

Values Make Your Life Fulfilling

The robber held a gun to Julie's head and told her he was going to kill her. "Why," she hysterically asked? "Because your life has no meaning," he replied.

Julie's heart was pounding as she shook herself awake from the frightening dream. She had recently been diagnosed with a terminal illness and had surgery, but was given little time and no hope. The combination of the illness and the nightmare moved Julie to action. The robber was right, her life was meaningless. She had stuffed her values and dreams for many years.

Within the week she left her job, her significant relationship, sold her house, bought a traveling paint set, and caught a plane to France. That was 18 years ago. Julie is currently giving plein air art lessons and paints professionally in Laguna Beach.

Psychotherapists Dr. Lawrence LeShan and Dr. Ruth Bolletino would not be surprised by Julie's story. They have seen many terminally ill patients totally recover and many others significantly extend their lives as they learn to find and express their best and most meaningful ways of living – as they "sing their unique song."

Bolletino said in a telephone interview that they have also helped many people who are not ill, but simply want to find better ways of living their lives. Bolletino believes that the primary work for all of us who want to live richer lives is to grapple with the forces that keep us from being compassionate enough toward ourselves to take our values seriously.

Our values are often suppressed by our fear of what others will think of us. Bolletino tells of a lawyer who had stayed in a job he hated because of his fear of seeing his father's disappointment. LeShan writes of a corporate executive who wanted to be a special education teacher, but had to courageously withstand the disapproval, dismay and horror of parents, siblings, and friends.

Our values are not to be taken lightly. Our values fuel our emotions, motivations, and sense of meaning. Life without them can feel futile. The good news is we may not need to divorce, sell our house, and leave our jobs to be true to our values. We can move in less dramatic ways toward a more fulfilling life.

Our first step is to identify our values. One way is to examine those times in your life when you felt most alive or at your best. As you examine what you were doing, who was with you, where you were, who you were being; do some values jump out? Professional Coach Laura Whitworth says she simply asks clients, "What would a fulfilling life be like for you?" Other coaches ask clients to list what they are passionate about.

Dr. Martin Seligman has the values in action survey at www.authentic happiness.com or in his book, *Authentic Happiness*. LeShan, includes 29 exercises to help you decipher your personal best life including a list of things that turn you on and off in his book, *Cancer as a Turning Point*. LeShan and Bolletino also do intensive work with individuals and groups, www.cancerasaturningpoint.org.

Your values may relate to your natural or dependable strengths, your interests, or your dreams. Your values may reflect existential needs which Dr. Carol Ryff determines as: mastery, autonomy, relatedness, self-acceptance, and growth. Dr. Ryff says people are happiest when they are feeling capable, connected, and autonomous.

Your values may also connect to what Dr. Christopher Peterson calls character strengths or virtues. He groups the virtues into six families: wisdom and knowledge (e.g., social intelligence, curiosity, love of learning), humanity (e.g. kindness and loving), courage (e.g. valor and perseverance), temperance (e.g. humility and self-control), justice, and transcendence (e.g. appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality). Dr. Peterson says people are happier when they creatively use their signature strengths or character virtues.

After you have identified your major values, prioritize them. Then examine how your life currently reflects your values. Come up with one to three actions that will take you closer to living a meaningful, vibrant life. Share you intentions with your friends and family and ask them to help keep you accountable to living a meaningful, joyful life.

If you find you are unable to share or live your values and desires with those closest to you out of fear or anxiety, consider talking to a mental health professional. LeShan and Bottelino offer intensive personal work assistance in New York City as well as in a retreat setting. Also consider that you may need a little help in being creative about living your values. Some job or relationship crafting may be just as satisfying as a major shift in direction.

Whitworth says that the link between values and a fulfilling life may be so obvious it's sometimes invisible. We can't be fulfilled without our values.