Identifying What's Most Important

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Understanding what's important, what you value, is the key to navigating life's many options. Whether you're trying to decide on your next big project, long term goal, or just whether or not you should go out tonight, weighing your options against your values makes all the difference between making the right choice, or the one that leaves you feeling regret.

Values aren't something I set out to define. In fact, what was important to me was dictated by others. My Parents, society, social media… the things I thought I needed in my life and what I thought was important… wasn't really important. At all. Let's call those False Values.

We adopt false values by blindly accepting other people's definition of what life should look like… success, happiness, connection, romance, and even who we should be… as our own. Without examining further. Without ever refining or redefining them and truly understanding things like our identity, and how we want to feel once we achieve that thing we're going for.

To understand where false values come from, I'll unpack this in the context of then and now. Actually, let's set the stage and define values first.

For the sake of this article… ***values are defined as*** - a person's principles or standards of behavior; one's judgement of what's important in life; values are what you stand for.

Values determine your code of conduct. The scale upon which you weigh what you say, what you do, and ultimately who you are.

But where do values or more accurately, false values stem from?

False values then and now

Then

Values are essentially inherited from our family of origin. We were taught what was right and wrong, important and not important, what women do, what men do, what success looks like, how to be and act, and what to do in order to be loved and accepted.

Clearly we need to learn how to do the world from somewhere. But continuing down the same road as our parents and our parents parents doesn't necessarily seem like the best way to evolve.

Now

Now it's all on display. We gladly adhere to others idea of what success, happiness, and what a life well lived should look like. Not just social media, but any form of media, movies, or ads. We're not as immune to this as we would like to think we are. On a subtle and often not so subtle level, we see the carefully curated feeds of other individuals and feel a sense of lack and defeat, thinking our lives should look like theirs.

There's also what's socially and culturally acceptable. What is done in public and what's done in private. What's ok to talk about and what's not.

Diving deeper into then… How you were raised

Starting very early on, our well meaning parents let us know what was ok and not ok to do. What will land you in the court of loved and accepted and ultimately getting your needs met, and what will land you in time out… literally. This is where a lot of our behavioral tendencies come from. At this very moment, you might be thinking… here we go with that childhood shit… and I used to think that too. But where the fuck else do you think this shit came from? To think that we can spend the majority of our time being influenced by a small number of individuals and that not have an affect on who we are is kind of ridiculous.

Now, different families have different values. So this shows up in a variety of ways. In some families, that means we have to be impeccably perfect. Keep everything tidy, get perfect grades, be the captain of the football team, the teachers pet. If those conditions are met, then we get the approval of our parents and elders. We get the gold star.

In other families, we have to be goofy, overly joyful, and if we show the faintest, ever so slight tinge of what could be considered a negative emotion, we're tickled, joked with, made to smile… as if seemingly negative emotions are to be avoided at all costs. This makes sure that mom and pops version of the world is carried forward.

In these moments we log every little phrase, gesture, behavior, and posture subconsciously about how we are supposed to be, what's ok and what's not.

Anger is not ok.
Don't spend so much time in your room, you need to be more social.
Be happy no matter what
Be ok with what you have
Don't interrupt
Do it right or don't do it at all

We hear things like this that shape us as an individual and can silently control who we show up as in adulthood.

As a parent, I've definitely had these less than stellar moments myself. I've said things I wish I didn't say and that I'm not proud of. But I know that these things get to be unraveled as they come.

Whether it was straight up shame inducing statements like these, or more behavioral anecdotes, the way we relate, the feelings that were labeled as ok, and what's important was all framed for us very early on. Everything from emotions to the day to day.

I'll circle back around to now and talk about how society dictates our values here in a moment, but first, I'll give you an example of this in a simplistic sense.

Example: The way I grew up, predictability and consistency and the daily routine were prized. There weren't many surprises that happened and if there were, surprise certainly wasn't valued higher than consistency and predictability. Come to find out though… I love surprise!

How I rediscovered my values

I actually found my values in reverse. I started trying new things. One thing specifically triggered this whole cascade and evaluation, but I'll get to that in a second. I started playing with the parts of my identity that felt a little drab. Specifically being a dad.

I had a pretty easy childhood. I grew up in a supportive family with lots of people around all the time. The model that was portrayed for me as "this is what loving parents do" relied heavily on values like predictability, consistency and even practicality.

As much as I would like to pretend I made the conscious choice to enter parenthood with my own set of rules and that I diligently engineered how I was going to do it, that wasn't exactly the case.

Needless to say, when my daughter was born, I found myself automatically doing life and parenthood the way my parents did. Not necessarily a bad thing, but certainly not by choice. Some eight years later, I'm beginning to diligently re-evaluate what's really important.

Story time…

My daughter loves her Nana and Papa. They live in Rochester NY and we live in Asheville NC. Stopping by for a little surprise isn't exactly a short stroll down the street. It takes a bit of planning to make that happen. One time I decided to craft a surprise visit from Nana and Papa.

The idea was to just play it like we were going to one of our regular spots in town and when we got there, Nana and Papa would be there to surprise her.

The scene was set. My parents arrived and I had Violetta's mom drop me off at the front while she went to park and bring Vivi in for the surprise. I went inside to greet my parents and it was going just as planned. When Violetta came in and saw Nana and Papa in the booth at one of her favorite spots in town, The French Broad Chocolate Lounge, she was so absolutely elated. Her face lit up and her little body wasn't sure what to with all that love. It was worth every second of planning. She talked about it forever saying "I didn't even know you were coming!" It was a really sweet moment… a memorable one.

Here's the surprise caught on video…

https://www.facebook.com/jeffagostinelli1/videos/10213864289940990/

It's been 10 months since the surprise. We go into the Chocolate Lounge at minimum twice a month and every time we do I ask Violetta where she wants to sit. She looks at me with a huge smile on her face and proudly walks over to the booth where Nana and Papa surprised her. Every. Single. Time.

The activity of planning the surprise, timing it perfectly, seeing the expression on my daughters face, and the overall vibe this created left me with a beautiful mix of pride, accomplishment, nurturing, and love.

The element of surprise wasn't something I grew up with, but something I have come to discover is really important to me. When I feel things are getting too routine, I go to work at crafting the perfect surprise experience for us to do.

This could be something as little as a surprise trip to the park with her favorite snacks packed for an afternoon outing, a horseback ride strategically planned after school, or a play date with one of her friends. The element of planning the perfect surprise and experience is something I value.

Like I mentioned at the beginning of this article, I didn't actually set out to define my values on purpose, they sort of found me. The interesting thing about it is this. Not only did I not know my value of surprise, but it was literally inverted. My parents valued things on the other side of the spectrum like predictability, consistency, and even routine which I in many ways inherited as the norm.

This discovery sparked a full tilt examination of what other things I just accepted as values and the way things should be. I got massively curious. And it's evolving. I love surprise, and I'm also realizing that I love adventure and planning awesome trips and experiences. Let's dive into the other biggest influence on what we think we should value, or false values.

Now… how society dictates our values

Clearly we live in an in your face 24/7 kind of world where everyone's life is on full display. Especially the parts of their life that they are most proud of showing you. It's easy to start to want what other people want. Especially if you spend a lot of time surfing social without clearly knowing what you stand for. It can definitely be a great source of inspiration, but without discernment, can also stear us in the wrong direction.

This is not going to be some long rant about how social media is bad and how you should never use it. It is to say that if you feel defeated, judge yourself, or just straight up feel like shit after scrolling through facebook or Instagram for 1 or even 20 minutes, clearly something isn't right.

Getting a handle on how much scrolling you subject yourself to is clearly a direct path to rediscovering what's truly important to you.

In fact, reeling in my attention and minimizing distractions created enough space for me to realize something else was trying to get my attention and to stop searching outside for all the answers.

I talked about this in a recent article titles [A Remedy for Distraction – When Time Management Isn't Enough, Do This Instead](). So you can reference that for the backstory and more context.
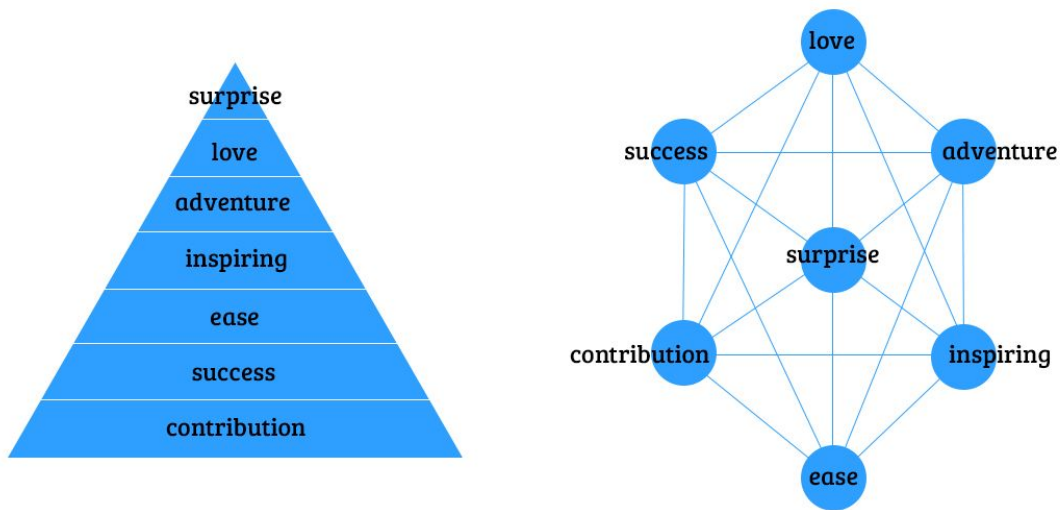
Before we dive in and start to unravel what you value, I want to give you a little heads up about more of the old school model of the values hierarchy and what I've discovered.

From hierarchy to matrix

The traditional values hierarchy never really settled well with me. It always felt like I had to choose one over the other. That I had to prioritize success above health. Health above spending time with my daughter. And so on an so forth. That's where a new approach came in.

Instead of the top down hierarchy of making one more important than the other, here's what I found to be far more useful.

Imagine your values all exist on an even playing field, and instead of being a hierarchy, they exist as a matrix. Sure you'll shift your attention from one to another, but they are all simultaneously fed and upgraded because they are all connected. Here's what that shift looks like.

In the above surprise example, focusing on creating more awesome experiences and surprises fueled my desire for success and choosing the right activities, not being distracted, and not wasting time. Focus became more of a byproduct of meaning instead of sheer brute force and will power.

At the same time, so did the importance of using my time wisely, eating clean and avoiding certain foods, staying on my meditation game, and getting enough sleep. That one value was a keystone for the rest to fall into place. It simultaneously brought most of my values into alignment. One value that came into focus upgraded the importance of other values simultaneously.

In the exploration, I've decided to look across the board and do a genuine overhaul of my values, see what's most important right now, and ultimately align them with my goals. Having my values front and center along with my goals has been the defining factor in staying on task and choosing what I give my time and attention to.

Discovering your values

Whether you know it or not, you already value something. The point here is to get down your current set of values. Then check out the list of values and see if there's anything you want to adopt or feel resonate with who you really are.

From there, you'll use your values as a guidepost to weigh options, make decisions, and choose how to invest your time and attention on what's most important.

Having a list to reference is powerful and can really help you find new words that you may not have even knew existed. Here is a list of values you can use to prime the pump and start to see what resonates with you.

Abundance	Control	Freedom	Order	Silence
Acceptance	Conviction	Friendship	Organization	Simplicity
Accomplishment	Cooperation	Fun	Originality	Sincerity
Accountability	Courage	Generosity	Passion	Skill
Accuracy	Courtesy	Genius	Patience	Skillfulness
Achievement	Creation	Giving	Peace	Smart
Activeness	Creativity	Goodness	Performance	Solitude
Adaptability	Credibility	Grace	Persistence	Sophistication
Adventure	Curiosity	Gratitude	Persuasiveness	Spirit
Affluence	Daring	Greatness	Philanthropy	Spirituality
Agility	Decisive	Growth	Playfulness	Spontaneous
Alertness	Decisiveness	Happiness	Pleasure	Stability
Altruism	Dedication	Hard work	Poise	Status
Ambition	Delight	Harmony	Potential	Stewardship
Amusement	Dependability	Health	Power	Stillness
Appreciation	Determination	Honesty	Practicality	Strength
Assertiveness	Development	Honor	Pragmatism	Structure
Attractiveness	Devotion	Hope	Present	Success
Attentive	Dexterity	Humility	Productivity	Support
Awareness	Dignity	Imagination	Professionalism	Surprise
Awe	Direction	Impact	Prosperity	Sustainability
Balance	Discipline	Improvement	Prudence	Talent
Beauty	Discovery	Independence	Punctuality	Teamwork
Belonging	Drive	Individuality	Purity	Temperance
Benevolence	Duty	Industry	Purpose	Thankful
Boldness	Ease	Influence	Quality	Thorough
Bravery	Education	Innovation	Realistic	Thoughtful
Brilliance	Effectiveness	Inquisitive	Reason	Thrift
Buoyancy	Efficiency	Insightful	Recognition	Timeliness
Calm	Elegance	Inspiring	Recreation	Tolerance
Candor	Empathy	Integrity	Reflective	Toughness
Capable	Empower	Intelligence	Resilience	Traditional
Careful	Endurance	Intensity	Resolve	Tranquility
Certainty	Energy	Intuitive	Resourcefulness	Transparency
Challenge	Enjoyment	Irreverent	Respect	Trust
Charity	Enthusiasm	Joy	Responsibility	Trustworthy
Charm	Equality	Justice	Restraint	Truth

Cheerfulness	Ethical	Kindness	Results-oriented	Understanding
Cleanliness	Excellence	Knowledge	Reverence	Uniqueness
Clarity	Experience	Lawful	Rigor	Unity
Clever	Exploration	Leadership	Risk	Usefulness
Comfort	Expressive	Learning	Sacredness	Utility
Commitment	Fairness	Liberty	Sacrifice	Valor
Common sense	Faith	Logic	Satisfaction	Victory
Communication	Fame	Longevity	Security	Vigor
Community	Family	Love	Self-control	Vision
Compassion	Famous	Loyalty	Selflessness	Vitality
Competence	Fearless	Mastery	Self-reliance	Wealth
Concentration	Feelings	Maturity	Self-respect	Welcoming
Confidence	Ferocious	Meaning	Selfless	Willingness
Congruence	Fidelity	Mindfulness	Sensitivity	Winning
Connection	Flexibility	Moderation	Serenity	Wisdom
Consciousness	Flow	Motivation	Service	Wonder
Consistency	Focus	Neatness	Sharing	Worthiness
Contentment	Foresight	Openness	Significance	Youthfulness
Contribution	Fortitude	Optimism		

Here are my 3 favorite ways to pin down your values

Each exercise has a slightly different feel, so you'll get better results if you do a little journaling on each one.

#1 - Identify peak experiences
Think back to times that were really fun or heightened emotionally. Were you travelling? Were you looking into the eyes of your beloved after you expressed yourself and feeling supported and loved? Were you running a marathon? Did you just finish writing a great article? Where you spending time with your kids?

#2 - Where do you feel deficient
If you've experienced poverty, you may come to value success. If you feel isolated or alone, you may come to value love and connection and make it a point to do the things that support those values.

#3 - What are your non-negotiables
The best way I've found to explain this is … what makes you feel more like you. - Do you have to spend time alone to feel centered? Do you work out and feel "normal"? Do you have to meditate at least 10 minutes every morning to feel centered? Do you feel more connected and tapped in when you're outside?

For each one, be as vivid as possible. Describe the experience or the requirement not just in the mechanical sense, but in the feeling sense.

Example: When I run, I feel like it's just me and the elements. It's the ultimate exercise in guiding my attention step by step, thought by thought, feeling by feeling, one foot at a time. I feel free, capable, strong, and alive.

Here are a few questions to help you prime the pump

What were you feeling when you had the peak experiences? What elements were present? Was it just you or were there others with you? Describe the experience in as much detail as possible and be as vivid as you can with your emotional language. The embodied feeling experience will create the richest result.

Now, read over what you wrote for each one and pick one word that describes each experience, deficiency turned into new choice, and non-negotiable.

Once you have this, reference the one word values list to make sure you didn't leave anything out. If you're looking at the list and see some values that "jump off the page" tune in and see if that's something you value.

Now it's time to widdle it down…

Once you have your list, play the *this* or *that* game. If you had to choose one would you choose this or that.

Example: If your list has success, love, surprise, and honesty on it, you would simply ask, "If I had to choose one would I choose love or surprise." You may end up keeping both, just make sure by the end of the exercise you have 7 values on your list.

Instead of ordering them in the old top down approach, take out your journal and draw a matrix similar to the one pictured above and put one value at each point.

Instead of putting the one that's most important right now at the top of a hierarchy, place your top priority right now in the center. If you're not sure which one that is, give yourself a few days to just observe what you've created and weigh that against you daily life. Start to notice what comes into focus.

What do you do with this now?

You can use your values in one of two ways… **as a guide** or to **course correct**.

As a guide

I'm going to go out on a limb here. My guess is you aren't starving for options of what to do, what to buy, or things you could insert into your life plan. Did you catch the sarcasm there? But for reals though. There's a million and a half options of what you could do, so being clear on your values is important now more than ever.

When you clearly understand your values right now in this moment, then it's a lot easier to make a choice. Let me rephrase that. It's simpler to make a choice, not always easy.

What could get in the way of you living your values and achieving your goals

Some may call these limiting beliefs, but that phrase has gotten so much air time, I'm not going to use it other than just to tell you I'm not going to use it :)

This is where knowing your tendency is HUGE. What is your go to response that has prevented you from living the life you dream for yourself. Is it constantly trying to get the approval of others? Is it the fear of missing out? Is it the fear of disapproval or needing approval.

For me... FOMO like a MOFO. If I am making a choice based on the fear of missing out on something, pretty near to 100% of the time, I regret it. In these times when I've decided to do something because I was afraid of missing out, I took note of the feeling in my gut, the stories in my head, and the allure of the call to distraction.

The next time you end up doing something and feel guilty as a result, just do a quick inventory of what the sequence of events looked like in the moments of decision. Knowing how you typically respond to what could come across as a great idea is golden. The next time it shows up, you can easily navigate using your values as your guide instead of your insecurities.

To course correct

Let's get real about this. No one is on course 100% of the time. The myth of perfection has been busted enough times to know that it simply doesn't exist. It's an unrealistic expectation that will just set you up for failure.

We all fumble from time to time and sometimes pay attention to our fears more than we ought to. The important part is how quickly you can recover. How long and how consistently can you shift your focus back to the things you value, the thoughts that support them, and the behaviors and actions that are consistent with them?

When you find yourself off course, and you'll know by how you feel, your values will help you get back on track. I'll go into this recovery period and how I navigate this one in another article.

For now, define what's important to you, understand what can possibly get in the way and start putting this into practice. When you have your values front and center you'll find a greater sense of peace in making tough decisions. You'll feel like you're doing the right thing, and ultimately you'll be acting on what's important to you.