulsory health insurance when his professional organization is so opposed? We place a high value on the legal contract in this county. But suppose a labor union membership simply doesn't believe in the contract made by leaders? Does this justify the wildcat strike? How does a laborer react when he doesn't believe in the ideas of his leaders?

Let me discuss a minute how values are enforced and perpetuated. Pressures of the group teach the new member what the values are and cause him to behave in conformity with them. Brewster makes this clear when he says, "...among the most dominant drives of men is the aspiration for ever higher status and the fear of falling into a lower one than they now enjoy. As used here, status is the standing--the approbation and esteem---that one covets for himself in the eyes of all observers, including his own. The potency of the status striving is evident on every hand...Its vital center is a love of merit and an aversion to demerit."2/ The observers Brewster talks about are organized into certain groups, not all observers at random. The group gives a person values and then gives him esteem in reward for living up to them or takes away esteem where he fails to.

In an earlier time we had many fewer groups than we have today, and any one of these groups functioned to give us a wider range of values than any one group gives us today. Let me contrast the organization in which I grew up with that in which my boys are growing up. We had a small neighborhood group made up of several complete families in which we worked, played, set up for the sick, mourned the dead and even fought. All of us, grown up and kids, were almost always under the surveillance of the one group. We all knew exactly what was expected of us, and we gave it, including I well remember, a distinct skepticism of the first county agent. In contrast, my kids go to school with a group of kids whose parents I hardly know. The kids of the folks I work with go to a variety of schools and grades, and few of them know my kids at all, much less know them intimately. The kids in school and the men at work belong to almost the complete array of religions and many within the same faith are members of separate congregations. And all of these organizations are now big organizations. If we each draw our values out of the group, the confusion is obvious. I as a parent exert little influence on my son's group, and we as a family share the influence on him with other groups. So my church, my profession, my son's group, and our family are all somewhat detached from each other in forming and enforcing values.

This is what gives rise to the awful outcries concerning conformity. My son conforms to his group. This looks like unthinking conformity, but it is a new manifestation of what has always gone on. We always complain of conformity when someone conforms to values other than ours. Conformity is not our problem. It's the manifestation of the fragmenting we are getting in our social groups. This fragmentation is every where. Farm Bureau, which has never been noted for its pro-labor attitudes, was astounded to find in Michigan that more than one-third of its members were also

2/ Brewster, John M. "The Impact of Technical Advance and Migration on Agricultural Society and Policy", Journal of Farm Economics, Vol. XLI, No. 5, Dec. 1959, p. 1169.

members of the AFL-CIO. You can see this splintering on all sides in your work, as you work with married home agents, with working housewives, with part-time farming families, with new families moving into rapidly growing urban areas. View this taking place all over the nation, and you have a picture of the new group alignments and the resulting decline of old values. You meeting here is a manifestation of this phenomenon. On a significant portion of your professional values, this is the group whose esteem you cherish, even more than some of your colleagues at home and certainly more than many of the other professions on your own campus. And how many discussions do you have on "What ought we do?" "What should be done?" And these are not idle questions. Many times you don't know until the group decides. It matters little that everyone else in the group didn't know either until the group decided.

The values different groups set up are interesting. They are always designed to protect the group. We have a different set for our group and their group. Rugged individualism is still good, for you. My professional group helps me develop. If you seek security you are soft and have lost the spirit of adventure; it's in the public interest to give the college professor tenure, medical insurance, and retirement. Public subsidy of farmers is bad says the national magazine who mailed your issue to you through Government facilities at about half what the service cost. I like free competition and progress, but there should be a law against teaching college courses by television.

This has been an inadequate presentation. I reflect the same confusion and indecision regarding our value system and structure as I discuss. My sole attempt has been to show values as a day by day instrument of life. I would like to do away with the idea that values are some how detached and independent guides for our journey through life, something like the North Star. They are caught up in our actions and behaviors with a constant interplay of influencing and being influenced. Whether people in our profession should sit by passively as observers or enter the fray in shaping our values, I don't know. Your judgment is as good as mine. Perhaps it depends on our values.