

Designing Your Life

How to
Build a
Well-Lived,
Joyful Life

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Designers Love Problems

Look around you. Look at your office or home, the chair you are sitting on, the tablet or smartphone you may be holding. Everything that surrounds us was designed by someone. And every design started with a problem. The problem of not being able to listen to a lot of music without carrying around a suitcase of CDs is the reason why you can listen to three thousand songs on a one-inch square object clipped to your shirt. It's only because of a problem that your phone fits perfectly in the palm of your hand, or that your laptop gets five hours of battery life, or that your alarm clock plays the sound of chirping birds. Now, the annoying sound of an alarm clock may not seem like a big problem in the grand scheme of things, but it was problem enough for those who didn't want to start each day with the harsh beeping of a typical alarm clock. Problems are why you have running water and insulation in your home. Plumbing was created because of a problem. Toothbrushes were invented because of a problem. Chairs were created because someone, somewhere, wanted to solve a big problem: sitting on rocks causes sore bottoms.

There's a difference between design problems and engineering problems. We both have engineering degrees, and engineering is a good approach to solving a problem when you can get a great deal of data and you're sure there is one best solution. Bill worked on the problem of engineering the hinges on Apple's first laptops, and the solution he and his team came up with made those laptops some of the most reliable on the market. The solution required many prototypes and lots and lots of testing, similar to the design process, but the goal of creating hinges that would last

five years (or opening and closing ten thousand times) was fixed, and his team tested many different mechanical solutions until they met their goal. Once this goal was met, the solution could be reproduced millions of times. It was a good engineering problem.

Compare this with the problem of designing the first laptop that had a “built-in mouse.” Because Apple’s computers relied on the mouse to do almost everything, building a laptop that required you to be wired up to a regular mouse was unacceptable. This was a design problem. There was no precedent to design toward, there was no fixed or predetermined outcome; there were plenty of ideas floating around the lab, and a number of different designs were tested, but nothing was working. Then along came an engineer named Jon Krakower. Jon had been tinkering around with miniaturized trackballs, and had the crazy idea to push the keyboard to the back of the unit, leaving just enough room to squeeze in this tiny pointing device. This turned out to be the big breakthrough everyone had been looking for, and has been part of the signature look of Apple laptops ever since.¹

Aesthetics, or the way things look, is another obvious example of a problem with no one right solution that designers work on. For instance, there are a lot of high-performance sports cars in the world, and they all evoke a sense of speed, but a Porsche doesn’t look anything like a Ferrari. Both are expertly engineered, both contain almost identical parts, but each has a completely different aesthetic appeal. The designers at each company take exquisite care with every curve and line, every headlight and grille, but they make very different decisions. Each company works in its own way—a Ferrari has an unmistakably passionate Italian look, and a Porsche a fast, exacting German sensibility. Designers study aesthetics for years in order to make these industrial products the

equivalent of moving sculpture. That's why, in some ways, aesthetics is the ultimate design problem. Aesthetics involves human emotion—and we've discovered that when emotions are involved, design thinking has proved to be the best problem-solving tool.

When we were faced with the problem of helping our students leave college and enter the world as productive and happy people—to figure out just what the hell to do with the life in front of them—we knew design thinking would be the best way to solve this particular problem. Designing your life doesn't involve a clear goal, like creating hinges that last five years, or building a giant bridge that will safely connect to landmasses; those are engineering problems, in which you can get hard data on your options and engineer the one best solution.

When you have a desired outcome (a truly portable laptop computer, a sexy-looking sports car, or a well-designed life) but no clear solution in sight, that's when you brainstorm, try crazy stuff, improvise, and keep “building your way forward” until you come up with something that works. You know it when you see it, whether it's the harmonious lines of a Ferrari or the ultra-portable MacBook Air. A great design comes together in a way that can't be solved with equations and spreadsheets and data analysis. It has a look and feel all of its own—a beautiful aesthetic that speaks to you.

Design doesn't just work for creating cool stuff like computers and Ferraris; it works in creating a cool life. You can use design thinking to create a life that is meaningful, joyful, and fulfilling. It doesn't matter who you are or were, what you do or did for a living, how young or how old you are—you can use the same thinking that created the most amazing technology, products, and spaces to design your career and your life. *A well-designed life is a life that is generative—it is constantly creative, productive, changing, evolving, and there is always the possibility of surprise.* You get out of it more than you put in. There is a lot more than “lather, rinse, repeat” in a well-designed life.

Think Like a Designer

Before you can do life design, you need to learn to think like a designer. We'll explain a few simple ways to do this, but first you need to understand one really big point: Designers don't *think* their way forward. Designers *build* their way forward. What does that mean? It means you are not just going to be dreaming up a lot of fun fantasies that have no relationship to the real world—or the real you. You are going to build things (we call them prototypes), try stuff, and have a lot of fun in the process.

Want a career change? This book will help you make that change, but not by sitting around trying to decide what that change is going to be. We're going to help you think like a designer and build your future, prototype by prototype. We're going to help you approach your own life design challenges with the same kind of curiosity and the same kind of creativity that resulted in the invention of the printing press, the lightbulb, and the Internet.

Our focus is mainly on jobs and careers, because, let's face it, we spend most of the hours of our days, and the days of our lives, at work. Work can be a daily source of enormous joy and meaning, or it can be an endless grind and waste of hours spent trying to white-knuckle our way through the misery of it all until the weekend comes. A well-designed life is not a life of drudgery. You weren't put on this earth to work eight hours a day at a job you hate until the time comes to die.

That may sound a bit melodramatic, but many people tell us that this is a good description of their lives. And even those who are lucky enough to find a career they love often find that they are frustrated and have a hard time designing a life that is balanced. It's time to start thinking differently—about everything.

Design thinking involves certain simple mind-sets. This book will teach you those mind-sets and how to use them to do life design.

The five mind-sets you are going to learn in order to design your life are *curiosity*, *bias to action*, *reframing*, *awareness*, and *radical collaboration*. These are your design tools, and with them you can build anything, including a life you love.



Be Curious. *Curiosity* makes everything new. It invites exploration. It makes everything play. Most of all, curiosity is going to help you “get good at being lucky.” It’s the reason some people see opportunities everywhere.



Try Stuff. When you have a *bias to action*, you are committed to building your way forward. There is no sitting on the bench just thinking about what you are going to do. There is only getting in the game. Designers try things. They test things out. They create prototype after prototype, failing often, until they find what works and what solves the problem. Sometimes they find the problem is entirely different from what they first thought it was. Designers embrace change. They are not attached to a particular

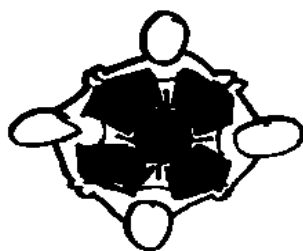
outcome, because they are always focused on what will happen next—not what the final result will be.



Reframe Problems. *Reframing* is how designers get unstuck. Reframing also makes sure that we are working on the right problem. Life design involves key reframes that allow you to step back, examine your biases, and open up new solution spaces. Throughout the book, we will be reframing dysfunctional beliefs that prevent people from finding the careers and the lives they want. Reframing is essential to finding the right problems and the right solutions.



Know It's a Process. We know that life gets messy. For every step forward, it can sometimes seem you are moving two steps back. Mistakes will be made, prototypes thrown away. An important part of the process is letting go—of your first idea and of a good-but-not-great solution. And sometimes amazing designs can emerge from the mess. The Slinky was invented this way. Teflon was created this way. Super Glue. Play-Doh. None of these things would exist if a designer somewhere hadn't screwed up. When you learn to think like a designer you learn to be *aware of the process*. Life design is a journey; let go of the end goal and focus on the process and see what happens next.



Ask for Help. The last mind-set of design thinking is perhaps the most important, especially when it comes to designing your life: *radical collaboration*. What this means is simple—you are not alone. The best designers know that great design requires radical collaboration. It takes a team. A painter can create an artistic masterpiece alone on a windswept coast, but a designer cannot create the iPhone alone, windswept beach or not. And your life is more like a great design than a work of art, so you cannot create it alone, either. You do not have to come up with a brilliant life design by yourself. Design is a collaborative process, and many of the best ideas are going to come from other people. You just need to ask. And know the right questions to ask. In this book, you will learn how to use mentors and a supportive community to help with your life design. When you reach out to the world, the world reaches right back. And this changes everything. In other words, life design, like all design, is a team sport.

Anti-Passion Is Our Passion

Many people operate under the dysfunctional belief that they just need to find out what they are passionate about. Once they know their passion, everything else will somehow magically fall into

place. We hate this idea for one very good reason: most people don't know their passion.

Our colleague William Damon, director of the Stanford Center on Adolescence, found that only one in five young people between twelve and twenty-six have a clear vision of where they want to go, what they want to accomplish in life, and why.⁴ Our experience suggests, similarly, that 80 percent of people of all ages don't really know what they are passionate about.

So conversations with career counselors often go like this:

Career Counselor: "What are you passionate about?"

Job Seeker: "I don't know."

Career Counselor: "Well, come back when you figure it out."

Some career counselors will give people tests to assess people's interests or strengths, or to survey their skills, but anyone who has taken such tests knows that the conclusions are often far from conclusive. Besides, finding out that you could be a pilot, an engineer, or an elevator repairman isn't very helpful or actionable. So we're not very passionate about finding your passion. We believe that people actually need to take time to develop a passion. And the research shows that, for most people, passion comes *after* they try something, discover they like it, and develop mastery—not before. To put it more succinctly: passion is the result of a good life design, not the cause.

Most people do not have that *one thing* they are passionate about—that singular motivator that drives all of their life decisions and infuses every waking moment with a sense of purpose and meaning. If you've found that studying the mating habits and

evolution of mollusks from the Cambrian period until the present day is your purpose for living—we salute you. Charles Darwin spent thirty-nine years studying earthworms; we salute Charles Darwin. What we don't salute is a method of approaching life design that leaves out 80 percent of the population. In truth, most people are passionate about many different things, and the only way to know what they want to do is to prototype some potential lives, try them out, and see what really resonates with them. We are serious about this: you don't need to know your passion in order to design a life you love. Once you know how to prototype your way forward, you are on the path to discovering the things you truly love, passion or not.

A Well-Designed Life

A well-designed life is a life that makes sense. It's a life in which who you are, what you believe, and what you do all line up together. When you have a well-designed life and someone asks you, "How's it going?," you have an answer. You can tell that person that your life is going well, and you can tell how and why. A well-designed life is a marvelous portfolio of experiences, of adventures, of failures that taught you important lessons, of hardships that made you stronger and helped you know yourself better, and of achievements and satisfactions. It's worth emphasizing that failures and hardships are a part of every life, even the well-designed ones.

We're going to help you figure out what a well-designed life looks like for you. Our students and clients tell us it's fun. They also tell us that it's full of surprises. We can assure you that at

times it will take you out of your comfort zone. We're going to ask you to do things that may feel counterintuitive, or at the very least different from what you've been taught in the past.

Curiosity
Bias to action
Reframing
Awareness
Radical collaboration

What happens when you do these things? What happens when you engage in life design? Actually, something quite extraordinary happens. Things you want start to show up in your life. You start to hear of job openings you were dreaming about. People you were interested in meeting just happen to be in town. What is happening here? For starters, it's that "getting good at being lucky" thing we mentioned earlier, a result of curiosity and awareness, and a by-product of using the five mind-sets. In addition, the process of discovering who you are and what you want has a rather extraordinary effect on your life. There will be effort and action involved, no doubt, but it will seem, rather surprisingly, as if everyone is conspiring to help you. And, by being aware of the process, you will have a lot of fun along the way.

All through the process of life design, we will be right here with you. To guide you. To challenge you. We're going to give you the ideas and tools you need for designing your way through life. We're going to help you find your next job. Your next career. Your next big thing. We're going to help you design your life. A life that you love.