

The Journal of Values-Based Leadership

Volume 14
Issue 2 Summer/Fall 2021

Article 6

July 2021

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Recommended Citation

Hester, Joseph P. (2021) "Values, the Filters through Which We Think: Integrity, Transformation, Growth, and Hope," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22543/0733.142.1370>

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol14/iss2/6>

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Values, the Filters through Which We Think

Integrity, Transformation, Growth, and Hope

— JOSEPH HESTER

For more than a decade, I have been writing about “values-based leadership,” expressing my ideas about issues and constructs seeking clarity and understanding. Here, I return to my philosophical and spiritual roots to share what I believe is the energy shaping my values and the behaviors it espouses. I grew to manhood in the South and here I was educated and enculturated. My roots are in evangelical Christianity and perchance you have read some of my articles in *JVBL* or the *Humanities Bulletin* you have discovered that I take a more philosophical approach to ethics and moral issues having distanced myself from my evangelical past. Even my small book on the Golden Rule – *A Summoned Life* – takes a



philosophical bent rather than being “belief oriented.” This has been a challenge as many of my ideas and much of my thinking find their origin in my experiences in the church, the years I spent in divinity school, and the fact that most of my family and many of my friends are immersed in evangelical Christianity. No one completely escapes his or her cultural origins; about this I make no apologies.

Four major themes have shaped my life, work, and relationships: “***integrity, transformation, growth, and hope.***” These denote behaviors and attitudes that have defined my values and have grown from my conviction that values are the filters through which we think. These themes minimally involve three major actions:

- (1) extending one’s inner values outward through personal integrity and trustworthiness,
- (2) maintaining positive, growth-oriented relationships, and
- (3) developing ethical behaviors that not only connect us locally but to a wider world of people, ideas, and events. I could use other words to describe my values-orientation, values associated with civility and moral purpose, but civility and moral purpose are essentially involved in the four themes I have chosen.

The behaviors identified by these themes are generated and maintained individually and collectively by those who put values and ethics at the heart of their lives, families, and organizations. I can’t emphasize the communal nature of values

enough; without the support of family and friends our values often lie limp as we are unable to muster the courage for their activation. Support is needed from those in one's community of family, friends, and work. Values-based leaders should remember this and lead by example as well as by compulsion. Values-based leaders are people who are committed to moral integrity, habits of intellectual inquiry, high standards of moral reasoning, truth-seeking, and a willingness to re-examine their behaviors and the beliefs, values, and purposes driving their work.



Actions

- (1) ***Extending inner values outward with the courage to live virtuously*** includes self-awareness, patience, self-confidence, a willingness to listen and share, understanding individual differences and uniquenesses, and developing goals for positive and responsible growth. Here is something I wrote in 1995 for a speech at the Torrance Center at the University of Georgia which I think is apropos to this subject:

Special attention is given to the men and women who are able to withstand the pressures to conform and maintain their creativity and creative instincts throughout their lives. These are more often than not men and women of ambition, aspiration, and tenacity. For people of purpose, to put it plainly, it all adds up to a life well-lived with a fully operational sense of perspective. Although daily pressures may cause us to lose our focus as stress and anxiety creep in, with time, dealing with pressure becomes a normal way of life and the ability to sustain purpose strengthens. Nothing seems to perplex those who understand the meaning and direction of their lives; their behavior conveys reassurance. Their creative and intuitional qualities speak of this gift—how they discover it, and how they maintain a steady path over a lifetime.

- (2) ***Maintaining positive, growth-oriented relationships*** means being receptive to new and unusual ideas, respecting and appreciating the opinions of others their skills and growth, understanding and appreciating the value of work, and creating positive social relationships and attitudes. As I have written,

In time we learn that our lives are largely built on a scaffolding of relationships. Understanding this takes many years as most of us learn this lesson late in life. Relationships—good and bad—create the web of our lives. Finding purpose in our web is difficult for much that happens to us is either incidental or accidental. Purpose is intentional and a difficult and foreboding task. When we discover our purpose we are able to maneuver through life in more productive ways.

- (3) ***Finally, connectedness focuses on accepting others*** on the basis of human equality, respecting the value of individual differences, being responsible to others and to the environment, understanding the importance of family, faith, and community as originators of personal and collective values. As I wrote in 2018 in my article, “*Seeking Community in a Divided World*”:

Seeking Community in a Divided World seeks a common moral vision amongst values diversity. It recognizes the value confusion and conflicts burdening our lives but asks for dialogical conversation based on such principles, as human integrity and dignity, decency, fairness, responsibility, and equality. These common, but uncommon values are a framework for building moral communities. We acknowledge that our lives are a web of relationships and that ethical bonds are needed for building strong moral communities, nations, and the protection of the environment.

Themes

The four themes guiding my ethic are *integrity, transformation, growth, and hope*. A powerful force driving our values is HOPE. Hope is a metaphor used Biblically and signifies spiritual energy, an energy that leads to a life of kindness, honesty, and caring for each other. This energy includes what I call “spiritual wisdom” which is not limited to any form of religious expression. Rather, spiritual wisdom is an intrinsic predisposition indigenous to all humanity. It stirs within us the recognition of our moral center thus drawing respect for humanity as a sacred trust. Paul, in his letter to the Hebrews, provides a clue to the meaning of “hope” when he said, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Faith is thus the energy that lies at the heart of hope driving a life of benevolence and compassion.

Many will interpret “faith” as “belief in a higher being,” and the more secular will



render it as “belief in self and others or even in democracy and its goals.” Paul defines “faith” as “the substance of things hoped for.” Either way, whatever one’s focus, *faith provides a pathway for our moral acuity and hope articulates this pathway in a life of moral integrity*. Using this sense of hope — as promise, fulfillment, spiritual, and as a positive directive — we are able to understand how faith and ethics are

inter-connected. Hope then is a metaphor for a life of kindness and compassion, of altruism, goodwill, and understanding, and benevolence. Hope expresses our faith in others respecting their dignity and self-worth.

For the religious person, it is quite natural to turn to the sources of one’s faith for ethical understanding and meaning. The secular individual will have to explore other sources, even the experiences of life itself. Both could discover inspiration in their commitment to democracy and its principles of freedom, equality, and responsibility. Hopefully, the truth and meaning found in their search will have moral roots reaching deeply into the soil of ordinary living with sustaining growth and nourishment. One must agree that it is within the human ferment of dialogue and behavior, where faith

and belief informs ethical practice so that within our relationships with others, we are able to uncover the importance of ethics and the moral principles guiding our lives. Truth, goodness, and ethical behaviors comprise the nourishment for the human community.

Of course, we're tempted to hold up our religion as a model for life and goodness, but this doesn't mean that such goodness can't be found elsewhere. Try as we might to understand the views of others, we discover that in the act of thinking and interpreting, the voice we hear is so often our own. If the voice of morals and truth are heard only through our own filters – conceptual metaphors tainted by time and circumstance – the hope and the possibility for ethical dialogue and community understanding will be lost, dying a death of a thousand qualifications and authoritarian and repressive indictments. Spiritual wisdom dictates that no one person or one group of persons possesses a monopoly on morality or a control on knowledge and truth.

Living with ethical intentions gives meaning to life, to family, and community. It also widens our capacity for understanding and compassion. Our moral integrity includes respect and dignity for others. These attitudes are important for the survival of the human community – they are the crucibles through which “humanity as community” must pass. To be a community or to live in community is to be shaped and reshaped by a culture we are helping to produce. Within the nexus of history and culture, of belief and meaning, we are challenged to discover, as well as help create, the fundamental principles and discernible ethical patterns that have universal and lasting qualities. Our goal is, or should be, to live an ethical life so that we can share



with others through word and example a vision of a more ethical world. Ideally, this world will be exemplified by

integrity,
transformation,
growth &
hope.