

Where do my values come from?

I define my values as the standards against which I aim to live my life. I may not always achieve the standards I set for myself, but that is my intent. Given that I am still living my life; have been doing so for fifty-six years and hopefully will do so for a long time to come, my standards have evolved and continue to evolve. I know that as I get older my values become more 'stable'. By this I mean that I recognise better (than I did when I was younger) the things that mean most to me. I know what is important in my life (which may be different to what is important in other people's lives) and I know what it does to me to live my values or have my values compromised.

There may be a genetic link to people's values, which has yet to be discovered. However, I know my values have come about through experience; of being in the company of others who have similar values; through observing the effects of others and myself, holding those values; of testing those values in everyday living and shaping the meaning of those values as I have lived my life so far.

Clearly, the influence of my parents was crucial in the initial setting down of my values, but not entirely. I was born when my mother was forty years old and was not an expected addition to the family, although I must stress I never felt unwanted for a moment. I have two older brothers; one seventeen years older than me and another ten years older. In many ways I was an only child and one of my earliest recollections was of my eldest brother going into the Army as part of his National Service conscription and my other brother taking his 'O' levels. The times were post war, being born in 1953, where bomb sites were our playgrounds and moving into the 'swinging sixties', where I was too young to participate! The values of this era must have affected me. They were times of austerity, yet I wanted for nothing. Being part of a community, which collectively came through the war together, albeit scathed, was important. It would be naïve to suggest that everyone got on well and I can remember my mother falling out with a neighbour. But in general people shared the time of day; helped others in any practical way they could e.g. running errands, or doing shopping for them.

As a child growing up during those times I know (now) that my values were evolving and being shaped by my environment and by those with whom I came into contact. My mother, who I know better than my father, was born in 'The Marsh'. This is an area that was bulldozed after the war as it had become a slum. She was brought up as one of seven children, the youngest in the family along with her non-identical twin. Her father, my grandfather, was an 'ash carter' by trade; a dustman. Her mother, as far as I know, never worked (not surprising with seven children and a husband to look after) and had heart problems, although she lived until her mid eighties. They lived through the Boar War, in which my grandfather fought, the Great War, the Great Depression and the Second World War, to name a few major events. Mother was born in 1913; father in 1905.

Survival in those days must have been harder than I can possibly imagine. Yet, in discussion with her about her life, I always felt that they lived their lives to a moral code and as part of a community that supported each other, with no doubt some exceptions. My mother had a wonderful story about how things were in the years of the depression, where the children would be encouraged to play near the railway, as the Marsh was next to large railway siding, and call to the drivers and firemen. Taken by the 'sweet' little girls, the firemen would (against regulations and in the face of disciplinary action) throw coal from the tender onto the embankment, which was then collected by the girls to take home to provide some fuel and heat.

I could have seen this as a family value of taking what you want; stealing by finding or begging. That was never a family value; stealing was wrong. Yet, somehow it was presented as taking what was offered was acceptable, to survive, not for profit. This may not have anything to do with my values and how they evolved, but I believe there is something intrinsic in this story that demonstrates the values my mother, the biggest influence on my life, had and carried throughout her life. There is something in this story that is a metaphor for the way I wish to live my life. There is a sense that, no matter how disadvantaged one is, there are others out there that will be willing to help. Perhaps I see myself in the metaphor as the fireman throwing out the coal?

My mother, the matriarch, was the person who had and always will have the biggest influence on me in terms of how I live my life. She taught me, harshly at times, what was right and what was wrong. She is my barometer for gauging every action I take. I know when I think of doing something 'wrong', my mother is sat on my shoulder. I never remember her directly teaching me values but I know there were clear values in what she said and did.

As part of my growing up and from an early age, I attended church with an 'Aunt'. I can never remember my parents going to church, except for weddings and funerals, or even talking about religion. However, they were always happy for me to go to church or Sunday school. In many ways I would say they were both neutral about religion all through the time I knew them. I was very close to my Aunt, who in fact was the next door neighbour, and spent a lot of time in her company until we moved, when I was about twelve. Even then I spent as much time visiting as I could until I got married. She and her brother and sister-in law were very kind to me and I know that they lived their lives by the values they held. They were not wealthy people by any means but would always give what they could and more importantly in many ways would give of their good spirit generously. They would help others without thought for what would be in it for them. Indeed, they looked after me like I was a blood relation for the many years I knew them. Only later in life was I saddened to realise that this is not the way everyone lived their lives. Nothing in terms of values was ever 'stuffed down my neck' by them;

just 'being there' seems to have been enough to have influenced my values and behaviour.

Interestingly, for me at least, I have few memories of my father. He was forty-eight when I was born and died when I was about fourteen, after a long degenerative illness lasting about three years. The years when he was ill were my formative years and I was out doing other things with my mates. Mum was out working, as dad was unable and I think now, sadly in hindsight, that perhaps I could have spent more time talking to him. However, I know that he influenced me in his presence. I remember him as a generous, laid back content man, who would give generously of his time. He worked hard and was proud of what he had achieved. His pride was well deserved as he was orphaned at the age of fourteen and had to immediately fend for himself from that day. He ended up raising three strapping lads, owning his own house and car and being well respected by everyone who knew him. Some achievement in my book!

Given the background of the family; from slum and orphan; through Wars and Depression, my brothers and I have ended up in a very different place. My eldest brother, who died at the age of sixty-two, became an artist attending the West of England Academy for the Arts. Such a thing, for someone from a working class background was rare back in the fifties. The story goes that my brother came home from school one day, where they recognised his talent, and told my mother he wanted to be a painter. She is reported to have said "Great, you can start painting the kitchen!" He was a good artist but in those days he could not make a living so went into the printing trade. The family was always proud that he was an artist, but no doubt also glad that he had a trade! When he retired due to ill health, he took up painting again and had started to sell some work before he died.

My middle brother was the intellectual and risk taker in the family. As the story goes, he obtained a good number of good passes in his 'O' and 'A' levels and was offered a scholarship to go to University by ICI. Mother refused to let him go as he needed to get a 'proper job'. This was probably the making of him! He is a very determined person with innate charm and genuine charisma. He worked exceptionally hard to build up a business of his own, becoming very successful against his standards of measurement i.e. by 'bank balance'. In many ways he is a highly likeable person but differs from me in that his prime goal, after not going to University, was always to make as much money as possible. I think once he started down this road it became addictive and he couldn't stop, even though he realised that making significant amounts of money meant exploiting others. I don't believe he 'hurt' anyone but the value I have of fairness became increasingly evident, and obvious to me by its omission as time went by and we no longer have much to do with each other, although I love him dearly, mainly I believe because of me and my dislike of the way he expresses some of his values and derides the people I work to support.

My own childhood was the best ever! Growing up in the fifties and sixties, having bombsites as a playground; not knowing that there were material things in life that were yet to be experienced; having a warm, loving (now very small) home and family was just fantastic! I loved school, except in the penultimate class of the juniors where I was very unhappy. I loved secondary school best. It was a church school, providing what I now know to be a moral Christian values base, although again, I don't perceive values to have been stuffed down my throat. At secondary school I learned a lot about the wider world; about life in other countries (edited through other people's eyes of course) and about me and the way I wanted to live my life. I was part of the church and choir and attended church regularly. I was fortunate enough to be invited to sing opera (in Latin) in Venice in 1964, something again that was not the usual activity for a working class lad to be doing. It's my claim to fame!

Although I see my values as 'my' values now, it is undoubtedly true that these have been influenced by my association with the church. I believe that my experience was that, rather than being 'indoctrinated' by Christian values, I was able to develop my own values, by experiencing the values of the church and by testing them out and deciding for myself if I should adopt those values. I suppose it could be argued that if I had been exposed to other values, such as happened in a previous generation in Germany, via the Hitler Youth, I may have adopted those values. Who can tell if this might have been the case? I like to think, obviously, that it would not have been so, as the foundation for my acceptance of my values has come from a broader base than just the Church and has been subject to a process of shaping and reshaping over the years.

Having enjoyed school I wasn't very good at passing exams and left with no examination results to speak about.

To finish, I want to describe something that happened when I was working as an educational psychologist in Swindon in 1993. This to me was a significant incident in the formation of my values and something that I hold on to dearly to this day.

I was visiting a school and the Head Teacher mentioned that he was concerned about a boy in year 6. This boy, he said, was very bright but recently he seemed to be experiencing problems. He described how the boy had been out with his mother at the week end and had walked into a glass door. He was also demonstrating some 'odd' behaviour in school. I agreed to meet him and find out what I could. He was indeed a bright lad with an IQ around 140. However, as it turned out, he was experiencing problems with his sight and co-ordination. A little while later he was diagnosed as having a motor-neurone problem.

The world in which he lived turned upside down, although great efforts were made to keep him positive. A few months later I was asked to see his four

year old sister. When I visited her at the house there was already the same diagnosis. She was the most gorgeous, blonde haired, little girl. I observed her trying to play with her dolls. She was unable to move her hands at all, so was moving the dolls by picking them up in her teeth and placing them elsewhere, talking to them as though everything was normal.

Her parents, a good middle class, church going couple, told me that she had completely lost the use of her arms and hands and could not even hold the weight of a crisp. She was losing the use of her legs and would need a wheelchair when she went to school. This is was one time when 'the system' worked quickly and seamlessly for both children. Health, social care and education put what was ever necessary in place for them. There was never any question that either of the children would not attend their chosen mainstream school. When I spoke to them, both schools were very positive about taking them. The little girl was provided with an electric wheelchair and the boy was given a speech recognition machine, which was imported from the US as it was not available in the UK at that time. Both children started their new schools, the girl attending primary school where she was able to be included because of the work we had done to get the wheelchair and 'remove the barriers' to her being part of the normal life of the school.

Heartbreakingly, a few months into her first term the little girl died, unable to breathe as the muscles in her throat stopped working. The family was heartbroken, as can be imagined; the professionals, including myself were also heartbroken. Not just because of the girl but also fearing for the boy as this was likely to be his fate. This is the first time I had literally cried over an issue at work. It tested my strength and faith in accepting this was a fair world, as clearly it was not fair at all. Why? Why had this happened to two of the nicest children in the world? Why had this happened to a good family? I am not for a moment suggesting that these things should happen to others but it seemed totally unjust and still seems the same as I write.

At that point I had a choice. Walk away and accept that the world is cruel and become cynical about what happens or to stick in there and keep trying to make a difference to peoples lives, particularly those who through no fault of their own are experiencing difficult times. I decided the latter and I know this is how I will live the rest of my life.

In some funny way this story has a happy ending. Although I left my post to take up another, I heard later (see newspaper cutting) that, despite of the obstacles he needed to overcome (or is it because of), the boy had maintained a positive disposition and had achieved examination results that many of us could never even dream about. What an inspiration to us all.

So this is a short version of where my values come from and why I do what I do today and the reasons behind the passion I hold for the work I do.

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