

How to Live a Meaningful Life: Using Design Thinking to Unlock Purpose, Joy, and Flow Every Day by Bill Burnett and Dave Evans

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In their book, Burnett and Evans build on their earlier books that use design thinking principles to teach individuals how to use these activities to design their (work) lives. Burnett and Life Design Lab co-founder Evans, both mechanical engineers and former Apple employees, apply pragmatic “design thinking” to common life problems. Their new book, *How to Live a Meaningful Life*, contains strategies for getting more out of your everyday experience and finding purpose without upending your life.

This book frames the content around the fundamental question of how to design your life to address the question: “What is the Meaning in Life?” Being intentional with an introductory discussion around the difference between meaning in life versus meaning of life, the second being the more common question one considers, the authors go on to structure the chapters around a very practical approach to helping the reader consider what people care most about: having a life full of meaning, fulfillment, and impact (p. 18). Burnett and Evans identify four key components to “meaning-making”: wonder, flow, coherence, and community. They suggest that focusing on the connection and experience of the individual moments can unlock more meaning in our daily lives, using that focus on each moment and deciding whether the experience will be transactional or bring an elevated sense of “flow” to those moments. Meaning is perhaps best thought of as a process of becoming that unfolds moment by moment. It also doesn’t have to be so serious. They encourage readers to develop wonder and curiosity to spark creativity and imagination in everyday life. The authors illustrate these ideas with examples of personal and client stories, accompanied by guided exercises that prompt readers to apply their life experiences and suggestions, continuing to iterate as their lives may require.

While some may criticize this book for its simplicity and some redundancy with their earlier publications (2016 and 2021), I appreciate how they have shaped the content to connect with today’s challenges, expectations, and post-pandemic conditions. They explicitly encourage the reader to appreciate the small moments rather than being overwhelmed by the big picture or expectations around what their lives should be in this moment (being sensitive to where the reader is in their own life cycle), from adolescent to senior; they have a chapter, “Ages and Stages” that provides insight into how your age and experiences may impact how you create meaning. Additionally, they stress the importance of building a network of support

(Chapter 7, “Designing Formative Communities) that provides guidance and structure on connecting with others to support this work (and their lives). Instead of being organized around having a good time or achieving goals, formative communities foster a way of being, Burnett says. The only criteria are that members are motivated to lead more authentic, meaningful lives and to support each other in doing the same. Their sensitivity to the challenges of human connection and the life cycle relative to life’s meaning is notable; these are not discussed as such in earlier work. As we are all navigating how (social) media impacts the expectations and comparisons we make about our own lives, these practices help guide the reader toward self-reflection to gain clarity about what brings them meaning, rather than relying on comparison to determine what that meaning should be.

Burnett and Evans are terrific storytellers about how to apply the principles presented to conduct a series of design-thinking reflections. They describe their personal viewpoints and connections to other academics in the field to support their ideas and reflections.

Lessons for the Classroom

This book would be an impactful addition to any course that covers personal change, resiliency, or topics in human resource management (HRM). In fact, I’ve used their earlier publication, *Designing Your (New) Work Life* (2021), in a graduate management course on personal change, resilience, and career development, and the students resonated well with using design thinking to structure reflection activities around their postgraduate career goals. Because the book is grounded in design thinking principles to address the question “The Meaning In Life,” it would be a valuable toolkit of activities for students to complete as part of these courses, or for those geared toward leading people (HRM). Any course that encourages students to develop and understand their own value and belief systems (or to supervise others) can benefit from using this material.

The lessons in the book are very pragmatic and designed to be used throughout life (and all its facets, not just work) to iterate on a variety of design thinking practices, prompting students to reflect on the meaning in their lives. The book contains numerous structured “Try Stuff” exercises for most of the concepts introduced, which instructors could use as appropriate to their course learning goals. The instructions in each “Try Stuff” section provide clear directions and opportunities for students to

practice the ideas presented. An instructor could build “formative” communities within their class to facilitate how these groups operate and support these life design principles (and to take them beyond the semester).

References

- Burnett, B., & Evans, D. (2026). *How to live a meaningful life: Using design thinking to unlock purpose, joy, and flow every day*. Simon and Schuster.
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- Burnett, B., & Evans, D. (2016). *Designing your life*. Alfred Knopf.

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