

# Your Past, Present, Future Self

**Susan David:** Many of us are feeling confused and torn right now, even as the immediate threat of the coronavirus pandemic subsides in some parts of the world with life taking on a semblance of being normal. There is, on the one hand, a yearning for the way things were, and on the other hand a pushing back, a desire to learn from the experience and to reasonably question: what parts of normal weren't working and what parts of normal do we not want to return to? For so many in the world, these questions are against the backdrop of so much pain and heartache at the moment, as protests focusing on equity and fairness and justice are at the fore of so many people's minds. And there is so much hurt. Now feels like the time for all of us to connect in with the backdrop of the pandemic but to also think about our current situation and who and how we want to move forward in the future so that the world we create is a world that we will be proud of and that we will want to raise our children into. So as we start talking about life returning to normal, it's helpful for us to think about what normal looks like, both for ourselves but also for the society that we want to create. And I thought that it would be wonderful to spend this episode focusing on exactly that. Who is the "us" in us? What are the values that we want to bring forward? And how can we shape a "normal" world that is both connected with our past and our present, but is also speaking to the future that we want to create for ourselves, for our families, and for our communities. This is Checking In with Susan David.

In a previous episode, I spoke about the death of my warm-hearted, warm-handed Papa when I was 15 years old. Our family was emotionally and financially ravaged. While, on the outside, I looked okay, on the inside, I was spiraling down fast. I was in suffering. One day, my English teacher—with blue eyes that I will never forget—handed out blank notebooks to the class and said, "Write. Tell the truth. Write like no one is reading." And just like that, I was invited to show up to my grief and my pain. It was such a small act, but nothing short of a revolution for me. In that period of darkness, I started to connect with my regrets and my irrevocable loss. But something began to emerge: a sense of insight, clarity, and resilience. It was a learning about myself and about the grief that, as it turned out, shaped my entire life and my career.

At a societal level, this pandemic has evoked a collective trauma, an awakening to the reality that we did not lose control; rather, we had no control to begin with. That for all of us, life can change in an instant. We know this rationally, of course, but the near-overnight shift in circumstances—with illness, uncertainty, death, and job loss occurring at a mass level—has moved this knowledge from our head into our heart in a way that is visceral and profound. And yet, in the coexistence of the fragility of life alongside its beauty, we also know that this experience of growth (even in the midst of trauma and loss, grief, stress, and pain) is real and possible. This type of post-traumatic growth is a reality. Despite not having invited hardship into their lives, people will often describe that coexisting with a hardship is often an experience like a sense of empathy: spiritual

wellbeing that grows, connection with others, an evolution of values, recognizing, for instance, that particular aspects of life that we were once living and were significant, now seem petty, and also people's connection with being more willing to advocate for others. Specifically, people who are experiencing post-traumatic growth will describe how they have an appreciation for life, new possibilities, a new experience of relationship with others, a sense of personal strength, a new outlook on life, and even an existential change.

In the past week, people have spoken about these embers of growth for themselves. One person said to me, "I've just come out of being the sickest I've ever felt. I didn't think I would make it. Health is everything. I'd always resented the idea that I should exercise and eat well, but being able to do so now seems a privilege." Another person said to me, "If anything, this pandemic has evoked huge amounts of anger at the disparities in our society. It's outrageous that the color of your skin or how much money you have directly affects whether you live or die. I've always known these statistics, but they've never been as stark as they are right now. I want to do something about this, to choose and choose again, to focus more on compassion and fairness in my community." And yet, a third person said, "I realize now that I was on a kind of autopilot, not really questioning how I was spending my time or how I was spending my children's time. Between the busyness of my life, work commute, and their swimming, tutoring, after-school activities, and everything else, there was just no time for us, as a family, to breathe and be. This period hasn't been easy—far from it. But I want to start off with a bit of a blank slate, to intentionally choose what I add, rather than default to it."

In truth, life pre-pandemic has been leaving many emotionally and spiritually depleted. So many organizations and businesses are extraordinarily hard to work in—even toxic. Advertising and social media promote the never-to-be-fulfilled promise that we will feel better if we buy more. And societal and political structures seem to leave us feeling more at war with an imagined other than in compassion with our fellow humans. All of this can lead us to experience life as a never-ending Ironman or Ironwoman competition, where doing and achievement have replaced being and living. Now, more than ever, it is important for us to find our compass. To connect with our deepest selves, and to create restoration and wholeness in us as individuals, and also in a society that seems displaced by racism and inequity. One way we can begin this process is through connecting with our difficult emotions: the discomfort that can come with facing into ourselves with courage. When we do this, we can begin to ask ourselves questions like, "What do I truly need? What do I need to let go of? What parts of my life have not been working for me? What parts of society are costing us? What does the child in me need? And what does the future me need?"

These types of questions start to evoke what psychologists call the continuity of the self. The ability to recognize you as you, to bring the fullness of yourself forward and to recognize and connect with yourself despite the passing of time and changing circumstances. This idea of continuity of the self has been shown to be very powerful. It's a motivator of behavior. For instance, in one experiment, psychologists asked a group of people in their early twenties to write a letter about their current selves to their future selves. Some were asked to cast their minds just three months ahead, to their near selves, and the others to jump forward two decades, to their distant selves.

They were then instructed: think about who you will be at that time and write about the person you are now. Which topics are important and dear to you and how you see your life? In other words, these people will ask to think about and articulate what mattered to them. After writing these letters, the two groups were presented with a questionnaire made up of illegal scenarios and they were asked how likely they would be to participate in these activities. Fascinatingly, the people who wrote letters to their distant selves were significantly less likely than those who wrote letters to their near selves to say that they would participate. At first glance, it might not be clear how something like writing a letter—to yourself, no less—could possibly change your attitude about behavior. But these writers were creating what I described earlier as being a continuity of the self. By connecting their distant selves with their values, they were more able to understand themselves as people with core beliefs and a moral keel that would remain stable, even as other elements and situations in their lives changed.

When we are living the reality of each day—the busyness, the goals, the checklists, the shopping, we are often so focused on the present that we forget the bigger picture of our lives: that there is a child in you that had hopes, dreams, and beliefs. Are you caring for that child? Are you honoring what they wanted? And we forget that there is a future frail person in you, one that has needs and that will look back on life and decide whether it has been a good life. Are you looking after that person? Continuity of the self is the process by which we reconnect with our past and our future, so that there is a stable sense: past, present and future that just is, it is who we are and we are living who we want to be. If you're willing, I'd like us to do an eyes-closed exercise that focuses on continuity of the self and of beginning this process of restoration and recalibration. I'm going to ask you to engage in an exercise of imagination. This was originally developed by my colleagues Robyn Walser and Darrah Westrup.

Some people imagine in ways that are very clear, with an almost movie-like quality, and others imagine in a way that is more fuzzy. However you imagine is fine. Please take some time to be in a position where you feel comfortable but alert. I invite you to close your eyes and take just a moment to focus on your breathing. Breathing with curiosity.

Now gently and quietly look down at your feet. If you're wearing shoes, imagine the shoes melting away so that it's just you and your feet. Those feet have taken you on vacations. Think of one that you've been on. Those feet that have cuddled up next to someone and felt the closeness of their skin. Those feet might have carried you into situations that you've been scared. It might have been a conversation that was a difficult one to have, or it might have been into a hospital to say goodbye to someone. Those feet have also brought you into times of joy. It might be when you've connected: when you got married, when you experienced the birth of a child. Gradually, think of your feet getting smaller and smaller. And those feet wearing a pair of shoes that maybe you wore when you were a child. See if you can recall those details. What color are those shoes? Can you see the littleness of the shoes? Now I'd like you to search back through your memories to a time when you remember feeling a little confused, sad, lonely, frightened, or ashamed. Perhaps when you were six or seven, perhaps a little older or younger. It might be the time that you wore shoes of that size. Picture what you looked like at that age. Imagine how small your hands were and the type

of clothing you wore. Perhaps imagine yourself in one of your favorite outfits. Now put yourself in the place of this child, as if you have become that child and are looking through her eyes. Look down and see your small hands and the clothes you were wearing. Now imagine that you're going back to a place that you lived when you were that age. If you can't picture your exact home at that age, choose a place that you can picture. Once you have the image, imagine that you're standing before the home as that child. Imagine walking up to the front door and reaching up to take the doorknob, turning it to open the door and step through. You look around. You notice the pictures on the walls, the furniture. Notice how you have to look up to see some of these things, given how small you are. Now, I'd like you to go to the place in the home where you might find someone who you really loved. It might be your mother or mother figure, a father or father figure. Or it could be any other person in your childhood who was wise, who looked after you, who wanted the best for you. It could be a sister, a brother, or even a teacher. When you've found that person, notice what they're doing. Look around and see the room. Walk up to your wise person and do whatever you have to do to get that person's attention so that the person looks you right in the face. Once they look at you, from that place of one of your early hurts, ask that person for what you need. Tell her or him what it is you need. Maybe it's love or kindness, understanding, forgiveness, nurturing or acceptance. See if that person can give it. Now gently pull away from this person and begin to walk to the front door. When you arrive, reach up, turn the knob and open the door. Step through and pull the door closed behind you.

You begin to walk away from the house, heading down the sidewalk or street, and as you do this, you notice that in the distance you see someone walking towards you. An adult. As you get closer, you realize that it's you. It's the adult you you are today. You as the child go up to the adult you see before you and do whatever you have to do to get the adult you's attention so that the adult you looks at the child you, right in the face. Once you have the adult you's attention, from the place of hurt, ask the adult you for what you need. And as the adult, tell the child what you need from him or her.

Now imagine that you're leaving the scene of this meeting—of meeting the adult you on the sidewalk—and imagine that you're transported back to this very moment, to this room, this room that you're in, the chair you might be sitting in. You are now the adult that you know today. And now, imagine that that little child, the child you were just a moment ago, is standing right outside the door of this room you're in. The child is opening the door and stepping inside. Imagine that the child is walking towards you. That the child comes up to stand right before you, and as she stands there (or he stands there), give the child your attention. Look the child right in the face and see what the child needs. Ask this child if there's anything that she or he needs or wants from you, and whatever the child asks for, give it—see if you can give it. Again, it might be love, acceptance, joy, fun, letting go, self-care, or anything else that comes to mind. Notice if there's any withholding in you. Check to see whether you're resisting anything. If you are, see if you can let that go and give the child what he or she needs. Tell this child that you are here and you want to help in any way you can. If the child asks you to take him or her somewhere special, go ahead and do it. Offer the child a hug, a kiss, words of kindness, or a gift of some sort. Again, this is an exercise in imagination. So you can give the child anything she or he wants. If the younger you doesn't know

what he or she wants, or doesn't trust you, then you can let them know that that's fine. That you are here to support and will always be there to do whatever you can to help. Now, imagine that the child is climbing into your lap. Imagine that the child is melting into you, becoming a part of you. Continue to radiate caring and kindness towards this younger you in any way you can think of through words, gestures, or deeds. Once you have a sense that this younger you has accepted your caring and kindness, let the child be and bring awareness to your breathing. Now gently bring yourself back to the room. Picture it and return when you're ready.

From that exercise, see if you can write down any one thing that spoke to you. And again, some of the questions from earlier might resonate. What do I truly need? What do I need to let go of? What parts of my life have not been working for me? What does the child in me need? And what does the future in me need?

I hope as you move into the next week, one in which there is so much trouble in our society, that we have, all of us, the sense of centeredness and connectedness, the ability to experience life and to give of ourselves with compassion, with kindness, and to truly bring the best of ourselves forward. I look forward to connecting with you next week for our last episode. Until then, be well, stay safe, and let's check in next week.