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Arlington Street Church
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Walking Your Why

On this Mothers Day morning – and every day, now – I wake up to a world for which my mother had no idea how to prepare me, and for which I had no idea how to prepare my children.

What once felt somewhat optional now feels critical. Today, I hear the clarion call to “walk our why.” Based on the work of Dr. Susan David,¹ I invite you today to join me in a reflection on the powerful spiritual practice of aligning our intentions with our values with our action ... for such a time as this.

This is a little harsh, but truth hurts: In her book, *Emotional Agility*, Susan David writes, “We all have a tendency to simply 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 that 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. It’s just a lot faster and easier to follow what we see than to work it out for ourselves.”

Dr. David continues, “Other people’s actions and choices affect us more than we realize, on every level, through a fascinating phenomenon called *social contagion*. 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. [It’s been proven that] our [chances] of becoming [thin or] obese [increase] with each [thin or] obese person [with whom we] come into contact....”

¹ Susan David, PhD, *Emotional Agility*

A marketing study out of Stanford University that “tracked more than a quarter of a million airline passengers ... proved that [we’re] a whopping 30 percent more likely to make an in-flight purchase if [our] seatmate does.” Just think of all those bad films and crummy snacks!

And “[our risk] of getting divorced, a decision you’d think would be deeply personal, ... [is] higher if other couples in [our] peer group are also splitting up.”

And then things get really weird. “Unlike infectious diseases, which tend to be transmitted from person to person, you can ‘catch’ some behaviors from people [with whom] you’ve never even come into contact.... One study found that couples are more likely to divorce not just when their friends do, but also when friends of their friends do....”

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The good news is that this mindless, “herd instinct” and decisions made with absolutely no time between impulse and action can be beneficial. If our friends exercise regularly, chances are we’re going to get up and out, too. But in the long run, these choices lead inexorably, inevitably, to “living what feels like somebody else’s life – a life aligned with values [to which] we don’t necessarily ascribe....” Remember that Talking Heads song: “And you may ask yourself, well, how did I get here?”

Years ago, our former Prudential Committee chair, Art Shirk, was working at Fidelity, but when he got to the top – the pinnacle of his career trajectory – he looked around and 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 and founded Coaching Hall International, located in Bogota, Colombia – the first certified coaching training program in Latin America. When he began, he didn’t even speak Spanish. Toward the end, he was brokering peace between members of the Colombian government, paramilitary groups, crime syndicates, and left-wing guerrillas. I told this story at Art’s memorial service this winter. That leap is one of his greatest legacies.

Tom Shadyac – comedian and film director of huge hits such as *Liar Liar* and *Bruce Almighty* – had a similar epiphany. In the early 2000s, he was worth more than 50 million dollars. He had a fleet of luxury cars and a seventeen-thousand square-foot mansion in LA; he traveled by private jet.

“The lifestyle was fine,” he writes, “but it certainly didn’t deliver on the promise of elevating happiness. I simply found it all neutral, and in some ways, negative.... When I considered ... how others couldn’t meet their basic needs for food [or] medicine ... it didn’t feel right.”

Tom Shadyac began flying in coach, sold his mansion, and took to commuting on his bicycle. He gave away a lot of money to causes in which he deeply believed. He didn’t renounce the world; he just got pickier about which movies he’d produce and winnowed down his material possessions until they weren’t getting in the way of his true priorities. He writes, “I haven’t given up everything. I simply met myself at my needs.” His whole story is amazing – you might want to watch Oprah interview him.

What touches me is the way in which both Art Shirk and Tom Shadyac used clear principles to realign their lives – guideposts that are so clear, in fact, that they’re immune to that contagion detailed by Dr. Susan David. “Some of [Shadyac’s] Hollywood buddies thought he was nuts, and didn’t hesitate to tell him so. Others praised [him] for his decisions. But neither reaction mattered much to him.” Knowing he was doing the right thing, as he sees it, fueled his courage to take that “road not taken.” And yes, “walking his why,” he became happier.²

Dr. Susan David writes, “Just ‘going with the flow’ drains purpose from your ... life, making personal and professional relationships seem tenuous and uncertain.... If you’ve never taken the time to sort out your values, you’re always winging it, which is how we wind up frittering away our time” – surfing the net, falling down the rabbit hole of Facebook, “cycling through hours of reality TV.”³ Spanish cellist Pablo Casals said, “Not to decide is to decide” ... and there we are: nowhere near anywhere we ever meant to be.

This is the affirmation of The Open Church, founded by my friend and colleague, Rev. Dr. Brad Braxton:

“We live on purpose. We love on purpose. We lift on purpose.”

It’s not easy, and it’s a lot of work, all this intentionality – living with clearly articulated values and making decisions that align with the way we want to

² *op cit*, p. 114

³ *op cit*, p. 117

live our lives. “Walking our why” toward fulfilling a mission in which we believe means that, some mornings, we face the world with “everything up for grabs.”⁴

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This is a cool study: A group of people in their twenties was invited to write a letter to their future selves. The instructions were, “Think about who you will be ... and write about the person you are now – [what’s] important and dear to you and how you see your life.” One group was told to write to themselves as they would be just three months from now. The other group wrote to their “distant” selves – maybe 20 years from now.

Afterwards, everyone was presented with three illegal scenarios: buying a stolen computer, committing insurance fraud, and illegally downloading media. They were given a questionnaire and asked how likely they would be to participate in them.

The study concluded that the people who had written letters to their “distant” selves were significantly less likely to participate in these unsavory activities.

How can just writing a letter – to yourself, no less – change your behavior? The study posits that the people who wrote to themselves just three months out couldn’t see that the person they would be in twenty years has everything to do with the person they are now. Somehow, they figured that what they did now wouldn’t matter.

But among the “distant self” group, writing the letter had created in them something called “continuity of self” – the deep sense that they had “core values and a [stable] moral keel,” no matter what happened in their lives, and that their choices always matter. This is all about getting comfortable in your own skin and liking the life you live.

What are your core values?

Dr. David describes some characteristics of values this way:

- * They are freely chosen; they haven’t been imposed on you.
- * They guide you rather than constrain you.

⁴ *op cit*, p. 118

- * They're not fixed; they're active, not static.
- * They foster self-acceptance, reduce our tendency to compare ourselves to others,⁵ and, I would add, boost our self-confidence.

Here at Arlington Street, we have a running start on articulating our guiding values: our faith is built on Unitarian Universalism's Principles and Purposes, and Arlington Street's mission of love, service, justice, and peace offers us a North Star for our direction and choices. Dr. David suggests answering a few questions to get even clearer, such as:

- * What's worth my time?
- * What matters most to me?
- * What relationships do I want to deepen?
- * What makes me feel most alive?⁶
- * How do I want to tell the story of my life?

And then there's this question, which is a little more stunning, but might just do the trick: As you wake up each morning, ask yourself, "If this were my last day on earth, how would I act?" – not "What would I do," but "How would I act?"⁷

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Beloved spiritual companions, at every crossroads, we are presented with the choice to follow the herd or to embrace our values, acting like the person we want to be. What once felt somewhat optional now feels critical ... for such a time as this.

Where are you leaning your ladder?
Not to decide is to decide.

May we choose to fill our lives
with purpose and meaning –
love, service, justice, peace.
May we choose to be happy.

Let's walk our why!

⁵ *op cit*, p. 121

⁶ *op cit*, p. 122-123

⁷ *op cit*, p. 123