

What Do You Value?

Susan David: When I studied ancient Greek literature in my university days, I was always intrigued by the concept of catharsis. You may have run across the term yourself in school. Today, it's most often used to describe the emotional release we feel when faced with a tragic work of art. The usage of catharsis is at the core of what it means, as they say, "to have a good cry." It's why the tears you shed every time you watch Rose tell Jack she'll "never let go" can feel just as cleansing as they do heartbreaking. Though this definition of catharsis is the most common, it's not the only one, or even the definitive one. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum has argued that a more appropriate translation of the original ancient Greek term is something closer to clarification. From this perspective, the experience of attending a tragic play like Oedipus Rex is less about the feelings that overtake us as we watch and more about what an engagement with such difficult material reveals about the world and about ourselves. This wasn't mere entertainment. It was a chance to instill civic virtue, to communicate complex truths, to invite people into reflection, and to help people to process the reality of their day-to-day experience. There was even a special set of characters, the chorus, who served as a critical voice shepherding the audience through the plot and providing commentary to help them to interpret and understand what they were seeing. Even as none of us can currently venture out to see a play right now, we are all enduring tragedy on a scale that is large enough to shock even the master playwrights of yore. The illness, the death, the economic instability, the uncertainty about the future: it can all feel so overwhelming. But it can also be as clarifying as any play to grace an Athenian amphitheater. These circumstances offer us the opportunity, perhaps even the imperative, to define the values that are most important to us, and to make choices that move us closer to the lives we want to live. This is Checking In with Susan David.

For many of us, any mention of values is enough to summon unpleasant memories of Sunday school lectures or parental scoldings. We might associate values with rigid dictates issued by authority figures, who are eager to judge us as good or bad, right or wrong. These aren't the kinds of values I'm talking about today. A more agile and productive way to think about our values is to see them as qualities of purposeful action that we can bring to many aspects of our lives—especially now, during COVID times. There is no "one size fits all" values; values that are important to me might matter little to you, and vice versa. What ties them together is that our values can act as a compass or a north star, guiding us as we make decisions and leading us toward people we want to become. They're your why—the underlying reasons you do what you do. Values differ from goals in that they're not items to be accomplished or boxes to be checked off. They are ongoing, helping us to move forward, even as our circumstances change. Any list of possible values is bound to be woefully incomplete. They are as varied and individual as the people who hold them. Loyalty, reliability, creativity, wit, excitement, intellectual stimulation, social conscience, being present as a parent, partner, or friend—there aren't any wrong answers here.

In the first episode of this podcast, I discussed how values can help us make choices even during more normal times. However, crises have a way of bringing them to the fore. Everyday decisions suddenly seem loaded with significance. Should we visit grandma on her birthday and try to stay six feet away from her, or postpone until some indefinite point in the future? Should I ask my employees to show up for work this week, this month, this summer? Further, the pandemic has viscerally changed all of our lives, and moments of profound change often lead us to think about the big picture. With mortality now so close to the surface, it's natural to consider whether we're happy with the way we've been living our lives. And given our mass unemployment and uncertain economic prospects, millions suddenly have had to rethink their plans and expectations for the future. Many, many people are considering what's important to them right now.

If you're one of them, a great way to identify your values is to set aside some time each evening—just a couple of minutes to write down everything you've done that day that feels worthwhile—and then to figure out which value each resonated with. The pleasure you take in a Skype call, for instance, with an old friend, might show that you value deep relationships. The pride you feel after throwing together a delicious dinner with whatever is left in the pantry could suggest that you value creative problem solving or providing for your family. Of course, even in the busyness, our days can be particularly repetitive right now. So if you're coming up empty, another way to approach the question would be to consider what you would be doing if you were suddenly liberated from all your worries, COVID-related and otherwise. This isn't to say you should necessarily act on these dreams, but they can be revealing. A daydream about quitting your job and moving to Paris to take up painting might mean that you value adventure and self-expression. Or, if absent money-related stress, you'd like to finally have a child with your significant other, it could show how much you value family. As I've mentioned previously on this podcast, even the tough emotions we're experiencing right now can point us in the direction of our values, our anxiety, our pain. Even our anger is evidence that we care. And our values are revealed by what we care about. Your fury at the conspiracy theories spreading across social media may indicate that you value rationality or science. The deep sadness you feel at not being able to visit your favorite coffee shop or pub may show how much you value community and personal connection. Identifying your values so that they aren't abstract ideas—but are known and explicit to you—can be enormously helpful. They are the essence of who you are, the heartbeat of your own why. Last night, I had a COVID indoor playdate with my daughter and we read the beautiful book *The Little Prince*. I was reminded of the essential nature of values by this line in the book. "And now here is my secret, a very simple secret. It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye." I absolutely love this line, because values are of the heart, not of the head. And yet at the same time they provide a lens through which you can process tough decisions so that you aren't winging it. Rather, you are bringing about a greater level of intentionality to your life and your days, which is key to your wellbeing and to having a compass during changing and challenging times. Values also help inoculate us against choices that are not our own. Without even knowing it, we can start picking up on the behaviors of others, a process called social contagion. This can mean that over time, as if on autopilot, we can come to want things that we've never considered even wanting before: the car your neighbor drives, the clothes you see on Instagram, or the promotion that your colleague got. These things may look good and desirable

on the surface, but they might not be truly reflective of you and how you want to live. Research shows that young women who performed values affirmation exercises (an exercise in which they were asked to write down who they were and what they cared about) were better able to counter cultural prejudices against women in science and to earn high marks in their undergraduate physics courses. The same goes for black and Latino teenagers in school settings that consistently can undervalue them. Values are not just accouterments that make our lives more pleasant. They are loadstars that keep us on track, even as the world tries to shake us off course.

Knowing your values—your why—is only the beginning. If we really want to unleash their true power, we have to apply them. We have to walk our why. This can get complicated when two or more of our values seem to come into conflict, and often people will say that their values are in conflict. Say, for instance, that you value being both a reliable professional and an attentive parent. How then do you respond during COVID when you've got a client demanding that you turn around a contract by Friday, and a child holed up in his room playing Fortnite instead of finishing his remote math lesson? The secret lies in realizing that it is really the values themselves that are at odds. Your values just are your values, they just are. What is most likely at odds is not your values, but rather your goals. Remember, goals are the concrete things that you're aiming to achieve, usually at very specific times. Values are the reasons these goals matter to you. There's nothing inherently at odds about valuing both your career and your child. You can care about each deeply. However, there may be a conflict between getting that contract done on time and helping your kid through their lesson at this particular moment. A good way to manage conflicting goals is to fully attend to the things that matter to you when you're attending to them. If you're fretting about your child's grades while you're editing the contract, you're neither helping your kid learn nor adequately focusing on your work. The same goes with worrying about your work deadline while stumbling through quadratic equations with your son. Both things matter to you. Both are important. Give yourself permission to invest in each task without guilt. And this sometimes requires adapting and adjusting the specific timeline of your goals. In addition, while our decisions certainly do add up, no single choice point defines who you are and what you value. If you absolutely need to finish that work project by Friday, this doesn't mean you don't value your child or their education. It just means that you may need to help them catch up over the weekend instead, even if the assignment gets to their teacher a little bit late. Goal conflicts between work and parenting are particularly common. But this kind of flexible thinking can be applied to whatever situation you're facing.

If a friend lost a parent to the pandemic and is in desperate need for a comforting hug, it may feel as if your values of friendship and health are at odds. Here too, though, it's really the goals that are conflicting. The goal of communicating care through physical touch runs against the goal of maintaining social distance. In situations like this, emotional agility can be your greatest asset. Think of creative ways to honor both of your values, even if you can't achieve both of your initial goals. This may mean letting your friend know that you're open to extended Zoom calls whenever they need you, or sending over a treasured blanket or childhood stuffed animal to provide some of the tactile comfort you can't offer right now. It's helpful to come to terms with the fact that balancing goals won't always be easy. Often, we know rationally that we aren't omnipresent and

omnipotent. And yet we beat ourselves up. We tell ourselves that we are a bad parent and a bad worker. And we don't give ourselves the self compassion that is essential to being a human in a complex world. In times like this, it might seem that it's never easy. Choice inherently comes with sacrifices and forecloses on opportunities. However, it's also the only way to live in harmony with your values. To truly walk your why, you must make the decision to take each step forward with your values in mind and to also sometimes let go of goals that might not be achievable in the here and now because they are in conflict, because it's simply not possible to be in two places at once. And gee, because you're human, and therefore not omnipotent or omnipresent. Grant yourself the permission to let go with kindness, with grace, and with dignity. Living your values or walking your why will not bring you a life free of difficulty. We all face dilemmas. Now, it seems, more than ever, and no matter how solid our beliefs and regardless of our specific decisions, moving towards your values isn't always fun or easy, at least in the moment. If you're socially anxious, for example, and feeling a little lonely, and a friend invites you to a Zoom party, the easiest response might be to send your regrets and stay in bed. But if you truly value friendship, and let those values guide you, you'll make a move towards the value and say yes. And when you click onto that Zoom call, you might experience another bout of discomfort, more than if you had stayed under the covers. But that initial discomfort is the price of admission to a meaningful life.

I recall a profound interaction I had with Jane Goodall, the famous primatologist. She told me that at a certain point in her illustrious career, which she had devoted to conservation and to animal welfare, she went through a period in which she cried frequently. She later discussed this with a friend, who asked her why she thought she'd been so sad. "And I said something which really startled me," said Jane, "It had never really come to my mind before. I said, 'I think I was crying because I knew I was giving up the right to feel selfish.' That's what I said to her. Isn't that strange?" A colleague of mine described the dilemma this way: your mind says, "Hey, I thought if I did this values thing, I wouldn't feel so bad or so conflicted after making a choice." But the simple fact is, you still have to choose. There is loss inherent in any choice. You give up the path not taken. And with any loss comes a certain amount of pain, sorrow, and even regret. The difference is that you will have a real investment in it that will help you to navigate with agility through those difficult emotions. Even if your choice turns out to be wrong, you can at least take comfort in knowing that you made the decision for the right reasons. You can show up to yourself with courage, curiosity, and self-compassion.

Lately, I've been doing a lot of reflection about what's important to me. And I've been thinking about a colleague named Linda. Linda was diagnosed with ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. It's always difficult to watch someone you care about suffer. But it was especially hard with Linda. She was so full of love for her family, her community, and for simple pleasures, like dancing. Linda loved dancing, and the disease stole that from her. But Linda knew who she was and what she valued. And the one thing that she valued deeply was human connection. Until almost the very end, she used social media to maintain those connections. In one of her final posts before she went into hospice, she wrote, "I plan on taking this quiet time, in that sacred place, to think about my life and my death. I feel lucky. Many people are snatched from this life without a chance to measure their mission. In the meantime, dance if you can." Our values are what give us the opportunity to

live our fullest lives, to be the people we aspire to become in times that are challenging, in times that are now. Know your values. Heed their call, and, of course, dance if you can. I hope that this episode was of value to you. That's all from me today. Be well, stay safe, and let's check in next week.