

Do What You Will: best-choice values

We are Pagans, free-spirited folk who dance wildly beneath the Moon. We resist all constraint. We are temperamentally allergic to rulers and rules. We are goats, not sheep, and very glad of it.

Accordingly, we have evolved a high-choice ethic, centered on our Rede, which forbids only that which is demonstrably harmful. We will neither forswear nor prohibit any other actions. Instead, we consider all needlessly imposed requirements or restraints to be a form of harm and a violation of the Rede. We value our autonomy very, very highly.

This high-choice ethic causes us two big problems.

First, paradoxically, the very freedom of choice that we so cherish occasionally forces us to face tough choices between tragic alternatives. Sometimes the best anyone can do is to minimize harm, not avoid it entirely. The only way we could spare ourselves deep inner conflict and terrifying confusion at those moments is by ceding our responsibility to traditional rules or authoritarian rulers.

Since we won't do that, each of us is left to make our own decisions. What we choose to do at those critical junctures will deeply affect our lives and the lives of others. Mistakes can cause great harm. Although we can never fully comprehend the factors at play in any situation, we know we must inevitably experience the outcomes of our actions, good or ill. Thankfully, such terrible crises are rare.

Second, and the focus of this essay, if all harmless behavior is permissible to us -- as we insist that it must be -- we each need to choose between competing goodnesses nearly every day. We may want intellectual stimulation, fun, physical fitness, great sex, creative self expression, wealth, children, gourmet meals, friends, conscious contact with Deity, emotional intimacy, a lovely and comfortable home, a challenging career None of these desires are even relatively more right or wrong than the others. They're all completely OK, just different from each other.

In the world of form, here, where we live most of the time, there are always limitations of time, energy and material resources. These limits force us to assign each of the good things we want a comparative value, understanding that we may never attain the things we rank towards the bottom. These frustrating forced choices are what actually show each of us just what our true will is.

Here's a secular example: What if I really love classical guitar music and dream of a concert career? To make that happen, I need to practice many hours a day. A disciplined practice schedule, if freely chosen, is far from enforced drudgery. It's me really doing my own thing, self-actualization in action. My consistent work shows that music is a primary goal for me and not just some fantasy.

What if I don't practice? No ethical issues are involved. Nobody would think I was evil. At worst, they'll say I just didn't know my own mind, didn't want music as much as I may have thought I did.

What if it turns out that I didn't practice my guitar because medical school took all my time and energy? People would probably congratulate me on figuring out what I really wanted and having the guts to focus on that and let the lesser dreams go.

What if I didn't practice because I was caring for my beloved grandmother, sick with Alzheimer's. I value family over career. People would probably admire my loyalty and generosity. But my other potential, for medicine or music, would be deferred, perhaps lost.

Which is the better choice? Can we determine that?

On the very specific and personal level, values obviously vary widely. Just among the very few members of Proteus Coven, as of this writing, we have one person who aspires to be a filmmaker,

another who is working toward a PhD in a scientific field, a non-fiction writer But if you generalize a bit, you can see that each of us is striving for self-actualization in her or his own way, with the close-bonded coven serving as a support group for all. We all value self-actualization, and so do most Pagans.

Communities and cultures, whether religious or secular, have identifiable group values, usually more inclusive because they are more abstract. It's easy enough to observe whether a person's specific values (e.g. to be a doctor or a dancer) harmonize with the more general values of their community (e.g. self-actualization).

I think that, as our religion matures, we might be able to figure out which values are Pagan. But I don't think we can identify universal values or universally applicable standards for determining which values are "good" or "bad." Self-actualization, for example, is not prized in all cultures. Some value the family and community far above the individual, to the point of believing that "the nail that sticks up must be hammered down." For another obvious example, some of our neighbors define obedience and chastity as holy virtues. Most Pagans probably consider those traits to be pathological. Perhaps values are really just a matter of taste, of esthetics, personal or collective.

I tried to read some philosophical literature in preparation for writing this essay. Most of it seemed to consist of analyzing what people really mean when they discuss one of this culture's traditional virtues (courage, generosity) or vices (deceit, spite), simply taking as given which behaviors or attitudes are virtues and which are vices. Perhaps collective values are part of the most basic framework of any culture, the kind of assumptions that cannot be critiqued from within the system.

Lacking absolutes, how can it be right for a community to impose any specific prescriptive values on its members? As long as we do no harm, what we choose to do is nobody's business but our own. On the other hand, it makes sense for people concerned with their own growth to choose a community of like-minded folk, where they will find a supportive human context for their efforts to discern and live by their own core values. As a first-generation religion still mostly comprised of converts, we understand this quite well.

Backtrack: humanistic psychologists and educators talk a lot about "values." What can we learn from their use of the word?

"Value" is derived from the Latin *valere*, which means strong or worthy. Two closely-related words from the same Latin root are "valor" and "valid." Our values are those things, activities or qualities that are strong and worthy, high priorities, in our lives. What the psychologists call "values," occultists would more typically call "true will." Nothing new to us so far, except language.

People's values can only really be known by their actions. Some few people are hypocrites. Many more tell the truth as best they can, but lack clear insight. That's why so many wisdom traditions, including our own, advise us to judge others and let ourselves be judged more by actions than by words.

Integrity means making your walk and your talk consistent with each other. Incongruence, the manifestation of (usually unconscious) inner conflict, wastes psychological energy in rationalization and denial. As we come to understand our inconsistencies, we can resolve them in either direction (for example, either by practicing more consistently or by understanding that a musical career never really was my deepest desire).

As a person's self-concept, self-presentation and actual behavior become more consistent, their energy becomes available for growth and creativity. To make the best choices for myself, surely I need to know myself, to understand what I value more, less, or not much at all. The same principles apply to groups and their collective values.

So, what we can learn from the psychologists and educators is the concept of values clarification, a process by which people can become aware of their core values. Consciousness opens up our choices, both about our values and our actions, so that we can harmonize them better.

Here are the key points I think we can learn from humanistic psychology:

- Because values guide our personal priorities within the world of form, they must be chosen from among alternatives and within realistic limits.
- Unlike our minimalist ethics, personal (or community) values are prescriptive. They tell us what is best to do, not just what to avoid. Therefore they must be *freely* chosen.
- Values are demonstrated by attitudes and actions, not mere statements. Personal growth brings about a gradual increase in congruence.

It behooves each of us to clarify our personal values. It behooves those of us who are members of groups, lineages or traditions to work together to clarify our collective values. It behooves the entire neo-Pagan community to clarify those broadly-shared values that define our religion. Leaving our values as unspoken assumptions can lead to incongruity, as well as to inner and interpersonal conflict.

On what basis do we choose the best among the broad range of acceptable options? How might we find guidance without abdicating our freedom? How can we benefit from the experiences of our elders without bowing to hierarchical authority? How can we help one another make good choices without falling into groupthink or stifling conformity?

Up to this point, this discussion would apply equally well to secular communities. Secular environmental activists, for an obvious example, would do well to monitor their own consumption patterns, recycle their garbage, and so on (and, of course, most do). Religious communities have an additional Source for our values and an additional challenge: How can we draw wisdom and guidance from our religious lore without devolving into static fundamentalism?

"Religion," is derived from the Latin root, *ligere*, which means "to connect." Two closely-related words from the same Latin root are "ligament" and "link." Religion, re-linking, is a pattern of activity that restores a connection. We might understand this to be the link between values and behavior or that between the Sacred and everyday life. So religion, at its very root, is about congruence, about integrity.

What makes a person or a community specifically *religious* is that they seek to establish, clarify, deepen and sustain their collective conscious contact with Deity -- however they conceive of Deity -- and make what they learn from that contact a primary input into their value system, a guidepost for their lives.

Religious symbols, myths and rituals represent the collective wisdom and creativity of those who have walked the same Path before us. They are the cumulative heritage of our religious tradition (and, clearly, every religious tradition has its own distinct body of tradition, its own cumulative heritage).

Our Pagan lore is derived from many sources. Some of what we have comes from the ancestral Pagan cultures of Northern and Western Europe, or from the great classical Pagan civilizations. Some is borrowed from other continents, including contemporary indigenous faithkeepers whose native traditions have unbroken continuity. Some is the direct fruit of the contemporary neo-Pagan renaissance, for the Ancient Gods surely still speak to those who learn to listen.

Our cumulative heritage of religious wisdom is most often expressed in images, symbols, parables and myths. We should not take these literally, rather we should ponder them deeply, meditate and dream on them, for what they teach us of meaning and value is far more important than objective fact. We will not all find the same things in them, as myth always speaks to different people according to the needs

that are most pressing in their lives at that time.

As we grow in faith, we are shaped by this heritage. As we mature in spirituality, we contribute to its ongoing development. By opening ourselves to the still, small voice of Spirit that sings through our traditions and still sings within and all around us, we can discern what is strong and worthy for us, here, now. Thus personal and collective spiritual development are a constant and interactive developmental process in any living religious tradition, a double helix of growth.

In this way, the power and beauty of the Ancient Ones can empower and guide us in all our affairs, both religious and secular. So mote it be!

Values Clarification Exercises

For individuals

1. Select a Goddess or God that you've been feeling particularly attracted to.
 - Look up some good, poetic translations of materials from that Deity's original culture of the myths, odes, invocations concerning that Deity. Identify the values that are depicted in the stories and poems.
 - Now, do the same with some popular modern re-tellings. Are the values depicted there the same? If they are different, list the differences.
 - Which of these values seem strong and worthy to you?
2. If any of the values you have identified do not seem strong and worthy to you, try to figure out why not. Then rank the ones that remain in the order of how intensely they draw you. Identify ways you have acted in accordance with those values within the past lunar cycle (go back to the New Moon before last).
3. If there are any that you have not practiced recently, consider whether you want to drop them from your list. For the top half of your remaining list, plan three ways you can put them into practice within the next lunar cycle (go forward to the Full Moon after next).
4. Think about what you would put on a t-shirt (or in a signature file for your email), a short phrase that describes you as you are right now, and that you would want the world at large to see. What would it be?
5. Of your achievements so far, which three would you want to have written on your tombstone? This describes your most significant and lasting contributions. Is there something you would like to have there that is not yet so? Plan three ways you can begin working toward that goal in the next lunar cycle, and in the next year.

tips

- Identify the values depicted in your normal altar set-up, Circle casting procedure, etc. You can do the same with any key texts of your Tradition (e.g. the Charge of the Goddess). If your group or Tradition has a particular tutelary Deity, do the same with that Deity's myths, invocations, etc. Follow the same procedure as in the individual exercises #1-3, above. To make this exercise even more interesting, have each member do it separately, at home, without consultation, and then compare notes.
 - Brainstorm the Pagan values. No limits and no rejections, just list as many as the group names. Post the entire list. Then give everyone three slips of paper and ask them to

choose the three values they feel are most integral to our religion, and write one on each slip. Tally the result, and re-write the list of values in rank order, numbering the items. Cut the list off when it is twice as long as the number of people participating in the exercise. Distribute the new list, so that everyone can reflect on it for some time. Discuss the results and your reactions at the next meeting.

- Do rounds in which each member completes the following sentence stems:
 - I am proud of ...
 - I would like to ...
 - I have learned that ...
 - I regret ...
 - I am annoyed about ...
 - I am frightened by ...
 - I am disgusted by ...
 - I wonder about ...
 - I enjoy ...
 - I need ...
 - I want ...
 - I hope ...
- and, after each round, discuss any common themes that emerged.

A Resource

Simon, Sidney B. *et al*

Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students

NY: Hart, 1972

This collection of values clarification exercises is the foundational classic of the field. It's dated. Since it was intended for use in schools, many of the exercises are juvenile. It's a bit of work to adapt them. Despite that, this book is a very important resource.

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