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Is "what's my passion" the right question? | Dave Evans

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The Veritas Forum

PART OF A SPECIAL 6-WEEK SERIES | Career searches often begin with the same question: “What’s my passion?” If you’re in a period of job transition — maybe you’re about to graduate, retire, or have felt like a new job is on the horizon — we want to help. And, we don’t think that “passion” is the best place to start. Join us as we talk with Dave Evans, New York Times best-selling author of *Designing Your Life* and Stanford professor, about what questions we should be asking when it comes to making our next steps vocationally. You can order Dave’s book, *Designing Your Life*, here: <https://www.amazon.com/Designing-Your-Life-Well-Lived-Joyful/dp/1101875321/> See more of Dave’s books on his website, <https://designingyour.life/> Like what you heard? Rate and review *Beyond the Forum* on Apple Podcasts to help more people discover our episodes. And, get updates on more ideas that shape our lives by signing up for our email newsletter here: https://mailchi.mp/veritas/newslettersubscribe_pd. Thanks for listening!

Transcript

Imagine this, you're at a cocktail party, chatting with someone you've just met, and they ask you the age-old question. So what do you do? Maybe that question is easy for you because you have a clearly-defying job. Or perhaps it's easy because you recently got a new job or a promotion and you can't wait to tell someone about it.

But maybe it's not so simple. Maybe you're wondering whether to stay in your job, or maybe you're about to graduate or retire and ensure what's next. What do you do is the last question you want to be asked? If you're in a season of career change for any reason, this episode is for you.

You might be asking yourself questions like, "What do I want to do? What's my passion or purpose?" But today's guest, Dave Evans, wants you to ask a different question. What's next? This is *Beyond the Forum*, a podcast from the Veritas Forum and PRX that explores the ideas that shape our lives. This season we're talking about character and virtue.

I'm your host, Bethany Jenkins, and I run the media and content work at the Veritas Forum, a Christian nonprofit that hosts conversations that matter across different worldviews. Dave Evans has had many careers. The current version of Dave, version 6.0, is the co-founder of the Stanford Life Design Lab and co-author of the worldwide bestseller, "Designing Your Life and Not Designing Your New Work Life." Collectively, pushing about a million books in 23 languages all over the planet.

Before Dave was a professor and best-selling author, he served as the project manager for the design of Apple's first mouse. He co-founded the gaming company Electronic Arts. He worked in alternative energy and he's been a consultant.

But in the late 1990s, he started teaching a course at UC Berkeley about career and decision-making that would set him on his current path. The course was called "Is Your Calling Calling?" I thought I was going to teach at once and I'm teaching at 14 times. Dave loved it.

He loved coaching college students about career decision-making or what he calls vocational discernment and offering them better tools than simply asking the question "What's my passion?" Which as it turns out isn't a great way to find a job. That's because one, passions aren't fixed. Two, most of us have more than one passion.

And three, it puts way too much pressure on work. As Dave has told me many times, there's no job charming. Dave knew there was a better way and he taught that better way at UC Berkeley for eight years.

And then in 2007, something fortuitous happened. His longtime friend, Bill Burnett, became the head of Stanford's design school. My buddy Bill Burnett, becomes the new executive director of the design program at Stanford University.

And the design program, which I know pretty well, they're the lunatic fringe. They just might think this was interesting. So Dave invited Bill to grab lunch, where he planned a pitch bill on his idea to bring his vocational stuff to Stanford.

Dave was sure it would take a lot of convincing. And I'm thinking this vocational discovery thing, I mean, universities don't do that and he's got this brand new job. And he's got to prove himself.

So it's a terrible idea. But maybe if I kind of, you know, do a water torture drip on his brain for about a year, something might happen. But Bill immediately got it.

He cut that it was a big, important problem that needed to be solved. I know it's a huge problem. Comes in my office all the time.

I've been teaching on this now for 20 years. It's ridiculous. I love what you're doing.

We'll start at the summer. We'll prototype it immediately. We'll launch it in the fall.

And then Bill mentions the deal breaker. By the way, we do all that curriculum through the lens of design thinking because that's all we're validated to teach. This is going to be great.

See how many you got to go. At UC Berkeley, Dave's course was taught through the economics department. But if he was going to teach vocational discernment at Stanford, he needed to do it through an entirely new lens through the lens of design thinking, because that's where Bill could make it happen.

But Dave wasn't daunted by Bill's deal breaker. In fact, he thought it was brilliant. He had already approached career decision making with practical tools that encouraged students to explore their ideas out in the real world empirically.

I flipped it into design thinking over the weekend, because the truth is if you have an empirical orientation to the vocational discernment, which I do, then design thinking is actually perfect. Dave was familiar with design thinking, especially human centered design thinking. Companies like Apple and other places where Dave has worked, often use design thinking to bring new products to market.

Let's take Nike for example. Nike would never create a new shoe in the factory and immediately put it on the shelves to sell. No, they'd survey their customers, build a prototype for people to test, get feedback on that prototype, and redesign a new prototype based on that feedback.

And they'd continue that cycle, prototyping, getting feedback, making edits over and over again until they were confident that the product was ready to go to market. That's the process of design thinking. It's iterative and user centered and empirical based on observation, not just ideas.

You can't analyze or theorize your way forward. You have to build your way forward. Dave and Bill's genius was taking design thinking and applying it to vocational and career decisions, a process Dave calls life design.

Just like Nike prototypes different shoes, you can prototype different careers through internships or informational interviews. Then you can reflect on those experiences to see what works or doesn't work and adjust where necessary. Through this process, you can build your way forward.

If you're in a season of career change, then design thinking may be a great tool for you to approach the question, what's next? To get you started, there are six mindsets that Dave says are foundational in a life design. Curiosity, bias to action, radical collaboration, reframing, awareness and storytelling. First, curiosity.

You need to be curious about your customer, which in life design is you. As you consider what's next, ask yourself questions like, what are my interests, desires and needs? What lifestyle is important to me? Do I have any limiting factors like needing to live near family? What kind of work makes me tick? Curiosity. We go there because that's the power pill.

That's the little dilithium crystal powering the Starship Enterprise of your life, which gets you going into the human experience, what draws you forward. And the curiosity says, "Ooh, there's something really wonderful over there. So I'm going to go out that wonderfulness by pursuing it.

I'm going to start with a presupposition of something interesting going on over here. What might that be?" To hone your curiosity, Dave recommends starting a good time journal. In a notebook, record your daily tasks and how they make you feel when you do them.

Energized, engaged, frustrated. Do that for a few weeks, and you'll start to make small realizations about yourself and the world around you that may help you figure out what's next. But curiosity can only get you so far.

Eventually, you need to do something. So the second mindset is having a bias to action. This is the prototyping stage, and Dave says that just like Nike creates prototypes of its shoes, you can prototype your career.

We define a prototype as an empirical experiment to answer an interesting question. "What would it be like to be an assistant producer on a podcast?" I don't know, we listen to podcasts all the time. I don't know, make one.

So what's that like? If you're curious about becoming a podcast producer, Dave says, "Embrace a bias toward action and just do it. Try it out." You don't need a huge production value to learn something about yourself and podcast production. Prototypes are always three things.

Cheap, quick, and informative. Internships are great prototypes for college students because they're fairly quick, they're usually cheap, you may even get paid, and they're very informative. Grad school, however, isn't a great prototype.

It's not quick, definitely not cheap, and it may not even be informative. So if you're thinking about grad school, consider prototyping the career you want to go to grad school for. For example, if you're thinking of law school, consider interning at a law firm or working for a year as a paralegal.

In the scheme of things, a year as a paralegal isn't a long time, and instead of taking out student loans, you'll likely get paid. If you enjoy it, then you'll be more confident about your decision to go to law school, plus you may even discover the type of law you want

to practice before you even start school. Dave says the important thing is not the prototype you make, but rather that through trying stuff, you cultivate a bias towards action.

We don't just sit in the couch and think deeply. Oh, God, what should we do? I mean, that's fine, but it's called reflection. You have to have some data there.

Go try something in the empirical world, learn something, not try to prove yourself right, but just try to learn your way forward until you get to a critical mass of this is working well enough. We should call this a product, or we should call this the next season of my life, and I'm going to make a decision. At a Veritas Forum event at Cal Poly in February 2020, Dave said the reason you can't analyze or theorize your career is because there's no data about your future.

You haven't been there yet. There is no knowing beyond the shadow. There's no certainty that this is it.

And so that's why we argue in for this prototype model is set the bar low and clear it. I mean, find ways to take in a little more step and a little more step and a little more step. There are lots of ways I can experiment with things that aren't unduly costly.

And if I'm listening into those things and I'm growing through those things and I'm reflecting on what they mean to me, I'll have more confidence to make bigger steps, bigger steps, and finally bigger steps. One of the most valuable prototypes for life design is the informational interview, or as Dave calls them, life design prototype conversations. You basically find someone who has done the thing you think you want to do, like gotten a certain degree, and you ask them to coffee to hear about it.

Let's go ask the college I'm attracted to, put me in touch with half a dozen recent grads who got that degree, and what are they doing? Or they have in mind? How was that? So a whole bunch of conversations. These conversations are great prototypes because they're quick, usually 30 to 45 minutes. They're cheap, just the cost of a cup of coffee.

And if you're in college, the other person will likely cover it. And studies show they're also very informative. Dan Gilbert in the psych department at Harvard has studied this thing called "Surgation vs Analysis" on decision making.

And it turns out what's more informative, a bunch of data or talk innocent people. Even complete strangers, you don't even know, just getting their story. Turns out, because you're a human being, which means actually you're an embodied intelligence organized around narrative stories.

So when you hear information embodied in a real life, contextualizing a story, not just sitting in a report, you will actually be able to process it more accurately, more competently than just reading the data. And that narrative story allows me to surrogate.

I really am, if you will, you know, walk in a mile in their shoes, and that's a meaningful piece of data.

One of my friends told me that she did over 100 informational interviews in her first years after college. She landed in politics and worked for years on campaigns and doing policy work before she ended up in journalism. She's now an anchor at a major news outlet.

It's far from where she started, but those informational interviews were key for her. Not because any single one of them had the answer, but because with each conversation she reflected and then redirected her path, always looking for the next best step. Plus, along the way, she built a pretty great network.

Go find people kind of living in the future that I'm trying to imagine. I'm going to reveal my assumptions while I do that, by the way. And then I'm going to be able to get a new question that takes you to the next exercise.

But there's one rule of informational interviews. Ask about the other person and their career journey, but don't ask them what they think you should do. As with any rule, there are always exceptions, but the point is informational interviews are for you to listen.

Many times the person you're having coffee with doesn't even know you or doesn't know you deeply enough to answer that question for you. They may not be the best person to counsel or coach you about your career. But that doesn't mean you have to answer that question alone, because the third mindset of life design that Dave emphasizes is radical collaboration.

Radical collaboration means asking people who know you to help you in your design process. Dave shared a time when he failed to radically collaborate. It was in his undergrad years at Stanford.

While in majoring in biology, I really don't like it at all. I'm not very good at it. The end of my sophomore year, one of my TA's, my lab TA's, comes to me and says, "Dave, we'd like to have a conversation with you." We notice you're not really enjoying the work, and by the way, you don't do it very well.

We have a recommendation. We would like to recommend you drop the major and do something else. The only thing you do well is argue for your grade.

Somebody thought maybe you should be a lawyer. Please quit. I'm going to go ahead and tell you a little bit about the TA.

Please leave my department. It's a really affirming experience. So, of course, I knew the guy was full of crap.

I blew him off, stuck with it. So, now we go to the fall of my junior year, and at the end of that quarter, the same thing in the next lap. Dave, I was talking to John, your TA, last quarter.

We've gotten together. Really, we'd love it if you quit, Dave. You socket this.

You're really bad and you're argumentative, and you're annoying the other students. Please leave. So, I suddenly realized on Thanksgiving break, in the fall quarter of my junior year at Stanford, I want to dump biology and change majors.

Oh, my God. If I'm going to get some other degree, I probably got to get a go. I have five quarters left to finish something that isn't biology, and I have no idea what it is.

Dave was able to take enough credits to get a mechanical engineering degree, and then he stayed for his masters, too. But he wants you to learn from his mistake. Radical collaboration could have put him on a better path earlier on in his college experience.

Talk with people who know you. Tell them what you're exploring. Tell them about your prototypes.

Ask them to listen. The question for you is, who are you going to invite into your life-design questions? The fourth mindset of life-design is reframing, and it asks you to rethink the questions you're asking. Reframing is a design-thinking mindset that helps you to find the true nature of your question.

One of my favorite examples of reframing doesn't come from life-design, but from a question that a company like Fisker's Scissor Company might ask. If they asked one of their designers to create a new pair of scissors, the designer might come up with a modified version of a scissor. Perhaps it's pink, or it's for left-handed users.

But what if they reframed the question? What if instead of asking for a new pair of scissors, they asked for a new way to cut paper? Their designers might end up with something very different than a pair of scissors. Reframing is a superpower for designers, and reframing comes out of the combination of curiosity and radical collaboration. It's a superpower for life designers, too.

In fact, I used a reframe at the beginning of this episode. Instead of asking the question, "What do you want to do for the rest of your life?" or "What's your passion?" I suggested a different question. "What's next?" Because "What's next?" takes the pressure off.

It's much more manageable. Dave told me a story about how his friend John reframed his career questions. John was in a corporate job that he hated and desperately wanted to leave, but he also had a very sick kid who needed the health insurance that his corporate job provided.

In order to do a reframe, you have to join reality first. Like, "Okay, John, the golden rule applies. He who has the gold rules, these guys are on the company, they're in charge." Guess what? That's the deal.

Your choices are. Figure out a way to make this work or move. And you can't afford to move because you can't allow your kid to suddenly get bounced out with a preexisting condition.

So you're screwed, dude. What are you going to do about that? Oh, I can reframe. This is a good job.

It pays me good money and it will help me save my son's life. And I'm willing to make a sacrificial effort to take care of my son for the next five years, which is the protocol he's currently on. And I am not going to ask my job to satisfy anything other than noble work well done where the products deserve to be bought and the customers are well served.

John ended up in the same job with the same responsibilities, with the same outcomes and the same colleagues. But reframing changed his approach entirely. Instead of seeing his job as a means of self-fulfillment, he saw it as a means to take care of his son, which was the most important thing to him.

You might feel stuck in a job you hate too, but you're not sure if you can or should leave. You may feel like you're halfway through a degree that you don't think you'll use, but you're an upperclassman and have invested too much time in your degree. What are you supposed to do? I have to get over the grief of the loss and the disappointment.

This is not by the way, what's often called when life gives you lemons make lemonade. I specifically argue against that strategy, because the problem with that little metaphor as cute as my sound is, when you've got something you don't like, and you don't want and was not of your choosing. You should make something cool out of that.

You should take that lousy thing, that lemon thing, and it's very self. You should turn into a wonderful thing by throwing sugar in. We're not saying that.

We're saying, look, when life gives you lemons, you know, don't necessarily become lemon-centric. What else is available to you to reorganize your life around? Hi all, this is Carly Regal, the assistant producer of Beyond the Forum. If you're loving the podcast so far, we want to invite you to continue engaging in these important conversations by signing up for our newsletter.

Each month, you'll receive thoughtful content about the ideas that shape our lives, updates from our student and faculty partners, and other Veritas news and events. You can sign up today by visiting veritas.org. Thanks for tuning in and enjoy the rest of the show.

[Music] Our fifth design thinking mindset is awareness.

As we go about designing our lives, awareness means that we take the time we need to do each step of life design well. Prototypes aren't going to work every time. You may do 25 informational interviews and then realize you want to change your direction entirely.

Or you can reframe again and again, but you still may feel stuck and the answer may be unclear. Dave says that design thinking in and of itself doesn't give us all the answers, but it does provide great tools that expand our way of approaching problems. We just have to be careful to treat them as helpful tools, not as foolproof.

You don't want to over invest in them. They become predictive and now you're getting trouble. You're like you're processing out telling you who you are.

That's not a good thing. You want your process to enable you to move forward. That's what you're looking for.

But you've got to be process competent. I'm a little bit of a I'm 15 months almost to the day and out downstream of having lost my dear wife Claudia. People say, well, you just got to get through it.

Well, you know, if I was just getting through it, you just wake up and be still like, okay, is it open? It's only day 182. Dave wanted to reframe the grieving process. He didn't want to just get through it.

He wanted to be in it. He needed to grieve the life they had planned, the life that was cut short because of cancer. He didn't want to rush the process.

I studied how much stuff about grief people would say, well, where are you? I'm here. Let me tell where I am. This is where I currently think I am and I'm making it up as I go.

Things will happen that will throw you off the plan you imagined. They're setbacks. So are failures and other griefs that you've experienced.

These happen and it's important to take time to process them, talk through them with friends, share your feelings and journal your thoughts. And Dave says that processing your setbacks, especially your failures, is key to building what he calls, quote, failure immunity, which means that you don't see failures as failures. You see them as means to grow.

Our final mindset is storytelling. In order for me to articulate the story of what I'm learning and reflecting on, I have to actually know it. You can't deliver it unless you can articulate.

If you haven't articulated it, you don't own it. So part of what we're trying to do there is help people do what we call name it and claim it. Now I'm going to reflect on it and like

what happened? In other words, storytelling isn't just about telling your story in the past, about what's already happened to you.

It's also about telling your story in the future, about what you imagine might come to be. And Dave says this is important because the choices we make often aren't purely empirical or logical, often they're narrative. That is, we imagine living this or that life and we picture ourselves in those futures.

And a lot of times you can picture yourself in various stories. If there's more than one lifetime's worth of you in there, might there be more than one purpose for you? And could that change over time? How do you plan for that? How are you supposed to discern right now the purpose of that thing that doesn't even exist yet? Years ago, I did a life design workshop with Dave where he invited participants to do a storytelling exercise that he calls Odyssey Plans. It engages all six of the mindsets.

The idea is that you create three alternative five-year plans. One plan might be similar to what you're doing now. Another plan might be something you do if the thing you're doing now isn't an option.

And the third might be a wild card, something you do if money and time and resources weren't an issue. You imagine what your life might look like for each of these ideas over the next five years and you're comprehensive. Don't just think about your career.

Also include important milestones like getting married, having kids or moving to a new city because all of these hold together in one life. When I did it, my second plan was the faith-based liaison at the White House. I had thought about that job for ten years because I was working in the Bush administration when he created the faith-based liaison office.

By the time I was doing the Odyssey Plans exercise with Dave years later, I had now had a law degree. I worked at various faith-based nonprofits and I had DC experience. Being the faith-based liaison, I thought made sense.

So for the exercise, I started planning out the five years. Year one, I decided needed to be on the road. Since I was living in New York City, I'd need to travel to DC more to reconnect with my political friends.

Year two was an election year and since I didn't know who'd be president, I needed to volunteer for a campaign. Year three, I was in the job. But then I began to wonder, what would I be doing in that job? Would I just be trying to build consensus with a bunch of people who aren't interested in consensus? Would I be proposing ideas that people thought were fringe or unimportant? Would I have to do a lot of convincing or sales pitches? As I started to write down what exactly I imagined I'd be doing in the job, I realized I didn't even want it.

I realized and I admitted to myself that I wanted the title more than the job itself. And ever since that day when I did the exercise, I haven't spent one minute day dreaming about that job. The mere exercise of writing down the plan changed my desire.

Dave says that part of the reason the Odyssey plans exercises so helpful boils down to choice theory. The biggest threat to your happiness and the choice you make is the unimagined choices you never explored. The key here in the Odyssey plan exercises then is to be specific.

Imagine yourself actually doing things, not just in theory, but writing it out and sharing it with someone. If I can articulate it, then I actually get to own it. And your chances of really having it be true and something that you're going, "That's the part that really matters to me." You hear it when you hear it bounced off the other person.

Storytelling brings options forward and forces you to make a decision. In this episode, we've tackled the question of what's next, and we've talked about how to make vocational discernment decisions through six mindsets. Curiosity, bias to action, radical collaboration, reframing, awareness, and storytelling.

But our main lens of vocation has been through career. The real key to being a better person or living a good life isn't just to focus on what you do, but on who you are and who you are becoming. Dave says his ultimate goal as a Christian is to become fully human.

To help him in this pursuit, he reflects on a Bible verse from the gospel account according to Luke, "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man." I don't know what they told you about that, but they told me, "God loves you in condition. God has always loved you in condition. There's nothing you could do to make God love you more." That's what they told me.

But Dave says that that verse in Luke, "In Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God, calls that idea of God's love into question in a sense. How can God's favor for Jesus grow over time if Jesus was perfect from birth? Does perfect get better?" We think about perfect, like Aristotle did, like there's this perfect conceptual idea. No, perfection is embodied reality which is growing.

You're going to get better. You used to be worse. So Jesus is being revealed over time.

He's more Jesus-like with time, which is exactly the way it's supposed to work. The fully blossomed rose and the seed and the little chute in between, they're all perfect. But clearly the fully blossomed rose feels like it's more perfect.

Why is it more perfect? It's more perfect because it's more revealed. The intrinsic glory hiding in the DNA of that seed has had its way and has become fully realized, fully realized. We call the shop at Stanford in the Emmy department.

The product realization lab. I just walk somebody through, you know, lades and mills and stuff. You know, we make stuff in there.

We bring things into reality. We real hyphen eyes them. God is asking you to become fully realized.

The glory that you're hiding. So as you become more alively yourself, you allow the world to experience more of the chunk of the incarnation of God that you represent. Dave says this idea that we're living more and more into who we are and who God made us to be is partly why life design works.

You need to be living in the moment, in the stage you're in now, rather than overemphasizing the idea of the finished product. It's not just the end of your life or the end of a song or the end of anything that matters. The journey matters too.

So in design thinking, what we are doing is by this empirical process of deeply empathetically listening to the world, accepting it and loving it. Contemplation defined by Merton is a long and loving look at the real. Designers have a degree in a long and loving look at the real.

I trust that the reality I'm going to find is going to be the pathway to the good thing. I'm not going to reject anything. That is an incredibly loving mindset to have.

And now I'm going to go participate in it humbly. I'm going to ask simple questions and try little experiences and say, is this working for you? What was that like? You know, there's an incredibly humble, receptive place to be, believing that, you know, I am with God living into the invitation that might be revealed before me. This way of being in the world, including taking responsibility for, but not more authority than I deserve to be a responsive, caregiving person and growing into one myself along the way is what we're trying to do.

We're never trying to be right. We're never trying to be done. We're just trying to do the best thing we can in reality in real time.

It's building our way forward, taking small steps and recognizing that we aren't in control of everything and don't know the future. Next week, I dig deeper with Nancy Hill, a developmental psychologist at Harvard, into one of Dave's mindsets, awareness. Her research mainly focuses on the adolescent stage of development, but her work is applicable to anyone who feels like they might be behind their contemporaries.

Are you 45 and unmarried without children, like me? Are you graduating college this year without a job lined up? Are you in your 30s and still renting an apartment and leasing a car? Who made up these arbitrary markers for, quote, "adulthood" anyway? Join me next week as I ask Nancy these questions. You won't want to miss it. Hi again.

This is Assistant Producer Carly Riegel. To end our episode, we at Beyond the Forum want to take time to say thanks to all the folks who helped us get this show together. Our first thanks goes to our guest, Dave Evans.

Thank you so much for joining us and for your great stories and incredible wisdom. I hope that all of you all that listened have some great next steps for your vocational journey. We also want to thank our production team at PRX.

Galen Beebe gave us fantastic edits in our narration, and Jocelyn Gonzalez and Morgan Flannery made everything sound good, which is not an easy task. And of course, we want to thank the students who host and plan these forum conversations, as well as the John Tippleton Foundation and all of our donors for the generous support of our conversation. Alright, that's all for this episode.

Thanks for listening to Beyond the Forum.

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