

# Reflections on values that challenge us and those that do not

by Michael J. Kendrick PhD

**Michael Kendrick** is currently an independent consultant in human services and community work with a focus on both national and international work in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom as well as other countries. He has a passionate interest in the provision of quality services to people with disabilities and other marginalised people. Michael, who is Canadian but now lives in the USA, has been a regular visitor to Australia over the past 16 years. With over 25 years of experience, he has made a very significant contribution to the field as an educator, consultant, and advocate.



His interests have included leadership, service quality, the creation of safeguards for vulnerable persons, social integration and community living, change, innovation, values, advocacy, the role of individual persons and small groups in creating advances, evaluation, alternatives to bureaucracy, personalised approaches to supporting people, and reform in the human service field amongst others. He is particularly interested in individualised service responses for people considered 'difficult to serve'.

He has most consistently worked in the disability, mental health and aged care fields for nearly 30 years but has also worked in areas such as drug abuse, aboriginal affairs, child protection and community education. In this work he has occupied a variety of roles including being the Assistant Commissioner for Program Development with the Massachusetts government, the Director for the Institute for Leadership and Community Development and the Director of the Safeguards Project. He is very active as public speaker and trainer as well as evaluator, consultant, and advisor to advocates, governments, agencies and community groups. His masters and doctoral work were in social work and sociology respectively. He regularly teaches at various universities both here and abroad as time allows. He is a citizen of both Canada and the US who currently resides in Massachusetts. A listing of his various publications and the more usual training he offers is available at [www.kendrickconsulting.org](http://www.kendrickconsulting.org).

Michael J. Kendrick PhD, Kendrick Consulting Services

4 Bullard Ave., Holyoke MA USA 01040

Tel: 413 533 3511 Fax 413 533 8071 Email: [kendrickconsul@attglobal.net](mailto:kendrickconsul@attglobal.net)

Values are normally something that we aspire to. They clarify and direct us to decisions and conduct that we may hope has merit. Ethics might be thought of as internalized values expressed through actual behavior i.e. values that are lived rather than simply talked about. In playing this role of guiding us as to what we should be, values can help us generate demanding ideals to strive for and benchmarks that clearly indicate when we have lived up to them and when we have not. If values are to do us any good they must both ask something of substance from us and place us in jeopardy of failing to meet the test they provide. Values that do not deeply challenge us to improve or deepen the merit of our conduct are not likely to be values that bring out the ultimate good in us.

Many people with very admirable values will, on occasion, come to recognize that their conduct is deficient, to some degree, in terms of its coherence with what their values demand. Though the person has failed to live up to what is required, the values still serve the person because they provide an ongoing reference point for future conduct simply by the contrast they illuminate between the person's stated values and actual "lived" values. By pondering this difference the person can either decide to renew their resolve to make their further conduct more coherent with their values or they can decide to abandon these values so that they can persist with the conduct that their former values did not support.

## Deception and values

Of course, it is also possible to evade the responsibility for living coherently with one's professed values and this will typically require some measure of deception of oneself and others. The most common of these is through hypocrisy. This refers to our capacity to persuade ourselves and others that no gap exists between the values we claim and our actual conduct i.e. we say one thing and do another but deny that this is so. In order to achieve this we typically need to deny, conceal or minimize the significance of the extent of the contradiction between professed values and actual conduct. We can also actively begin to reinterpret the values and how they should be lived in ways that free us to pursue conduct that would formerly have been seen as unacceptable. Inevitably, this will lead to some form of dishonesty.

Another strategy for evading the need to be ethically scrupulous is to select values and interpretations of them that would largely guarantee that we can continue to claim that we are successful in upholding the professed value. Typically, this is done by choosing mantras, slogans, rhetoric and buzzwords that lack so little precision so that it is nearly impossible to define conduct that is contrary enough that an unambiguous gap between the values and actual behavior can be discerned. For instance, we can claim that we are "caring people" but leave it entirely vague as to what is meant by the phrase. In this way, we can exploit the many advantages that come with being able to portray oneself as an allegedly good human being, but without being burdened by any specific obligation or responsibility in terms of our conduct relative to others. The elasticity of the conveniently vaguely defined "good person" standard may even convince the proponent as it quite ably allows them to believe that they are in fact "good". In effect, this ruse achieves the appearance of virtue, but does not burden people with the actual substance and demands of virtuous conduct.

If this kind of deception is not to our taste we also have the option of going further by seizing upon selective examples of purportedly praiseworthy conduct on our part as being illustrative of virtuous conduct. We thereby create the suggestion or impression in the minds of others that we are virtuous in a somewhat more systematically pervasive or holistic way. This might be thought of as us largely posing as having highly positive values at the level

of appearances, but without actually taking personal responsibility to adhere rigorously to a given value across all of our behavior. It is really a form of posing where we either consciously or unconsciously create symbolic instances of praiseworthy conduct, recognizing at some level that it is essentially only image management rather than a true accounting of who we actually are. Naturally, it helps with the theatrics of such appearances to enlist others to play their part to validate such self-congratulatory values claims in that being seen in association with credible persons serves to validate the impression that is being sought. This is done in much the same way that sellers of various goods summon attractive and apparently credible persons to be seen to endorse and thereby authenticate whatever claims the seller has about their product. In some instances, intentionally being seen in the presence of persons who enjoy considerable reputations for merit of a high order adds to the impression that these persons see the values claimant as being virtuous when in reality it is simply a coincidental juxtaposition.

If we find that we are actually seeking a type of genuinely good conduct rather than relying on deception, then this starting point offers us a chance to consider the possibility that values integrity could be cultivated, deepened and flourish as well as meet the most rigorous tests of authenticity. This would involve addressing several key challenges involved in living with values integrity that are discussed in brief below.

## Selecting positive values

Adopting and committing to positive values is not always easy or straightforward, as it asks us to choose values that help us to be better human beings and there are certainly many instances where we might select poorly. For instance, while loyalty to others can often be a wonderful component of relationship, it is also true that blind loyalty may undo much of the worth of the positive aspects of loyalty. This weighing of the worthiness of various values in turn forces us to discern and evaluate what are values that have a compelling track record of upholding what is good in and for people. For instance, the demanding nature of values such as strict non-violence and loving of one's enemies is admirable because it involves a standard of conduct in which anger, hatred and hostility to others is entirely unacceptable.

Often, we do not have to start from scratch with such perplexing discernment challenges, as we

can be guided by moral exemplars and by wisdom and religious traditions that they have already recommended in their own teachings and texts the values and principles that they have tested and found acceptable. Even these may need further testing, but they are typically a good place to start. Similarly, if one were to examine the values and conduct that they direct us to avoid, we may be helpfully instructed and guided. For instance, all reputable ethical systems emphasize the importance of both respect for truth and truthful conduct and the harmfulness of lies and the manipulation of others, particularly for selfish purposes. Since positive values such as honesty have repeatedly been heralded by sources that are themselves credible as being a highly desirable type of conduct over millennia, one can have much greater initial confidence in them.

### **Defining conduct that is consistent or not with upholding positive values**

Though it is unlikely that most people can act in entirely consistent ways in relation to their professed values at every point in their lives, it is nonetheless important that some meaningful degree of consistency be expected in regards to the symmetry of stated values and personal conduct. At the very least, values integrity would require that a given person know that their conduct is inconsistent and acknowledge this as a failing. This recognition would uphold and affirm the value by the admittance that personal some actions simply are not acceptable or defensible behavior because they are not in accord with the proper interpretation of the value at issue. For instance, if the proposed value was that the person should keep their promises and they failed to do so, then it would be important that this failure be acknowledged as being unsatisfactory conduct because promises should be honored.

### **Identifying what obligations and responsibilities come with values integrity**

Values that do not involve obligations and responsibilities are probably suspiciously weak because they do not involve any constraint on our less desirable and damaging behavioral potentials. Equally, values that demand that we treat others in an exemplary way will mean that we must regularly demand more of ourselves and consequently curtail any hurtful behavior. For instance, if we take on the value of “others before self”, we must routinely place the needs and interests of others as being of greater priority than preoccupations with ourselves.

This responsibility to be of service to others will of course mean that we are active and engaged in helping others flourish and this may well involve the acceptance of self-sacrifice as being an inherent obligation in the interests of service to others.

### **Addressing values and personal conduct incoherencies**

If one has embraced a life of attempting to live up to high standards or principled conduct, it is more than likely that one will fall short with some regularity as the higher the standard to more difficult it will be to be faithful to it. Given this premise, it will also mean that we must work very hard at correcting our ways so that moments of incoherency are lessened and instances of reasonably consistent behavior are increased. If, for instance, we have embraced kindness and compassion as worthy values then we will take on the subsequent obligation and challenge to generate kindness and compassion towards others even at times when we find it extremely difficult to do so. In fact, we may even have to embrace the recognition that we perpetually fall short and may have to seemingly endlessly have to re-resolve to do better and to follow this up with actual kindness when it matters.

### **Crafting safeguards to keep us honest and good**

They are many conceivable supports and safeguards that we might consciously employ to keep us more coherent with our values that we might otherwise be. However, these will not be useful unless they are sought out and enlisted with regularity and resolve. For instance, our friends can keep us honest by asking them to do so and forthrightly acting upon their criticisms when these are deserved. We can also keep our focus on the cultivation of good qualities by actively seeking out influences in our lives that direct us towards our higher and better nature and by avoiding influences that that bring out the worst in us. Thus we take charge of the state of our lives and become an active agent in defining who we are and what we would like to be. Though this will not ensure that we do not fall short, it will nonetheless contribute to our further development towards being the kind of person who is sincere in being good when it matters.