



Guest

Bill Burnett is a designer, educator, and co-author of *Designing Your Life*. He has worked across toys, technology and academia, and now leads the Life Design Lab at Stanford where he helps people rethink how they build their careers and lives.

In this conversation, we walk through his journey from the early days of design to his work with students and professionals who are trying to find clarity in a world that keeps shifting. Bill talks about the power of curiosity and play, the value of reframing problems before rushing to solutions, and why small prototypes often reveal more truth than long plans.

He also explains gravity problems and anchor problems, how energy and engagement shape our daily experience, and why coherence is a reliable signal that your choices match who you are. We touch on how AI is reshaping work and why the most durable skills involve empathy, creativity and the ability to learn fast.

The discussion is a helpful reminder that there is no single perfect path. There are several good paths, and we find them by paying attention, trying things and staying open to what the world is telling us.

Context to the conversation

Welcome to the 2025 year ending conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast, a series of reflective conversations on Leadership, Transitions, Careers and Life. A podcast which brings together a combination of insights from local journeys and global wisdom since 2016.

I am your host Deepak Jayaraman. My Why is to help growth minded individuals play to their potential through my coaching, podcasting and writing. You can learn more about my work at www.playtopotential.com.

My guest this time is Bill Burnett. Bill is faculty at Stanford Design School and over the years has helped design a range of things from Apple laptops to people's lives. He is the Co-Author of the bestseller – *Design your Life* where he speaks about taking design ideas and applying it to our lives. I hope you find the conversation useful as you go into your year-end break.

In our conversation, we spoke about the dysfunctional beliefs around education and careers, criticality of problem finding (as compared to problem solving), gravity and anchor problems, and the nuances behind architecting a coherent life.

A shout out to Navyug Mohnot who was the one who made this conversation possible. Navyug is a certified Design Your Life Coach and teaches at ISB – Indian School of Business, Ashoka University and NID - National Institute of Design. He was kind enough to connect me to Bill who kindly agreed

to make time for this conversation. Without further ado, let's dive into the conversation with Bill Burnett.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Bill, thank you so much for making the time. It's a real pleasure and honor to have you at the Play to Potential podcast.

Bill Burnett (BB): Thanks for inviting me.

DJ: And then first of all, thanks to Navyug Monot, a common friend who was kind enough to make this possible. So thank you to him. Bill.

BB: Yeah, he's a big proponent of the designing your life stuff.

DJ: Got it. Got it. I think it's in this conversation, I find it useful to go back to people's roots and childhood. Bill, I'd love to know a little bit about your early years and more specifically, maybe if you had to think a little bit about where the roots of some of what you do now might've been sown in your early years. Could you talk a little bit about that?

BB: Yeah, you know, it's the, I think it was Steve Jobs who said, you only can connect the dots in reverse. I didn't, I was kind of a spacey kid, but I was always sort of artistic. I was always drawing things and thinking about things using my imagination. But of course in school, they tell you that's not, that's not useful. So I, you know, tried to be good at the stuff they told me to be good at, like math and, and reading and things. But I always had, I've always had sort of, think maybe an artistic soul, if you will. I went off to, I grew up in the Boston area, right? Just right outside of Boston, Massachusetts. It's on the East Coast for your listeners. And I was eager to get as far away from my parents as possible, so I picked Stanford as the university that I wanted to go to. somehow or other I got in, I'm not sure why. But it turned out it was also the one program that had this really interesting design. Major was in the school of engineering. wasn't an art major, like design is typically in an art school. But it was in the school of engineering, but it combined art and engineering and psychology and anthropology because it was the original founder and the guy who scaled the program, guy named Bob McKim. Their theory was like, well, if you teach people to engineer things, but you don't teach them about people, they'll make inhuman machines. Like in those days, it was mostly machines back in 60s when they started this thing and so I thought that was quite brilliant and I ended up in that program And that took me into a career in design start out in the toy industry Because I thought that would be fun and and then came and then that was in Midwest in Cincinnati, Ohio. I got to work on Star Wars toys I was at the company that had the Star Wars license. So I was doing Star Wars toys and Raiders of the Lost Ark toy On the design side of those of those products. Yeah

DJ: And were on the design side of things or?

BB: I came back to the Valley and then I did my masters and got into tech. I've been in the tech business ever since. I did a couple of startups. did seven years at Apple. I had my own consulting

firm. We specialized in designing products in Silicon Valley and then bringing them to Asia. So had an office in Silicon Valley in Palo Alto and then an office in Hong Kong. I went back and forth to Hong Kong for about 10 years. But connecting it all was this idea of designing things that are easy for people to use for using the design methodology, the human-centered design methodology, which we call design thinking nowadays, but it's just designing for people and understanding people I thought was just the most interesting kind of design. I was never a pure engineer in the sense that I just wanted to work the equations, didn't care about the people, and I was never a pure artist because I thought you needed to know engineering to get stuff done. Anyway, that turned out to be a pretty fun. Along the way, I started teaching at Stanford. I started teaching way, back in the 80s and 90s. But just one class every year, we like to bring in practitioners to teach design, because design's a moving sport, right? It's always moving. And that led to, in 2006, when David Kelly, who's our senior academic, also the guy who started IDEO, the big international design firm, and started starting the D school in 2006. He called me up and said, hey, you've been teaching here part time. You ever thought about being a full-time professor? I said, no. He said, well, I'm going to start this design school, and I need someone to help me with the degree programs and other things. So anyway, I took that job in 2006. In 2007, I got together with my friend Dave Evans when he and I had done some business consulting and things together before. And we created a class for students, because I noticed the students were really struggling. And Dave had been working over Berkeley with students in the same situation. They're struggling to launch, they're smart, but they really don't know much about the world. And it seemed to me that that was just another design problem, the most interesting one, because you're you, the future product is you in the world. And that's what started the Designing Your Life classes that turned into the book in 2016. And then another book in 2020, right at beginning of the COVID epidemic, Bad Time to Launch Your Book. But that was called Designing Your Work Life. And then we updated it with more information about hybrid work and how the world of work had changed after the pandemic. So we had that book out in 2022. And Dave and I have just completed another book. It'll come out in February in the US. And it's kind of zooming back again to think about using designs, ideas, and design mindsets, but to really dig into the question of meaning, purpose, spirituality, community, things like that. if I look at retrospect, the same curious kid who liked to sketch and draw things is still sketching and drawing things. It's been all the way through from toys to tech to now designing people or people's experiences and lives. I don't do the design, they do the design, but I teach them how. And it's all been about humans and about creativity and about working in a way that's meaningful and feels like you're doing something important and working together in communities to great communities and great things. Along the way, I had three kids. That's probably my most important design job was just raising three children. They're all grown up to the world. But that's kind of the short version of the story. I really do think of it as sort of is one continuous thread. It's about humans, creativity, innovation, leading a purposeful, meaningful life.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: One of the things I notice about people who are agile with their careers is that they do not hold on to one identity too tightly. They have a broad sense of what they are good at and what gives them joy and then are fluid about how it manifests. They also voyage through life opening themselves to serendipitous opportunities.

James Clear (JC), the Author of Atomic Habits says something similar too. He urges us to keep our identity small.

JC: "tighter you claim to any individual identity the harder it becomes to grow beyond it. So, you see this in pretty much any area of life. The tighter you claim to the idea that like a teacher who has been teaching for 20 years and have their lesson plans figured out and it's like this is the way it is, the tighter you cling to that the harder it becomes to grow beyond that, learn new different learning methods, new learning modalities, change your course structure etc. The surgeon who is like this is the way we do the operation even though there might be a new technology that allows them to do it in no less invasive manner, the tighter you claim to that previous identity the harder it becomes to grow beyond it. And this is one of the real challenges for building habits which is that early on building a new identity is a really valuable thing because it can get you to stick to the habit. So, for example, let's say that you are not fit right now but you want to start getting in shape, building the identity of I am runner is a really valuable way to get you to stick to that when you are running. But then what happens you know 20 years from now if you injure your knee or your hip and it's not possible for you to run anymore and now you feel like yeah, you have lost this sense of self and so you need to transition to a new identity. So the process here is not like a line, it's much more like a circle, you are continually evolving, continually updating and expanding and revising you beliefs and you really need to be committed to doing that and if you can keep your identity small it makes that process easier because it's like retouching a painting. If your identity is so large that it consumes everything about you then all of a sudden getting rid of that aspect feels like you are tearing yourself in two. So, for all of those reasons keeping your identity small could be a valuable way to continue to grow or evolve and expand."

DJ: It's wonderful to see that Bill doesn't see confine himself into a specific identity like Engineer, Designer, Coach, Consultant, Academic. Each of these labels can also be cages within which one can get stuck.

DJ: Fascinating, Bill. And as a student of transitions, one thing I'm curious about is key choices people make, right? I think you were in the industry for a while, you were a consultant for a while, now you're in teaching, you've written books. Can you talk a little bit about maybe the key choices you might have made in your journey while centering around design?

BB: Well, mean, design was just, when I went off to university, I really wanted to go to art school, but it didn't seem like that was particularly practical. And my dad was like, well, if you want to go to art school, I'm not paying for Stanford. You can come back and go to art school at the University of Massachusetts for \$600 a year. But I also, I didn't really want to just do art. I wanted to do other things. So I think the choice of design was a perfect match between the sort of creative side of me, the side that cares about aesthetics and design and engineering side of me that cared about making stuff that was real. know, doing startups just felt like a natural thing to do because everybody does startups in Silicon Valley. I did one that I sold successfully and one that I ran straight into the ground. you know, I've had both experiences. I wanted to work at scale, so I went to Apple. Because it was making more of everything than anything I'd ever done before. mean, you know, we did a I did 11, I was on the teams that did the very first laptops. And I ended up being the project manager for 11 laptops. And you know, Apple makes a laptop, we make 100 million of them. So every little decision really matters. And I really wanted to get into that level of scale. Consulting was just because I was,

you know, bored, I got bored at Apple. mean, 11 laptops is like, can I design a washing machine? Could I design a toilet? Could I design something other than a computer? And they were like, nope. That's all we do. It's just computers. So I'm consulting for him and I designed toilets for the biggest manufacturer in America. designed, you know, all sorts of things for lots of people, or my teams did. And I really enjoyed working with, you know, teams that like every week it was a different problem. This week we're working on, you know, touchless water systems for a major plumbing manufacturer. Next week we're working on guitar tuners for a major guitar company. So the variety was cool. At the end, I didn't really like consulting that much because even though you know this from your McKinsey background, even if you give somebody a really good idea, they don't always take it. A lot of times they say, thank you very much. That's very interesting strategy. And we go, great, what are you going to do? It's like, yeah, we're just going to do what I always did. But thanks for that information. That was great. I don't know. It just really bothered me that people would, you you only have so much time to design things and I want that things to actually go to market. I think the biggest pivot really was coming, being a full-time academic. I've had my own consulting firm was making a lot of money, was going pretty well. When David called, you the offer was at 40 % of what I was currently making. Academics, even at Stanford, don't make very much money, certainly not compared to Valley salaries. And I had young kids who had not gone to college. There's a lot of, you my wife also works, but you know, we were counting on our income to be a certain thing. So that was a tough decision because I had to make it based on, I never really worked for money, but this was the first time where I actually had to confront, okay, now I'm gonna walk away from a lot of money to do this thing. And I credited my wife with encouraging me to go for it because she was, I was concerned that we'd have to support family but she said no, just do it, this is the right thing to do. So that was a really big decision and a really big difference. When you go from running big projects, either as a consultant or at Apple or whatever, and you become an academic, I was running the undergraduate and graduate programs in design, I was working with curriculum committees and professors and all sorts of new relationships and things. It was quite a big pivot. Never been happier. I've been doing it for 17 years. So even if you imagine I'd walked away from 100 grand in salary, and that was much more than that. You know, I've left \$2 million on the table. And I've never been happier. I've never been happier. one of the first things I'd say to people is it's absolutely true. It matters what you work on. It doesn't matter how much you get paid. That's a nice way to keep score, but there's a lot more going on than money. if you, and a lot, run into lots of folks who are very successful, successful in finance, private equity, know, hot shot lawyer in a big firm making lots of money, making seven figures or eight figures salaries, and they're miserable. I'm sure you've seen this one because you coach people through transition. They ended up someplace because they were talented and smart and, you know, small systems of reward and punishment that kept getting rewarded for doing, you know, billing more hours or finding more clients or, whatever it was. And they find themselves at the end of that rat race realizing that it doesn't matter. None of it's important that they don't identify with the work and they become a person they don't want to be.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I could relate to the passage of play where Bill speaks about considering a teaching job where the compensation is 40% of what he was getting paid in his job at that point. He speaks about the role of his wife in giving him the psychological net to take the plunge. I had something similar happen to me when I was transitioning from EgonZehnder to set up a Coaching Practice on my own in early 2016 about a decade back. It was well known at that time that Executive Search and that too in a

pedigreed firm was a much more lucrative profession than pursuing Coaching. But my heart was not in it. I saw me tossing and turning about this decision for a few months. One day, she asked me point blank “what’s the worst thing that could happen. Your practice doesn’t take off. Then maybe you come back and join another firm”. That coupled with some of the lifestyle adjustments we made, played a significant role in my ability to take the plunge.

I love what Raghu Ananthanarayanan (RA) says in this context. He is somebody who has studied Indic Wisdom for many decades. He talks about the distinction between who we are being and what we are doing.

RA: *“I was talking to you about the state of shantam, that’s available to all of us. When we sleep, deep sleep, we actually get into the state of shantam except that we are not aware of it. That is when even biologically, that’s when your regeneration takes place. That’s when healing takes place, your brain gets reordered, and all of this kind of thing happens in deep sleep. That is when you get in touch with your being without any external pull or push or any disturbance. So, in the Gita, when they talk finally about Sanyasa Yogam and then Arjuna goes into battle, he is in this state of shantam, he’s in the state of quietude inside while being prepared for battle. So, he is not depleting his energies. If I am in the doing mode, I am using my energies and then I have to come back to be replenished, but if I can be anchored in the being, in the quietness while I am acting, I don’t get depleted. I can maintain intensity for a long period of time. I can stay in dhyana for three hours like it is recommended. And I am sure if a leader can really be in dhyana on his most interesting and difficult problems, he will get insights from an intelligence much bigger than himself.”*

DJ: Like Bill says, I don’t think I had the language for this at that time. But now I can say that when there is resonance between who you are being and what you are doing or when work feels like play, then I feel you are able to tap into an endless reservoir of energy and that can make all the difference when you think of the long game.

BB: And I’ve never had that happen to me. I’ve always, and it was, before we started doing the Designing Your Life stuff, all this was pretty intuitive. I just went to the things that made sense and I paid attention to what was important and money and other things was always a secondary thing. So I was just, I would say I was lucky, but I guess I was intuitively smart, and I found the things that mattered to me. Next day when David Kelly offered me the job at the ridiculous salary, said, okay, here’s the thing. I just want, I want two things. I want to be able to teach any class I want to teach. He said, absolutely, you can teach anything you want, or make up a class, whatever you want to do. And I said, and I, you know, I want to put 1,000 designers into the world that are working on the hard problems, because that’s the important thing. We’ve got to get the smart kids of Stanford working on the hard problems. No more social media crap. No more, you know, grocery development apps. Want people working on stuff that’s important. At the time, we were only graduating maybe 20 or 30, you know, students from our program. We’re up to almost 100 a year now. We’ll be at a couple of hundred a year, and we’ll easily surpass the thousand students. So, I had an agenda, and it was about impact. And that was so much fun to work on. Then Dave and I had, Dave and I taught the class for seven years and I finally said, we bet, you know, there’s only so many kids, only a few thousand kids can take this class at Stanford. Let’s get this off campus. And finally, he hates writing, but I finally convinced him to do it. And I’ve never been happier. I’ve never, and I’ve never had work that is more fulfilling or more important, I think.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I see many people often think about Purpose as something that is lofty, saving the planet and way different from what we do at work. But I find that smart people take their passion and energy and direct it towards purposeful activities. Like Bill speaks about training designers but having a filter on the kinds of problems they will go on to solve. Atul Kasbekar, is one of the most celebrated photographers in the country. Every year, he organizes an initiative that is now 10 years old. Proud Fathers for Daughters. He assembles some of the finest photographers in the country and they click candid photos of fathers and daughters who want to get a photograph taken from those who work with top models and superstars. This is for a fee which goes towards NanhiKali, a Non-profit started by Anand Mahindra in 1996 that supports the formal education of girls from underprivileged communities in some of the remotest and most underserved parts of India.

Back to what Bill says, I feel directing our passion towards purposeful activities, I feel, is often easier than trying something that is distant from what you do.

DJ: Lovely, lovely. And what does the pie chart look like today, Bill? If you looked at your pie chart of time and attention among the various things you do, what's the composition?

BB: I've walked away from all of the administrative role I had. was running the undergrad and graduate program and other administrative stuff. I've turned that all over to the D school folks. doing a great job with it. And now I'm running my lab, which is called the Life Design Lab at Stanford. I've got three fellows. I have a small group of folks that we all work together on this stuff. Technically, they all report to me, but it feels more like a kind of a collaboration. I spend probably 60 % of our time doing that about 30 % of my time writing or speaking and talking about life design stuff and things that are important in our new book. And then I try to spend as much time as I can in the studio doing other creative things. sort of getting back to that kid who wanted to be an artist full-time. I want to have more of that in my mix. And that's purely for the sheer joy of creativity. I'm sure you know that when you're really in that space where you're doing creative work, it's different than every other mindset that you can occupy. know, I'll probably retire maybe from teaching in a few years. think I got a few more years, a few more ideas in me. But at some point, you know, I don't understand why people think retirement is boring. I've notebooks full of stuff, paintings I want to paint, songs I want to write, you name it. I mean, to move fully into the creative economy would be my next step.

DJ: And it's a great time to be in the creative economy, right? I think just in terms of the sort of the ecosystem around.

BB: It's amazing. It's amazing. It's amazing. You know, just we just were we were doing a podcast, Dave and I talking a little bit about the new book with a guy named Nathan Barry and he runs a thing called kit.com, which is basically a platform for creators. And we met a bunch of other people who are creators. And you know, like this one woman loves gardening and she's become the gardening whisperer and she's got two million followers and she's making a killing in the gardening world. Another guy is a DJ, but he likes to teach people how to DJ. And he's got 4 million followers. If you ever wanted to be born in a time when being a creative person or just being creative in and of itself, all the new tools and all the stuff that's out there, fantastic. And then being able to... you know, share what you do with other people. Forget whether it makes any money or not. Just to share what

you do. To be able to express your creativity and have someone hear your poem or someone hear your song or someone, you know, see the image or the video you created. That's never been easier and there's no gatekeepers and you just go straight to a population of folks. If you've got something that's interesting, you'll find an audience. And then maybe even monetize that audience. But I was just talking to somebody who's just quit their job and wants to be a full-time artist. And I said, look, here's the, you know, never been better, blah, blah, blah, but here's the deal. I have this inspiration, in fact, that I just printed it. don't know if you can see it, but Robert Henry, who ran a painting school in New York for many, many years back in the other century, has a quote that I love. It's actually on the door to my studio. says, the goal isn't to make art. The goal is to be in that wonderful state of mind that makes art inevitable. Because art's not a product. It's a process. So to be in that wonderful state of mind that makes art inevitable. Wow. Wouldn't you like to live there?

DJ: I want to move the conversation to some of the, you know, maybe themes you cover in the book, Bill. I read your book, *Design Your Life with a Lot of Interest*. I published a book with Penguin last November titled, *Play the Potential*, where I tried to take a stab at an approach for leading a full life, multi-dimensional life. And I was sort of processing what you've written. Very early on, you talk about dysfunctional beliefs and you actually go on to say that there's an opportunity for us to reframe. And actually along the way in that context, you say only 27 % of the graduates end up pursuing a career in the degree of their choice. And I get that, right? I trained as an engineer and what I do now is so far, I'm in the 73 % for sure. But I just wanted you to maybe throw light on this, what do mean by dysfunctional beliefs and what's the opportunity to reframe here?

BB: Well, you know, I love the fact that you had play in the title of your book because one dysfunctional belief is that, well, play is for kids. It's frivolous. It's silly. shouldn't be, you know, if you're a serious adult, you shouldn't be playing, which is so wrong. As you know, right, neurologically, we need to play in order to keep parts of our brain healthy. And play is how we learn how you learn as a child, how you continue to learn. So play curiosity, all those things, the dysfunctional belief that that's just frivolous. If you could just blow that up. Your book does a great job, then you realize, wait a minute, what other things have I inherited from society or things that people tell me are true, but they're really not true. So, you know, the fact that play is critical to creativity, to human development and learning, it's not frivolous at all and you should never stop playing. A lot of times people say, you teach the class that helped me figure out what I want to be when I grow up. And I go, well, yes, sort of, except if growing up means you lose your curiosity, you lose your playfulness, you lose your ability to learn, then screw growing up. Like, none of that. So all these things in society that are actually pretty dysfunctional, they lead you to the wrong conclusions. The idea that whatever I majored in in college, I'm going to do for the rest of my life, so I better pick the right thing. Well, the data in the US is that less than 20 % of the people are going to be doing that 10 years from now. And the data is for this young generation that's coming up, they're going to have two or three completely different careers. And in fact, now with AI and stuff coming, they're going to have careers that aren't even invented yet. Right? Right? So, so you pick your major to organize your college experience, but it's not the, like, chill out. It's not a death sentence. You know, I majored in computer science. I have to write code for the rest of my life. Which by the way, I've been telling my students for about five years, don't major in computer science because it's a dead end. They go, what are you talking about? You get a great job, make a of money. go, you can now, but in a few years, watch out. So I think dysfunctional beliefs are things that hold people back. they might have been true at one era of time, but they're not true anymore. You know, I do a lot of advising and young students and they're going, I'm thinking about maybe majoring in design, but my

dad really wants me to be a lawyer. My mom and dad really want me to get doctors, lots of doctors in my family. And this is, you know, that's reasonable for parents to sort of try to guide their kids a little bit. Sometimes it gets a little extreme, particularly first gen immigration parents, know, first gen parents from India or China or someplace and have really strong ideas. Yeah, they've grown up the hard way. The really strong ideas about what success looks like and success looks like doctor, lawyer, engineer. Let's not fiddle around with this other stuff. And I go, you know, let's zoom back and reframe, because design is like to reframe. I'm assuming your parents love you. I'm going to assume they're kind people. And I'm going to assume the pressure they're putting on you is because they think they have a solution. They care for you and they want you to be successful and be able to take care of yourself and be able to take care of them when they're older. And so they're pointing you to things that were absolutely proven paths in their generation. The problem is... It's not a proven path anymore. And in the coming generation, particularly AI and stuff, some of those jobs are not even going to exist. So go back to your parents and say, I know you love me and I know you're trying to pick something really good for me, but I think some of your ideas are a little out of date. What I'm hearing from professors and other people who looking at the future is, you know, I should probably be preparing myself for 21st century skills, not 19th century skills. And you look at the World Economic Forum report, you look at other reports, McKinsey's got a report on this. 21st century skills are not these hard-coded jobs that are all transactional. 21st century skills are empathy, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking. That's what you gotta educate your kids on. People come to me and they're really worried. In fact, they're really scared. They're scared that they've got a plan, but they keep hearing AI is going to blow up their job or blow up their... This isn't just students. People in their 20s, 30s, 40s come to me and say, this is terrible. I'm doing a lot of work in Singapore. I'm working with the Singapore government and they're predicting a lot of jobs are going to go away. In Singapore, a lot of the jobs are in logistics, transportation, finance, banking. These are really... know, good jobs, Singapore is amazing. It is only 60, it's just had their 60th anniversary and they have created an incredible economy. But a lot of the economy they've created is transactional, know, moving things or data or money around. Well, those transactional things will be automated easily by AI.

DJ: One of my friends has an interesting quote. He's currently the CTO of Citadel, Umesh. We were batch mates in our undergrad. And he has an interesting quote. says, don't hang your coat on skills. Hang it on the problems that you want to solve. Because, you know, whether it's, whether it's being a lawyer or being a doctor is a skill. But if we focus on the problems, then we can bring to bear whatever skills we have, including AI and hopefully be of relevance to the world.

BB: Yeah, and including skills you haven't developed yet, skills that will come in the future when you get that job that hasn't even been invented yet. And the way to prepare yourself for that is to think about the problems you want to solve, the strategies you want to employ, how to stay nimble, how to stay fast, how to learn quickly, how to adapt. That's what I want in our design program. That's very much what we teach our students. And so even though I learned that back when dinosaurs roamed the campus, and all the tools, you had to learn drafting when I was a young design engineer, had had to learn, I drew the calculations with a scientific calculator, but none of that stuff exists anymore. But I learned how to think, I learned how to find the right problem. So many people. So many people are good at problem solving, but they're not looking at the right problem, right?

DJ: Can you talk about that? I think just maybe if you want to sort of shine the light on that piece, which is defining the problem.

BB: Well, my favourite Peter Drucker quote, right? The famous business professor said, “There's nothing quite so foolish as doing something very, very well that never needed to be done in the first place.” And if you look at lots of businesses, lots of business strategies and stuff, people just go right after a solution without stepping back and going, well, what's the root? What's really going on here? What's the problem? And design is like this, technology and the value is like this all the time. Sometimes I do tours of the D school, people, know, start-ups come and they have a cool thing and they want to learn about innovation. So I do a tour and I ask them, what are you building? And they go, we got this really cool technology. And it'll be really something very complicated, something very tricky. And I'll go, that's really cool. Who is it for? And they go, we don't know, but we'll just pivot till we find a market fit, because somebody told them some lean startup gobbledygook. We're to pivot to a market fit. And I follow one of the firms here, one of the analyst firms who tracks the VCs. they do a survey every year of entrepreneurs, why did your company fail? Because that's the more interesting question, not why did you succeed, but why did you fail? And if you look at the Pareto chart of failures, about 80 % of it is basically boils down to, we built something nobody wanted or we built something and it had no economic value, at least it cost too much to make or nobody wanted to pay for it. So, I mean, it's just baffling to me that we're still creating companies and billions of dollars of venture money is going into these companies. And they've never stopped and said, well, what is the problem we're trying to solve? Who's it for? And why would they pay us? Very simple questions, right? Very, very simple questions. And yet we still keep spinning up startups that make no sense. And we're the middle of this bubble now. We're coming to this. mean, of millions of billions of dollars are going into startups that have some little tiny spin on what they're going to do with AI. AI for recruiting, AI for law, AI for this. How many of these companies do we really need? But people who are good at problem finding will be valuable regardless of the skill set they had or have to learn. Because if you come up with a better problem, you're going to come up with better solutions,

DJ: And what does it take to become good at problem finding, Bill? What do think?

BB: It's a, if you look at what we call the mindsets of a designer, and then you look at the 21st century skill list from the World Economic Forum, they're almost matched. Curiosity. Before you jump into problem solving, get curious about what are you working on? Why are you doing this? Who's it for? What would they pay for it? What are their real needs? And just talking to them isn't enough, because you've to go deeper. People don't really know what they need. They'll just tell you simple things that aren't important. Being willing to work on teams that are really different than you, what we call radical collaboration. I have a bias, no matter how creative I am, I still have a bias. I'm going to see a problem a certain way. Maybe I'm flexible and I can see it a bunch of different ways, but I'm still in my box. But if I'm working with an anthropologist and I'm working with a psychologist and I'm working with maybe a performance artist or an improv person, and they're all on my team and we're all looking at the problems from really different angles. We're gonna shake out something that's a really interesting problem. I use this example sometimes, and it's not the Starbucks of today, but the original Starbucks when it was invented by Howard Schultz. In whatever it was in, say, 88, whatever it was, mid-80s when he invented Starbucks, the average cup of coffee in America cost 75 cents. And a cup of coffee was the thing you got on the side of getting your, muffin or something for breakfast or whatever it was. 75 cents. This guy comes along and says, I want to charge you \$3 for this thing called a latte. And everybody goes, what's a latte? Right? Somehow, he went from 75 cents to \$3. But if you read his origin story, he was in Italy. He was at a cafe. And cafes in Italy have the espresso machines and there's a steam going, and they have a little counter. Everybody has their

little espresso and they stand on the counter and they talk about their day. It's a social experience. He realized that the way you sell a \$3 cup of coffee is you create a completely, it's not about the coffee, it's about the experience. He found a better problem. And in the original, when you first walked into a Starbucks, you'd never been to one before, you'd never been to Italy before, all of a sudden the experience was nothing like picking up that cup of coffee alongside the donuts, right? It was a completely different experience and it was all about the sound, smell, the story, single origin, blah, blah. None of this existed before that. He found a better way to sell coffee by selling the experience that he'd found in Italy and turning it into something he could build and scale. By the way, Starbucks is not very successful in Italy, because it's not unique. And now I go to China and Luckin is the new giant for that is outperforming Starbucks because they have a better handle on the experience that the average Chinese consumer wants to have. So it's finding a better problem. It's always about stepping back, looking at the problem a different way. Curiosity, radical collaboration, having people on the team with different ideas. A biased action, try stuff. Our whole thing is prototype. You can't know what the future's like. When the team was, I was at Apple when we did the first laptops and we built hundreds of prototypes before we figured out a configuration where the track ball was in the front, the keyboard was in the back, there was a hand rest automatically where we could put the batteries. All that took prototype after prototype. I wasn't there when they were doing iPhones, but from the biography that Isaacson wrote of Jobs, they showed the prototypes of the iPhone to Steve at least three times, probably more than that, but at least three times. Three times he said, nope, not good enough, do it again, do it again. You haven't unlocked the magic yet. So build things, be curious, ask good questions, and don't jump to solutions so fast because every designer knows your first couple of ideas are going to be stale, they're going to be boring. You've got to have lots of ideas to get to the good ideas. And the same thing with your life. It's very obvious to me that your life is just like an iPhone. There's no specification, so you're just going to have to invent it. And you'll invent it by prototyping and talking to people and radical collaboration with the world and empathy for yourself and empathy for the world. What is the world? Just because you want to do something doesn't mean the world cares. You have to match your desire to the world's need. So it was all pretty obvious to me that you could take the same thing in the same way and innovate and invent your life.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This reminds me of something that came up in my conversation with Thomas Wedell Wedellsborg (TW) who has written a wonderful book titled - What is your problem, the. Book is all about the art of framing the right problem to solve. Just like how Bill speaks about how Howard Schultz looked differently at the coffee drinking experience, Thomas speaks about an interesting perspective to the elevator problem, something that we all encounter every day in our lives.

TW: *"Well, you imagine that you are the owner of an office building and that the tenants in the building, they are complaining about the speed of the elevator, it is too slow. What many people do there is to take the problem for granted, okay, the elevator is slow and then they swing into solution mode and say, how do we make it faster, do we put in a better motor or do we have to go out and buy a new elevator for that matter. What a clever landlord might suggest is instead that you put up a mirror next to the elevator because of course what happens is when people see a mirror, they look at themselves and they fall in love, they forget time and the underlying idea there is, what problem are you solving, that a mirror is not necessary a solution to a slow elevator and mirror is a solution to the*

problem that people think it is annoying to wait. So it is a simple example and it really encapsulates that difference between jumping into solution mode, going into and trying to analyze the problem which is asking, why is the elevator slow, and then the crucial difference between analyzing it and framing it right which is a question, wait, is this really about the speed of the elevator or is there something else going on, is there perhaps a better problem to solve.”

DJ: If I had to relate to my personal journey, when I was a search consultant at EgonZehnder, I felt that many organizations were solving the organizational problem of having to find a new leader but nobody was solving the candidate problem of “how should I navigate my career”. Understandably, I the profit pools of corporations are bigger than the paying capacity of individuals but I felt there was room for at least one individual to set up a practice and work with a few leaders who would see value in this and would be in a position to pay for this. That in a way is the genesis of my starting Transition Advisory on 1 Feb 2016, about a decade back. And as I walked the path and the podcast slowly grew, my mission slowly morphed into helping people play to potential whether they are in a role or in transition.

But back to Bill’s point, I guess it comes down to having a curiosity and empathy to see how we can marry our skills and our passions to the world’s needs! With Gen AI coming into our lives, the premium on problem finding as compared to problem solving becomes that much more critical.

DJ: Fascinating and talking about problems you talk about gravity problems and anchor problems and you say that this Sometimes these categories of problems can stump people. Can you can you talk about these two?

BB: Well, you know, again, you do coaching with some pretty high performance people. So you probably run into it all the time. It's like, you know, uh, I'm the CEO, but I don't want to be a CEO anymore. I really want to write poetry, but I still need to make, you know, \$750,000 a year. So can you coach me into a poetry position and make \$750,000 a year? And it's like, that's the gravity problem, dude. There are no, there are no poets who make a lot of money unless you're a rapper and you become a, you know, very famous rapper, you're Jay Z or something. You don't look like a rapper to me. look like a boring CEO. I think a lot of times, if you look at the psychology of it, or even the neuroscience of it, it's just fear-based. I don't like my job, and I want something better, but I'm not gonna quit. I think there are ways to make your job better, but basically, I don't wanna do this anymore, but I'm afraid to change. I have no solution to that. My partner, Dave Evans, who I write the books with, was fond of saying, you can't solve a problem you're not willing to have. So if you don't want to change, can't, know, none of my, none of the design stuff works. Design is about change, about positive change, you're making a better design. So people get stuck on stuff where, you know, the classic was, another one was coaching a young executive, had risen very rapidly in a startup that was growing very fast. And so, know, like he was one of the first people on the product team and that grew exponentially. And so then he was the first, you know, director of the product team. And then was VP of products and engineering, you know, and he just assumed he was gonna get promoted every couple of years. Well, companies gets bigger, growth slows down. We got lots of VPs. got lots of directors, don't need any more VPs. He's like, but I gotta get promoted or I'm, you know, I'm gonna be unhappy. And I'm like, well, your company's not gonna promote anybody for a while. So that's just a gravity problem. You either reframe and come up with, you know, you want a promotion because you want more impact, because you want more money, what do you want? And

then we figured out what he really wanted. Yeah, what does he really want? And then he went and got the thing that he could get. So you got to let go of the gravity problems. You know, I worked with a company that's a very famous company, privately held by the family. And frankly, if your last name is not one of the family's last names, you will never be the CEO. That's just the way it goes. So you're gonna work for a family company, and you're not the son of the guy who started it. It's a gravity problem. You run into this all the time. And people get all wrapped around being unhappy and can't have what they want, it's not fair, blah, blah, blah. like, no, it's just great. If it's not... changeable, it's just a circumstance. It's not a problem. get, like, and this is, you know, this is the old wisdom tradition. I think it's maybe even in the Bible, God grant me the serenity, God grant me the wisdom to change what can be changed and to accept what cannot be changed. Right? It's like, yeah, just, and the wisdom to know the difference. Exactly. Anchor problems are a little different. The classic one is Dave who likes sailboats. goes, I really want to sail every weekend, but I can't afford a sailboat. How can I afford this? How can I get enough money to afford a sailboat? And it's like, well, wait a minute. Affording a sailboat is not the problem. You want to go sailing every weekend, right? Right. Let's drop the anchor. Your preferred solution has accidentally snuck into the problem. Drop the anchor for a second, maybe buying a sailboat's later. But how do you go sailing every weekend? Well, it turns out you can join a sailing club. You can co-own 10 boats with a collective, you can just go down to the docks, someone's always looking for someone to crew a boat. There's lots of ways to sail. You don't need to buy a boat to sail and you don't need to, you know, I wish I could do this but I can't do it until I can afford this or until I get this, you know, this training. People do this all the time. put a solution they can't have as the only solution to the problem and they anchor the problem on a bad solution, probably not even the one that would be the best for them but they can't see their way around it. So the reason we identified these two classes of problems is you can get stuck on these for a long, time. I'll give you one for me. It was truly an anchor problem, and I probably was unaware of my anchor for a long time. When I was young in high school and in college, I was a gymnast, and I was in great shape. Gymnasts are in great shape. I'm quite a bit older than that now. Just went to my 45th reunion. And now fitness is important, but I was always thinking, well, I gotta look like I looked when I was 20. And I don't know why I thought that, but no matter what I was doing, I never got to that place. And then I realized, wait a minute, first of all, that's silly. Second of all, it's impossible. And third, I looked at the McKinsey Health Institute, published a thing on what are the 23 factors of health that actually promote longevity and health and it's all about mobility and function It's not about looking like I'm you know 23 and have great, know tummy It's about can I move can I walk can I can I go everywhere? want to go can I do I have flexibility and mobility once I drop the anchor of looking like I used to look and I went towards the goal of functional health everything changed right? So I mean, I teach this stuff and it probably took me five years to get my head on straight.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I like what Bill says. Gravity problems are just circumstance. You just need to acknowledge and move past it.

I came across an interesting anchor problem recently. I am coaching an individual who just moved on from a senior role in a pedigreed consulting firm. One of the things that emerged from the feedback was that this person may not enjoy building out a large people intensive business but would thrive in a small set up with high quality people solving tough problems. As we were

evaluating various pathways, one option that we were evaluating was starting a boutique advisory firm. To which this person said, I am done with Services, I want to start a Products business! As I listened to him describe this, it occurred to me that the mirror image of a services business is not necessarily a products business. May be it is a spectrum of things. Then we got onto a discussion about what it was about the Services business that really didn't sit well with him and then we realized that there were many feasible pathways that could play to his strengths and would be energizing, not just a products business.

DJ: Hmm. True, true. The other thing that struck me, which is very close to my heart, Bill, is coherence. You talk about, you define it as a combination of who you are, what you believe in, what you're doing, and so on. How have you, you know, how have you gone about finding coherence in your life and what's your, you know, what's your guidance here?

BB: I think it's really important. Again, you and I both probably talk to folks who, they'll come to you or come to me and they say, I'm very successful but I'm not happy or things are okay but I wish they were better. And I go, okay, well that's a good starting point. mean, if you have the energy to try to make something better then we can start designing. We'll design little prototypes and see what works. When I hear that and then I ask them about it, it's somewhere along the line. I was working, I always wanted to be a teacher, but I ended up in high tech, and then I ended up in marketing, and then I ended up doing this other stuff, and it's just, and I'm just tired, I just wanna do it anymore. I go, why did you wanna be a teacher? I like to help people, I'm a person, I love to learn, and I love to give what I learn away, and I said, okay, is there any of that in your job? No, there's none. All right, so basically the core person that you believe yourself to be is not having a chance to be expressed anywhere in your work? Or do you volunteer at schools? No, I don't have time for that. Okay. So you're out of coherence, right? The, you know, who I think I am and what I'm actually doing in the world don't match up at all. Now it doesn't mean you quit your job and you go teach, you know, first grade. It just means, all right, let's get back to who am I? What's the story I grew up with? What do I do for a living, what's it for? mean, not just what do I do with the job description, what do I think work is for? And then my life view, like what's the purpose of life? I mean, people have a very spiritual sense of life and it's important and there's a plan and in their religion, in their tradition, maybe there's even a plan that is revealed to them by their tradition. And they're working in a law firm helping oil companies destroy the planet, contracts for all companies. Sounds like, so how does that meet your, how does that match up with your spiritual goals? Because you tell me that your spirituality is important, that your soul is the important thing here, but you're doing what you describe, I don't say this because I don't, I let them tell me, don't tell them, our first rule is we don't should on our students, right? I don't tell them what they should do. But I say, you tell me your job is soulless, and yet you say the most important thing you know, is to father your soul. So those are examples of extreme, extreme lack of coherence, and they create a lot of tension, they create a lot of pain, they create a lot of anxiety in people, and then rather than addressing that and trying to put it back together, they self-medicate with alcohol, they chase the next promotion, they chase more money, they do lots of things to sort of, you know not really look at the problem. But when you actually do these things, it turns out people kind of know what would be a good fit for them. It takes a little work, but they can figure it out. And then the question is just, all right, well, how do we move from where we are to that other place? And that might take years, maybe, or maybe you have enough resources where you can just say thanks to the law firm, cash out your \$4 million bonus and go do something else.

DJ: And in your experience, Bill, what are some of the markers of a coherent life? What should people look for, for them to know that they're sort of in the zone of coherence?

BB: The first book is called Designing Your Life, How to Build a Well-Lived Joyful Life. So the first thing I'm looking for is joy. Is there joy in your life? Not just happiness. Yeah, I got a new car, I'm happy. I mean, joy, like moments of joy. For me, I have three grandchildren, so spending time with my grandchildren are moments of joy. I'm looking for moments of joy. We have them do a flow journal, sort of a... just a quick one-line journal, rate your energy and engagement every day. And if you don't have moments where you go into flow, where your skills and the task are perfectly aligned and you're just in the zone, if you don't have those, something's wrong. We're missing, some circuit is not connected. So joy, flow. And when I ask you, I mean, this has been 70 years of Gallup surveys say that 70 % of Americans are disengaged from their job. And something like 30 % of those are actively disengaged, like they really hate their job. So, know, so if we, where are the moments of joy, where are the moments of flow? And typically you'll find that those are not in your job. They're elsewhere. They are with your grandchildren. Or when you go out in the garden and you plant some plants or something. And so I got, great, hold onto those feelings, because those are feelings of a coherent person doing a thing that brings them joy or flow, or meaning or purpose. Now let's dive into the job. What's missing there? How do we wire that or rewire that? jobs aren't set up for meaning. They're set up to get stuff done and make money. But you can make jobs meaningful. Any job can have meaning. So I look for joy, flow, and then when they do the life view and work view, where's the joy and flow in your life and where's the joy and flow in your work? And people who have can identify that and then you double down, do more of the same, you try to eliminate the things that create the friction. All the same things you do in a good, in a good design. Eliminate the friction, you know, isolate the good stuff and you get more of it. That's how you do it.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Very often, when I work with individuals that are feeling a lack of coherence in their life, they often swing too far and this is where having someone to walk the journey with your or speaking to mentors can be helpful. When I spoke to Ashish Dhawan (AD), the founder of the Convergence Foundation and one of the driving forces behind Ashoka University, he spoke about how that counsel came from Harvard's dean at that time, Jay O Light.

AD: *"I did toy around with the idea of becoming a professor because academic life appeals to me. And in fact, I reached out to... one of my mentors was a former dean of Harvard Business School and he had also been an investor in our fund and Jay Light who was the person said listen, I know you, I know you will get frustrated in this in a couple of years so don't become a professor, don't become a high school teacher, but my pitch to him was even if I become a high school teacher I will write books and I will do videos and I will do like Sal Khan, I am not going to be like a regular teacher but... so, anyway, I mean, I think at the core when I think about it, I mean an entrepreneur at heart. So, I like creating new things, so that's one. And two is, this sort of education bug was within me from early on and I have already also believed just at an intellectual level that it's the bedrock of society and if you want to transform not only the economy but also society you got to work on education. And so, it just felt like the right higher calling for me. And then in terms of choices, I think, Ashoka thing in a way, I had always... I had an amazing experience at Yale, I had got exposed to the U.S., to a Liberal Arts education; it transformed me personally, it created multiple interests in me, I learned Spanish and*

then eventually Portuguese, fell in love with Latin America, I became good at learning languages, I learned a lot of different things. I developed a love for history, I had many interests and so I really wanted when I came back to India and I was recruiting people, I found them to be much more unidimensional and not having too many interests beyond the narrow work interest. And so, this idea of building a Liberal Arts university was always somewhere in the back of my head. And then it sort of just happened, you know, while I was at ChrysCapital, Sanjeev Bikhchandani and a few friends were talking about this idea of building a new St. Stephens. There was another group of IIT'ians who were very interested in building an engineering college and eventually when we came together and quite frankly, Pramath Sinha, who is an ex-colleague of yours from McKinsey was someone that I reached out to because I had met Pramath earlier and Sanjeev knew him as well. We all came together as a group and frankly Sanjeev and I pushed very hard to say because we were putting in the initial capital that we want this to be a Liberal Arts university because that's what you really care about. And so that's how Ashoka emerged and in 2010 we bought the land. This was when... that was the same year I announced that I was leaving ChrysCapital, and I still had a year-and-a-half before I transitioned out. So, the Ashoka project was underway and then with Central Square Foundation, which is focused on school education, I had been on the boards of one or two non-profits even prior to while I was in my work life. I also started to give small bits of money to some non-profits, so I could go out in the field on a Saturday to just see what happens. I started reading books on education reform and so it was clear to me that I wanted to build a foundation that worked more on system reform in school education. And then I actually took a month off and visited about 60-70 different foundations and non-profits in the U.S. to just learn about teacher training, curriculum development, EdTech, you know, a variety of different areas. And so, then it became clear to me that at Central Square Foundation we were going to work on this idea of system transformation and really work by leveraging grant making but a lot of foundations just focus on grant making, that we would actually work on doing research in building ecosystem but also on policy making and then eventually working with government on system reform. And what attracted me most was this system reform part. So, these were the two early projects, I think, I was naturally attracted to them because of my own personal interest in school education, becoming a teacher early on in life and then my Yale experience and therefore the desire to build a Liberal Arts university."

DJ: The way Ashish navigates this transition is a great example of how we can solve for coherence by being experimentative, seeking feedback from the world around us and just feeling your way through the process rather than taking any dramatic steps.

If this is a topic of interest, this is something I discuss in my book – Play to Potential – Lead a full life, become the best you, that I published with Penguin in November 2024. I describe the notion of living a FLAVOUR-ful life and how we can be intentional about solving for coherence across the various dimensions. Hope you find it of value.

DJ: And you use two words, energy and engagement in the journal. Can you talk a little bit about the distinction between the two? Because very often I notice people sometimes can end up confusing the two.

BB: Yeah, so energy would be, when we do a thing where you do an energy map of your week, when you're doing activities, some activities you do, when you're done, you actually feel more energetic. Like, this is a cool conversation when we're done. I'm gonna be full of ideas, and you're gonna be full

of ideas. We'll be more energetic. Other times I have conversations maybe with toxic people in my organization about budgets and things, and it's a zero-sum game, and they're always fighting, and that just drains me of my energy. So energy is something you can notice in yourself and the metric we use is when you're done with a task, are you more or less energetic than you were when you started? Engagement, mean, know, turns out the human brain can only do one thing at a time. It can do lots and lots of things in parallel, but you're only aware of one thing at a time. So what you put your attention to, what you engage in is where you're putting all your cycles. Are you engaging in lots of negative behaviors, negative self-talk, negative interactions with people or are you engaged in positive self-talk, positive interactions, positive activities. Engagement is about what you spend your time on and energy is really, what's the energetic profile of those things? they giving or draining energy? So they are different and you know, I did this one because I can't, I've tried doing journaling, you know, I'm supposed to journal, it's supposed to be good for you and all the positive psychologists say journaling is great. I just never could get into it, so I figured, all right, what could I, I could write one line a day, one line, one observation about my day, and I could put it on, we got two little dials on our good time journal, give me one thing that happened today that was positive, rate positive, negative energy, positive, negative engagement, and if it was flow, put a big red star. And that, can, you can persist in that, because it's just one observation of a day, positive or negative, one observation a day. Rate it on the chart, move to the next day. Do that for the positive side guys will say, if you want to start a new habit or eliminate an old bad habit, it takes about eight weeks. So journal for six to eight weeks and see how your mood is, see how your feeling is. The more you spend time paying attention to positive things, guess what? More positive things show up. Huh, isn't that funny?

DJ: And I want to pick up on flow. You say flow is play for grownups. And one related question I had was empirically I've sometimes seen that people around us notice us when we are in flow, sometimes better than us noticing ourselves. Can you talk a little bit about how do we sort of place our finger on what gives us flow?

BB: Yeah, so mean, this is back in the 90s when Mihaili Csikszentmihalyi kind of did this study. And the study was he gave everybody beepers and everyone's, was just a whole piece of technology that most of your readers will not know about. Remember when we had beepers and it just beeped on your hip. And it beeped every once in while and you had to make a journal entry about what you were doing at that time. And you noticed that some of the journal entries were these times when people experienced sort of timelessness, that the task at hand was, was fully engaging and fully absorbing and that they really kind of were in the zone. then they've studied it athletes, know, get in this zone where they just have kind of superhuman performance. So it is, and there's another neuroscientist who's got 21 things that trigger flow. I forget his name, but we can probably look it up and you can put it in your notes later. So it's a pretty well-known state of cognition where your engagement with the task is 100%, you're not being distracted, you're not noticing other things. And people describe it as maybe time stands still because they're so engaged in the present moment that they're not worrying about the future, they're not thinking about the past. So everybody's had those experiences, it might take a little reflection to go, wait a minute, I think I might have been in flow that time when... you know, we were all sitting around playing guitars and then that one thing came to me or that one song happened. Or it might have been, you know, flow when I was in that, when I was running and suddenly, I stopped thinking about work and I stopped thinking about, you know, getting the groceries and I just was in that runner's high of just moving through space and everything felt beautiful, right? It often shows up as a physical thing that way. That's why athletes experience it

a lot. So, the neuroscience is pretty well mapped. Think you're right, it might take someone to observe for you a few times, hey, you seemed really like you were into it when you were doing that time. And you might go, yeah, you know, I really was. I hadn't noticed. But once you've noticed it, you will not forget it. Once you've seen it, can't forget it. you should be in flow. I mean, if you are living a coherent life and doing the things you are meant to be doing or love to be doing. Flow becomes almost a natural byproduct of that. You'll find, you still go to the budget meeting and that's not flowy, but you can find flow almost anywhere. In our new book, we make the distinction between living in the transactional world where you're just getting stuff done and living in the flow world because it's not just these peak experiences. mean, flow can happen as it's almost a regular sort of mindset by just paying attention to where you're engagement is, paying attention to where your energy is and managing it so that you are fully engaged. So when you talk to somebody, you're really talking to them. You're not thinking about your schedule or something else. And when you're creating an activity for yourself, you drop into the flow world because it's there all the time. It's just there all the time and anybody can do it.

DJ: That's a great distinction. The great distinction sort of not rather than externalizing flow, you sort of take ownership and find flow in the transactional world.

BB: Yeah, fine, yeah. And the thing is that everybody's looking for, particularly the Gen Z's want more meaning and purpose in their life. Well, you don't find meaning and purpose in the transactional world. You find it in the flow world. You find it in the moments of connection. You find it in the moments of recognition. Hey, this is where my, this is my sweet spot. This is my thing. You recognize it in yourself and then you learn to generate it in yourself. And yeah, you're in the transactional world. You want to make sure you drive safely and you invest for your retirement. Those are all transactional things. But you can approach the rest of your life with by seeking flow and by designing flow into what you do. the physiology of this is it's super healthy for you because you're not in a state of anxiety. The transaction world to me is a state of anxiety. I'm constantly, am I late? time, I mean; to get this right, it's all anxiety. Flow is the opposite of that. And it's so good for your body, it's so good for your brain. And it's also directly connected to curiosity. I watched, so I have a four-year-old grandson. And he's reminding me what real curiosity looks like. Because he's just curious about everything. You know, we go for a walk, and then all of he goes, grab a look. I go, what? He goes, it's an ant. And we get down on our hands and knees and we watch the ant crawl across the sidewalk. And he goes, where's the ant going? I said, I know, let's watch. How do ants know where they're going? Do they have eyes? Yeah, they have eyes, but they're not like our eyes. They're different. And sometimes I got to get on my phone and look stuff up because I don't know the answer. But I would argue a four-year-old is in flow almost all the time, right? Because everything is so interesting.

DJ: Mm-hmm, fascinating. Fascinating. of the statements that stayed with me in your book, Bill, you say, I quote, we all contain enough energy and talents and interests to live many different types of lives, all of which could be authentic and interesting and productive. Asking which life is best is like asking whether it's better to have hands or feet. Can you talk a little bit about that? Because I come across a lot of people, to your point about what I'm meant to be doing, there's an element of...

BB: Yeah. Singularity, right? There's no like, yeah. Right. I gotta find the perfect thing I'm doing in this only one thing, right? Gosh, you know, I mean, for some people, you know, I think Bill Damon, who runs the center for the study of adolescents here at Stanford, and he wrote a great book called path

to purpose. There are some people it's only less than 20 % he found that are truly, you know, designed for like, I am going to be a doctor, I always wanted to be a doctor. I don't know why when I was three year old I wanted to be a doctor. I still want to be a doctor, I'm a doctor. But most of those people actually, in his study, the people in the 20%, I really want to be an artist, I really want to be a dancer, I really want to be a singer, I really want to be a designer. And of course their parents say, well that's not a real job, you shouldn't want that. But the people who are driven by a singular idea, oftentimes this is in the arts. For everybody else, it's like, well look, I've got more lives in me than I'll ever express. I could be this guy, that guy, this guy, that guy. So the question isn't optimizing, the question is coherence, the question is joy, the question is flow. But there's lots and lots of ways to the top of that mountain. And when you're trying to optimize the perfect way, you're missing out on all the possible great ways. There's lots of great ways, but you're trying to find the perfect way. Well, you know perfection is the enemy of the possible. It's also, if you were a fixed being, if you were exactly the same at 20 and 40 and 50 and 60 and none of your desires, none of your curiosities ever changed, then maybe there is one thing for you. But I'm a lot different guy after raising three kids. I'm not the same guy I was before I was raised. Certainly not the same person I was at 18 when I picked my major at Stanford. Certainly not the same person I was at 45 when I decided to quit a computer manufacturer, Apple Computer, and go out and start my own consulting firm. So I change, you change. There is no singular version of Deepak. Don't you, isn't that kind of cool? You could learn and change and become, you could. Want to spend your time and attention on new things. So what are we on? Am I optimizing? At 18, was I optimizing my corporate self? I didn't even know if I was gonna have a corporate self. When I was in my corporate life, was I optimizing my professor self? I didn't even know I was gonna be a professor. So this idea of a singular thing seems limiting versus the, hey, there's more than one life in you and your goal isn't to optimize the singular one, it's to find the many good ones. And then to this process, know, design process of prototyping, stuff, find the one that's actually possible. Because, you know, yeah, there many lives in you, but some of those lives don't make any money. Some of those lives don't end up with a family. Some of those lives, you know, there's a lot that you learn as you get older. One more thing, it's slightly different than your question. I apologize for talking too much, but in our new book, which is called *How to Live a Meaningful Life*, we looked into the Maslow's pyramid, right? The Maslow's pyramid, by sort of normal, people would say, well, Maslow's pyramid, the top is self-actualization, to be all that you can be, to fully actualize every part of yourself, which doesn't necessarily imply singularity, but it is, you know, like, I would say fully actualized is fully coherent. But it turns out, before he died, a couple years before he died, in his journals, Maslow said, that's not it, I got it wrong. The top of the pyramid after self-actualization is self-transcendence. Because of course, it's about going beyond the ego and beyond the self. Now, that's true in every wisdom tradition I know on the planet. It's called compassion. It's called getting out of your own ego and doing something for others in the world addressing, you suffering and whatever, you know, inequality or just addressing beauty and the transcendent things about the world. And so if where we're going is transcendence, you can't tell me there's only one path. There's a lot of paths to the top of that mountain, right?

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I had the privilege of speaking with Marshall Goldsmith (MG), one of the most celebrated Executive Coaches. He refers to an interesting Buddhist idea about each breath leading to a new version of ourselves.

MG: *“Deepak, okay, take a deep breath, take a deeper breath. Now, a good Buddhist principle is this, every time I take a deep breath it’s a new me, it’s a new me. And everything in your life is done by an infinite set of people. Their names were the previous Deepak’s, the previous you. Close your eyes. I want you to think of all the previous Deepak’s, think of all the gifts they have given you just listening to me talk right now. Think about how hard those people tried; think about all they did to help other people. Open your eyes. Now if any group of people did that many nice things what should you say to those nice people?”*

DJ: Thank you.

MG: *Doing it, thank you, and thank you. Now, did they make a little mistake or two over the years? Let go, let go. Now back to your question, moving forward. The Deepak I am talking to I am writing a new book called the Earned Life, the Deepak I am talking to right now, you haven’t earned one thing, and you have earned nothing. Almost everything you have has been inherited; it’s a gift from the previous Deepak’s. You didn’t earn a thing, they did. The guy I am talking to, you haven’t earned anything. Now you have to ask yourself what this person is going to earn. What is this person going to earn moving forward?”*

DJ: I love this framing from Marshall. He speaks about each breath being a new version of us and in a way urges us to earn our relevance afresh with gratitude for the past.

DJ: I came across another interesting perspective from Prof Jeffrey Pfeffer of Stanford (JP). We were talking about authenticity and it being true to self. And he provocatively asked “true to which self”

JP: *“This goes back to this whole thing about authenticity, you need to be true to your inner self or your true self, but I would hope that most human beings are on a journey of learning and development and that Deepak at your current age, whatever that is because you look amazingly young to me, is not exactly the same person as Deepak a 10 or 5 or 20 or 25 or 30. My hope would be, from our conversation, my belief would be that you have been on a journey of learning and self-discovery and that you have been on a journey of growth and development, and so that therefore, when you say be true to yourself. If you are really true to yourself, you are basically not going to be on a journey of growth and development because you are going to say I have to be true to my one-year-old self which basically does not use the toilet. That is an extreme example but you get the point.*

DJ: Back to what Bill says, it is useful not get consumed with one identity or say, “I am like this only” and get stuck to a label. The more fluid we are to our evolving self and not bound it with any limiting adjectives, greater the chances of us discovering possibilities and playing to our potential.

DJ: Fascinating. I know we have 10 odd minutes to go, Bill. I had a few rapid fire questions, if you're okay. Just questions, but just one or two line answers. And then I wanted to wrap with a question I ask all my guests. First one, who are the three master life designers that inspire you and why? know, individuals who inspired you with the way they've designed their life.

BB: I will try to give shorter answers. Well, David Kelly would be on that list because he's lived a life of pretty much uncompromised creativity. He started his own company when nobody knew what an innovation company was and created that and the D school and all the other things we do at

Stanford. So David would be a guy who's designed a life that I really admire. My book agent is also, I don't know if we would call him the agent, for the Dalai Lama. He wrote several books with the Dalai Lama. He's got a new one coming out. Where basically he goes to Dharmasala. He sits there for a couple of weeks. The Dalai Lama tells him what he wants to write about. then he writes it. I think the Dalai Lama has got a really well-designed life. And he didn't choose it. This is interesting. I saw him at Stanford one time. And he's a very funny guy. Very funny guy. yeah, So I say David and Nidalat Blama, good company. Who else? A third person. You know, my wife is someone I deeply love and admire. She's always, always been coherent. I met her when she was a student. She's always been coherent and she's never, she's just certainly a kind, flexible, warm person, but she's never compromised on who she is and what she believes in and what she does. And she was a model for the kids and the kids all grew up knowing that, it's really important. Be who you want to be, stand up for what you want to stand up for. You're to take some heat maybe if you have an unpopular position. But your integrity, she would call it integrity, is the only thing you've got. You give that away, you got nothing. So she's my other.

DJ: Fascinating. Lovely. Of the various things you discuss around life design, what's the most commonly misunderstood insight?

BB: That creativity has something to do with art or music or something that if I can't sing or dance or paint or draw I'm not creative that's ridiculous there's nothing creativity is nothing to some of the most brilliant scientists I know are the most creative people I know and they couldn't carry a tune if you gave them a bucket so the creativity is somehow related to arts and if you're not artistic you're not creative that's not true it's not neurologically true we know what some of the basis, the neurological basis of creativity is, it's got nothing to do with a talent for art. But it gets conflated all the time and some teacher told you you can't draw and so you think you're not creative and I hate that.

DJ: Lovely. You talk about possible selves. If you hadn't become a know, life design teacher, designer in an alternate version, what do you think you might have become?

BB: In the alternate version, I didn't get into Stanford and I ended up at Yale because Yale had recruited me for the gymnastics team and I would have ended up probably a lawyer. Because I actually think the law is incredibly creative if you do it right. But that's my guess.

DJ: Fascinating. Hmm. Fascinating. What element of what you say have you found to be the hardest to implement to bring it to life?

BB: What's the Emerson quote? Most men live lives of quiet desperation. The hardest thing to do is for people to get over their fear of trying something new. And curiosity is a you know, great energizer, but boy, you know, sometimes whatever, how they were raised or the way school, you know, they went through school. It's just, people are, people would almost rather have the problem they've got then take the energy to try to change it. Because at least the problem I've got, I kind of know that I know how to handle it versus I don't know what will happen if something changes. it's to overcome fear, I think. That's the hard part.

DJ: And how has the emergence of AI and the impact on careers, how has it changed your thinking around designing your life, designing your career? Has there been one or two big shifts in your thinking given the emergence of AI?

BB: What we're using, I'm building a lot of AI into my classes because it's really good at brainstorming, it's really good at reframing problems, it's really good at giving kind of new rationale for things if you use it in a creative way. So the stuff that was hard to teach, I can now use in AI to show lots and lots, mean teaching is essentially, designing things is essentially looking at lots and lots of patterns and trying to find something new in lots and lots of patterns. So AI gives me a chance to have the students experience lots and lots and lots of patterns of a reframe, of an idea, so that they can learn faster. I think it reinforces the notion that you can't predict your future. And now it's just like, whoa, nobody can predict their future. And so you can't engineer the future. Engineering thinking is powerful, but it needs a lot of data. And if you don't have any data, you can't design the bridge, you can't design the car. And people are always trying to engineer their future and think they've got it figured out when, and then of course the circumstances change. So I think AI is accelerating the opportunity to think about your life in a creative way and to think about things being new. But I think if you start from a fearful position, AI is really terrifying, right? Because it might upset all of your plans and strategies. And if you're not trained as a designer, you're not, you're going to be too rigid. You're going to break when the system breaks and the system will break.

DJ: Bill, this podcast is titled *Play to Potential*. What does the term mean to you, given your vantage point?

BB: Play to potential, that you play your way into the future version of yourself, that you discover the thing you didn't even know you were looking for by goofing around and trying stuff and trying it with other people. never, playing by yourself is kind of boring, playing with other people. So find ways to engage in what looks like play, because play is the thing you do without an agenda, without, know. You can want to win and lose maybe in certain games, but I like games where it's more open-ended. But play is the thing that will put you in a situation where something amazing will happen. It happens all the time. But you've got to be in a playful state of mind. I think *Play to Potential* is a great title, but it's a great strategy for thinking about how do I find what's next. After I do them all, my pros and cons lists, I look at all the reports, I look at 21st century skills from the World Economic Forum, I still have to play my way into the future. It's the only way to go.

DJ: Beautiful. That's a wonderful place to wrap the conversation. Bill, thank you so much for being so generous with your time and insights. Really enjoyed it.

BB: You're welcome. Thanks for the great questions. love this. This is really fun.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I hope you found the conversation purposeful. I recently came across an inspiring video of Dick Van Dyke, the actor who acted with Julie Andrews in the super hit movie *Mary Poppins*. He speaks about turning 100 and how he is full of life and keen to keep playing his way into the future! Such a wonderful approach to playing to our potential with energy, vitality and curiosity in the long game of life.

If you liked this conversation, you might like the book *Play to Potential* published with Penguin, where I outline some thoughts around designing a coherent life or a FLAVOUR-ful life as I like to call it. We are also publishing a journal which serves some of the insights as a drip feed and gives people

an opportunity to reflect and evolve in 2026. You can find the details of these and the Play to Potential membership at www.playtopotential.com

Thank you for tuning in and look forward to getting back in touch in 2026. Merry Christmas, Happy New Year and best wishes to you and your families! Bye now.

End of transcription

Nugget from James Clear that is referenced: [Keeping the identity small.](#)

Nugget from Raghu Ananthanarayanan that is referenced: [Doing versus Being.](#)

Nugget from Thomas Wedell Wedelssborg that is referenced: [Elevator problem and reframing.](#)

Nugget from Ashish Dhawan that is referenced: [Potential pathways post ChrysCapital.](#)

Nugget from Marshall Goldsmith that is referenced: [Staying relevant over the long term.](#)

Nugget from Jeffrey Pfeffer that is referenced: [True to which Self?](#)

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- 106.05 Bill Burnett - Gravity and Anchor problems
- 106.06 Bill Burnett - Designing a coherent life
- 106.07 Bill Burnett - Journaling energy and engagement
- 106.08 Bill Burnett - Multiple paths to the mountain top

About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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