

“Are You Living Your Best Life?”
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When the world around us seems to be changing so rapidly, sometimes it makes to sense to take some time to re-evaluate our lives. This morning, I invite you to join me doing some reflecting.

How do we decide how to live our one precious life? Are we basing our choices on our personal values or are we going along with what everyone around us is doing? Or maybe some of both?

Of course we all like to think we’re completely independent-minded, but, “Other people’s actions and choices affect us more than we realize,” writes Dr. Susan David, in her book, Emotional Agility. “We all [tend] to plow ahead with blinders on, just getting through the day. If we need guidance, we look around to check out what other people are doing, mindlessly choosing all sorts of things we’ve been told are universal keys to satisfaction, such as a college education, home ownership or having children. In fact, these are not for everyone.”

There’s a phenomenon called social contagion. Dr. David continues, “If the term brings to mind a virus, spreading through a population via seemingly random contact, that’s exactly the idea. Studies show that certain behaviors really are like colds and the flu -you can catch them from other people.” A marketing study found that people on airplanes are 30 percent more likely to buy a snack or pay to watch a movie if their seatmate does.

I know, aren’t we all saying, well, I’m sure I’m part of the other 70 percent. Right?

“Following the herd” can also be beneficial. If we have friends who exercise regularly, we’re also likely to exercise. The real issue with being a copycat is that we can end up feeling like we’re living someone else’s life. Of course, that’s not actually true. But the question may arise: Am I living my best life? Am I living a life that aligns with my deepest values?

A UU man from Boston named Art Shirk had a successful career working at Fidelity. When he got to the top, he looked around and he realized, he said, that he had leaned his proverbial ladder against the wrong wall. Art took a leap into the heart of his true passion – helping young people achieve their full potential. He founded a program in Colombia called Coaching Hall International – the first certified leadership training program in Latin America. The goal of the coaching is to accompany the person to find their inner self, so that the leader can be a guide in that search for others.

Shirk didn't even speak Spanish when he began. Toward the end of his life, he was brokering peace between members of the Colombian government, paramilitary groups, crime syndicates and left-wing guerrillas.

Tom Shadyac, who directed huge hits like *The Nutty Professor*, *Liar, Liar* and *Bruce Almighty*, had a similar epiphany. In the early 2000s, he was worth over 50 million dollars. He lived in LA in a 17,000 square-foot mansion. He had a fleet of luxury cars and traveled by private jet.

Then Shadyac had a bicycle accident and suffered a severe head injury. During the 4 months that it took for his concussion to heal, he had to remain in a dark and quiet environment. When he finally emerged to see the light of day, he had a realization that there was more to life than material things.

Shadyac said it felt wrong that he had so much when there were others who didn't even have enough food. He sold virtually all his possessions, including his mansion. And he gave away all his profits to a long list of charities he chose to support. He left himself with just enough money to buy a mobile home, and he moved into a trailer park. He still does directing work, but he refuses to accept anything more than the minimum fees set by the Directors Guild.

Shadyac doesn't regret his decisions. He had lived in LA for 20 years and didn't know a single one of his neighbors. Now, it takes him 20 minutes every time he takes out his trash, because he's always chatting with his new neighbors. And that's the way he likes it.

Both Tom Shadyac and Art Shirk were guided by clear principles, and they had the integrity and the courage to realign their lives so that they would be living

according to their values. In honoring those values, they became immune to the social contagion described by Dr. Susan David. Shadyac says it was knowing that he was doing the right thing that fueled his courage to move forward, in spite of friends and colleagues telling him he was nuts.

Dr. David writes, “Just going with the flow drains purpose from your...life. If [we’ve] never taken the time to sort out [our] values,” our lives lack that foundation, and we can end up frittering away our time on things are meaningless.

Living our best life means, first, listening to our hearts. The prophet Muhammed spoke of the Presence in the heart. Omid Safi, the director of Duke University’s Islamic Studies Center asks,

What is this presence?

It is not so much presence of God.

God is always present.

It is we humans who are absent from our own heart.

Presence means to have the fullness of who we are with us.

In the Compassionate Listening Class I’m teaching, we’ve been looking at how our values influence our feelings – the way we react to what other people say and do. When we take time to explore our values and reflect on them, we become more aware of what matters to us and why. By listening to our hearts, we know when we are living in a way that’s congruent with our values and when we’re not.

Being able to say, “I have strong values of generosity and helping others,” for example, enables us to make intentional decisions that align with those values.

We don’t all share the same list of values, or have them in the same hierarchy. That’s what makes our interactions with other people interesting! Some of our values we’ve probably inherited from our parents. And we develop other values through our experiences. Values are always positive; and they aren’t static; they evolve over time. It’s important to have balanced values. If someone’s top value is responsibility and their lowest value is the enjoyment of life, I believe they’re missing out on one of the reasons we are here, and that is to experience joy and happiness. Someone who places enjoyment of life on top and responsibility at

the bottom is equally unbalanced. A meaningful life balances enjoyment with responsibility to the world.

Mary Oliver speaks to that need for balance. We all have responsibilities. But there is value in paying attention to the small miracles of nature, too. Given that our society values productivity and busyness, she defends her choice to be idle, to fall down in the grass, to watch a grasshopper: “Tell me, what else should I have done?” Everything dies; and too soon. And if we’re always, go, go, go –we miss the brief, awesome moments of nature’s glory.

At every crossroad, we have an opportunity to either follow the herd or to be guided by our values, to be the person we want to be.

What do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

Values exercise:

- Choose 5 values that are most important to you.

Questions for reflection:

- What brings me the most joy?
- What makes me feel closest to mystery, to a higher power, to the spirit of love and life?
- What makes me feel most alive?
- What brings me a deep sense of satisfaction?

Discussion