

On Priorities, Identity, and Values

Each day, we show the world who we are. We demonstrate our priorities through what we do, all day long. And those priorities represent what we value. Sure, we might also *say* that some things are important to us, but our actions can easily extinguish the significance of those words.

Everything from the time you wake to what you do first to what you do next, to reading this or stopping reading this, to what you do while you're reading this and when you're done reading this are all decisions, whether you see them that way or not. They are decisions that say . . . *I'm the kind of person who* . . . Each day you're crafting your identity: sculpting it by either doing more of the same from yesterday or doing different things during some of the day. This includes self-talk. Do you speak to yourself harshly, constantly judging yourself and reprimanding yourself? Well then you're the kind of person who does that. That's what—on some level—you've decided to do. You think that's appropriate, and it's a priority at that moment. Or it's a habit and you're on autopilot. We all have 24 hours in each day. Who will you be, *in toto*, 24 hours from now? Who do you want to be? The kind of person who does what or no longer does what? The next 24 hours will likely present you with the following decisions:

I am the kind of person who . . .

- spends a lot of their time . . .
- sounds like . . . (Listen to the sound of your voice when you speak to others. And when you speak to yourself. Maybe you sound one way to yourself and a different way to others. Maybe the tone of voice to your children or partner has a certain quality. Maybe your voice is grounded and comes from stability sometimes and it quivers at other times.)
- spends time with people and loves to . . . or not
- is/isn't self-critical
- judges others for their . . .
- notices the mistakes I make, and when I do, I . . .
- notices the mistakes others make, and when I do, I . . .
- accepts myself (or not)
- frequently gets angry with myself (or not)
- eats . . .
- drinks . . .
- works (hours/day, job description, location, so much here . . .)
- thinks tradition and ritual are important (or not)
- behaves differently with different people (or not), and if so, how?
- believes in . . .
- trusts that . . .
- has the following social media accounts . . .
- spends X time on social media

- spends most of their time on social media (posting, sharing, liking, scrolling, Doomscrolling)
- talks on the phone (as opposed to texting only or maybe it depends on the person)
- chooses to make time for . . . by sacrificing . . .
- is disciplined and structured in this way . . .
- is not disciplined and structured in this way . . .
- wears . . .
- walks like . . .
- always makes time for . . .
- looks and sounds like this when they listen . . .
- creates well-being
- creates suffering

Who are you today and who are you becoming?

Intention is a critical component of mindfulness. Being at-choice with your attention and crafting yourself with intention isn't exactly a popular topic of conversation in most circles. And yet, what could be more important?

Your interaction with this book is an experience that explores who you are and what behaviors and thoughts are serving you. It's an exploration of who you have become and who you want to become, and a method for crafting that person. We'll continue our work together, which began when you decided to read this book, by capturing what your life looked like for the past two days through the lens of doing—what you did—how you spent your time. Recall as much as you can. From the time you got up to what you ate (intermittent fasting, anyone?) or drank and when and with whom, to your Wim Hof-style cold shower, exercising, social media, chatting with your neighbor, hugging your kids, walking your dog, email, and client meetings and calls. See if you can remember the amounts of time things took. As important, and this is a skill you'll be cultivating, see if you can isolate what you did from what you're thinking or feeling about it (or what you're thinking and feeling about anything else). If that last part sounds confusing or doesn't immediately resonate with you, just move forward with describing what you did, where, when, with whom, and for how long. If you did something you don't ordinarily do, you likely remember it more vividly because it's novel and you weren't on autopilot—you were paying attention. Note novelty and if there's anything to be said about it. Maybe there isn't. If not, move on.

I invite you to notice whether you have a need to pull things together into a narrative that somehow makes sense of your days. We don't remember things as they occurred; memory is an act of (re)construction. It's not as if we've got a file cabinet in our brain and all we need to do is flip to the file for yesterday, and voilà, there's an accurate accounting of the day. Also, if you notice that

who you are depends on where you are and whom you're with, that might be off-putting. You might be wondering about your own authenticity or whether you're seen as inconsistent or a performer. I invite you to instead look at it this way: you might have different roles you play, and along with those roles come different ways of being. Our identities aren't static. Now stop judging yourself and move forward. Try to simply record what you did, with whom, where, and for how long for the last two days . . .

YESTERDAY		
What I did	What I was thinking	What I was feeling

THE-DAY-BEFORE-YESTERDAY

What I did	What I was thinking	What I was feeling

What you just did was an act of reconstruction. You reassembled your life from those two days, and who knows what lens you were using, where things are skewed and how much, and whether anyone else involved in your days would agree on your construction. Those days are composed of thousands of decisions. You can call them micro-decisions if that helps you de-emphasize them, but you can take any one of those decisions and wonder what the rest of your day would have been like if you made a different decision. Do you know? How can you know?

When you read over how you spent your time, what strikes you? You likely remember more about yesterday than the day before. What patterns do you see? Did you remember your thoughts or feelings? What values do you see? What questions do you have for yourself? Do you wake at the same time each day? If so, you're the kind of person who does that. If you don't, then you're the

kind of person who doesn't. Do you talk to strangers? Do you tend to be in a rush? Do you make sure to say good morning, please, and thank you? What and whom do you make time for, and at the expense of what and whom?

Put *I'm the kind of person who . . .* prior to everything you wrote. The patterns and the one-offs. Everything. It doesn't matter; you did what you did. Those were all your priorities in those moments. And by choosing what you did, you chose not to do other things. You opted out of other things with your choices.

I'm the kind of person who...



Now invite your mind and body—your thoughts and emotions—into the picture. When you read all your “*I'm the kind of person who . . .*” statements, what comes to mind and body? How do the words hit you? Can you read them without judgment?



To round out this exercise, identify your top three values. Not the values you see in your recording of your two days, but the values you think are most important to you. If someone asked you what three concepts were most important to you, you would say (e.g., belonging, community, family, spirituality, beauty, learning, love, excellence, justice, adventure) . . .

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Are your stated values represented in the descriptions of your two days? Do your values map onto your behavior?

Yes

No

If someone had only your lists from your two days to go on, what values-conclusions would they make? If your impulse is to be at all defensive and say, “Yeah, but those particular days were uncharacteristic of me” feel free to choose another two days and use those instead.

The Top 3 Values reflected in my two days are:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

If you’d like to use an actual tool that more than 15 million people have used, created by positive psychology’s Martin Seligman, check out the Values-in-Action Character Strengths Survey at <https://www.viacharacter.org>. It’s free and has loads of research and resources ² including a wonderful book called *Mindfulness & Character Strengths: A Practical Guide to Flourishing*.³ Your relationship to your values and whether they are lived values, as it turns out, influences your capacity to flourish. Using a validated tool is important, as you might be surprised to learn that self-report of values isn’t that accurate.

This is an appropriate time for a distinction between positive psychology and mindfulness. They’re not the same thing and they don’t have the same intentions. Positive psychology started with Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi⁴ seeing an imbalance in the concentration of the field

of psychology. They wanted to balance the focus on mental illness with equal focus on joy, altruism, and other so-called “positive” or “constructive” emotions. We should be studying both, as they have equal value as parts of the human condition.

Meanwhile, the waters of mindfulness are a bit muddier, and there is by no means consensus about the relationship between so-called positive emotions and mindfulness. For my purpose here, our playground is all parts of the human condition. While I’ll share the fruits of the research in positive psychology in Chapter 9, and I teach all of it in *Mindfulness for Financial Advisors* as well to children and adolescents, my goal isn’t the improvement of anyone’s subjective well-being or life satisfaction, although that could very likely be a second-order effect of this endeavor. Instead, my hope is that you can feel what it’s like to befriend every part of your experience and come to terms with the reality that all the mental and emotional activity that shows up for you in your day is worthy of being with and working with, if only for a moment. I don’t want you to shy away from experiences you don’t like while pursuing more of what you do like. Equanimity is the name of the game here, and it’s achieved by approaching each part of your human experience with curiosity, non-judgment, and mindful awareness. You don’t get to equanimity with positivity.

Create U

We all have labels we use to identify ourselves. But regardless of the labels you use, I promise that you’re more like me than not, and we are identical in a handful of ways. We have brains and nervous systems. We are organisms embedded in external contexts—physical, social, and cultural environments—that comingle with our internal context and produce our human minds.⁵ We are mammals and are social animals even if we’re introverted. We are complex, open systems and are constantly reorganizing ourselves based on external influence. We have emotions. We want to be loved. And we create who we are each day with our thoughts, actions, and interactions, either accidentally or on purpose.

All of us human beings are the sum of what we’ve been doing. If you want to know who someone is, look at what they’ve been doing. There’s a scientific basis for the idea that we’re shaping our brains each day and becoming who we are becoming. It’s called neuroplasticity. In 2021, we know what it means and we take it for granted, but less than 60 years ago we thought we were born with the brain we were born with, and that was that. Neuroplasticity doesn’t quite describe what’s happening and is a bit limiting for neuroscientist David Eagleman, so he has virtually abandoned it in favor of the term *livenwired*⁶ to capture the reality that the brain is constantly changing according to what’s relevant to the whole system. It changes when our body has been modified, often compensating for what has been lost, such as when someone loses their sight and their other senses become more relevant and take over the visual cortex. It also changes as a result of practicing motor acts or rewarding sensory outputs.⁷

You may have heard about London taxi drivers whose brain regions associated with spatial memory were larger than those of London bus drivers, who follow standard routes.⁸ Your brain learns what it needs to become based on what is called for by its circumstances and by what you

deliberately do (and even when you do it is important). Like neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett and others, Eagleman thinks of the brain as an energy-conscious prediction mechanism, whose job is to continuously calibrate in order to burn less energy,⁹ as it's saving energy for the unexpected.

There are a handful of caveats here, including: the various areas of the brain don't all operate on the same schedule of plasticity (i.e., there are critical periods for the acquisition of some abilities, where the door closes thereafter); plasticity declines with age, and across the brain it declines differently; and there are also genetic differences. Furthermore, human babies have few built-in skills and a great deal of plasticity, while adults have mastered specific tasks at the expense of flexibility. There's a trade-off between adaptability and efficiency; as your brain gets good at certain jobs, it becomes less able to tackle others.¹⁰

How does this relate to mindfulness practice? In two ways:

- 1) It's the basis for the idea that we become what we practice. As you learn to pay attention, you become a person who pays closer attention and pays attention more often. As you learn what emotions are and how to meet them, you create a brain that does that. Your internal model of the world becomes one that, as a matter of course, pauses before it does the thing it used to do, e.g., scream, hit, turn and stomp away, say the most hurtful thing possible. You begin to rewire yourself via your new awareness.
- 2) Your brain wants to predict well so it can be sensitive to and well-resourced for the unexpected. When we're training the attention through the body scan in class, for example, there are frequently complaints about how boring it is. People wonder why it's so long (45 minutes for MBSR, shorter for this course), why they have to do it every day, and why they would ever need to explore the sensations of the top of their right foot, as they don't have any anyway. This is a normal response. For those who don't want to do a body scan when not much is happening:
 - a) If you approach it with curious friendliness, you might find that you do in fact have sensations of various kinds; and
 - b) You're creating an internal model of scanning your entire body, even when nothing much is happening. This is helpful in sensitizing you to how the body feels ordinarily, which makes it striking when something is a bit off. You notice what's off earlier than you would have. You even notice when sensations that could become emotions begin to arise. In the Academy-award winning *My Octopus Teacher*, South African documentary filmmaker, Craig Foster, is asked why he keeps going to the same kelp patch every day when there's a whole ocean he could be exploring. His response? "That's how you get to know a thing."

Your brain is constantly reorganizing itself and remodeling itself, strengthening networks being used and weakening those not being used, repurposing regions and increasing or decreasing the footprints of regions according to what's relevant to you. This raises the significance of the decisions you make and the things you choose to attend to. As psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist writes, "Attention is a moral act: it creates, brings aspects of things into being, but in doing so makes others recede. What a thing is depends on who is attending to it.... Attention has consequences."¹¹

Your choice to attend to something tells the world you value it. It's important enough for you to attend to, and you want to create a brain that predicts attending to it in the future. Everything you do changes your brain. The consequences of where you put your attention are huge; they're literally life altering. You are making yourself with your attention.