

DAY 2

KNOW WHAT MATTERS

What do you mean, I have to decide what to have for dinner? Seriously, if I have to make one more decision, I'm gonna lose it!

Every moment of every day, we're bombarded by a freight train of opportunities, people, ideas, invitations, ads, conversations, and asks screaming

at us. With every one, we've got to make a decision. Yes, no, maybe, kinda, later, now, bigger, smaller, hotter, colder, cuter, higher paying, less traveling? Taxi, subway, bus, walk, or ride? Single-origin, high-altitude organic coffee with lovingly handpicked virgin hemp milk, half-caf macchiato with 2 percent, or slam a double espresso? By the time we hit breakfast, we're beyond overwhelmed!

Then come the real decisions, the ones that actually matter. Yes, our caffeine transport system matters, but a handful of other choices may actually be more life-and-death, or at least happy life and slow, meaningless decline into death. Little things like who gets our attention, when do they get it, and why? What gets the nod, what gets turned down, and

how much will someone need to give us—in money, love, attention, or a sense of purpose—to make it worth a yes? What projects, jobs, activities, and relationships do we welcome, and what do we say no to? How much suffering will we endure, and why, before changing direction?

Make the right decisions and the way we contribute to the world ends up filling our Contribution Buckets. Life gets a whole lot better. So do the lives of those we end up dancing with and serving. Make the wrong decisions, though, and it feels like we get to the end of every crazy busy day but haven't actually done anything that matters. String that out for weeks, months, and years and, boom, we've just wasted the better part of our lives.

Thing is, we can't make good decisions until we know what matters to us. Until we have some sense of what's important, what we believe, what we value. When we know these things, decisions get easier. Something's either aligned with our values and beliefs, or it's not. If it's aligned, it's a yes. If not, it's a no. If we have two options, both well aligned, we choose the one that's a better fit.

Of course, that doesn't mean we never experience angst when saying no to something cool in the name of something that matters more. Or that the answer is always crystal clear. Black-and-white clarity is rare. The seemingly ever-present grip of FOMO (fear of missing out) and its maniacal, ADD-addled tentacles of distraction leave us perpetually wondering if there's a bigger, better job,

person, deal, or future out there! Meditation helps, and a daily awareness practice lets you see more clearly, but c'mon, we're all still human. Emotion and irrationality will always have a seat at the table. Which is why it's that much more important to know yourself well enough to be able to make decisions that survive the taunts of the gremlin of doubt.

The more I think about it, the more it seems we don't really have a decision-making crisis. We have a self-knowledge crisis. How can we decide who or what to say yes or no to until we know what matters to us? So let's bypass years of psychotherapy (kidding—many of my closest friends are psychotherapists!) and take a bite out of the self-ignorance apple with a simple question:

What is important to me?

Tough question, right?

There are so many ways to answer. The politically correct way, the nonchalant hipster way, the struggling artist way, the PTA parent way, the L.A. rocker way, the responsible grown-up way.

I'll share an approach that's worked well for me. But first, a big warning: Answer these questions as if nobody's listening. Assume nobody will ever know what you've said. Why? Because if we think our answers might someday "get out," we inevitably end up lying to ourselves. We give some blend of what Stephen Colbert calls "truthiness," or little white reinterpretations of the truth. The moment we consider we might have to share our answers, we default to the way we either "wished" we felt or the way we think we're "supposed" to an-

swer.

Don't do that. Self-knowledge isn't about the person you wish you were or might someday become. Nor is it about the beliefs and values you think society wants you to have. It's about who you are now. As you read these words. Honest, unfiltered, politically, socially, and morally in-the-moment you. Own your truth. Good decisions don't come from self-delusion. They come from ruthless self-knowledge, brutal honesty. When it comes to doing what matters, truth beats truthiness.

Now let's talk about that question "What is important to me?" Another way to put it is "What do I most value?" Same basic question, but it's often easier to answer this way. I recently asked a roomful of people to share the things

they value most in life. Here are some of the words they shouted out:

- Faith
- Family
- Freedom
- Peace
- Compassion
- Security
- Friends
- Love
- Respect
- Money
- Truth
- Vulnerability

- Equality
- Integrity
- Humility
- Play
- Simplicity
- Trust
- Generosity
- Creativity
- Openness
- Wonder
- Fun
- Growth
- Accountability

- Kindness
- Justice
- Flexibility
- Mindfulness
- Courage

Then I asked them to look at the list and edit it down to their five strongest values, the ones they'd hold most sacred. Inviolable. The most important things in their lives. Once they had their top five, I asked another question: So what?

What do you do with this information? So now you know family matters or money matters or health matters a lot. But how does that information guide your decisions and actions?

Hmmmm. What if we took it one step further and added a verb to each?

Let's take the value of "family" as an example. Okay, so family is really important to you. But just saying that doesn't help you make decisions. What if we changed it to "provide for my family"? Better. Now we've got a verb attached to it, an action. Still, the word *provide* is vague. For one person, it might mean supporting financially; for another, it could mean being present. Even the phrase "provide financially" is vague. And who exactly is included in "family"? Is it just my partner and kids? Is it that third cousin, twice removed, who I see once a decade?

What if we took that word—*family*—and turned it into a sentence that guides how we decide and behave? Something

like:

I want to ensure that my wife and daughter will always have a comfortable home; to earn enough money to take care of their needs and provide the best education possible for my daughter; and to be physically and emotionally present, kind, generous, open, and compassionate.

Better. Much better. Why? Because now not only do I know what's important, what matters, but I also know how that information will guide my decisions and actions. Now, if I'm presented with an opportunity to invest my time or attention or money in something, I can ask:

Will this move me closer to ensur-

ing a comfortable home for my wife and daughter, earning enough money to take care of their needs, and providing the best education possible for my daughter? Will it allow me to be more physically and emotionally present, kind, generous, open, and compassionate?

If yes, I'm in. If no, I'm out. And if I'm weighing two options, I can choose the one that gets me closest. Expressed this way, a simple value now becomes an actionable value. It becomes useful in guiding my everyday decisions and actions. That's the place we want to get to with our top five values.

Now it's time to do the work yourself.

Daily Exploration:

Step 1—Write down your basic values. Use the above list of values as a starting point, but don't be limited to them.

If there's something that's not on the list but you feel it is really important, go with it. Start by just brainstorming all the possible things that are important to your life. Make your list as long as you like. Pure stream-of-consciousness. Do not do any editing yet.

Step 2—Now, take a look at your list and circle the five values you feel most strongly about.

Go with your gut. And just as a reminder, this is not about what you wish your answers were, or what you want others to think; it's about what they truly are.

Step 3—Look at each of your top five

values, and write them into a sentence that gives them context and definition.

Be sure to include a verb. Spend a little time refining these sentences. Then, on a new piece of paper, write all five down.

Step 4—*Place that piece of paper somewhere you can see it or reference it whenever you want.*

As opportunities come your way throughout the day, ask yourself, “Does saying yes move me closer to what I hold most dear?” If the answer is no, whether it’s checking your e-mail every 10 minutes or taking a new job, just say no. And start to say yes to only what genuinely matters most to you.