

Design Your Lives

You are legion.

Each of us is many.

This life you are living is one of many lives you will live.

Now, we are not talking about reincarnation, or anything with religious implications. The plain and simple truth is that you will live many different lives in this lifetime. If the life you are currently living feels a bit off, don't worry; life design gives you endless mulligans. You can do it over at any point, at any time. "Correction shots" are always allowed.

Working with adults of all ages, we've found that where people go wrong (regardless of their age, education, or career path) is thinking they just need to come up with a *plan* for their lives and it will be smooth sailing. If only they make the *right* choice (the *best, true, only* choice), they will have a blueprint for who they will be, what they will do, and how they will live. It's a paint-by-numbers approach to life, but in reality, life is more of an abstract painting—one that's open to multiple interpretations.

Chung was stressing out. He'd worked hard all through his career at UC Berkeley and was graduating with honors. He

expected to go to graduate school eventually, but wanted to have some experience first in his chosen profession so that he could get the most out of grad school and launch his career quickly. To keep his options open, Chung applied to six different internship programs, varying from one to three years in length. Then something awful happened. He was accepted into four of the six internship programs, including his top three choices. Getting in wasn't awful; it was what happened next. Total indecision. He had no idea what to do, and no idea how to solve the age-old problem of not knowing what to do.

He was completely unprepared for getting into his three top choices, and, to exacerbate the problem, his three top choices were completely different from one another. One was teaching in rural Asia, one was doing paralegal work with an anti-sex-slavery nonprofit in Belgium, and one was doing research at a health-care think tank in Washington, D.C. They were all great, but which one to take?

Chung knew that this was an incredibly important decision, because where he did his internship would direct his graduate studies, and what he got his graduate degree in would direct his career, and that would set his life path. If he didn't *get it right*, he risked ending up in a "second choice" life. But he didn't know what his first choice was. He didn't know which was best.

Chung was making a very common mistake. He thought there was one best way to spend his life, and he had to know what it was or he'd be settling for second best—or worse. But that's not true. We all contain enough energy and talents and interests to live many different types of lives, all of which could be authentic and interesting and productive. Asking which life is best is asking

a silly question; it's like asking whether it's better to have hands or feet.

After Chung came to office hours, Dave asked him, "If you're having such a hard time picking, are you sure you even have to? If you could do all three internships, one after another, how would you like that?" Chung replied, "I'd *love* to do that! But is that even allowed? How do I get permission to do all three?"

"Just ask. You've got nothing to lose by asking."

He did, and, to his great surprise, two of the organizations were willing to wait; he could do all three over the next five years if he wanted to.

It dawned on Chung, finally, that the reason he couldn't figure out which one was best was that there was no best. There were three great and totally different possibilities in front of him. At this point in his life, he could afford to check them all out, and that's what he did.

Of course, what finally happened was something Chung had never imagined at all. During his first, two-year internship, he stayed in contact with his other undergraduate buddies, talking and Skyping regularly. After about nine months, all of them except Chung found themselves unhappy and disillusioned with life after college. That wasn't so surprising. Leaving college is pretty stressful, and Chung was having some struggles on the job himself, but what was different was how everybody felt about it. Chung had learned life design. He had tools he could use, and accepted that there was more than one happy path he could chart his life by. His buddies didn't have that confidence, so Chung started spending time helping each of them figure out what they could do next. He loved doing that. In fact, he loved it so much

that he decided to investigate how he could do the same kind of helping all the time. Right after that first internship, he canceled the next two and went to grad school in career counseling. After finally accepting that there were at least three great careers he could live into well, he discovered a fourth. That's the sort of thing that happens when you stop trying to "get it right" and start designing your way forward.

Dysfunctional Belief: *I need to figure out my best possible life, make a plan, and then execute it.*

Reframe: *There are multiple great lives (and plans) within me, and I get to choose which one to build my way forward to next.*

Embrace Your Multiple Personalities

One of the most powerful ways to design your *life* is to design your *lives*. No, we haven't hit our heads and that isn't a typo. We're going to ask you to imagine and write up three different versions of the next five years of your life. We call these Odyssey Plans. Whether or not three interesting variations of your next five years immediately leap onto the screens in the multiplex movie theater in your head or not, we know you've got at least three viable and substantially different possibilities in you. We all do. Every single one of the thousands of people we've worked with has proved us

correct in this. We all have lots of lives within us. We certainly have three at any particular moment. Of course, we can only live out one at a time, but we want to ideate multiple variations in order to choose creatively and generatively.

Now, it may seem a daunting task to come up with three different plans, but you can do it. Everyone we've worked with has done it, and so can you. You may well have a preferred plan already in mind. That's fine. You may even have a plan that you've committed to and that is well under way. That's fine, too—you still need to develop three Odyssey Plan alternatives. Really. Some of the people who've gotten the most out of this exercise are the ones who entered into it already having all the answers to their One True Plan in place. The value of conceiving multiple prototypes in parallel (like these three Odyssey Plans) has been validated by research at the Stanford Graduate School of Education. A team led by Professor Dan Schwartz evaluated two groups.¹ One started with three ideas in parallel, then subsequently had two more ideas on the way to their final idea. The second team started with one idea and then iterated four more times. Each team generated five rounds of ideas, but the parallel team did much better—generating more ideas and clearly better final solutions. The serial team—who started with just one idea—tended to keep refining the same idea over and over, never really innovating. The conclusion is that if your mind starts with multiple ideas in parallel, it is not prematurely committed to one path and stays more open and able to receive and conceive more novel innovations. Designers have known this all along—you don't want to start with just one idea, or you're likely to get stuck with it.

Try not to think of your Odyssey Plans as "Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C"—where A is the really good plan and B is the okay

plan and C is the plan that you really hope you don't get stuck with but that you would accept as tolerable if absolutely necessary. Every Odyssey Plan is a Plan A, because it's really you and it's really possible. Odyssey Plans are sketches of possibilities that can animate your imagination and help you choose which wayfinding direction you will actually take to start prototyping and living into next.

Don't worry about choosing which alternative life you are going to live. We have great ideas and tools for the difficult task of "choosing," and we'll discuss them in chapter 9. Criteria for choosing what's next may be based on available resources (proximity, time, money), coherence (how the alternative fits into your Lifeview and Workview), your confidence level (do you believe you can do this?), and how much you like it. But first things first. You need to develop the alternatives.

So Many Lives, So Little Time

We call these Odyssey Plans because life is an odyssey—an adventurous journey into the future with hopes and goals, helpers, lovers and antagonists, unknowns and serendipities, all unfolding over time in a way we both intend at the start and weave together as we go. Homer² told the ancient story of Odysseus as a metaphor for this life-as-adventure. So we want to take the time now to imagine multiple ways you could launch the next chapter of your life's journey—your quest.

We want you to create three very different plans for the next five years of your life. Why five years? Because two years is too

short (makes us nervous that we haven't thought far enough ahead) and seven years is too long (we know stuff is going to happen to change things by then). In fact, if you listen to people tell their stories, most people's lives are actually lived as a series of two-to-four-year seasons strung together. Even important longer periods (the child-rearing years) are broken into substantially distinct two-to-four-year chunks—the toddler years, the preschool years, the tween years, the years when they don't speak to you, also called the teen years. Five years cover one good four-year chunk with an extra year of buffer time. After doing this exercise many different ways and thousands of times with people of all ages, we're confident five years is about right. Just try it.

We want to insist (since we won't be grading your homework) that you create three very different alternative versions of you. Three plans give you real choices (a list of three feels much longer than a list of two), and will stretch your creative muscles hard enough that you'll know you didn't just opt for the obvious answer. We want you to come up with three truly different alternatives—not three variations on a theme. Living in a commune in Vermont and living in a kibbutz in Israel aren't really two alternatives; they're two versions of the same alternative. Try to come up with three really different ideas.

We know you can do this because we've seen thousands of people do it successfully, including lots of people who started out convinced they couldn't possibly come up with three alternative ideas about what life they might live. If you're one of those people, here's a way to quickly come up with "three versions of my life."

Life One—That Thing You Do. Your first plan is centered on what you've already got in mind—either your current life

expanded forward or that hot idea you've been nursing for some time. This is the idea you already have—it's a good one and it deserves attention in this exercise.

Life Two—That Thing You'd Do If Thing One Were Suddenly Gone. It happens. Some kinds of work come to an end. Almost no one makes buggy whips or Internet browsers anymore. The former are out of date and the latter are given away free with your operating system, so buggy whips and browsers don't make for hot careers. Just imagine that your life one idea is suddenly over or no longer an option. What would you do? You can't not make a living. You can't do nothing. What would you do? If you're like most people we talk with, when you really force your imagination to believe that you *have* to make a living doing something other than doing That Thing You Do, you'll come up with something.

Life Three—The Thing You'd Do or the Life You'd Live If Money or Image Were No Object. If you knew you could make a decent living at it and you knew no one would laugh at you or think less of you for doing it—what would you do? We're not saying you suddenly can make a living doing this and we can't promise no one will laugh (though they rarely do), but we are saying imagining this alternative can be a very useful part of your life design exploration.

Dave was speaking to a young MBA student recently who was convinced that he didn't have three ideas about his life.

"So what are you going to do?" Dave asked the young MBA.

"I want to go into management consulting."

"Great, that's your life one," Dave replied. "But guess what? All the CEOs in the world just got together and concluded that they

really hadn't been all that helped by all those billions of dollars spent on consulting, so they all decided to stop buying any more. Consulting just died. What'll you do now?"

The MBA was shocked. "What! No consulting at all?!"

"Nope—none. You gotta do something else. What's it gonna be?"

"Well, if I couldn't do consulting, I guess I'd try to work inside a big media company working on strategy or marketing communications."

"Great! That's your life two!"

When asked what he'd do if money or image were no object, and after being reassured that no one would laugh or make fun of him, the young man proposed his life three.

"Well, I'd really like to go into wine distribution. It always seemed a little silly, but frankly it fascinates me and I'd love to try it."

"Okay," said Dave, "there are your three lives."

We've run through a similar dialogue with people who were stuck on only one idea for their lives. If you can't come up with three ideas quickly, just try this approach to your life one, life two, and life three, and you'll probably find yourself getting more than enough ideas.

Don't get stuck. Don't overthink it. But do really do it.

It's an exercise that will change your life.

Literally.

For all of us, Odyssey Plans can define important things still to do in our lives, and help us remember dreams we may have forgotten. That twelve-year-old astronaut you once were is still there. Be curious about what else you might discover. Try making at least one of these plans at least a little bit wild. Even if it's something you would never do in your right mind, write down your most far-fetched and crazy idea. Maybe it's giving up all your worldly possessions and living off the grid in Alaska or India. Maybe it's taking acting classes and trying to make it in Hollywood. Perhaps it's becoming an expert skateboarder or devoting your life to adrenaline-producing extreme sports. Or maybe it's hunting down that long-lost great-uncle and filling in the gaps of your family story. You may want to do different alternative plans for different areas of your life: alternatives for career, for love, for health, or for play. Or you may want to combine these elements. The only wrong way to do this is to not do it at all.

Martha's Many Lives

What follows is an example of three five-year Odyssey Plans from a participant in one of our Mid-Career Workshops. Martha is a technology executive who was looking to try something more meaningful for the latter half of her life. She came up with three very different plans for her future, each a little more risky and innovative, but all involving some kind of community building.

Her three plans were: doing her first Silicon Valley-style start-up, becoming the CEO of a nonprofit working with at-risk kids,

and opening a fun and friendly neighborhood bar in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, where she lived. Note that each example has a six-word headline describing the plan, a four-gauge dashboard (we really like dashboards), and the three questions that this particular alternative plan is asking.

Example 1

Title: "All In - The Silicon Valley Story"

Alternative Plan # 1

6 word title
ALL IN - THE SILICON VALLEY STORY

Questions this plan addresses

1. DO I HAVE WHAT IT TAKES?
2. IS MY IDEA GOOD ENOUGH?
3. WILL I ATTRACT VC \$

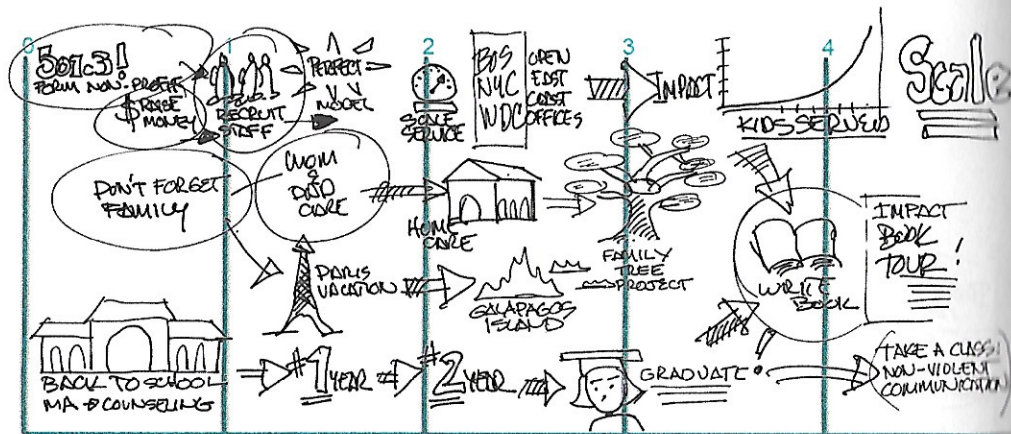
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Questions

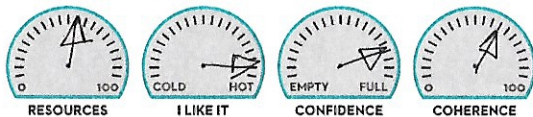
1. "Do I have what it takes to be an entrepreneur?"
2. "Is my idea good enough?"
3. "Will I be able to raise venture capital money?"

Example 2

Title: "Using What I Know—Helping Kids!"



Alternative Plan # 2



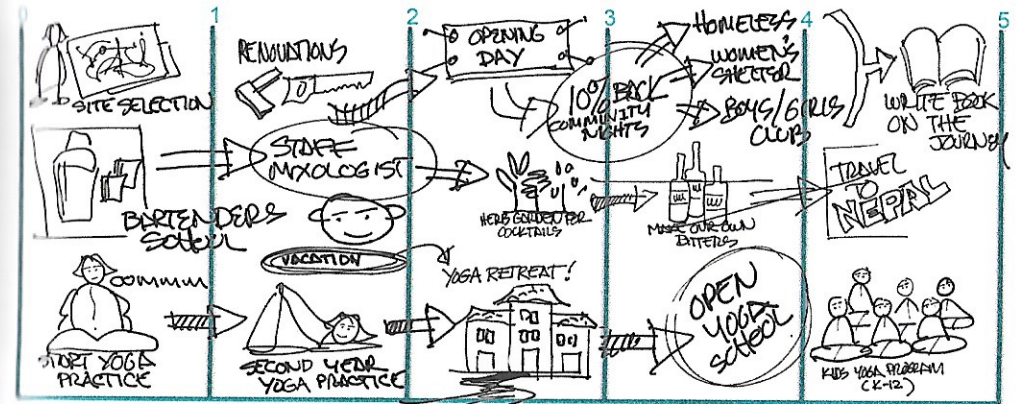
6-word title: **USING WHAT I KNOW-HELPING KIDS!**
 Questions this plan addresses:
 1. WILL SKILLS TRANSLATE?
 2. CAN I REALLY HELP KIDS?
 3. WILL THIS BE MEANINGFUL?

Questions

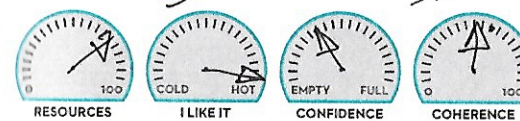
1. "Will my skills translate to the nonprofit world?"
2. "Can I really help at-risk kids with a nonprofit?"
3. "Will this be meaningful?"

Example 3

Title: "Creating Community—One Drink at a Time!"



Alternative Plan # 3



6-word title: **CREATING COMMUNITY-1 DRINK AT A TIME!**
 Questions this plan addresses:
 1. IS THIS TOO RISKY?
 2. CAN I CREATE REAL COMMUNITY?
 3. WILL THIS BE PROFITABLE?

Questions:

1. "Am I ready to take this much risk?"
2. "Can I really create true community with a bar?"
3. "Will this be profitable?"

Life design is about generating options, and this exercise of designing multiple lives will guide you in whatever's next for you. You aren't designing the rest of your life; you are designing what's next. Every possible version of you holds unknowns and compromises, each with its own identifiable and unintended consequences. You are not so much finding answers in this exercise as learning to embrace and explore the questions, and be curious about the possibilities.

Remember, there are multiple great lives within you.
You are legion.

