



WHYZMEN: REWIRE RETIREMENT • GOING DEEPER • SESSION 6

Designing a Meaningful Second Half

Five beliefs that get in the way, five design principles that help

Navigating Transition • Building Brotherhood • Igniting Jubilee

Going Deeper: optional, never assigned. Allow about 20 minutes, plus time for the reflection questions at the end.

Meaning isn't waiting for us at a finish line. We build it in the moments we're living right now, and the second half of life is the best time to learn how.

This reading draws on a *Hidden Brain* conversation between host Shankar Vedantam and Dave Evans. Evans is a Stanford lecturer and co-author, with Bill Burnett, of *Designing Your Life* and *How to Live a Meaningful Life*. Their Workview and Lifeview essays are your homework after Session 6, in your Harvest Charter (\$1.2 My Compass). This reading follows his argument in two parts: five beliefs that get in the way of a meaningful life, and five design principles that help. It closes with a warning and a practice to try. The ideas that matter most to men who have crossed a finish line of their own, the end of a career, get the fullest treatment.

The opening story: Michael Phelps and the finish line

At the 2012 London Games, Michael Phelps became the most decorated Olympian in history, with 22 medals, 18 of them gold. For about twenty years his life had one shape: early-morning practices, endless laps, and the next race. Then it ended.

What came next surprised him. He called it a "post-Olympic depression" and later said, "I saw myself as strictly a swimmer, not as a human being." There were stretches when he did not want to be alive. Over time he turned that pain into advocacy, speaking openly about mental

health and narrating the 2020 documentary *The Weight of Gold* about Olympians who struggle after their careers end. He said retirement was frightening because he had to find "whatever it was I was looking for."

Why this matters to us. Few of us have a gold medal, but nearly every man in this room has had a Phelps moment: the retirement lunch, the last commute, the title on the door that went to someone else. If the job was the scaffolding holding up our sense of who we are, taking it down can leave a man asking, *Who am I now?*

The Preacher in Ecclesiastes knew this feeling. After building, planting, and gaining more than anyone before him, he wrote: "Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (Ecclesiastes 2:11). The trouble wasn't that the work was bad. The work just couldn't carry the full weight of a man's identity.

The takeaway: a role is something you *do*. Your identity is who you *are* before God and the people you love. WhyzMen exists to help you separate the two, so that retirement can be a doorway instead of a cliff.

Part One: Five beliefs that get in the way

Evans has spent about 20 years helping people redesign their lives and careers. Again and again they return with the same complaint: *I did everything right, and it still isn't as fulfilling as I hoped*. He traces the problem to five common beliefs.

BELIEF 1 "All will be well" once I arrive

We tend to picture a finish line: *Once I'm married with two kids and my own business, all will be well*. Alison, an accountant Evans met in Kansas City, had reached every goal on her list: a thriving practice serving about 50 small businesses, a happy marriage, two children, a three-bedroom house, and a car nearly paid off. Still she asked him, "What did I do wrong?" Something was missing.

Evans's answer: "There's not a different you waiting on the other side of that finish line." Getting there doesn't make you a new person.

BELIEF 2 Fulfillment means becoming all I can be

Most of us absorbed this from Abraham Maslow. His 1943 Hierarchy of Needs, one of the stickiest ideas in social science, puts *self-actualization* at the top: become everything you're capable of, and fulfillment follows.

Evans calls this impossible. Each of us carries "more than one life's worth of living" inside. That's good news, but it means no one can be all he could be. So drop the impossible goal and ask a better question: *Can I be fully who I'm trying to be right now?*

BELIEF 3 Meaning comes only from impact

Many of us count our lives meaningful only if we make a difference that is recognized and that lasts. Evans is in favor of impact. The trouble is treating it as the *only* source of meaning.

- It's a gamble. Even when you do everything right, the odds of real impact are maybe 50-50, because "those other 8 billion people" go off script.
- It fades. "What have you done for me lately?" Evans helped create Apple's first mouse, yet much of what he built is now forgotten.
- It can become an addiction. Some of his friends are founding their seventh company, and when they can no longer do it, they face an existential crisis.

BELIEF 4 One radical leap will fix everything

Sonia, a young software engineer whose code reached millions of people, suddenly felt like she was just "turning the crank." She was drawn to an organic farm in the San Juan Islands. Another successful tech worker bought rural land and founded an artists' commune. Two years later he admitted, "All it is is radically different. I don't even really like this."

The dream of finding *the one place I was meant to be*, with no compromises, almost never comes true. A radical change feels like change for a while, but the newness wears off. You still wake up as you.

BELIEF 5 More is always better

As a young executive with three children, Evans worked about 75 hours a week on three or four hours of sleep. One Saturday he overheard his three-year-old son Robby ask his mother, "Could we play with dad today, or is he just going to fall asleep in the chair again?" Evans's own father had died when Evans was that age. "When I was Robby's age, my dad was gone because he died. When Robby's Robby's age, his dad's gone because he's asleep."

Psychologists call this the *hedonic treadmill*: how much is enough? Just a little more. Researcher Leidy Klotz has found that we instinctively solve problems by *adding*, even when *subtracting*

would work better. Evans points to Georgia O'Keeffe's line that "it is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis that we get at the real meaning of things." The life you already have probably holds more meaning than you're noticing.

Part Two: Five design principles for a meaningful life

Design thinking began at Stanford in 1963 as "human-centered design." It is a method for problems with no single right answer: you understand the problem, generate ideas, try small prototypes, and learn your way forward. Burnett and Evans use the same method on the hardest design problem of all, a human life.

PRINCIPLE 1 Pick a question you can actually answer

"Problem finding precedes problem solving," Evans says. Many efforts fail because people are working on the wrong problem, and usually it's one that's too big.

What is the meaning of life? is a fascinating question, but it makes a poor design question, because only a whole life can answer it. Evans suggests a better one: ***How might I live a more meaningful life now?*** That question is doable and testable, and you can start on it this week.

This is why WhyzMen moves through specific sessions, domains, and field tests instead of asking you to settle your life's purpose in one sitting. As Jesus taught, "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much" (Luke 16:10).

PRINCIPLE 2 Fully engaged, calmly detached

Give the moment everything you have, and hold the outcome loosely. Evans calls this the mindset of a designer, and it rests on two plain facts. You control how you take part. You don't control how things turn out.

The two pull against each other. When we cling to the result (*Will he like it? Will this work?*), part of our attention leaves the room. Evans says: "The best way to be fully engaged is to let go of the outcome."

A good decision is not the same as a good outcome. Ron Howard, a Stanford decision scientist (not the film director), separated the two. A wise choice can still end badly, and a foolish one can get lucky. If we ran the same decision in a thousand parallel worlds, the wise choices would usually come out better, but not every time. So we judge ourselves by how well we chose and how faithfully we showed up, not by the weather.

The rain at the wedding. You can plan the perfect outdoor reception and it can still rain. You can spend the afternoon angry at the forecaster, or you can say, "All right, what can we do with this?" Evans pushes back on the phrase "making the best of a bad situation." The rain isn't out to ruin your party. It's just falling. All we ever do is make the best of *the* situation.

Scripture held both halves long before design thinking did:

Fully engaged: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord" (Colossians 3:23).

Calmly detached: "In their hearts humans plan their course, but the LORD establishes their steps" (Proverbs 16:9).

Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer says it in one breath: courage to change what we can, serenity to accept what we cannot, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Where this shows up for retired men: adult children's choices, a grandchild's struggles, a health report, a volunteer project that doesn't take off, and the field-test experiments later in WhyzMen. Show up fully, then hand the results to God. Detachment also makes us better listeners. When we aren't defending an outcome, we can hear criticism with curiosity instead of hurt pride. "It's not about you all the time," Evans says.

PRINCIPLE 3 Craft your story

The story you tell yourself about your life shapes both how you live and how it feels to live it, so choose it with care. Joan Didion wrote, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." Psychologists now confirm what she meant: our inner narrative is not decoration. It steers us.

Evans attaches one firm condition. **The story has to be true.** This isn't positive thinking or fantasy. Out of all the true stories you could tell about your life, choose the one that is *truest and most generative*, the one that gives you the best chance of becoming fully alive.

Fifteen minutes that lasted for years. At Stanford, many first-generation college students arrive wondering whether they belong. Their default story goes: *The prep-school kids are going to run circles around me.* Researchers offered them a different story that was just as true: *You're here because you're highly capable, and there are plenty of resources to help you.* When an older first-generation student who had lived that story told it to them, a short intervention of about 15 minutes changed how they performed, and the change held through college and for years afterward.

Two details matter for us:

1. **The new story was true.** It didn't deny the challenge. It reframed it.

2. **It came from someone a few steps ahead on the same road.** That is what a triad and a cohort of men can give one another.

A biblical pattern. Joseph had every reason to tell his life as a story of betrayal: sold by his brothers, falsely accused, forgotten in prison. Instead he told the truest version: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:20). Psychologist Dan McAdams, whose work also appears in your Charter, calls this a *redemption sequence*, where something bad turns toward good. Its opposite, the *contamination sequence*, has something good spoil into bad. People whose stories carry more redemption tend to be more generative and more hopeful.

Your connection to WhyzMen: In Session 5 (Co-Author & Protagonist) you drafted your story, and in Session 6 (Read My Story) two brothers heard it and you read it for its turns. As you keep revising §1.1, ask yourself whether you're telling your story as one of contamination or of redemption, and which version is truer.

PRINCIPLE 4 **Make moments**

Evans calls *moment-making* the most important skill for anyone who wants to design more meaning into life. Moments full of meaning are all around us, if we're present for them.

The fire-hydrant wrench. As an engineering student who also worked as a volunteer firefighter, Evans set out to machine a hydrant wrench from a big block of brass. He had never used a mill, a lathe, or a metal bandsaw. He broke tools, wasted material, and ended up with something far from the perfect wrench in the expensive supply catalog.

He came to see this as a picture of real life. He calls it the **scandal of particularity**: there is no perfect wrench, no perfect birthday cake, no perfect conversation. There is only the real one you're in. A real thing is always limited and a little flawed, and that's not failure.

If all you want is the finished product, then every step before it is just in the way. And the moment of being *done* lasts about a microsecond. Evans asks whether he was present for the making: noticing how a sharp tool cuts differently from a dull one, feeling the metal give under his hands. "People very often miss the whole darn thing because all they wanted was the outcome."

Flow world vs. transaction world. The *transaction* was finishing the wrench and getting it onto the truck. The *moment* was standing at the lathe. Ram Dass put it in three words: *Be here now*. Like Michelangelo freeing a figure from marble, the meaning is in the carving as much as in the statue.

The same goes for relationships. A marriage, a friendship, or a bond with a grown child is never finished. It's always under construction, and that is where it's lived.

PRINCIPLE 5 "Got to" → "Get to", the two-second reframe

When you catch yourself saying "I've got to," try "I get to." The task stays the same. What changes is how you experience it, and it often changes right away.

When we're in what Evans calls the *transaction world*, life becomes a checklist to finish: *I've got to get through this meeting, got to get this done, got to get these people to agree*. The *flow world* sees the same hour as something to take part in.

The editor's story. Evans's book editor was working from home and about to start a video call. Her child was making a racket in the next room. *I've got to get this kid to quiet down*. Then she remembered the idea she'd just read in his manuscript. *No: I get to work from home, which means I get to hear the effervescent sound of a very alive child*. She put on headphones and joined her call. She said the change of mind took about two seconds, and everything shifted.

Try it on a retired man's week:

"I've got to..."	"I get to..."
drive my wife to her appointment	spend 40 minutes side by side with the woman I married
babysit the grandkids Saturday	be the grandfather they'll remember
go to that committee meeting	sit at a table with people trying to do some good
do my WhyzMen homework	spend two hours looking honestly at my own life, with brothers doing the same
go to the doctor again	have one more season to live and love

Martha and Mary. In Luke 10, Martha is "distracted by all the preparations that had to be made." Every dish is a got to. Jesus answers gently: "Martha, Martha... you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one" (Luke 10:41–42). The psalmist puts it in a line: "The LORD has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad" (Psalm 118:24).

One caution. "Get to" doesn't mean pretending hard things are easy or putting on a smile through real grief. Caregiving, illness, and loss are heavy. The shift is not denial. It's looking for the gift folded inside the duty. Shankar Vedantam pointed out that we often see this only after someone is gone, when we would give anything for one more of the ordinary, irritating moments we once rushed through. "Get to" lets you see it *before* then.

Moment-making in miniature. "Get to" is Principle 4 in a single phrase. It turns a chore

you're getting through into a moment you're living in.

The warning: destination sickness

"Destination sickness" is living for the next milestone for so long that you miss the life happening along the way. Evans first heard the term from an intensive-care nurse at Stanford Hospital, and it shook him.

She described her patients, many of them highly accomplished people in their mid-50s who had "burned their hearts out." Each had always been chasing the next thing: the degree, then the graduate degree, the good job, making partner, the first million. *That next thing will make me happy.* Now there was no next thing left. They looked back, she said, and realized they had raced past all of it, and most of them died in despair. Then she gave Evans some advice he never forgot: "Here's a tip. Don't do that."

Evans recognized the same sickness in himself. It was the 75-hour weeks and the son who expected to find his father asleep in the chair (Belief 5). The nurse simply showed him where that road ends.

Others have seen it too.

- Bronnie Ware, an Australian palliative-care nurse, wrote down what her dying patients regretted. One of the most common, especially among men: *"I wish I hadn't worked so hard."*
- In Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, a judge who did everything "properly" asks on his deathbed, "What if my whole life has been wrong?"
- Moses prayed, "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12).

Why retirees aren't immune. You might think retirement cures destination sickness. Often it only changes the destination: *when the house sells, when the trip happens, when my health improves, when the grandkids are older.* Evans's "all will be well" trap waits at every age. Jesus spoke to the same anxious reaching ahead: "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself" (Matthew 6:34).

The cure is not to stop planning. WhyzMen will ask you to plan, and plan well. The cure is to stop *postponing your life* until the plan is finished.

In summary

Meaning isn't something you find at the end of the road. You design it, one real moment at a time.

The opening story

- **Michael Phelps:** after 22 Olympic medals, he "saw himself as strictly a swimmer, not a human being." When the role ends, an identity built only on the role goes with it.

Five beliefs that get in the way

- **"All will be well" once I arrive.** No different you waits on the other side of the finish line.
- **Fulfillment means becoming all I can be.** That's impossible, since you hold more than one lifetime's worth of life. Aim to be fully who you are *now*.
- **Meaning comes only from impact.** Impact is a gamble, it fades, and it can become an addiction.
- **One radical leap will fix everything.** The novelty wears off, and you're still you.
- **More is always better.** Often the answer is subtraction, not addition.

Five design principles that help

- **Pick a question you can answer.** Swap "What is the meaning of life?" for "How might I live a more meaningful life *now*?"
- **Fully engaged, calmly detached.** Give your full effort and release the outcome to God. A good decision is not the same as a good outcome.
- **Craft your story.** Choose the *truest and most generative* version of your life story, redemption over contamination, as Joseph did.
- **Make moments.** There is no perfect wrench, only the real one. Live in the flow world, not the transaction world.
- **"Got to" → "Get to."** A two-second reframe that turns a duty into a gift.

The warning

- **Destination sickness:** if you always live for the next milestone, you can reach the end and find you missed the whole journey. "Here's a tip. Don't do that."

For reflection and practice

Questions to journal or bring to your triad

1. When did you have your own "Phelps moment"? What part of your identity left with the job, and what stayed?
2. Name one situation right now where you're gripping the outcome. What would it look like to stay fully engaged but calmly detached?
3. Think of a hard chapter in your life. Have you been telling it as contamination or as redemption? Which version is *true*er?
4. What "destination" are you currently putting your life on hold for?
5. Which "got to" in your week most needs to become a "get to"?

A one-week practice: Got to → Get to

- ☐ **Daily check (evening, 2 minutes):** Write down one "got to" you caught yourself in that day and rewrite it as a "get to." Note what you noticed once you did.
- ☐ **Midweek:** Try the reframe out loud with your wife or a friend, and tell them what you're practicing.
- ☐ **Weekly review:** Read back your seven entries. Which reframe changed the moment most? Bring it to your triad.

"Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."

— Allen Saunders (1957), later made famous by John Lennon

Source: *Hidden Brain* episode with Shankar Vedantam and Dave Evans (Hidden Brain Media). Further reading: Bill Burnett & Dave Evans, *How to Live a Meaningful Life: Using Design Thinking to Unlock Purpose, Joy and Flow Every Day*.

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