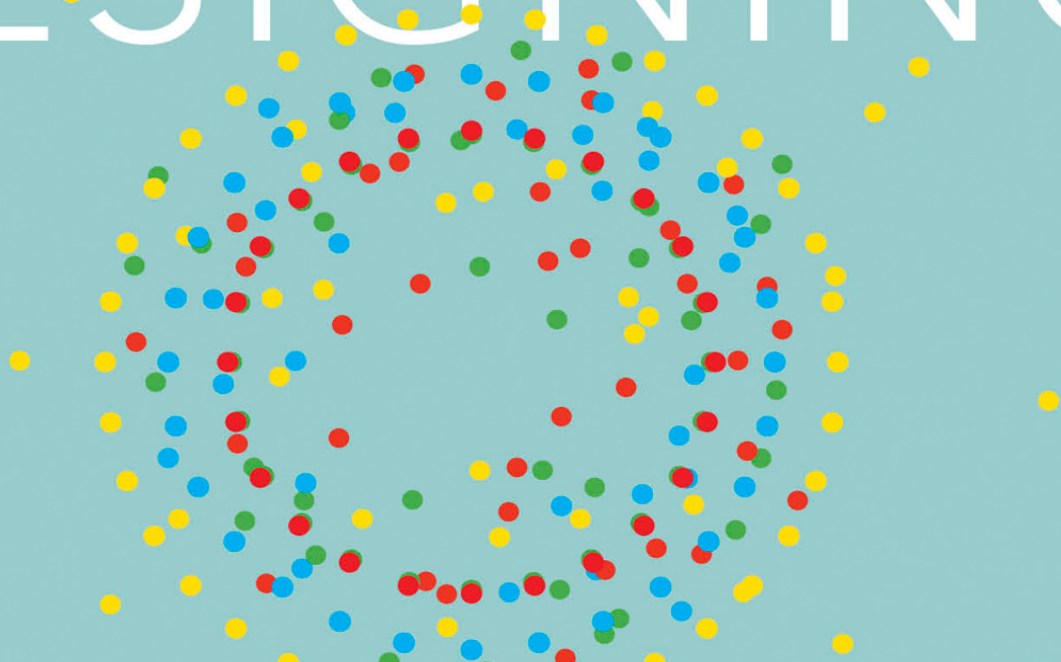


BILL BURNETT & DAVE EVANS

DESIGNING



YOUR LIFE

HOW TO BUILD A WELL-LIVED,
JOYFUL LIFE

Designing Your Life

How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life

**Bill Burnett and
Dave Evans**

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To all of the wonderful students who have shared their stories and lives with us and whose openness and willing engagement have taught us more about life design than we ever could have imagined.

To my wife, Cynthia, who told me to take the job at Stanford; I love you and wouldn't be the person I am without you.

–Bill Burnett

To my dear wife, Claudia, the true literary force in our house, who refused to let me not write this book and has tirelessly reminded me why. Your love has redeemed me again and again.

–Dave Evans

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Introduction: Life by Design

Ellen liked rocks. She liked collecting them, sorting them, and categorizing them according to size and shape, or type and color. After two years at a prestigious university, the time came for Ellen to declare her major. She had no idea what she wanted to do with her life or who she wanted to be when she grew up, but it was time to choose. Geology seemed like the best decision at the time. After all, she really, really liked rocks.

Ellen's mother and father were proud of their daughter, *the geology major, a future geologist*. When Ellen graduated, she moved back home with her parents. She began babysitting and dog walking to make a little money. Her parents were confused. This is what she had done in high school. They had just paid for an expensive college education. When was their daughter going to turn magically into a geologist? When was she going to begin her career? This is what she had studied for. This is what she was *supposed* to do.

The thing is—Ellen had realized she didn't want to be a geologist. She wasn't all that interested in spending her time studying the earth's processes, or materials, or history. She wasn't interested in fieldwork, or in working for a natural-resource company or an environmental agency. She didn't like mapping or generating reports. She had chosen geology by default, because she had liked rocks, and now Ellen, diploma in hand, frustrated parents in her ear, had absolutely no idea how to get a job and what she should do with the rest of her life.

If it was true, as everyone had told her, that her college years were the best four years of her life, Ellen had nowhere to go but down. She did not realize that she was hardly alone in not wanting to work in the field in which she had majored. In fact, in the United States, only 27 percent of

college grads end up in a career related to their majors. The idea that what you major in is what you will do for the rest of your life, and that college represents the best years of your life (before a life of hard work and boredom), are two of what we call dysfunctional beliefs—the myths that prevent so many people from designing the life they want.

Dysfunctional Belief: *Your degree determines your career.*

Reframe: *Three-quarters of all college grads don't end up working in a career related to their majors.*

By her mid-thirties, Janine was really starting to reap the benefits of decades of dedication. She'd jumped on the fast track early and had managed to stay there. She was a graduate of a top college and a top law school, had joined a firm that did important and influential work, and was on her way to really “making it.” College, law school, marriage, career—everything in her life had turned out exactly as she had planned, and her willpower and hard work had given her everything she wanted. She was the picture of success and achievement.

But Janine had a secret.

Some nights, after driving home from the law firm that bore one of the most recognizable names in Silicon Valley, she would sit out on the deck as the lights of the valley came on, and cry. She had everything she thought she should have, everything that she thought she wanted, but she was profoundly unhappy. She knew she should be ecstatic with the life she had created, but she wasn't. Not even close.

Janine imagined that there was something wrong with her. Who wakes up every morning the picture of success, and goes to bed every night with a knot in her stomach, feeling as if there's something missing, something that got lost along the way? Where do you turn when you have everything and nothing all at the same time? Like Ellen, Janine held a dysfunctional belief. She believed that if she rode all the merry-go-rounds and grabbed for all the brass rings she would find happiness. Janine is also not alone. In America,

two-thirds of workers are unhappy with their jobs. And 15 percent actually hate their work.

Dysfunctional Belief: *If you are successful, you will be happy.*

Reframe: *True happiness comes from designing a life that works for you.*

Donald had made his money. He had worked for more than thirty years at the same job. His home was almost paid off. His children had all graduated from college. His retirement funds had been carefully invested. He had a solid career and a solid life. Get up, go to work, pay the bills, go home, go to bed. Wake up the next day and do it all again. Lather. Rinse. Repeat.

For years Donald had been asking the same question over and over. He carried this question with him to coffee shops, to the dinner table, to church, and even into his local bar, where a few fingers of Scotch would quiet the question. But always it would return. For close to a decade, the question had woken him up at 2:00 a.m. and stood with him in front of the bathroom mirror—“Why the hell am I doing this?”

Not once had the guy looking back at him in the mirror ever had a good answer. Donald’s dysfunctional belief was related to Janine’s, but he’d held on to it for much longer—a life of responsible and successful work should make him happy. It should be enough? But Donald had another dysfunctional belief: that he couldn’t stop doing what he’d always done. If only the guy in the mirror could have told him that he was not alone, and he did not have to do what he had always done. In the United States alone, more than thirty-one million people between ages forty-four and seventy want what is often called an “encore” career—work that combines personal meaning, continued income, and social impact. Some of those thirty-one million have found their encore careers, and many others have no idea where to begin, and fear it’s too late in life to make a big change.

Dysfunctional Belief: *It's too late.*

Reframe: *It's never too late to design a life you love.*

Three people. Three big problems.

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.

Your well-designed life will have a look and a feel all of its own as well, and design thinking will help you solve your own life design problems. Everything that makes our daily living easier, more productive, more enjoyable, and more pleasurable was created because of a problem, and because some designer or team of designers somewhere out there in the world sought to solve that problem. The spaces we live in, work in, and play in were all designed to make our life, work, and play better. No matter where we look in our external world, we can see what happens when designers tackle problems.

We can see the benefits of design thinking.

And you're going to see the benefits of design thinking in your own life. 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.

How Do We Know?

It all started with a lunch.

Actually, it all started when we were both undergrads at Stanford University in the 1970s (Dave a little earlier in the decade than Bill). Bill discovered the product-design major and an exciting career trajectory to go with it. As a child, he used to draw cars and airplanes while sitting under his grandmother's sewing machine, and when he majored in product design, it was because he had discovered (much to his surprise) that there were people in the world who did this kind of thing every day, and they were called designers. As the executive director of the Design Program at Stanford, Bill is still drawing and building things (he's come out from under the sewing machine), directing the undergraduate and graduate programs in design, and teaching at the d.school (The Hasso Plattner Institute of Design—a multidisciplinary hub of innovation at Stanford where all the classes are based on the design thinking process). Bill has also worked in start-ups and Fortune 100 companies, including seven years at Apple, designing award-winning laptops (and those hinges) and a number of years in the toy industry, designing Star Wars action figures.

Bill knows how lucky he was to have discovered product design and a joyful and fulfilling career path so early. In our teaching careers, we've both come to see how rare that is, and just how often it doesn't work that way for students, even at Stanford.

Unlike Bill, when Dave was an undergrad, he had no idea what he was going to do. He failed at being a biology major (more on that later) and graduated in mechanical engineering—frankly, for lack of a better idea. During college, he never found good help with the question “How do I figure out what I want to do with my life?” He managed to figure it out eventually, “the hard way,” and has enjoyed more than thirty years in executive leadership and management consulting in high technology. He product-managed the first mouse and early laser-printing projects at Apple, was a co-founder of Electronic Arts, and has helped lots of young start-up founders find their way. After a pretty rough start, his career developed

wonderfully—but he always knew that it had been a lot harder than it needed to be.

Even though we both went off to start careers and families, we continued to keep a hand in working with students. Bill was at Stanford, where he watched as hundreds of students came through his office hours and struggled with figuring out life after graduation. Dave was teaching at UC Berkeley, where he had developed a course called How to Find Your Vocation (aka: Is Your Calling Calling?), which he taught fourteen times over eight years. Still, he longed to do more at Stanford. Along the way, he and Bill had intersected time and again, in business and personally. Dave had heard that Bill had just accepted the position of executive director of the Stanford Program in Design, a program Dave knew well. It occurred to Dave that the multidisciplinary demands of being a designer were likely to put design students under an unusually heavy burden: trying to find a way to conceive a personally meaningful and authentic, as well as commercially viable, career vision. He decided to call up Bill and have lunch and share some of his ideas—just to see what might happen. If it went well, maybe they'd have more lunches on the topic, and in perhaps a year or so something might come of it.

And that's why it all began at lunch.

Five minutes into that lunch, it was a done deal. We decided we were going to partner to bring a new course to Stanford, to apply design thinking to designing life after college—first to design students and, if that went well, then to all students.

That course has gone on to become one of the most popular elective classes at Stanford.

When asked what we do at Stanford, we will sometimes respond with our carefully crafted elevator reply: “We teach courses at Stanford that help any student to apply the innovation principles of design thinking to the wicked problem of designing your life at and after university.” And, of course, they then say, “Great! What's that mean?”

And we usually say, “We teach how to use design to figure out what you want to be when you grow up.” At that point almost everyone says, “*Oh!* Can I take the class?!” For years we've had to say no to that question, at least to everyone who didn't happen to be one of the sixteen thousand

students at Stanford. That is finally no longer the case. We've been offering Designing Your Life workshops to everyone (www.designingyour.life), and we've written this book so that you don't have to go to Stanford to have a well-designed life.

But you do have to be willing to ask yourself some questions. Some hard questions.

Designers Also Love Questions

Just as Donald faced the mirror every night and asked himself, “Why the hell am I doing this?,” everyone struggles with similar questions about life, about work, and about his or her meaning and purpose in the world.

- **How do I find a job that I like or maybe even love?**
- **How do I build a career that will make me a good living?**
- **How do I balance my career with my family?**
- **How can I make a difference in the world?**
- **How can I be thin, sexy, and fabulously rich?**

We can help you answer all these questions—except the last one.

We have all been asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” This is the fundamental question of life—whether we are fifteen or fifty. Designers love questions, but what they really love is reframing questions.

Reframing is one of the most important mind-sets of a designer. Many great innovations get started in a reframe. In design thinking we always say, “Don't start with the problem, start with the people, start with empathy.” Once we have empathy for the people who will be using our products, we define our point of view, brainstorm, and start prototyping to discover what we don't yet know about the problem. This typically results in a reframe, sometimes also called a pivot. A reframe is when we take new information about the problem, restate our point of view, and start thinking and prototyping again. You start out thinking you are designing a product (a

new coffee blend and new kind of coffee machine) and reframe when you realize you are actually redesigning the coffee experience (Starbucks). Or, in an attempt to make an impact on poverty, you stop lending money to the wealthy class in a country (as the World Bank does) and start lending money to people considered too poor to pay it back (micro-lending and the Grameen Bank). Or the team at Apple comes up with the iPad, a complete reframe of what the portable computing experience is about.

In life design, we reframe a lot. The biggest reframe is that your life can't be perfectly planned, that there isn't just one solution to your life, and that that's a good thing. There are many designs for your life, all filled with hope for the kind of creative and unfolding reality that makes life worth living into. Your life is not a thing, it's an experience; the fun comes from designing and enjoying the experience.

The reframe for the question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" is this: "Who or what do you want to grow into?" Life is all about growth and change. It's not static. It's not about some destination. It's not about answering the question once and for all and then it's all done. Nobody really knows what he or she wants to be. Even those who checked a box for doctor, lawyer, or engineer. These are just vague directions on a life path. There are so many questions that persist at every step of the way. What people need is a process—a design process—for figuring out what they want, whom they want to grow into, and how to create a life they love.

Welcome to Life Design

Life design is the way forward. It's what will help Ellen move from her college major to her first job. It's what will help Janine move from the life she should have into the life she wants. It's what will help Donald find the answer to the questions that keep him up at night. Designers imagine things that don't yet exist, and then they build them, and then the world changes. You can do this in your own life. You can imagine a career and a life that don't exist; you can build that future you, and as a result your life will

change. If your life is pretty perfect as is, life design can still help you make it an even better version of the life you currently love living.

When you think like a designer, when you are willing to ask the questions, when you realize that life is always about designing something that has never existed before, then your life can sparkle in a way that you could never have imagined. That is, if you like sparkles. It's your design, after all.

What Do We Know?

In Stanford's Design Program, we have taught more than a thousand students design thinking and how to design their lives. And we'll let you in on a secret—no one has ever failed our class. In fact, it's impossible to flunk. We have more than sixty years of combined teaching experience, and we have taught this approach to high school students, college students, graduate students, Ph.D. students, twenty-somethings, mid-career executives, and retirees wanting an “encore” career.

As teachers, we have always guaranteed our students “office hours for life.” This means that if you take a class from us we are there for you, forever. Period. We've had students come back to us over the years since they've graduated, and they've told us how the tools, ideas, and mind-sets that we teach have made a difference for them. We're quite hopeful—and, frankly, pretty confident—that these ideas can make a difference for you, too.

But don't take our word for it. Stanford is a very rigorous place. Though anecdotes are nice, they don't count for much in academia. To speak authoritatively, you need data. Our class is one of the few design thinking classes that have been scientifically studied and have proved to make a difference for students on a number of important measures. Two doctoral students did their dissertations on the course, and what they found was pretty exciting.² They found that those who took our class were better able to conceive of and pursue a career they really wanted; they had fewer dysfunctional beliefs (those pesky ideas that hold you back and that just

aren't true) and an increased ability to generate new ideas for their life design (increasing their ideation capability). All of these measures were "statistically significant," which, in non-geek-speak, means that the ideas and exercises we lay out in our course and are going to walk you through in this book have been proven effective; they can help you to figure out what you want and show you how to get it.

But let's be perfectly clear right from the start. Science or no science, this is all highly personal stuff. We can give you some tools, some ideas, some exercises, but we can't figure it all out for you. We can't give you your insights, change your perspective, and provide you with nonstop "aha" moments, all in ten easy steps. What we can tell you is that if you actually use the tools and do the life design exercises, you will generate the insights you need to have. Because here's the big truth: there are many versions of you, and they are all "right." And life design will help you live into whatever version of you is now playing at the Cineplex. Remember, there are no wrong answers, and we're not grading you. We will suggest you do some exercises in this book, but there are no answers in the back to tell you how you did. We've added a recap of the exercises at the end of each chapter that has them—a Try Stuff box—because we suggest that you, well, try stuff. That's what designers do. We're not measuring you against anyone, and you shouldn't measure yourself against anyone, either. We're here to co-create with you. Think of us as part of your own personal design team.

In fact, we suggest you go out and get a design team right off the bat—a group of people who will read the book with you and do the exercises alongside you, a collaborative team in which you support one another in your pursuit of a well-designed life. We'll talk about this more later in the book, and by all means you should feel free to read it on your own first. Many people think that designers are lone geniuses, working in solitude and waiting for a flash of inspiration to show them the solution to their design problem. Nothing could be further from the truth. There may be some problems, such as the design of a stool or a new set of children's blocks, that are simple enough to be tackled by an individual, but in today's highly technical world, almost every problem requires a design team. Design thinking takes this idea even further and suggests that the best results come

from radical collaboration. Radical collaboration works on the principle that people with very different backgrounds will bring their idiosyncratic technical and human experiences to the team. This increases the chance that the team will have empathy for those who will use what they are designing, and that the collision of different backgrounds will generate truly unique solutions.

This is proved over and over again in d.school classes at Stanford, where graduate students create teams of business, law, engineering, education, and medical students that come up with breakthrough innovations all the time. The glue that holds these teams together is design thinking, the human-centered approach to design that takes advantage of their different backgrounds to spur collaboration and creativity. Typically, none of the students have any design background when they enroll in our classes, and all of the teams struggle at first to be productive. They have to learn the mind-sets of a designer—especially radical collaboration and being mindful of process. But once that happens, they discover that their abilities as a team far exceed what any individual can do, and their creative confidence explodes. Hundreds of successful student projects and innovative companies, such as D-Rev and Embrace,³ have come from this process, and are proof that collaboration is the way design gets done today.

So be a genius at your life design; just don't think you have to be one of those lone geniuses.

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.