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Finding Higher Common Ground on Values **© 2005 by Corinne McLaughlin** **Center for Visionary Leadership**

People care deeply about moral values. Values shape our vision of a preferred future. The question of the hour, however, is *Which* moral values should be promoted? Is there any consensus on this question? And if there's a consensus on values, how can they be applied to specific (societal) issues?

Actually there is a great deal of evidence for consensus on values world-wide. The Institute for Global Ethics in Maine founded by Rushmore Kidder, researched values around the world and found there are five core values that all societies agree on: love/compassion; truth/honesty; fairness/tolerance; responsibility/accountability; and respect for life.

Surprisingly, schools in such diverse area as liberal Berkeley, CA and conservative Kansas City, MO have found they can agree on common values to be taught in their schools when they dialogue together in a professionally facilitated process. The Partnership for Character Education, based in Washington, D.C., has had a great deal of success bringing together principals, students, teachers, parents, and community members to explore common ground on values.

At the 1992 Parliament of the Worlds' Religions, hundreds of representatives from most of the major religions built a consensus around key values they had in common: non-violence, tolerance, truthfulness, respect for life, equal rights, solidarity, a just economic order, and partnership between men and women.

When we look for the common threads in moral values, we find there is actually more agreement than differences among a wide variety of people in the U.S. For example, Character Counts, a coalition of the largest and most influential, educational and youth organizations, found a consensus on core values to be taught in the schools: Trustworthiness, respect, caring, fairness, responsibility, and citizenship.

The consensus building process is often called a "*multi-stakeholder dialogue*"—a dialogue among many people who have a stake in the outcome. Finding *higher common ground* among participants through dialogue and deep listening, where *everyone is heard and real concerns are shared*, can cause dramatic breakthroughs, even among groups with very diverse views.

Even in intractable conflicts around specific policy issues, such as abortion, common ground can be found using a professionally facilitated process. Both Search for Common Ground in Washington D.C., and Public Conversations Project in Boston, for example, have found common ground in dialogues with pro-life and pro-choice opponents on this issue. Both sides found that instead of arguing about when the fetus in the womb became life, they could expand the time frame of their discussion and focus instead on the cause of pregnancy. Both sides found common ground on preventing unwanted pregnancies, and they have created a joint campaign to reduce teen pregnancies. Both sides also wanted to make adoption more easily available.

We focus on the underlying values held by our clients and by their organizations. We ask people, “What’s important to you and why? What values or principles do you want to steer your life or your organization by? What is the inner compass or direction that is key for you?”

We help people look at their life journey and the key turning points in their life that have related to leadership and values. We utilize effective techniques we’ve developed to help them prioritize their values and make real commitments to them. Participants get very clear about what’s their number one value, what’s next most important, and so on. They then create a clear vision statement for themselves, or their organizations based on their values, and develop strategies for accomplishing their mission. “Is money the only thing that makes you feel happy and fulfilled or do you feel greater satisfaction when you take care of your people, your community and the environment?”

Many speakers at the conference from business and government spoke about the need to create a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in their work. They spoke of their need to bring their whole selves to work, body, mind AND spirit, by living their values at work. Each defined spirituality in complimentary ways. Some spoke about spiritual values as the importance of doing high quality, honest work with a lot of integrity. Others valued how they treat their workers, or how they protect the environment or volunteer in their community. Some discussed meditation, prayer and spiritual study groups in their workplace. The conference was very intriguing to the major media—we were interviewed by many newspapers and TV shows. It was very exciting and inspiring to hear people’s personal journey, how they applied their values at work, and the emerging consensus around spiritual values in the workplace.

A diverse group of spiritually-oriented political leaders, authors and activists from around the country met together several times over a two year period leading up to the conference and we built a consensus on how our moral values might be translated into politics:

- 1) Empowerment:** supporting citizens in connecting with their purpose and passion and providing opportunities to develop their full capacities to participate in society.
- 2) Respect and Compassion:** recognizing the innate value of all people, appreciating diversity, and providing for those who truly cannot support themselves.
- 3) Collaboration:** promoting communication, cooperation and community among similar and diverse groups.
- 4) Equity:** providing equal opportunities for education, meaningful work and entrepreneurship.
- 5) Common Ground:** promoting non-violence and dialogue to build consensus on mutually beneficial solutions to divisive issues.
- 6) Whole Systems Thinking:** focusing on emerging opportunities and the interconnection of all aspects of an issue.
- 7) Stewardship:** recognizing that humans are an interdependent part of the web of life and that we have a responsibility to protect the environment and ecological diversity.
- 8) Positive Solutions:** promoting best practices that are just and sustainable— effective and proven solutions to social, economic and political problems
- 9) Balancing Rights with Responsibilities:** protecting individual rights, as well as encouraging a sense of responsibility to give back to society.
- 10) Political Courage and Honesty:** encouraging elected officials to embody their values and speak their conscience.

Most spiritual traditions respect the grain of truth on each side of a conflict and promote healing, reconciliation and forgiveness. The training of initiates in ancient mystery schools included training in paradoxical thinking--holding two opposite ideas at the same time. The Taoists teach about yin and yang--the polar opposites—that are held in a dynamic balance. The Buddhists teach about the Noble Middle Path between the pairs of opposites. In the Jewish Kabbalah, The Tree of Life, the middle pillar shows the path of balance between the opposites.

A common mission and goal can be especially helpful in transcending different lifestyles, as volunteers who recently helped victims of Hurricane Katrina learned. The media reported that traditional, middle class Methodists from Kentucky worked hand in hand with free-spirited, tattooed hippies from the Rainbow Family to set up a camp in Waveland, Mississippi to serve food and medicine. The barriers between people come down more easily when there is open-hearted serving. They find appreciation for common values such as compassion, hard work, and flexibility.

If we are to keep evolving as a society, our institutions need to reflect the changes in our consciousness and a new consensus in our values. Otherwise our institutions will become rigid and crystallized, holding back the evolving life within them. If we are willing to dialogue with others with different views, openly searching together for common ground, we can forge a new consensus in areas where there now seems so much conflict, and so create a better future for us all.