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## LESSON B

### The Meaning of Values

**FOCUS:** A discussion about values presents a dilemma—whose values will we talk about? We will learn a new way of thinking about values that will help us understand how people and values are related. This new way of thinking will help us see that values are an expression of the moral sensibility all people have about what is right and wrong.

#### TEACHER BACKGROUND:

Material in this lesson is an important foundation for this course. The Teacher Information, "Another Position About Values," is furnished to give the teacher the philosophical background that is the basis for the discussion. Some students may be capable of reading and discussing the material. [This material is excerpted and adapted from: Wallace, C.M. and Olson, T.D. (1982) AANCHOR: An alternative national curriculum on responsibility. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, unpublished curriculum.]

#### ACTIVITIES:

1. Have students agree completely on a list of values they will adopt as a class. This is an example of a value-based approach. Use Teacher Information, "A Value-Based Exercise."  
*[Students will probably not be able to agree on a very large list of values that they all share equally. This is what happens when people try to define certain universal values. The list becomes broad and vague or the universal nature dissolves when even one individual disagrees. This is an example of a value-based approach and the problems it creates in talking about values.]*  
Next, have students agree to a value-free structure in the class. They will agree that any behavior is acceptable. Discuss what this will mean in a variety of classroom circumstances. For example, what does it mean about attendance? taking exams? homework? classroom property? personal possessions? etc.  
*[Explain that this approach actually elevates the value, "freedom of choice", to a special status as a value.]*
2. Students will redefine the meaning of values. Show that the meaning of values depends on what it means to be human and have a **moral sensibility** about what is right and wrong. Use Transparency Masters for Activity 2, pp 1-14 through 1-16.
3. Illustrate "moral sensibility." Make up your own quiz and have students take it. Gather the quiz and photocopy each one. Grade the photocopy of the quiz. During the next class period pass back the quiz and have each student grade his or her own copy. When the grading is completed tell students you have a copy of the original and that you would like them to compare their two scores. Return the photocopy of the previously graded quizzes. Discuss. Point out that students know the difference between right and wrong.
4. Discuss the ideas of "moral sensibility." Use Teacher Information, "Broken windows in Los Angeles" and the "Discussion Sheet" that follows.

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## “A Value-Based Exercise”

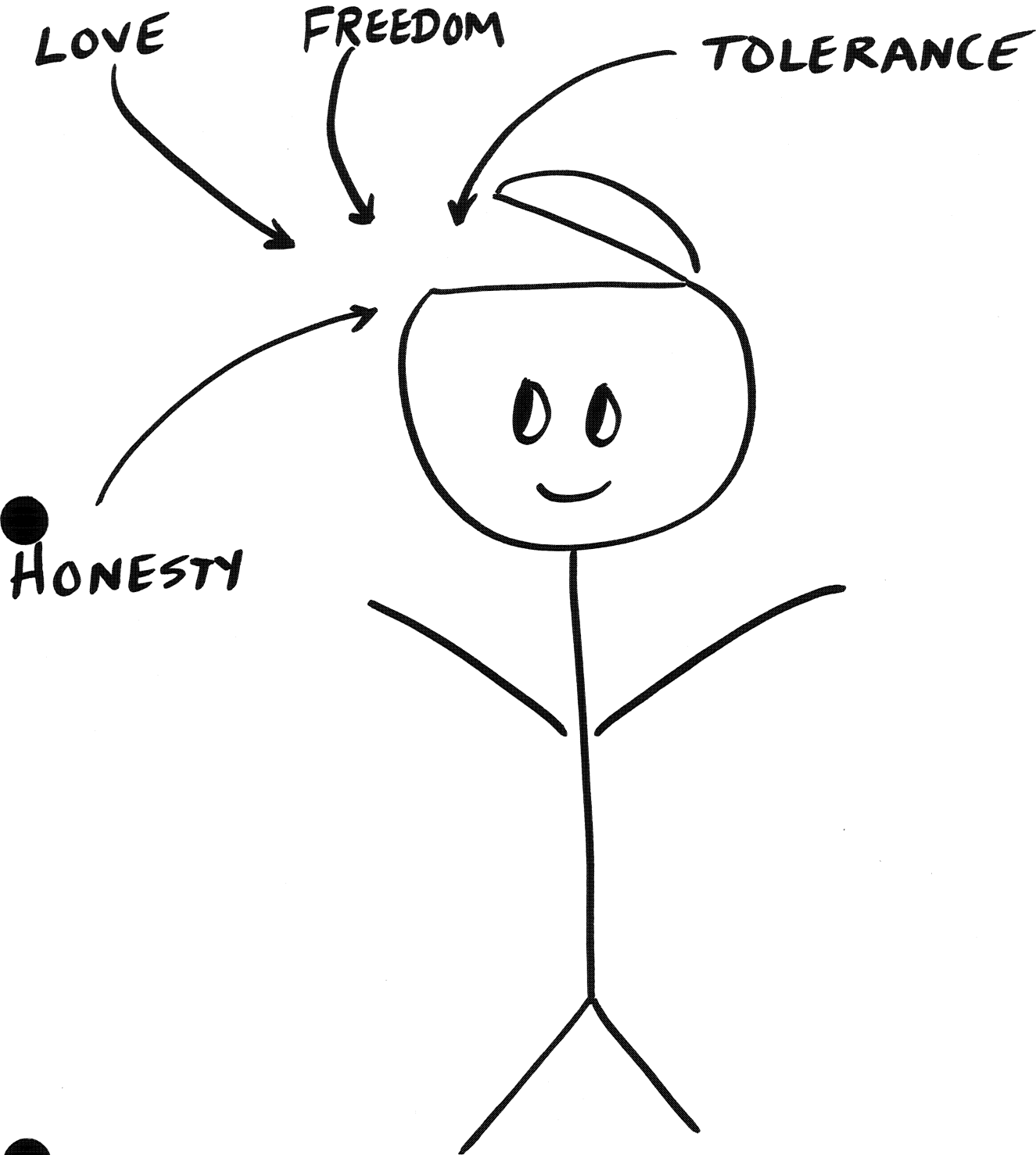
The teacher should appoint a class Leader and a Scribe. The Leader will conduct the discussion, the Scribe will write the values on the board. Students should refer to the personal values they have identified in previous activities for a starting point.

Rules for discussion:

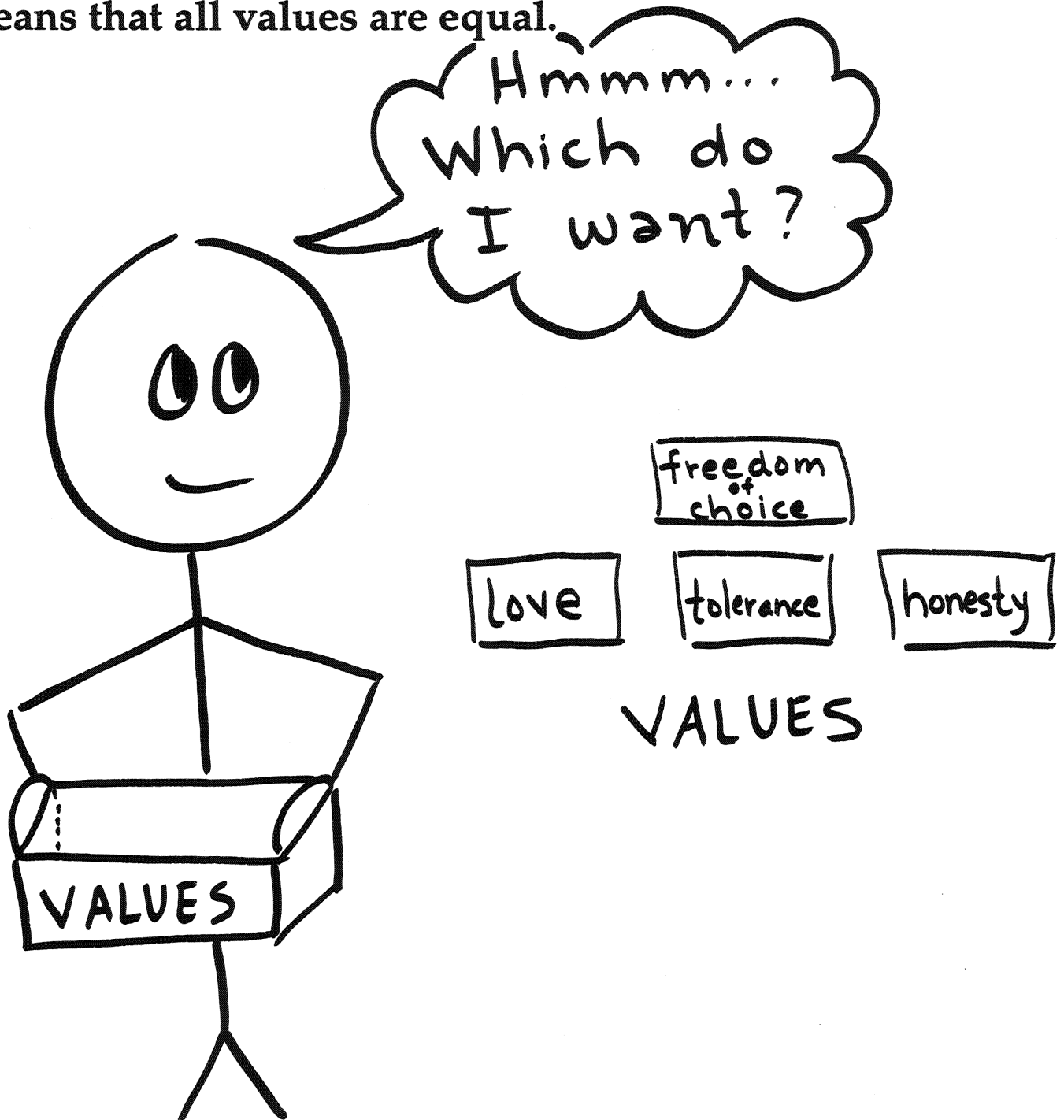
- a. Everyone has a right to speak their opinion and to have their opinion respected.
- b. Even one disagreement with a given value will disqualify it from the list.

This discussion could become lively! Students will probably not be able to agree on a very large list of values that they all share equally. This is what happens when people try to define certain universal values. The list becomes broad and vague or the universal nature dissolves when even one individual disagrees. This is an example of a *value-based* approach and the problems it creates in talking about values.

Some people believe that values are “poured into” teens. That is, teens “get” values from their friends, the media, teachers, parents, church, etc.



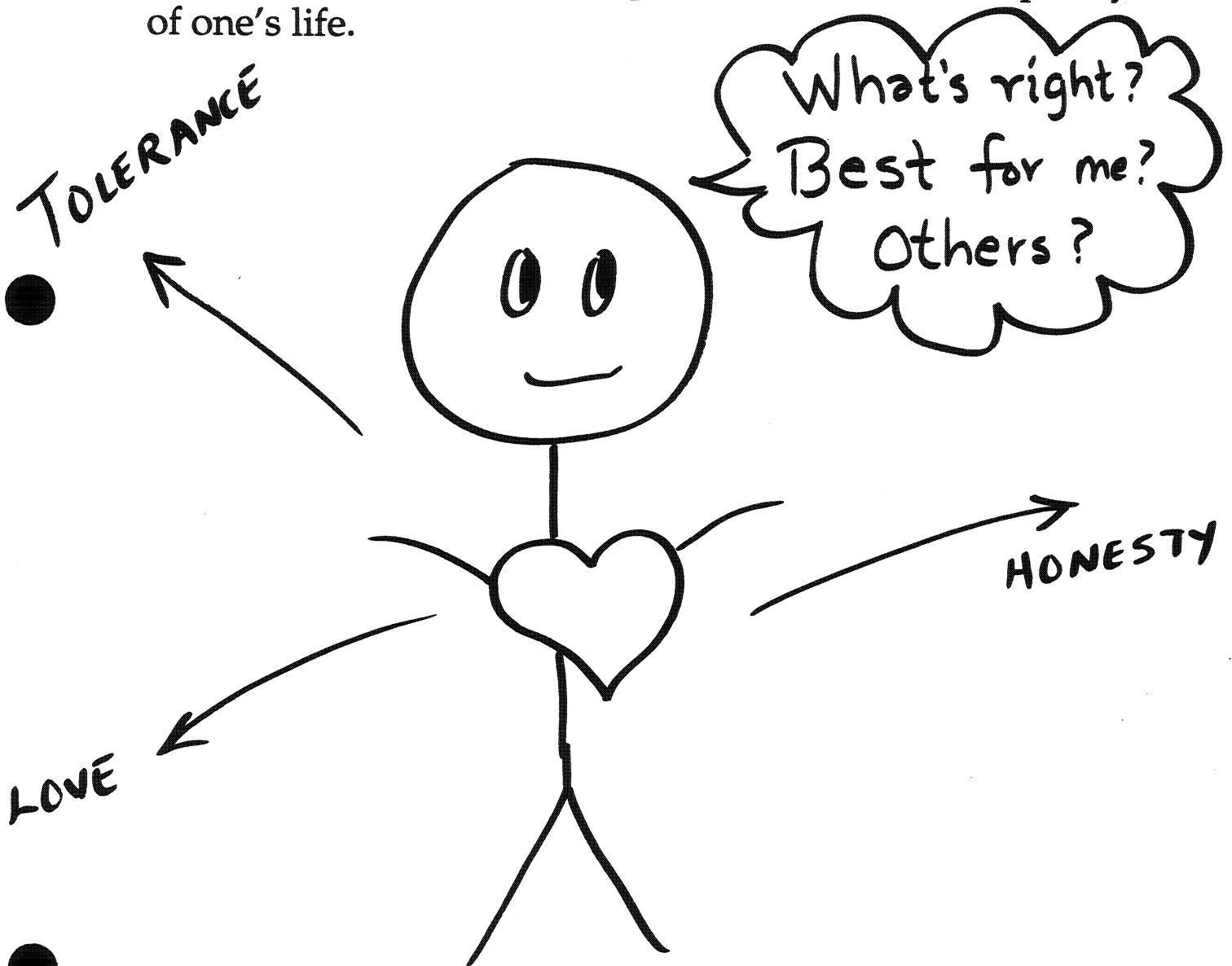
Others believe that the best way to approach values is to avoid prescribing a specific set of values. This means that all values are equal.



Except for the value of "freedom of choice"--this value actually becomes most important!

● A new way to think about values is to assume that having values is part of being human.

- The meaning of values depends on what it means to be human and have a moral sensibility about what is right and wrong.
- The best interest of self and others is always a consideration when making choices.
- “Values” thus become an expression of the moral quality of one’s life.



# Broken windows in Los Angeles

## caused by shattered values

Provo Daily Herald, 5/15/92

OK, I'll admit it — there are a lot of things I don't understand. I don't understand hockey. I don't understand why Tootsie Pops are shaped like that. I don't understand why anyone would want to intentionally suck smoke into their lungs. I don't understand Madonna. And I don't understand what happened recently in south central Los Angeles.

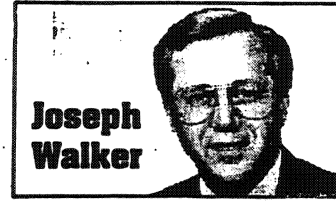
I think I understand the basics of the L.A. thing. People were concerned about the implications of a controversial court decision. And with good reason. I mean, I saw the Rodney King videotape — again and again and again — and I cringed with every brutal blow. I don't know why the police did that, and I don't know why the jury reached the decision it reached. I wasn't in court to hear all of the evidence, either.

But even if it was the worst judicial decision since Pilate, that

still doesn't help me understand the reaction to it. Not completely. I can understand anger, resentment, fear and frustration. But what has killing and maiming innocent people, burning buildings and wholesale looting and pillaging got to do with it?

Television coverage filled our living rooms with frightening, unforgettable images: victims being beaten by hate-filled mobs; vistas marred by smoke from arson-induced fires; street scenes that looked like war movie sets, complete with devastated buildings, the smoldering remains of cars and trucks and broken glass and debris everywhere.

But the most frightening image of all was the sight of children gleefully raiding shops and stores and carting off clothes, jewelry, electronics and alcohol. "This ain't stealin', man," one teen-age boy shouted at a TV camera as he



Joseph Walker

### Value Speak

hustled toward a liquor store. "It's just shoppin'. Only evrything's free!"

He laughed. And then he ducked into the store.

What we saw had nothing to do with juries or judicial equity. Nor was it about discrimination or social injustice. What we saw was greed gone crazy. We saw disrespect for other people and their property. We saw disdain for the law and social order. For a couple of days on the streets of Los An-

geles we saw the dark side of human nature exposed to the bone and laid open for all to see. And it wasn't pretty.

Of course, there was another side to the story. Lost in the chaos and confusion were quiet acts of heroism and courage — people of conscience who chose not to loot; parents who refused to allow their children to get caught up in the feeding frenzy; Good Samaritans who risked retribution by stepping in and caring for the injured.

So what's the difference between the teen-ager who carried out load after load of looted goodies and the teen-ager who chose not to? Why did some families pillage together while others stayed home and prayed together? What is it that prompted some people to pull victims from harm's way while others were pulling triggers?

Social scientists will wrestle

those questions forever, probably, so I guess it's OK if an average Joe like me doesn't have all the answers. But from what I can see it doesn't really have a lot to do with race, since there were people of all races looting, being looted and resisting the temptation to loot. Nor does it seem to have much to do with economics — in that part of town everybody is in basically the same economic boat.

The difference, in my view, has to do with values. Take honesty, for example. When it comes right down to it either a person is honest or he is not. There's nothing conditional about it. The truly honest person won't take something that doesn't belong to him or her — period. Police presence, or lack of same, is irrelevant. Ditto whether or not everyone else is doing it. There's no such thing as being relatively honest.

But if you don't value honesty — or if you place a higher value on convenience or personal pleasure — the only difference between honesty and dishonesty is opportunity.

What we saw in Los Angeles, then, can only be understood fully in the context of moral values. Yes, racial tension, economic pressures and perceived injustice fueled the fire. But the kindling was made up of shattered fragments of values like honesty, tolerance and love. And the only meaningful long-term solutions will be found in strengthened homes and a fortified educational system where values are taught, embraced and lived — really lived. No matter what.

That's something even I can understand.

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## “Discussion Sheet”

After reading “Broken windows in Los Angeles caused by shattered values,” by Joseph Walker, discuss:

Do you agree with Mr. Walker? Do you disagree?

Explain Mr. Walker’s argument about the breakdown in family values in terms of a *value-based* position, *value-free* position, *moral sensibility* position?

**VALUE-BASED:** People in American families agree on certain values like honesty, tolerance, and love. The riot in Los Angeles show how those values have “broken down.”

**VALUE-FREE:** People in America try to avoid prescribing a certain set of family values though honesty, tolerance, and love may be embraced by some. The riot in Los Angeles shows how some families and individuals don’t hold values like honesty, tolerance, and love.

**MORAL SENSIBILITY:** People in American families know the difference between right and wrong. The riot in Los Angeles shows how some individuals choose a course of action that violated their sense of right and wrong. These individuals blame the government or the L.A. police for acts of discrimination as the basis for their riot behavior. The real source of the behavior is a conscious choice to choose between right and wrong. The news media does not report the consequences of riot behavior in individuals’ lives. We may not fully understand the guilt that may result from choices made during the riot.

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## “Another Position About Values”

Although family life education is gaining in popularity, the dilemma about how the content of curricula should address the issue of values has not been solved. This paper suggests a way of thinking about people and values which dissolves the value dilemma.

The debate about values in family life education centers on whether the content is value-based or value-free. This debate is deceptive, in that it casts the problem as a choice between being value-based, therefore prescriptive of some set of values; or, being value free, that is objective and factual, thus avoiding a value stance altogether. The latter view is, presumably, more scientific and non-biased in the presentation of educational material. Both choices in this dilemma may be logically indefensible. On the one hand, value-based programs may be able to avoid prescribing behavior, but on the other hand, it may be impossible to be value free and objective when educating about human behavior.

One response to the critics of value-based preventive programs is to define certain universal values. Once these basic principles upon which “all well-meaning people can agree” are accepted, educational programs can steer a course along the center of these agreed upon values and thus avoid imposing inappropriate values on a target population. Yet, all it takes is one person to disagree with, or find an exception to, a value-stance and the universal nature of the value dissolves. Any value-based stance in a curriculum, therefore, is ultimately illegitimate, given that even one dissenting individual choice can disintegrate it.

The position of those who advocate the value-free approach may be equally illegitimate. By claiming to be value-free and not prescribing a specific set of values or behaviors, they actually prescribe that any behavior is legitimate. Without any criteria to measure the value of a value, all value stances become equal. Thus, the stand of those advocating objectivity in the content of family life education programs is really a value stance also. The value prescribed is *relativism*, where no judgment can be mounted against any value.

Often, those who advocate being value-free also take an additional position which legitimizes their position. This additional position claims freedom of choice as a more basic or fundamental value than any other values. By giving “freedom of choice” special status as a value, the value of other values rests in the process through which they are chosen, and not on any judgment of the moral content of the value itself.

The debate about values—whether to be value-based, value-free, or free to choose—seems to leave family life education without a logical foundation. If education for families can neither



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be value-based nor value-free, upon what ground can it proceed? One solution to the problem is to ignore the debate and go forward under the illusion that we can either be value-free or that we can be free to prescribe certain values.

Another solution is to re-cast the problem by changing the definition of how humans and values are related. This solution challenges the assumption about how we typically explain human behavior. Usually we explain behavior by looking to forces and variables beyond the control or responsibility of the individual. We assume that these factors somehow cause our behavior. For example, teens engage in premarital sexual activity because they have been influenced by popular songs and films. This thinking makes it seem that human behavior in the present moment is hostage to a variety of past events. In other words, individuals are victims of forces outside their control. With respect to values, according to this view, individuals have values "poured into" them from the outside.

We can recast this assumption by not assuming a cause and effect connection between past or present forces and the choices individuals make in the present moment. Rather, we can assume that individuals are capable, in the present moment, of making decisions either in accordance with, or against, their moral understanding of the situation they are in.

We explain moral understanding as an expression of human capacity, not an expression of previous conditioning. Thus, the meaning of values depends on what it means to be human and being human means having a moral sensibility. Moral sensibility gives people the ability to assess moral meaning, including taking account of their own experience. This view credits all people with the capacity to judge right from wrong and to do so with respect for both self and other's best interests. This view recognizes that values are not "things" imposed externally, thus, it becomes impossible to give an objective definition of values independent of human ethical action. Instead, values become expressions of the moral quality of life being lived by the individual.

This new way of thinking transforms the meaning of family life education to a context where moral meaning is examined as inseparable from human moral understanding. In short, individuals can evaluate, by their own conscience, the moral quality of decisions or behaviors. While moral meanings are examined, specific values are neither listed nor prescribed; nor does debate over universals occur. The focus shifts to the quality of human experience as measured by how people experience life when they are being true to their humanity, as compared to when they are not.

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More specifically, this view invites teens to examine, in their family relationships, the difference between being responsible for the choices they make or blaming other people and events for their actions. When adolescents see themselves as active participants in choices about their decisions, attitudes, behaviors, and feelings, rather than being ongoing victims of external influences, they see the possibility of change in their present circumstances and of a future they can actively create.

**Excerpted from:**

Olson, T.D. (1990). "Delivering family and value-based education programs: Philosophical possibilities." Paper presented at National Council of Family Relations, Seattle, WA. November, 1990.

**With reference to:**

Warner, C.T. and Olson, T.D. (1981). Another view of family conflict and family wholeness. Family Relations, 30, 493-503.