



**YOU  
ARE  
HERE**

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# Start Where You Are

**T**here's a sign over the design studio at Stanford that says *You Are Here*. Our students love that sign. You might say it's somewhat clarifying. It doesn't matter where you come from, where you think you are going, what job or career you have had or think you should have. You are not too late, and you're not too early. Design thinking can help you build your way forward from wherever you are, regardless of the life design problem you are facing. But before you can figure out which direction to head in, you need to know where you are and what design problems you are trying to solve. As we've shown, designers love problems, and when you think like a designer, you approach problems with an entirely different mind-set. Designers get juiced by what they call wicked problems. They're called wicked not because they are evil or fundamentally bad, but because they are resistant to resolution. Let's face it, you're not reading this book because you have all the answers, are in your dream job, and have a life imbued with more meaning and purpose than you can imagine. Somewhere, in some area of your life, you are stuck.

You have a wicked problem.

And that's a wonderful and exciting place to start.

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**Problem Finding** + *Problem Solving* = *Well-Designed Life*

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In design thinking, we put as much emphasis on problem finding as we do on problem solving. After all, what's the point of working on the wrong problem? We emphasize this because it's actually not always so easy to understand what our problems are. Sometimes we think we need a new job or a new boss, but often we don't really know what's working and what's not in our lives. Often we approach our problems as if they are an addition or subtraction problem. We either want to get something (add) or get rid of something (subtract). We want to get a better job, get more money, get more success, get more balance, get rid of ten pounds, get rid of our unhappiness, get rid of our pain. Or we might just have a vague sense of discontent, or a feeling that we want something different or something more.

Usually, we define our problem by what's missing, but not always. And the bottom line is this:

You've got problems.

Your friends have problems.

We've all got problems.

Sometimes those problems relate to our job, sometimes to family, or health, or love, or money, or any combination of these things. Sometimes our problems can feel so overwhelming that we don't even try to solve them. We just live with them—like an irritating roommate we constantly complain about but never get

around to evicting. Our problems become our story, and we can all get stuck in our stories. Deciding which problems to work on may be one of the most important decisions you make, because people can lose years (or a lifetime) working on the wrong problem.

Dave had a problem once (okay, he's had a lot of problems, and would say that this whole book comes out of his astonishing ineptitude), but this particular problem kept him stuck for years.

Dave started college at Stanford as a biology major, but he soon realized not only that he hated biology but also that he was failing miserably. He had graduated from high school believing that it was his destiny to be a field-research marine biologist. There were two people responsible for this particular version of Dave's destiny—Jacques Cousteau and Mrs. Strauss.

Jacques Cousteau was his childhood hero. Dave watched every episode of *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau* and secretly imagined he had been the one to invent the Aqua-Lung instead of Jacques. Dave also really liked seals. He ended up believing that the coolest thing in the world would be to get paid to play with seals. Dave was also curious about whether seals had sex in the water or on the land (only with the birth of Google many years later did he learn that most species mate on land).

His second misguided reason for becoming a marine biologist had to do with Mrs. Strauss, his high school biology teacher. Dave did pretty well in all his high school subjects, but he liked biology the best. Why? Because he liked Mrs. Strauss the best. She made biology interesting; she was a great teacher. And Dave misperceived that her good teaching correlated to his stronger interest. If his PE teacher had taught as well as Mrs. Strauss, Dave might have

believed that it was his destiny to hang a whistle around his neck and be an advocate for mandatory dodgeball in the workplace.

So the unholy union of Jacques Cousteau and Mrs. Strauss caused Dave to work on the wrong problem for over two years. The problem he thought he was solving was how to become a marine biologist, or, more specifically, how to inherit the *Calypso* from Cousteau when he died. Dave started college with the firm belief that his future was in marine biology; since Stanford didn't offer a major in marine biology, he decided to major in biology. He hated it. At that time, biology classes consisted mostly of biochemistry and molecular biology. The premeds were killing it in class. Dave was not. Academically, he was getting crushed, as were his dreams of someday getting paid to frolic with the seals while speaking in a French accent.

He then decided that, in order to fix his problem of hating biology and doing horribly in his classes, all he needed to do was some real science: research in a bio lab would get him a step closer to researching the mating habits of seals. He crashed his way into doing bench research on RNA, which meant he basically cleaned test tubes. It was crushingly boring, and he was even more miserable.

Quarter after quarter, his bio teaching assistants and lab teaching assistants kept asking him why he was a biology major. Dave would begin to tell them about Mrs. Strauss and Jacques Cousteau and the seals, but they would interrupt and say, "You're no good at bio. You don't like it. You are grumpy and nasty all the time. You should quit. You should drop this major. The only thing you are good at is arguing; maybe you should be a lawyer."

Despite the tsunami of negative feedback, Dave persisted, because he had this set idea in his mind of his destiny, and he kept

working away at the “problem” of getting his grades up in biology. He was so focused on the what-he-had-in-mind problem that he never looked at the real problem—he shouldn’t be majoring in biology, and his idea of his destiny had been misguided from the beginning.

It has been our experience, in office hour after office hour, that people waste a lot of time working on the wrong problem. If they are lucky, they will fail miserably quickly and get forced by circumstance into working on better problems. If they are unlucky and smart, they’ll succeed—we call it the success disaster—and wake up ten years later wondering how the hell they got to wherever they are, and why they are so unhappy.

Dave’s failure as a marine biologist was so profound that he ultimately had to admit defeat and change his major. It took him two and a half years to address a problem that was clear to everyone else after about two weeks. He eventually transferred to mechanical engineering, where he was quite successful and happy.

Someday, however, he still hopes to frolic with seals.

## A Beginner’s Mind

If Dave had known to think like a designer fresh out of high school, he would have approached the problem of his college major with a beginner’s mind. Instead of assuming he knew all the answers before he asked the questions, he would have been curious. He would have wanted to know exactly what a marine biologist does, and he would actually have asked some marine biologists. He would have gone to the Hopkins Marine Station

of Stanford (only about an hour and a half's drive from campus), and asked how you go from a major in biochemistry to working in marine biology. He would have tried stuff. For instance, he could have spent some time on the open sea and discovered whether it was as glamorous as it looked on television. He could have volunteered on a research vessel, maybe even spent some time around some real-life seals. Instead, he began college with his mind (and his major) made up, and ended up learning the hard way that maybe his first idea wasn't his best.

Isn't that true for all of us? How often do we fall in love with our first idea and then refuse to let it go? No matter how badly it turns out. More important, do we really think it is a good idea to let our earnest but misguided seventeen-year-old self determine where we work for the rest of our lives? And what about now? How often do we go with our first idea and think we know answers to questions we've never really investigated? How often do we check in with ourselves to see if we are really working on the right problem?

"I need a better job" is not the solution to the problem of "I'm not that happy working, and I'd rather be home with my kids." Beware of working on a really good problem that's not actually the right problem, not actually *your* problem. You don't solve a marriage problem at the office, or a work problem with a new diet. It seems obvious, but, like Dave, we can lose a lot of time working on the wrong problem.

We also tend to get mired in what we call *gravity problems*.

"I've got this big problem and I don't know what to do about it."

"Oh, wow, Jane, what's the problem?"

"It's gravity."

“Gravity?”

“Yeah—it’s making me crazy! I’m feeling heavier and heavier. I can’t get my bike up hills easily. It *never* leaves me. I don’t know what to do about it. Can you help me?”

This example may sound silly, but we hear versions of this sort of “gravity problem” all the time.

“Poets just don’t make enough money in our culture. They’re not respected enough. What do I *do* about it?”

“The company I work for has been family-owned for five generations. There is *no way* that, as an outsider, I’m ever going to be an executive. What do I *do* about it?”

“I’ve been out of work for five years. It’s going to be much harder for me to get a job and that’s not fair. What do I *do* about it?”

“I want to go back to school and become a doctor, but it will take me at least ten years, and I don’t want to invest that much time at this stage of my life. What do I *do* about it?”

These are all gravity problems—meaning they are not real problems. Why? Because in life design, if it’s not actionable, it’s not a problem. Let’s repeat that. If it’s not actionable, it’s not a problem. It’s a situation, a circumstance, a fact of life. It may be a drag (so to speak), but, like gravity, it’s not a problem that can be solved.

Here’s a little tidbit that is going to save you a lot of time—months, years, decades even. It has to do with reality. People fight reality. They fight it tooth and nail, with everything they’ve got. And anytime you are arguing or fighting with reality, reality will win. You can’t outsmart it. You can’t trick it. You can’t bend it to your will.

Not now. Not ever.



# A Public Service Announcement About Gravity and Public Service

You've heard the expression "You can't fight City Hall." That's an old idiom about gravity problems. Everybody knows you can't fight City Hall. "Hey!" you retort. "You can *so* fight City Hall! Martin Luther King fought City Hall. My friend Phil fought City Hall. We need *more* City Hall fighters—not fewer! Are you telling us to give up on the hard problems?"

You raise an important question, so it's important to make clear exactly how to address what we're calling gravity problems. Remember that the key thing we're after here is to free you from getting stuck on something that's *not actionable*. When you get stuck in a gravity problem, you're stuck permanently, because there's nothing you can *do*, and designers are first and foremost doers.

We recognize that there are two variations of gravity problems—totally inactionable ones (such as gravity itself) and functionally unactionable ones (such as the average income of a full-time poet). Some of you are trying to decide if the thing you're stuck on is a gravity problem that isn't actionable, or just a really, really hard problem that will require effort and sacrifice and runs a high risk of failure but is worth trying. Let's address this difficult issue by looking at each of the sample gravity problems we listed above.

**Gravity Biking.** You can't change gravity. You'd have to relocate the earth's orbit to pull that off, and that's a pretty crazy goal.

Skip it. Just accept it. When you accept it, you are free to work around that situation and find something that *is* actionable. That cyclist could invest in a lighter bicycle. She could try losing some weight. She could learn the latest techniques for climbing more effectively (turns out pedaling faster in really small gears is easier and takes more stamina instead of more power; stamina is easier to build up).

**Poet Income.** To change the median income of poets, you'd somehow have to alter the market for poetry and get people to buy more poetry or pay more for it. Well, you could try for that. You could write letters to the editor in praise of poetry. You could knock on doors to get people out to the poetry night at your local coffeehouse. This one is a long shot. Even though you can work on this "problem" in a way that wasn't possible with gravity, we'd recommend that you accept it as an inactionable situation. If you do that, then your attention is freed to start designing other solutions to other problems.

**Five-Year Unemployed Job Seeker.** The statistics are unmistakable on this one. If you've been unemployed a long time, you have a harder task to get re-employed. Research using identical résumés with no difference but the duration of unemployment made clear that most employers avoid the long-term unemployed—apparently, groundlessly concluding that whoever else didn't hire you over that time must have had a good reason. That's a gravity problem. You can't change employers' perceptions. Instead of changing how they think, how about working on changing how you appear to them? You can take volunteer roles and list significant professional results (without having to get into how little you were paid until much later in the conversation). You can identify roles in industries where there is less

ageism. (Dave is so grateful that he got into teaching later in life; now his age is seen as a source of wisdom, and he's not still trying to pass himself off as a marketing expert to clients half his age who know he's no digital native and doesn't actually "get it" anymore.) Even in the face of daunting realities, you always have some freedom you can exercise. Find it and take action there, instead of against gravity.

**The Family Firm Outsider.** So, for the last 132 years, no one whose last name wasn't Fiddleslurp has held an executive role in the company, but you think the time has finally come, and you're going to be the one to break through. If you just do a great job and bide your time, in three to five years that VP title will be yours. Okay—you can invest those three to five years, but, please, do so realizing that there is no evidence whatever that your goal will be attained. It's your call, but you might be better off buying a lottery ticket. You have other options. You can go down the road, to a firm that's not family-run. But you love the town, and the kids are happy in school where you are. Okay—then embrace the good things that come from just accepting it. Reframe the company's family legacy as being your source of job security, with a decent income, in a dependable firm. Knowing you won't have to take on increased responsibilities in adjusting to endless promotions, you'll be able to learn the job so well you can do it in thirty-five hours a week, resulting in great work-life balance (and time to write more poetry!). Or maybe you look for greater value instead of greater authority. You find a new function or offering that can grow the company or increase profits, and become the expert—the go-to person—for running that part of the business. You will always be a manager and never a VP, but, as the person responsible for so much value, you could become the highest-

paid manager in the place. Who needs a title if you're getting paid what you want?

**Ten Years to the M.D.** Again, this is a real gravity problem—unless you'd like to start your life design project by reforming medical school education (which, by the way, is pretty tough to do if you don't already have an M.D.). No—we wouldn't sign up for that one, either. What you can do is change your thinking and remember that in only your second year of med school you get to start treating patients and “doing medicine.” Most of the doctoring done in hospitals is done by the residents—the trainees who have finished four years of medical school and gotten their M.D.s and are now walking the wards and apprenticing. If you can't change your life (because of gravity), you can just change your thinking. Or you can decide to take a different route—be a physician's assistant and do a lot of what doctors do but at a fraction of the training time and cost. Or enter the wellness field, running prevention programs for a progressive insurance company and thereby making a dent on health without being on the clinical-care side of things.

The key is not to get stuck on something that you have effectively no chance of succeeding at. We are all for aggressive and world-changing goals. Please do fight City Hall. Oppose injustice. Work for women's rights. Pursue food justice. End homelessness. Combat global warming. But do it smart. If you become open-minded enough to accept reality, you'll be freed to reframe an actionable problem and design a way to participate in the world on things that matter to you and might even work. That's all we're after here—we want to give you the best shot possible at living the life you want, enjoying the living of it, and maybe even mak-

## **Designing Your Life**

ing a difference while you're at it. We are going to help you create the best-designed life available to you in reality—not in some fictional world with less gravity and rich poets.

The only response to a gravity problem is acceptance. And this is where all good designers begin. This is the “You Are Here” or “Accept” phase of design thinking. Acceptance. That's why you start where you are. Not where you wish you were. Not where you hope you are. Not where you think you should be. But right where you are.