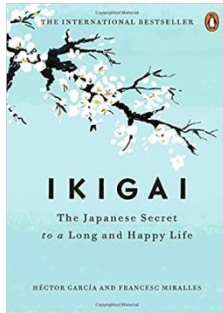


Finding Your Ikigai: Reason for living

Many people who are in their mid to late careers are interested in adding more energy, engagement and meaning to their lives. Here are two books, one on the “Japanese secret on a long and happy life” and the other on “How to build a well-lived and joyful life.” Together they provide an enticing step toward a life with more energy, engagement and meaning.



“Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life” , by Hector Garcia and Francesc Miralles is an intriguing book studying the people in northern Okinawa. This section of Okinawa is one of the “blue zones” places in the world where people live longer and healthier than anywhere else on earth. The book has an interesting view of people living in Okinawa. Not only do they live long, but they stay active for a very long time. The elderly Okinawans never retire.

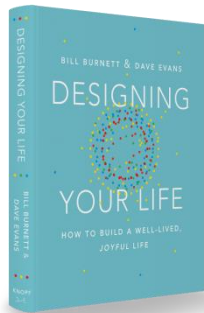
The book starts with a Japanese proverb
” *Only those who remain busy want to become hundred* ”

Finding and pursuing one’s ikigai is seen as the reason so many Okinawans remain busy and live so long. But how does one find one’s ikigai? Having found this how does one redesign one’s life to follow one’s ikigai?

It’s not easy to emulate people in a culture that is so different and so far away. That’s where “Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life” falls short. At the end of the book, they list the ten rules of ikigai:

1. Stay active; don’t retire
2. Take it slow
3. Don’t fill your stomach
4. Surround yourself with good friends
5. Get in shape for your next birthday
6. Smile
7. Reconnect with nature
8. Give thanks
9. Live in the moment
10. Follow your ikigai: There is passion inside you, a unique talent that gives meaning to your days and drives you to share the best of yourself until the very end. If you don’t know what your ikigai is yet, as Viktor Frankl says, your mission is to discover it.

These are all good maxims to live by. However, many of them are not new. To be fair, each of the 10 rules has more content. I have only included the entire rule 10 because it points out the circular reasoning. It seems to say, “Stay active; don’t retire. To stay active, follow your ikigai and if you don’t know what it is, keep looking.”



Luckily, I have found a better guide to finding one's ikigai and one that is more suited to people living in the U.S., Canada and Western Europe. It's "Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived and Joyful Life," by Bill Burnett and Dave Evans. The book is written about one of the most popular courses at Stanford University. The book teaches us about the design thinking approach and at the same time how to use these tools to design and build our lives.

A key is the first chapter, "Start Where You Are." As Bill Burnett says, "A key component of design thinking is to use a human centric approach to solving problems. Start with empathy." Since our life is the problem we are trying to solve, we begin by examining our life, creating a subjective evaluation of our health, our work, our play and what we love.

One concept in "Designing Your Life" that contrasts with the "Ikigai" is the idea of discovering your passion. Burnett says, "The notion that you have a passion is a destructive idea." He goes on to say, "It is the success you experience in some of your work that will ignite your true passion." In other words, we can't find our passion by thinking. We must try new things they will ignite our passion.

Although there are some common components between the two books, "Designing Your Life" has exercises with each chapter, and progresses linearly as one would expect a course to progress. "Designing Your Life" provides the reader with a set of tools to:

- **Build our own life compass** - The authors point to life as wayfaring vs. using a compass or GPS to get someplace. With GPS, you know the end point and are generally looking for the fastest way to get there. Our lives are different, we don't know when it will end and each experience changes where we may go next. Our life compass helps keep us on the best course. "You don't have to have it all figured out for the rest of your life, you just have to create a compass for what life is about for you now."
- **Identify energy, engagement and flow** - Identify what activities give us energy and engagement, and in which ones we find ourselves in a state of flow. They also introduce a journaling exercise which is helpful in identifying the impact activities have in our day-to-day lives.
- **Getting unstuck** - We frequently think our first idea is the only one. As a result, we get stuck working on something that is unworkable. They reframe this the following way:
 - Dysfunctional Belief: I have to find the one right idea
 - Reframe: I need a lot of ideas so I can explore any number of possibilities for the future.
- **Prototype and test** - Build prototypes of possible next lives. Then test those in the real world. Have a bias for action. - One of my favorite quotes from the book is "You have lived only one life so far, but you have multiple potential lives within you. The key is to choose one life you want to live and design your way forward."
- **Choose Happiness** - Let go of the choices you didn't follow and move on.
- **Build a team** - "You live and design your life in collaboration with others."

The value of providing tools is that one is never finished designing one's life. The authors say it is better to take small steps toward your goal and reevaluate that to try to get there in one step.

“A well-designed life is constantly creative, productive, changing, evolving, and there is always the possibility of surprise. Life then is about designing something that has never existed before.”

I recommend “Designing Your Life” as a great book to get an introduction to design thinking as it applies to one’s life. However, there are significant differences between people who have just finished their education and those of us who have been out of school for a decade or more. Here are a few examples:

1. The “**Start Where You Are**” The exercise in the book asks for a subjective evaluation of your: health, work, play and love. For someone who has been out of school for over ten years finances and lifestyle are essential ingredients to a current picture. In addition, relationships are broader and more relevant than “love.” After all, it is the quantity and health of our relationships that have the biggest impact on having a long and healthy life.
2. **Seeing with new eyes:** This is not as important for someone in undergraduate or graduate school as it is for someone who has been in a career for more than a decade. Over time, we become used to seeing their life through the lens of their career.

As a result, it is important to include exercises that help people see their life to date with new lenses. This includes their adult life and childhood. We are taught early on how to see the world. It helps to go back to childhood to remember the passions and loves we had before we were taught what to see.

3. **People progress at different speeds** - Whereas a course has to start at the beginning of a semester and progress through to the end. People’s lives may not fit the calendar schedule. In addition, people don’t always progress in a linear fashion. Because of this, it is important to let people go at their own speed, not one dictated by a school calendar. Some take as much as a month between sessions, but this is necessary for them to do the work and digest what they have learned.

The end result is by modifying the existing exercises and adding additional ones we have created a new program that we offer to individuals and groups. It’s called Design What’s Next. We have found this is an effective approach to helping people find their reason to live. For more information see www.DesignWhatsNext.com