Context to the conversation

Bill Burnett speaks about his early years, some of the hard-wired elements of his operating system and how he has navigated his career across various pursuits including designing Star Wars toys, Product design at Apple and teaching Life Design at Stanford.

Transcription

****

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): 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?

Bill Burnett (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.

End of transcription

****

Nugget from James Clear that is referenced: Keeping the identity small.

RELATED PLAYLISTS YOU MIGHT LIKE

Formative years: Discussions around how the leaders were influenced by the climate in which they grew up and how that has impacted them as individuals and the choices they have made as they have gone about their journeys. You can access the playlist here.

Identity: Identity refers to the reputation, characteristics etc. of a person that makes the individual or the people around him/her think about them in a certain way. To put simply, how do we think of ourselves and what to the others think of us. Identity is a key element that we need to wrestle with during pivotal transitions. Herminia Ibarra shares her insights on how we should treat Identity as a Work in Progress that gets influenced by the journey we go through and the choices we make. Ram Guha speaks about the multiple identities of Gandhiji. Atul Kasbekar speaks about how he saw his

identity evolve from being a photographer to a producer. All this and more in this playlist. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Self-awarenes: Insights around what it takes to build a better understanding of self. This includes perspectives around how we can deepen our picture of ourselves through a combination of inner work, mindfulness practices and by gathering meaningful feedback from the world around us. You can access the playlist [here](#).

SIGN UP TO OUR COMMUNICATION

Podcast Newsletter: Join 1000s of leaders who benefit from the Podcast newsletter. Not more than 1-2 emails a month including keeping you posted on the new content that comes up at the podcast. High on signal, low on noise. Sign up for the podcast newsletter [here](#).

Nuggets on Whatsapp: We also have a **Podcast Whatsapp distribution group (+91 85914 52129)** where we share 2-3 nuggets a week from the Podcast archives to provoke reflection. If that is of interest, please click [here](#) and send a message stating "INTERESTED". Do also add this number to your Phone Contacts so that we can broadcast our messages to you when we share a nugget.

****

Ricardo Sunderland- Nuggets

- 106.01 Bill Burnett - Formative years and the arc of career
- 106.02 Bill Burnett - Balancing Passion and Pragmatism
- 106.03 Bill Burnett - Dysfunctional beliefs around careers
- 106.04 Bill Burnett - Finding good problems to solve
- 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](#).

Disclaimer and clarification of intent behind the transcripts

This written transcript of the conversation is being made available to make it easier for some people to digest the content in the podcast. Several listeners felt that the written format would be helpful. This may not make sense as an independent document. Very often spoken word does not necessarily read well. Several of the guests have published books and the language in their books might be quite different from the way they speak. We request the readers to appreciate that this

transcript is being offered as a service to derive greater value from the podcast content. We request you not to apply journalistic standards to this document.

This document is a transcription obtained through a third party/voice recognition software. There is no claim to accuracy on the content provided in this document, and occasional divergence from the audio file are to be expected. As a transcription, this is not a legal document in itself, and should not be considered binding to advice intelligence, but merely a convenience for reference.

The tags that are used to organize the nuggets in the podcast are evolving and work in progress. You might find that there could be a discrepancy between the nuggets as referenced here and in the actual podcast given this is a static document.