

Introduction

We, the authors, have been married for nearly forty years. Since meeting in 1982 we've lived in thirteen houses in six cities in four countries. We've also remodeled a few houses to make them wheelchair accessible, and every single time the contractors drove us insane. We bought and sold fifteen properties in three countries, and, thanks to Isaac's financial acumen, we have a nearly perfect record of always losing money on real estate.

Surprisingly, we've found time to do other things together. For example: we coauthored four books on well-being that almost killed us. We also co-taught a class for twelve semesters; and every semester Ora insisted that Isaac upgrade his lectures, even though the students seemed to like them just fine. We lived through four graduate degrees and two doctoral dissertations. Combined, we've had a total of fifteen jobs. We also ran together two randomized controlled trials of an intervention consisting of 152 activities that we designed. Ora has censored dozens of Isaac's humor columns for fear that he might lose his job. We also raised an amazing and highly spirited child who could argue about the fairness of bedtime before he was toilet trained. And we did all of this without ever having a single argument.

You probably don't believe us, do you? You *shouldn't* believe us. Of course we argued! In fact, we argued endlessly about this book. But despite Ora's search for perfection, and Isaac's many imperfections, we are still truly happily married.

When we think about what we're doing right, there are three things that keep us together. First, we make each other *feel valued*. Second, we help each other *add value*. Third, we cuddle in bed. (In this book we deal only with the first two factors, because Ora thinks it is too embarrassing to talk about anything we do in bed.)

When it comes to mattering, however, we have learned not only from each other but also from our son. Matan taught us an important lesson

when he was three years old. This was in Winnipeg, Manitoba, thirty years ago.

Winnipeg has the distinction of being one of the coldest cities in the world. While the contrast with the warmth of Tel Aviv could not be starker, we decided to move to Canada in 1984 to pursue graduate studies. Despite its freezing temperatures, Winnipeg turned out to be a great place to raise a family. Matan was born there in St. Boniface Hospital in 1987. We bought our first home there in 1990. It was in River Heights, next door to Torah Academy, where two wonderful teachers, Morah Pam and Morah Darcy, ran a fantastic preschool program. Most mornings Isaac would walk Matan to preschool, but occasionally, when he had an early morning meeting, Ora would take him. Although Ora uses a wheelchair full time now, she was still able to walk short distances at the time.

One morning Ora walked Matan next door to the school before heading off to work. It was the dead of winter, and the temperature outside was minus twelve Fahrenheit. Ora slipped on a hidden piece of ice and fell down. She tried to get up, as she was still able to do at the time, but the ground was too slippery. Matan, three years old, became very distraught at the sight of mommy on the ground, unable to get up on her own. He wanted to help her as he had seen daddy do at home. Ora explained that he's too little to do that, and she did all she could to reassure him that one of the drivers passing by will stop to help. It all happened in a matter of seconds, but for Matan it seemed like eternity. Eventually, Ora was helped by a driver who spotted them despite the high banks of snow. Matan was visibly upset that he could not help. He was too small to help, but he was big enough to feel frustrated.

Safely at home at the end of the day, Matan and Ora told Isaac what had happened. The distress no longer there, Matan was nonetheless bothered by the incident. "But I didn't help you up," he kept repeating. Ora sat him on her lap and explained that he did the best he could. A little later, Matan came up to Ora with some of his little toy cars. He wanted to play what had happened. "One car goes by, and doesn't stop. Another car goes by and doesn't stop. Another car goes by and stops." He demonstrated with his cars as he spoke. Going along with his game, Ora said: "This must be the nice lady who came to help us." Matan raised his head from his cars, looked at Ora with his big brown eyes, and said: "No mommy, this is me when I am big. I get out of the car and help you up."

Connections that help us feel valued and add value impact our health, happiness, love, work, and society.¹ The consequences of mattering or not

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matterings can be seen everywhere, at every age.² The lack of matterings often results in depression, suicide,³ and even aggression and xenophobia.⁴

The suicide rate in the United States rose 33 percent from 1999 to 2017. In 1999 the rate was 10.5 per 100,000. By 2017 it had gone up to 14. In rural counties, the rate increased 53 percent.⁵ Depression affects 322 million people around the world.⁶ This is the equivalent of the entire population of the United States. The rate of depression in the United States has gone up from 2005 to 2015 from 6.6 percent to 7.3 percent. Among teenagers, the rate has increased from 8.7 percent to an alarming 12.7 percent.⁷

Lack of engagement at work is rampant. Around the world, 85 percent of workers are either not engaged or actively disengaged at work. The cost of having so many workers psychologically absent is approximately \$7 trillion.⁸

Nationalism is on the rise around the globe, presenting a serious threat to liberal democracies.⁹ We are now facing a democratic recession.¹⁰ A few countries that embraced liberalism in the 1990s, such as Hungary, Turkey, Thailand, and Poland, went back to authoritarianism in the last decade.¹¹ China and Russia are undemocratic in their own ways. Brexit and the election of Donald Trump confirmed the turn toward nationalism in the English-speaking world. In Europe, xenophobic parties gained strength in France, Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands.¹²

What do depression, disengagement at work, and divisive movements around the world have in common? They all reflect lack of worth and lack of matterings. People who suffer from depression, workers who feel alienated, and citizens whose identity is threatened feel devalued. They feel that their lives, work, and identity do not matter. While some respond to this situation by internalizing feelings of despondence, others overcompensate by nurturing feelings of superiority and joining nationalistic movements headed by authoritarian leaders.¹³ Indeed, it is not only rates of depression that have gone up but those of narcissism as well. The proportion of teens endorsing the statement “I am an important person” has risen from 12 percent in 1963 to 80 percent in 1992. Among college students, scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory have gone up 30 percent from 1979 to 2006.¹⁴

Inequality has also reached unprecedented levels. The wealth of the eight richest people in the world, \$440 billion, is the same as that of half the world, 3.5 billion people. In the United States, 85 percent of the entire wealth of the country is owned by 20 percent of the population. The bottom 40 percent, in turn, own just 0.3 percent of it. When it comes to

compensation, in 1960 a chief executive earned approximately twenty times as much as the average employee. In 2018 this number was 354.¹⁵

Despite mounting evidence concerning global warming, governments and citizens alike continue to ignore the consequences of bequeathing to our kids an uninhabitable planet.¹⁶ What do narcissism, inequality, and indifference to global warming have in common? They are expressions of the belief that some lives are worth more than others. Narcissists are obsessed with their own value, the elite is utterly indifferent to the well-being of the poor and racial minorities, and elected officials are sacrificing future generations. They all feel that their own sense of mattering, here and now, is more important than the rest of the world. In some cases, people who feel forgotten by elites support populist politicians who promise to restore to the masses their lost privileged status.¹⁷ For people who feel like they don't matter, joining a nationalistic movement presents a tantalizing opportunity to regain prestige and feel superior.¹⁸

Feelings of being devalued or overvalued, in relationships, at work, and in the world, are among the most serious threats facing us. They derive from a failure to foster mattering. The results can be disastrous for individuals and society as a whole. When disaffected masses feel that their identity is devalued in society, they respond in one of two ways. They either turn toward nationalism and extremism, as in the case of xenophobic movements, or they protest to defend their rights, as in the case of Black Lives Matter and the LGBTQ movement. Discrimination against people with disabilities gave rise to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), while the oppression of Blacks in the United States gave birth to civil rights legislation. These are but two groups who felt excluded – that they did not matter. The passing of the ADA and the Civil Rights Act sent the message to millions of people that they did matter. But their gains have been tenuous.¹⁹

Prompted by the killings of innocent Black men and women, many of them by the police, today we witness a resurgence in the fight against racism. The recent killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, among other Black men and women, reflect deep and entrenched institutionalized racism: the belief that an entire group of people matters less.²⁰ As Isabel Wilkerson has amply documented in her 2020 book *Caste*, the United States created, and for centuries upheld, a caste system in which Blacks are kept at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This was alternately done through brutal repression and violence such as lynching, through the legal system, and through the dissemination of racist ideologies.²¹ The response to racism cannot be just individual. It must be collective, societal,

and structural. Oppression, the antithesis of mattering, will not be eliminated by the hope that some people will become enlightened.²²

The cumulative effects of disadvantage and racism are in full display in times of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that Blacks and Latinx die at much higher rates than Whites, demonstrating, once again, that discrimination has enduring and lethal repercussions.²³ When people don't matter, individually and collectively, fatal consequences ensue. Social action is required to fight racism and oppression. This is why in this book we go beyond the personal and the psychological aspects of mattering. We also address its societal and political aspects.

Mattering consists of feeling valued and adding value. By feeling valued we mean being appreciated, respected, and recognized. By adding value we mean making a contribution and making a difference in the world. We feel valued by, and add value to, self, relationships, work, and community. In the best of times, feeling valued and adding value create a virtuous cycle. In the worst of times, they form a vicious one. It is hard to feel valued by others when you don't add value to them. Racism, discrimination, and oppression work against feeling valued and opportunities to add value.²⁴ This is exactly what the Black Lives Matter movement is fighting against.

Mattering is essential for happiness, health, autonomy, self-acceptance, well-being, purpose, mastery, and growth.²⁵ These may be seen as positive personal outcomes, but mattering is also crucial for justice and community well-being.²⁶ When we balance feeling valued with adding value, when we reach an equilibrium between adding value to ourselves and adding value to others, we are building a healthier society. Research shows that people report more satisfaction with society when they experience high levels of tolerance, trust, civic engagement, and nonmaterialism.²⁷ All of these factors contribute to mattering at the same time that they enhance social contentment.

When we feel valued by ourselves, we fulfil the need for self-acceptance.²⁸ When we add value to ourselves, we meet the need for self-determination.²⁹ By feeling valued by others and by enriching their lives, we cultivate love.³⁰ The act of adding value at work fosters mastery and competence.³¹ Making a contribution to the community promotes a sense of belonging.³²

When these needs are met, we experience personal, relational, occupational, and social well-being. When these needs are thwarted we develop one of two types of problems: devaluation or narcissism. We feel either invisible or invincible; ignored or grandiose.³³ These conditions result in internalizing disorders such as depression or anxiety or externalizing

symptoms such as violence and entitlement. The fact that today we suffer from so much depression, disengagement, divisions, narcissism, inequality, and ecological entitlement derives from a particular culture, a “Me Culture.” In this culture, “I Matter” is more important than “We Matter.”

In a “Me Culture” people are guided by one mantra: “I have the right to feel valued and happy.” The self-centered nature of this philosophy focuses on what is good for me and what can make me happy. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown, in stark relief, the rampant individualism of the “Me Culture” – people ignore basic safety measures that would protect the collective. Instead of wearing masks, people claim infringement on personal liberty. Instead of showing solidarity toward fragile neighbors, they care about their own need to party first.³⁴

But if the “Me Culture” is the problem, what’s the solution? We need to cultivate a new philosophy of life where “We all have the right *and* responsibility to feel valued *and* add value, to self *and* others, so that we may all experience wellness *and* fairness.” We call this a “We Culture.” Whereas the “Me Culture” is primarily individualistic, hedonistic, acquiscent, and ameliorative, a “We Culture” is communitarian, purposeful, challenging, and transformative. Had we all embraced the latter, we could have avoided much of the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic.³⁵

Our culture is obsessed with feeling valued and feeling happy. This infatuation with ourselves, bolstered by selfies, personal branding, and access to megaphones such as social media, is deceiving at best.³⁶ The way to matter is not to turn ourselves into commodities for sale. Rather, the way to matter is to pursue meaning by adding value to self and others, making others feel valued, balancing rights and responsibilities, and seeking wellness with fairness.

Without fairness, there is a limit to how much wellness we can promote in individuals, organizations, and societies.³⁷ Women, African Americans, people with disabilities, and many other minorities cannot flourish unless they experience fair treatment at school, work, and the community. To fully matter, we must combine fitness with fairness. Yes, we must develop skills, work hard, cultivate grit and resilience; but in the absence of fair opportunities minorities will not experience mattering. We must create a *wellfair* society, one that embraces not just wellness but also fairness.

Mattering exists in the microcosm of relationships and work but also in the macrocosm of social policies. Countries that promote economic fairness and equality achieve much better results in health, mental health, trust, education, safety, social mobility, and life expectancy. Similarly, people in countries that promote fair policies in health, education, labor

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market inclusion, and wellbeing in general report higher levels of life satisfaction. Fairness makes people feel like they matter not just as family members or colleagues but also as citizens.³⁸

Mattering faces a serious challenge in the future. When robots and artificial intelligence eliminate millions of jobs, people will need to find alternative ways to make money and meaning. We must build the caring sector and the green sector. With rising life expectancy, many of us will require help as we age. Robots cannot replace love and caring. In a caring economy, day-care providers, home health-care workers, and teachers would be paid living wages. In addition, we must create green jobs and must consider a universal basic income program that will guarantee all of us the provision of essential resources.³⁹

The profound sense of worthlessness affecting millions of people is causing a great deal of personal and social misery. The suffering ranges from depression and suicide to entitlement, xenophobia, riots, and mass shootings. Lack of mattering is felt at home, at school, work, and in the community. If you are affected by relationships, workplaces, or cultures that denigrate people, you can do something about it. We need nothing less than a mattering revolution, and you can be part of it. The mattering revolution must begin now, and it must begin at home, in the workplace, and in the community. You can fight depression and disengagement by making other people feel valued and helping them add value. You can build a society where equality and fairness replace nationalism, discrimination, narcissism, and neglect of global warming. By showing that you care about others, in the present and in the future, you will find a sense of meaning and mattering. We invite you to explore the signs, significance, sources, and strategies of feeling valued and adding value.

PART I

Understanding and Promoting Mattering

CHAPTER I

The Mattering Wheel

She had just experienced the greatest disappointment of her life: she could not marry the love of her dreams. Heartbroken, in desperation, she ran away, leaving everything and everyone behind. After many trials and tribulations, including a very dangerous journey, she arrived sick and penniless to a new town. There, Jane Eyre found respect and appreciation from the community. As a teacher, she *felt valued* because she *added value* to her pupils and their families. She felt welcomed. This is how Jane described her new life:

I felt I became a favourite in the neighbourhood. Whenever I went out, I heard on all sides cordial salutations, and was welcomed with friendly smiles. To live amidst general regard . . . is like sitting in sunshine, calm and sweet; serene inward feelings bud and bloom under the ray. At this period of my life, my heart far oftener swelled with thankfulness than sank with dejection.¹

Charlotte Brontë published *Jane Eyre* in 1847. In that passage, she captured an essential part of mattering: feeling valued. Over forty years later, across the pond, William James, the great American philosopher and psychologist, described the opposite experience – feeling devalued – as follows:

If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met “cut us dead,” and acted as if we were nonexistent things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruelest bodily tortures would be a relief; for these would make us feel that, however bad might be our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth as to be unworthy of attention at all.²

Astute observers of the human condition, Brontë and James were describing the feelings associated with the first part of mattering: *feeling valued* or *devalued*. Matan, our son, showed us earlier how important it is to also add value. Matan’s story, as well as the writings of Brontë and James, illustrate the two sides of mattering: feeling valued and adding

value. So far, these two experiences have been studied in isolation, but in fact they are two sides of the same coin: mattering. You may feel valued, but if you don't have opportunities or skills to make a meaningful contribution, to yourself or others, your life is incomplete. The same goes for adding value. You may be able to help yourself or others, but in the absence of feeling valued, something important is missing. This is why this book brings together these two symbiotic components of mattering.

Feeling valued and *adding value* are not only complementary but highly interdependent. Together, they create virtuous or vicious cycles. Marginalization and exclusion engender frustration, alienation, and even aggression, which make it very hard to gain positive regard. Appreciation, on the other hand, leads to self-confidence, mastery, and the desire to make a difference. This, in turn, will make you feel valued.³

It's not hard to relate to these experiences. They need not be dramatic events. Thinking back, have you ever felt *devalued* by your relatives, boss, or peers? Have you ever been ignored at a party, at work, or in the community? Has anyone excluded you from a group? If not, you're lucky, but if such things have happened, you know these experiences hurt. They hurt because they threaten your sense of mattering; and if they happen often enough, research shows, they shatter your psychological and physical well-being. Indeed, the experience of exclusion has been linked to serious consequences, ranging from stress and depression to suicide to mass killings.⁴ In some instances, as in the case of Christian Picciolini, who became a skinhead to find acceptance, marginalization leads to joining extremist groups.⁵ There, the excluded again experience a sense of belonging.

In contrast to experiences of exclusion, if you've ever *felt valued*, or had an opportunity to *add value*, you know how good it feels to matter – so much so that your health and happiness go up every time you experience these positive emotions. In fact, you live longer and feel more fulfilled when you experience them regularly. You get a sense of meaning, importance, and satisfaction in knowing that your actions make a difference in somebody's life.⁶ As leading social motivation researchers put it, "giving can create a warm glow of happiness, boost self-esteem, increase self-efficacy, and reduce symptoms of depression. It predicts improvements in physical health and even how long people live. It can strengthen social relationships, creating and strengthening social bonds and fostering the sense that one can make a valuable contribution to others."⁷

When it comes to adding value, we can learn a great deal from people who dedicate their lives to service. Whereas givers in general tend to be healthier than nongivers, some givers live longer than others. Those who experience