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Bernard Roth, co-founder and academic director of Stanford University's d.school, shares design-thinking tools for reframing life's stubborn problems and unlocking solutions. Professor Roth, author of the book "The Achievement Habit," also engages audience members in exercises meant to cut through the excuses we tell ourselves that hold us back from accomplishing our goals.



Transcript

(applause) - Thank you.. Welcome.. I scoured this place last week to see what's going on here.. I still have an audience, that's good.. So this is not about football, I'm sorry to tell you.. It's about ideas, and it's about my life.. And it's about your life.. So, as Tina says, I actually started as a pretty straight mechanical engineer out of New York City.. I still have the accent.. I've only been off the boat 50-some odd years, so it takes a while..

And I have three degrees in mechanical engineering that I actually earned.. And, after my PhD, I actually was supposed to stay at Columbia, but I got a free vacation to California.. And, since my wife hated New York, we ended up staying at Stanford.. And I've been here since 1962, which is before a lot of you had been born.. So, I've been here a long time.. And the thing to understand is, the Stanford and the Silicon Valley I came to is very, very different, or was very different than it is today.. And one of the things that struck me when I was here is A, there was there was the Human Potential Movement and all that, so I learned there were other things than machines and robots.. There were people.. And I got interested in that, in creativity.. And I started to think about teaching, in addition to the things I knew something about, the things I wish I had learned in school myself..

And one of the things I noticed was that people talked a lot about starting their own companies.. And most of them didn't.. In the Design Program where I was an ME, most of the students ended up working for Hewlett-Packard or maybe Ampex, which doesn't exist anymore, or Raychem, which doesn't exist.. But they went to these large companies.. And they all had this kind of pipe dream, this fantasy of starting their own company.. And that kind of, I didn't really care, but it actually reminded me of a play called The Iceman Cometh, an O'Neill play.. And in that play these people are in the bar, and the whole play takes place in the bar.. And they talk about leaving the bar, and the whole play, nobody leaves the bar.. And somehow this whole idea of starting a company reminded me of that, and it bothered me a lot.. So I decided to start a course, which had in it two, you could do a project, and the project involved one of two topics..

One was, do something you've never done before in your life.. And the other was, get rid of a problem in your life.. And then we had all sorts of processes.. Some of the things I wrote about in the book are from that class.. And, it kind of was really interesting, because what I hit upon was this whole idea that if you do something, you're never the same.. It's kind of really interesting.. And so people did projects, which, you know, they weren't academic projects.. They were jumping out of airplanes, and riding motorcycles, and building stuff, and all that.. And I noticed it changed people.. It gave them a kind of impetus..

And this whole idea of doing became a very important part of my life and my teaching.. And it's, rather than talk about it, let's do it.. And the whole pragmatic thing is, if it works in your life, fine, it'll incorporate it and change you if you want to.. If it doesn't work, forget about it and do something else.. So, I kind of developed this class, which is called Designer in Society, based on these principles, and my life was pretty ok.. And I developed something called a Creativity Workshop, which we give around the world, and for professors, and that was kind of great.. And then about 12 years ago or so, this thing called the d.school appeared in my life, and it was sort of a sidelight for me.. And then David Kelley, who was sort of the principal of the people who founded it, got cancer, and I was at home minding my own business Friday night at about 11 o'clock at night, and I got a call from Jim Plummer, who was the Dean of Engineering in those days.. And he said, "I'm really uncomfortable "with David being out for his treatments, "not having a faculty person in charge there," and "Would you do that till he comes back?"

So, I said "Sure." I didn't negotiate or anything.. I just said "Fine." And then Monday morning I walked into the d.school, and I never left..

(chuckles) And it totally changed my life.. And what it did is it kind of took the things we had been talking about always.. In those days, we called it need-finding, and we changed it to human-centered design, and it kind of was a way to express all these things which were kind of, They were kind of part of my life, but really there was too many other pieces to make it all come together.. And when I got to the d.school, it kind of crystallized this thing we call design thinking, is really what we've been talking about all along.. And we really can use it for other things rather than designing stuff.. So let me just make that clear.. There's this thing called design thinking in the world, which you've probably heard about.. And the way the name came about, it uses methods that traditionally were used by designers to design stuff, uses some of those ideas.. But now it applies it to almost everything.. So it's very widespread in business now, it's in health..

I cannot tell you how many different groups want me to talk about design thinking.. Nurses and trainers and all this kind of, you name it.. Groups of people working with, want to somehow use design thinking in the world.. And people come into the d.school and think we can cure cancer and all that.. So, it kind of gets a little inflated.. But, really, it's a kind of useful tool in problem-solving and all that.. And what I decided to do is to apply it to ourselves.. And I thought my colleagues would kill me, because one of the things in design thinking is, don't design for yourself, design for someone else, ok.. And that's a really good thing, because others can see things you can't see.. But to me, it doesn't mean you can't also use it, until something better comes along, use it on yourself..

And so I tried to use the principles of design thinking, and my ideas in creativity, and my teaching from Designer in Society to make a kind of holistic thing for you or me to go forward in the world.. And these are things I've used with students for, you know, 40-some odd years, so I know they work.. And I've used them in my life, so I know that they work also.. So what I want to do today is share some of these things with you.. And the first thing is this whole idea of problem-solving.. So, first of all, problems have a bad rap.. Not around here, because Tina's brainwashed everyone that they're opportunities.. But, basically, in the real world, problems have a bad rap, because people think, "Oh, it's a problem.. "It's terrible," and all that stuff.. But in fact, it's important to understand that that's where my life force comes from..

And I'm sure there are others in the room whose life force comes from that also.. So when I have a problem, I'm excited.. I can't sleep.. I get up.. I'm always activated to do that.. And in fact, that's kind of what it's about.. And one of my favorite stories is a book that was written in the 1800s in imperial Russia about a character called Oblomov, and for the first 250 pages of the book, he doesn't get out of bed.. And the whole idea, it's a fantasy, but the whole idea was to be critical of this aristocracy that it's no reason to get out of bed.. Everything is taken care of for him.. Why would you get out of bed if everything is taken care of for you? So that's the kind of idea to understand about problems..

It's a good reason to get out of bed, ok.. And if people get depressed, they don't get out of bed.. So it's a good sign you want to get out of bed.. So you get out of bed and that's great.. And you got these things which are energizing, and you want to work on them.. And we have them in our lives.. And most of people in this room are great problem solvers.. And I think of myself as a great problem solver.. So the question is, why do people like you and me have things in our lives which are troubling, which we cannot handle? How come? We're so smart.. You're a very smart guy..

I can tell right off the bat.. You're a smart guy too.. And you're a smart woman, right? Sure, we all know that.. (chuckling) I must say, this is an aside, but I went to a memorial service for Sandy Dornbusch, who was a colleague I knew for many years from Sociology.. And I heard he would tell his students, "Don't worry that you don't feel smart.. "When you go home for Christmas break, "you'll feel smart again." So, his point was, everyone is so smart around here, it's hard to feel smart, ok.. So, whether that's true or not, it's a nice thought.. So, we're here now, and the question is, you're ok.. Most of you are dressed properly.. You found this room..

You kind of got into Stanford.. You know, you have a lot of accomplishments.. So why is it that you and I lose sleep about something? And I have a theory what that is.. And I say that most of the time, it's because we're trying to solve the wrong problem.. So my statement to you is, if you have a problem that you are really losing sleep over, and that you cannot solve, it's because you're working on the wrong problem.. It's as simple as that.. And I have seen that in my PhD, you know I used to be an expert on robotics and kinematics and stuff like that, and I would have PhD students come in, and I knew the field very well, I'd been researching for many years, and I'd give them a problem, and we'd work for a couple years, and then suddenly we'd realize, "Oh, it wasn't really, "The real question is this." It wasn't a big change, but we realized suddenly what the gem was.. And we did that, the student could finish up in a couple of months, write up, and go on with their lives.. And it was a really great example where here we had a lot of expertise and yet we didn't know what the real question was.. And I've seen that when companies come in and they, or consulting things, they ask you to do something, and it's the wrong question..

And it appears over and over again.. And it certainly appears in my everyday life.. So, what I want you to understand is, it's really easy, it's what we call in design thinking reframing the problem.. And the secret is to reframe it.. And the question is, "How do I do that?" And the answer is really, really simple.. And the way I suggest you do it, is you ask yourself what it would do for you if you solved the problem.. Ask yourself what it would do for you if you solved the problem.. And that is the question you want to ask yourself.. I'll give you an example where I totally failed.. So I rented a car, and I drove up to the wine

country..

And eventually the car ran out of gas, and I pulled into the gas station.. And I started to look for the release for the cover to the gas tank.. And I must have looked for ten minutes, in the glove compartment, every place normal designers would put it, and I couldn't find it.. I was kind of frustrated, and then I noticed a similar car drove up for gas.. So I went up to the lady, and I said, "I know this is a stupid question, "but where is the release?" She said, "There is none." And so at that point, I realized what I was doing.. I had framed the question to where the release is.. And why would I, if I played my game, which I didn't of course, but if I played my game, I would say, "What would it do for me "if I could find the release?" "Well, I'd be open to get the cover open." So now the question is, "How do I get the cover open?" And if you get the cover open, the easiest way, is walk over and open it up.. So it's a silly, trivial question, but it, in fact, embodies the whole idea.. So what I'd like you to do is not take my word for it that it works, and I can assure you it's worked for thousands of people around the world, and it will work for you.. So I would like you to play that game right now in your own head..

I'd like you to think, and don't take something like peace in the world forever.. That's not gonna work, all right? But take something literally that you lose sleep over, like, should you go on a date with so and so? Or should you do this, or should you go for graduate work? You know, something normal and common.. Or should you tell your roommate she's making too much noise at night? Anything that bothers you, really, and that, recurrently, you haven't been able to solve even though you're so smart.. So take that problem and ask yourself what it would do for you if you solve that.. I'm gonna be quiet for a few minutes.. Ask yourself what it would do if you solved that.. And, like in my case, I would get the gas tank cover open, and I change it to, "How do I get the gas tank cover open?" So, in your case, you're gonna ask what it would do for you, and you're gonna change it to a problem, ok? So, go ahead and do that, and I'll drink some water.. Ok, enough of you look alert, so I'm gonna assume most of you have gotten there.. So, does anyone have any troubles doing that exercise, in other words going to figure out what the new question is.. So, have you figured out what the new question is? "Not sure." Do you want me to interact with you and enlighten you and save your life? - [Voiceover] I probably don't have a good enough question for you..

- Ok, good.. Someone have something? Yeah? - [Voiceover] So I have a problem waking up in the morning and then not just being able to get out of bed.. - Ok, so, ok, great.. So your problem, what would happen to you if you, The problem is how to get out of bed, right? Not waking up? You're awake.. - Could you repeat-- - What's that? - Just please repeat what he said so everyone can hear.. Repeat what he said so-- - Oh, ok.. Well, I'm trying to figure out myself.. But he said he has a problem waking up in the morning, getting out of bed.. And I'm trying to figure out if the waking up is the problem or the getting out of the bed is the problem.. - [Voiceover] Waking up is fine..

- Yeah, waking up is fine.. - [Voiceover] But getting out of bed.. - But getting out of bed.. So the question is, once he's woken, how does he get out of bed, ok.. So the question you have to ask yourself is what would it do for you if you could get out of bed in the morning? - [Voiceover] I would get out of bed.. (audience laughs) - You would get out of bed.. Ok, good, good.. Ok, so now the question is, "How do I get out of bed in the morning?" So give me some ideas we can, Who can brainstorm? Can you think of any ways of getting out of bed in the morning? - [Voiceover] Well, some that I've tried is taking my alarm and throwing it across the room so I have to get up.. - Ok, that's one way.. Ok, what else? - Umm..

- Well, what would it do, why do you want to get out of bed in the morning? What would it do for you if you got out of bed in the morning? - [Voiceover] Get more work done.. - See, you're not letting go of the original question.. That's the issue, so what would it do for you? So, let's say "get more work done".. So the question is, "How do you get more work done?" It has nothing to do with getting out of bed.. If your really, if that's really, you know, we're just playing a game here.. But this is the insight, so pay attention.. This is you sitting here, ok? This is a gift to you.. He thinks it's getting out of bed.. It's not getting out of bed.. It's getting more work done, if that's true..

So, are there ways to get more work done? I could figure out how to stay in bed and get more work done, as an example, ok? And there are lots of ways of getting, I don't know what your life is like, but probably you could think of 100 ways to get more work done.. And if you can't, there are people in this room who know how to do it.. They'll tell you.. So, if really that was the problem, you've opened up your solution space.. So we've opened up the solution space where we're no longer hung up on getting out of bed.. Now it sounds trivial.. Everyone knows how to get out of bed, and he does too.. So it's not a great example, and it is a great example.. You understand what I'm saying? It's a great example, because the structure is exactly what you're doing with your problem.. It's exactly what you're doing with your problem..

And as silly as, pardon me, as silly as this sounds, yours is as silly also.. It's as silly as that.. Let's try some other victim here.. Who else? I'm gonna give you a reward.. I'm not the kind of guy who takes advantage of people without, this will have more meaning to you later on.. And I'm gonna give you a reward even though you didn't fully participate.. So I give rewards here.. Psychological training, you understand.. (audience laughs) Yes, what's yours? - [Voiceover] Mine's slightly different.. So I've been working on a project in the philanthropy sector for like four months now..

But I feel like we've been trying the wrong approach to trying to solve a problem.. We're trying to make millennials more passionate about philanthropy, but I feel like, So the problem we're trying to solve is how to make millennials donate more money.. But we're trying to build something for NGOs, CBOs, to connect their beneficiaries to the dollars that they donate.. But I feel like it doesn't really make the users more empowered about-- - Just make it, I have to translate all this, so make it

very succinct.. What's the problem? Not the whole story.. What's the problem? - [Voiceover] So, we want to make millennials donate more money.. - Just a simple, one sentence.. One sentence.. What's the problem? - [Voiceover] The problem is, we don't know how to go about changing a social behavior.. - You don't know how to go about changing a social behavior..

That's her problem.. What would it do for you if you knew how to go about changing social behavior? - [Voiceover] Then we would be able to generate more donations to prime factories.. - So now you want to know how to generate more donations.. - [Voiceover] Yeah.. - Can you generate more donations without changing social behavior? See, that's the whole thing, ok.. It's again, is there any way to generate more donations without changing social behavior? Yes, there are.. There are lots of ways, ok.. I have a way.. You take out a gun and you ask people for money.. (audience laughs) That's one way, right..

That's a way to generate more money.. Another way is scamming and swindling.. Anyone else? You in bed, you must be thinking up some way to (audience laughs) This guy.. (laughing) No, seriously, that's the point, you know.. She's locked into one thing and won't let go of that one thing, if that's really the problem.. And if you've been trying it for four months, you gotta let go.. You know, I read somewhere that we have between 50,000 and 60,000 thoughts a day.. I don't know if that's true, but we do think a lot.. However, the tricky thing is that 95% of those are repeated thoughts.. And 80% of those are things that are fear and can't-do kind of thoughts..

So just sitting and thinking for three months, you're not gonna get another thought about social behavior.. I guarantee you.. - [Voiceover] Ok (chuckling) So you have to reframe the problem.. And the way to reframe, it's let go.. See, you're not listening to me.. You don't want to do it.. But I'm telling you that's where it is.. And it's really hard to let go of problems.. It really is really interesting.. People just won't let go of their problem..

So if you tell them, they say, "Well, what if? "Because," and all that.. Just let go of it.. Forget about it.. It's not working for you.. - [Voiceover] Ok.. - You're saying it, but I don't believe you're gonna do it.. Are you gonna do it? - [Voiceover] I'll definitely think about it.. - All right, I'm gonna reward you, but I don't believe you.. (audience laughs) - [Voiceover] I promise.. (laughing) Thank you..

- Ok, let's take one more and then we'll move on.. Anyone? Anyone else? So, if you're not raising your hand, oh, you have, good.. Yes? - I consult with a start-up, and I'm having trouble getting my client to pay the full fee.. - Ok, great.. Ok, what would it do for, so, she's with a start-up and she's having trouble getting her clients to pay the full fee.. So the question is, what would it do for you if you got your clients to pay the full fee? - I would have a good professional relationship with them, and I would have money.. - You'd have a good professional relationship.. Of course, if you don't get 'em to pay the fee, they'll have a better relationship with you, right? So the question is, how do you get a better relationship if that's what it is.. But you of course want the money, right? So the relationship is a kind of-- - Secondday.. (audience laughs) - red herring..

It's a red herring.. So the question is, "How can I get my clients to pay the money?" which is the original question.. What would it do for you if you got your clients to pay the money? - I would get all my money.. (laughing) - Yeah, but you're stuck on the same thing.. What would it do for you? What are you gonna do with all the money? What are you gonna do with all that money when you get it? Here, I'm your client.. I'm gonna give you some money.. What would it do for you? (audience laughs) Here.. What did that do for you? - I'm gonna invest it.. - You're gonna invest it, ok.. - In my project..

- You're gonna invest it in your project.. So you need to find money to invest in your project.. Is there any way to, is there anyone in this room who has ever found any money to invest in their project which they didn't get from a client paying them? Has anyone ever figured out how to get any money in Silicon Valley to invest in a project other than getting your client to pay for you? You see? Do you see what I'm saying? She's stuck with that thing, and she'll be banging here head against the client not paying her.. I hope they pay her, but if they don't pay you, so what? If you really want to do what you said, which is to get money for something else.. If that doesn't work, get money somewhere else.. You're not gonna let go either.. Another one.. These people won't let go.. So, you see, if you're not letting go, you really don't want to solve the problem.. It's as simple as that..

You want to make your clients wrong for not paying.. I agree they're a bunch of son of a bitches that they don't pay you.. But that's the point.. You have to, if that's really, Now I know we're playing a game here, and I'm gonna give her a reward anyway.. I'm not that tough.. But, the point simply is, I think you can see in these examples, that, in fact, it is simply that if you're really stuck, if this is real, I mean this is just a game we're playing, but if this is really a problem you're stuck with, you have to be willing to say, "What would it really do for me if I got that?" Not, "How will I do it?" See, we're stuck in the, we're implementing a solution.. We're not really looking at the question.. And if her case, the question is how do I get money to do other things? It would be great if she got it from her client, but if she's not, so what? No, it's "so what?" There's other ways of getting money, if that's what the question is, rather than in binking herself and not doing it.. I hope she gets it from your client, but, if you don't, you don't want to spend your life worrying about that.. You want to go on and do the other thing, and this is the way you do it..

Say, "What do I really want?" And the solution space opens up tremendously.. You could also use the gun and the robbery that I suggested for her.. It works for a while.. Ok, good.. Any questions about the process? Yeah? - [Voiceover] I'm curious how, when do you know that you need-- - I have to get closer.. - [Voiceover] Sorry, when do you know that you need to give

up? - When do you know when you need to give up? We'll get to that later on, but it's whenever you want to.. There's no such thing as "have to give up".. And there's no such thing as "have to do it".. It's up to you, you know what I mean? All I'm saying is if you're stuck and you're losing sleep, the chances are it's the wrong question.. Or else you would have found it..

She says she's working on it for three months.. If she's been really working on it for three months, she's not gonna find it if she works on it for another three months.. She has to find the real question, and then the answer will be obvious.. It will be obvious.. It's a simple, I've been through it a lot of times.. And I'll give you my book.. I have some examples how I really screwed up.. So I learned the hard way.. Ok? Good.. Ok, so that's the first thing..

If you're gonna solve problems, you really want to be working on the right problem.. And my good example, Yeah, go ahead.. - I was asking about the process.. What if you want to learn how to solve a particular type of problem? - Yes.. That's too hypothetical for me, ok.. - Well, like in-- - Let me show you what it's about.. This is my favorite story in this issue.. There's a drunk walking along.. And he hits a lamppost.. And he bounces off..

And he hits a lamppost.. And he bounces off.. And we can give the lamppost various names.. But it's a lamppost, and he bounces off.. And he goes back.. We don't have that much time.. He hits the lamppost, and he goes, "I give up.. They got me surrounded." (audience laughs) And that's the way you are.. That's exactly the way you are, but you're not drunk.. If you're not willing to let go, you're gonna keep banging against it..

You're gonna keep banging against it, and then you're gonna surrender because they have you surrounded.. And if you're not drunk, you go, "Oh, an obstacle, an obstacle, an obstacle, an obstacle," and "Oh, that's it.. I got it.. I'm through." You understand? The whole idea is, everyone's gonna have obstacles in their lives if it's a tough problem, or else you solved it.. You're dressed properly.. You got to Stanford.. You got a front-row seat here.. You solved a lot of problems.. You just got this one little thing.. Your clients are not paying you..

So what? You're gonna make your whole life your clients aren't paying you? Or are you gonna go ahead and do what you want to do? All right, good.. She's shaking, but it's still not there.. Anyway, let me shut my phone off quick before I get embarrassed.. Ok, so you don't want to be like the drunk even though you're sober.. But most of us act that way.. Really, it's just a matter of walking around the obstacle.. So, what are ways that kind of get us entrapped? Assuming you have the right problem, it often solves itself.. However, things happen.. Things come up.. One of the first things that come up is, it doesn't kind of work..

Like, he throws his clock across the room, but somehow he doesn't get up and get it.. So, if I asked him why he doesn't get up and get it, he'll give me a reason.. He's a very reasonable guy.. I can tell, he's a reasonable guy.. He'll give me a reason why he doesn't get up to get a clock.. If I ask her something, she'll give me a reason why she can't change social behavior.. If I ask her something, she'll give me a reason why she can't collect from her clients.. And they're all reasons.. Except in my world, and I hate to use this bad word here, all reasons are bullshit.. All reasons for human or personal behavior are just bullshit..

And I mean it in the sense of, you don't know what it is.. You're making it up.. So I use "bullshit" in the sense of, you're making up something which you don't know if it's true or not.. And it goes like this.. If I ask you for the reason you did something, if you ask me why I'm here, I'll tell you, "Tina invited me." That is not, there is no lie in that.. But it's bullshit.. 'Cause Tina could've invited me, and I could have not come.. And I could've probably, if I really wanted to get here, maybe gotten past Tina and got someone else to invite me.. So, the point simply is, there's a million reasons I got here, one of which is, Tina invited me.. And if you ask me, that's the most reasonable thing to tell you..

So I want to be a reasonable guy.. I'll tell you, and you'll go about your business.. And that's fine.. Who cares? The problem is that, often, we hide excuses as reasons, and we'll never change our behavior if we don't tell ourselves the truth.. And I'll elaborate on that in a minute.. So, the point simply is, there's a lot of things that go on.. Tina and I have a very complicated relationship, starting from when we first met, where we hated each other and all of that.. And now, she's the most supportive friend I have in terms of my book and stuff like that.. So, I said, there's like a lot of things going on between me and Tina.. And between anyone, any friends, you know what I mean? Nothing secret's going on..

(audience laughs) Came out the wrong way.. Mike, I didn't mean it, Mike.. It came out the wrong way.. But, you know, we have a complicated relationship as we do with all our friends.. So, the fact that you choose to give your reason, you're just singling something out.. My favorite is, right now my mouth is terribly dry.. So if you ask me why my mouth is dry, I'll say I'm talking a lot.. And that seems obvious.. However, every time I talk my mouth is dry.. However, my wife is always telling me, "Drink more water." I'm chronically dehydrated..

When I go to Burning Man, I don't pee the right colors.. (audience laughs) My whole life is one of dehydration.. Every time I talk, I know this is gonna come up.. I also, of course, drank a bottle of wine last night.. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.. So there's a lot of things that could have caused my dehydrated, dry mouth.. So the one I tell you is, I'm talking a lot.. It's obvious, it's a way, that's the way you have to be in life.. But I will never change my behavior if I don't tell myself that I really don't know the reason.. Now let me explain where my epiphany comes from..

My epiphany comes from a board meeting in Berkeley.. I was on a start-up company, I was on the board of directors.. And we'd have regular meetings.. And the company didn't fail but did quite well, so I had to keep going to meetings.. And I was always late.. I was always late, always.. And I'd come in, and those days it was Highway 17.. And I'd come in, I'd say, "Oh the traffic on Highway 17 was terrible." And they'd all say, "It's ok Bernie.. "We're just glad nothing happened" and all that, and "It's ok." And I knew it wasn't ok.. I mean these were people who have lives and all that, and I was just holding them back..

And of course I realized what it was is, I wasn't leaving enough time.. And I wasn't leaving enough time, since I didn't give them enough valence in my life.. It wasn't important enough to me.. So I realized I ought to make a decision.. I either resign from the board, or I ought to be there on time.. And being on time was as easy as getting out of bed.. And it was just simply not doing, in those days we had a teletype in my office to do email, not doing a few extra emails, not making phone calls, no cell phones in those days believe it or not, not making a few extra phone calls, and not talking to a colleague in the hall as I was leaving the building, and leaving enough time so even if there was, imagine that, traffic in Palo Alto and traffic in Berkeley and traffic on Highway 17, I'd get there on time.. Once I got that epiphany, it changed my whole life.. I used to be the person who was always late to everything.. Now I'm the pain in the ass who starts everything on time..

I'm always on time.. My former chairman, he was terrified about me, 'cause he was always late.. "Bernie's coming.. I gotta be on time, I gotta be on time." And people who read the book, they're afraid to come in two minutes late.. So it's not that really bad, but it's a great example of reasons.. So, the being late was bullshit.. There was traffic on Highway 17.. But that was not the reason I was late.. There were a million other reasons I was late.. So the point simply is, who cares? You care if you want to change your behavior..

Just like my epiphany about, it wasn't the traffic on Highway 17 that was making me late, changed my behavior about time.. It can change your behavior about a lot of things if you care.. And the way you have to do it, is not to tell yourself a lie.. And the way you have a lie, is you tell yourself a reason.. Because you're so complex.. You and I are such complex beings, that there's no one, single reason for anything.. I always like to tell people, if some progenitor three generations ago hadn't had sex, you wouldn't have been here.. So that's why my mouth's dry, you know.. It's nonsense, right? So that's stupid, isn't it? So the whole idea is simply, you're picking out the one that makes sense, but there's a million reasons.. There's not a reason for anything..

And the other interesting thing is that people have done experiments.. They've put people in MRI machines, and they've had them push a button or something.. And they look at the parts of the brain that fire, and then they ask them what they did.. And it turns out, the part of the brain that works on the actual, mechanical, muscular control fires before the part of the brain, the cortex, that works on the reasons.. So what happens in most cases is you do what you do, and then you make up a reason for it.. And that's what a reasonable person is.. A reasonable person can explain their behavior, and they're reasonable.. So you want to be a reasonable person.. However, you want to not fool yourself.. So what I do, if you ask me why I came here, or why my mouth is dry, I'll tell you I'm talking a lot or Tina invited me..

And I know that's bullshit.. Now it doesn't matter in this case.. However, in some cases, like coming late to the board meeting, like other things, it does matter.. And I will never change my behavior as long as I tell myself that lie.. So what I do if you ask me a question, I'm reasonable, I give you a reasonable answer.. And I go, "I'm never gonna say that again." And of course I say it again.. But eventually I change.. So the point simply is, if you get the view that all social reasons for your behavior are really, you don't know what they are.. And you're just making it up, you'll be much more powerful.. And if your behavior is not what you want, you can change it..

And don't use the reason 'cause that's just an excuse.. And we all know excuses are pejorative things.. So if I ask him why he doesn't get out of bed, he'll give me a million excuses why he can't get out of bed.. But if he actually wants to get out of bed, and he stops giving himself the bullshit reasons, he could get out of bed, ok.. And get less done.. Or more done, I forget which you want to do, ok.. (audience laughs) But at any rate.. And it works so well.. I get, and funny, it just happened this morning again.. I get maybe four emails a week from some student somewhere in the world who wants to come to Stanford and do a PhD with me..

I could ignore those emails.. I don't have any connection to most of these people.. It's not that someone, they're just picking me randomly.. And they're probably going to every professor in the world.. I somehow feel it's nice to respond.. They put a lot of work into it.. They give me their resume, their life story.. So I used to say, "I'm sorry.. "I can't take you because I don't have any money." Or "I'm going on sabbatical." Or something nice to let 'em down easy.. And what would invariably happen is, I'd get pushback..

"Oh, well you don't have any money? "I have a rich uncle.. "He'll support me." Or "You're going on sabbatical? "How about I come a year from now?" Whatever I'd say, they'd have some, and the email would go on and sometimes I'd just truncate out at first station.. Now, that I'm enlightened, I say, "Sorry.. Can't help you.. Good luck." You know what happens? Half the time I get back one message: "Thank you very much for answering my email, Professor." I feel good about that.. I feel much better than not answering.. And it's over.. And they apparently feel good about it.. I don't know, maybe they're building me up.. They think they're gonna come back next year..

I don't know.. But it just seems like so much better.. I just say what I can do and what I can't do without giving the reasons.. So what I'm advocating is, live your life as reason-free as you possibly can.. It really helps.. It really helps.. Now, a lot of people in my little domain of the d.school and in the Design Group of Stanford have taken my workshops.. So when some poor professor in my Design Group, who likes to complain a lot, gets up and he says at the meeting, "Well, the reason "I can't do this is the dean said blah blah blah," he's greeted by a chorus, "That's a goooood reason." Meaning it's bullshit.. So, it's a little embarrassing, but in fact he gets the benefit of knowing that it's just, the dean is not stopping him.. The dean is not, the dean's doing whatever the dean is doing, and he could do whatever he does..

So I want you to understand, when I say "goooooood reason", I spell it with five o's.. So I mean goooooood reason is not a good reason at all.. You got the idea? Ok.. So what I want to do is give you that experience, 'cause you don't want to take my word for it.. Some of you look like, what's this guy talking about? So what I want you to do is, as close as you can, get a partner next to you, and if you can't, go to the next row.. I'll give you two minutes to get a partner.. So everyone just get a partner you could work with.. Hopefully, someone seated next to you.. And if you don't have a partner, raise your hand.. We'll get you a partner..

(audience talking to each other) So what you and I are gonna demonstrate-- a partner, raise your hand.. Anyone not have a partner? All right, anyone willing to admit they don't have a partner? Ok, good.. So the idea is this.. Tina and I are gonna demonstrate the game to you.. So I'm gonna say to Tina, "The reason my mouth is dry is I'm talking so much." - That's a good reason.. - The reason I'm here is 'cause you invited me.. - That's a good reason.. - The reason I'm talking about this is a way to advertise my book.. - That's a good reason.. (audience laughs) - Ok, see, these are all things in my life that are all true, ok..

Now she's gonna tell me at some point, and I'm just gonna keep going.. So one of you is gonna keep going.. At some point, I'm gonna say, "Change roles." At that point, she's gonna give me something that's in her life, and I'm gonna say, "That's a goooooood reason." And every time she tells me something, I'm gonna acknowledge that's a goooood reason, ok.. And just, don't judge it.. Just see how that feels to you.. And really try and disprove Bernie, you know.. In math, one counterexample disproves everything.. Give something that's really a good thing that is a real reason.. And when you get back "That's a goooooood reason," think about it for a minute, ok.. Everyone got the experiment? It's a real life experiment..

So, please start.. One partner starts giving things, and then the partner says it's a good reason.. Then I'll tell you when to switch roles.. Go ahead.. (audience talking to each other) Ok, thank you, thank you.. Ok, anyone have any comments, or questions, or good reasons, anything anyone? So let me just explain it to you another way.. If a student comes into my class and she says, "I'm sorry Professor, I have a flat tire on my bike.. "I'm sorry for being late." That sounds great and even if she had the flat tire, if the rule was if you come into a class late, you fail the class, she would not have been late.. Even if she had a flat tire.. It's as simple as that..

If the rule is, if you're late to a class, you get kicked out of Stanford, everything would start on time at Stanford.. It's just a matter of caring.. It's a matter of putting enough valence in it.. I gave a talk at Google.. This was a riot.. This was like, it couldn't be tailor-made.. There was one person who didn't have a partner, so I ended up working with her.. So she says, and she came in late, so she says, "The reason I was late is I work in the other building." (audience giggles) I loved it.. It was like I could have kissed her, right.. The reason she's late is she works in the other building..

And she thought that was real.. (audience laughs) I was at a PhD exam in the Ed School, and we're waiting a half hour for a professor from Berkeley.. And they're all sitting there saying, "Oh she's coming from Berkeley." So? She comes a half hour late, 'cause she's coming, so it's, the whole world doesn't care about that stuff.. If you don't care, it's fine.. If you don't care, it's fine.. But you have to understand that if you want to change your behavior, you cannot use these excuses, which you call reasons.. And you have to just give things more valence in your life.. It's as simple as that, ok.. And I won't even tell you about the collection mafia she's gonna hire to get the money.. You have to just give it a little more valence..

There are ways, ok, good.. So, so far we have covered getting the right problem to work on, and we have covered the idea that reasons are bullshit in my world, and I hope you'll make them in your world, and Yes, Sir? - [Voiceover] So is it a matter of not telling ourselves the bullshit? - Yeah, yeah.. Thank you, thank you.. I'm gonna give you a present.. I'm gonna give you two presents, because this is something you do not want to try at home.. Believe me.. I've been doing this for a long time.. I have never once told my wife her reasons are bullshit.. (audience laughs) I have never once told my sons their reasons are bullshit.. I have never once told my buddies, my biking buddies, and I have never once told my colleagues in the d.school or in the Design Group that their reasons are bullshit..

I just tell Bernie Roth.. If I fix myself, the world is better.. You cannot do it.. You're taking my workshop, so I can tell you.. You're giving me license.. People are not signing up for your workshop.. Your friends, your roommates, your family has not signed up for your workshop.. Believe me, I've been in this business a long time.. I used to do BlackRock workshops, I've done Essen workshops, I've done a lot of workshops.. You do not want to do this stuff if you're not the guru..

Fix yourself.. You can be the guru for yourself.. Do not be the guru for someone else.. Just show 'em by example.. You will ruin your relationships.. So, seriously speaking, do not, thank you, that's a great gift.. 'Cause I mean to say it, and sometimes I forget it.. And then at night I feel horrible what I've created in the world.. (audience laughs) A bunch of monsters, you know

what I mean? A bunch of monsters.. Do not do that..

It really takes something wonderful and nice and turns it into something awful.. Ok, thank you.. (audience laughs) There's one other thing I want to do, and that came up with your question there.. And there's a difference between trying and doing.. And the thing about it is, there's this wonderful line in the Star Wars movie, the first one where Yoda, and I'm always afraid when I say this that I'm gonna be struck down dead, but so far I've gotten away with it.. Yoda was wrong.. And not in the context that he was doing it, ok.. But the point is, there is a try.. He said there's no try, there's just do.. And, people love to quote that, especially entrepreneurs..

But the point simply is, there's a try and there's a do.. And they're both ok states.. There's really nothing wrong with trying to do something.. And there's certainly nothing wrong with doing it.. The problem is when you think they're the same thing.. And when you think you're doing something, and you're really just trying.. And when you're trying, when you hit an obstacle, the lamppost, you get defeated.. And when you're doing, it doesn't matter if there's lamppost.. You jump over it, you knock it down, or you walk around it.. So there are obstacles..

I had a fellow who's sort of dear to my life in that he's a great story.. He was a Stanford student in the days when I got here way back when.. And he was a swimmer and he had a bad accident in the shower.. And he had to have a back surgery.. And the doctors told him he'd never swim again.. And he wanted to go to the Olympics.. So he ignored the doctor's advice.. He got some guy to take him down to Saratoga Reservoir, train the hell out of him.. He just qualified, just barely qualified.. He went to Rome and he won a gold medal..

And he came back and he put the gold medal on the doctor's desk.. And he set the world record also, at the time.. And he told me, he was just down here.. He's become a lifelong friend.. And he's a serial entrepreneur.. He's the most entrepreneurial guy I've ever met.. And he did pemmican beef jerky, maybe a product you know, or you don't know, which was a really good product.. And he told me, "You know, Bernie, "every time I have hit a block, that's what got me "to do something really great and creative." He said, "Everything in my life," It was like the swimming thing.. "I probably would have never gotten there, "if I hadn't gone through that surgery "and that whole accident." And even, there's another story about how he got the event and all that.. And he has like 20 things he's done, and they're really very good things in the world..

And he said, "Every time there's been something "I've just had to go round, that's what made me creative "and let me see that." So the whole idea is, if you're doing something, you're gonna do it no matter what.. And just having a block can be a gift.. Having a block can be a big gift, 'cause it gets you to see something that you wouldn't have seen, ok.. But even if it isn't a gift, you still have to go around it.. So the whole idea is not to do trying and doing.. And I'll tell you one story.. I could tell you this 'cause my wife isn't here, and she won't watch it on the tube.. And she hates when I tell this story.. However, to me it's the one story which really says it all.. And the story is the following..

We were up in San Francisco visiting my son.. And we were about to drive home.. And we passed the Roxie Theater, which is in the Mission District, and it's a kind of funky theater, and it shows things you'd never see elsewhere.. And the line was bigger than I've ever seen in front of the Roxie.. And I noticed it had a band.. It was a movie about a band, and the band was there.. I'd never heard of them, but I think, "This is hot.. We've gotta go." So I said, "Let's go." She said, "No, no, no.. I'm tired.. Let's go home." I said, "Come on, let's go." She said, "Ok, we'll go." I said, "Jump out..

You buy the tickets, "and I'll go park the car." So I come back ten minutes later, and she's not on line.. And I said, "Well, why aren't you on line?" She said, "I couldn't get tickets." I said, "Why not? Why couldn't you get tickets?" She said, "They're sold out." "Yeah, but why couldn't you get tickets?" "They're sold out.. Didn't you hear me?" "Stay here for a few minutes." So I went out and I got two tickets.. So the point was, and she was right.. It was terrible.. We shouldn't have gone.. But the point simply was, she was trying.. She was accommodating me.. And she hit an obstacle.. They were sold out, which was true..

And that was it.. She was defeated, and it was ok.. She didn't mind.. She didn't mind.. She tried.. And that's the whole idea of trying.. If it works, fine.. She would have gone.. If she would have bought two tickets, we would have gone.. But she couldn't, but she didn't..

So trying is that way.. If it works, fine.. If it doesn't work, it doesn't.. Doing is different.. Doing is, if they're sold out it doesn't matter.. It doesn't matter if they're sold out, you're gonna get two tickets, ok.. And it's a good example.. Now I have trying in my life.. I'm not a jerk like some people, who, they only do.. If I have to kill him, I'll change my mind..

I will not, Don't worry.. (audience laughs) I'm gonna change my mind from doing to trying, ok.. But the whole idea is, I had an episode.. I was supposed to go to a meeting in Texas.. And I really was reluctant to go, and it was my obligation, 'cause they had given me some money.. So I went to the airport, and I met my good friend Christa Donaldson there.. We both were there.. And the gods were good.. Dallas-Fort Worth was closed because of snowstorms.. So I called up and said, "Really sorry..

"I can't come.. It's a snowstorm." And they said, "That's ok." And we both went to our homes, and we were as happy as could be.. So that was great.. But if I really wanted to get there, do you think having a snowstorm in Dallas-Fort Worth would have stopped me from getting to Dallas-Fort Worth? If my life depended on getting to Dallas-Fort Worth, I would have gotten

there.. So trying is great at times.. I'm not knocking it.. That's where Yoda was wrong.. But you have to be appropriate, and you have to know when to stop trying, if you're not doing it, and start doing.. Or forget about the whole thing and do something else.. So I have to leave a little time for questions..

I must leave-- - [Voiceover] Four minutes.. - Four minutes for questions.. That's more than enough.. We've been doing so many questions.. So, thank you.. Let's have questions.. (audience applauds) Yes? - [Voiceover] Can you give some, just some thoughts on how to change the habits, because-- - Sure.. - [Voiceover] we all have a habit of placing ourselves so-- - Absolutely.. It's a great question.. How do you change the habit? It's really hard to do it at one time..

It's, it's, it's, it's, I'll tell you, a woman did a story in the New York Times about this, I'll just answer, and she called me up and she said, "We want to do a project for New Year's, "and what should we do?" And I said, "Well, the way we do it in the d.school, "is we give the reader something to do." And she said, "Well, give me an example." So I said, "Well, give me something in your life "that's really hard to do." She said, "Well, to tell you the truth, "I've gained a lot of weight, and I'm embarrassed "to go out and see my friends" and all that.. And I said, "Well, what would it do for you if, "what would it do for you "if you lost the weight?" "I'd be able to have a social life." So I said, "Well, the problem I would give you "as a reader is, go have a social life." Nothing happens.. Sometime later, the article comes out.. "I lost 25 pounds doing this design thinking stuff." So I wrote her a note and I said, "Thank you very much." She says, "I'm a believer." So, in her case, she changed the habit by reframing the problem.. However, the way it generally works is, you do it a little, like my lateness thing, you know.. It didn't happen, like, instantly.. It's just you say, "I don't want to have that habit anymore." We all have bad habits.. And if you tell yourself the truth and don't give yourself excuses, reasons, you will change if you want to.. It's just getting out of bed, you know what I mean? You think he could get out of bed if he wants to? No matter what his history is.. I used to have a friend..

He used to train people on giving up smoking.. And he'd get a big auditorium like this, and he'd say, and it had "No Smoking" signs around, and he'd go, "How many of you are smokers?" And they'd all raise their hands.. And he says, "Well, I don't see anyone "with a cigarette in their mouth." The point was, that was their perception of themselves.. But they weren't smokers at that moment.. And that's the whole thing with you.. You have a perception of yourself with the bad habit.. You can change it if you do it a step at a time and forgive yourself.. You're not gonna change it immediately, so you're gonna screw up.. I would use a different word, but we're on TV.. You would screw up, ok? But it doesn't matter..

It's ok.. Now next time, you'll do it.. And you will do it if you want to do it.. I guarantee you that.. If you want to do it, if he really wants to get out of bed, if she really wants to figure out how to collect her money, you can do it.. Not necessarily the first time, but you can do it.. So, yeah, we all have bad habits, I have 'em, you have 'em.. - So Bernie, - That's what makes you human.. Yes? We're done.. - This was so wonderful..

Please join me in thanking Bernie.. (audience applause) - Thank you.. (audience applause)..