

The Values Exercise

From "I have no idea what my values are" to three words you can act on, in one sitting.

About 45 minutes · a pen and something to write on · phone in another room

Start here

You have been asked what you do, where you grew up, and what you want to be. Almost nobody gets asked what they believe.

So you answered the questions you were given, with the answers that were lying around you. That is not a flaw in you. It is what happens to everyone who was never handed the vocabulary.

This exercise hands you the vocabulary, then makes you choose. You finish with three words for what you stand for, and one sentence you can act on this week.

How to do this

- Give it one sitting, about 45 minutes. Splitting it over a week is how it never gets finished.
- Write by hand if you can. Your hand is slower than your head, and the slowness is useful.
- Do not answer in your head. A value that never reached paper is a mood.
- Skip anything that does not land. You need enough answers, not all of them.
- Nothing here has to be impressive. Nobody is going to read it.

If a question gives you nothing, write the worst answer you can think of. Something to cross out beats a blank line.

The reason you cannot name them

You do have values. You act on them every day, which is why some things make you furious while other things leave you completely cold. What you are missing is the words.

Words come from somewhere. If the people around you talked about money, loyalty, faith, safety and status, those became your words. If nobody around you ever said what they stood for, you learned to describe what everyone else thought, and then to call it yours because you had held it a long time.

A borrowed belief does not feel borrowed. It feels like your personality.

One question does more work in this document than any other. Ask it of anything you are about to write down.

Would I still hold this if nobody I knew held it?

If the answer is no, or if the honest answer is that you have never once thought about it, you have found a borrowed one. Do not throw it out yet. Just know what it is.

Two more things get in the way.

- Approval. You have been paid in approval for agreeing. Some of what you believe was bought.
- Other people's feelings. When someone is upset, their view arrives with force, and it is genuinely hard to tell where their reaction stops and your opinion starts. That is why part two begins with your own history instead of with an argument.

PART ONE

Get a vocabulary

Forty words follow. Read all of them before you mark any.

Why forty and not the four you already know? Because a value you cannot name is not available to you. Most people are fluent in about six words for what matters, and they inherited five of them.

Put one letter in the space beside each word.

M Mine. I know this one. I already live it.

? I want this to be true of me.

X Not mine, and I have been acting like it is.

Go on your first reaction. The words you have to think hard about are usually the ? or the X.

You are not picking the words that make you sound good. You are marking what is already true, and what you have been faking.

The forty

Read the whole list once. Then go back and mark it.

_____ Honesty	_____ Learning	_____ Respect	_____ Humour
_____ Kindness	_____ Beauty	_____ Responsibility	_____ Simplicity
_____ Courage	_____ Order	_____ Independence	_____ Depth
_____ Loyalty	_____ Adventure	_____ Belonging	_____ Growth
_____ Freedom	_____ Security	_____ Creativity	_____ Presence
_____ Family	_____ Calm	_____ Justice	_____ Generosity
_____ Faith	_____ Service	_____ Patience	_____ Discipline
_____ Fairness	_____ Ambition	_____ Strength	_____ Steadiness
_____ Curiosity	_____ Health	_____ Gentleness	_____ Wonder
_____ Craft	_____ Friendship	_____ Truth	_____ Integrity

Now count your M marks. Most people have between four and eight. If you marked twelve, you are marking ? as M. Go back and be harsher.

Keep this page. You will come back to it.

PART TWO

Four places values hide

Do all four, quickly and badly. You are collecting words here, not writing an essay.

A. The high points

Three moments when you felt most like yourself. Not achievements. Not a day someone praised you. Moments when you were in the middle of something and thought, this is right, this is me.

Moment one

Moment two

Moment three

What was true about me in all three

Underline any word in there that is close to something on the forty list.

B. The anger

Three things you cannot stand. In other people, in the world, or in yourself. Be specific. Not 'injustice'. The actual thing that happened, or the thing you watch people do.

One

Two

Three

Anger is a value with the sign flipped. If lying makes you furious, honesty lives in you, and probably somewhere you were hurt. Write the positive word for each anger.

The value under each anger

C. The envy

One or two people you are quietly jealous of. Not the whole person, because you would not want their life. The exact thing.

Who, and the exact thing

Now take the person out and name the quality. 'She has a life she chose for herself' is a different value from 'she is admired'. One of those is freedom. The other is not a value at all.

The quality underneath

D. The cost

What have you given up to keep people happy that you still miss? A job, a country, a friendship, a way of spending Sundays, a version of yourself.

What you put down under pressure is usually what you actually valued.

PART TWO

Your shortlist

Go back through everything you have written. Circle every word or phrase that repeats, and everything that gave you a jolt when you wrote it.

Write up to fifteen here. Words only. No sentences. No explaining.

PART THREE

Fifteen down to three

This is where people stall. A shortlist feels like progress. Only choosing does anything.

You are going to cut, and it will feel wrong. Cut anyway. A value you cannot choose between is a value you do not get to keep.

Step one. Cut to eight

Take each one in turn and ask: if this were taken from me tomorrow, how much would it hurt? Keep the eight that hurt most. The other seven were never going to survive a bad week.

Step two. Three rounds

Three times you are going to ask the same question and then live with the answer. Cover your other answers with your hand if you have to.

Round one. Look at your eight. If everything else had to go, which one is the last standing?

Value one

Round two. It is gone now, and you cannot pick it again. Reset. Ask the same question of what is left.

Value two

Round three. Same again.

Value three

The third one is usually the interesting one. It is not the word you would say out loud first, and it is often the one you have been neglecting for years.

Step three. Check they are three different things

If two of your three are the same idea in different clothes, honesty and truth, say, merge them and go again. Three words that all mean the same thing is one word, and you can do better than one.

Then give each one a verb. A value you cannot turn into an action is a slogan.

Value one means I

Value two means I

Value three means I

Read those three sentences back. If any of them made you look away, that one is doing its job.

PART FOUR

Test them

Anyone can write three good words. The test is whether they cost you anything.

Fill this in for each of your three. Keep the actions small enough to do on an ordinary Tuesday, because that is the only day these ever get done on.

One

VALUE

The last time I acted against it

What it asks of me this week

What I have to stop doing

Who I will tell

Two

VALUE

The last time I acted against it

What it asks of me this week

What I have to stop doing

Who I will tell

Three

VALUE

The last time I acted against it

What it asks of me this week

What I have to stop doing

Who I will tell

If you cannot point to your value in your calendar or your bank statement this month, it is not a value yet. It is a preference.

The last box is the one people skip. A value that stays in your head is a way of feeling good about yourself. A value you have said out loud to someone is one you have to keep.

If you cannot bring yourself to tell anyone, write it down and put it where you will see it tomorrow morning. That counts as half.

PART FIVE

Write the sentence

Fill this in, then say it out loud once.

I stand for ____, ____ and ____, which means I will ____ even when ____.

And the other sentence, which matters just as much.

**____ is not one of my values, even though I have been living as if it
were.**

The second sentence is what you do with the borrowed ones. You do not have to argue with anybody about it. You just stop paying for it.

It is also the one to keep for the moments when someone else's reaction lands hard and you cannot tell whose feeling it is.

Whose voice is this?

Often you will find the reaction has a voice attached. A parent, a boss, a friend whose approval you learned to read for. Your own reactions tend to arrive without a script. When you can hear who it is, you have found somebody else's view standing in your head, and you can put it down without a fight.

Before you close this

Do these in the next week, or the three values become three words you once wrote down.

1. Write the three somewhere you will see them. Back of a notebook, lock screen, an index card on the desk.
2. Tell one person. Not for approval. Because saying it out loud is what makes it real.
3. Do the smallest action from part four on two of the next seven days.
4. Read the second sentence, the one about what is not your value, once a week for a month. That is the one that changes how you spend your evenings.

Then check in with yourself once. Not to grade yourself. To see whether these three are still the three. They can change, and most people keep two and trade one.

If this opened something bigger than a worksheet, that is normal. Values sit close to old grief. Take it to somebody who does this for a living, and take what you wrote with you.

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Made for anyone who was never asked what they believe.