

What Do You Want Out of Life? Values Fulfillment Theory with Valerie Tiberius

Valerie Tiberius: [00:00:00] These big values that we have, there's lots of ways to think about how to fulfill them. And if you can be a bit creative and flexible, it's easier to fit things together

Debbie Sorensen: that was Valerie Tiberius on psychologists off the clock.

Yael Schonbrun: we are three clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships work and.

Debbie Sorensen: I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in Mile High Denver, Colorado. Co-author of ACT Daily Journal, and an upcoming book on act for burnout.

Yael Schonbrun: I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston based clinical psychologist, assistant professor at Brown University, and author of the book Work Parent Thrive.

Jill Stoddard: from coastal New England, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, author of Be Mighty, the big book of Act metaphors and the Upcoming Imposter. No [00:01:00] more.

Debbie Sorensen: We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

Jill Stoddard: Thank you for listening to psychologists Off the clock.

Debbie Sorensen: Hi everyone. This is Debbie. I have a conversation for you today with Valerie Tiberius, who is a philosopher, which is kind of a fun change of pace for us to have a philosopher on the show today.

And she has a brand new book out called What Do You Want Out of Life? Philosophical Guide to Figuring Out What Matters. And when I heard about this book, I was excited about it because that question I. Such a good one. What do

you want out of life? You know, it's a question we all probably ask ourselves from time to time as we're figuring things out.

And sometimes as a therapist, clients come in and that's really what it kind of comes down to is they're trying to figure out what I want on my, out of my life. Maybe they're young and they're just trying to figure out which direction to go, or maybe they've noticed that they're a little unsatisfied with life and they wanna make a change.

Um, Big question and it can be a hard one for folks. And so I was [00:02:00] really curious what philosophy you had to say about this. And when it came time to schedule our co-host introduction for this episode, I really wanted Yael to do it with me because we talk a lot about some of these different areas of life that matter and how sometimes you have to make some decisions when they bump up against each other.

And Yael, I know you have your terrific book. Working parents out, and I think this is one of the examples that we kept going back to is like, how do you care about two big things in your life at the same time? And then how do you, how does that play out in an individual life in this, this finite amount of time that we have on this planet?

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, well, I love that you brought a philosopher on psychologists off the clock, Debbie. Cuz I think philosophy and psychology are really intertwined and I loved getting her insights in how much they sort exist in beautiful harmony with a lot of the things that we talk about on this podcast, and I also really appreciate that it made you think that your conversation with Valerie made you think of [00:03:00] my book.

And as I was listening to the conversation, I, I was also thinking about sort of like how we make these hard decisions. And one thing that I thought was really. Fun that she talked about is that sometimes it can help to just shift priorities of what's important to you based on context that like, and I talk about this actually in my book, that sometimes we can't get what we want and the difference between what we want and what we have.

It does contribute to how happy we are, the quality of life that we experience, and the greater the discrepancy, the less happy we feel. And there really are a few ways to deal with the discrepancy. So one is to lower your expectations, embrace a more realistic view of what's possible. Um, but that can feel a little depressing.

a different thing could be to, to improve what we have and. Reduce the discrepancy by like improving whatever, uh, isn't going well, but a different approach to dealing with the discrepancy between what we want and what we have involves attention shifting. So when we move attention away from where life isn't what we want it to be, and towards [00:04:00] other areas that are more in line with our ideals, we in a sense control the spotlight of our attention.

And I have a whole section in my book where I talk about like spotlighting the stars. And so the approach doesn't change your standards. Just modifies your importance hierarchy. And I think this kind of gets to like, you know, the, the wisdom of figuring out like what you can change and what needs to be accepted.

And sometimes we can't change our reality, but we can change sort of what. We focus on, there's that William James quote of like, what we put our attention on is what we experience. I'm butchering the quote, but it's something like that. And she talks a lot about how, how her philosophy, what she explains in her book, really feeds into that.

And I think that is something that we can do when we have these tough choices that caused us to need to pick one thing that's important to us over another, right? Instead of focusing on what we're not picking, to really appreciate what we are picking.

Debbie Sorensen: I think that's such wise advice to, [00:05:00] to be more satisfied with things because I think we do sometimes have that natural tendency to focus on, I know I do, right to focus on the things that aren't working out or the areas where we're struggling, or the areas where we feel like we're missing something.

And it's that, you know, that slight shift in how we're thinking about it, that can make a big difference in terms of our satisfaction.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, and it's not that we can't, like maybe it's a both and cuz sometimes focusing on what we don't have can be really informative, but really being deliberate about how much attention you give to that.

Like figuring out how much does this help me recenter on something that I wanna pursue versus how much is it distracting me from what I have? And maybe even just pausing and asking that question. And if you find that this is the choice and this is. Not a choice that's without costs, but it's one that you're committing yourself to.

Then you can make it a more comfortable choice by focusing on what you're getting out of making that decision of choosing one good over another.[00:06:00]

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, that's a really good point. And you know, one of the things that was kind of fun for me doing this, this. Interview with Valerie is that I got to give her a few examples from my life. She talks about a few from her own life too, which was fun. And then I got to ask her about a few of mine.

So it was kind of cool to get to pick the brain of a philosopher. Um, and I think that you'll probably recognize some of the examples. They're pretty like universal and so you probably will hear a few that you can relate to yourself.

So we hope you listen to those and, and find something helpful in this conversation. And learn a little bit about what you want out of your life. .

Dr. Valerie Tiberius is the Paul w Frenzel Chair in Liberal Arts and professor of philosophy at the University of Minnesota.

Much of her work has taken a practical, empirical approach to philosophical questions, trying to show how these disciplines can improve the world for the better. She has published numerous reviewed papers and several books, including the [00:07:00] reflective life, living wisely with our limits. Moral psychology. A contemporary introduction, wellbeing as value fulfillment, how we can help each other to live well. And her new book. What do you want out of life?

A philosophical guide to figuring out what matters, and that's what we're here to talk about today. This book is hot off the presses. It'll be coming out right around the time this episode is released. And you know, I have to say, well, first of all, welcome Valerie. I'm so happy to have you here.

Valerie Tiberius: Thanks. Thanks so much for inviting me.

Debbie Sorensen: And it's kind of fun for me because we do occasionally have people on the show who are outside of the field of psychology or mental health, but rarely a philosopher.

In fact, I'm not even sure if we've had a philosophy professor on the show before. I'd have to double check on that, but certainly it's a little bit different than. Typically what who we have on our show, and I am just really excited to

hear about how [00:08:00] psychology and philosophy can kind of intertwine to help people with wellbeing. Um,

Valerie Tiberius: That's actually, it's, it's, uh, it's kind of not surprising to me what you just said and also a little bit sad given the history of philosophy because ancient philosophers were, I. I guess they weren't exactly therapists, but they had, uh, schools that were the, the whole point of which was to help people live better lives.

And so they, you know, walked around in the marketplace talking to each other about how to look well and philosophy. I mean, we haven't really, I don't know. We, we, we've strayed from that history and done something different. So, um, I'm, I'm glad to be here. Glad, glad that you would find the book interesting.

Makes me happy.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Well, thank you. Yes. And I think that, um, it's interesting you, there's a quote in your book, you say, philosophy offers a coherent way of thinking [00:09:00] about what matters in life. And I think the two really do go together and historically have gone together, you know, philosophy and psychology. But over time, I don't know, when I took a philosophy class in college, it was.

Not like your book, which I think is much more practical and applied and has a lot to offer in people's lives. And as a therapist, I hear people come in a lot of times. Sometimes it's a young person or someone who's going through a life change or upheaval or just someone who's not very satisfied. And that's kind of what they're looking for, right?

Is, is what do I want out of life and, and what matters. Why do you think philosophy can add something maybe that that therapists might not naturally be thinking of?

Valerie Tiberius: So I, you know, because I'm not a trained therapist, I, I. I don't, I'm not very informed about what the therapists do except for my own experience in therapy, which I've had. But, [00:10:00] um, some therapists who, the, the kind of therapy I'm probably most familiar with is cognitive behavior therapy. Which actually has a lot in common with a certain philosophy, stoic philosophy, uncovering the cognitive roots of your problems and sort of talking about whether those, uh, the, the beliefs that are, that are supporting your negative emotions are, you know, rational or not rational, sensible things to believe or not.

Um, that's, there's a lot in common there with stoicism. Um, but I don't think. . So one of the things that philosophy does is it tries to. To offer a whole world view about how things fit together. So rather than sort of, um, jumping in as a philosopher to what are the, what, let's identify your problems and figure out some steps to solve them, or, uh, let's, let's try to deep [00:11:00] do a deep dive and figure out the, the great historical roots of your, of your current troubles, uh, philosophy.

Just, um, It's its goal, I think, well, that's a little bit grand, but, but what philosophy aims to do is to provide a really, a kind of theoretical perspective on, um, what we're trying to do in life and why it's hard and how to get through it. Uh, but it, it doesn't dive into the details of individual people's lives.

I think that's, I think you need therapy for that.

Debbie Sorensen: Right. Yeah. And I think that that. That makes sense, right? It's I, because as a therapist, people come in and we dive into those details. You know, what's, what's the problem here? What's going on, what's working, what's not working? And I think even as a therapist, just having that overall framework and, and helping people figure that out in their lives, you know, those [00:12:00] big questions can often go hand in hand with that

Valerie Tiberius: Yeah, it was one of the challenges of writing the book actually, was that you have to give, as you said, you know, it's more applied and more practical. You have to give examples if you're talking about these things and you want the book to be interesting and useful to people, but, You know, you don't want the example to be the point.

It's just supposed to illustrate the big picture because I would like it if people could take the big picture and apply it to their own lives rather than, uh, cause of course I can't interact with every reader and say, you know, this is your problem. Let's figure out what to do about that. I'd rather have to depend on the reader to kind of draw from.

You know, vague sort of examples, something about their own life.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, well, I think you're effective in doing that, and I think as we go through the conversation today, we might draw from a few examples as well that most people will relate to, if not directly. They'll be able to [00:13:00] kind of think how it applies to them. And the main theory I think that you offer in your book is called The Values Fulfillment Theory of Wellbeing. And I was wondering, I mean, I know this is a big topic, but if you could give

sort of a brief introduction just to orient the listeners what, what that theory is and what it has to offer.

Valerie Tiberius: So, I take it to be a theory of wellbeing or living well. , and the basic idea is that you live well when you, fulfill or realize or live up to, the values that are. Important to you and fit who you are as a person and the values that fit together in a way that lets you fulfill as many of them as you can over the course of your lifetime.

So basically the really nutshell version is, , a well lived life is a life that's rich in value fulfillment. [00:14:00] Um, yeah, that's the, that's the short answer.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I love that. And, and you talk about both values and goals and to some degree, the way that you write about them, they're. They're pretty similar in a lot of ways, but there are some differences. Could you tell a little bit about how you define those two

Valerie Tiberius: So this is one of the annoying things about philosophers that we, we, maybe this is true of therapists too, I don't know, but we're really into defining our terms and being very specific about that. And sometimes we define them in ways that don't. Exactly. Fit ordinary usage. So I take, so my, my definitions might not be quite what is typical for these words, but I take goals to be this very broad category.

Like you could just think of them as everything we want is a goal. Anything we aim at is a goal. So that can include all sorts of things, like from, you know, I [00:15:00] want to clip my fingernails to, I want to get promoted or have a baby, or whatever. Um, values are, uh, a subset of goals. They're specific kind of special goal that is, um, important to us, that is, uh, more intrinsic rather than as a means to an.

Uh, so it's something that we care about for its own sake, and it's psychologically integrated. So values tend to be like, the better values for you will tend to be values that fit your whole personality.

Debbie Sorensen: Can we unpack a little bit the difference between those means to an end type, goals and or something that we care about more intrinsically?

Valerie Tiberius: Right. So I do think there's kind of a continuum, but a, a good example of something that's I, well, [00:16:00] almost always purely instrumental is money. So it's nice to have. Money is helpful for lots of things,

but money, the, the value of money is always what it can do for you. It's not valuable for its own sake if you just sit there with a lot of money doing nothing with it and it doesn't bring you any happiness or a feeling of security or.

It doesn't, if it's doing nothing, it's useless. Um, whereas something like relationships with other people, we tend to value more for their own sake. They, we tend to think being in a relationship with somebody else, that's just good. It doesn't have to bring me, uh, success or, or health or it's just the relationship.

That's good. So that's, maybe that's one example that helps see the difference between instrumental and intrinsic.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I like that cuz I think so I do a lot of values work with my clients and I. [00:17:00] Mentioned to you earlier that I use mostly an approach called acceptance and commitment therapy, which values directed living and, and setting goals in line with your values is a big part of act. In fact, I, I think it's sort of the ultimate, what we're really hoping for our clients is that they'll have a fulfilling and meaningful life, and I do sometimes have clients who originally come in. goal like that, something along those lines where I kind of feel like there's something deeper here. You know, you surely making money isn't actually what you care about. What is it? And I think sometimes there's a lot to explore in that. Like, is it security? Is it freedom to be able to do things? Is it, you know, something about financial stress and lifting that stress?

But there's always more to the story when people have something like,

Valerie Tiberius: Yeah. So in effect, you actually are making that distinction. Maybe you don't use those words, but it sounds like it's, it is a [00:18:00] distinction that you work with.

Debbie Sorensen: I think so. Yeah. And I think actually reading your book helped me frame that a little bit more clearly in my own mind. Like what is it about those types of goals that people have that don't quite resonate as a true value?

Valerie Tiberius: Nice. Yeah. Yeah. I think things like, um, you know, being popular is like that, or, or fame, reputation, those kinds of goals where if you, if you think about, if tho if those are things you find yourself going for and, and you really pause to think about it, it's probably so. At, at the root is that you want to be loved or approved of by other people, but it isn't fame per se.

You know, it's not, it's not like I want more Facebook likes. That's my goal in life. Uh, there's something more intrinsic that's behind that.

Debbie Sorensen: Absolutely. Yeah. So there's a debate I think, well, there's a debate that you write about [00:19:00] within philosophy about whether some values are better than other values, or are values sort of neutral, like they're all the same, you know, whatever your value is, it doesn't matter. Um, what are your thoughts about that?

What stance do you.

Valerie Tiberius: So I think. There's a lot of ways to answer that question, and I guess philosophically, I think values are always ultimately rooted in. In people, uh, or at least sentient creatures who value things. So I'm, unlike some philosophers like Plato, uh, that there are values out there objectively in the world.

That's not my view. So when you talk about better values or worst values, I don't think there are these kinds of like, you know, 10 commandments [00:20:00] about values that are out there written in stone. that we can use to adjudicate whether our values are good or bad. So for me, I do think some values are better than others, but it's always gonna have to do with the psychology of the person.

Um, so some values are better than others because they fit us better. Um, you know, if you're a person who. Uh, loves to dance, but you just have never made time for it. Um, your parents told you it was kind of a trivial, stupid thing to do. Um, it, you might be better off valuing some dance in your life and trying to bring it in as one of your goals because it really fits, uh, your emotional tendencies, your, your, you know, just your basic tendency to feel joy from dancing, which not everyone has.

Um, So that's, so that kind of psychological fit or what I, I call integration is one way that [00:21:00] some values can be better for us than others. And the other way is, has to do with conflict, um, between values and other values or values in the world. So, Values that don't conflict with everything else you're trying to do are better for you than values that are constantly, um, causing you strife because, you know, they're making you sacrifice things in other areas or the world is just, you know, telling you constantly you're never gonna be able to do this.

Uh, so that's, that's my view about it. I'm how do therapists think about whether they're better values and worse values? Cause you're supposed to be kind of neutral, aren't you?

Debbie Sorensen: Well, yeah, I mean, I think that's exactly it is that what I often hear within psychology is, is a bit more of a neutral stance toward it, right? If you value something, Let's dig into that and if there's barriers, we'll explore them and set realistic goals within that [00:22:00] value. But I can tell you that it is true that people end up getting really frustrated if they're setting unrealistic goals or they just get, you know, discouraged or that kind of thing.

And this piece that you said about our human nature, and we are such social creatures, that I think when it comes down to. Pretty much everyone I've ever done values work with, there's something in their values related to relationships, as you said earlier, and maybe people worry, oh, if I'm really neutral about values, if the stance is neutral about values, are people going to value, you know, mass murder or something like that.

And it's like, I've never heard that. I don't think it's really. A very common thing for most people to have a value like that. But I do think that, yeah, I, I really appreciate what you're saying here because it's almost like, for [00:23:00] a majority of us, it constrains it a little bit, you know, and, and you do, you write about barriers and how we can sometimes address things like barriers and conflicts that are real, but at the same time, when you have your life and you want to. You know, figure out a way to have a meaningful life. You do wanna find things that you can be successful at. You know, if I, I'm 48 years old, if I decide I really wanna become an astronaut or an NFL football player, something like, I not really be too, I'm gonna really fixate on that

Valerie Tiberius: Yeah. If I were your therapist, I'd definitely try to talk you out of the football player thing. You just Yeah,

Debbie Sorensen: Not, probably not ever gonna be my strength in life. Right.

Valerie Tiberius: Right, right. Um, yeah, I think the, the point about human nature, I'm glad you mentioned that too. Uh, it, I think that especially with these relationship goals, these, you know, affiliative [00:24:00] goals, um, sometimes I think people don't even acknowledge or recognize how important they are.

And so you can be in your life willing to sacrifice relationship for other things, like a more high paying. a job that moves you away from your family, for instance, that is exciting and pays better, but it really throws a wrench in the

works of all your good relationships. And we can, we can tend to think, well that's, you know, it's, it's, it's worth it, uh, because this is such a great job and relationships well out, find new friends or whatever.

Um, but that, those kinds of social goal, the relationship. I think for most people, they're so deep in there. Um, and so tied in with everything else that if, when you sacrifice them, you pay for it. Even if you, you don't think that they're your priority, but [00:25:00] it will have negative consequences when you let your friendships and your family relationships slide.

Do you, do you find that.

Debbie Sorensen: I mean, the research on this is crystal clear that having social support is really important for our wellbeing. And I definitely find that, I mean, I just thinking of people I know personally and in my clinical work, you know, when people are too isolated or they aren't prioritizing relationships often, you know, they'll end up depressed, isolated, lonely.

Valerie Tiberius: Right. That's, that's been the whole saga of the pandemic is the isolation and the increased depression and anxiety and, yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Well, let's actually kind of jump off that though, to talk a little bit about, uh, conflict between competing goals, because that's something that, that you highlight quite a bit in your book. And that example, I think of balancing. For instance, a, a work life or a career [00:26:00] with a personal life, work life balance is definitely a major conflict that many people are trying to navigate.

Uh, myself included. And you know, probably a majority of the people who are listening are gonna resonate with that. Could you just talk from that values fulfillment lens? Could you talk a little bit about conflict between competing goals? What's going on?

Valerie Tiberius: So, uh, for sure let, let, we can start with kind of an easy example that's not very challenging. Uh, that, and that's from my own life. Um, so I recently, speaking of dancing, it was actually maybe from writing this book, I kind of decided I really wanna take tap dancing classes, , and so my husband. For my birthday, he did all this research and found a place where I can go and they have a class that's for beginners and that class conflicts with this seminar that's good for my job that I should go [00:27:00] to because it's like talks given on Zoom by fancy people who I should know what they talk about.

They're not recorded, so I have to actually go at the time. So that's like a really tiny little conflict that pits life against work, but that kind of conflict. Um, you know, blows up into much bigger things. And I think, uh, the one that I referenced just a few minutes ago when we were talking about relationships, um, it, you can think of cases where taking a new job, doing something that advances your career goals, maybe moves you away from the people you love or demands so much of your time that you.

Much less of it to give to your, your children or your spouse or your partner or friends or whatever. That's a kind of work life balance crisis That's pretty general. Um, climbing the [00:28:00] corporate ladder or the ladder ladder in a law firm or, uh, you many different kinds of jobs as they. They get more demanding and it decreases the time that you have just basic time to spend with people.

Um, so that's, I think a kind of work life balance crisis. And then of course there are as many work life balance crises as there are, uh, jobs and, and lives really. Um,

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Well, and I think in acceptance and commitment therapy, one of the things we talk about is that they can both be important to you. You know, dancing and your job are both presumably very important to you, but then you have to make those decisions about the details of how it plays out. You know? Do you take the big job going for partner in the law firm, or do you take a.

Lower, you know, a more low key job. Do you take the dance class or not? Can I ask what you decided to do in your specific case, or are you still [00:29:00] trying to decide?

Valerie Tiberius: Uh, so for me, this dancing is like a, it's, it's part of the exploration. I'm not, I've never tapped dance before, so it's not something I already have a commitment to. And I, I prioritize the seminar so far, but I'm, it's one of those, I think often when we make these kinds of decision, It's helpful to recognize that you don't, whatever you decide to do now, it could be a short term decision.

So you could think, I'm gonna, I'm gonna do this thing because I care about my job, but I'm not gonna live that way forever. I'm gonna, you know, stop and reevaluate it a year and see. How is, how is my mental health at this point? And do I need to make some changes? Um, because I was happier when I was living near my family or whatever.

Uh, so I did decide to go to the seminar and forego the tap class, but that's only for, that's a [00:30:00] temporary decision. And I'm gonna, it's not gonna be the final word on tap dancing.

Debbie Sorensen: Right. And even if you zoom out and think, what is it about tap dancing? Maybe there's, you know, maybe there's a , uh, a salsa class on Saturdays that you could take instead, or something like that, that would fulfill that same thing. So it's not like that means you're never going to take a dance class. That just means this particular class right now, you, you made the other decision.

Valerie Tiberius: That's exactly right. And so it's really in making these decisions, it's really, I, I mean, it's one of the things I try to emphasize in the book that. These big values that we have, there's lots of ways to think about how to fulfill them. And if you can be a bit creative and flexible, it's easier to fit things together

Debbie Sorensen: Absolutely. Well, let's talk a little bit about some of the ways that we might respond to conflicts effectively. You have a whole chapter about this in your book, and people can [00:31:00] read the whole book to really get the whole sense of everything that you have to offer there, because there's a lot of different ways that you think about that, which I appreciate.

It's not like a simple, oh, here's your quick fix. Work-life balance or anything like that. Um, but I would like to talk about a couple. One would be reinterpreting a value. I thought that was a really interesting way to think about it. Um,

Valerie Tiberius: I think again, that I'm, maybe the book gives you language for something you do already, because when you were talking, your first suggestion about probably coming from your background as a therapist, your first suggestion was, well, what about salsa? Isn't there? Salsa on Saturday if you can't do tap on Wednesday.

Um, and that's, that's, that is what I think reinterpretation is, and it, it involves thinking about and being more specific about what really matters to you about that value and asking yourself, [00:32:00] is there some other way of getting that thing that. That I haven't thought about yet. So in the, in the dancing case, you're, you're exactly right.

I mean, you know, it isn't, it isn't the sound of the tapping that's drawing me to dance. It's the movement and the music. And of course you don't, it doesn't have

to be tap dancing for that, to find that. Um, if, if, um, what's another sort of example?

Debbie Sorensen: I have one from your book, which was about the definition of a good mom.

Valerie Tiberius: Oh, right, right. Yeah. So I don't have children, but I, everyone, I know all my. Best friends, and both my sisters have children. Uh, so I talk a lot, um, about parenting with, with my various friends. I think they might like to talk to me about it because I'm not a parent and because [00:33:00] they don't. I, I think they're worried that other parents who do things differently will judge them, whereas I, I don't judge anybody because I, it looks really, really hard to have children, and I don't wanna, I wouldn't wanna judge anybody for something.

I'm not doing myself. But I have noticed that, you know, I have some friends who's, Standards for being a good mom are really, really high. And so that if they, if they fail to make the cupcakes from scratch for the, uh, the bake sale or they, or they end up having to buy their kid a Halloween costume, um, from a store rather than sewing it themselves, they just feel like a failure.

And then I have other friends who are sort of, Oh my kid's healthy. Woohoo. Good for me. You know? Um, so I, I, I think, I mean, I'm, it's interesting to me that you, um, picked up on that example cuz you are a mom. So maybe, maybe it [00:34:00] was helpful or, or it rang through.

Debbie Sorensen: it hit close to home for sure, because I do think sometimes, you know, we have that, that conflict and that guilt when, you know, I'm a working parent and so there are times when I think, oh, you know the, I missed this field trip and. You know, I might feel like that conflict, I, I missed the field trip because I had to go to work that day.

I had clients scheduled or I had a meeting I couldn't miss. And just kind of that reminder that there's not only one way, and I think this is, that's an example, but I think it's true in a lot of domains, that we can get a little bit more flexible in our thinking. You know, maybe I talk to my kid after school about the field trip and maybe we, you know, do something else together.

That weekend or something like that. So it's, it just creates a little bit more flexibility I think.

Valerie Tiberius: And one of the things I think is really helpful in having that kind of flexibility and in thinking about like new interpretations for your values. Like [00:35:00] what are, what's a different way I could think about this that would be more livable? One thing I think is really helpful is like looking at other examples, so that can be talking to friends and finding out how other people do it, but it can also be thinking about how people have done things in other cultures and throughout history.

Like sometimes when I look at my friends now stress so much about what school their kid is gonna go to and whether they can afford a private school or get their kid into this special school. I maybe that is as important as, I mean, maybe that really is much, much, much, much more important than it was when I was going to school.

But when I was going to school and all my friends were going to school, we went to the school that it was like, that's the school you go to. There was no, there was no choice. There was no strife about it. Um, and we all turned out fine. So I don't know, I, I'm not suggesting that, [00:36:00] oh, don't care about what you shouldn't care about what school?

Your kid goes to. That's not what I mean. But it can be helpful to think that at other times in other places, people stress less about the things that we're stressing about now, and they did okay. You know? So I think sometimes those comparisons can help.

Debbie Sorensen: yeah. Puts things into perspective a little bit. A reminder, maybe this one decision isn't make it or break it in terms of having a good life.

Valerie Tiberius: And, and maybe also it, it might help to recognize there's certain things about our culture right now that are, that stress people out that aren't like, you know, necessary. Um, we don't have to live that way.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Yeah. Well, another way to respond to conflict that you offer is giving up a goal, and I actually thought that was a really interesting exploration because it. Not always [00:37:00] come to mind. I think sometimes we latch on really, really tight to a goal. So what are your thoughts about that strategy and when might it make sense to do so?

Valerie Tiberius: Yeah, so I do think of that strategy if you're talking about, like, if you're talking about easy little goals like. , you know, I want, I wanna learn how to make Italian meringue cuz I saw it on the Great British Baking

Show. And, and I, I, I, you know, I realized, well, my husband hates dessert and I'm diabetic and maybe that's not the best thing.

I can just say, okay, I'm not, I'm not gonna do that. I'm not gonna do any baking at all. Uh, that's, that's kind of easy, but that's a very small. Goal and it, it's probably more instrumental, um, when it comes to giving up the big things that are important to us. I think that really it has to be a kind of last ditch effort.

I mean, I don't think it's, it's not easy to do. [00:38:00] Um, if that thing really is very important to you, it's gonna cause a lot of disruptions to say, okay, I'm no longer striving for that. But I do think it can make sense. Uh, one of the examples I talk about in my book is, um, Of, uh, gay people, LGBTQ people whose families, communities, or churches are not accepting of their, of who they are.

So in those kinds of cases, you would have a person who presumably values themselves and their romantic partnerships or their identity, who they are, but they also value these, um, relationships with their community or their family or their church. Sometimes people in that situation resolve the conflict by giving up the church or the family, and they move away and adopt a new family.

You [00:39:00] know, it's often called the chosen family. Um, so that's the kind, I mean, that's a, that's a case that I find very. Tragic. Um, but that's the type of case where the stakes are really high, where it could make up make sense to give up one of those really important goals altogether.

Debbie Sorensen: that's a really good example, and I was thinking also of some other examples like when you have to, when you turn down a job or you leave a particular profession because it's not working out so well, or when you, you know, just make a big change like that. And I, I think one of the things it's really worth noting is that, It's inevitably go going to be accompanied by some feelings of loss and grief, and it's, it's not an easy decision to make, but I definitely think there are times when, you know, we've been maybe pursuing the wrong value or something about it is just not fulfilling us in the way we had thought.

Valerie Tiberius: Absolutely. [00:40:00] Or, or it starts to conflict too much with everything else. I wonder if you, um, find this with your patients that, um, Because I was driven to this idea sort of by thinking it through philosophically, but I think it helps well, and from my own experience and, and talking to people as well, that says confirm, but I find it helps to hang on to the values that you're not giving up.

So, you know, to, to sort of remind yourself, this is why I'm doing this. Um, and to, you know, Of course, you're right. You have to let yourself experience the loss and there will be grief attached to giving up something important. Um, but at the same time, I also think you have to try to, you know, pump up the, the bit that you're, the reason for the sacrifice.

Um, whether it's, uh, relationships with other people [00:41:00] or your own peace of mind and serenity, lack of stress, whatever.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, no, I think that's true and, and I, I would argue that it probably won't completely eliminate the pain. Are saying, but that it can be a reminder of why, why am I making this terribly hard decision? For instance, if someone was going to, Um, divorce their spouse or end a romantic partnership. You know, that's just, if you care about that person, if you care about that relationship, it's going to be hard.

But there, if you're doing that, there's probably a reason, like, maybe this person isn't treating me very well and I need to do that. And I think it's like you're making a values directed choice, even though sometimes it's really hard to do. And it's not gonna make it like, oh, I don't care at all anymore.

But I think it's gonna just sort of ground you in the why behind it

Valerie Tiberius: Exactly. Yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: And maybe remind you that there's other ways to have a meaningful life, that that one relationship isn't the only way to have that [00:42:00] meaningful life or that one career path. Yeah.

Valerie Tiberius: right. Yeah, I totally agree with that.

Debbie Sorensen: Okay, so for those clients who come into my office, and this actually was why when I saw the title of your book that it's coming out soon, I was like, I need to see if she'll come on the podcast is because clients sometimes come in or people who are listening might experience this. I certainly have at points in my life this feeling of what do I want out of life and, and I'm gonna quote your book, you. None of us has a detailed set of well-defined values sitting around in our brains waiting to be discovered. Rather, we muddle through life with a general sense of the things we care most about, and a vague idea of what it means to succeed. And so I'm just wondering, sometimes people are exploring that question, then they want to come up with a less vague answer to that, right?

They want a better sense of what are my values? What's important to me? What do I want out of life? so there's a lot of [00:43:00] of ways to look at that question. You're your book again. You have a whole chapter with some different ways that people might think that through. Um, but I was wondering if you could give a few examples of how people can start to explore that for themselves.

Valerie Tiberius: Um, so it's interesting, you know, when I was kind of thinking about, I knew you were gonna ask me about this, and when I was thinking about. The strategies. So I, I give, I, I have these different strategies that are, you know, it's sort of a bird's eye view. Like here's a general strategy for thinking about what you really want and what really matters to you.

And I, when I was thinking about it, I was reflecting on how many of those strategies could be done really well with the therapist. Um, so one of the strategies, the first strategy I talk about is introspection, which has a lot of limits people. I think that's the sort of common way of, if you think, what, what do you want?

Well, you just look inside and you'll find it out. You'll, you'll [00:44:00] discover all your desires sitting there, all your goals and values. And I think we're not that, um, transparent to ourselves. So we, we look in there and we can't really, um, we don't always see the truth, I guess. Um,

So the another strategy that I talk about, I call the lab rat strategy, which is the strategy of trying to pic. So it's trying to picture yourself from the outside, trying to think of yourself as if you were your friend and you're looking at your life from a bird's eye point of view or an experimenter's point of view, a scientist's point of view, and sort of witnessing your behavior and how am I responding to.

Um, I think that can be helpful, but that's also a way in which therapy can be helpful because a therapist is another per, literally another person who can reflect back to you what your um, can, can make inferences based on like what you say and how you [00:45:00] report that you feel about things. A therapist can, can see what that means in a way that you might not be able to see.

Um, And then I also talk about, um, learning from other people, which, um, I think I've learned a lot about myself and what I care about from friends who, you know, a good friend who's. Sensitive and, and can put things in a nice way, can, can tell you what, uh, can tell you things about yourself that you might not easily see.

Just I have it. There's a kind of a little example of that that I remember from when I was in high school. I was reading *Dust AKIs Crime and Punishment*. It was good literature and I was a serious student, and I, I felt like that was really important to read. And my best friend at the time, at one point, she says to me, you know, Valerie, every time you read that book, you get [00:46:00] really grumpy and depressed. Now that's not really, that's not so relevant to the goals of my life, but it is just an illustration of how other people can mirror. It's not so much mirroring, I guess that's the wrong word. Other people can, uh, see things and put things together in a way that you can't because of various defense mechanisms you have or a self-conception that you don't wanna break.

So that's, that's again, connected to therapy because I know therapists are not friends, but they are, uh, maybe sometimes better than friends because they don't have an agenda of their own.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, we certainly observe what we're seeing or try to pay attention to that. Yeah,

Valerie Tiberius: Yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: there absolutely is a lot of overlap in those strategies. I think. and some of the skills I've learned as a therapist over the years, and sometimes it is just [00:47:00] observing people and helping them pay attention, like noticing certain emotions that show up, you know, vitality or regret or longing.

I think there's different emotions that can point to values, whether you're on track or off track. Um, you know, even noticing people's eyes light up when they talk about something or an emotion show up. And then sometimes we do more experiential things like. Imagine you're the speech someone's going to give at your funeral or something like that.

You know, it's like we can try sometimes to really evoke it a little bit because whatever comes out will, there's gonna be something powerful about that.

Valerie Tiberius: Yeah, yeah, I do that. I give that assignment to my intro students. Um, when we're talking to Intro to Ethics, we do a section on wellbeing and I ask them to, I don't do the obituary thing because it seems a bit morbid with teenagers, so or, you know, young 20, early twenties on things. Uh, so I have them write the, um, [00:48:00] The, the toast at their 80th birthday.

So they have to write about what they hope that someone would be saying about them when they're, when they're turning 80. And of course, so many of them

mention relationships, like it's just, it's kind of astounding how many of them talk about. You know, I'll be surrounded by my grandchildren and they will say that I was a good father, brother, mother, sister, whatever.

And I, I, I've always found that to be quite, um, you know, it's almost moving, but it's certainly impressive.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I mean it's, I think that just really highlights how, because that's my experience too, is that when people do exercises like that, almost every, in almost every case, relationships rise to the top and. Of some kind. You know, it might be different relationships or different qualities of relationships, person to person, but there's almost always that social aspect of it, that connectedness.

And again, it speaks to [00:49:00] our, our human nature and how certain values are pretty close to universal. Maybe not a hundred percent, but I would say a majority of us going to really rise to the top.

Valerie Tiberius: Do you ever find that you have. A client who just doesn't seem to have those kinds of relationship values, and what, what do you do about, or maybe you haven't had such a person.

Debbie Sorensen: I can't really think of a time when that wasn't in there somewhere. I mean, I, I do think there's a lot of differences between people and what that looks like and where that fits into other areas of their life. . Um, and sometimes people are pretty off track, and that might be part of why they're coming in.

They really care about relationships, but they're really isolated. And then that's a big part of our work together is, you know, what's getting in the way and how can we get you closer to what you want? But I, to this day, I have not had a single person who's like, I don't care at all about other [00:50:00] people. I don't care about relationships.

Those people might exist, but they're not coming to therapy. I mean,

Valerie Tiberius: Right,

Debbie Sorensen: You know the, Yeah.

Valerie Tiberius: It's, it's, I'm so glad to, to get that perspective. You know, philosophers have a great tendency to, to come up with wacky counter examples

to things. So you, you sort of, you propose something and the, the philosophical instinct is to, to, to think of the one weird case that would falsify what, what what you're proposing.

Um, and I, you know, I, I've always, in my work, I, I've always. The person who's saying, well, yeah, there, there can be a few weird cases, but by and large people are like this. And it's um, it doesn't always fly in philosophy

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah,

Valerie Tiberius: so.

Debbie Sorensen: Well, that's. Well, and I hear that in psychology too. People say, well, what if you're doing values work? And they, you know, again, they value some, some really antisocial thing. It's like, you know, I just, [00:51:00] yeah, okay. There's people out there doing terrible things, but I don't know, I don't see it. Usually it's not, if that's happening, it's usually not really even resonating with their value.

Valerie Tiberius: That is precisely the, the, I get that all the time from when I present, when I talk about my, my theory, people will say, well, what about people with grossly immoral values? What about heinous evil people? And I, I'm sort of like, yeah, you know, there are a few, maybe historically there, there are some people like that.

Um, , what does that mean for the rest of us? ? I mean, we don't wanna become those people , like, would that be good? No. Uh, and I also think they're quite rare and, and you're right, unlikely to seek therapy if , if those really are their values.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. And, and I definitely have had people who come in because they feel guilty. You know? I think that's different than not caring. It's like they think, oh, I've done something. You know, moral injury. [00:52:00] We've actually had an episode in the past on moral injury. Like there are people who have done things, for instance, in combat or.

They lose their temper or something like that, but the response they usually feel is remorse because they're like, well, that's not consistent with my values. And to me that's a much more common thing than I see. I think those, you know, those people with no remorse out there, again, they're, I don't know what they're doing, but they're typically not in my therapy office.

Valerie Tiberius: Yeah. And, and you, you know, from what you read, soldiers are, can be extremely tormented by the things they do in war. It has, it's really hard to get over it because of that conflict between their moral values. Yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. So there's two more questions that I wanna to ask you. Um, one is about that idea of a morals, values, conflict, and, and I wanna take a look at this question you ask in the book, which is, how are moral values harmonized with our other values? So I had an [00:53:00] example of this, okay? And this is an example of when doing the right thing isn't quite in line with what we really want to be doing.

And so the example that I came up with is, I love to travel, it's that's always been like my greatest. Vitality and just passion is traveling. And when I was younger I used to do more travel and obviously there are barriers like money and time off and all the responsibilities and that kind of thing, pandemics, right? But I still love to travel and I love to travel with my kids and take them new places and have adventures. I'm also concerned on a moral level about the environmental impact of flying all over the place, which I've been reading more about, um, the impact of tourism industry on, you know, certain places.

It's, it's really a problem for the people who are native there and their economy, you know, being able to afford housing if there's all these mega hotels. So, anyway, I'm conflicted because I, I sort [00:54:00] of feel like I don't travel that much. There are people who traveled 10 times more than me. Why shouldn't I be able to once in a while?

But then I also feel like, I don't know, I, I just feel like there's, there's that kind of showing up for me. So what are your thoughts about that?

Valerie Tiberius: Yeah. Boy, that's a, that's a really hard question. Are we outta time

Debbie Sorensen: We're getting close. Yeah. Is that too long of a question? Yeah.

you're gonna have to not shell it for

Valerie Tiberius: It's a super, it's a really interesting question and such a great example. So, uh, first thing from the point of view of philosophy, there are two questions here. One question. , what should I morally, what morally ought I to do?

And the other question is, what's good for me? Um, the moral question. My book isn't about what's morally required of you. I have some thoughts about, about moral requirements. You know, I teach ethics, um, and I'm, I'm [00:55:00] somewhat inclined to think that morally speaking, what we. Obligated to do is our fair share, but things are pretty bad right now, and our fair share might be quite a lot

Um, so morally speaking, you know, I'm going to kind of defer on that question and say I, I'm, I'm, I'm not competent about what we ought morally to do, especially about climate change right now. It's a very, very complicated question and there's complicated, um, science and complicated questions about cause and effect and what your little contributions add up to.

And then complicated moral questions about what, how big our moral obligations really are in the first place. Um, when it comes to value, fulfillment and living your own life. Well, I do think that doing your fair share, morally speaking is the right strategy. And I think [00:56:00] some of the reinterpretation could help you with this, um, conflict about traveling.

So there's ways to think about traveling that reduce the kind of burdens that you're talking about. Um, you can, Buy carbon offsets. If you buy a flight, you can not stay in large expensive hotels, but stay at more local places that are more sensitive to, um, resource, use. So for instance, I actually just went to Italy amongst sabbatical and um, we stayed in a place.

It was on an island where they were really suffering drought, and the, uh, we stayed in a little very local b b run by a local couple. And the proprietor, who was absolutely a delightful person and, and a physics professor, obvious, oddly enough, he asked us to shower in a bucket. So you stand in the shower in this big yellow plastic bucket, [00:57:00] quite large, and the water all goes in the bucket, and then you use the water to flush the toilet.

Now, that's really weird if you're American , but I loved it because it was a way of being a tourist without. Being distanced from the actual environmental pressures on the environment of the place you're visiting. So anyway, um, now I'm going on too long, but there are ways of thinking about traveling that are less.

Morally compromised and there are ways of thinking about your moral obligations that you know, you have to negotiate some kind of compromise and you can think, well, how can I meet these moral obligations and still do some of the things I want to do? If you travel with your kids, talking with your kids

about what the moral consequences of travel are, that seems like a good thing to do.

So I dunno how helpful that is

Debbie Sorensen: No, [00:58:00] that

is helpful. I think I appreciate it. I know I asked you a really hard question in a nutshell, but I I do think that, um, maybe just it's more complicated than that. It's not all or nothing, and there are ways to maybe find. Like you said, do your share, but also find kind of, I guess, a middle ground there.

Yeah. So depending, maybe on the issue, it seems like it's, it's more complicated. It's not, there's not like one absolute right or wrong to some of this kind of thing.

Valerie Tiberius: I think that's right. And of course I, you know, there are some absolute wrongs and there are some things that are definitely all or nothing. Like, don't kill people.

Debbie Sorensen: Right? Yes. Abso . Yes. Okay.

Valerie Tiberius: you can't offset that with

Debbie Sorensen: Right. There's no carbon

Valerie Tiberius: exactly No murder offset.

Debbie Sorensen: Right. Okay. And, and along those lines, kind of sort of this final question, which I know is another big one, but I just wanna address, you know, those real world barriers when we're talking about [00:59:00] finding realistic values. And I mean, again, I know this is big, but we live in a world where there are things like racism, sexism, economic disparity, you.

Disability access issues and that kind of thing. And so sometimes, I don't know, I guess I just, you know, when you're thinking about realistic values, I think sometimes people are up against barriers that are those kinds of social things. Um, I just wondered if you could maybe end by saying a few words about that.

Valerie Tiberius: Yeah, that's one of the things I really, that it was important to me to talk about in the book because, uh, so much philosophy is written in this

really sort of abstract voice where there isn't a lot of attention to that. And also, frankly, so much philosophy is written by white men who haven't had the same kinds of experiences.

Um, So I, I guess I would say first that the fact that there's so much injustice in the world just makes [01:00:00] it really hard for some people to live good lives and that that's bad and that those of us who are, who have the resources to do something about that. That's part of what, part of one of the projects that we, where we should do our fair share is in trying to make the world.

An easier place for everybody to thrive in. So that's, that's the first answer. Um, the, the second thing to say is that for people who, um, well, like myself, and this comes up in the book, you know, I've certainly experienced a lot of sexism and philosophy, but I'm also very. Fortunate. You know, I'm, I, I'm, uh, I've been fortunate in my career and I, um, I haven't, you know, I'm, I'm white, so I have not had to deal with the, uh, effects of racism in this country.

Um, but because I have an [01:01:00] interest in. justice and, and ending oppression that I, where I have some per some personal experience with the sexism side of it. Um, I think I'm able to make that one of my values in a way that, you know, has good consequences in my life. Um, so, so sometimes actually learning something firsthand about the injustice or sexism or whatever it is, uh, ableism, ageism, um, It, it actually gives you a motivation and some insight into figuring out how to make things better.

So I think sometimes I'm, I'm not saying that, oh, it's oppression is good for people because then they're more motivated to fix it. That's, that's not that point. But from your own point of view, um, if you have had those experie. , uh, building the ending of [01:02:00] injustice into your own values can actually, um, make a difference to how well your own life goes.

You can get fulfillment that way and there's a lot of caveats there. You know, there for, for a lot of people that's just not possible to do. Uh, so it depends on the individual, but I think for some people it is.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I just heard someone the other day that said something I like, which was that they were privileged and so therefore were trying to do what they could toward alleviating. Some injustices and they said something like, and I know there's people who don't have the privilege of doing that, and I'm kind of doing it for those people so that they can take that load off themselves, and I liked that.

Whether or not you're directly impacted by, Some of those you can still do your part and bring something to the table. Yeah.

Well, Valerie, I wish we didn't have to end the conversation cuz I feel like there's so much more I wanna talk to you about, but we have run out of time.

It was really fun for me to, to hear a slightly different take on some of the same kinds of things we grapple with over here in [01:03:00] the field of psychology. So thank you so much. Where can people find you? I, the title of your book again is, what Do You Want Out of Life?

A Philosophical Guide to Figuring Out What Matters and Can People Find You online if they, they wanna learn more about your work?

Valerie Tiberius: Yeah, I have a website. It's [valerie tiberius.com](http://valerie.tiberius.com) and that's probably the best, the best place.

Debbie Sorensen: Okay. Well, thank you so much. We will link to that and to the book as well on our show notes for today's episode. Valerie, thank you very.

Valerie Tiberius: Thanks so much for having me. This was delightful.

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