

Prioritizing Your Values

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Professional careers are subject to ups and downs. Tedious job responsibilities, challenging family matters, horrific world events—any of these can result in restlessness, withdrawing from activities you previously enjoyed, and feeling burnt out. While some factors are out of our control (e.g., world events), it's possible, and self-motivating, to explore what might be within your reach. A good start in that effort is clarifying your values and seeing how they link to your goals.

Musicians are master goal-setters: they apply to grad school, enter competitions, and plan their daily practice. All of what you do now as an organist is due to your having set some achievable goals along the way. And let's face it: life tends to go better when you set goals you can actually accomplish.

However, just because you can identify a goal doesn't mean it's worth pursuing. Before you set another long- or short-term goal that will require some allocation of your time, take a step back to assess your values—what you stand for and care most about. Reflect on these questions:

Which elements in my life are most important to me?

How do I set goals that are linked to these elements—that is, my values?

Am I currently engaging in activities that align with my values?

How would my life change if I were to align more of my goals and daily behavior with my values?

These questions may take time to answer, but they will help uncover your values, or as Russ Harris, author of *The Happiness Trap*, describes them, “your heart's deepest desires for how you want to behave as a human being.” Values are different from goals in that they can't be achieved. Instead, they guide how we engage in the various facets of life. For example, if you identify kindness, community, and autonomy as some of your values, you will include them as important factors when considering how to spend at least part of your time.

Harris's book (and other texts on acceptance and commitment training/therapy) takes readers through exercises to identify and clarify the pillars that might support and guide their life choices. For example, after some reflection you might find that what you value

most is acceptance, compassion, skillfulness, excitement, and trust. In the case of excitement, you want to engage in interesting, novel activities with people who are fun and stimulating. With that in mind, you can take stock of whether your current routines and goals align with this value.

If you scan your career and see that nothing is exciting and stimulating, this might be a signpost in your pursuit of personal and professional happiness. Behavior that is misaligned with values can often cause frustration, even despondency.

Your values can be tied to *everything* you do in life. You might decide to live out the value of excitement by starting a new musical project, helping a neighbor, volunteering at a food bank, or having a movie night with a spouse or some friends. It's possible, too, that simply *trying* any of these could be reframed as an act of excitement, as well as tied to other values you've identified.

Once you've clarified your values, what can you do if you find that your professional activities don't align with them? There is one value that people rarely articulate but that can be very helpful in making decisions and pursuing value-aligned goals: patience. Instead of immediately quitting an unsatisfying job or throwing in the towel in another area of life—letting frustration or impulsivity get the best of you—find *one small step* you can take that may connect with your clarified values. What is something you can do right away that will bring you closer to living one of your values? If it's excitement you're after, perhaps you could sit down at the organ and play a new piece, or return to one you haven't played in a few years, this time looking for the unexpected and creative moments in it. Or call a friend and make a plan for a lunch date or outdoor adventure. This may seem trivial, but it's small steps like these that start building a life of values, and a valued life.

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