

# Becoming Ourselves Again

Reclaiming Our  
Core Values

*For you formed my inmost being;  
You knit me together in my  
mother's womb.*

— Psalm 139:13



*When we get in touch with what truly matters to us,  
we discover what makes us most alive.*

*When we find that which rests at our core and gives us life,  
we rediscover the value God intended in us and for us.*

This five-part reflection on Core Values was prepared for CREDO conference participants by CREDO faculty member and conference leader Brian C. Taylor. Brian was the longtime rector of an Episcopal parish in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and is author of several books on spirituality.

Read each of the chapters slowly. Take time to reflect on the questions that follow, noting your responses in the space provided. This booklet can serve as a reference point from which you begin your CREDO experience. Bring it with you to your conference.



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# Passion and Principles

Why do individuals, businesses, tribes, religious groups, political parties, and nations behave the way they do? What is it that brings consistency to a person's behavior over time, or supports shared commitment among whole groups of people? More personally, what is it that motivates us in how we live our daily lives, and how can we become more faithful and authentic in that life?

**Core values are those basic beliefs or organizing principles that give our lives meaning and shape our relationship to the world around us.** They direct us when we face a decision. They guide our ethics and fuel our passion for life. Unexamined, some strongly held values can also keep us stuck in unhealthy or self-limiting patterns and behaviors.

For people of faith, our primary shared core values are informed by God's will, or Revealed Truth, or the Word: this is what

*This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.*

— Jeremiah 31:33 – 34a

God offers — through scripture, theological and ethical teachings of the Church, and the lives of the faithful. God's "values" guide and govern our lives: compassion for the vulnerable, forgiveness for the repentant, justice and dignity for all, purification of our hearts and actions, and responsible stewardship of God's gifts. We are accountable to these divine core values as they shape our lives.

We are made in God's image, and so we carry God's own core values as part of our being. By discovering

what they are, how we stray from them, and how we can return, we become what we are created to be. As we consciously align our lives with God's will, we are most truly ourselves.

For Christians, living into our core values always has to do with the person of Jesus Christ, for he is the Word, the expression of God's will for humankind. Christ stands before us, beckoning

us to inhabit the core values embodied in his life and teachings. We live out this common calling in as many diverse ways as there are Christians, for we all have different gifts. But the many manifestations of our individual calls are but dimensions of the one person of Christ. In him is our unity. At important transition points, we feel our call renewed, and we look towards Christ again, taking up new challenges and opportunities for further growth into his life. There are also secondary values that are more of human making. Some of these are of our own choosing. Others are inherited. These secondary values can lie at the very root of who we believe ourselves to be. For instance, one man might have grown up with the belief that he is basically alone in this world, and therefore has to deal with his problems all on his own. In this case, he holds essential the value of self-reliance. Another person may have had the experience of being surrounded by attentive and loving adults, and so throughout her life, she expresses her value of being in relationship, in community.

As we rely on our primary core values and these secondary values over a period of many years, they become the organizing principles and provide the passion for how we live, day in and day out. A woman may value self-expression, and so she becomes an artist. Much of her life is defined by this value, for it drives her daily schedule, how she will spend money, what she does on vacation, and who many of her friends will be. Self-expression is not only part of her identity; it becomes the organizing principle for how she chooses to live.

Participants at CREDO conferences are encouraged to reflect on their values — both primary and secondary — and whether those values, in fact, serve as the organizing principles for how they actually live, day to day. We all get “off track” now and then; it can be helpful to remember what is most important to us, and how we want to live our lives. This kind of honest reflection can be the beginning of a genuine transformation.

### **Reflection Questions**

- What are some core beliefs I had growing up?
- What are my deepest values today? Are they, in fact, the organizing principles of how I live my life?
- In what ways are my deepest values congruent or incongruent with my calling as a follower of Christ?





# Environment and Values

Our core and secondary values come from a variety of sources. We arise out of and journey through a vast network of influences, shaping us every step of our way. We are raised in a particular nation, with its own values born out of history. Our personal ethnic and racial heritage informs the way we view life. We are

*We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.*

— Romans 12:5

shaped by our family background, friendships, and communities, and the national, cultural, economic, and neighborhood settings of our life.

Another deep set of influences can be religious. If we grew up in a particular faith tradition, it imparted

values to us. We may have assumed or rejected parts of this tradition, but it had its influence nonetheless. The same can be said for other spiritual influences along the way. Our faith is born out of complex sources and continues to be molded in a lifelong pilgrimage.

We perceive and respond to all these environmental influences in very personal ways. This becomes obvious when we look at

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

— Romans 12:2

siblings who grew up in a very similar setting. One becomes a people-pleaser, another, a rebel. Similarly, one first-born, female, Hispanic-American Episcopalian, who is from an Anglo-Catholic urban parish and poor neighborhood, is going to end up with some core values that are different from another person who shares the very same background.

We are, each of us, unique — a non-recurring possibility!

Part of our individuality comes from being graced with the gift of personal conscience and the capacity to choose. The power to exercise independent choice is very difficult for some, and yet it is always possible. Our faith tradition tells us this.

In scripture, we are assured that we have the free will to choose how we live our lives. God invites and asks for response not only



# Shadow and Conflicting Values

## Shadow Values

What one could call shadow values are those guiding principles by which we live, but about which we are relatively unconscious. Without awareness, shadow values can motivate us in ways that end up being unhealthy or harmful. Two examples from church life make this dynamic obvious to most of us who have worked in this environment.

One person makes decisions at every turn that will result in the greatest number of people being happy and feeling supported. He says he is called to serve other people, to love them as God loves, without condition, without reserve. Everyone loves him, but he becomes burned out, a hollow shell, distant from his family, and unable to make decisions that might displease someone. Layered over what he assumes is his core value

*I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind.*

— Romans 7:22 – 23

of loving others, he begins to detect his shadow value: to be loved by everyone.

Another person may treasure the prophetic role, speaking out fearlessly on issues of justice. In preaching, community organizing, and public witness, she speaks strongly on behalf of those without a voice. The fact that her congregation is shrinking is only evidence that she is doing the right thing, for prophets are always without honor. She believes she is motivated by God's demand for justice. But layered over her principles, she may also hold a strong value to be right, to win, to justify herself. In the process, people are trampled upon, nuances are lost, and communities are polarized.

Shadow values are often expressed in socially acceptable behavior, and are rewarded and thereby reinforced. There will always be supporters of those who appear to be loving or prophetic. Nothing wrong with that, right? But when these behaviors are motivated by a self-serving or otherwise unhealthy perception of one's core values, they inevitably cause harm to everyone concerned.

It's not a question of whether we have shadow values that drive us. We all do. It is a question of whether we bring these shadow values to awareness. When we do so — whether through therapy or spiritual direction or by the honest feedback of others in our family or community — we can lessen their impact on our life and ministry.

## Conflicting Values

Another potential source of difficulty with values is when two or more worthy values appear to conflict with one another. Most of us in communities of faith hold as a value the call to simplicity of life. We know that the pursuit of material possessions, frantic activity, and too many responsibilities can create stress and distraction. We can gain the world and lose our souls. So we seek a greater simplicity and focus.

And yet it is natural and good for humans to be engaged with others and with useful activities. Life is rich, and given to us by our abundant Creator to be enjoyed and developed. We are co-creators with God and within community. When we are too concerned with simplicity and remaining “grounded,” we can become isolated, dull, uninvolved. So two worthy values — simplicity and engagement with life — can be in conflict.

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.*

— Ecclesiastes 3:1

People talk a lot about finding balance, as if we could find that “sweet spot” between just enough simplicity and not too much engagement, between enough self-care and not too much self-giving. But perhaps it isn't about finding

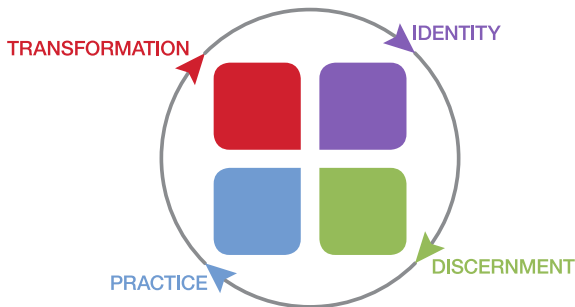
that single sweet spot. Perhaps our task instead is to learn to live in a creative tension between two complementary (rather than opposing) values.

It's fine that sometimes our strongly held values are in conflict with one another and create friction. That's what keeps us alive. And as we cultivate self-awareness, we discover how to live with creative and life-giving tension between them, just as we continue to search for what lies at our very core.



# Discerning and Daring to Live Our Deepest Values

At a CREDO conference, the faculty and curriculum present a model of learning and growing that has been helpful for many who are reflecting on their life and vocation. The acronym for this model is IDPT, which stands for Identity, Discernment, Practice, and Transformation. It is a circular, or better yet, cyclical process:



- ▶ **Identity** — our sense of where we come from, who we have been, and who we are now. However, we are never a fixed “thing,” and there are times when we feel nudged forward, and we itch for change or greater authenticity. This leads us to
- ▶ **Discernment** — the act of being in a questioning, seeking mode, identifying issues at play, and listening for the Spirit’s call forward. Part of this listening requires
- ▶ **Practice** — praying in new forms or building new behavioral habits, for instance. Practice may also extend after our discernment, for when we sense a direction forward, we often take on new or intensified practices that will clarify and deepen our new direction. Finally,
- ▶ **Transformation** — what God does, through this whole process. By God’s grace we become new people and claim our new identity, which starts us all over again.

Within this spiritual cycle of transformation can come the rediscovery and reclaiming of our core values. Through discernment, we look within and ask ourselves: What have we always cared about, more than anything else? In our life and

vocation, which is that quality of being and activity that makes us feel most authentic, what have we given our heart to? We take the time to examine our secondary, shadow, and conflicting values, and their effects on how we live our lives. We discern through reading, prayer, and journaling. But mostly, we wait for that which God would have us hear.

It is practically impossible to do this spiritual work without some form of community. We need friends, family, fellow pilgrims on the journey in order to get to clarity. We need people to discern with

*I wait for the Lord; my soul waits for him; in his word is my hope. My soul waits for the Lord, more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.*

— Psalm 130:5-6

us, to whom we can express our dissatisfaction, our dreams, our fear of change. Others give us a reality check; they tell us things we hadn't thought of; they mirror back to us what they hear and see in us. And when we have doubts, they give us encouragement and support to be our most authentic self.

In our daily lives, however, this kind of support is not always readily available. Added to this is the fact that many clergy and lay employees of the church are isolated. Something about the culture of church work seems to encourage whatever tendencies we might already have to go it alone. Clergy and lay staff are hesitant to open themselves vulnerably to their professional peers or their bishop, and doing so with parishioners can be tricky. So they keep their problems to themselves, always

presenting a positive and certain persona of faith, direction, and leadership.

*"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."*

— John 15:11

At CREDO conferences, community happens in a variety of ways — in small groups, relaxed conversations over coffee, faculty consultations,

and just by being with others in worship and fellowship. Only in a safe, confidential environment of people who care about us can some kinds of questions be raised and shared. However one finds this environment — with a trusted clergy-colleague group, a spiritual director, one's spouse or partner or close friends — it is essential to spiritual work.







# Grand Dreams

For some, a return to core values can be as subtle as re-setting the rudder while sailing. One might return to regular exercise after a period of neglect, or shift from one form of prayer to another. For others, transformation can involve much more.

As CREDO conference participants explore and engage the IDPT cycle of personal change — and filter the possibilities of transformation through their own core values — the result can manifest itself in a CREDO Plan or CREDO Rule of Life, which can serve the participant as both a faithful response to the work of their CREDO conference and an action plan.

Additionally, conference participants are invited to consider the possibility that, as they reflect on their core values, they might discover that one or more of their values are begging to find new expression in a dramatic and emotionally compelling way.

What Grand Dreams might rest at the provenance of one's deeply held core values?

A Grand Dream is a goal that has several key characteristics.

## A Grand Dream is:

- **Authentic** — anchored in a person's core values as an expression of one's deepest longing or strongest commitments;
- **Relational** — requiring discernment, planning, and collaboration within a community;
- **Visionary** — a long-term project, and while progress is measurable, the completion of the goal is not a sure thing;
- **Timeless** — part of one's legacy and will likely outlive its creator.

Examples of CREDO participants' Grand Dreams include:

- hiking the Appalachian Trail;
- building a national network of ministries for women who are abused;
- developing a new kind of parish community that is centered around the basics of Christian worship and praxis, but embodying this tradition in new forms that are vital and compelling in today's world;
- becoming expert in Spanish, chess, or French cooking.

Some recently ordained clergy have remarked that in completing seminary and becoming ordained, they have completed their most recent Grand Dream.

Whether or not such a dream lies waiting within your heart, CREDO encourages participants to rediscover their core values and to consider how they might freshly express them. After all,

*You are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever.*

— p. 308,

Book of Common Prayer

our most basic values not only tell us where we have come from and who we are today, they also hold our vision of what we are called to become tomorrow.

It is hoped that in this process, we will find congruence with our

core values and those of Christ, with those values we affirm for ourselves and God's revealed will, between My Grand Dream and God's Grand Dream for us. And as we find our way forward into our envisioned future, we will know ourselves to be in the process of redemption, where we are being brought to our fulfillment, according to God's purposes, along with the rest of creation.

Through redemption, we come to understand in our own life and vocation what is prayed at every ordination in our church — “that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.”

## Reflection Questions

- Have I had some recurrent Grand Dream that is waiting for me to muster up the courage and respond?
- If so, what is it?
- In what ways is this Grand Dream a reflection of my core values?



# Conclusion

When we set about discerning our values, we are on a journey to drill to the very core of who God made each of us to be. Inevitably, this asks us to pierce through a hard shell of some secondary, conflicting, and shadow values that make us human, yet hide us from our authentic selves.

On this journey, we sort through those secondary values that are inherited from many different influences, and those that

*“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”*  
— John 10:10

we have taken on by choice. We try to distinguish between once-unconscious shadow values that we may desire to grow beyond, and those healthier values that will

make more of us as we live into them. We acknowledge that there is a dynamic tension inherent in our values as we live and dance among them. And we find that Grand Dreams may resurface that have been buried for many years.

Along this journey, we also discover that this search is less about taking on something new and more about discovering something old, perhaps primordial... something knit deep within us by God.



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