

Self Identity, Sense of Self–Values, Purpose, and Meaning

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<http://www.davidayeats.com/index.html>

Our values, (including our purpose and meaning), shape our identity, and shape the choices we make. As we go through life, and grow from one stage of development to the next, our life experiences (our life conditions) change, and as they do, our values shift. What we value shapes who we are.

Playground fun, football games on Friday nights, cheering kids at soccer games on Saturday morning, and bridge games at the senior center each represent different life conditions, different values, and an evolving, (and hopefully increasingly consolidated), sense of self.

*Our values form and shift as we live life and our life conditions keep changing. With new experiences, new knowledge, and natural human maturing over the lifespan, the new life conditions that result cause us to look at ourselves and the world differently, and we begin to value things in a different way. Things we have thought to be good, beautiful, wise, or evil may not look the same as we grow. Because we are evolving, growing beings and because we move through clear stages of development, what we hold to be important may change over the course of our lives, and so, *our sense of self, of who we are, can change as well, and we can move toward greater refinement and greater clarity about our sense of our self.**

Two year olds have little understanding and less perspective on the world. Adolescents are absorbing new ideas, experiences, feelings, and knowledge at a much faster rate than they can integrate it. Young folks just starting a life together know about many

things, but as their kids leave home some years later, any of them would look back and say how little they really knew and understood when they started their families. *Each stage of life pulls us further along on the road to a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world. Who we are keeps changing—incorporating and yet going well beyond the previous stage. We keep redefining ourselves and getting a clearer picture of who we are.*

As we evolve, we are able to take in an ever larger perspective, creating more choices, different choices, and more sophisticated possibilities. We are more aware of the variety and depth that life offers, and we may become more conscious, not only of the external world, but our internal world as well—which can greatly enhance our sense of who we are, and gives us more confident access to our internal wisdom and our intuitions.

The clearer we are about who we are, the better we can care for ourselves, because we have both a broader picture of who we are and of what self care entails.

And the better our ability to self define who we are, and what our values and purposes are, the better able we will be to care for ourselves more consciously, more deliberately, and more completely.

Self defining grows as we pay attention to both what the external world is about and has to say about values, meaning, and purpose, as well as to what our internal world—separate from other people's points of view—is telling us. If we ratify who we are based on what others tell us about who we are, we validate or confirm our sense of self and identity externally. On the other hand if we corroborate our sense of self based on what we internally conclude about

our sense of self and identity, we have validated ourselves internally.

For all of us, we are first defined by others' ideas about who we are. We are born into a family and a culture that has clear ideas about who its members are and what their roles are, and we are shaped by those ideas. We are valuable in the ways that others decide, and for the purposes others decide.

Then as we grow and become a bit separate from our families (and usually, align with our peers), we begin to define ourselves separately from family. But now we are defined more by peer group and peer pressure. Though still defined largely by others, (external validation), there can be an inkling of an idea that we might begin to define ourselves (moving toward internal validation). After all, we have chosen to see ourselves as, in some ways, different than our families. We set the stage to begin to move from external validation to a combined external and partly internal validation.

Some of us, as we move through the lifespan, shift to ever greater internal and lesser external validation, and a few shift almost entirely to a sense of personal definition that is internally validated, and so not easily affected by others' perceptions and judgments. (For more information about this subject, check out other posts on human development and self care on this website).

Our sense of who we are in the world is solidified through the reinforcement of our perceptions in a repeated way. We start to take a perspective on our life and ourselves that matches the repeated experiences we have. If I am raised as a Mongolian herder, my sense of self, my perspective, and the reinforced experiences in my life will be

true for me, but will be very different than if I am raised as a Harvard preppie. Who I see myself to be is, initially anyway, completely shaped by the people, culture, economy, and other life conditions into which I was born.

Most of us raised in the “cultural trance”—a phrase coined by Charles Tart in the book *Waking Up*—of the herder or the preppie or any other role defined script, will remain in that trance throughout our lives. But *some will become aware that the life and person they have been trained to be is only a script, or a role, one of an infinite number of possible ways one can lead a life.* With that realization, one may begin to look inward to find a more stable and ever present context of self definition. These folks begin to validate themselves, to define themselves from within, rather than continue to look to the culture to tell them who they are and what they are worth.

Those who have learned to self validate, do so by paying attention to internal intuitions and wisdom. Those of us who are more or less defined by others' perceptions of us, others' expectations of us, and by those who have power over us, are validated by others, and we see ourselves as worthwhile based on how others see us.

This locus or center of self definition is important, because our self care will be very different if we are defined by others or defined by our own internal wisdom.

If we are obligated to respond to others' sense of who we are and what we are worth, we can only care for ourselves by getting really good at compliance, because our sense of self, and maybe our safety, is dependent on these others' validation.

True self care results when we seek our own internal intuitions and wisdom, and when we

have learned to trust ourselves enough to act with a great degree of autonomy and self accountability based on this internal knowledge.

Truly caring for ourselves involves listening within and acting out of the clarity that results. It involves a recognition that the beacon that can guide us through life exists not in the world outside, but the world inside. When we are able to access this level of what is true for each of us, true self care is evident. It is not self serving or self absorbed, but it is quite selfish. That is what makes it so difficult for people who have been trained to listen to and prioritize what others say—if we listen within we will be challenging important people, established agreements, powerful authorities and well practiced scripts. We may feel less clear about who we are, and we may even feel more at risk.

The most critical aspect of self care is learning to listen to and to trust the truth within us.

As we get better at understanding ourselves on our own terms, (as our values shift) and as we get clearer about our meaning and purpose as self validating beings, the path to self care—a path that involves loving others as well as ourselves—becomes ever more lucid, and life becomes ever more rewarding.

Self care requires that we see ourselves as important and worthwhile enough to survive. That is hard-wired in all of us, (though for some of us who have been compromised in our lives, an internalized pattern of self destructiveness can appear to be more dominant than survival itself).

If we are deserving of being alive, we ought to be able to infer that we are deserving of a

satisfying life as well—we are! But familial, social, cultural, and religious messages—the cultural trance—that has droned in our ears for years, can persuade us that we are not innately worthy of a satisfying life, rather that we are unworthy, defective, and undeserving. So we can choose to buy the external brainwashing and “have fun” with that set of values, or we can choose to treat ourselves with regard, as good, and as worthy of love and care.

Now, if I am worthy and good, I need to tell myself that, remind myself of that, and stop the tapes that suggest anything different. I need to consciously treat myself well, and seek my well-being at all times, to judge myself as fine and good at all times.

This is a hard one to get our arms around, especially if we have been told to be selfless and not selfish: that we can save ourselves by sacrifice, good works, deference to others, self doubt, and self criticism. True self regard is not cultivated by any of these strategies.

In reality, *each of us gets to choose our perspective—and our values—to see ourselves as worthy, good, and joyful; or as guilty, bad, ashamed, and defective. It's our choice.*

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