

# OpenTheo

## Designing Your Life Worth Living | Dave Evans & Bill Burnett

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### The Veritas Forum

Bill Burnett and Dave Evans teach the most popular class at Stanford. The course, entitled "Designing Your Life," aims to reframe the way students think about the question, "How do I live a meaningful life?" Burnett, an atheist, and Evans, a Christian, both believe the key to a joyful and fulfilling life starts with thinking like a designer. As we kick off this new year, enjoy this throwback episode featuring Dave Evans and Bill Burnett as they discuss their methods for living a life worth living. Please like, share, subscribe to, and review this podcast!

### Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast, a place where ideas and beliefs converge. What I'm really going to be watching is which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful and humble to the people they disagree with.

How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity and consciousness are a mystery, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this involved. Today we hear from popular professor duo Dave Evans and Bill Burnett, who had the design program at Stanford University, known for their popular courses called "Designing Your Life", also the title of their New York Times best-selling book. Today they take to the stage at UC Berkeley in a discussion titled "Designing Your Life Worth Living", moderated by Dr. Amani Nuru Jeter.

So welcome, thank you for coming tonight. It's good to be here, thanks. So when I was reading all about this methodology, you all call "Life Design Methodology", and I was really intrigued, one about your story, so we'll get around to talking about that, kind of how you came to work together and how it's been to work together as two people with very different worldviews.

And I just want to repeat that this is really not about pitting Christianity against atheism,

what this is really about is having a constructive and evocative conversation about what it means to live a worthwhile and meaningful life. And how you all have enjoyed working together and how you've come to collaborate to help people live a worthwhile and meaningful life. But what I want to start with is what is life design methodology, this idea of designing your life, what is that all about? Well the Life Design Lab at Stanford, we claim that our mission statement is that we apply the innovation principles of design thinking to the wicked problem of designing your life at and after the university.

What does that mean? It means we're the guys that teach the class to help you figure out what you want to be when you grow up, which we reframe, because we think given that's a bad question, we're the guys to hopefully help you figure out what you want to be next as you continue growing. And then the key thing there is how do you apply design thinking to the challenge of life design. So Bill, what is basically design thinking and what's it going to do with life? Yeah, you know, we've been working on this since the 60s at Stanford.

It's this idea of human centered design. We used to just design products and services and things. In fact, when I did the major was called product design.

But we use principles of ethnography and anthropology. We try to really understand humans and have empathy for their situation and then design things for them that are appropriate. And this comes up in universal design for people with handicaps.

It comes up with, you know, I think we're kind of all handicapped when it comes to technology. So trying to make technology easy to use. And Dave came over, I was teaching over at Berkeley, came over in 2007 and he said, "Hey, do you think we could, one, do you think your design students need help launching getting out in the world?" And I said, "Absolutely, because you know, design is a little bit different than being an engineer or a pre-med or something.

It's a very open field. It's not really clear just because you have a degree what you're going to do with it." So I said, "Yeah, they need help. And why don't we try using our own method, our own human centered design to design something to help students launch?" And that led to a whole series of prototypes and classes and building little experiences for the students and seeing how they reacted to it.

I think, you know, we just taught a full-day seminar on Thursday. There were 15, 16 different modules in that seminar. And I think each of those modules, we've probably prototyped and iterated a dozen times.

We've really been through 40 of them to get to those 14. So it's using that same idea of how do you design in a human centered way if the problem is me and my life. So empathy for me, empathy for the world that I'm going to go into and try and then prototyping things that allow you to kind of sneak up on your future.

So that's an interesting concept. Both of you have mentioned this idea. So you're saying sneak up on your future.

And you mentioned before, not planning out maybe to paraphrase what you're going to be or do 20 years from now, but just figure out what you're going to do next. My mother would cringe if she heard you say that. So, you know, we're here on a college program.

She's a lovely woman, but she's wrong. She is a lovely woman. So we're here on a college campus and many of us, I can remember when I was in college, you know, you plan your life out.

This is what you want to be. This is the person you aspire to be, the career you aspire to have. And you figure out every step along the way to get there.

Many of us might say that our parents would be a little nervous if we told them, well, I just know what I'm doing tomorrow. I don't yet know what I'm going to do 20 years from now. So can you talk a little bit about that concept in relation to the idea of what it really is in essence to live in meaningful? What does that mean to live in meaningful and worthwhile life? I'd be glad to be first of you.

Just Claire, tell me exactly what's going on in 2037. I am in the world in large. And so what's going on in medicine? How's the whole medical field working now? What are the issues you're dealing with in 20 years? I have no idea.

You're supposed to have a 20-year plan. Your mother's going to be upset. I had a 20-year plan.

That's how I got to where I am now. Okay, just need one. So the problem is when you're designing your life, you're designing a thing called the future.

None of us have been there yet. We might want to get to next Friday, I think we might go a week when we actually do a planning exercise in our classes. We run three five-year plans.

Because all of us can be more than one lived experience in the world. We say there's more aliveness in each of us than one lifetime permits us to live. So there's more than one of you in there.

And there's more than one right answer to you. There's not a single right answer to you. And in the world at large right now, the technological engineering mindset has sort of begun to mislead people to believe there is an optimal solution.

There's got to be a way to do this right. It's sort of a tempting thing to want to believe. But there are a lot of questions to which there are not right answers, only a series of potentially good answers.

And by the way, you'll never even know if you have the best answer because you only lived one of them. And so what we're trying to do is give people the tools to live into the empirical process of iterating their lives for life as a lived experience, not an analytical experience. You can't know the future, you can build the future.

You can still have a plan. I mean you can still say, "Hey, I'm in Berkeley and I want to major in political science or mathematics or history or whatever." And have an aspirational mission. I want to see the end of food injustice in the urban centers of the top 15 cities in the US by 2050.

That's fine. But what happened, what the data tells us is that about seven to ten years out of school, only 20% of the people are doing anything that had anything to do with what they made your day. So we like to talk about these, what we call dysfunctional beliefs that sort of hold you back.

Like whatever I major in, that's what I'm going to do for the rest of my life. Well, 20% of you, that's true. And 80% of you are going to take that thing and then build on it and do something else.

It doesn't mean you majored in the wrong thing, it just means then you did that for a little while and then you decided, "Hey, maybe I'll get an MBA." Because really the way I want to have impact is through marketing or to business. Or maybe I'll go into a nonprofit. Because that's where I see myself now is having impact.

So we like these little five year plans, but we like to have three of them. Because you want to be flexible, the world can throw you a curveball, right? Not everything goes the way it's supposed to. And then we like to give people tools so that the data says you're going to have three different careers, the data says you're not going to be based on your major.

The data says, you know, that this general, I see a lot of people look like they're in school here at Berkeley. You're probably going to live to be 100. You're going to work for 70 of those years.

I'm pretty sure it won't be the same job all 70 years. So how many of you hope you can't talk about what you're doing 20 years from now because it doesn't exist yet? We want to work on stuff that doesn't mean you want to work on the cool thing. I mean, Dave and I have seen whole portions of our industry just disappear.

When I got out of school, one of the jobs you could have with my training was as an engineering, what was called an engineering draftsman. You drew up the drawings of what was going to be made on paper, on paper with a pencil. Actually with an ink pen.

That's all computers do that now. Nobody even knows what a draftsman is. So you want to have a set of tools that are flexible because the world's going to change and you want

to be able to grow into the next thing that you're going to be.

So it's not like, "Oh, don't worry about it. If you can get to the party on Friday, you're fine. That's not what we're talking about.

We do talk about five-year plans and imagining yourself into the future. It's actually probably better to think of it that way and really imagine it well than to try to plan something when you really don't have a lot of data. So we're going to get back to that.

I have a follow-up question for that. We'll get back to that in a minute. We've got a book you're going to be doing.

I'm going to get your book. I wanted to ask you about going back to this idea. So in your classes and in your book you talk about, you call it a well-lived, and joyous life.

And tonight we're here talking about living a meaningful and worthwhile life. Would you say that those are essentially the same concepts? Are they different? What is the difference? Or can you compare and contrast the idea of a well-lived, joyous versus a meaningful life? There's a concept we use in our classes we call it. We encourage people to live the coherent life.

But the coherent life we mean in a life where who you are, what you believe in, what you were doing are in alignment. That you can articulate what you believe what your belief system is. You are aware of what role you're trying to play in the world.

You're looking at what you're doing and aware of your personality and identity. You can say, "Are these all in my being a consistent person?" Now whether or not well-lived and even joyful or even meaningful, I remember one student in one of my small groups in class, we got to a discussion on meaning-making and she said, "I'm a nihilist. I've finally worked long and hard to discover there is no such thing as meaning.

And so I would like to skip the rest of this conversation. I said, "Fine, as long as you respectfully listen to the other students." "Yeah, well they're really kind of ticking me off because I'm sitting there going, "That's so stupid, there is no meaning." So for her living meaninglessly with authenticity was as meaningful as it could get, so it took risks for her. It's coherent that she could be.

She was pretty happy. So because we're teachers, we are two people in our role as teachers, our job is to help people get into alignment with the truth as they understand it. And they're true.

So what's meaningful to them is entirely up to their value system. We know a lot about two different kinds of things. How do you help people experience meaning? That's different than how do you help people define meaning? So we do not define meaning making in our Stanford class because that's not a job.

You define what is meaningful and we can help you get your hands on that. Finding purpose in life is one thing. Defining the purpose of life is quite another.

So we define it individually differently, but we do not tell people the purpose of life. We try to help them get their hands on finding it. But the other thing is the data when we talk to all our students, they were like, I don't want to just take some crummy job.

I want to do something that's purposeful and useful. I want to be useful in the world. I want my life to be meaningful, to have meaning.

And so we went back to the positive psychology stuff and we said, okay, well what psychology, when you live a healthy, joyful life for you? And I think a thriving life, what are the elements that the psychologists have determined contribute to that? And then we looked at them because we're kind of data-driven guys. You can't just make stuff up. It's a university.

You can't, you know, you can't just make things up. This isn't politics. So, you know, and you know, the work of Martin Seligman and Chexent Mahay and other psychologists who studied what makes people thrive, what makes them healthy, what makes their lives feel meaningful.

It's, you know, having strong relationships, having working on something bigger than yourself, having accomplishment, you know, something that you can feel that you've accomplished and mastered. And so we've taken those ideas and we've just put them into the class and made them clear for students so they can be actionable. They can do something, just discover, oh, well, this feels like it might, you know, this feels like it might be something that I would be good at and that I could understand in the world.

The world would want it, you know, just because I want to do something that doesn't mean the world wants to pay me to do it or to support me. And so we looked at that stuff. We boiled it down to some very, there's a thing in design about a biased action, like, let's just try stuff.

So all of these things turn into little exercises that the students do, and they come back and they say, wow, that was really useful. That helped me sort out what I was thinking. So we don't say you should think this, but we say, try these things.

It will help you figure out how to be the best version of you that you can be, right? That's what we're trying to do. So you mentioned there's a difference in, there's a difference between purpose in life and purpose of life, and I kind of hear that in what both of you all are saying. When you said that, I immediately thought, well, isn't the purpose of life to have purpose in life? Is there really a difference between the two? If you're purposely minded.

But not everybody is. My purpose in life is to have as much fun as I can. I personally

would not affirm that it's a brilliant way to go.

But as a Christian, I believe in free will. And I believe that God actually gave us sovereignty over our lives, including whether it's acknowledging or not acknowledging God or what have you. So if you want to go do that, you've actually got the authority to do that.

And now, I can say my personal worldview or my personal lived experience might disagree with that. And if you care about my opinion, you can ask me about that personally. If you care about the thinking of the tradition that I aspire to, you could ask about that.

If you want to ask what psychology observes that makes most people happy according to the psychologist that studied people a certain kind of way, you can listen to that or not. Or you can do whatever the heck you want. So, you know, we in terms, as Stanford instructors, we do not necessarily claim that we have access to universal truth about those questions.

And we can say, okay, positive emotion, engagement, relationships, you know, what's meaningful to you and achievement are elements that go into the thriving lives of many, many people. You know, which one is more important than the other? And by achievement, you mean achievement like I helped that individual this afternoon, or I wrote a piece of code that millions of people used. So what kind of achievement matters to you? Those are, there's lots of essay questions here that are always driven by the individual.

So we can suggest things that people can try to work toward, because we've learned a lot about what works for others, this might work for you. But is it working or not, is the individual's decision? The distinction though does get into the fundamental difference in our worldviews. And again, I'm not here to, I am neither a scholar of existentialism nor a spokesperson for atheism.

But in my worldview, there is no such thing as ultimate purpose. It doesn't exist. It comes out of existence, proceeds essence.

It comes out of the notion that we're here. We are here. There is no purpose for it.

Therefore, we are forced to create our own framework for meaning. That is the freedom where that's the anxiety of freedom. And you either figure it out or you don't.

But at the end of this, it's over. A transcendent principle that would organize meaning making did not precede our existence. We got here, we got consciousness, we decided purpose would work as part of the consciousness experiment.

Yeah. I started out as a physics major. And I thought, because I thought physics, physics

is so interesting.

It actually turned out to be too hard. I wasn't a very good physicist. But design is easier.

But physics, I was like physics asks the big question, why is there anything instead of just nothing? Why is there anything and just nothing? And then I took this class in existentialism and I found out there was this guy in the 1880s named Gottfried Leibniz who asked, why is there anything and not nothing? And he came up with a whole world view around that. And that led me to Nietzsche and Sartre and all the sort of 20th century existentialists. And they had a really good argument for how this works.

And it didn't posit something that I couldn't, like I kind of like the simplest explanation for things. And it didn't include, and it hadn't since, as I mentioned, I was raised in the church, but it didn't survive college. So it was, you know, it was this thing like, well, this explanation works very well.

It provides me with happiness in a world view. And it doesn't require inventing something that I can't put my finger on. So you all have, getting kind of talking more about the differences in your world views, how has that come into play in the nature of your collaboration together? I actually hear, despite the fact that you all have different world views, some similarities, some differences, but also some similarities.

And I'm curious when you think about this kind of, what's in my mind, is purpose driven life for some reason, Rick Warren and all of the stuff he's doing. And then the idea that there is no purpose, I create it, right? But what I hear both of you saying is that there's liberation from both of those perspectives. But I would imagine that in doing the work that you do, those world views might mean that you kind of come down very differently on some concepts that might be important to the work that you do.

So how has it been kind of working together from that perspective and moving this field forward? So how we began, we started working on wrestling this question. So how does the happy existential ethos and the happy Christian contemplative practitioner get along well and teach the same thing about stopping each other all the time saying no, no, no, that's not it. And so very shortly after we made the decision to work together, I said okay, so now we have to work the question.

And I said, well, they got a question. I do God, you don't do God, we got to work through it. I don't think it's going to be an issue.

No, no, no, trust me, it's going to be an issue. And then he goes, I said, we have to talk about it. I don't think we need to talk about it.

Go, Bill, here's the deal. We need to work this through so that if it comes over to our students that's already been worked through, there are at least questions you really need to ask me because technically I worked for Bill. Bill is the executive director and I



get my appointment because he said I married him.

He's not technically legitimate. Ultimately, if we disagree, he's not very dangerous to me. I am technically very dangerous to him.

I said, you need to ask me really hard questions. If you don't, I'll give you the questions and then you ask them. So we went up to a beer garden up in the mountains and we sat down for a whole afternoon and killed a pitcher beer and we worked it through.

And sure enough, it was no problem. The reason it's no problem is not because we agree on those issues, but it turns out for happily different reasons, and we probably both think we know why this is true for different approaches. But our worldviews both lead us to an understanding of the definition of a human person, which is quite coincident.

And so the manner that I think what it means to act like a human being, the ultimate example, which is lived in following the aspirational example of Jesus Christ, the way you treat people, the way you think about people, the way you invite people to be. And so, in terms of the way you're noble selves, the principles I hold about that turn out to be for a pretty different initial set of reasons, the same kind of principles still hold. So our worldviews are very different in our class language.

Our work views are virtually identical. And so on those bounding principles, we agree on the how and what's important. We disagree on some of the answers.

But because we don't give our students the right answer to these questions, that's not necessary for us to agree on them. But I would say it's also true that Dave's theology is relatively liberal. And the notion that God gives you free will is not held by all Christians.

I read Rick Warren's book, and I was astonished by it. It was part of the marketing plan for our book. I wanted to, because he sold a lot of books.

So, you know, had we had that conversation at Zotz over Bob Senk, who was two pitchers of beer. I don't really remember. And had it been, you know, I had Dave said, look, this is the way it is, and it's no other way.

And I need to bring that into the classroom, or I can't be an authentic person, then I would have said, you know, we can't do this. But I know I think you have, you are, you know, the theology, as we've discussed it, is relatively liberal. It's quite forward thinking.

It's less 14th century than many Christians I know. It's not bad for Jesus' sake. I know.

It's a... So what are some of those similarities and some of those differences? Well, for instance, I believe that we have ultimate freedom, that we decide how our lives unfold. That we don't get to deal with... There's a thing called facticity. We don't get to deal with... We can't change the laws of physics.

We can't change the things that happen to us. We can't change the weather. But we have a choice to decide how we move in the world, how we interpret the things that happen to us.

That we are ultimately responsible for creating meaning in our lives. And Dave's version of his idea of... Saying very similar things. Live a Christian life is very similar.

There's a different... Certainly a different endpoint. And a different reason why, maybe, you do those things. But essentially, the human that we're describing is the same human.

And I'm certain there are students in the class who connect the dots with each of us in a different way. And we do a thing at the end... When we teach together, we haven't done this in a while, but when we do have the opportunity to teach together, we have a thing at the end of class called Ask Bill and Dave. And you can ask us anything.

You can ask us how much I mean. You can ask me... You get to do that a little bit later about it. Yeah.

Whatever you want. And how much beer? How much beer was available? And ultimately, and somebody says, "Hey, you guys seem to talk about some things differently. What's the deal?" And I will say I'm an atheist, and Dave will say I'm a Christian, and they'll say, "How does that work?" And then we tell them.

We just tell them. We just tell them. We're just fine.

Yeah. So we don't hide it, but it's not part of the curriculum. Maybe on that point.

So, yeah, I'm definitely a believer in free will. One of the reviews of the book we most appreciate was clearly the authors respect the autonomy of the reader. And we both do.

I respect the autonomy of the individual because I understand that since in his beneficence God decided to allow creation to occur out of himself, because I think actually was taught that physics is really good at the how of reality, not the why, because the pre-being-bang stuff is kind of a bit... Now it's hard to talk about time before it existed, but what gets the big bang going? Which is a cheap argument, by the way, for God. It's really kind of parlor trick stuff. If you've got to rely on that, you're in your own church.

But on you go, and so that in wanting to reflect God's glory, which is aliveness and love and reality, that the human person moves fully into that and for love to occur, which is the essence of it all, free will has to happen. You can't have true love without true freedom. So I've got a rootedness in what freedom is fundamentally all about, which I think Bill of Characterizes the essential nature of the matter that happens to acquire

consciousness over the long and arduously accidental process called natural evolution development.

So we got to this reality in a very, very different way. But we still both say, I'm responsible for making sure that I don't violate your responsibility. We spent a lot of time, by the way, working really hard.

One of the reasons our course has gotten a lot of response was for many, many years in the secular university, the university didn't think there was a way to try to nurture or to affect the formation of lives without messing with the answer to life. In a post-enlightened modernity model, first do no harm, and I'm not going to manipulate you by abusing the power I have as being your instructor, being your professor. So I'm not going to touch that stuff.

And so for almost a century, we didn't. And I always believed that it was criminally negligent. And so in five minutes, I was like, "Hey Bill, what if we taught this?" He goes, "Totally, let's do this thing.

My students are struggling all the time. We should do it. The fall is prototype at the summer.

Let's go." It was like a two-minute deal. Because, by a section, we have the belief that you can put together a very, very structural, very, very disciplined model that can hold people freely. You know, enough structure to get somewhere, but enough, not so much prescription is to tell you the answer.

And so far it seems to be working. That's why I think that's why, you know, fundamentally this human-centered design thing works. It's human.

You know, what do you want to be when you grow up? I don't know. Okay, well let's try some stuff. And let's explore that.

Let's explore that question. And, you know, what we found is the students, you know, I don't know how you guys feel about this, but you have a lot of conversations, you know, as a student in the dorm and, you know, over, you know, late at night in the stairwell. But they're not that helpful sometimes because you're both, everybody's confessing this sort of anxiety that they have around, you know, "How do I make these choices and what do I do?" And all we do is we give it a little bit of, you know, we put a container around it, we give it a little bit of structure, and help people discover for themselves, you know, "Well, what do you want to grow into?" And why are you made, I mean, I get students, you know, I have lots of advisees and they come in and they want, "I want a major in engineering." And they go, "Why?" And they go, "I don't know.

My dad wants me to be an engineer." It's really good major. Yeah. My dad wants to be an engineer.

My dad wants me to do CS. You know, my mom wants me to be a doctor. And I'm like, "Okay, well, we're going to stop right there." So one of the things that I hear in what you're saying from when you first started talking, what keeps ringing in my head is living a stress-free life.

It sounds like living a stress-free life. And I mentioned that and it's probably resonating with me in that way because I do work on stress. Right.

You know, I do work on racial health disparities and think a lot about kind of how our social worlds, how I lived in social experience impacts in the kind of stress that goes along with that. So this idea of chronic stress, how that gets into the body, how it can dysregulate our physiologic systems, how it can impact our mental health. And we know that there's a connection between the mind and the body.

So not having to think 20 years from now and thinking about the next moment, I think this idea about the purpose in life being kind of capturing or figuring out what it is that you care most about and just seeking that, whatever that looks, just like kind of letting it play out. Not stressing about stuff, right? And so what I'm thinking about is how, what your thoughts might be on, how this living a well-lived, enjoyable life, this human-designed thinking, how it might be related to this construct of stress that we know has very real manifestations for people's physical bodies. You know, it's interesting.

I don't know the data at Berkeley. I imagine it's pretty similar. My students are incredibly stressed.

They're stressed about school. They're stressed about the grades. They're stressed about, you know, they have this fear of missing out.

FOMO. Oh, what if I don't do everything? I've got to do everything on campus. Otherwise, you know, I'm not getting enough of this thing.

And then there's, oh my God. How many blocks do you have to walk to get some Adderall? Right. Yeah.

One, maybe two? Yeah. So there's a lot of stress on campus. And that was one of the first things we were thinking about.

I had never really thought about it in terms of the class being an antidote to stress. I think, you know, if you -- The research shows the disirreduction and things. We reduce anxiety.

We reduce anxiety. In fact, if you don't take the class, you get more upset. Yeah.

So we have -- No, we have a piece of research from Bill Damon's lab that says, "If you take the class, you have less anxiety." You're more susceptible to dysfunctional beliefs.

You're more likely to think things that are not truly and be upset about it. But I'd also suggest that as soon as you decide you want to live a purposeful life, your stress goes way up.

Yeah. Because now you have to answer a whole bunch of questions. And if you go down my path, you know, be careful if you look into the abyss.

The abyss looks back. But if you allow yourself to create it as you go along as opposed to -- So I have a very good friend. We were in the same cohort at Johns Hopkins together in graduate school.

And I can remember being in the hallway there, in the hallways there, night after night, day after day. And she would always say, "I'm doing what I feel like I should be doing. What everyone has told me I should be doing my whole life." But something doesn't feel right.

But she went ahead and she graduated, got her doctorate, went on and got a tenure track faculty position in Chicago. And the year before she went up for tenure, she just said, "I'm not happy. I'm done." And she walked away from it all.

And there was a lot of investment in what she had done. And the idea of walking away brought her tremendous angst. And she didn't really know what she wanted to do after it.

And surprisingly, she's in this field now called, "So I say research design. It's design research. I have to say my way to figure out that she does it the other way." And so design thinking is not, "Don't worry, be happy." It's not like, "Hey, darling, just figure out what you want to do this week until you go with that.

It will all work out. The universe loves you. It's just going to be fine." That is not where we're coming from at all.

I mean, it often-- But this should idea, like the not should thing is big. And that's huge. And we don't shit on you.

You shouldn't shit on you either. Don't be. But SHO, U-L-D.

Yeah, I said, "I'll tell you." But we've been doing workshops all over the place. And the one that strikes me is, "We were doing this exercise, and this lady raised her hand." And she said, "I can't do it. I don't want to think about my life this way." And I said, "What do you do for a living?" She said, "I'm a corporate lawyer." I said, "Do you like it?" She said, "I hate it.

Every day I go to work. I lose a little piece of my soul." I said, "Why are you doing it?" Because I have to. You don't understand.

I have to. My whole life is built around this. My whole persona is built around this.

This is what I wanted. And I got it. It's highly successful.

And I hate it. And I insult me new. She told the story about-- She's 42 years old.

She's out in the field. She's on the road. She's just killed it that day.

You know, out there with a client. She went to bed at the hotel. Four o'clock in the morning.

She wakes up. She runs into the bathroom, flips on the light, looks at the woman and mirror and goes, "Oh, shoot!" That's not what she said. And she goes, "I'm really good at this.

And I hate it." You know, I'm making a ton of money. They love what I'm doing. You know, "Oh my God, how am I going to get out of this thing?" So we're running this kind of stuff all the time.

So when you're doing designing your life, and if you're going to live coherently, look, you know, even if you have these three-- I really think I might want to do work with kids. I want to do TFA. Then I want to go get my masters in education.

I want to work with at-risk kids in the city. Oh, and I really want to work for Mackenzie because I really want to work on the social innovation practice, because I want to really change the way the nonprofit world can transform what's going on in society. And oh, yeah, I really want-- I picked up a minor in mathematics, and I really want to work on big data and how that stuff can really use what's going on in the civic sector.

These are radically different lives. You know, very different ways of living. Very different outcomes, very different experiences.

Which one is right? Well, there's not a right. Oh, it's up to me. Yeah, wow.

Now, that's a really stressful reality. And then we do cheat some say, "So if you're going to do this, I mean, you know, this is a contact sport. You want to live consciously?" We say, "We're here to help you gain a competent consciousness in life and vocational wayfinding." And if you want to actually be awake, I mean, all the great teachers, and there's the Buddha where, you know, it's Jesus.

Because, you know, you've heard it said, "But I say unto you, if you want to wake up and smell the coffee and live in reality, and then take responsibility for it, it gets really serious." And then you have to be willing to learn how to let go what you're not doing, you have to learn how to decide when to judge yourself and when not to. And we do work on those issues a lot. But, I mean, in advising my students, it's like, that student who comes in and says, "Well, my mom wants to be me.

I want you to be a doctor. Wants me to be in the chair." It's like, "Okay, I don't want to be responsible for you waking up at 40 and realizing that you have wasted 25 years of your life doing your mom's life and not your life." And I'm still waiting for the angry calls from mom because I talk students out of the wrong major all the time. But that's the thing.

You know, your friend was doing what she should do. She was getting the right accomplishment. She's very happy now, by the way.

She found the thing. Or just let go of the thing that wasn't real for her. None to beat the example.

Right of the street at Coffee Strada when I was teaching here for 14 semesters for eight years, a lovely time. I love Counts, a great school to practice at. So one of my students came to office hours and she said, you know, she was a junior in a pre-med.

She was majoring in bio. She was doing really well. She had already done some pre-admittance in the medical school.

You know, blah, blah, blah. But I'm really not at all. I don't think I like people that much.

I'm not sure. I definitely don't want to do blah. I'm just not sure I can do this.

You know? I said, okay. So you want to talk about maybe changing your major and changing your direction? She goes, what do you say? It's true story. I go, wow, you just kind of sounded like you think about it.

Maybe you don't like medicine. No, no, I don't. So you're probably not thinking about going to medical school.

I never said that. I never said that. Are you saying I shouldn't go to medical school? And I said, I'm not saying anything.

What are you saying? And she got really upset and I said, look, I'm not trying to tell you to do it. I'm not trying to tell you to do anything. I was just, you just told me this.

What does that mean to you? She goes, I don't like the way you're talking to me. You're talking to me either. You're actually going to have to get worse.

And I finally, she said, she said, look, you don't understand. I've been on a track to go to medical school since I was 12 years old. And I know I'm 20.

And if I change my mind now, that means I have been wrong for eight years. I have wasted my life. I can't.

I can't. I can't. And she got up and she ran.

She ran down bankrupt. - That's a story? - True story. Something going on.

I'm getting a call from a dean. First a mom, then a dean. Didn't come back to class without a hearing.

It comes three weeks later. She didn't come back to class. It came back to office hours.

Said, I'm sorry. You really upset my guy. Yeah, that seemed like a pretty upsetting time.

What's going on? But that idea, I made this decision when I was 12. And my 20 year old self could not forgive. I mean, you really want your 12 year old self to run the next 85 years of your life? - Right.

- Have you met 12 year olds? You're mostly 20, 21, 22. Do you really? I mean, would you delegate the rest of your life to your 21 year old? No. And you know, we often, you know, people, one of the questions that they're like, there's a rumor that college is the best years of your life, right? Four years of, best of your life.

Trust me. It's way better to be in your 50s. - I say 40s.

- 40s 50s are awesome. You got money. You got power.

People pay attention to you. You can do whatever you want. 20s are nice.

Enjoy them. Nothing likes it. You're 50s.

In your 60s, you really understand. Yeah, it's really great. Can you give us some examples of how you have implemented this idea of human design thinking in your own personal lives? How have you addressed this issue of what's a meaningful life for Dave? What's a meaningful, enjoyable, or well-lived life for Bill? And how have you been intentional about that? Let me go ahead and sort of explicitly frame that in inter-Christian context.

You know, what does it mean to be called? I believe there is a caller. I believe there actually is intelligence in the universe with a beckoning. I don't think it's FedEx envelope waiting somewhere hidden under a bush, you know, in the name of it.

Even though we'd all love to get one, except you really wouldn't. That'd be nice. I got one.

I changed my mind. Maybe that's how we did it today. The FedEx envelope under the bush instead of the burning bush.

Don't get cute on me, though. I'm not going to go snarky on you now, because you're an example. I understand.

That if you are living a God-centered, if you're living God-wardly, if you're living into your best intentions and into what you hope the Spirit might be inviting you to, making



yourself available of how God might be leading you. And you find certain things are demanding your attention. I keep noticing, I'm hanging out with 18 to 32-year-olds all the time.

They're always on my mind remembering how hard it was for me when I was in college. Never goes away. "Gee, what's up with those people?" So what do you do? You just lean into.

You lean into the curiosity. You lean into, "Okay, Lord, show me this question that won't go away. Show me what you want to do with this question." Not the answer.

Like, sit on my couch and just pray forever until the answer falls out of the sky like a little bird going, "Do this!" You know, "That doesn't happen." And so you lean into it. So I talked to everybody. I couldn't.

I had coffee with Randy Berry, you know, 18 years ago now. He goes, "You should teach a Catholic." "That's a great idea." But I have no curriculum, no PhD, I'm not on the faculty end. You know, I have no relationships with anybody who do.

But other than that, it's a great idea. And he goes, "No, no, no, there's decalves. There's decalves in there.

I'll set you up and we'll, you know, four weeks later, I'm in front of a bunch of students." And I thought I'd do it once. I thought I'd do it once as an experiment, as a prototype. And then at the end of my first semester in the fall, I stood and walked in and said, "You're teaching in the spring, right?" Because my friend wants to take the class.

And I'm driving over from Santa Cruz, for God's sake. And literally, there's a phrase when Nehemiah, the cupyard of art is actually says, and the king asks, "Why are you sad?" And one of my favorite sentences in the scripture says, "So I prayed to the Lord of heaven, and I said to the king, and I don't think you let the king, like, I'll be back in a minute. I don't think that works that way." And he's like, "So, so that you pray on the in-breath and you respond on the out-breath, and I pray on the in-breath, so what's the deal? Okay, okay, here's the deal.

You send them, I'll show up." Yes. Fourteenth semesters later. Apparently, I'm an educator.

So that's how calling works for me. And so calling and prototype iteration, I mean, the reason design works is it's inadvertently Christian. And it's inadvertently, I don't mean that cheaply.

It's inadvertently Christian because it started with a question, "What does it mean to be a human person?" And it said, "And we're going to look at that ruthlessly, honestly, now with a bias. We're going to take an open mind, and they looked carefully, and frankly, it's

not that hard to understand what people are really like, if you are open and honest. And so design openly and honestly reveres the human person and tries to respond to it in a constantly teachable way.

So the posture of prototype iteration is infinitely teachable and infinitely humble. So of course, what works? You know, I had deeply flawed human being. It was just working on this idea of coherence, right? I would argue that you want to live a life of integrity.

And integrity is a mountain with no top. You try their best, and then you fail, and then you get up and you climb a little bit higher and you fall, but you never get to the top of that mountain. I think living a well-lived purpose, as purposeful a life as I can live, is just trying to stay in some kind of integrity with my values.

One of the things I told Dave, when we started teaching this class, I said, "You know, the problem with this kind of class is we're either doing this stuff or the biggest hypocrites you've ever met." And so I work on my personal practices. I'm trying to do a mindfulness thing. I get up every day and I say two things, which it turns out are actually from existentialists.

I didn't know this, but looking it up, you know, I get up every morning and I say, "I live in the best of all possible worlds because that has to be true. I have no other world I can live in." And everything I do today I choose to do. I chose to come here, I chose to tap this conversation, I chose things.

Now, you know, my incredible wife Cynthia is sitting in the audience and she can enumerate the number of ways in which I am not always an integrity or a good person or, you know, a good listener. I not infrequently hear my wife say, "You know, there's this guy, he teaches a class that's Stanford, you should take it." [laughter] Yeah, so, you know, for me it's a very practical sort of thing that you get up in every day and you try not to try to put something back in the world. Leave the campsite better than you found it.

Don't hurt people. You know, play, play. There's a book that we used to use in class, actually written by a guy who's, I guess, he's not a minister, but James Carson.

Well, he was a theologian and a philosopher. Yeah, it's a book called finite and infinite games. I play the infinite game of life.

I play the game to continue to play. But the finite games of did I teach my class well, did I treat the student with respect, did I help this person figure out, you know, a problem they're working on in design, is, you know, how you measure your life, that's how I measure it. I want to say the opportunity to say something about Bill.

One of the great joys, I mean, we both have the privilege of saying in various places when we're together and apart, you know, this is the best guy you ever got to work with.

And we both think that, and that's really true. But one of the really great joys, I will say, quite honestly, if you want to partner with people, I'll take coherency over conviction.

Probably my best accountability partner on maintaining my spirituality is an atheist. When I was on the fence about whether or not to take the invitation to become an entrepreneur in residence at the Center for Faith and Work in New York City and missed my first quarter in 37 quarters of teaching at Stanford, Bill said, "What do you, what do you, you're agonizing? You have to do this." "Well, no, I don't actually have to do it." "No, you do have to do it." "This is who you are." "I mean, are you actually going to miss this? What's wrong with you?" "We'll figure it out. We'll cover this." And that's not just, "Oh, go have a good time." He's holding me accountable to my convenience.

He says, "You keep saying you're all, like, this is the best place in faith and work in the world and you want to be a national thought leader?" And they just said, "Come, you can't not do this." And, you know, a nice Christian who's sloppy at her Christianity isn't going to help me near as much as a coherent and disciplined person. He knows what he thinks and he's really trying to live that way, and so am I. That's more helped to me than a crummy Christian. "Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm." "Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm." "Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm." "And the nicest thing Dave's ever said to me is, 'Damn it, why are you so happy?'" [laughter] "I'm not supposed to be happy.

I'm supposed to be the happy guy. I've got God.' "Think about it. It's not working for you.

We can come on over to myself." [laughter] "Well, but, you know, you've been vulnerable. I remember the time you call me on the phone." "Yep." "You're walking across the quad. It's a sunny afternoon.

The sun is going down. You're listening to... "Stevie wonders." "You know, and I think you use the term, you know, I'm just... I think you... I'm having a spiritual experience." "Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, yeah. Which he's actually not allowed to have.

But he understands that the semantic of that has to do with this experience of new monosity, which, you know, his consciousness... "We stayed up like late, really late one night in London after we were really tired and kind of worked with the stuff through. "But, you know, he's... that's an act of vulnerability and candor that, you know, it's a great privilege and honor that he knows I'm not going to abuse that." "You know, and we've talked about this. My worldview includes mystery." "Right." "Right." "I don't know how this stuff works." "That's kind of nice, actually.

That... that leaves mystery in the world." "Okay." [applause] If you like this and you want to hear more, like, share, review, and subscribe to this podcast. And from all of us here at the Veritas Forum, thank you.

[buzzing]