

Discovering My Own Values by Leah Perlman

“At the end of your life” a friend once asked, “What do you hope to have happened?” I thought it a great question and decided to give him a thoughtful answer, so I pocketed it for later and bought myself a month for the assignment. For a while my mind flooded with questions of plot. Will I fall in love? Will I have kids? Will I know passion in my work? Will I touch lives? Will I change the world? For the better? What will my regrets be? Where will I have traveled? Where will I have lived? Will I have really traveled? Will I have really lived? When I was a kid watching movies, I used to shout during tense scenes, “Ah! What’s gonna happen!?” “How should I know?” My dad would laugh, “I’m watching the same movie you are!” I wasn’t really asking him. But the uncertainty, it’s unnerving.

It’s so tempting to ask questions about how things will turn out, grasping at some kind of assurance in a constantly changing world. But the answers are not here, not now. They’re waiting patiently at the end of the story, relaxing in the shade, probably sipping lemonade. They’re not going anywhere, so perhaps it’s better to let the questions go and just give in to the possibilities.

“Will I this? Might I that?” I let all those questions go, and soon a new question began peaking around the corner of my consciousness. Rather than ask what life I hoped to live, I began wondering how to live life. The assignment had changed for me, from one story telling to an inquiry into my own values.

For most of my life, I believe I inherited my values from my context. Looking back, I can see that in the years before getting into a good college the most important thing to me was just that, getting into a good college. Once at Brown, it was the grades. After graduating, I spent two years working and living, proving my independence to...myself? I think? And then I came to work at Facebook, a company with deeply embedded and well-articulated values. I believed in the vision and my coworkers, which was enough for me to adopt the values of the company as my own. Efficiency and leverage became important to me, along with openness, connectedness. impact. These were the things that kept me up at night.

What should’ve kept me up was my dad’s cancer. He’d been diagnosed sometime while I was in college, but I mostly pretended he hadn’t because that was easier. I assumed he’d just get better. But then one day, during my Facebook years, he got worse. X-years-to-live type of thing. I was tempted to push the news aside again and go back to helping democratize the world’s information (also known as processing my email) when something inside me flipped, snapped, woke up, and sang out. I saw in an instant that I was living a life on autopilot. I was asleep at the wheel, and I had been for...could it be? forever? So, what do I now? That day I put in a request for a six month leave-of-absence, needing space from my own life in order to see it. And also, to spend time with my parents.

In the two years that followed I began, super slowly, to start following my own heart. As unpracticed as I was, it often spoke in low tones, gave me mixed messages, or long bouts of silence. This is still true, but the more I listen, the more I hear. And now that I’ve spent some time living in accordance with my own intuition, I can look back and see a new

cohesion taking shape, my very own personal values are becoming clear.

And just before I share them, I'd like to add that one result of following my heart is ending up in the presence of amazing teachers and role models. Much of what follows comes directly from what I have learned from them. Big hug, deep bow.

Truth. I can't presume to know all the manifestations of living a truthful life, but I hope to always live into that question.

One aspect of truth I've come to value is the ability to see clearly. A practical way I've learned to see True versus False is through "Is" versus "Isn't." I value learning to see what IS. As I move down my path I know longer care what I am not, what this world isn't, what my partners or family or friends aren't, you know? Rather, who am I? Who are they? What is happening? Recently a friend stopped emailing me when he got a new girlfriend. My first thoughts were "He isn't responding", "I'm not as important to him", "I not being supported" and "I don't have my close friend anymore." It took me a few weeks to let go of what wasn't happening and see what was. He was falling in love. My hurt and anger had kept me from being happy for him. And as I began writing for myself each day instead, I was developing my internal support. My sense of loss and indignation had kept me from seeing the growth in myself. Along with the isn't's also go the the shoulds and shouldn'ts, the can'ts, didn'ts, weren'ts, and the needs and has tos.

I've also taken on the practice of speaking as truthfully as I can, which has come to include saying not simply whatever is true, but what is kind, helpful and timely.

Communicating truth is not just to lie or not to lie. Rather, it's an art. I can send you a text to tell you I love you. Or I can open my door to you whenever you knock, answer whenever you call, listen whenever you need. Which is most true? Recently I heard someone say that speaking truthfully is only half the game, "How truthfully can we listen?" Listen without judgment, without expectation, without interruption, and without planning a response?

Breaking through cognitive dissonance is another way of living in Truth. Cognitive dissonance is the holding and living out of contradictory values. Recently I've been learning a lot about meat production, a topic about which I consciously ignored of until recently. Probably because I knew that if I knew too much, I'd have to start sacrificing. And I LOVE hamburgers. So often we hold cognitive dissonance for the sake of convenience - not knowing where and how my clothes are made allows me to buy cheaper things, as if someone else isn't paying the cost. Not understanding the real threat to the planet allows me to keep driving, flying, producing...consuming. Consuming the very system, the earth, that brought me into being. I've never liked politics, or paid nearly enough attention to world affairs, human trafficking, religious oppression, women's rights, endangered species, or any of the worlds suffering. I live such a life of privilege it's so incredibly comfortable not to let any of that in. If I really knew what's going on in the world, could I still live my life the way I am living it? No. But I can't awaken unless I awaken to everything and so, I am committed. However, I've also come to peace with the fact that learning to live in alignment takes education, and time. The "right" way to live is not always obvious. I heard Al Gore once say that despite the environmental cost of flying, he believes it's worth it for him to educate the world on climate change. My path to cognitive resonance is to pay greater attention to my motivations, and to evolve at a pace that leaves me feeling strong and safe enough to continue down the path.

Self-Love. Until two years ago, I liked myself. If you'd asked me to swap with anyone I wouldn't have done it, and I often felt proud of who I was and what I'd done. But I didn't LOVE myself. I didn't LOVE myself as if I was absolutely perfectly wonderfully unconditionally irresistibly lovable. Like truth-seeking, it may be a journey that lasts my whole lifetime, but these days I'm aggressively committed to honoring myself, my needs, my desires, my tastes, my emotions, my choices, my past, my intentions, my body, my art, my mistakes, my everything. I hope to honor it all as if there is nothing more important in this world to honor. I (am working to) love myself as if I'm my own only child;

as if me and myself were the last two people on earth. I believe in myself as my very own religion. Not in a way that ranks me above anyone else; but allows for everyone to be their own personal God. I don't know who this, but I like it, "If everyone healed themselves, the world would be healed."

My body, my self, this physical being is the way in which I interact in the world. What my body does, how it acts, what it says, what my fingers type, that is the only contact I have with this universe. This is my vehicle, this is my tool, this is it. So I need to keep it healthy and happy, and energized. I need to know everything about it. I need to learn to use it as wisely as possible. This self, it's the only thing I have, really, so I will love it, worship it, and learn to make it shine as brightly as I know how.

Set an Example. And while I'm learning to honor and love myself, I try to remain aware of the effect that my actions have on others. I'm healing myself with the desire of healing the world. So after asking "Is this right for me?" The next question is "What example does this set?" They are deeply related, the answers can't be separate because nothing is right for me unless it is also right for others to witness. But often the answer to the first isn't clear and second question helps find clarity. We speak a thousand times a day, and each time is an opportunity to say something helpful or harmful. Sometimes it might feel good to complain or gossip, but what example does that set? Sometimes I rush to be first in line, get the best seat, get the best piece, etc., without regard for how that might be affecting others around me. Quite often I find excuses for living out of line with my values. Asking what kind of example I'm setting so often sheds light on the gray areas and helps me pay attention to the broader impact of my actions.

Empowerment. The world is. It is what it is. What good is "I wish my parents would...", or "the world was...", or "my boss would...", or "my friends this", or "traffic that", or "the weather this", or "anything that." The world is what it is. People are how they are. I don't sit around getting annoyed that gravity doesn't work differently (well, sometimes) because it just IS. So, the world is what it is and I want to live a happy peaceful life. So the only question is, how do I do? What do I change? Who do I become.? I love this quote: "Feeling resentment is like drinking poison and hoping someone else will die." Even if I don't change the world at all, I am empowered to change the feelings and responses I have to it.

Recently, an almost-landlord of mine pulled some weird stuff. I spent a few days feeling angry, and then annoyed, and now I'm almost up to compassion. I may never meet the guy, so it's not for his sake, it's for mine. Anger feels crappy, like I'm caging an animal inside me, and annoyance is the same, but maybe a fly instead. Compassion, however, is like drinking a warm cup of chai: cozy, sweet, and energizing. It feels great to my insides. My experience of this life will be the sum of my actions and my reactions, so if I want to live a good life (which I do! I do!) I will cultivate healthy responses. I want to take full accountability for everything that happens to me. I'm not a victim of anything. I'm free.

Creating what I crave. The idea is this. If I find myself craving something, I'm learning to give it away. If I'm lonely, I look for ways to make someone else feel less lonely. If I wish someone loved me, I find someone to love. If I think I'm being wronged, I find a way to apologize. If I want more community in my life, which I do, I will create it. I believe the clearest sign of what I am meant to cultivate in the world is identifying that which I crave the most. It's harder than it sounds. When I walk into the kitchen and see dirty dishes everywhere, you can bet my gut instinct is not to joyfully clean up after everyone. But, that's how it works. I have two paths to peace in that moment: let go of the irritation, or do the dishes myself. Understanding that which I crave is actually that which I am best suited to foster, that's pretty damn empowering.

Humor. While sometimes humor can seem like a frivolity, that which comes at the end of a knock knock joke, or after the chicken crosses the road, it must be more. Humor melts ice. It cuts tension, and lightens the heaviest loads. Humor has the capacity to transform suffering to joy. Sometimes humor is all that can break down the walls of one perspective,

opening up new ways of seeing, which offers us new choices. It can communicate truths that can be easily tuned out in every other way. I had a teacher who once said that humor puts the “light” in “enlightenment.” I think the reason humor has made it into my set of core values is because I need it to keep the rest in perspective. We are each, after all, infinitesimal in the span of time. So humor reminds us that while everything is important, nothing is so serious.

Love everyone. I will spend the rest of my life learning to see every person on this planet as lovable as a small child or a cute puppy. And also, as wise as the wisest teacher -- as worthy of worship as my highest value. Like the rest, this is going to take a while, probably my whole life. But for now, my days are laced with small openings. I’m proactively choosing to spend time with people who confuse me. I’m spending more time chatting with strangers. I’m spending time with the same homeless people I used to pretend I didn’t see. I’m watching children more. And animals. I’m asking more questions. I’m cultivating patience. I want to love everyone not for his or her sake, but for my own. Loving feels SO good. The beauty here is that the path to loving more, is loving more; the journey and the goal are the same. And so, I practice.

Aesthetics. I’ll never forget a conversation I once heard between two friends.

“Why do you do what you do?”

“To maximize the good. And you?”

“Aesthetics.”

I spent years trying to understand this answer. At first, it made no sense whatsoever. I’d spent my life trying to perform, improve, excel, achieve, each moment fueling the next like my body was on fire and a lake just ahead. Like the first friend who answered, I lived in a world of right and wrong, where right led to happiness and wrong to suffering. But aesthetics? To me that word had only to do with art, and only to do with a single moment in time. How does that look? How does it make me feel now? Through this friend’s answer I began to see the whole world as a single work of art to be viewed and re-viewed in one discrete moment after the next. In this framework, our actions are decided not by what we expect to produce the best future outcome, but by what yields more beauty now. And that’s “beauty” in every dimension, not just beauty according to the senses, but as the heart can appreciate it. In this framework, nothing is about right and wrong, happiness vs. suffering. Actions just result in more or less beauty along an infinite scale.

Last night I was offered a ride and chose to walk home in the rain. Why? Aesthetics. Yesterday, aesthetics guided me to read a book cover-to-cover. Sometimes we feel called to act in a way that doesn’t make the most logical sense. Later we might see a broader purpose it served, but it’s in following these instincts that we break free from the limits of what we know, and open ourselves up to new possibilities. I’ve come to see aesthetics as the value I’m honoring when there’s no good reason for doing what I do, but it just feels right. It’s the same force that guides a painter to choose how and where to stroke his brush, and what turns a life from a series of patterns and habits, into a work of art.

~ Epilogue ~

I sent all of the above to the friend who asked the initial question, “how do you hope your life to turn out?” And in a letter to him, I ended with this:

“I guess this isn’t quite the story of a life you’d want to read, with a climax and denouement. It’s not told from the end as we discussed. There aren’t a lot of specifics or characters. But even without any specifics in place, perhaps this all tells a story anyway. At the end, this life will have been a journey of perseverance; a century, I hope, of opening to truth and love. I will have cultivated a generous heart, I will have never lost the spirit of fun, I will have loved well, and set an example of love, truth, generosity, beauty, laughter and kindness. I will live and die at peace, confident that I did my very best.