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Context to the conversation

Bill Burnett speaks about how he thought about navigating through various choices and transitions and how he balanced pursuing his passion and being pragmatic in terms of providing for his family without swinging too far to one side.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): 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 centring around design?

Bill Burnett (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 start-ups just felt like a natural thing to do because everybody does start-ups 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 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. 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 may be 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.

End of transcription

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

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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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