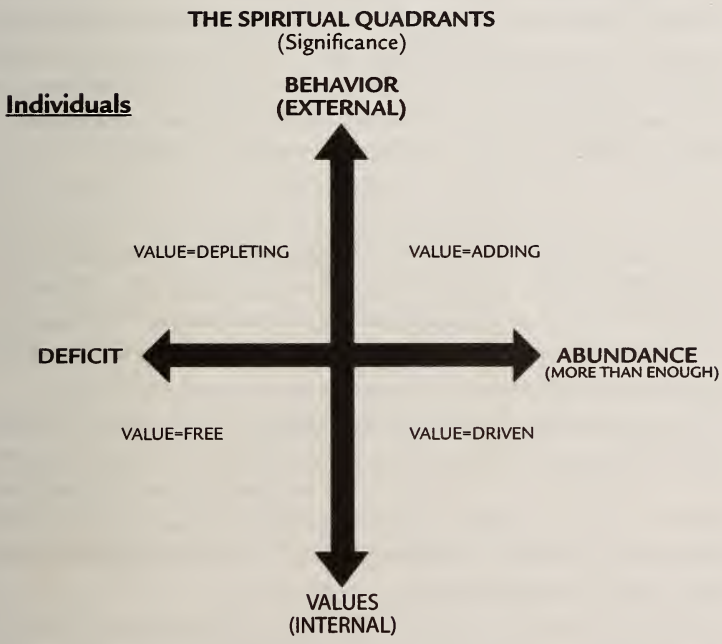
Who Are You, and What Do You Really Want?



What if you returned a telephone call from someone you didn't know, reached an answering machine, and got this message:

"Who are you, and what do you really want? Leave a message at the beep."

That's quite a challenge. What would you answer? After all, they're arguably life's biggest questions.

"Who are you?" As in, "What do you stand for most deeply?"

"What do you really want?" As in, "What do you want to do with your life?"

Spiritual energy is the uniquely powerful source of energy we derive from serving something beyond ourselves. Doing so gives us a level of meaning, significance, and connection to others that we rarely get simply by meeting our own needs or advancing our own cause. When we serve others, we also widen our identity. It almost literally makes us bigger.

Unlike the other energy quadrants, you'll notice that there are no adjectives listed in these (see page 238). Science can help us objectively understand precisely what fuels our physical, emotional, and mental energies, and what depletes them. In the spiritual dimensions, the values and behaviors that fuel us are more subjective, nuanced, and personal. We have to discover what they are for ourselves.

Deeply held values define who we aspire to be. They're rooted in what we stand for. When we're guided by them, they provide an internal compass that helps us to navigate the storms we all inevitably face and to make the right choices in our lives, even when we're tempted to take a more expedient route.

Typically, that impulse arises when we experience a sense of threat. In this deficient state, we become reactive and survival-based. By contrast, when our own core needs are well met, we feel a sense of security and comfort. At our best, we experience abundance, a state in which we have more resources than we need—and a greater capacity to move beyond ourselves toward others.

Values—the province of the lower-right quadrant—are a source of identity, clarity, and strength. Virtually anything in your life can be taken away from you—a job, a home, loved ones, your health. No one can take away your values without your permission. Knowing what you stand for is also a powerful source of energy. A broad range of studies has shown that people whose motivation comes from within—variously referred to as intrinsic, self-authored, or authentic motivation—are more energized, more engaged, more persistent, and ultimately higher performing.

"He who has a why to live for," said Nietzsche, "can bear almost any how." When something really matters to us, we bring vastly more energy to it in the form of focus, conviction, passion, and perseverance. Spiritual energy also fuels each of our behaviors in the other energy dimensions—physical, emotional, and mental.

As in the other three energy dimensions, we cultivate spiritual energy most effectively when we move rhythmically between spending and refueling it. In the lower-right quadrant, we fuel our values through reflection, introspection, meditation, or prayer, but above all by wrestling with ourselves. This is especially critical at times when we're feeling fueled by emotions that threaten to overwhelm our deepest values.

Our first spiritual challenge is defining our values. Typically, they're embedded in us at an early age, long before we explicitly think much about them. They come from our parents, teachers, churches, and synagogues, and from the norms of the communities in which we grow up. Even as adults, relatively few of us spend much time thinking consciously about what we stand for and how we want to behave as a result. We spend far more time simply responding to demands as they arise in our lives every day. The busier and more rushed we are, the less likely we are to ask ourselves questions such as, "What is the right thing to do here?" "Did I act from my deepest values in this situation?" and, "Am I serving something beyond just myself?"

It's only by taking the time to conjure with these challenging questions that we stay connected to our deepest values. Meaning and significance are not feelings we discover inside us. Rather, we must consciously cultivate them.

"It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us," Viktor Frankl wrote about his experience surviving in a Nazi concentration camp. "We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—hourly and daily. . . . Life ultimately means taking responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual."

In practical terms, tapping into spiritual energy means calling on the energy of your best self. This isn't that complex to define. Think for a moment about your best qualities—the ones that make you feel best about yourself and that nourish others. You'll be writing them down in the lower-right quadrant. To undertake this exercise, get a

pen and a piece of paper, and begin by drawing yourself a set of quadrants as they appear at the start of this chapter.

Begin by answering this short series of questions designed to help you reconnect with the values you hold most dear.

1. Think about people in your life you view as mentors, or role models, or whom you simply most admire. Which specific qualities of theirs come to mind?
2. Imagine one of your children—or a person to whom you are especially close—describing you to others. What are the qualities you'd hope he or she would cite?
3. Think about behaviors you observe in others that you can't stand. What are they? Directly after each one, list the opposite of that quality.

Perhaps the most reliable signal of what you value most deeply are the words or phrases you've cited as opposites of your answers to the third question. Reflecting on what we *can't stand* in others prompts a visceral response that almost always captures exactly how we really feel. In turn, defining the opposite of what we can't stand tends to reveal a value we truly *stand for.* If you can't stand meanness, for example, it likely means that you highly value kindness. If you're deeply put off by rudeness, it suggests you value consideration.

As you look over the words or phrases you've chosen to put in the lower-right quadrant, you'll likely notice that many of them—in all likelihood the vast majority—have something to do with positive ways of treating others. They're often about rising above our more self-centered instincts.

That doesn't mean we live these values reliably in our everyday lives. A value, after all, is just an aspiration. The qualities we can't stand in others often turn out to be ones we resist seeing in ourselves, precisely because we find them so distasteful. But even if we're not always embodying our deepest values, reconnecting with them can be a source of energy and an inspiration to begin to live them more fully. Take a moment to think about recent occasions when you've done just that—when you've behaved at your best and most lived your values. Write down examples in the upper-right quadrant.

By contrast, the lower-left spiritual quadrant reflects a *values deficit.* This typically occurs when we feel our own value is at risk—akin to the Survival Zone in the emotional quadrants. It's our most primitive and reactive emotions that show up in the lower-left spiritual quadrant. Self-protection trumps our higher aspirations. Think about recent times when you've behaved at your worst, and write down several examples in the upper-left quadrant. Next, think about the reactive emotions that prompted those behaviors, and write those down in the lower-right quadrant.

NARROW, SHALLOW, AND SHORT-TERM

It's hard to imagine a more vivid example of the consequences of self-interest than the recent fall of the banking system. It's evidence for powerful how the focus on more, bigger, and faster eventually leads to a worldview that is narrow, shallow, and short-term.

"There's plenty to criticize about American financial life," author Michael Lewis has written, "but the problems are less with rule-breaking than with the game itself. Even in the most fastidious of times it is boorishly single-minded. It elevates the desire to make money over other, nobler desires."

At the most basic level, more money is a route to more safety and security—and therefore helps us to meet several of our most primal needs. Because money has the power to provide instant pleasure, it also has the potential to become preoccupying and even addictive. The problem, much as it is with any drug, is that money provides diminishing returns over time. Numerous studies have shown, for example, that once our basic needs are met, money has little to no impact on our happiness. Nonetheless, the typical pattern in any addiction is to progressively do more of whatever the addictive behavior may be, in an increasingly futile effort to recapture the initial pleasure it provided.

Soon after he quit, but before the company fell, a former managing director at Lehman Brothers told us this story: "I was sitting in my office one afternoon and complaining to no one in particular about having to go on the road again. The guy at the desk next to me said, 'Yeah, I've got to fly across the country myself, and I'm gonna miss my daughter's first birthday.' Now this guy had been at the firm for

twenty years, and he was worth at least fifty million. So I said to him, 'Why do you still do it?'

"He looked at me like I was some kind of idiot for even asking the question.

"'Well, for the money of course,' he said. But of course, it wasn't the money anymore. You keep doing this because it's who you think you are. It becomes your whole identity. You disconnect from everything else. I know that's true, because I experienced my own identity crisis when I finally quit. It felt like detoxing from a drug."

Here's how the head of human resources at one of the large financial firms that ultimately failed put it to us, in the midst of the boom: "I often wish our senior executives would tie the accomplishment of their goals to a higher purpose than just being the most profitable. Unfortunately, that's all most of our leaders know."

When the immediate material rewards are sufficiently seductive, the more primitive centers of the brain override the more reflective capacity of the prefrontal cortex. It's noteworthy, for example, that not a single CEO or senior executive at a large bank ever stood up and blew the whistle on the practices that led to the worldwide financial meltdown in 2008. Through some combination of greed, rationalization, and denial, the key players lost touch with any values beyond their immediate self-interest. As Watergate co-conspirator Jeb Magruder once put it: "Somewhere between my ambitions and my ideals, I lost my moral compass."

Several years ago, in the midst of the boom, I gave a talk to managing partners at a large investment bank known for its supreme self-confidence. The topic was how to sustain high performance in an era of relentlessly rising demand. I spoke about the role of the four different sources of energy and how intermittent renewal is a critical component of sustainable performance. When I finished, a partner in his late thirties or early forties—no one in the room was much older than that—raised his hand.

"You're making an assumption that we're concerned about sustainability," the partner said, without a trace of irony. "The reality is that there are hundreds of talented people knocking on our door every year, dying to come and work here. If one person burns out or decides to leave, there are ten more prepared to step in, and every one

of them is willing to work twenty-four/seven. Why should we be worrying about something like renewal or reflection?"

Why, he was asking, should any of us worry about anything but earning as much money as we can, as fast as we can? Three years later, the economy collapsed, the stock market crashed, and the firm nearly went out of business.

That's one reason to worry.

THE POWER OF REFLECTION AND INTROSPECTION

Revisiting, reflecting upon, and conjuring with our values is the antidote to a perspective that's narrow, shallow, and short-term. The challenge is that introspection requires quiet, uninterrupted time—the scarcest of commodities in the world most of us now inhabit. Because taking time to look inward rarely generates instant rewards, it's easily expendable—an activity that is important but not urgent, to again recall Steven Covey's phrase.

The consequence is that few of us pause regularly to think about why we're doing what we're doing, where we're headed, or what the consequences are likely to be. Instead, we spend our days feeling compelled to act, react, and transact, at least partly out of fear of what we might see is missing if we stopped long enough to look.

It's easier, oddly, to stay busy.

From an energy perspective, one of our core spiritual challenges is accepting that our highest and lowest selves—the best and worst of us—coexist inside us and forever compete for our favor. "To know ourselves, we have to know our own animal nature first," Ian McCallum writes in *Ecological Intelligence*. The genetic difference between humans and chimpanzees is no more than 2 percent, he points out, while the elephant, the lion, and even the spotted hyena all share more than 90 percent of our genetic makeup. Listen to the way McCallum evocatively captures the implications of these facts:

> It is important to remember that the game we are all playing is a share one. It's called survival. "I want it all and I want it now," is the brain stem

> speaking. The psychological instincts of the predator, the parasite, and the scavenger are in our history and in our blood. They will not go away, which means there is no point in turning a blind eye to them. . . . We are all, in our own subtle ways, manipulators and con men, and we all own a little bit of the beggar, too. We, too, are territorially and materially acquisitive. We are pathetic, but we are also wonderful. And when we know this, when we recognize our inflation or the scavenger, the con man, and the road-rage creature within us, then we can learn how to say yes or no to them.

The advantage human beings have over every other species is a modern brain, a prefrontal cortex that allows us to reflect and make intentional choices. That requires not just cultivating our highest values—who we are at our best—but also having the courage to recognize our basest instincts. "There is no sun without shadow," said Albert Camus. Or, as Carl Jung wrote, "I must have a dark side if I am to be whole; and inasmuch as I become conscious of my shadow, I also remember than I am a human being like any other."

Recognizing our own base instincts requires not just openness but also humility. False humility is manipulation covertly aimed at winning praise. Genuine humility frees us of the need to protect an image of ourselves or stand above others. It gives us permission instead to accept, embrace, and learn from our limitations. In one recent study of leaders, those with the highest opinions of themselves turned out to be the least receptive to criticism or negative feedback. In another study, those with the highest levels of "self-esteem" were more likely to "irritate, interrupt, and show hostility to others."

It's through the willingness to recognize our primitive impulses that we can choose to rise above them. It's by reflecting on our most deeply held values that we can set a course for ourselves. In situations of conflict or disappointment, and most especially when we feel threatened or triggered, one of the most powerful reflective practices is to ask ourselves a simple question: How would I behave here at my best?

It's plainly easier to rationalize our reactive behaviors, to blame others when something goes wrong, or to find ways to avoid thinking about anything that makes us feel bad. But much as it's valuable to ask ourselves what it looks like to behave at our best in difficult situ-

ations, it's also important to ask, when we we've fallen short, "Where was my responsibility, and how can I do better next time?"

Embracing our own complex and contradictory nature frees us from the need to defend ourselves when we fall short of our own ideals. It also saves us from squandering energy on denial, rationalization, and blame. As McCallum puts it: "It does not matter who or where we are, our lives at all times will involve subtle and sometimes obvious combinations of [our] survival strategies. Whether we are lions, hyenas, or humans, we engage in these activities for the same reasons—for food, turf or territory, security, approval, sexual partners, rank, status, attachment, and belonging. . . . We employ these strategies not only to establish ourselves, but also to promote and to protect ourselves."

The poet Carl Sandburg brilliantly captures our dual nature in his poem "Wilderness," written in 1918.

> O, I got a zoo, I got a menagerie, inside my ribs, under my bony head, under my red-valve heart. . . . For I am the keeper of the zoo: I say yes and no: I sing and I kill and I work: I am a pal of the world: I come from the wilderness.

The level of awareness that most makes this possible is mindfulness, which we introduced in chapter 15, as a way to train attention. It also has great value in the spiritual dimension. Mindfulness is the practice of simply witnessing the arising and passing of our thoughts, feelings, and sensations without becoming caught up in them or feeling captive to them. It's only from the perspective of this witness—the part of us that sees all of who we are—that we can acknowledge the most unappealing aspects of ourselves, as in, "Yes, I am that, but I'm not only that."

The mindful perspective spares us our ordinary inclination to choose up sides. Instead, we're literally able to see the big picture: the good and the bad in ourselves and in others, and to see it with compassion, and even humor, rather than judgment. From this view, higher consciousness isn't some mystical aspiration. Rather, it simply means becoming more conscious—and more accepting as a consequence.

The irony is that our efforts at self-protection and self-preservation so often result in precisely what we're seeking to avoid. We keep people at a distance to avoid feeling vulnerable and risking rejection. We get angry and hostile when we don't feel we've been treated fairly. We're selfish and self-serving when we fear we aren't getting enough of whatever we think we need. In each instance, what we seek, above all, is to feel safe, secure, and valued. We want to belong and be connected to others, but our survival instincts succeed only in pushing others away. In the process, we confirm our worst fears.

Strengthening our spiritual selves requires a leap of faith. When we reach out, we can be spurned. When we're generous, others may take advantage of us. When we own our shortcomings, we can be subjected to blame and scapegoating. When we put the interests of others above our own, we may fear that no one will take care of our needs. It takes courage and commitment to live our deepest values and cultivate our best selves. But, as T. S. Eliot put it, "Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far they can go."

Fear also blinds us to how much we receive in return when we extend ourselves. Take a look again at the qualities you chose to describe yourself at your best. How many of them are indeed connected to the way you treat and relate to others?

Risky as it sometimes seems, we almost always feel better about ourselves when we're serving something beyond our immediate self-interest. The fact that we feel better about ourselves when we give without precondition makes evolutionary sense. Reciprocity, like generosity, ultimately serves our survival better than selfishness. Giving freely builds trust, deepens relationships, and reinforces values that serve the greater good.

Defining and regularly revisiting our values is just the first step in tapping spiritual energy. Living these values in our everyday behaviors is what truly brings them to life. How then, in the face of all the pulls to survival behaviors, do we make that happen?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN ACTION STEPS

- At the end of the workday or before you go to sleep, take a few minutes to ponder this question: "When did my more primitive, survival instincts guide my actions today?" Next, ask yourself, "How would I have behaved at my best?"
- Practice mindfulness. Once in the morning and once in the afternoon, stop and take a few moments, as you breathe in and out, to simply be aware of what's arising and then let it pass. You may notice physical sensations, emotions, or thoughts. Learning to observe yourself is a way to free yourself from the compulsion to act on every feeling that arises.