

# OUR FUTURE NATURE PODCAST

## SEASON 1

### EPISODE 4: DESIGNING YOUR LIFE

#### SPEAKERS

Sean Lee Davies, Bill Burnett

#### **Sean Lee Davies** 00:03

Welcome back to change makers. I'm your host, as always show me Davis. On change makers. I talk with some of the best minds and thought leaders in the field of sustainability, conservation, and social entrepreneurship. I aim to separate the real deal from the greenwash and document the transformative technologies that can actually make a difference to our lives and our world. Our guest today is the executive director of Stanford's design program, and author of the best-selling book designing your life Bill Burnett. Hope you enjoy. Bill. Thanks for joining us, and welcome to Hong Kong. Thank you. Tell us a little bit about your philosophy.

#### **Bill Burnett** 00:43

Okay, well, about my 10 years ago, a good friend of mine, Dave Evans, and I got together to design a class for students at Stanford, to help them figure out what they wanted to be when they grow up. Everybody asked, what do you want to be when you grow up? I still don't know. I don't either. And, it's a bad question, because growing up means losing your curiosity. So, we put this class together called Designing your life because I mostly teach design to design students. So, we use a process we call design thinking or human centered design to design products and services and experiences. And I thought, I can use that same process for designing the next thing I want to do in life. So that turned out to be very popular, we now teach a class for freshmen called Designing your Stanford class for genius called Designing your life in a class with a PhD students called Designing a professional and then that turned into a book. And then that book ended up translated into 26 languages. So, I've been going around the world and talking about you thinking about the rest of your life as a design, rather than some problem to be solved. When you're a designer, you always come up with multiple solutions, your prototype stuff to see if it's going to work. And all this works really, well for, you know, designing your life. And when people sort of adopt this idea, or this methodology in the mindsets of a designer, they end up reframing the problem and coming up with new ideas and feeling like they have a sense of freedom, that the world that the next thing they do might be even more interesting than what they're doing now. But what I tell my 22-year old's is you got to learn this process, because you really don't want your 22 year old, telling your four year old what he's gonna do for a living. I mean, that doesn't make any sense, right. And by the time, you know, 10 years out,

all the jobs are going to be different anyway. So, you don't have some kind of a dynamic process for figuring out what's next, you're going to get just gonna get stuck,

**Sean Lee Davies** 02:28

believing a good point that because with all the talk of AI, and the replacement of jobs, a lot of people feel very uncertain about the future. So how big of an impact do you think AI is going to have on, you know, blue chip jobs? And how do people kind of reinvent themselves?

**Bill Burnett** 02:46

Yeah, you know, there's been a lot of a lot of studies and speculation and kind of forecasting and what jobs are going to stay what jobs are going to go, I think, I'm not so much interested in the forecast as in, just step back and think, okay, in every wave of automation, jobs got eliminated, a new job got created. When I got out of school, as an engineer, I was working on a drafting board, you know, with a cheese square and a triangle. And now I work in three-dimensional CAD space, I do everything inside the computer. So you know, and that meant draftsman no longer have jobs and lots of people that have jobs, but there's all these new jobs. So, I think, you know, we're gonna replace as many new job, we're gonna have so many new jobs, we have jobs that go away, they're just gonna be very different. And the one thing that I think I've looked at lots of different forecasts, the one thing that everybody says is the very last jobs that will be automated jobs that require social and emotional intelligence jobs that require humans to connect with humans to understand human needs. And so I think design jobs, you know, any jobs in the creative industries will be will be safe. And so, you know, learning to be a design thinker, designer of your life, actually has built some resilience around this job thing, because, you know, you're gonna, again, you know, one way of looking at is, hey, these jobs are going away another looking at is like, Nick, in 10 years from now, there's going to be jobs that I could do that haven't even been invented yet. And some of them are going to be interesting and awesome jobs. And particularly, if you focus on the creative side of what makes a job worth doing, I think you're gonna be I think you're gonna be fine.

**Sean Lee Davies** 04:21

That's all very well, if you're like a young grad student, you know, you're in the learning mode. What I'm zero, you're 45 years old, you've been in a banking job, or you're in a job that's been thrown by automation. I mean, it's not as easy as that to redesign your life at that age. And a lot of people feel that at 45 really is too late to redesign. Do you think there is a sort of threshold of age beyond which you can't be designing?

**Bill Burnett** 04:46

And workshops, you're going everywhere. One of the very first workshops you did was in New York, and there's a woman sitting right in the front 300 people in a ballroom and random friend. She was a class of at Stanford 82. She was our class of 57. She was at two years old, and when we came to planning your life, we have a formula to do these three plans for your life. And she raised her hand and my partner Dave on overthinking, well, she's 82 years old. And she said, Young man, this thing

only has three spots for things, I have six things I want to do before I die, I need another piece of paper. So everybody thinks the rest of their life is going to be interesting. And there's some anxiety around what the changes will be. But you know, what, whether you're just coming out of the university, or you're at that 20 to 30, year 3040, and you're changing jobs, or you're thinking maybe this isn't that interesting, or you're in the place where maybe you're thinking about retiring, and each of these different stages, having some design tools makes a huge difference in your competence. Yeah, you're gonna probably have to retrain, and not everybody's gonna fit in the new economy. And so, I think that one of the things we got to talk about is, what's the safety net for people that don't, that don't get retrained, everybody talks about, hey, autonomous trucks are going to come, and all the truck drivers are going to lose their job. Right now, in the United States, we're short about 150,000 truck drivers. So, we need more truck drivers, right. And it's going to be quite a while quite a while before autonomous cars actually starts changing things. And the interesting thing about that is all the predictions say we'll probably need to build a lot fewer cars, maybe only 1/3, as many cars. But those cars will wear out faster because you know, we're using them all the time. And so, some of these things you just can't predict, what you can predict is that jobs will change. And that you're going to have to be a little nimbler about doing that. But what I noticed is that people when they get to sort of their 30s, and 40s, they want to change their job anyway, that's kind of tired of being and they're looking for something else to do. And so, there's a bunch of tools into designing a life book, and we have a new book, they'll come out in May next year, we just finished the manuscript called Designing your work life. Because so many people hate their job, that we came up with a whole bunch of new tools to figure out how to make your job, the job, you've got the one you when you pivot to the one that's exciting for you. Because everybody wants to have a little bit of creativity in their job. Yeah, everyone wants to have a little bit more autonomy in their job. And there's ways to get that.

**Sean Lee Davies 07:13**

It's a good point that as a employer, as a boss of my own startup, it's very hard finding good stuff. We want to stay with you. Because everyone's designing their own work life. So, this brings into another question like, how do you hire people? Now? How do you keep people loyal? Yeah. Because they don't want to have the perks of designing their own workspace and having a full-time salary. Now you hear about big insurance companies or big companies now offering like co working spaces for their employees, they can take holidays, whenever they want to try and keep them, keep them engaged, engaged. But as a startup, how do you keep people one working for you to keep them engaged, they can keep on working for you?

**Bill Burnett 07:57**

Well, you know, I've always had this when I was at Apple, and I had, you know, 4050 people working for me, I had my own my own couple my own startups. And I've also had a big consulting company, we used to have an office here in Hong Kong, with about 20 or 30 people on the, I've always had the theory that, you know, people don't really work for me, they work for themselves. But what I've got to do is make the job interesting. And so that's the one they want to do. Yeah, I don't really know

that I've ever motivated anybody. But I took a motivated person and said, you want to learn this on this because I got a job, you could learn this stuff, you'd be awesome. And while there, while you're, you know, learning, you're still delivering what I needed to do. So I always kind of figured that people work for them in their heads, they're always working for themselves. And, you know, Nietzsche's got a famous quote, I can deal with almost anyhow, if I know my why, yeah. You just get you know, in a startup, you have a big advantage, because it's all about why. Why are we doing a startup? It's a crazy thing to do. Nine out of 10 startups fail. What do you Yeah, you're not so the odds are against you? I am not. Yeah, but entrepreneurs are crying and kind of crazy. But they have a real passion for the why they have a problem they want to solve. So it should be pretty easy to find people if they believe that that's an interesting problem. To work on it because their impact is so direct. You're on you're in a small group of people. You know, I was I started like a house on fire, like, I'm putting out this fire you putting out that fire? Hey, who wants to do that one over? There's a thing over there. There's over there. So you get to try lots of different things in a startup and it keeps you pretty engaged. It also it's also hard because there's a lot of work. But I think you have the biggest thing. I mean, if I'm the big insurance company, and the why is to sell more insurance. Yeah. I don't know how keep anybody excited about that. Except people who are so afraid of trying anything on their own Adele's saying do that, but they're not the height. They're not the high-performance workers. So, I think I think if you just focus on telling the story, the right people will show up as an old as an old expression in university. When the student is ready. The teacher will arrive. I think in a startup case like this is your start. And I tell the story, you'll know. And you'll join because you want to you want to make that mission happen. And you'll, you know, you stay for as long as that makes sense. And then and then you move on. And, you know, that is I think it's an ecosystem of workers. And sometimes we're all working together in this company. And sometimes you're working together in that company. I tell my students, you know, never burn a bridge, always, you know, always be polite to the people you work with, because you're going to be, you know, Silicon Valley, you're going to be working with them again, and again and again,

**Sean Lee Davies** 10:28

in some other way, or form, come back. For the people who haven't had the chance to read your book. What are the three core principles or delight design tools behind your philosophy? Would you call a method?

**Bill Burnett** 10:40

Yeah, that's it. Yeah. Designing like method. We hate you know, David, I hate making things short. But we were when the book came out, we did a little book tour, and we were going to be on this Canadian TV show. So, I'd like a morning show. And we're supposed to have a seven-minute segment, but something went wrong. And the British comes up to us because you've got three minutes to summarize the whole book, they've goes, Hey, we're professors, we can summarize anything in three minutes. Because if the three minutes, or you're not on, repeat your segment, so we were like, okay, hold on a sec. So, here's the whole map. Get curious. Because curiosity is the energy that drives you to try something new, to talk to people, because the answers in the world, it's

not in your head, it's an oral tactic. And then prototype stuff, build things just to test your assumptions that you learned from being curious and talking to people. And then, after you've done something, tell your story. Because people love to hear stories. And that story will attract other people around what you need. So if you get curious, tries to get curious, talk to people try stuff and tell your story. It's kind of a virtual cycle, a virtuous cycle that goes on and on. Because that's that story of what you're just learning from that prototype that came from your curiosity and talking to people attracts other people, because it turns out interested in interesting people are interesting. You want to talk to interesting people. And as you as you learn this process of using your curiosity, to drive you into the world to radically collaborate with other people and engage with a bias to action to the mindsets of a designer, you just turned into a more interesting person. And then you start meeting interesting people.

**Sean Lee Davies** 12:09

So by virtue of we just said, I'm gonna be more interesting after our conversation,

**Bill Burnett** 12:13

well, maybe I will be

**Sean Lee Davies** 12:16

like, Well, Bill, where do you think the source of creativity comes from? Or how can someone make themselves more creative?

**Bill Burnett** 12:23

Yeah. So we did a little thing this morning, in the workshop we did about the sort of neuroscience of creativity, it turns out, people that are highly creative have this kind of damaged part of their brain where they, they don't they don't react to novelty, the way everybody else reacts to novelty, like, Oh, what's that? And creative people go, Oh, what's that? Which wouldn't have worked very well in the jungle? Because they would have been eaten by the animal that she's jumped out of the jungle that they got curious about. But I think I think so I think one thing we know is that everybody has the same potential for curiosity. And you can train your brain to be more curious by being less fearful. Essentially, we shut down our curiosity by being afraid, I don't want to say anything stupid, I don't want to do the wrong thing I want to I want to act like everybody else. So, people who learn to to be more. I'm not afraid of being different, Chen to access their creativity, where it actually comes from, you know, I, I noticed when I get when I get in the zone, and I'm having ideas, they seem to come through me rather than be authored by me, I'm sure when you're writing, you sometimes get in his own way, like, hey, where did all those words come? And artists will talk about, you know, I was painting in the canvas, finished itself or told me what it needed to be. So, I do think that we have the ability to access our unconscious thinking. And then when we get together in groups, you know, Carl Jung, the famous psychologist, talked about the collective unconscious. So, there's some kind of a way in which we all have these unconscious patterns are types that we draw on. And when I see

something in you that you see me and you see someone else, that these things start, these patterns start to emerge.

**Sean Lee Davies** 14:03

Many great inventions have been invented simultaneously around the world. Exactly,

**Bill Burnett** 14:07

Exactly. So, I think I think, you know, without getting too esoteric or new age, we have the ability to draw on more than just our own consciousness for where, exactly and how exactly, I think that's still a bit of a mystery. But don't assume that your brain begins and ends, you know, inside the shell of this body. And certainly, it's not just your brain that we have as many neurons in our gut as we have in our brain. And gut feelings are real and kinesthetic knowledge is real, our ability to move in the world. We are embodied intelligences. So there's a lot to draw on. That. It wasn't just the stuff you learned in school,

**Sean Lee Davies** 14:43

Right? If there has to be one particular skill that you would recommend to everyone for everyone to learn what would that SCOPY

**Bill Burnett** 14:50

learn how to be more creative by controlling your fear of being different? So just continue to challenge that fear and work. Work into it until you are You are fearless, fearless people are creative.

**Sean Lee Davies** 15:03

And finally we have a US China trade war going on largely sparked off by a tech race going on between China and the US. Now Silicon Valley was the big, the big guy in the room for a long time. Do you think China's gonna overtake the US in terms of tech and creativity? Or do you think the US still has what it takes to be the leader?

**Bill Burnett** 15:26

Well, I'm gonna vote for the US side, because I'm kind of a US guy, but I'm gonna vote for it for a particular reason. Creativity, if you just follow what I just said, creativity, fundamentally comes from a lack of fear. And creativity come fundamentally comes when you believe that there is a possibility of making something different. I think the the problem with China's got to happen. I've worked with many Chinese engineers and Chinese designers are incredibly creative people is everybody's at all old Chinese not creative. It's not true. They're very creative. But they don't have a system that promotes difference the system and promotes everybody being the same, or everybody conforming to a certain kind of social pattern. And I think when that happens, smart people just decide not to be creative. It's too risky. So yeah, technology, they'll continue to advance some technology, but technology for what purpose? There's a lot of technologies invented nobody needs. I think, I think

I'm hopeful that the creative spark that is all over Asia and all over China will help redesign the systems and political systems and systems so that that the true creativity of those people can be realized. But it's hard to be creative in a totalitarian regime.

**Sean Lee Davies** 16:48

So you gave a workshop today at the cage, which is laying Crawford Joyce group's mission program. Yes. How was that for you? And how special is that program here in Hong Kong?

**Bill Burnett** 16:59

Well, in Hong Kong, I think there's no other program like it, it's quite special. And it's interesting, because a lot of other programs like this, they tried to get 50 startups to get 100 startups and these are really, really focused, you know, Christina Ventura, and the people that really focus on quality. So they're doing three or four startups, and really nurturing those startups in a way that I don't see happening in other programs. So that's cool. And they have an amazing building, you know, over in the south side of the island, which is, you know, we have an expression of the diesel space creates behavior to be creative, you need to be in a creative space,

**Sean Lee Davies** 17:30

and Hong Kong doesn't have space,

**Bill Burnett** 17:33

a lot of space, certainly not spaces like this, it's really, you know, it's as nice as spaces, we've got the d school I've seen all around the world. So I think they're really on the leading edge of trying to create value through something other than just like making money, but creating value around the kinds of products that they're doing the kinds of technology that they're supporting. It's, you know, fashion and the many of the other brands that are in the light copper world are really all about creating an emotional connection to users, not just a technical connection. And so I think that puts a different spin on the stuff they're doing and the companies there and the people today at the workshop, were some of the best people I've ever I've ever coached. You know, normally when I do brainstorm or something, they'll have 10 ideas, and they had 30, you know, no, next round, they'll have 20. And these guys have 50. So it's already kind of a culture of creativity. And when you walk around the building, and they had a lovely tour with Christina, it's really a crazy, funky space. If you haven't seen it, you gotta go see.

**Sean Lee Davies** 18:38

Where's the next Google gonna come from the next Google?

**Bill Burnett** 18:42

If I had to guess it would be Silicon Valley, because that's an easy, that's an easy one. Israel.

**Sean Lee Davies** 18:52

Thank you very much for joining us. We have a great time in Asia and thank you. If you like our show and want to support our work, we have a patron link on my website [seanleedavies.com](http://seanleedavies.com). We'll be back next week. See you then.

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