



# 20 Real Life Stories of Values in Action

*A compilation of true stories that show the  
power of living what we believe*

# Introduction



Values aren't just words we hold in our minds - they come alive in the way we act, the choices we make, and the way we treat others. In a world full of noise, distraction, and division, living by our values is more important than ever.

Every day, people around us quietly demonstrate courage, honesty, kindness, fairness, or perseverance. These choices may not make headlines, but they can bring about positive change - a quiet kind of revolution. They are the building blocks of trust, connection, and hope. They show us that, even in difficult times, our principles can guide us to do what is right, not just what is easy.

This collection of inspirational real-life stories shares examples of values in action - ordinary and extraordinary moments where people chose to live in alignment with what they believed in.

Each one invites reflection:

- Which values guide me?
- How do I want to show up in my life, work, and relationships?

By pausing to notice values in action, we remind ourselves that values such as integrity, compassion, and courage still shape the world. And when we choose to live our own values, we can strengthen the fabric of our communities - one action, one decision, one story at a time.

*Shaz Marshall*



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# HONESTY



## The Wallet Returned

In 2019, researchers carried out an unusual experiment across 40 countries. They “lost” more than 17,000 wallets – some with a little money inside, some with a lot, and some completely empty.

What they discovered surprised even them: the wallets with money were more likely to be returned than the empty ones. In fact, the more money inside, the more honest people became.

### *Why would this be the case?*

Maybe honesty is a value that runs deeper than convenience or temptation. Many people, when faced with the reality of someone else’s potential loss, couldn’t ignore the weight of doing the right thing.

This study is more than just an interesting statistic – it’s a reminder that integrity is alive and well across cultures. When people choose honesty, even in something as simple as returning a wallet, they reinforce trust between strangers and strengthen the invisible fabric that holds societies together.

### *Reflection*

Honesty may not always be the easiest path, but it is always the one that builds trust. And trust, once earned, is one of the most valuable currencies we have.

# RESPONSIBILITY & COURAGE



## Captain Sully

In January 2009, US Airways Flight 1549 took off from New York's LaGuardia Airport. Just minutes into the flight, disaster struck: a flock of geese disabled both engines. With 155 lives in his hands and no power to climb, Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger had seconds to decide.

His choice? Against all odds, he decided the best way forward was an emergency landing on the Hudson River – and he pulled it off! In fact, every single passenger and crew member survived.

Sully later said he wasn't a hero, just a man doing his job. But his calm under pressure, his responsibility as a leader, and his courage in the face of uncertainty, turned a potential catastrophe into what became known as the "Miracle on the Hudson."

### *Reflection*

Responsibility is more than a duty - it's a value that shapes our actions when it matters most. Courage doesn't always roar; sometimes it's quiet, steady, and focused on others' wellbeing before our own.



# DIGNITY



## Rosa Parks

Back in December 1955, seamstress Rosa Parks boarded a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. When the driver demanded that she give up her seat for a white passenger, she quietly refused. That single act of defiance grew into a pivotal moment in history and the American Civil Rights Movement.

Indeed, the actions of Rosa Parks that day led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. For more than a year, African Americans refused to travel on the city's buses. This led to a ruling by a Supreme Court against segregation on public transport, declaring it unconstitutional.

Rosa Parks didn't set out to be famous. She wasn't looking for the spotlight. What she wanted was simple: dignity. The value of respecting every human being equally, regardless of skin colour.

Her courage in that moment rippled out to millions. It showed that even the smallest actions, when rooted in strong values, can shake the foundations of injustice.

### *Reflection*

Standing up for our values isn't always loud or dramatic. Sometimes it's a simple but firm "No" when the world expects us to stay silent. Dignity, once defended, can inspire others to demand it too.

# TEAMWORK & COMPASSION



## The Thai Cave Rescue

In June 2018, the world watched with bated breath as twelve boys and their soccer coach became trapped when a Thailand cave flooded. The situation looked hopeless. Monsoon rains poured in, passages narrowed, oxygen levels dropped. But what followed was one of the greatest examples of teamwork and compassion in modern history.

Rescuers from across the globe came together, including teams of divers, engineers, doctors, and volunteers. Some brought specialised equipment, others offered medical care, and countless more supported behind the scenes. After more than two weeks, against impossible odds, all thirteen were brought out alive. Tragically, one diver lost his life, which was a sobering reminder of the sacrifice involved.

This rescue wasn't about individual heroics. It was about people uniting around shared values: the belief that every life matters, and that compassion knows no boundaries.

### *Reflection*

When we put compassion into action and work together, we create possibilities that defy logic. The Thai Cave Rescue reminds us that teamwork and kindness can turn despair into hope, and strangers into family.



# SERVICE & GENEROSITY



## Dr Jonas Salk

In the early 1950s, polio was one of the most feared diseases in the world, crippling or killing thousands every year. The first effective vaccine was developed by Dr Jonas Salk. During an interview in 1955 for the See It Now TV Show, he was asked who owned the patent and famously replied: "Well, the people, I would say. There is no patent. Could you patent the sun?"

By refusing to patent his discovery, Salk gave up billions in potential profit. Instead, he allowed his life-saving vaccine to spread freely, reaching millions of people and eventually helping to nearly eradicate polio.

His choice reflected a deep value: service. He placed human wellbeing above personal gain. In doing so, he left behind not just a medical breakthrough, but a legacy of generosity and integrity.

### *Reflection*

In a world often driven by profit, Salk's example reminds us that values like service and generosity can leave a legacy more valuable than money - one that improves lives for generations.



# FAITH & BRAVERY



## Desmond Doss

During World War II, soldier Desmond Doss entered the battlefield with a conviction that set him apart: because of his beliefs, he refused to carry a weapon. Instead, he served as a medic.

On the brutal cliffs of Okinawa, while bullets and shells rained down, Doss saved 75 fellow soldiers – one at a time. He dragged them to safety, even when wounded himself, praying after each rescue, *“Lord, please help me get one more.”*

For his courage and faith, Doss became the first conscientious objector to receive the U.S. Medal of Honor.

Hacksaw Ridge is a 2016 film that tells the true story of Desmond Doss.

### *Reflection*

Bravery isn't always about fighting. Sometimes it's about holding firm to what really matters, when everything around you screams to let go. Desmond Doss demonstrated that true strength can mean living by your values – even in the darkest moments.

# EVERYDAY KINDNESS



## Wesley Autrey

In January 2007, Wesley Autrey, a construction worker in New York City, saw a man collapse onto subway tracks during a seizure. With a train fast approaching, Autrey had seconds to act.

Without hesitation, he leapt into the pit and shielded the man by pressing both of them into the shallow space between the rails. The train thundered overhead, missing them by inches, and both men survived.

When asked why he did it, Autrey simply said he couldn't just stand there and watch.

### *Reflection*

Kindness isn't always soft - it's sometimes breathtakingly brave. Wesley Autrey's story shows us that compassion often means taking risks, even for strangers. His selflessness reminds us that humanity can shine brightest in the moments we least expect it.



# PERSEVERANCE IN MOTION



## Terry Fox

In 1980, 22-year-old Terry Fox set out on what seemed like an impossible mission: to run across Canada with one prosthetic leg. A few years earlier, cancer had taken part of his right leg, but it hadn't taken his determination.

He called it the "Marathon of Hope", aiming to raise money and awareness for cancer research. For 143 days, he ran the equivalent of a marathon every single day - 3,339 miles in total. Eventually, his cancer returned, forcing him to stop. He passed away the following year.

Yet Terry's dream didn't die with him. His run inspired a movement. Today, the Terry Fox Foundation has raised over \$850 million for cancer research worldwide.

### *Reflection*

Perseverance is not about finishing every race. It's about pushing forward with courage and determination, no matter the obstacles. Terry Fox's legacy reminds us that persistence can spark hope and healing far beyond our own lifetime.

# FORGIVENESS



## Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison for opposing South Africa's apartheid regime.

When he was finally released in 1990, many expected him to seek revenge against those who had oppressed him. Instead, Mandela chose a different path: forgiveness.

He went on to lead South Africa as its first Black president, guiding the nation through reconciliation rather than retaliation. His willingness to forgive not only transformed a country but also inspired the world with the power of grace over bitterness.

### *Reflection*

Forgiveness is not weakness. It is strength of the highest order – the ability to break cycles of hatred and open doors to healing. Mandela's story teaches us that forgiveness is one of the most transformative values we can live by.



# COMPASSION



## The Starfish Story

One morning, an old man walking along a beach noticed a young boy throwing stranded starfish back into the sea. The beach was covered with thousands of them.

“Why bother?” the man asked. “You can’t save them all. You can’t make a difference.”

The boy picked up another starfish, tossed it gently into the waves, and replied: “It made a difference to that one.”

Though a parable rather than a true story, it’s included in this collection because it reflects a truth lived out daily by countless people around the world: small acts of compassion matter. Whether it’s helping a neighbour, showing kindness to a stranger, or protecting those who can’t help themselves, these actions ripple outward in ways we may never fully see.

### *Reflection*

We can’t fix everything – but that’s not a reason to do nothing. Each act of compassion makes a difference to someone, and that is enough.

#### *References:*

Dan Millman, *Sacred Journey of the Peaceful Warrior*  
*The Star Thrower*, Loren Eiseley

# COMPASSION & SERVICE



## Sir Nicholas Winton

In 1939, as war loomed, British stockbroker Nicholas Winton quietly organised trains to carry Jewish children from Czechoslovakia to safety in the UK. By the time borders closed, he had saved 669 lives.

Winton kept his actions private for nearly 50 years. His family only discovered the truth when his wife found an old scrapbook filled with children's photos and transport lists.

When Winton's actions became known decades later, one of the most moving moments was on a BBC programme, where he sat in a room surrounded by the very people he had saved – and their children and grandchildren.

### *Reflection*

Compassion often happens quietly, without seeking recognition. Winton's story reminds us that a single act of courage and kindness can echo through generations.



# JUSTICE & COMPASSION



## Marcus Rashford

This is an inspirational story from a very challenging time.

In 2020, a young footballer named Marcus Rashford used his platform to campaign for free school meals for vulnerable children during the pandemic. His efforts pressured the government into extending food support programmes that helped thousands of families.

Rashford, who grew up in poverty himself, spoke openly about his childhood struggles and why no child should go hungry. His compassion turned into action, and his values drove real social change.

### *Reflection*

Using our influence, no matter how big or small, to lift others is one of the most powerful ways to live our values. Marcus Rashford's story shows that compassion, when paired with courage, can change lives.

# SERVICE & DEDICATION



## Florence Nightingale

Known as the “Lady with the Lamp,” Florence Nightingale revolutionised nursing during the Crimean War.

Working long nights in unsanitary conditions, she cared tirelessly for wounded soldiers, reducing death rates dramatically through better hygiene and organisation.

Her dedication didn’t stop at the battlefield. After the war, she pushed for healthcare reforms, setting the foundation for modern nursing worldwide.

### *Reflection*

Service is not just about helping in the moment. It’s also about building systems that protect and uplift others long after we are gone. Florence Nightingale’s values of care and dedication continue to shape healthcare today.



# RESILIENCE & GRATITUDE



## Sir Mo Farah

Before becoming one of Britain's greatest athletes, Sir Mo Farah's story began with hardship.

Born in Somalia, he was trafficked to the UK as a child and forced into domestic servitude before finally finding freedom through the support of a school and sports community.

Running became his outlet and, with resilience and perseverance, he went on to win multiple Olympic gold medals. Farah later spoke openly about his past, using his story to raise awareness about trafficking and resilience.

### *Reflection*

Resilience is not only about overcoming personal struggles. It is also about turning pain into purpose. Mo Farah's journey shows that, with support and determination, even the hardest beginnings can lead to extraordinary impact.

# COURAGE & EQUALITY



## Emmeline Pankhurst

In the early 1900s, Emmeline Pankhurst and the Suffragettes risked prison, public scorn, and violence to win the right to vote for women.

They marched, protested, and sometimes faced brutal treatment. But their courage laid the foundation for gender equality in the UK.

It took many years for women to gain anything close to equality in the UK. For example, until 1975, a married woman could not open a bank account without her husband's permission. For several years after that, women could legally be refused the right to buy a drink in a pub if they were not with a man.

The journey continues, but every step forward takes us closer to equality.

### *Reflection*

Equality is not simply given. It is won through courage and persistence. Pankhurst's story shows that change often begins with brave voices that refuse to be silenced.



# INTEGRITY & INNOVATION



## Alan Turing

During World War II, mathematician Alan Turing cracked the Enigma code, which helped to shorten the war and save countless lives.

His brilliance was matched by his integrity. He served quietly, without recognition, despite immense personal struggle.

Tragically, his life was cut short by persecution over his sexuality. Today, he is rightly honoured as one of Britain's greatest minds.

### *Reflection*

Integrity and truth matter, even when the world doesn't yet recognise them. Turing's story reminds us that values can outlive injustice.

# COMMUNITY & COMPASSION



## Grenfell Tower Volunteers

After the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, ordinary Londoners rushed to help.

People opened their homes to survivors, cooked meals, donated clothes, and comforted strangers.

Amid tragedy, the value of community shone bright. Even in devastation, compassion can unite people from different backgrounds and beliefs.

### *Reflection*

Community is built not just with words, but with actions. Grenfell showed us that compassion is strongest when we help carry each other's burdens.



# HOPE & RESILIENCE



## Dame Deborah James

Diagnosed with terminal cancer, broadcaster and campaigner Deborah James (known as “Bowel Babe”) chose to spend her final years raising awareness and funds for bowel cancer research.

Her openness, humour, and resilience inspired millions. Before her passing in June 2022, her fund had raised over £7 million for Cancer Research UK.

A famous quote (often attributed to Abraham Lincoln) comes to mind: “And in the end, it’s not the years in your life that count. It’s the life in your years”. This brave lady certainly made every moment count and, for many, she remains an inspiration.

### *Reflection*

Hope does not mean life is free from hardship. It is the choice to live meaningfully despite challenges. Deborah’s legacy proves that resilience can shine through even the darkest times.

# ADVOCACY & DETERMINATION



## The Dunblane Parents

After the 1996 Dunblane tragedy, grieving parents channelled their pain into advocacy.

Their campaigning led to sweeping changes in UK gun laws, some of the strictest in the world.

Their determination, born from loss, created lasting protection for future generations.

### *Reflection*

Determination is not always about personal victory. It can also mean using heartbreak to bring safety and hope to others.



# STEWARDSHIP & WISDOM



## Sir David Attenborough

For decades, Sir David Attenborough has brought the wonders of the natural world into our homes.

Yet his legacy is not just about beauty. It is also about responsibility.

Through documentaries and advocacy, he's inspired generations to care for the planet, reminding us that stewardship is not optional but essential.

### *Reflection*

Wisdom is not just knowledge. It is the ability to use that knowledge for the good of everyone. Attenborough shows what stewardship looks like in action.

## Closing Reflection: Bringing Values Back to You



These 20 stories remind us that values aren't abstract ideals - they are lived through real decisions, often in ordinary moments that carry extraordinary meaning. From small acts of kindness to life-changing stands of courage, values are the threads that hold us together, guiding us when the path is unclear.

But the real power of values doesn't lie in reading about them. It lies in living them. Each of us has the opportunity, every day, to put our values into action - at work, at home, in our communities, and in the way we treat ourselves.

So pause for a moment and ask yourself:

- Which of these stories resonated most deeply with me?
- What value do I want to lean into more in my own life?
- Where might I already be showing up in alignment with my values - and where could I do more?

You don't need a grand stage or perfect circumstances. As these stories show, even the smallest actions can ripple outward.

When you live by your values, you become part of a larger story - one where courage, integrity, and compassion still matter. Because these examples of values in action aren't just about them. They are about you. And the choices you make today can help shape a better tomorrow.

*Shaz Marshall*