

Taking Stock of Your Values, or Identifying Your Ultimate Concerns

The purpose of this assignment is to provide students with the opportunity to develop a more articulate sense of their own primary values, their own sense of what theologian and religious studies scholar Paul Tillich refers to as one's "ultimate concern." For Tillich, religion (or, in terms often more comfortably accessible in our contemporary, ostensibly secular world, spirituality) is not a special function in human life; it is the "depth dimension" in all events, activities, or choices that we encounter. During their time in college, students are called upon to make a wide range of choices – regarding identity, affiliation, professional goals, and how to begin establishing a clear sense of life-work balance – many of which will define paths that they will follow through graduation and beyond. College is time during which students develop a foundation of knowledge, both in the terms of their chosen academic fields and also in terms of self-reflection. How we use our professional knowledge after graduation is, in large part, determined by our own personal sense of value. This is an activity geared toward self-reflection, and successful responses will emplace students' scholarly, professional, or otherwise utilitarian values within a larger context, which is itself defined, on an individual basis, by what the student considers most valuable, or important, in their own life.

Prompt: On a blank, unlined piece of paper, and in no particularly ordered fashion, record what is important to you. Try to use single words or brief phrases, and don't concern yourself with ranking these things. Consider your life as a student, as a community member, as a citizen of the Earth. Let your mind rest a bit for this activity, and wander where it will. Where do your daydreams lead you? What do you value? What responsibilities do you consider yourself answerable to? What activities do you engage in due to internal motivation, and not because they are expected of you? What ideals do you hold dear? What relationships do you consider important? What practices do you engage in because they are significant to you? Try to fill the page.

Then, once you feel as though the words on the page are, collectively, a fairly comprehensive representation of those things, relationships, ideas, or practices that you value, take a moment to simply look at the page. Imagine yourself into the world defined by the collection that you've articulated. And begin to think about this collection in terms of relative value. Which of these things hold an especially high degree of importance for you? Circle the words or phrases on the page that you hold in especially high esteem. Remember that by circling some, you are not dismissing the others: you are simply working to develop a clearer sense of your own current hierarchy of values.

Now, look once more at the page, concentrating on the items that you have circled. Recognize that there will be times in your life when you will be pressed to decide between two good, but mutually exclusive concerns. Being a good student will at times diminish your ability to be a good friend. Being a good lover will at times press upon your ability to be a good employee. Which of the items that you have circled would – if need pressed – move you to leave a meeting, to leave a class, to leave a family event? Which of those circled items would you drop all else to be present to, in whatever way was necessary? Try to isolate one, maybe two, that hold this central, or ultimate, place in your concern. Underline your ultimate concern.

Finally, compose a statement, reflecting on the process of articulating your values, and identifying your ultimate concern. What did you learn about yourself through this activity? What potential challenges do you foresee, in balancing one concern against another? How do you see your values working well together, and in what ways do you see them potentially in conflict? How might you begin to make choices, as a student and a burgeoning professional, in light of what you have identified as your ultimate concern?