

Design Thinking and YOU

In *Change By Design* by Tim Brown (2009), pp. 236-42.

There is something wondrously gratifying about putting something new out into the world, whether it is an award-winning piece of industrial design, an elegant mathematical proof, or a first poem published in the high school newspaper. Many people find that cultivating this feeling of **personal accomplishment is a powerful driving force**. It also happens to be sound business practice because it makes us less likely to accept the familiar, the expedient, or the boring.

Don't ask *what?* Ask *why?* (p. 236)

Every parent knows how infuriating five-year-olds can be with their constantly questioning “Why?” Every parent has at one point or another retreated behind the authoritarian “Because I said so.” For the design thinker, **asking “Why?” is an opportunity to reframe a problem, redefine the constraints, and open the field to a more innovative answer**. Instead of accepting a given constraint, ask whether this is even the right problem to be solving. Is it really faster cars that we want or better transportation? Televisions with more features or better entertainment? A snazzier hotel lobby or a good night's sleep? A willingness to ask “Why?” will annoy your colleagues in the short run, but **in the long run it will improve the chances of spending energy on the right problems**. There is nothing more frustrating than coming up with the right answer to the wrong question. This is as true in responding to a brief or designing a new strategy for a company as it is in striking a meaningful balance between work and life.

Open your eyes (p. 237)

We spend most of our lives not noticing the important things. The more familiar we are with a situation, the more we take for granted, which is why it usually takes a visiting relative to get us to visit Alcatraz or the Golden Gate Bridge, or spend a weekend in the Wine Country. My friend Tom Kelley likes to point out that “Innovation begins with an Eye,” but I'd like to take this one step further. **Good design thinkers observe. Great design thinkers observe the ordinary**. Make it a rule that at least once a day you will stop and think about an ordinary situation. Take a second look at some action or artifact that you would look at only once (or not at all) as if you were a police detective at a crime scene. Why are manhole covers round? Why is my teenager heading off to school dressed like that? How do I know how far back I should stand from the person in front of me in line? What would it be like to be colour-blind? If we immerse ourselves in what Naoto Fukasawa and Jasper Morrison have recently called “the Super-Normal,” **we can gain uncanny insights into the unwritten rules that guide us through life**.

Make it visual (p. 238)

Record your observations and ideas visually, even if just as a rough sketch in a notebook or a picture on your camera phone. If you think you can't draw, too bad. Do it anyway. Every designer I know carries a sketch pad the way a doctor carries a stethoscope. **These images will become a treasure trove of ideas to refer to and share**.

The same is true for the way we develop our ideas. Ludwig Wittgenstein was the most cerebral of twentieth-century philosophers, but his motto was “Don't think. Look.” **Being visual allows us to look at a problem differently than if we rely only on words or numbers**. I found it more useful to visualize this book as a mind map than to draw up an orderly table of contents. It gave me a sense of the whole that I couldn't get from a linear table of contents. The biologist Barbara McClintock used to speak about “**a feeling for the organism**.” Her colleagues stopped ridiculing her “touchy-feely” approach to science when she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. From Al Gore helping us to visualize the melting of the Greenland icecap

to the artist Tara Donovan helping us to visualize a million Styrofoam cups, **one picture can, as they say, be worth a thousand words. Maybe more.**

Build on the ideas of others (p. 239)

Everyone has heard of Moore's Law and Planck's Constant, but we should **be suspicious when an idea becomes too closely identified with the person who first thought it up.** If an idea becomes a piece of private property, it is likely to grow stale and brittle over time. If it migrates throughout an organization, undergoing continual permutations, combinations, and mutations, it is likely to flourish. Just as habitats need ecological diversity, **corporations need a culture of competing ideas.** Jazz musicians and improvisational actors have created an art form around their ability to build on the stories being created in real time by their fellow artists. There are a lot of "IDEOisms" floating around our office, but my favourite might be the oft-repeated reminder that **"All of us are smarter than any of us."**

Demand options (p. 239)

Don't settle for the first good idea that comes into your head or seize the first promising solution presented to you. There are plenty more where they came from. **Let a hundred flowers bloom, but then let them cross-pollinate.** If you haven't explored lots of options, you haven't diverged enough. Your ideas are likely to be incremental or easy to copy.

This can be a difficult commitment to honour. The pursuit of new options takes time and makes things more complicated, but **it is the route to more creative and satisfying solutions.** In the meantime, your colleagues may get frustrated and your customers impatient, but they will be happier with the eventual results. **You just have to know when to stop, and that is an art that can be learned but probably cannot be taught.** Setting deadlines is one way. Not only will they put an outer limit on the amount of time you take, you will find that you become even more productive as the deadline looms. **Curse deadlines all you want, but remember that time can be our most creative constraint.**

Balance your portfolio (p. 240)

One of the most satisfying things about thinking like a designer is that the **results are tangible.** Something new exists at the end of a project that did not exist before. Remember to **document the process as it unfolds** (we don't wait for our kids to become finished adults before taking their pictures!). Shoot videos, preserve drawings and sketches, hold on to presentation documents, and find somewhere to store physical prototypes. **Assembled as a portfolio,** this material will document a process of growth and record the impact of many minds (which can be useful during performance reviews, job interviews, or when you are trying to explain to your kids just what it is that you do). Dennis Boyle, employee number eight at IDEO, has kept every prototype he ever made (we declined his request to rent an airplane hanger to store them in). **It is hard not to feel proud of your contribution when you have a record of it.**

Design a life (p. 240)

Design thinking has its origins in the training and professional practice of designers, but these are principles that can be practiced by everyone and extended to every field of activity. **There is a big difference, though, between planning a life, drifting through life, and designing a life.**

Above all, think of life as a prototype. We can conduct experiments, make discoveries, and change our perspectives... We can learn how to take joy in the things we create whether they take the form of a fleeting experience or an heirloom that will last generations. We can learn that reward comes in creation and re-creation...our right and our privilege. We can learn to measure the success of our ideas not by our bank accounts but by their impacts on the world.