

THINK. PLAN. LIVE.

*Define and design your Best Life
in 6 Simple Steps*

G I L L M c L A R E N



DEDICATION

To my amazing daughters, Ellen and Lucy
You constantly inspire and support me
This book is dedicated to you

First published in 2017 by Gill McLaren

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Welcome to the world of *Think. Plan. Live.*

'What surprises me most is "Man", because he sacrifices his health in order to make money. Then he sacrifices money to recuperate his health. And then he is so anxious about the future that he doesn't enjoy the present; The result being he doesn't live in the present or the future; He lives as if he's never going to die, and then he dies having never really lived.'

Dalai Lama

There is something powerfully reflective about getting roughly halfway through life and wondering to yourself, *Is this as good as it gets? Am I really living the life I want from a career and family perspective?* A remarkably high number of people have these thoughts – you've probably had them yourself. But then life gets busy again, and we park them. But those thoughts often pop back into our heads at regular intervals, and they never really go away.

You may think what I am referring to is a 'mid-life crisis'. Others may call it that, but I don't see it that way. I consider it more of a 'mid-life reflection'. This is the process of wondering more often and more deeply

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about whether you are making the most of your life. These thoughts are most commonly about career and family life, but you may also wonder if you are doing the best you can for the people you care about, such as your children, aging parents and close friends. For many people this pondering or reflection is often triggered by challenges you or your friends and family are going through, or by hearing about or seeing others go through difficulties. Although these situations may spark thoughts about what you are all about and how to make the best of life, most people let these thoughts come and go. Most people never address, once and for all, what these 'life' questions actually mean for them. The questions are often asked but rarely answered.

I felt the same way about life, until one day I received a big jolt to my thinking. I was sitting in the audience at a talk and one of the panelists in a discussion on work-life balance said, 'I don't believe in work-life balance and that it exists; I believe in living your best life. Living your best life is really working out what you want out of life, not what you think you should want or others say you should do but what you want. Once you work that out you will be so much happier with your life.'

YOUR BEST LIFE DESIGN

The concept of Best Life Design and discovering what that looks like for you and developing practical tools to get you there have been my personal focus for nearly a decade since that jolt I received listening to that panel. My journey and discoveries about how you design and live your best life had plenty of twists and turns: some things worked and some didn't. But I have now reached the point where I feel I can share my discoveries with others, which is why I wrote *Think. Plan. Live.* I want to help you and others navigate Life Design and provide all the practical tools needed to do this.

'The more that you read, the more things you will know.
The more that you learn, the more places you'll go.'

Dr Seuss

Think. Plan. Live. is a workbook designed to take you on a practical and pragmatic journey, complete with tried and tested strategic frameworks, tools and practical advice that will stimulate your own thinking so that you can confidently design a best life plan for yourself as unique to you as your fingerprint.

The chapters are laid out in a 6-step approach to define your **Who, What, With, Why, Where** and **When**, giving you all the stimulus, encouragement and practical tools you need to rediscover your strengths, values and passions, and to help you steer yourself back on track or to find a new path. After completing these steps, the book explores in more detail how you can integrate your learnings into your life, career and leadership style.

The methods and approaches are tried and tested by me over many years, as the culmination of my own history to date; in fact, I left a busy executive job to write this book! After a three-decade career in the corporate world it increasingly dawned on me that people are not as happy as they could be, driven largely by the fact that they feel stressed and overworked, and are juggling building a successful and rewarding career with devoting time to a great family and personal life. I experienced first-hand that unfortunately work pressures often take over and family balance goes out the window.

The opportunity became clear: owning the design of our best life would really help. Initially I started with myself, but I then came to realise my practical thinking and planning tools and approach worked for my colleagues, teams and friends too. Through coaching and mentoring hundreds of people, my thinking and my tools have evolved into what you see here.

Do you fundamentally believe that you shouldn't feel as though you have to choose between your career and your family, and that even though you don't know how, it should be possible to build a more purposeful life plan that enables you to achieve success in both aspects of life? If that's the case, that's all you need to get started. A natural curiosity to explore who you are and your life choices and an openness to apply some thinking and some feeling to how you show up in life – based on the experiences of others in the same shoes – are the keys to developing your own Best Life Design.

Although everyone likes the idea of living their best life (who wouldn't?), discovering practically how to achieve this is difficult and

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daunting at times, and without the right support it can feel like an unrealistic goal. I have written *Think. Plan. Live.* to be a practical 'buddy' to support you through the steps of designing and living your best life. To keep it practical I have included my own stories, real-life examples, tools and tips to help you think through for yourself what's important and to help you design and plan out your own best life. After all the time and effort you have put into life so far, I think you deserve to have a rewarding career and to enjoy time to spend with the family and friends you care about.

The goal is that by the end of the book you will feel inspired and positive about what Life Design could do for your career and personal life by you playing to your strengths, living up to your values, and leading with purpose in your career. Hopefully you picked up the book out of self-motivation to make a positive change for yourself and a desire to make a difference in the world. The book will give you an extra nudge and some practical tools to help you create and work through your plan.

NO TWO LIVES ON THE PLANET ARE THE SAME

'Let go of who you think you should be
and embrace who you are.'

Brené Brown

For Life Design to really, really work it has to be personalised and tailored 100% to *you*. There is way too much pressure out there to live up to the unrealistic expectations or judgements put upon us – often unwittingly – by others. A foundation principle of best life definition and design is that the only judge of whether you are living your best life or not is *you*, and *only* you. I came to the realisation through coaching and mentoring hundreds of people that no two lives on the planet are the same. We each have our own Life Fingerprint, and just as no two fingerprints are the same, your best life is completely unique to you. It is created from knowing who you are, what you love doing (that is, your purpose), and what people, places or careers bring out the best in you.

'There are those that look at things the way they are, and ask why? I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?'

Robert F. Kennedy

The goal of this book is to re-stimulate your own ambition to make the best out of life and to make a difference. The book has loads of practical exercises, scientific frameworks and research, plus real stories and tips, and they all have one aim, and one aim only: to enable you to think about your own Sparks and Jolts in life that got you to where you are now and to help you gather those thoughts into a practical, forward-looking best life plan for yourself.

The book is modular and easy to navigate, and focuses on experiences and practical tools that are proven to be the successful building blocks of Life Design. *Think. Plan. Live.* aims to help you get to know yourself, to find your sources of inspiration, to find ways to unlock time, to define and build the right next career and leadership step, and to build a rewarding personal life with your family and friends.

STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR LIFE

'Always be a first rate version of yourself and not a second rate version of someone else.'

Judy Garland

I am now able to look back on my journey so far and feel pride that I navigated a successful executive career in the business world while working across three continents. I did so while being a mum to now teenage twin daughters, and being a compassionate and authentic leader in my own style. My journey to create this approach to best life planning was a thread running through my nearly 30-year career working for big corporates, the last 20 years of which was with one of the biggest international companies: Coca-Cola.

The turning point for me was realising that the strategic planning and business planning approaches I used to build strategic business plans

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could be equally applied to Life Design planning. When I shared this philosophy and approach with others, they too started to practise parts of it. I suddenly came to a realisation that what I had come to take for granted as my way of planning out my life, others regarded as a new approach that really helped them. That created a massive Jolt in me. I realised that sharing this approach was what needed to be done, and *Think. Plan. Live.* was created.

What I found was that, although people find the idea of designing a rewarding career and great personal life exciting, they also feel it's daunting and unattainable. If it was that easy, everyone would do it ... right? That's true. The problems generally stem from people deciding that they should define their best life in comparison to the lives of others. But the danger of comparing ourselves to others is that it creates unrealistic expectations; *they have a better job, a more supportive family, a nicer house or car, they are smarter and luckier than me.* The list goes on and on, and people end up with an unrealistic idea of what they should be aiming for in life. This is an even bigger problem today in the social media age. If you contrast that with the goal of defining *your* best life that is as unique to you as your fingerprint, the need for comparison goes away. Your goal becomes to make your life the best it can be for you and those you care about.

Reading and using the tools in *Think. Plan. Live.* will help you reconnect with what is important to you and discover what your unique talents and gifts are, and then convert these discoveries into a career, authentic leadership and a best life that 'fits' you.

'Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.'

Albert Einstein

The approach I have developed to help you discover your Life Fingerprint is, by its nature, very different to the approaches to development I have encountered during my career. Most of the tools for personal development are assessment tools which are designed to ... well ... assess you (or put another way, judge you ...), to classify you or put you in a box. My realisation – after going through my career and experiencing and being

Welcome to the world of Think. Plan. Live.

developed by this training – is that none of them started with a discovery of 'me' or really helped me to amplify me ... and to be truly myself. My goal is you will experience the tools developed for the Life Fingerprint as discovery rather than assessment tools. It's all about amplifying who you are.

My hope is that *Think. Plan. Live.* will be a practical guide to people who want to build a life more in tune with their purpose and who have a desire to make a difference.

So let's get started with planning your best life.

Gill McLaren

How to create a strategic plan for your Life

'The most difficult thing is the decision to act, the rest is merely tenacity. The fears are paper tigers. You can do anything you decide to do; you can act to change and control your life.'

Amelia Earhart

I felt 'Life Design' was the best way to describe my approach to mapping out your 'best life' because it is a fully owned design job from start to finish. During the design journey you must make some choices and trade-offs in different areas and in what you want the finished project to look like. First you make the plan, then you set about achieving it.

Where do you start when designing your best life? Before you can make any plans – in life or in business – you must first develop an accurate picture of where you are now. So, let's get into it!

YOUR LIFE PLAN: THE MOST IMPORTANT PLAN YOU'LL EVER WRITE

Over my corporate career I created many business plans. As part of this process I looked at a SWOT analysis (**S**trengths, **W**eaknesses, **O**pportunities and **T**hreats) to:

- assess what we were currently doing well and what we were doing poorly
- define opportunity areas in line with our strengths and capabilities
- help set a vision and targets to define and achieve our goals.

Based on this analysis I then mobilised a plan to get us to our destination, constantly honing and adapting the plan and the execution of it to get results. Business and strategic planning is proven – it works! If you are in business you will be more than familiar with this approach, and may also have many business plans under your belt. If not, the approach will hopefully sound intuitive to you. (And don't worry – business expertise is not a prerequisite for focusing on and planning your life ... everyone can do Life Design, no matter what their skills and experience.)

When I thought about my life and quizzed myself on whether I planned it with the same rigour as the business and strategic plans I was so adept at creating, of course the answer was *no*. So, I set about remedying that. How would I do it? What tools or frameworks would help? Where could I source inspiration from?

I was a work in progress for a while (still am ...), but after developing and adapting how I felt and thought about my life, I came up with an approach that really worked. But, even though I knew it really worked for me, I didn't initially see it could work for others too. But as I started to share my approach with other people, it really sparked interest, and this got me thinking how great it would be if I could walk people through the approach in a book. So that's what I've sought to do, making *Think. Plan. Live.* a workbook to your journey of building a strategic plan for yourself. After all, writing a best life plan for you has to be more important than any other plan you write. No-one wants to feel life is passing them by, or be left wondering *is this as good as it gets?*

You are the architect and the builder

Before committing the approach to paper in this book, I have tried and tested the tools and frameworks on myself, plus a spectrum of other people, including senior executive coaching clients, start-up founders, workshop attendees and friends, so I can now hand on heart say and know it definitively works. The core premise of Life Design is, the only person who can design your future life is *you*. You are the architect and the builder.

Now I often hear people at this point saying things like:

- 'I don't feel in control, and I'm no architect.'
- 'So much stuff is happening – I am just trying to get through it.'
- 'I'm juggling too many things.'
- 'I've no time to think.'
- 'My life is not about me because of everyone else I need to care for.'
- 'My work is what it is – it's all consuming and I just need to get on with it.'

And on and on it goes. These statements about life are true for most people, but that doesn't mean they *have* to be your reality. You can of course continue to live day to day, trying to work through each challenge piecemeal as best you can. And in reality, that's what most people do. But what I've found is that with a bit of thinking and reflection about your life and what's important – and, even more critically, what's not – we can reconnect with what really matters and design and shape our life path to be more about what we want and need.

What I have found is that often the most effective adjustments we can make are tweaks and small shifts that together create a massive difference. There is usually no need to completely re-plan your life – in design terms it's a renovation rather than a knock down and rebuild. In most cases it's about being honest with ourselves. When being honest, most people know where their problems lie, but just defining them and being aware of them does not create change. It takes being clear on what you'd rather life be like to create a mindset shift, and once that has happened anything is possible.

In many cases we have let some things drop off the radar that are important to us, and we may just need to reconnect with and find time for them.

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Some examples from my coaching clients are:

- spending a bit more time with close friends
- travelling more
- picking up that hobby again
- having more 'me' time
- finding time for work de-stressors, such as exercise or time with the kids.

Making life happen

Shifting to *Life Design* instead of *life reactions* means you get back in control and stay in the driver's seat. It just takes a simple but critically important reframe, from *life happens to me* to *I make life happen*.

The goal is not some perfect Life Design that means you don't have to react any more; of course life will still throw stuff at you all the time. But what I can confidently say is that if you have thought about where you are trying to head and what your life priorities are, you can react positively when problems arise and proactively recognise opportunities in a way that reflects your goals in life. As the old adage goes, 'When life gives you lemons, make lemonade'. Or another option I like even more: 'When life gives you lemons, make gin and tonic'.

If you think about your best life you can shape your existence more into what you want it to be, and so become more resilient when facing the inevitable curve balls and difficulties along the way.

Sparks and Jolts

As you read this book and complete the exercises, read the stories and try out the frameworks, it is your thoughts that count. Some parts will resonate or connect more than others – that's okay. What connects the most for you will be dependent on what's going on for you at work or in your broader life. Pay particular attention to what you are thinking and feeling as you read through the book, and if what you read triggers something take a minute to think about it versus letting it be a passing thought (trust me – these thoughts and feelings pop into your head for a reason ...). Some of these will be 'a-ha' moments or 'Sparks' in you, and for other moments the feeling will be much greater – these are our 'Jolts'.

Please read on with the mindset that you are going to really think about what the content means to you. I wrote this book to be a collection of stimuli, to share some of what works for me and other people I have helped. But, given your unique Life Fingerprint, what resonates with you is unique to you and is all about you ...




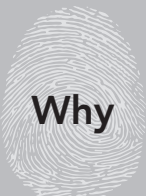


Synthesis, Synergy and Integration

My Life Design process is an iterative one, and it seeks to uncover who we are and what we really want, versus who we are being or think we should be. My method to create Life Design is in three phases:

- **Synthesis:** is to first look at all the information from your life to date and create a Synthesis of this into patterns of recurring behaviours, attitudes, values, strengths, life highs and life lows.
- **Synergy:** is about finding patterns in who we are and in life themes on what drives, inspires and energises us, and in what we attach greatest priority and importance to.
- **Integration:** is when it all comes together into a final plan for you. What aspects of your life are you happy with and which aspects would you like to optimise and develop? The Integration plans start with simple, easy-to-do next steps, but also for many people this will define future goal setting, career shifts and retirement planning.

So, given the journey of Life Design is about joining the dots, and capturing all the inputs to these dots, and building them into an integrated life plan, it is important you capture your thoughts, Sparks and Jolts as you experience them. While you are on the journey of Life Design this book will act as a good stimulus, but what it also does is sensitise you to observe how you are living your life each minute. As I will cover more in the next chapter in my story of how I became a 'self-anthropologist', I became much more in tune with my own behaviours during this process, and also where my triggers, motivations, energy sources and inspirations came from. I would encourage you to become a self-anthropologist too! If that concept sounds a bit strange to start with, don't worry – that's normal! Just start with the Synthesis part, which is all about paying more attention to your own behaviours and writing down your thoughts as you go.

LIFE DESIGN

Synthesis <i>Define who you are and what matters to you</i>	Chapter 2: <u>Who</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• My Life Line• My Values• My Strengths	 Who
Synergy <i>Develop your compass and define your work and personal priorities</i>	Chapter 3: <u>What</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• My Sources of Inspiration• My Life Wheel	 What
	Chapter 4: <u>With</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• My Energy Sources	 With
	Chapter 5: <u>Why</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• My Gifts and my Why	 Why
Integration <i>Build 12-month and milestone forward life plans</i>	Chapter 6: <u>Where</u>	 Where
	Chapter 7: <u>When</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Autobiography and Biography• Life Plan 12 months• Life Plan Milestones	 When

I have created the book to also be your notepad to collect your thoughts. Use the pages provided to jot down your thoughts as they come to the fore. The notes pages at the back of the book plus in each chapter can be used to capture your Sparks and Jolts as you go. When you have one of these feelings, simply write down what the Spark or Jolt was and how it made you feel, and if you have any initial thoughts on what you want to do about it. Just get in the habit of writing them down – no need to overthink them – as you go through the book. Some Sparks and Jolts will build as you make progress, so keep adding to them. Don't overthink what they mean, just capture the thoughts and feelings that pop up, as they happen.

'Live as if you were to die tomorrow.
Learn as if you were to live forever.'

Mahatma Gandhi

HOW TO SPOT A JOLT MOMENT

Why have I become so passionate about Life Design? One goal sits behind this for me: to fully live the 'best life' I can before I die. This may seem a morbid thought, but interestingly, contemplating death can have a remarkable impact on life – it certainly did for me. Here's a bit more context on my personal Jolts ... I've learned with clients I have coached – and in myself too – that some of the biggest Jolts and Sparks have come at the low points of their lives. To start with I thought it was just me, but what I have realised from my coaching work in Best Life Design is that both our highs and lows define us, but particularly our lows. There is something about when you fail that causes you to learn and think about what happened, but when you succeed you usually cruise on and don't learn. There is something we draw on in a low that stops us in our tracks and makes us think; our resilience kicks in and changes what happens after that moment.

I have realised for me, as for many others, major turning points can be caused by a reaction to feelings of sadness or regret. There is something about those emotions that I find drives me towards much deeper self-reflection, and through that I get into much deeper self-insights on 'what I am doing in my life?'

One such Jolt that completely changed my life, and was the impetus for leaving a successful corporate career to pursue Life Design, was paying attention to the impact the experience of losing two inspiring colleagues had on me, and my story with each of them.

The Coca-Cola Asia Pacific leadership teams would gather annually for major strategic meetings. I got to meet some amazing colleagues and learn about the different cultures and their markets and the challenges they faced. The meetings rotated around different countries, and as well as the hard work we put into those sessions we also had plenty of time for fun and socialising along the way. Through these meetings I met Shelley, who led the marketing team in Japan. She was an amazing lady; smart, practical, a great marketer and a great leader, plus also energetic and full of fun. She was one of those people I just clicked with. We didn't work together that much, but at those Asia Pacific meetings we always caught up for a chat, mostly socially to share stories and a laugh. She had a great sense of humour and a very quick wit.

In 2014 she was on an overseas business trip as part of a group from different countries from around the world. The group gathered in the hotel lobby getting ready to head out for the day. Shelley was there chatting to people, and then realised she had left something in her hotel room, so she headed to the lifts and back to her room. She never returned to that lobby. After several minutes people went to check on her. Tragically, she was found in her room having suffered a major heart attack. An amazing woman had left us at the age of 40.

News of the tragic loss shocked all who knew Shelley, and everyone was united in sadness. They were also united in recognition and reflection of what an amazing person she was. People shared stories and made videos to mourn her loss but also to celebrate her life and what she brought to the world. My thoughts went out to her family and close friends and colleagues. It hit me hard too, in a way that took me aback a little, and the tragedy made me really start to think and reflect about my life in a way that started to scare me. This was definitely a Jolt. If I were to die, what legacy would I leave in the world? Would I have lived up to my potential? Would I have made a difference? What would people say about me?

This reflection gave me some comfort in the sense that I knew I was cared about and that people would miss me and say nice things about me, but in terms of my legacy and all the things I wanted to achieve in life I still felt there was a big gap and I needed more answers. My reflections

intensified ... I thought deeply about my life, my leadership, how good a mum I was, and how I was showing up. Despite the unease that I perhaps wasn't living my best life, I reassured myself that life was still pretty good and everything was 'fine', so I parked these thoughts. I got practical and threw myself back into work.

That was until I was Jolted once more on hearing the news in the same year of a dear colleague back in the UK called Robert, who had been diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma. Early treatments seemed to go well, so the signs were good. But then I heard the news that he had taken a step back, and they realised that a stem cell or bone marrow donor was needed. However, his tissue type was incredibly rare, and no match could be found. Across the company, I and so many other people Robert had connected with signed up as potential donors. All that was needed was a swab of cells from your cheek and you could be assessed for a match. The procedure to donate marrow would be a painful one, but everyone willingly signed up in the hope that somehow we would be the rare match he was looking for.

The other inspiring part of this was that Robert's three daughters mobilised a campaign via social media to increase donors. They appeared in a number of national newspapers and on television, and their Facebook page generated 47,000 likes. The related donor charity received a surge in people testing to be a match.

Through the illness it was amazing to see the strength of feeling and support that family, friends and colleagues provided for Robert. Plus, Robert himself chronicled his own journey and reflections in updates and articles.

I had known Robert the whole of my 20-year Coca-Cola career. Although he was much more senior to me when I joined, we had connected from the start, drawn together by a shared irreverent English sense of humour (which I have realised is a theme in my life!), and also a real belief in how to build relationships with customers and to build collaborative teams. Robert was my mentor and ultimately my sponsor to secure my first customer general management role, but what set him apart was that he was an amazing leader who gave his time selflessly to others, no matter how junior they were. He also gave me one of the most pivotal pieces of coaching I ever received when I was embarking on my first major leadership role:

Gill, you have reached the point in your career where it's not about you anymore; you may be great at what you do, that's

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why I gave you the role, but from here on in it's not about you, it's all about how well you can inspire and motivate your team to deliver great things.

His advice really resonated with me, and I have sought to take that approach ever since.

Even after I left the UK we stayed in touch. We connected at major meetings, and while I was living and working in Malaysia he visited and we reconnected with laughs and stories like we had always done.

Robert's rare donor needs meant that despite the heroic efforts of his wife, daughters and others, none of the thousands of samples were a match, and he tragically passed away in September 2015, aged 58. Dauntingly for me he was only 10 years older than I was. This didn't feel like much time, and again I returned to thoughts of what my next decade should look like.

The tragedy of another loss gave me another unexpected Jolt. I reflected that although I had for some time been planning my best life, and at some point in the future my life had a chapter in it where I set up a business to focus on this, there was no urgency because I was also happy in my career. On the face of it life was good, but in my mind I knew that I had developed an approach to life that could really help people, and I was selfishly sitting on that ... it was my wake-up call to make a life change, and to write *Think. Plan. Live.*

It took tragedy to help me see that in myself, and what I have since realised from coaching people is that life's highs and lows, personal tragedies and triumphs, terrible and great bosses, and positive and bad experiences are often triggers, but not always triggers we pay sufficient attention to. Interestingly, what I also found is that the lows create much stronger reactions than the highs, because they force us to draw on our resilience to fix a situation or make it better. (Completing the Life Line exercise in the next chapter you may notice the same. So when you get to it, give it some time and thought.) My hope is that by proactively mapping your Life Fingerprint and acting on its insight on you, it won't take a tragedy for you to create the change you want to see in your life. Not that I am proposing a corporate quit, or suggesting you relive my story – far from it. My proposal is that you write the current and future narrative for your own life.

A life without regrets

So why am I sharing my story? Not because my losses were unique; others have suffered similarly, and also in much greater ways. And it's not to say that the answer is to make the dramatic move of leaving a successful career to follow a different path; that was my answer to find my calling, but is certainly not for everyone. The reason I've shared these stories is we all have moments, events and circumstances that trigger deeper thoughts and reflections and deeper latent emotions centred around what life is all about. That is universal. However, what is not universal is what you do with such thoughts. Do you brush them off and move on, or really pause and think about your thoughts and feelings? If we all take that simple extra step of paying attention to what we are feeling in both the highs and lows of our lives, we will find in those situations the clues about what we really want out of life. The sobering thought out of this is it is better to use those thoughts to channel positive change in our lives than wait to the end and look back with regrets.

I live with the aim of having no regrets at the end of my life about what I should or could have done differently. Instead, I will practically work through my thoughts and feelings along the way, and handle them the best I can, so I know I'm being me and living the best life I am capable of. That is *my* best life, not anyone else's glossy version of an ideal life – pure and simple.

Why is this important? It's important because of the scary fact that studies consistently show that as people come to the end of their lives they start feeling sadness and regret for what they didn't do, achieve, share with others, or say. If your goal is that you don't want to have any of these regrets yourself, start living your best life now. Don't wait.

Apply your own oxygen mask first

Remember, *starting with you* is a bit like applying the safety advice on planes: 'If there is a drop in cabin pressure, oxygen masks will appear. Put on your own mask before assisting others.'

At the Integration phase of life planning, mapping your life with others you care about is a significant and important part of the journey. The reason I don't start there is that I find many people are so selfless that they make sure everyone else is okay first and don't pay enough attention to themselves and what really matters. I find people become lost in

the fog of what they think they 'should' do or feel is expected of them versus what they really want.

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

Have you ever seen the television program *Who Do You Think You Are?* It helps celebrities trace back into their ancestry and discover their family tree, finding relatives and stories they never knew about, and in many cases taking them on journeys all over the world to trace their heritage. I love watching the program because it's history brought to life, but I particularly enjoy seeing the transformation people feel learning more about their history, because it triggers them to think about themselves and creates a connection with 'who they think they are'.

'Today you are You, that is truer than true.
There is no one alive who is Youer than You.'

Dr Seuss

The more I explored, thought about and worked with the idea of Best Life Design, the more it struck me that what is special is the uniqueness of who we are and the lives we lead. *No-one* will travel the same life journey as you, or will have the same hopes, dreams and experiences, so we should all throw comparisons to others out the window and start with a deeper look at the main project; that is, ourselves. To devise a best life, funnily enough we need to know what one looks like for *us* – not for other people but for ourselves. In the same way that no two fingerprints are the same, no two lives are the same. Each life has a unique fingerprint to it, and at the heart of Best Life Design is working out what that Life Fingerprint is.

Your Life Fingerprint

Let's rewind back to the beginning of time ... well, *your* time. The day you were born: Day 1. You were born into the world with a certain pre-set conditioning: your DNA from your parents, your surrounding family, the environment you were in, your IQ. On Day 1 of your journey on the planet, you were dealt a set of playing cards that shaped you. From Day 1

the clock started ticking, and how you played the 'game called life' was shaped by your environment, surroundings, parental influence, school, university, friends, relationships, travel, work, health ... the list of life stimuli goes on and on. New stimuli and inputs to who we are and who we become happen to us from Day 1 to the present day, whatever age you are now. The genes and IQ you were born with plus the external environment and influences you were surrounded by shaped you to be who you are, and your life to date has all been an input to how you show up in the world today. That nearly 50 years of input in my case was where I looked for clues to define and shape what my best life looked like.

What I have discovered is that our Life Fingerprint is well and truly defined by the time we reach adult life. Certain patterns of behaviour will recur, our highs and lows have triggers that have themes and patterns, and our values and strengths are well established too. But even though these patterns are set and are part of who you are, and your Life Fingerprint has already been defined by them, just because it's there doesn't mean it's visible to you. Up to 70,000 thoughts whiz through your head each day, usually with only the occasional thought devoted to yourself, so pondering what pattern your life is following clearly doesn't get much time.

If you could visualise your life as a fingerprint, what would be the patterns and grooves and shapes of thinking that would define it? That question is core to Best Life Design: define your Life Fingerprint and you have laid the foundations of Life Design. Easy to say, but hard to do ... and this is the core theme of this book. How do I deeply *think* about it, *plan* for it, and ultimately *live* my life true to who I really am as defined by my Life Fingerprint? From the Jolt I received to define and live my best life nearly a decade ago, I have been on a journey to build a methodology and approach that would systematically help me and ultimately others bring to the surface what our Life Fingerprint looks like. This theme will be a recurring theme throughout this book, and in the subsequent chapters you will find exercises and tools that will help you take steps to bring you great clarity on your Life Fingerprint. Once that's clear, Best Life Design will come into sharper focus too.

So if your Life Fingerprint is already developed, your choice is whether you seek to discover it or leave it hidden and unexplored. Either way, have no doubt that it still exists and shows up in your attitudes and behaviours and in your strengths, your values and your passions. Think of the discovery of your Life Fingerprint like an iceberg – parts of your

Think. Plan. Live.

Life Fingerprint are visible on the surface, other areas you may not have focused on or paid attention to even though you know they are important to you.

THE 6WS: WHO, WHAT, WITH, WHY, WHERE, WHEN

Best Life Design seeks to help you discover all elements of the Fingerprint using a 6Ws framework. The 6Ws are:

- **Who**
- **What**
- **With**
- **Why**
- **Where**
- **When.**

Let's have a look at each of these.

Who

Who captures the core of who you are – your strengths, your values and what drives your highs and lows, bringing out the best and worst in you. When you read your summary of your **Who** it will feel right and like a true summary. It sounds obvious to do this, to guide particularly work and career choices, but in most cases practicality has kicked in at some point in life and who you are got lost ... The exercises coming up of Life Line, Values and Strengths are the component parts of defining your 'Who ... am I?'

What

What focuses on what you enjoy doing – the type of work and career you enjoy and thrive in, and the hobbies, experiences and interests you enjoy. Once you have clarified what you enjoy doing, you can consider how what you currently do compares with that.

With

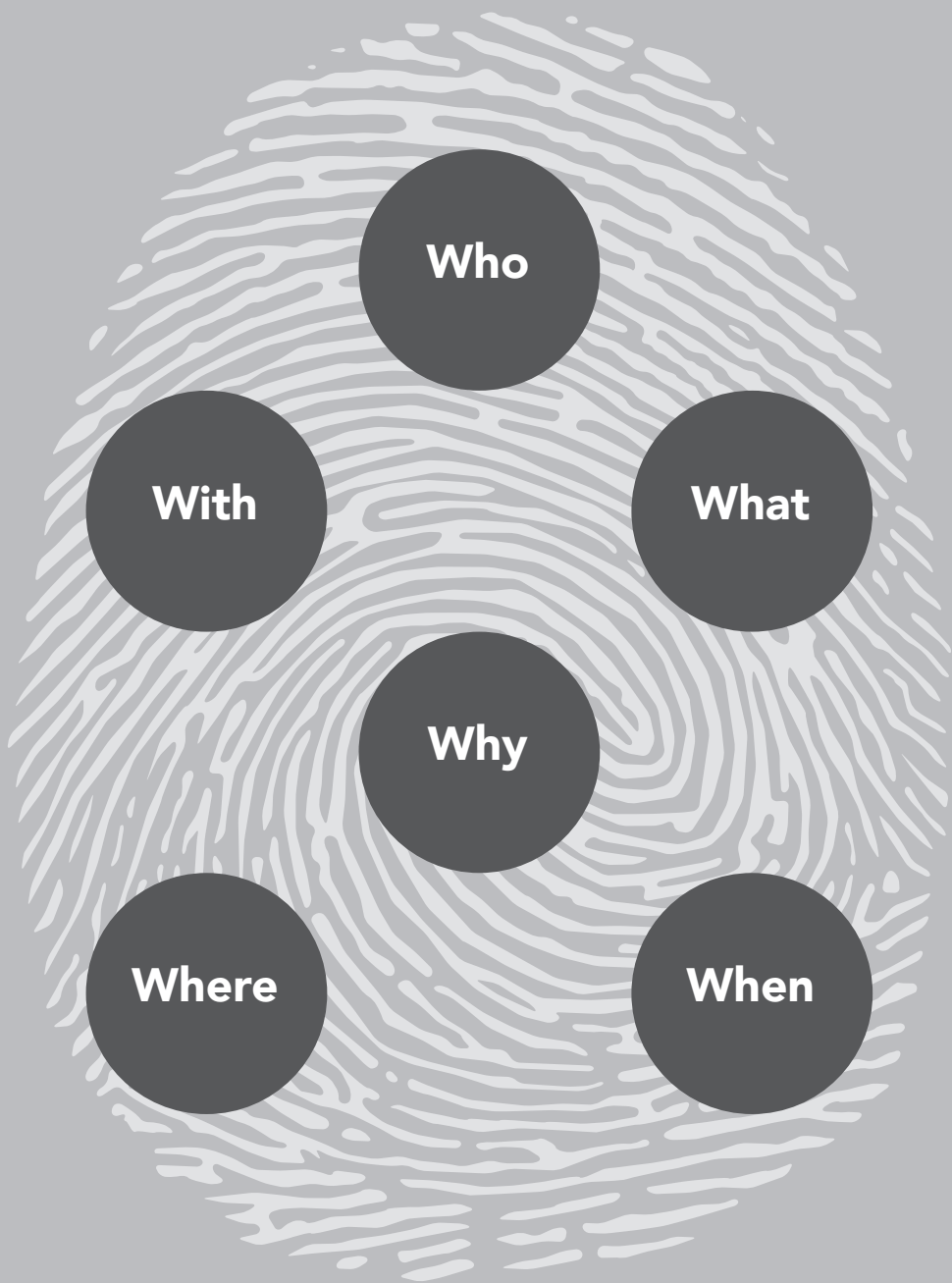
With puts the lens on who you enjoy doing things with – your family and friends, and also the colleagues or bosses that bring out the best in you too. It focuses on who and what gives you energy and inspiration and who and what takes these away. People either bring out the best or worst in us. We have more say and more opportunity than we think to control who we choose to spend time with. It's an active choice. It's at the core of actively managing our energy and inspiration levels. Because as humans we have a base need to fit in and belong, getting the **With** part of the Life Design puzzle wrong has in my experience the biggest impact on levels of self-confidence, self-esteem and happiness.

Why

My definition of your **Why** seeks to look beyond the area of purpose ... asking yourself why you do what you do is a good place to start. **Why** determines – based on your **Who, What, With** and your unique blend of strengths, values, belief and passions – what your 'gifts' are, the things that are uniquely you, that when you show up using this blend of what you do with who you are, you are at your absolute best, feeling energised and passionate. I have come to realise that people struggle to define their own 'gifts'; they are hidden from them because they are by their nature intuitive and come naturally. If this is the case, we often dismiss them as being normal and think everyone does things that way. They are in fact the opposite – unique and our greatest asset. We will explore more on how to capture your gifts in chapter 5.

Where

Where is all about places and environments that bring out the best in you. This is an area that doesn't generally get too much thought, but if you think about it, most people can identify the best environments for them. Countryside or city? Travelling or at home? On the beach or in a forest? What's your ideal home, your ideal work environment? With a bit of thought (and feeling), we all could visualise these places and pay attention to the physical spaces where we feel at our best and worst.



When

When is the final part of Life Design. It focuses when you want to do and achieve things against key milestones you determine. What would success look like in the next 12 months? When do I want to shift roles or careers? When do I want to start my own business? When do I want to move overseas or live back in my home country? When do I want to retire? Creating integrated plans against key personal milestones becomes intuitive, but only once the other 5Ws are clear.

* * *

Reading about these 6Ws may have intuitively triggered some Sparks for you on the answers to each of them, but for many people I coach and run workshops with, although there is a desire to know their answers to the 6Ws, thinking them through and reflecting on them so they 'feel right' is a blend of art and science. This is where the tools and frameworks I have created and included in the book come in. Many of these approaches are simple in construct; some are my own, some are my versions of classic coaching tools, some are neuroscience learnings. What I have sought to do is blend them together in sequence to take you on a journey so you become fully aware of who you really are (which is not always how you are showing up currently!), building that into an integrated life plan. The end result is a Life Design and Fingerprint purposefully designed by you, rather than one shaped by situation, circumstances and a career that wasn't congruent with what it ideally should have been.

I applied the 6Ws to Life Design and they form the component parts of the Life Fingerprint, not to help you delve back into your ancestry (albeit I do recommend that too at some point in your life!) but to build and capture, in a simple summary, a deeper understanding of who you really are as a person. Reflections about yourself through the 6Ws are the building blocks of life design.

Anyone from a business, commercial or research background may have come across a version of the 6Ws before. There are many applications for this methodology. I have previously applied the 6Ws in the context of strategic planning and research. To understand the motivations of consumer purchase decisions at Coca-Cola, we applied the 6Ws as the primary strategic tool to map the consumer beverage landscape in every country in the world. We captured all the drinks people consumed (including tap water, hot drinks, cold drinks – every drink), looking at **Who**

was drinking, **What** they were drinking, **Why** they chose to drink, what they drank **With** (such as with food or by itself), **When** they drank, and **Why** they drank (thirst, for energy, to be social). These insights were the bedrock of the strategic choices we made on how to develop, segment and innovate in beverages.

Think. Plan. Live. is designed to support you to design and build your best life via the creation of your Life Fingerprint over the course of reading the book. Each chapter ends with a component part of your fingerprint and is captured in the summary at the end of each of the 6Ws chapters.

DEFINING YOUR OWN LIFE FINGERPRINT

So what makes up you? It's funny how little time most of us really spend on ourselves, thinking about who we are and what we want from life.

Thinking about what you want to achieve from life – and I mean *really* pausing and thinking – is the oxygen you need before you can do anything else.

Exploring what makes you ... well, you

We really do need to start with ourselves before we can, as we do in later chapters, devote time to thinking about who we are building that life with. Most people feel at times an overwhelming need to make sure they are doing the right thing by others. Am I creating the right environment and opportunities for my children to be happy and become great human beings? Is my work great? Does my boss value what I do? Are my aging parents alright – they seemed a bit down at the weekend? Is my marriage alright, with enough time for just the two of us? Thoughts like these and many more whiz through our heads at an alarming rate of knots.

After processing all of these thoughts, most people's self-diagnosis on 'How is my life?' is *it's okay, it's fine, it's good enough*, or the most common *it's pretty full on now, but it will calm down and get better later*. This conclusion of 'I'll tackle it later' is a very dangerous one. 'Later' typically means parking that thought in another part of our brain. The hamster wheel of life continues, and we think we will get to the big, important stuff eventually. I hate to disappoint you but later rarely arrives; if you really want to plan and work things out it takes some deep 'me'

thinking time about who you are to find patterns and meaning in those thousands upon thousands of thoughts.

The other interesting part is, despite having all these thoughts, less than 5% of our daily thoughts are actually about ourselves. In fact, we are lucky if we give such weighty questions even a passing thought. Test yourself on this: when was the last time you asked yourself one of these questions:

- What are my hopes and dreams in life?
- What do I value?
- What am I good at?
- What is keeping me in a job where I don't feel I am fully valued?
- What do I love doing?

We usually devote very little time to ourselves and with ourselves to really work things out. 'With yourself' means really thinking about these questions for **Who** you are. These are all 'I' thoughts. Once your 'me' or 'I' thoughts are clear they can be followed by thoughts on **What, With, Why, When** and **Where**.

'The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.'

Mark Twain

This approach I have personally lived by, and I can honestly say hand on heart it worked and continues to work for me. The simple statement of 'live your best life', which I heard while listening to a panel discussion a decade ago, was a massive Jolt for me. I was doing great at work, I was a senior director at Coca-Cola, I was surrounded by colleagues I really enjoyed working with, I had a happy marriage, two amazing twin daughters and a great group of friends – what more could I hope for? But the honest answer to the question of whether it was my *best* life was far from an emphatic yes. It was a good life, a rewarding life, but also a full-on 24/7 life with all work and life boundaries blurred. I was feeling under pressure and worn out, and I was not feeling like I was reaching my full life potential. The other more morbid thought that crept into my head was if I died at that minute, I would not have left the legacy I wanted to leave.

So, that simple idea of living my best life quite frankly changed my life from that point on – it hit me at my core. It was a massive Jolt. ‘Living my best life’ became the mantra that I have lived by ever since. Without being melodramatic (which I’m not in life ...), this piece of simple wisdom changed my life.

I’m a big thinker (it’s no coincidence that the word *think* is in the title of this book ...), so I spent a long time – in fact, the next decade of my life – thinking about what a ‘best life’ is. My most insightful ‘thinking’ times seem to be when I’m asleep – I will suddenly wake up at 4 am with some blinding insight. The other time I think really well is on long-haul flights when I am travelling alone, with far too much time on my hands, so I think ...

My reflection on the concept of a best life is that far too often we strive for perfection, and that what we think a best life looks like is often based on observing the lives of those around us. This comparative approach to living is typically debilitating and demotivating, because somebody else’s life, their possessions and their aspirations are guaranteed to be different to our own, and very often we can easily see other people’s successes but not their struggles.

Although we are born with aspects of our life defined, such as our base IQ or our level of extraversion or introversion, much of our Fingerprint is developed over our life journey. In this regard we are responsible for our own evolution, our own development. We can manage and curate vital elements such as our sources of energy and our sources of inspiration.

With a little bit of thinking, reflection and planning you can unlock how you really feel about your life, and once you have done that you will never look back. If I reflect on how I came to work out what the barriers and drivers of building a great life are, it boils down to a few things. How we define ourselves is at the core of it. In your brain is an embedded story of who you are and what defines you; think of it as your life soundtrack. It is the collection of events from your childhood to the present day, and the people, experiences, major events and relationships that shaped you. When you were born, Day 1 of ‘Project You’ began. At that point, you were already the result of your parents’ genes, and Life Design had begun. ‘Project You’ is exactly that: a project, a constant work in progress, that builds over the course of your life. Always building, always growing, always evolving. We are each a unique project of human evolution!

As you know, arriving in the world was just the start – most science now recognises that who we are in the world is a blend of nature and

nurture. IQ has already been defined on Day 1; nature has dealt us a hand on what our intellect level is. Emotional Intelligence (EQ), on the other hand, seems to be a real blend of nature and nurture. How we emotionally respond to the world, our values and how we define ourselves are heavily defined first by our parents or who looks after us in the early years, and subsequently by relationship events with other people we meet along our path. Human interaction is an amazing thing. The behaviour that results as an output of our relationships with others forms the biggest part of who we are and how we show up in the world.

Our life is shaped by our experiences. Living means we are exposed to the elements, and just like a landscape is shaped and sculpted by wind, rain, water and temperature, we are shaped by people, experiences, learning, relationships, pain and pleasure. Our Life Fingerprint is crafted and contoured by these experiences ... that is what makes each of us unique.

NEUROSCIENCE AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR LIFE DESIGN

As well as the exercises I've included in the book aimed at helping you reflect, I also wanted to include a snapshot on the neuroscience that confirmed for me that my approach had validity beyond my own 30 years of work experience and life anthropology. Life Design by its nature is both art and science: the art of working out what's important to us and then living by it has a great deal of science behind explaining why we are as we are, and our behaviours.

How can we learn more about ourselves through brain science? We need to start by looking at our brains and how we process information – the stimulus of life. I am going to focus on how our brain impacts on how we show up in life. (I apologise up front to any neuroscientists reading this for my simplified version of brain functions.)

Our brain has three parts to it:

- brain stem, or reptilian brain
- limbic brain, or mammalian brain
- the neocortex, or human brain.

Let's have a look at these.

Brain stem or reptilian brain

In evolutionary terms this is the oldest part of our brain, and we share how this part operates with all other animals that have a brain. This collection of neurons makes sure our body functions systematically; it controls breathing, circulation and so on. This part of the brain has no ability to 'think' – it is completely responsive.

Limbic brain or mammalian brain

The limbic brain is responsible for all feelings, such as happiness, trust and loyalty. It is also responsible for all human behaviour and decision making, yet it has no capacity for language.

We often make choices to do or not do things based on our emotions. We may claim that we have been rational, but in reality in most cases we resort to what we believe 'feels right' or we go with our 'gut feeling' or our intuition. All these senses sit in the limbic or emotional part of the brain and are at the core of the choices we make in life.

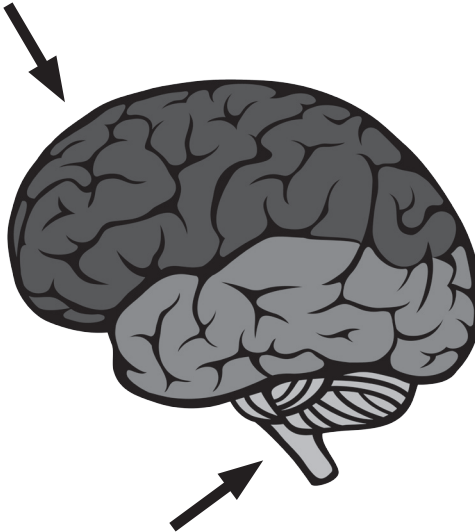
The oldest part of the limbic brain is the amygdala, which controls the fight or flight response that keeps us out of danger. Amygdala conditions such as anxiety, depression and phobias are also known to be linked to abnormal functioning of the amygdala, owing to damage, developmental problems or neurotransmitter imbalance.

The neocortex or human brain

The neocortex is the newest part of the brain. Although all mammals have this part of the brain, a large and developed neocortex is uniquely human. It is responsible for all rational and analytical thought, speech and language.

The neocortex is the only thinking part of our brain. It is always trying to understand and make sense of the world. Asking questions about a feeling converts it from a feeling to a thought. When we can go beyond expressing what we feel about something to rationally explaining what sits behind that feeling we have pushed our thinking into the neocortex. When we push our feelings to become thoughts we can make sense of their meaning.

Human brain (neocortex)
Higher order thinking



**Mammalian brain
(limbic brain)**
Emotions

Reptilian brain (brain stem)
Survival

'Be yourself. Everyone else is taken.'

Oscar Wilde

The power of understanding how our brain works, and the physiology behind it, is that we can harness that understanding to make more sense of our own thoughts and feelings, and also in some cases even more importantly understand how these brain triggers are impacting how other people around us appear to us. Through understanding brain function and its link to behaviour, trust me – the world around you will become more interesting and start to make more sense!

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.