On Moral Values
by George Lakoff

We are the 55 million progressives who came together in this election, voted for Kerry and rejected the Bush agenda.

We came together because of our moral values: care and responsibility, fairness and equality, freedom and courage, fulfillment in life, opportunity and community, cooperation and trust, honesty and openness. We united behind political principles: equality, equity (if you work for a living, you should earn a living) and government for the people—all the people.

These are traditional American values and principles, what we are proudest of in this country. The Democrats' failure was a failure to put forth our moral vision, celebrate our values and principles, and shout them out loud.

We must immediately convince our leaders to unite behind these values, express our common moral vision and hold the line against the Bush agenda because it is immoral! Bush will call them obstructionists. They must frame themselves as heading in the right direction, going forward not backward, defending the greatest of American ideals and moral principles, working against a radical right agenda that would lead our country to disaster and speaking for more than 55 million highly moral, patriotic Americans.

If we communicate our values clearly, most people will recognize them as their own, personally more authentic and more deeply American than those put forth by conservatives. At the very least they will see progressives as having deeply held, traditional American principles. This would be a huge step forward from the present state, in which conservatives are seen as having a monopoly on "values" and progressives are framed as the party of “if it feels good, do it,” with no higher principles.

Moral values at the national level are idealized family values projected onto the nation. Progressive values are the values of a responsible nurturant family, where parents (if there are two) are equally responsible. Their job is to nurture their children and raise them to be
nurturers of others. Nurturance has two aspects: empathy and responsibility—both for yourself and your children. From this, all progressive values follow, both in the family and in politics.

If you empathize with your children, you will want them to have strong protection, fair and equal treatment and fulfillment in life. Fulfillment requires freedom, freedom requires opportunity and opportunity requires prosperity. Since your family lives in, and requires, a community, community building and community service are required. Community requires cooperation, which requires trust, which requires honesty and open communication. Those are the progressive values—in politics as well as family life.

Take protection. In addition to physical protection, there is environmental protection, worker protection and consumer protection, as well as all the “safety nets”—Social Security, Medicare and so on. Equality means full political and social equality, without regard to wealth, race, religion or gender. Openness requires open government and a free, inquiring press. Progressive political ideals are nurturant moral ideals.

On the other hand, the strict-father family model assumes that evil and danger will always lurk in the world, that life is difficult, that there will always be winners and losers and that children are born bad—they want to do what feels good, not what’s right—and have to be made good. A strict father is needed to protect and support the family and to teach his kids right from wrong. That can be done in only one way: punishment painful enough that, to avoid it, children will learn the internal discipline necessary to be moral. That discipline can also make them prosperous if they seek their self-interest and no one interferes. Mommy isn’t strong enough to protect the family and is too soft-hearted to discipline the children. That’s why fathers are necessary.

Apply this, via metaphor, to the nation: We need a strong President who knows right from wrong to defend the nation. Social programs are immoral because they give people things they haven’t earned and so make them undisciplined—both dependent and less able to function morally. The prosperous people are the good people. Those who are not prosperous deserve their poverty. Taxes take away the rightful rewards of the prosperous. Wrongdoers should be punished severely. Government should get out of the way of disciplined (hence good) people seeking their self-interest. The President is to be obeyed;
since he knows right from wrong, his authority is legitimate and not to be questioned. In foreign policy, he is also the absolute moral authority and so needs no advice from lesser countries.

The so-called “moral issues” are affronts to strict-father morality. Strict-father marriage cannot be gay; it must be between a man and a woman. For a wife to seek an abortion on her own or a daughter to need one is an affront to strict-father control over the behavior of the women in his family. They are not the main moral issues in themselves; rather they are symbolic of the entire strict-father identity as applied to all spheres of life. That’s why they are so powerful for conservatives.

Swing voters have both models—in different parts of their lives—and are unsure about which to apply to politics in a particular election. The job of a candidate is to activate his model in the swing voters. Conservatives know this: By talking to their base, they are activating their base model in swing voters. When liberals move to the right, they are shooting themselves in both feet: They alienate their base and they activate the other side’s models in the swing voters, thus helping the other side.

Democrats in Congress need to understand this. They must hold their ground, be positive and be aware that moving to the right is a double disaster. It will only help the radical right’s agenda, break with values that unify us and make it harder to awaken our values in swing voters.

The only way to trump their moral values is with our own more traditional and more patriotic moral values. Proclaim them and live them, and we will find that there are many more than 55 million of us.