



Guest

Ayse is an accomplished Industrial Designer and has worked with Brands like Herman Miller, IKEA, Amazon and Toyota. She is the author of *Design the Life You Love* and gives lectures on *Design the Work You Love* to corporations. She was on the Fast Company's list of Most Creative People in 2017 and on the Thinkers50 Radar list of the 30 people that are likely to shape the future of organizations. Her work can also be found in the Permanent Collection at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.

Today, she gives talks, lead workshops, and teach masterclasses at companies to help leaders and their teams design their work and life, using 5 foundational principles of optimism, empathy, holistic thinking, collaboration and an open mind.

In this conversation, we explore various themes around how we can use Design principles to design that we love.

Context to the conversation

Hello Listeners, Welcome to the 86th conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast. I am your host, Deepak Jayaraman. This podcast is a labour of love for the long term where I have conversations with leading practitioners, thinkers, authors, artists, sportsmen and other leaders in their respective fields to decode insights around leadership, transitions and careers.

In addition to curating this podcast, I work with leaders with a growth mindset as a Trusted Sounding Board helping them and organizations transform and play to their unique potential. To know more about what is in the podcast archives and the advisory work I do, you could just visit www.playtopotential.com. That is playtopotential.com.

Now to the guest of this podcast. It is Ayse Birsal. I was first introduced to her thinking when I had an opportunity to speak with Marshall Goldsmith at the Podcast. He is considered by many as one of the Greatest and Most Successful Coaches of all time. He spoke about how Ayse had changed his life by getting him to think about his legacy. Then I went and read her book – *Design the life you love* where she uses principles of design to help with life design. Finally, if I really reflect on some of the insights I have gathered from the guests over the years and the realization from the work I do, I feel there is a lot of value we can derive by thinking like a Designer.

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Without further ado, let us listen and learn from Ayse Birsal.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Ayse, thank you so much for making the time for the Play to Potential Podcast, really excited to have you on the show.

Ayse Birsal (AB): Deepak, thank you, it is great to be here.

DJ: And as we were discussing before we started recording, this podcast is about three themes, Ayse. Am I pronouncing your name right, by the way, Ayse, is that right?

AB: You are doing it beautifully. And how am I doing? Deepak?

DJ: It is more P U C K. Deepak is closer to it.

AB: Deepak, okay.

DJ: Yes, that is perfect. Like the Canadian puck.

AB: Deepak. I like it. Thank you.

DJ: So, Ayse, this podcast is about three themes, leadership, transitions and careers. I would love to dive into the book you have written on the topic, Design The Life You Love, but before that, I am curious about people's journeys and some of the choices they have made in their life. You come from a family of lawyers; can you talk to us a little bit about how you ended up doing what you are doing now?

AB: Sure. I grew up in a family of lawyers in Turkey and I thought I was going to study law but then, I realized that I loved to create and draw and that law might not be the best place for that creativity. So then, I wanted to become an architect. I did not want to be an artist because I thought being an artist is too difficult, you know, being alone with that creativity, but that architecture is, I guess it is solution making, at the services of people. And then, from architecture, I turned to industrial design and decided to become an industrial designer.

DJ: And when was that transition, the architecture to industrial design?

AB: That was actually my last year of high school. So, I was planning to attend architecture school and then, a family friend came to tea and said, architecture, have you thought about industrial design, and I had never heard those two words together before. I was like industrial design, what is that, and he said, you know, do you see this teacup. We were having tea together and he said, you see how the edge is curved so that it fits our lips better and it has a handle so that we can hold hot liquid in our hands without burning ourselves and then, the saucer is there so that if you spill your tea, you would not ruin your mom's beautiful tablecloth. And he said, that is industrial design. And in that moment, I fell in love with the human scale of an industrial designer and I thought, that is what I want to be. And I am still feeling that, I still love the human scale of industrial design.

DJ: Ayse, of the various transitions or reinventions you have been through in your life, one of the reinventions that struck me was how you moved from being a designer of things to being a designer of things and being a designer of life. Can you talk a little bit about when you started bringing your attention to the element of life design?

AB: Absolutely. You know, Deepak, sometimes we say something in our life and we do not realize the importance of it. And that happened to me with Design the Life You Love because I was part of WPO, which is Women Presidents Organization and this is a group of women that we get together to collaborate and to help each other and to learn from each other. And one time, we did an exercise, where we were asked to define our, I guess it was our mission in one sentence. And I was young and I was kind of bored and I wanted to say something funny that had to do with design. So, I said, my mission is to design the life I love. And I said it in the moment and I do not know why I said that but it stuck with me and then years later when I developed my own design thinking process, deconstruction reconstruction, the two things came together and I thought to myself, hey, if I think that our life is our biggest project and now, I have my own process, can I apply this process to my life as kind of like the ultimate test, right, and that is how it happened.

DJ: Wow, and you also talk about that being triggered a little bit by the economic situation at that time, right. One of the themes I am curious about is how constraints sometimes lead us to creative solutions. So, can you throw a little bit of light on the context in which you started focusing on life design as well?

AB: Absolutely. In 2008 when the economy crashed, you know, I had a very successful design studio in New York, but almost all our clients took their work in-house. And it made total sense for them, they were cutting budgets and, you know, we were on the outside. But I did not see this coming and so it was really a very hard one year for us where we did not have any active projects. And that is the time when I, at the urging of one of my dearest friends and collaborators like Caplan, she said, why do not you use this time, now that you have all this time, to think about how you think because you think differently. And that was like a lifesaver for me. And I used that year, where nobody wanted to work with me, to think about how I think. So, it was kind of like a deep dive into my head and into my heart and to figure out how I come up with new ideas. And the fact that one person valued my thinking made all the difference. And I developed my own design thinking process, deconstruction reconstruction, yeah.

DJ: Fascinating. And I think if I fast forward to today, the last couple of years, just because of COVID, I come across so many people that have been pushed to a certain corner, but have used that as a springboard to something else, which is fascinating.

AB: Absolutely. I mean for us as well, COVID changed the way we work and, if I may, I started these weekly Virtual Design the Life You Love Teas during COVID as a way to help my community and see if they needed anything. And we are now up to Design the Life You Love Virtual Tea number 89, we are almost at a 100. And the amazing thing was, this is the thing that helped me through COVID. I thought I was helping people but it was the other way around, it helped me have a community of amazing people and the chance to meet with them every week. Things that we would never do, right, if it was not for these challenges.

DJ: True. Diving into the book Ayse, before we dive into the framework you have, the one story that stood out for me or one example was of Nelson Mandela. In the book, you refer to him and you call him a master designer of life. I have seen a lot of people use a lot of different adjectives on Mandela but master designer is not one of them. Can you say more about why you think he is a great designer of life?

AB: Absolutely. I think because of the way he reinvented his life again and again, and how he went from a lawyer and a political activist to being a prisoner, and then, coming out of prison and going back into politics and then becoming the President of his country, and through it all, I mean these are major life changes and through it all, he seemed to never lose his optimism, his humanity, his

empathy for himself and for other people, and how he turned challenges into opportunities. And these are truly the principles of thinking like a designer that I talk about in my book and I feel like he embodied these. And he never gave up, and he never lost sight of who he was, and he was always at the service of other people. So that is why I thought, you know, his life could have turned in so many different ways, but he redesigned his life again and again, without losing sight of his values. And that to me made him a master designer in addition to all his other qualities.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. This insight from Ayse reminds me of my conversation with Dr Ram Guha (RG) and his insight around how Gandhiji speaks about his various identities.

RG: *"I think of course there was diet, there was medicine and then there was sex or celibacy, so there were these three main obsessions. Well there was a fourth which was interfaith harmony which we have not talked about, which was, some ways most important, what kind of Hindu he was? We can talk about that later now in terms of his personal idiosyncrasies and eccentricities; he experimented a great deal with that, so it was, what should we eat? What is good? What is bad? What is healthy? What is unhealthy? What excites the senses? What does not excite the senses?"*

DJ: *And it seems like a very scientific trial and error kind of a...*

RG: *Then there was medicine, where he went from being someone who opposed modern medicine to someone who saw a place for it, particularly after he had two surgeries that saved his life one for one for piles and one for appendicitis so he adopted above plural pragmatic approach to medicine and then there was celibacy which was the most peculiar and bizarre thing where he was so obsessed with celibacy that he conducted this strange and notorious experiment or testing it by sleeping with his grand-niece which I have described in a chapter in my book and that came from some peculiar belief that if you are sexually pure you can control society and tame the passions, that you tame the passions within, you can tame the passions outside with Hindus and Muslim pursuing each other this is totally absurd, absurd and also I say a manifestation of vanity that if he is sexually pure Indians would stop fighting with each other so then there is in terms of in his inner journey his religious journey which is again very interesting and very novel and worth spending time on and the discovery, so Gandhi was a Hindu and even he call himself as a Sanatani Hindu but he was a very special kind of Hindu, for one thing his Hinduism did not require a shrine to express itself so in adult life he went to a temple only once which is a Madurai temple in Meenakshi because they had finally admitted Dalits the kingdom of god was within him Ram was then in his heart so that's the first aspect as a Hindu. No ritual, no shrine, faith is within you its inside you, you don't need a church or a mosque or a temple."*

DJ: The other piece that stood out for me in my conversation with Dr Guha is the point he makes about the fluidity of how Gandhiji thought about his identity! He didn't quite confine himself to any one particular box.

RG: *"I think his best to read out just three paragraphs of my book to explain how Gandhi himself saw his multiple callings, so here I am reading out Gandhi what I say about Gandhi and then there is quote of Gandhi in between "To deliver India from British rule was by no means Gandhi's only preoccupation the forging of harmonious relations between India's often disputatious religious communities was the second the desire to end the pernicious practice of untouchability it his own Hindu faith was a third and impulse to develop economic self-reliance for India and moral self-reliance with the Indians was the fourth these campaigns were conducted by Gandhi in parallel all*

were to him of equal importance, in 1933 he wrote to a close friend that "My life is one indivisible whole, I cannot devote myself entirely to untouchability and say neglect Hindu-Muslim unity or Swaraj all these things run into one another and are interdependent, you will find that one time in my life an emphasis on one thing at another time on another but that is just like a pianist now emphasizing one note and now another but they are all related to one another" and this is what I say in the end for Gandhi political independence meant nothing at all unless it was accompanied by religious harmony, caste and gender equality and the development of self-respect in every Indian, other patriots had used the Hindi word Swaraj to signify national independence. Gandhi made Indians aware of its true or original meaning Swa-Raj or self-Rule. So that is Gandhi in his own words and that is also as I told you a little while ago, I don't believe in saying this is the most important thing the only cause just a one route to success, Gandhi conducted his multiple careers and saw them of equally importance and at different times different aspects of his work came into the forefront others receded and those came into the forefront and so on."

DJ: Three things stand out for me from my conversation with Dr Guha. 1) He had a scientific approach to life and conducted many experiments 2) He was not fixated about his beliefs and was willing to evolve them 3) He didn't box himself by any single identity. He was fluid about who he was being at various points in time.

If this is of interest, you might also like the conversation with Vinay Sitapati at the podcast where he speaks about Narasimha Rao. That conversation is a master class in leadership under constraints. You can visit playtopotential.com and find that in the Guests section.

Let's now get back to the conversation with Ayse Birsal.

DJ: I was just listening to your careful choice of words. In the book you say, in life, there is no design, there is only redesign. Seems like a simple statement but I am sure there is a depth of wisdom behind it. Just unpack it for us.

AB: Sure. Actually, that was something that I learned from a dear friend of mine, Ralph Caplan, who was an amazing author and his book *By Design* is probably one of the seminal books, and about design. So, I was very lucky because Ralph Caplan was my friend and my mentor. And when I told him about *Design The Life You Love*, this new thing that I was doing, he said Ayse, you know, in life, there is no design, it is all redesign. And I thought, you know, you are right because, I mean it was really presumptuous of me to assume that you have never designed your life until I show up. And I think we are constantly designing and redesigning our lives. And all that I am doing is offering my process and set of tools and saying, hey, I find these things, you know, this process to be useful, they help me design products, I think they will help you design your life. But that was a good learning moment for me.

DJ: Hmm. So let us talk about your process Ayse. You talk about a bowl of soup, interestingly enough, and you talk about how we can, you have a four-step process that you suggest, can you walk us through what these are and maybe elaborate a little bit, just for the listeners to get a sense of the crux of the thinking?

AB: Sure. My process is deconstruction reconstruction and it has four steps. And I thought I need an easy way to explain it to people that does not come from design. So, chicken soup or soup was a good example. So let us imagine, if you want to make soup, you think of the ingredients that go into a soup and those things could be onions and chicken stock, let us say, some rice, some tomatoes. And as you are thinking of the ingredients, what you are doing and what I am doing with you right

now is I am deconstructing the soup. And I could say also, well, is this a soup that is like the kind of soup that my Turkish grandma would make, or is this the kind of soup that your grandma would make. It is like two different cultures, the same soup, but maybe in Turkey, we put rice and in India, you put something else. So anyways, it is really like looking at what is something made up of is the first step. And then the second step is how can we think about this from a different perspective, how could we see the same things from a different light. And so, if you teach me how to make chicken soup like your grandmother made, that is going to shift my thinking about chicken soup and I could, based on that, say, you know what, maybe this should be a vegetarian soup, and so I will take chicken stock out and instead, replace that with vegetable stock. And now, I have started playing with the ingredients, the parts. And then maybe, you know, some other people will tell us, hey, now that you have taken chicken stock out and you are making this with vegetable stock, well, how are we going to eat this, what if instead of a hot soup we thought about this as cold soup. And so now, we could reconstruct it, put it back together and we leave some things out, we could leave the hot temperature out of it and then, introduce the idea of cold temperature. Now we are thinking about how we put the ingredients back together in a whole new way. And then in doing that, how do we express it which is the fourth step, and the expression could be, hey, if you are going to make this cold soup, have you thought about what if we freeze it, you know, it is a whole other way of, you know, it is taking the cold idea and expressing it in a whole different way, if we can freeze it, then maybe we could make a new kind of soup that is frozen and yet edible, you know, maybe it is a popsicle soup. And now, we have come up with a whole different way. We have deconstructed soup, we thought about the same elements differently. As we thought about them differently, we did some research and brought new culture into it. And then, that led us to reconstructing it in a way that is new and different, and that new reconstruction then allowed us to express it as a new idea. And then if we were commercializing this, we could say, hey, this is a popsicle soup that you can eat on the way to school or on the way to work, you do not need a bowl for it. And so, that is how I think. And that is how I think with our clients, with Target or Herman Miller, with Toyota, and I teach them this so that we can now deconstruct and reconstruct together, and they can think differently about the same things that they know, that they are experts on. And then, I teach the same thing to people about their life.

DJ: And just to bring it to life Ayse, do you want to illustrate these four maybe in the context of a life design situation, just for the listeners to appreciate how this transfers to a life context?

AB: Absolutely. I mean, our life is our biggest project and when we say life, it is a big topic. So what I want people to do is to break that into its parts and say, hey, what are the parts and pieces of my life. You know, there is, maybe family in there, there is work in there, there is friends, there is health, there are hobbies, and then there is how I use time. And then, all of those things could be broken into their separate parts. And as we do that, as we deconstruct our life, we start to realize that their parts that have different weights and some of those parts, now that they are deconstructed, we can change them, we can replace them, or we can make new combinations. And then as we do that, we start to see the same things differently about our life. And as we start to see them differently, I introduce the idea of inspiration because when you are creating something, you need inspiration. And in our life, inspiration is other people. So, I call them our heroes and in getting people to think about their heroes, I help them reconnect with their own values. And then once you are reconnected with your values and you realize what is important to you, then you can make choices based on your values which is a big part of designing something. And then based on those values, you reconstruct. And in reconstructing, you can think about your life and try and play with different ideas and say, hey, if I, like, reconstruction is also, Deepak, understanding that you cannot have everything and that is the beauty of design. And so, you have to think about different permutations of ideas and say, what if I have these three things versus those three things and combine different

ideas. And then from that once you have a reconstruction that excites you, you can go to how to express your life.

Does that answer your question? It is really, I guess, my goal is to help people think about their life as something that they can, instead of letting life come at you, it is really designing your life is saying, well, I can envision my life using design tools and practice. And based on those ideas, I can now bring that idea to life, just like a designer would bring a chair or a car to life. I want people to have an idea, a creative idea about what is important to them, and think about that ahead of time, visualize it, imagine it. And then once they do that, they get excited and then, that excitement propels them towards making that idea happen. And then, I also tell them, well, how do you make that idea happen, you do it by creating a list of to-dos, getting collaborators involved and listing people in your idea, all those things come from design, everything that I know, my expertise is in design, I just show how design and life overlap and get people to think.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. I love the point Ayse makes about how we sometimes struggle to figure out what really matters to us. Thinking about who our heroes are sometimes can sharpen our self-awareness around what really matters to us and what we care about.

Something similar came up in my conversation with Rama Bijapurkar (RB), a Board Member and an expert in the area of consumer Insight.

RB: *"so I have friend who said to me that why don't you figure out three role models of people who you really respect and my list of three was C.K. Pralhad, P. Chidambaram and Bhimsen Joshi, I knew two of them C.K. and Chidambaram pretty well, I didn't know Bhimsen at all but I then realize that all three of them was absolutely solo performers, I mean C.K. who is my teacher and my guru in every way actually sat in wherever his office in Michigan and gave the whole world not just the theory of core competence, the idea of competing for the future, the idea of fortune at the bottom of the pyramid I mean the man just did it repeatedly again and again and again, the idea of co-opting your consumers, the whole set of things. And then when you look to Chidambaram, when he wasn't being the minister and he was out of power he was just a damn good lawyer and he was stop being a lawyer he was a minister but he was pretty much because of his individual stuff and I went to Bhimsen's 70th birthday at that time and he said that and he sang for himself and he basically said that day from the podium that I have said to the lord, I stopped singing please take me away, once I had those three M, and its again serendipity how did that three come? Then I said there are guys who don't have any umbrellas, platforms, nothing but they have basically given the world what they have given the world."*

DJ: If we feel stuck around the question – what do I want out of life, shining the light on the people that we instinctively look upto might have cues that could help us move forward and architect a life that is fit for purpose for our context.

If you like the show, please rate and review on Apple Podcasts or Spotify or wherever else you consume this content. I discovered that Spotify has recently launched the Ratings button. So, if you happen to consume the podcast on Spotify, do take a moment to pause and review the show.

Let's get back to the conversation with Ayse Birsal.

DJ: And given you do both Ayse, can you throw the light on what are the nuances in life design versus product design, in addition to whatever is applicable from product design, are there any elements which start becoming significant when we embark on life design?

AB: Oh, I love that question. Thank you for asking that. One of the things that is interesting about life design is, I call it pure design because it is you, your life and a design process. There is no intermediary of products versus when you are designing products, you are introducing products into that life as an intermediary. And often when you design products, the user is other people, like, we do not think of ourselves, we think of people who could be very different from us, but we try and solve problems for them versus when you are designing your life, this is your opportunity to be very self-centred and to think about you because you are the user of your life. And that is what I remind people, you know, you have one life and user of that life is you. You need to imagine what is the life that really, is your life design that works with your values, that is the kind of life that will bring you joy or that will bring you closer to joy. And then, of course, we are not alone in this life, but once you have that idea, you can bring other people into it. So, you can bring your family into it as your collaborators and talk to your spouse or children or your parents about, here is my vision for my life, I need your help, let us collaborate on it together, and you bring other people in.

DJ: That is interesting.

AB: At first, you need to know what you want.

DJ: Even there, if I go back to one of the things I learned from another individual, a lady called Tasha Eurich who was on this podcast many moons back, she talks about the notion of internal self-awareness and external self-awareness, and she says, one is our internal understanding of our needs, wants, aspirations and so on, and sometimes when we get external input, it comes in our blind spot, and it is important to address both before we form a full picture. Any thoughts on the outside-in perspective even at the design stage?

AB: Oh, I like Tasha's work a lot, and thank you for reminding us of that. I think both are really important. So, the way I try and approach it is, I want to connect people with their superpowers and their kryptonite's and their values as internal drivers and then, get them to think about their challenges and opportunities and the things that they want to include versus the things that they want to avoid. And so, there is a very healthy tension between who they are on the inside and then what is their environment and how they can create a balance between the two.

DJ: Hmm, got it. And one of the things you talk about, Ayse, is, in your book, you suggest that we warm up our right brain before we embark on the exercises, you actually ask us to draw something for five minutes. You know, I am trained as a, my left brain has gone through a lot of training, given I trained as an engineer and I went to B school, but can you throw a little bit of light on how we can warm up our right brain before we embark on some of these exercises that you suggest?

AB: Yes. I think it is kind of going back to your childhood. When we were three or four or five, all of us drew things and played with crayons, and there was that playfulness in what we were doing. And so, I think it is a capability that we all have but depending on our education that we forget. So, I want to bring that back to people and say, before you do anything creative and you do not have to be a designer to be creative, we can all use creative problem-solving. Before we get into that space, we need to warm up our creative brain, and it is very similar to what we would do when we go to a gym and we warm up our muscles. So, the idea of drawing something is really that same idea of warming up, but in this case, our right brains. And then, that centres us and gives a signal to our brains that we are entering the creative space and we are going to think differently and creatively. And I think it

is essential. So, I tried to get people to do that when I work with them and it does make a difference. It kind of centres them and they give themselves permission to be more creative. Now, the thing that makes drawing difficult for us is because we judge ourselves and we think, well, if we draw, it has to be a masterpiece, and nothing can be further than the truth. Drawing is a language and we all use that language, you know, we can talk in metaphors and be very visual, and we can write and we can do math formulas. So, it is just one more language that we have learned as children and we have somehow forgotten and I just bring that back.

DJ: Hmm. And maybe just staying with it, just like drawing something for five minutes is a warm-up, are there two-three other things that you do, just out of curiosity, just to get people into a creative frame of mind?

AB: Yes. I ask them about their emotions, and this is something that I learned way back when, similar to your question, we were thinking about, like, how could we help people be in this moment together with us, and I learned that asking people about how they feel right now is very helpful because it suddenly connects them. We call it the elevator from your brain to your heart, and suddenly, you connect with your mood in this moment and it gives people a chance to recognize, hey, I might have been doing something else like before I came here, like I do not know, what you were doing before you and I started talking together. I was doing email. What were you doing?

DJ: You know, it is 5 a.m. For me, it was just wake up and get a cup of coffee and get ready for the conversation.

AB: Exactly, So if I ask you, like, Deepak, how are you feeling right now?

DJ: I would say energized. Energized is the word that comes to mind, just an opportunity to listen to somebody in a different part of the world who has a very different perspective on life than the ones I have been exposed to. So just, at this point of time, soaking in the wisdom, and energized.

AB: Great. And I feel very focused right now to make sure that I can be as clear, in this moment, as I can be to articulate my thoughts. So, just saying that, did it make you kind of connect with yourself for a second?

DJ: Hmm. And it is interesting Ayse. It is in a way, back to the point around being present in the moment and being cognizant of how you are showing up, I brought back my attention to how I am showing up in this conversation.

AB: Great.

DJ: And it is also one of those things that we do not, as you rightly say, we do not give words to. It is one of those things that just remains but giving language to it and precipitating it, I am guessing, has its own power in unlocking creativity.

AB: Yes. And so now imagine I go one step further and I ask people not only to say how they are feeling in this moment, I also say, do a quick drawing of how you are feeling. And then people draw emojis or sometimes they get very creative and they do these wonderful drawings, but even a smiley face can suffice. And just that can serve as your warm-up for creative thinking, and that is it. Now you are connected with your heart and you have done some sketching. It is really interesting how small adjustments like that can help you think differently or be more open to the process.

DJ: The other piece I was curious about Ayse was the elapsed time. You talk about the four-step process. This is also one of those things which is not an overnight exercise but it requires us to immerse in some of these things over a period of time, sleep over it and get to a meaningful place. But in your observation, what have you observed about the time it takes to a meaningful redesign, these four steps, is it weeks, is it months, is it days, any perspective here?

AB: It has been really interesting because I have been doing this for now more than 10 years, helping people design their life and I have done all kinds of slices of time. I have done it in an hour at conferences like the Fast Company Innovation Conference, I have done it over one week at a retreat, I have done it over seven weeks with my students at the School of Visual Arts, I just did it yesterday in two hours using our new digital tool Design The X You Love as an online tool, so it really changes. And the thing that I try to do is, I really believe that what is the most difficult thing and the most important thing is to start. Once you start, once you start a design, the rest is easy because you get hooked in the process of developing new ideas, but starting that first, you know, like kind of that white page is what is so difficult. So, my goal these days whether it is with the book or the online tool that I just mentioned, is to find ways to get people into that state quickly and accelerate that process. And so, with the online tool for example, I get people in 40 minutes from the beginning to writing their manifesto about their life, or a subset of their life, and in 20 minutes from a manifesto to an action plan. And once you do that, you have something tangible that you can sleep on and think about and develop. So that has become my, kind of, a shortcut. And I was listening to a podcast about shortcuts, and I learned that shortcuts are when an expert does a lot of thinking so that other people do not have to think about it and really can take the quick route. So, I feel like I have created the shortcut to design the life you love.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. This reminds me of a conversation I had with Herminia Ibarra (HI) of London Business School. She is the author of Working Identity and is one of the leading thinkers in the space of Leadership and Career Transitions.

DJ: "How do you see the spectrum of the of the time it takes for senior leaders let's say the successful leaders in the mid-40s to move from let's say context A to context B is it 6 months, 12 months?"

HI: 3 Years, It's still 3 years, I mean I ask people all the time you know we have people here who are in the program that a 1 year program and they are hoping that will do the trick it never does in it's very frustrating because and honestly you know part of it is where does it start? When does the time frame actually start because there is also the bit of getting yourself to the point where you can start walking and so it's often a longer chunk than you think but it's if you think about extricating yourself, getting yourself to the point where we are actively looking for something else and then the looking and then the finding just exactly the right fit if you take time often between and you have taking on back to school in between it can be easily be 3 years and it's because people not gone hire you unless you have the experience because you don't have the network into that yet, you don't even have the language, you are still sorting it out for yourself. Experiment and learn takes a little bit longer and that's the hard part for people but that's often why they also go portfolio they start consulting us some of the old stuff just to make sure some money is coming in because you have got a continue life."

DJ: I guess there is no silver bullet here but it is critical to note that transitions are not an instantaneous switch but an organic process that take time. Creating space for that possibility to emerge and being deliberate about it are critical. I find that given the busy lives people lead, taking a

pause and creating the space is often the biggest barrier coming in the way of people being able to redesign their lives. Let's now get back to Ayse.

DJ: I did not realize there was a podcast about shortcuts, I would look it up.

AB: I think it is on Freakonomics, I can send it to you.

DJ: Sure. You actually have a provocative line in the book Ayse as I was reading it. At one point you say, if you have a perfect life, just stop here and go no further. You say, once you deconstruct your life, you will never be able to put it back quite the same way, almost like you use the example of a camera to make the point. Now, what is the watch out here, you know, who should not be over, you know, there is something to be said about overthinking it or over sweating it when things are broadly okay, so any thoughts on just watching out for this?

AB: Yes, that is my disclaimer. And I do tell people, one thing about design is once you start designing and especially once you start deconstructing something, you are not going to think about it the same way again and I thought, there is a responsibility to getting people to deconstruct their lives. What if they have a great life, maybe they do not need to redesign it. And I have a similar approach with design. When I am designing products, I feel like, if there is a great product out there, maybe the best thing to do is not to design it and let it be. So similarly, I tell people, once you start deconstructing your life, it is not going to go back the way it was before. So, if you have the perfect life, do not touch it and leave now. And it is the camera exit. The camera analogy there is, that you mentioned, is kind of like taking a camera that works well and then if you were to break it apart, you will realize, oh my, you know, this has hundreds of pieces that make it up, and then, it is really hard to put it back the way it was. And our life is kind of similar. We say life and it is just one word, but once we deconstruct it, we realize, there are like lots of things that go into this life, and as you see that, you start thinking differently, and you might come to a very different expression. So that is why I thought it is important to tell people, like if you have a good life, maybe this is not the right time to redesign it. If I may add to it, it is also, I think, design is, I see design as problem solving, and so you need a problem to solve. If you do not have a problem solved, then you do not need to design.

DJ: As I was reading the statement, the question in my head was what questions should I ask myself to see if I have a perfect life. It begs the question, what are the markers of a good life or a perfect life, whatever we use, for us to get a rough sense of, is it worth embarking on this, is it worth rocking the boat, if I may put it that way.

AB: Yes. Well, one thing that I have been doing more and more is to show people that life is also made up of smaller pieces. So maybe you do not want to design your whole life, but you could say, hey, I want to design, let us say, the vacation I love, or I want to design the legacy I love, I want to design the love life I love. So, you can, the more I do it, the more I realize, the subsets could be really worthwhile as design projects.

DJ: Ayse moving forward, you say that when we are in a creative process, there are situations where we get an idea but we cannot quite put a finger on what the idea is, and in those situations, you say that metaphors sometimes help us and help us get our thoughts across. Can you say more here, I found that very interesting?

AB: Yeah, I love metaphors as a design tool because metaphors help us understand new or different things in relation to things we know. So, for example, the soup example we talked about is a metaphor, like making soup is a metaphor for design your life. So, what I do in my sessions is to ask

people to come up with a life metaphor and then, using the hooks inside the metaphor to think about their life differently. The example I want to give you is actually the metaphor I have been using throughout COVID is metamorphosis. So, I ask people, our life through COVID is kind of like metamorphosis, and what is metamorphosis, it is the process of a worm becoming a butterfly, and so, well, not a worm, it is a...

DJ: Caterpillar.

AB: Caterpillar, thank you, so I will start that again. The process of metamorphosis is a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. And in the middle of that, you have the cocoon. And so, once COVID started and we started sheltering in place, to me, that was like us sitting like caterpillars inside our cocoons and everything we know breaking apart including ourselves. And then, I thought, well, before we were caterpillars, through COVID, we have been in our homes, going through an incredible change, and when we come out, we are not going to come out the way we were, we are going to come out as butterflies. And then when we come out as butterflies, that is really understanding that we are now a whole different insect and we have wings and we can fly. And using that metaphor, I got people to think about who were they before and what they want to keep from before COVID. And then what are the things that they have learned through COVID and the things that changed, and then that transformation that happened to them, and then going forward, what are the things that they want to keep and the things they want to change, including their new wings, you know, what is going to help them fly and take off. I hope I just demonstrated the incredible power of metaphors in helping us think differently.

DJ: Absolutely. I think it has also been a great learning journey for me over the last several months in the context of the podcast, just to hear how different people look at COVID through their own unique lens. One of the people I spoke to is a monk who is now at MIT, a gentleman called Tenzin Priyadarshi and he said, COVID is like a massive timeout that Mother Nature has given men and women to sort of, you know, you stay in your homes and sort out your stuff, almost like how we would tell our kids to stay in a room and sort out their thinking and cool down and sort of get on with life. And the way he framed it was just so simple yet so powerful. Similarly, this notion of a caterpillar and a butterfly, it is powerful, and the metaphor of a cocoon in the context of COVID, so thanks for sharing.

AB: Thank you. So that is why I love metaphors and for your listeners, one of my friends Todd Churches actually has written a beautiful book, it is called Visual Leadership, and it is one word, Visual Leadership, and he also talks a lot about metaphors from the angle of leadership. So, the two, our thoughts are very complimentary.

DJ: You know one of the other people, maybe staying with the point about metaphors, one of my earlier guests was a gentleman called Dan Cable of the London Business School, and he actually said, when they have people in their workshops, they ask them to imagine different possible selves in the future and they give them a few Lego blocks and ask them to build something with Lego and use that as an opportunity to give voice to what is inside them. So, I can very well imagine the power of the right brain and metaphors and some of these surrogates to unlock what is inside us.

AB: Oh, I love that, the idea of working with metaphors and Legos. Well, that is powerful. You are making me think, one of the things I say in the book and I ask people to do is to write their metaphor and also to draw it. And what is interesting is the two things are quite different and yet they complete each other. So, as we are drawing, we think of different things, and then when we are writing, we are thinking about different things. And so, it now is one plus one equals three, a much more complete idea.

DJ: Actually, that leads me to the next question Ayse. You say that a great expression is more than the sum of the parts. Can you say more about this here? Can you bring this to life for us?

AB: Yeah, as a designer, I am really a student of the idea of less is more. So, I am constantly trying to come up with how can we, using less parts, make more, and so that notion of one plus equals three, how can we create value by combining two ideas that maybe are difficult to put together, but then, if you can offer more value, so that notion of dichotomy resolution is something that I really believe in and practice.

DJ: Hmm. One of the things that is top of mind for me Ayse, I have two young kids, a 12-year-old and an eight-year-old, you know, I am curious about how to imbibe some of these things in kids. In a way, at least we grew up in a time where things were relatively linear, but I realize kids are growing into a future which is going to require them to be a lot more deliberate about how they design and redesign as they go through life, what is some of your thinking around how we can start helping our kids appreciate some of these things and sort of to give them the foundation as they grow up?

AB: Absolutely, I mean what you just said is something that I think about often. I think you and I, even though we grew up in different places, you know, we grew up with a similar, like you said, a linear roadmap, you do this, you go to school, you study hard, you know, you go to work, you work hard, you meet someone, you get married, you have kids, it was very, like, **tutum (00:47:04)**, you do this and then you do that, and I find my kids are also teenagers, they are 17 and 18, and I feel like I cannot give them the same roadmap. You know, there are no roadmaps today because everything is fluid and changeable and uncertain which is an incredible challenge, but at the same time, that is the opportunity. There are no roadmaps, so create your own roadmap, and in a way, Design The Life You Love is my answer to that. Teaching kids to think like a designer with optimism and empathy and collaboration and an open mind, asking what if questions, and seeing the big picture, and connecting the dots in new and different ways early on, and making that a lifelong practice. So that is the only way I know how to do it.

DJ: Hmm. Ayse, as a coach one of the things I think about is the gap between cognitively or getting something in our mind versus living it, I was curious about your thinking around what it takes from designing the life to living the life, any insights there in the way that plays out and also the iterative nature of the two?

AB: Absolutely. You are so right in, like how do you go from idea to actually living it. I think that often, the idea happens inside us, in our own brains, we are alone when we are creating the idea. And then to live it, we have to do it collectively, so we are together. And this is true for the design process as well, as like design of products and designing your life. When I am designing something, I am sitting in my chair at home, listening to music and working in my sketchbook. But then once I have the beginnings of a good idea, something that I feel like answers the criteria or turns the challenges into opportunities in a certain way, something that excites me, that is when I take it to my client and I share it with them early on and then, we start working on it together. And I feel the process with life design is very similar. You have an idea, you have an insight, you have something that excites you, and then, that excitement is what propels you towards the future and you realize, but to bring this idea to life, I need collaborators, I need help, I need to do this, I need to try it out. And you make a little prototype, you test it with other people, you bring them in, you build it together, you create it together and then you test it, you realize this part does not work and then, you replace that and it is sort of like that. And one of my favourite examples of this is Marshall Goldsmith who is known as the world's number one leadership coach who works with the best CEOs in the world. He came to one of my sessions and when I was asking everybody to design his life, he came up with this idea, based on his heroes, to create something where he could teach everything,

he knows to other people without asking for anything in return. And from that simple idea of I want to teach everything I know to others, he created the idea of 15 initially, it was called 15 Coaches. He said, I want to teach everything I know to 15 coaches. And he put this on LinkedIn as an idea and he said, I am giving away my knowledge, who would like to learn from me and then he thought maybe 100 people or 1,000 people would reply, and 17,000 people replied. And from that, the idea of Marshall Goldsmith 100 Coaches was born, it grew from 15 to 100 and now, it is more than 100 people. And the idea is Marshall teaches his expertise and his knowledge to us, and I am part of Marshall Goldsmith 100 Coaches, and then, the only thing we need to do is when it is our time to teach what we know to others for free. And so, it is this idea of a knowledge philanthropy. So anyways, long answer, but Marshall had the idea and then once he had the idea, by putting it on LinkedIn, he opened it up to collaboration and then from that, it became something that was real.

DJ: And it is also interesting that you played a role in opening up that possibility, now you are playing a role as a disseminator of that possibility as a part of MG100, even this conversation, I guess in a way you are sort of, this is knowledge philanthropy, I sincerely appreciate you are doing this.

AB: Oh, I love how you connected the dots there. Thank you so much, Deepak. Truly, it was, and you are right, you know, it is funny because with Marshall, he says, Ayse, you changed my life because I came up with this idea in her session and I tell, Marshall, hold on a second, you changed my life, and so it is kind of like a circle of giving really.

DJ: Fascinating. And Marshall was on this podcast as well a few moons back. And he spoke about you on that podcast as well, so clearly made a big difference to him and all of us are beneficiaries of his and your philanthropy.

AB: Thank you, and yours.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. We had a chance to speak to Marshall Goldsmith (MG) on the podcast earlier.

MG: *"I met a great woman named Ayse Birsal who is a designer and she said who your heroes are? Well, my heroes back to my story were these kind and generous people who are great teachers, Paul Hersey, Peter Drucker and Frances herself and Alan Mulally and all those iconic people. And she said why don't you be like them and I said that's a nice idea. I decided to adopt 15 people and teach them all I know for free and the only price is when they get old, they had to do the same thing. So, I made a little selfie video and put it on LinkedIn. So, I had 1.3 million followers on LinkedIn and I thought a 100 people would apply, I'd adopt 15 young people, they would follow me around and I would tell stupid jokes, they would laugh, make me feel good and then they would get old and do the same thing, you know, cycle of life. I was wrong, over 18,000 people applied and over 280 have been adopted. And so, now this program kind of changed my life."*

DJ: If this topic is of interest, you might also like to tune into my conversation with Herminia Ibarra where she speaks about designing micro-experiments. She says that we have to Act our Way into a New way of thinking, not think our way into a new way of acting.

Let's now get back to Ayse and wrap up the conversation.

DJ: As we wrap up Ayse, this podcast is titled Play To Potential. As you think of this phrase, what comes top of mind to you?

AB: You know, when you reached out to me, I loved that about your title because I think play is so important, especially when we are thinking about serious things, levity is required, and that is right there in your title. And I think play is important because when we are playing, we are like kids who are not afraid of making mistakes and if we can play, then we can connect with our potential. So, I think you are really onto something here.

DJ: Ayse, real delight having you on the podcast. Thank you so much for being so generous and so, what is the right way, so present and so light and so kind in this conversation. Thank you.

AB: Deepak, thank you. You brought me joy. This was a wonderful conversation, I felt really honoured to be here with you and your audience. Thank you.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Thank you for listening. I hope you found the conversation purposeful. A couple of messages before we wrap up.

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End of transcription

Nugget from Dr Ramachandra Guha that is referenced: [Multiple identities of Gandhiji](#).

Nugget from Rama Bijapurkar that is referenced: [Becoming a solo-advisor](#).

Nugget from Herminia Ibarra that is referenced: [Pausing to reinvent](#).

Nugget from Marshall Goldsmith that is referenced: [The full conversation](#).

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Ayse Birsal - Nuggets

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- 86.02 Ayse Birsal - Nelson Mandela - a Master Life Designer
- 86.03 Ayse Birsal - Deconstruction and Reconstruction - The 4-step process
- 86.04 Ayse Birsal - Life Design vs Product Design
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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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