

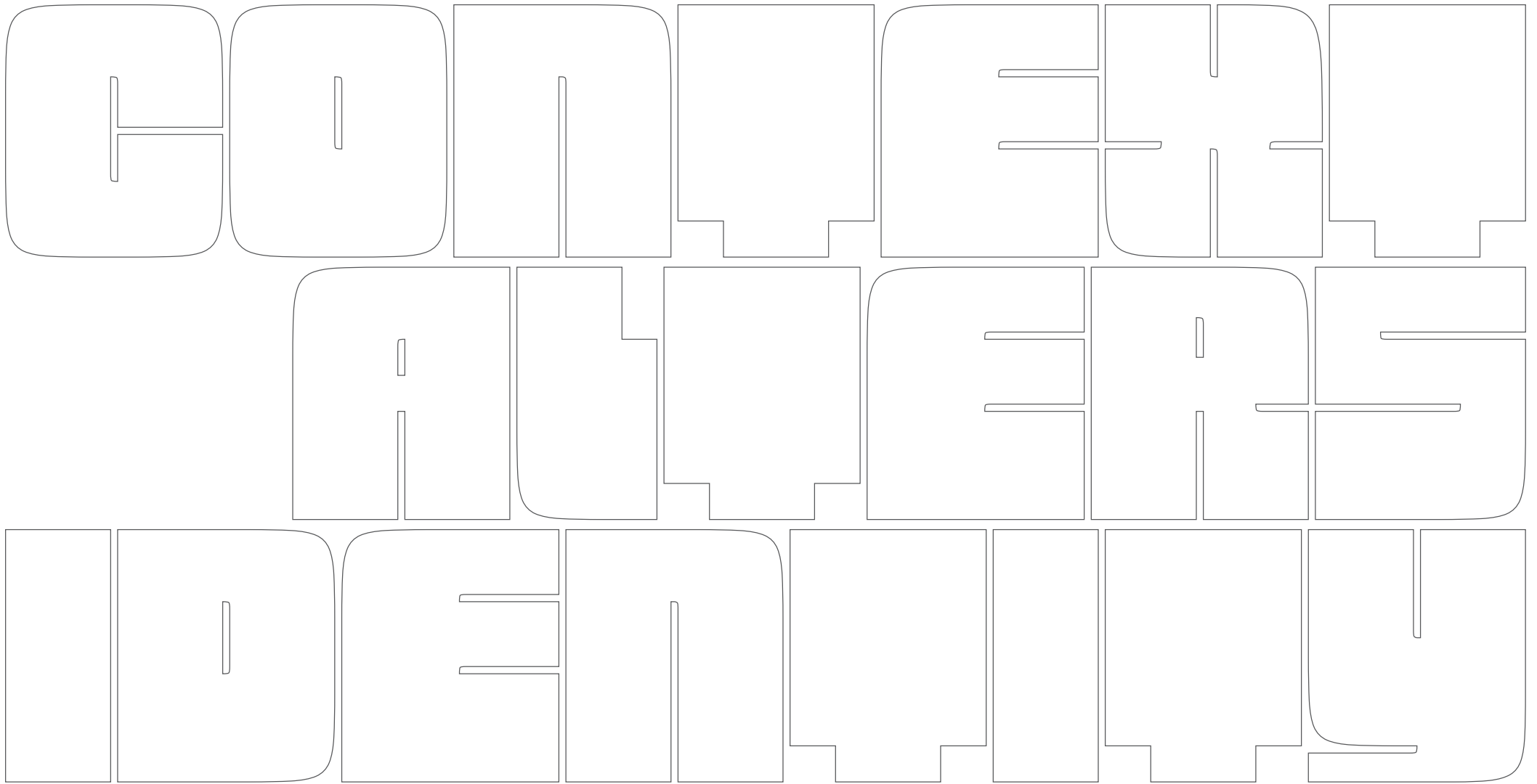
CONTEXT ALTERS IDENTITY

How our experiences, beliefs, and
perspectives impact who we are
and how we design

Rian Kasner

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**How our experiences, beliefs, and perspectives
impact who we are and how we design**

THIS ONE'S FOR ME.

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INTRO

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SENSATIONS

INTUITIONS



con•text

/kăntekst/

noun: context; plural noun: contexts

the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood and assessed.

I think of context as the container that gives us meaning.

THE EN DASH

The words “antevasin” and “borderlands” keep popping up in my conversations. *Antevasin*, a word Elizabeth Gilbert found on her journey in *Eat, Pray, Love*, means “one who physically lives at the border.” *Borderlands*, a word Gloria Anzaldú uses to title her book, means “an area of overlap between two things.” I love both words. They describe themes that continue to pop up in my life, but they don’t feel like mine. They belong to others that I relate to. I’ve been searching for my own word, something that describes my own journey. I’ve explored ideas stemming from *antevasin* and *borderlands*, and I’ve dived into this idea of “border.” I live on the border in so many aspects of my life, not just physically. Maybe I don’t want to fully identify with one thing or another. I find myself sitting somewhere between the border on all sorts of labels: athlete and book-nerd, skilled and unexceptional, intelligent and ignorant, stable and reckless, part of society and part of the wild, she and he, peaceful and unfulfilled, being in love and being alone, spirituality and atheism, wanting to go home and not wanting a home, confident and embarrassed, purposeful and nihilistic, fearless and scared. I find myself walking a line on the border of everything. I find the borderline.

Borderline.

I have finally come across a word that I love for *me*. A word that makes me think of a specific line: The en dash. One of the main uses of the en dash is to indicate a range of numbers or a span of time. It’s a beautiful little line that symbolizes everything that exists between two things. It can describe a range, or a spectrum, but most importantly, it can describe a *life*.

On the gravestone, they put a name, a birth date, and a death date. In between that birth date and that death date is an en dash. A line. This small line represents the entirety of a single life. It is everything that happens between those two dates. It is a whole being wrapped up in one beautiful little symbol: A line.

My whole life I’ve lived on the border. My whole life I’ll live on a line. My word is borderline.

I have always had an impostor fear because of my age and my identity. Because my contexts have told me to be fearful. Because society has told me that I am too young, too queer, or too ignorant. Because I see how others like me are treated in professional settings. Because I recognize the stereotypes attached to my identity. So, I have learned how to play within the system, trying to balance who I am and how I am perceived in different situations. Trying also to hide parts of myself in order to be taken seriously. To be respected. But the more I've learned about myself and the better I've gotten at code-switching for different scenarios, the more exhausted I've become. I don't have the energy for impostor syndrome anymore. I am simply embracing myself as a graphic designer who is obsessively interested in thought integration and identity influence.

One thing to know about me is that I have struggled with adopting the label “graphic designer” for myself. This comes from the general public’s perception of designers as “professionals who play a crucial role in shaping the visual identity of businesses, organizations, and brands,” (ChatGPT). That is what graphic designers do, I suppose. It’s what we’re trained to be able to do. But it feels so limiting. I want to associate more with a philosophical perspective of a graphic designer: Someone who might emphasize the ethical dimension of design, considering our responsibility in shaping public discourse, influencing behavior, and perpetuating or challenging societal norms and power structures. This is still considered a graphic designer, but I’ve changed the context.

I want to discuss how our context alters our identities. Our external context and our internal perception of it. If, as designers, we can actively recognize how we’re individually altered by our environment, both externally *and* internally, we can then be more intentional creators as we design the context for others to consume. We are in the business of influence, of context creation, of identity alteration. It’s important we understand that.

I am a graphic designer. To me, this means I am a visual communicator, a writer, a philosopher, an influencer, a context creator, an experience designer, a sociologist, a teacher, a researcher, a role model, and an ethicist. I believe designers have the unique skills to influence the future, but it starts with understanding how they themselves are influenced already. I am interested in how context alters identity universally, and how awareness gives us a say in the matter.

A LITTLE CONTEXT

THE REASON OF
US THAT THERE IS
AND THERE
WHOM WE
DO NOT
HOW

DR. CARL JUNG

THOUGHTS

CHAPTER ONE

WE SHAPE **OUR**
IDENTITY THROUGH
LOGIC WHEN WE
DEFINE **OURSELVES**
BY WHAT WE
KNOW, HOW WE
REASON, AND
THE SYSTEMS WE
SUBSCRIBE TO.



HAVE YOU MET YOURSELVES?

As a designer, I have always been extremely interested in psychology. I find it intriguing how the brain works and shapes our perception of our realities. In design, we talk a lot about color theory, hierarchy, gestalt principles, and other psychology-like concepts, but we don't often dive into the actual functions of the brain and how people experience their realities. I find there to be an extreme focus on how we can influence consumers through mental tricks, but I believe if we understand some universal concepts of how humans actually think, we can be more intentional with how we design for them. We can also be more intentional with our existence.

One of the most impactful experts on the brain that I've come across is Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor. She is "a Harvard-trained and published neuroanatomist, whose research specializes in understanding how our brain creates our perception of reality." Dr. Taylor first became famous from her viral TED Talk "Stroke of Insight." She was on track to becoming a brain researcher at Harvard, when she suffered from a stroke that completely shut down the left

hemisphere of her brain. It was a blood clot that caused everything to go completely "offline." Dr. Taylor describes in her TED Talk what it was like to have the entire left hemisphere shut down. She lost her capacity to understand and communicate in the form of language, she was unable to differentiate herself as a singular individual separate from the whole of her reality, and she lost her ability to recollect any memories from the past as well as understand the

concept of the future. She was simply existing in the moment, and described herself as an “infant in a woman’s body.”

It took her eight years to fully recover from the stroke, and as a brain researcher, she took her stroke as a study opportunity. Her book, *Whole Brain Living*, is a collection of the insights she gained from her experience, and is a step by step guide on how we, the readers, can use her findings to better our own lives and mental health, without going through a stroke to do so.

She describes herself as a completely different person after her recovery, but it’s not because she is a different person, she just chooses her default to be different than it used to be. Her internal context has changed. In her experience and research documented in her book, Dr. Taylor describes the brain as having four “characters,” and claims that “getting to know them inside of your brain is a ticket to freedom.” These Four Characters are described as such: Character 1 is the left thinking brain, Character 2 is the left feeling brain, Character 3 is the right feeling brain, and Character 4 is the right thinking brain. She acknowledges that the reader may have to make

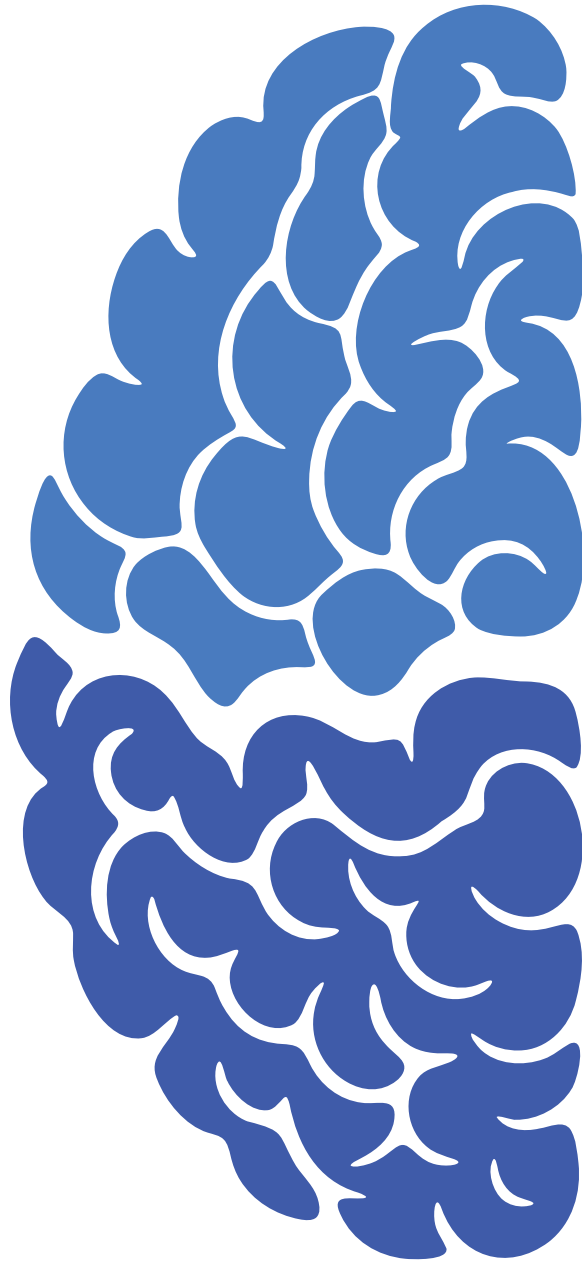
a shift in how they view their brain anatomy, because as a society we’ve all been trained to believe that our left hemisphere is our “rational thinking” brain, while our right hemisphere is our “emotional” brain. However, it’s better to view them as four brains, because although the home of our rational, conscious mind is in fact in the left hemisphere (Character 1), both our left and right hemispheres share emotional limbic systems equally (Characters 2 and 3). Our higher cortical thinking tissue lives in the right hemisphere (Character 4).

“Our left-brain emotional module is designed to bring in information about the present moment and then compare that to any emotional experience we have had in the past. As a result, our left-brain emotional Character 2 is programmed to protect us from anything that has a history of hurting us. . . . Our right-brain emotional Character 3 is exactly the opposite in that it processes present-moment experiences in the present moment. Therefore our emotional Character 3 always exists in the here and now and has no recollection of the past. Instead of pushing things away, our Character 3 moves enthusiastically toward any experience that remotely smells like an enticing and juicy adrenaline rush. . . . So, from a purely biological perspective, we humans are feeling creatures who think, rather than thinking creatures who feel. Neuroanatomically you and I are programmed to feel our emotions, and any attempt we may make to bypass or ignore what we are feeling may have the power to derail our mental health at this most fundamental level.”

Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor
Whole Brain Living

CHARACTER 1

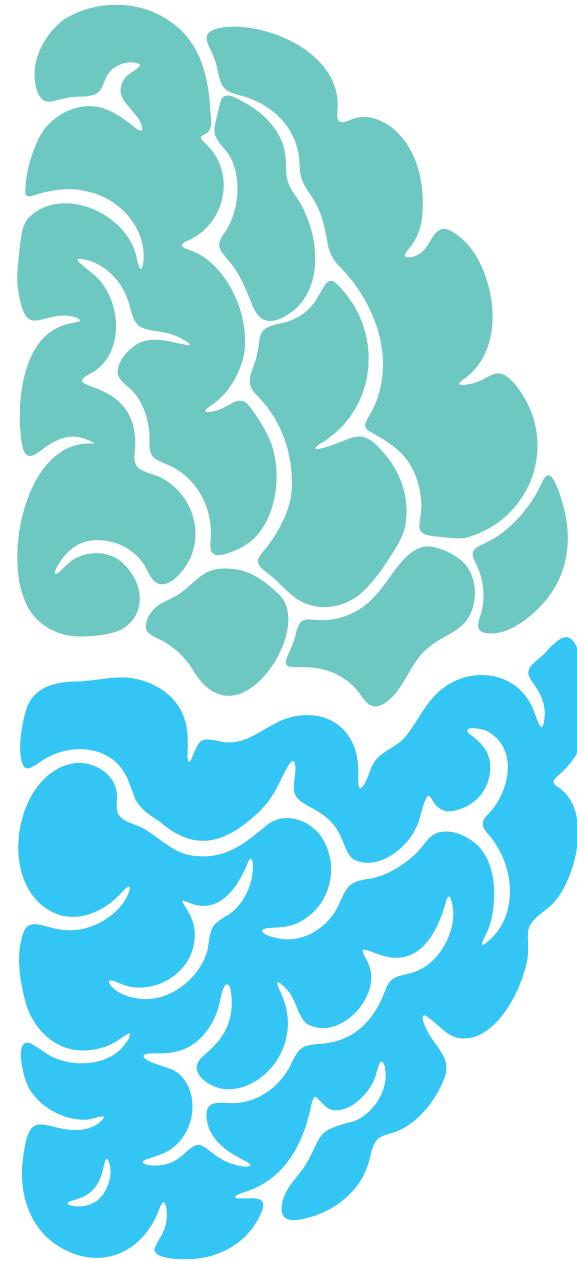
Left Thinking

**CHARACTER 2**

Left Feeling

CHARACTER 4

Right Thinking

**CHARACTER 3**

Right Feeling

Dr. Taylor is describing a new context for the perception of how our brains work. The idea is that we humans have distinct areas of the brain that process information and emotions almost completely opposite of one another, and that the reason we may ever feel torn between something, is because we have four “characters” that have different value systems and personalities. She goes as far as suggesting that we all name each of our characters within us to better visualize the idea that they are all distinctly different from one another. Our values, our desires, the way we see the world, everything is way more complex than we could’ve even imagined. Typically, people have a “default” character that takes over in many situations. Dr. Taylor invites the reader to think about different situations and think about what character takes over when you’re in them.

Dr. Taylor relates her Four Characters to Carl Jung’s four major Archetypes of the unconscious mind. Character 1 is the left thinking brain that is very past/future based, analytical, detail oriented, punctual, focused on “me,” organized, meticulous, and protective. This is similar to the Persona Archetype that is described as the different social masks worn in different groups or situations as a form of protection. Character 2 is the left feeling brain that is very cautious, fear based, manipulative, deceptive, egocentric, critical, self-judgmental, anxious, and angry. Character 2 mirrors Jung’s Shadow Archetype, which is described as the dark side of the psyche, consisting of repressed memories, emotions, and desires. Character 3 is the right feeling brain that is expansive, open, fearless, empathetic, trusting, playful, joyful, creative, and

curious. This aligns with the Anima/Animus Archetype that describes the “true self” and is the opposite of the Persona Archetype. Character 4 is the right thinking brain that is present moment-based, compassionate, open to possibilities, focuses on “we,” unconscious, expansive, accepting, and authentic. This similarly describes the Self Archetype which is considered the unification of the conscious and unconscious and contains all aspects of an individual.

The brain works in mysterious ways. Both Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor and Carl Jung have described these concepts of four distinct “personalities” within each of us. Four parts of ourselves that they both claim are within all of us. I find this extremely fascinating because I have personally created different personas of myself in different situations. Different contexts.

In professional worlds, I have always gone by my last name: Kasner. Kasner is a persona I have named that is very stoic, work-focused, intense, and confident. Kasner is someone who gets things done efficiently and productively. In my off-work life, I have always gone by my first name: Rian. Rian is playful, funny, outgoing, and silly. Rian is someone who lives in the moment and simply enjoys just being alive. I can see parts of Character 1 and 2 in Kasner, and parts of Character 3 and 4 in Rian. I have begun noticing a physical difference in my being when I am taking on the role of one or the other. I even describe them as different people, which is what both Dr. Taylor and Jung do within their respected fields of study. I have bought into this idea of the different parts of myself, and believe it is universal for the collective of humanity.

IF WE HAVE A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE PSYCHE, I BELIEVE THIS HELPS US BECOME MORE EMPATHETIC TO UNIQUE HUMAN EXPERIENCES.

Kasner designs with a completely different goal in mind than Rian does. Kasner is focused on perfection, is results-oriented, and designs to make a living. Rian is focused on experimentation, empathy, and designs for the sake of making something. I have unconsciously split my personality to exist in different contexts, which in turn produce different creative outcomes. What we are driven by influences what we make, and if we have these different parts in our brains with different values and different drives, then how do we know who is making what for when? Our identity influences the outcome of what we create, and if our

context alters who we are in any given moment, how might we understand the influence of our creations?

Both Dr. Taylor and Jung emphasize the importance of integration. If we can begin to recognize our default character/archetype, and acknowledge the existence of the others and when they show themselves in our being, then we can start to invite them all to become whole. I think of this as a form of parts work, often associated with Internal Family Systems therapy. If we can work on meeting and integrating the inner parts of ourselves, we can in turn access the ability to connect and relate to

others on a deeper level. These characters, these archetypes, these parts, are claimed to be present within every single human. Our understanding of our self can expand our understanding of *each other*. This allows us to be more intentional with how we design, and *why* we design.

If we have a deeper understanding of the psyche, I believe this helps us become more empathetic to unique human experiences. I've seen this happen in my own life since deep diving into these topics. By actively inviting parts of myself to come out more, I have noticed that my identity isn't altering as much when my context changes. I am

becoming a more conscious creator of my identity, not being influenced as much by the world. This has allowed me to think of design more actively rather than passively. I now sit with why I do anything more than I ever have before. This is because I have asked myself what my values are, and have allowed my characters to integrate instead of just defaulting to my productive and efficient Kasner persona. Studying my beliefs, values, and ethics as a whole has been a way that I have internally changed my context, therefor altering my identity.

MIDWAY UPON THE
JOURNEY OF OUR LIFE I
FOUND MYSELF WITHIN
A FOREST DARK, FOR
THE STRAIGHT FOR-
WARD PATHWAY HAD
BEEN LOST.

Dante Alighieri

The Divine Comedy: Inferno

Dante Alighieri—widely known simply as “Dante”—was an Italian poet, writer, and philosopher. He wrote a narrative poem about descending through the nine circles of hell as part of a journey of self-discovery. I find that the story is an excellent portrayal of the difficulties of understanding who you are and what you believe in. Dante confronts monstrous beings and navigates terrifying, unknown terrain, constantly wrestling with his emotions of fear, pity, doubt, moral confusion, and guilt.

I have been calling myself “Dante” lately, because I feel like I’ve been walking calmly through my own Inferno eager to see what’s on the other side of it, but not rushing the process. Dante is on this journey and he’s not at all sure what is coming next, but he’s trusting his guide to get him through it as he navigates challenges and is finding purpose. He’s facing demons, he has faith, he’s understanding his personal views, and he’s looking for truth.

I feel this way about traversing through a graphic design career. I think a lot of us do. At one point or another we experience the same emotions as Dante does: Fear, pity, doubt, moral confusion, and guilt. The rapid changing of the industry often forces us to reevaluate our contributions to it constantly. It asks us to reconsider who we are as designers and how we identify as creatives in the field. It’s exhausting. As the context of the industry changes, we have to alter our expertise to change with it, feeling like we’re constantly walking through this forest dark and not sure what obstacle is going to come up next. It can feel like an endless battle.

I have this beautifully designed oracle deck: *Archetypes* by Kim Krans. It was a gift before I even became fascinated by Carl Jung and his archetype theories. I use oracle cards as a tool for inspiration and self-reflection. One of the most profound cards I have drawn for the deck is called The Box.

In the deck book, the description states:

“We all live, to some degree, within the confines of The Box. This archetype represents everything that is known, anticipated, and expected. It holds us in place while simultaneously holding us back from our greatest visions. It is built of layer upon layer of social constructs and pressures. Breaking through its confines requires awareness, continued effort, and bravery. The Box may appear as expectations from parents, a well-paying but heartless job, the pressure to look or behave like others or simply to stay small. There is a box around you now, made of some type of confining thought. What is it? The Box shifts and morphs as we grow—this is part of its multi-layered nature. Once you break through one layer, another will present itself to you. Keep going. Break through. An exquisite life requires it. Moving outside of the box is exhilarating and expansive. But destabilizing. Others will wonder what you are doing, and why. You will too. This is part of the process. Everything within the box is known. Everything outside the box is unknown. That is why it is more comfortable to stay within its walls. Choose freedom.”

This feels like what Dante was doing: Peeling back each layer of himself as he goes deeper and deeper into his own psyche. This feels like what graphic designers do: Fight against the confines that hold us back creatively. This is a part of life. As we grow, as we evolve, and as we become more aware of how we want to exist in the world, we break through, one layer at a time. We, as designers, can then start to determine what kinds of marks we want to make during our short time on our borderline, in a literal and a figurative sense.



ONCE YOU BREAK
THROUGH ONE
LAYER, ANOTHER
WILL PRESENT
ITSELF TO YOU.
KEEP GOING.
BREAK THROUGH.
AN EXQUISITE LIFE
REQUIRES IT.

If we start to break through our layers, start to walk through our personal circles of hell, we then start to know the person in the mirror a little bit more. We start to see humanity just a little bit deeper. We start to then think of purpose, and what ours could be.

Designers are in the business of influence. We can be a part of helping others break back their own layers, feel less alone in their experience, and inspire them. Or, we are also dangerously positioned to be a part of building the walls of a box for others. We carry the same power as a propaganda artist. It's important to know that.

I want to resist this. I want to be the kind of designer that doesn't just design "user-centered" work. I want to design human-focused work. Earth-focused work. Work that helps point the needle in a more positive direction for existence, not just work that markets products I don't believe in. I used to go through the motions. I was the kind of designer that just focused on my paycheck. But, after truly understanding my own values, I've become the kind of designer that focuses on my impact. One that pays attention to how I want my work to be consumed, and *why*.

Dante eventually reaches purgatory. Paradise. By the end of the journey, he understands himself and how he navigates the world, bringing him peace. He finds courage, clarity, strength, wisdom, and hope. That inspires me. Not just in work, but in life. Dante walks through his own personal hell, forcing himself to challenge his mindset, his beliefs, and his value system. He comes out the other side as a more empathetic man who has found purpose. This is what we should all be aiming for. This can alter how we navigate everything.

AND THEN WE
EMERGED TO
SEE THE STARS
AGAIN.

Dante Alighieri
The Divine Comedy: Inferno

**DR. JILL
BOLTE
TAYLOR**

**WE ARE
FEELING
CAREFUL
WHAT WE
EAT**

WE SHAPE OUR
IDENTITY THROUGH
EMOTION
WHEN WE DEFINE
OURSELVES
BY WHAT WE
CARE ABOUT, HOW
WE CONNECT TO
OTHERS, AND
WHAT WE FEEL
IS RIGHT.

FEELINGS

CHAPTER TWO



When I was working at a marketing agency, I found myself in a Creative Director position, leading out the design department at this company. This was my first leadership role in the industry of design and marketing and I was *terrified*. The department needed a lot of help and guidance, and I was selected to be the person to provide it. My only leadership experience prior to this was being the captain on my soccer teams. I grew up in the sport, and frequently took on that team leader role. I was the buffer between the players and the coach. I was in charge of encouragement, accountability, and team morale. I was an equal to the players. I was someone they could trust and count on to be on the field with them, training just as hard as them, and speaking up for them. This was all I knew.

I read a book called *Herding Tigers* by Todd Henry. I lived by this book when I was leading a creative team. Henry claims that “leading talented, creative people requires a different skill set than the one many management books offer,” which I absolutely agree with. He uses the metaphor of “herding tigers” to illustrate just how powerful and unpredictable creative profes-

sionals can be. Tigers are not animals you can control or domesticate; they require space, respect, and the right environment to thrive. Henry explores the tension between structure and freedom, explaining how to create boundaries that empower rather than restrict. He also dives into common leadership pitfalls, the psychology of creative work,

COACH OR
CAPTAIN?

and how to build trust with highly autonomous, idea-driven team members.

Although I pulled so much from this book and highly recommend it for new leaders, I have to disagree with his claims in Chapter Five: The Shift from Peer to Coach. In the chapter, Henry states that once you step into a leadership role, you must create a clear boundary between yourself and your team. You're no longer their peer, you're their coach. He warns that trying to maintain the same level of peer-based connection after stepping into a leadership role can actually undermine your ability to lead effectively.

The problem with leading a creative team with a coach mindset lies in the fear that coaches instill. Even the best ones. In sports, coaches care about winning. They issue reprimands for mistakes, they've forgotten what it's like to be a player so it's difficult for them to relate, and their main job is to understand the strategy of the game to make the best decisions for the institution that funds the team. Their job relies on it and the success of the team relies on it. The coach is a very necessary role for a sports team, but it is a role that

players fear. Whether it's fearing the coach's wrath, or fearing the coach's disappointment. It doesn't matter how kind and well-intending the coach is, that kind of power-dynamic in a workplace setting draws team loyalty from fear instead of from trust.

Team captains, on the other hand, aren't as intimidating because they are one of the players. They care about the well-being of the team members, they are alongside the players when mistakes happen, they are in the weeds, on the field with the players at all times. Their main job is to focus on team morale so that they all together can reach the goals asked of by the coach. They know that if the team is being encouraged, working together, and isn't in a constant state of stress and fear, then everything else will fall into place.

Captains are vulnerable with the rest of the players. They know they are not the strongest player in every situation, and they encourage members who are better than them. They know their expertise, and they do not pretend they can play every position on the field. They are a beacon of encouragement, knowing the skills of the rest of

the players and the potential of each of them. Coaches say "do it." Captains say "you can do it." They know when efficiency is not the most important thing. Captains believe there are no emergencies in this field, only urgencies. They make sure their team knows that they believe it so that when they ask for urgency, it happens out of trust and respect instead of out of fear. Captains take the heat for mistakes and give the team credit for successes.

I led my team like captain, not a coach. The difference in this mindset changes the culture of the team as a whole. It changes the context the team exists in. When team members see you as one of them instead of above them, it builds trust. The way this plays out is the team comes before anything. Coaches are focused on results first and expect the team to get them, Captains are focused on the team first and know that results will come. We see this in sports all the time: A low performing team fixes their morale and they start to win. Rarely does the strategy of the coach change in these instances, it's the culture of the team that has shifted.

Team Captain Leadership means your members know that you can do the work also. If they are drowning, you can step in. It does not mean you do it *for* them, it means you do it *with* them when needed. Henry emphasizes in his book that it is important for a leader to allow team members to do the work and make mistakes, even if the leader can do it better at times. I agree fully with this, and I would add that the leader can help take on the load when the load gets heavy. Coaches don't play; they direct. Captains can play and direct on or off the field. When team members see their leader in the weeds with them, more trust builds.

I have found that much of the corporate world takes on the mindset of a coach. They make sure the hierarchy is so defined that the team feels distant from them. The relationship with team members is formal and passive, with no depth or connection. I had so much success on my team because they were not afraid of telling me when they were struggling. They knew that I would help them figure it out, or be the one to talk to the “coach” to get problems resolved. I continued to take on projects that kept me “on the field” with them, so they knew that I always understood and remembered what

it was like to have their job. I could then be able to realistically delegate tasks without team members burning out. They knew that when someone else asked for a heavy lift from our team, my feet would be on the ground “sprinting” alongside them to get it done. I developed trust with everyone as an equal who spoke up for the team, rather than a person of power who spoke at the team.

The team captain mindset is driven by empathy, connection to the team, and an understanding of where everyone is at and where they can be encouraged. This can directly translate into the classroom from the perspective of an educator. If a teacher takes on a team captain mindset with the students—meaning coming from an encouraging and understanding mentality instead of from a matter-of-fact and apathetic mentality—then the success of the students learning skyrockets. When students are learning from an instructor who

prioritizes their well-being over everything, there is freedom for them to feel safe to explore, challenge, and thrive. Often times, students might even be better than the instructor in some things. Humility often differentiates the captain and coach mindsets.

The coach is respected. The team captain is respected and loved. When I left my marketing job to become a professor, my emotions got the best of me because I loved my boss. She was an excellent representation of the team captain mindset. I did not fear her, she was vulnerable with me, and she made me feel valued. This is what we should be doing for our teams. As the classic saying goes: “people don't leave jobs, they leave managers.” Manage like a captain and your team's job fulfillment will go through the roof, giving you creative tigers that will thrive. A shift in mindset and approach will positively alter team and classroom dynamics for everyone involved.

A conversation with my boss after I ran a team captain leadership training:

boss

I really appreciate you running that discussion and I walked away with some great takeaways for sure. Something I kept thinking about is: What is the role of the “coach” and when is that appropriate? There has to be value they’re bringing, but much of what you said about a coach had negative undertones—Is there a positive function that they’re serving in this analogy to leadership?

me

Yes, there are a lot of negative undertones to the “coach,” but that is mostly because they are in a position of power. You can have a great coach, but players will typically still fear if they have done something “wrong” in the coach’s eyes, needing to always impress them, and often will not come to a coach for emotional support. The coach is the same whether the player is thriving or surviving. The team captain supports differently depending on the player’s current state.

From my perspective, I might see you as a team captain to me, and the CEO would hold the position of “coach.” It’s not that I fear our CEO; I think he’s great. He runs the structure of the team really well, and has appointed a great team captain. You help him figure out what’s best and he looks to you for insight, but we, the Department Heads, interact directly with you, and so you also get to take on our emotions and understand us on a personal level. I think it is important for our direct leadership to do that.

me

To my team members, *you* might be in the “coach” role, because *I* am in the team captain role. Again, it’s not a bad thing and it’s not that you’re a scary person, but I am the one that takes what’s expected from you and implements it on my team in a way that understands them on a personal level.

The team captain can be the same as a coach in what they do, but they lead with the members *feelings* in mind. The coach does not. It’s all about being a leader for your team on a more personal level *with* them vs being a leader in a position of power *over* them. The coach is important, and I think we have good coaches here, but there is always that need to impress that drives everything when you are perceived as “coach.” You don’t need to impress the team captain to know they have your back and they work with you on your growth.

boss

Wow, this is such a great perspective. I have not thought of it like this before. The hierarchy you have outlined in Coach vs Team Captain is extremely clear. Your direct leader can and should feel more like a captain, whereas the leader to your leader is bound to feel more like a coach (no matter what their behavior). This alleviates the concerns I had around that idea, of feeling like I need to be team captain to *everyone*. I just need to focus in that capacity on my direct team. Paying attention to, and serving their feelings. So well said and helpful. Thank you!

“The team captain can be the same as the coach in what they do, but they lead with the team members feelings in mind.”

Cedar City, Utah. Oh, do I love it here. Cedar has been holding me since the moment I arrived. It started off as a liminal space, somewhere that I moved to from Puyallup, Washington in order to begin my independent life leaving adolescence. I came to Cedar to play soccer. Recruited out of high school, the coach of the college team in Cedar offered me a full-tuition scholarship to join the roster, and invited me to a free visit to vet the school and the town. I had never even been to Utah before, let alone teeny tiny Cedar City. I fell in love the moment we pulled off the highway from the airport. Main Street in Cedar was what you would imagine an old small desert town main street to look like, straight out of a movie. Old buildings were strung together with various shops and

dining that were clearly all local, quirky hand-painted signage covered the business windows with the owners personality, antique street lamps added to the vintage aesthetic I was collecting. Best of all, it was quiet. It was peaceful. This was dramatically different from what I was used to: The modern, downtown hustle and bustle through businesses designed to look expensive and so many people crowding the shops and streets that it made you wonder if it was even worth paying the parking fee to be there. Cedar was the opposite of everything I ever knew, and the colors were different. I was used to grays and dark greens, the colors that I found not only in the streets and trees, but also in my psyche of the space. Cedar City held yellows and bright oranges, and these are colors that my being wants to exist in.



WHY HOME TOWN

The small town holds a backdrop of Cedar Canyon, a bright red-orange mountain that is so close you feel like you can touch it if you reach out in front of you from any point in town. The mountain sits east of the town, so when the sun falls asleep on the west side and the colors seem to joyously announce their departure into the night, they reflect off the colors of the mountain, and the whole town lights up, announcing their goodbye, welcoming the moon and the stars, exiting their performance from the day with a bow, and kissing the mountain goodnight. I have never seen more beautiful sunsets than the ones in Cedar City.

On my second day in this town, I signed the papers to join the soccer team. I was officially moving to Cedar and it was one of the easiest decisions I've ever made.

In Cedar City, I truly found myself. Cedar was the place that I learned to become me without the impression of my upbringing. I was able to explore my own thoughts, opinions, and values separate from what I had always known. No one in the town knew who I was when I got there, so there weren't any preconceived ideas about who I was supposed to be. I had the ability to reshape my identity without any judgment or prying eyes, and I think that was the greatest gift Cedar could've ever given me. I found community, I found peace, I found belonging.

After two years, I had a dramatic situation occur on the soccer team that brought me to this beautiful town, and it resulted in me having to remove myself from the situation. At the time, my identity was tied up in the label "soccer player." I began soccer the moment I began walking. The sport held a lot of my growth as a person. It held my discipline, my mindset, and my purpose. So, when I left the team that brought me to Cedar City, I immediately, without hesitation, searched for a new team so I could continue my soccer journey, because I wasn't going to let something outside my control end the dreams I had worked toward for so long.

So I left Cedar, determined to keep soccer in my life, and transferred to a new team in Monroe, Louisiana almost overnight. But while I had the best season of my soccer career there, everything else was wrong. The city felt gray and hollow—no colors, no community, no sense of belonging. Soccer remained, but I did not. I needed to come to terms with who I was and who I wanted to be, and soccer just wasn't worth it anymore. So I let it go.

I left Monroe and the player label that I carried for 17 years, and ran back to my beautiful Cedar City, where I felt most like *myself*. I'm not sure I ever believed before that a place could have so much importance on the quality of one's life. Cedar, a place balanced between nature and society, has always felt like my physical borderline. Even when I left, somehow I knew I'd return. It holds the space where Rian was found.

IT WAS IN LOSING AND REGAINING
MYSELF THROUGH PLACE THAT
I BEGAN TO UNDERSTAND THE
SUBTLE POWER OF CONTEXT.
TODAY, MY APPROACH TO DESIGN
IS ROOTED IN THAT SAME
AWARENESS: SPACES CARRY
EMOTIONAL RESONANCE. WHEN
I DESIGN, I WANT TO CREATE
BEAUTIFUL AND EMOTIONAL
SPACES THROUGH MY WORK
THAT HOLD PEOPLE THE WAY
CEDAR HOLDS ME. BUT I DON'T
JUST WANT TO COMFORT, I
WANT TO CHALLENGE. I WANT
TO INVITE PEOPLE TO REFLECT
ON THE PHYSICAL, DIGITAL,
AND INTERNAL SPACES THEY
INHABIT, AND CONSIDER HOW
THOSE CONTEXTS SHAPE WHO
THEY ARE, WHAT THEY VALUE,
AND HOW THEY MOVE THROUGH
THE WORLD. IF DESIGN CAN BOTH
HOLD AND PROVOKE, THEN IT
BECOMES A MEDIUM FOR SHAPING
NOT JUST EXPERIENCES, BUT
IDENTITIES.

BE
LED

BY

YOUR

CURRICULUM

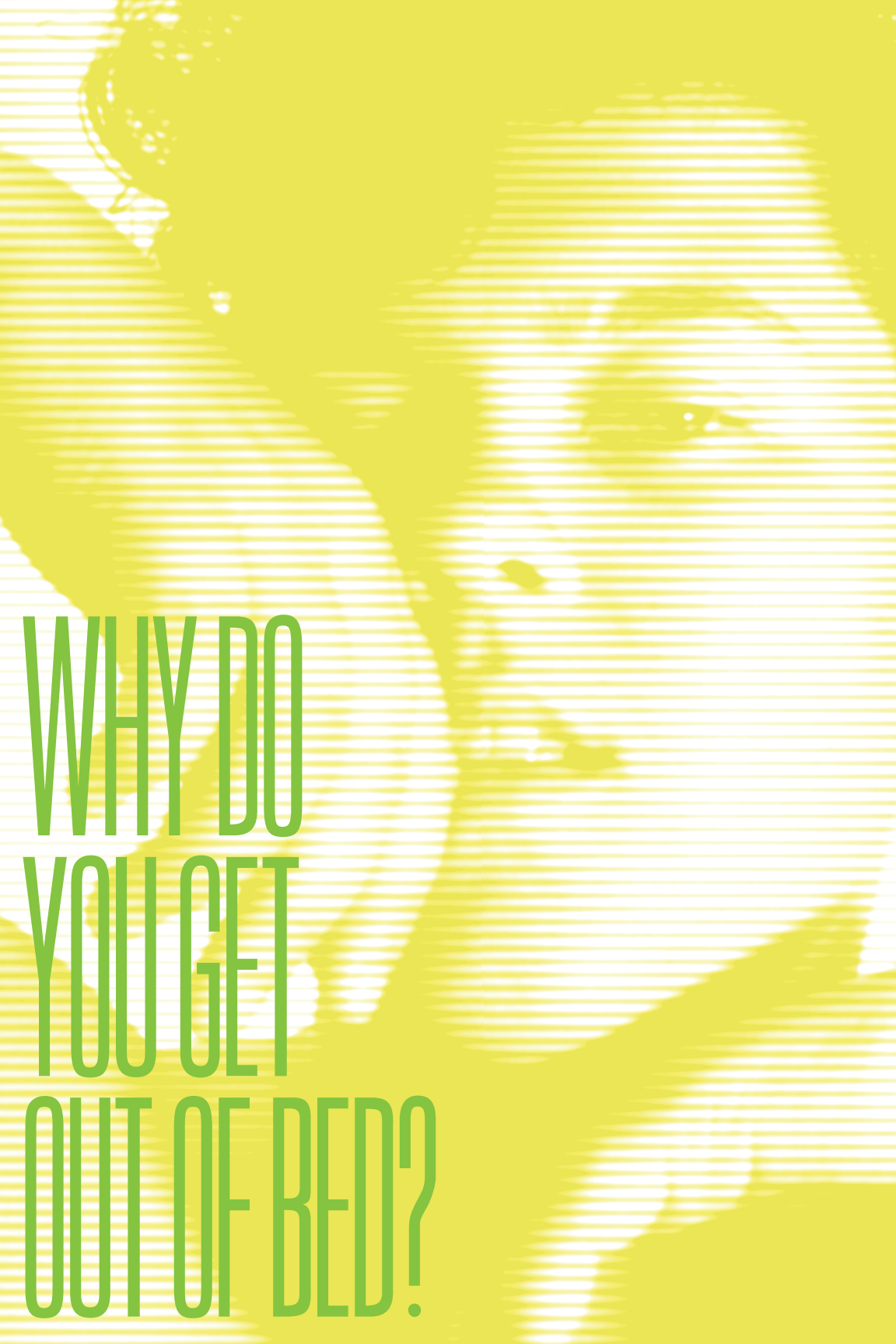
HÉCTOR GARCÍA

SENSATIONS

CHAPTER

THREE

WE SHAPE OUR
IDENTITY THROUGH
PERCEPTION
WHEN WE DEFINE
OURSELVES
BY WHAT WE
EXPERIENCE,
THE THINGS WE
NOTICE. AND HOW
WE ENGAGE WITH
THE MOMENT.



WHY DO YOU GET OUT OF BED?

What happens when you realize you're designing for a world you don't want to build? For a while, you keep going. You rationalize it. You say things like, "It's just a job," or "At least it pays well." You convince yourself that your discomfort is impatience, that fulfillment is something you earn after years of compromise. But slowly, the misalignment seeps in. You start to feel the gap between your values and your output.

For me, it started in a marketing agency. I was good at it. I was paid well. But the work served clients and industries I didn't believe in, and eventually, that friction became something I couldn't ignore. It wasn't burnout exactly; it was a quiet erosion of purpose. I realized I was using my creative skills to reinforce systems I didn't care to see grow. I had a classic graphic design existential crisis about it, and began searching for stories of others in a similar context for validation that I wasn't alone in this.

Turns out, many of us feel this way. It's the corporate trap that we're trained for. A job can be just a job but what if we want it

to be more? What if we want it to carry more purpose? Feed our soul a bit? These questions led me to a new Japanese word: *Ikigai* [ee-kee-gahy], meaning "a reason for being." We might call that *purpose*. I found and read the book *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life* by Héctor García and Francesc Miralles, leading me down an obsessive path towards finding my career *ikigai*.

I call it "career *ikigai*" because I want to make it clear that *ikigai* does not have to be wrapped up in what you do for work. The version of *ikigai* most of western corporate culture is familiar with is not the traditional Japanese understanding of the

word. In its original context, ikigai is less about career optimization and more about a quiet sense of purpose, often found in the everyday: Caring for family, enjoying a cup of coffee, tending a garden, etc. But in the West, we've latched onto ikigai as a tool for aligning work with meaning, perhaps because we've over identified with our careers as the source of self-worth. While this modern adaptation doesn't reflect the full depth of the original philosophy, I still believe it offers something useful for those of us trying to navigate life within a culture that equates productivity with value. For me, this career version of ikigai gave language to something I'd felt but couldn't quite articulate: The context of your work can shape your identity, and if it's misaligned it can quietly erode your sense of self.

García and Miralles describe four key components



that make up your ikigai: Something you love, something you're good at, something the world needs, and something you can be paid for. This is what I consider to be a quality framework for finding ikigai in your career. If there is a job that can encompass all four of these things, it is more likely for one to find fulfillment in the work they do everyday. When I was evaluating my work at the marketing agency, I found it only hit two out of the four components: It was something I was good at and something I could be paid for. It wasn't something I loved, and it wasn't something I felt like the world needed—at least not the worlds I cared about. That's only 50%. No wonder I was experiencing some existential dread when it came to my career. An ikigai evaluation gave me a new lens. It was no longer about whether or not I could do the job, it was about whether or not I wanted to.

I came across a podcast episode titled *Find Your Life's Purpose With the Japanese Philosophy of Ikigai* by Back from the Borderline. In it, the podcast host walks the audience through an exercise on how to find their own ikigai, asking questions to spark ideas. I've included this exercise on the next page. I went through these questions, searching for something that might hold all four components of career ikigai. This is how I came across the idea of becoming an educator.

I sat with this idea for a while, contemplating making the necessary moves towards the career shift. After adjunct teaching, I found it was something I loved and was good at. I do feel like it's something the world needs and it's definitely something I can be paid for. It hits all four. 100%.

Since transitioning to teaching full time, I have not only felt more fulfilled in this work than any other work prior, but I have become more creative, more introspective, and more driven than ever before. Being in a career that feels like I'm thriving instead of merely surviving has made my work feel more purposeful, in turn making my impact even greater. In the marketing agency, the context of the work was changing who I was. I didn't like the version of myself that showed up for this kind of labor. I had to ask: If I keep designing inside systems I don't believe in, do I lose sight of why I became a designer in the first place? The answer was yes. I now get to design systems for others to thrive in. I get to teach students how to make meaningful work. I love it. I'm good at it. It's needed. And it pays my bills. For me, that's career ikigai.

If you're a designer or educator who is starting to feel the slow ache of misalignment, I'd ask: When was the last time you considered the context of

your work? Not just what you do, but why you do it, who it's for, and what kind of world it helps sustain. The ikigai framework gave me permission to ask new questions: What do I actually care about? Who do I want to serve? What kind of systems am I contributing to. Do I even care that these systems grow?

When I started to ask these questions, I began to see the deeper connection between ikigai and career identity. We often think of identity as something internal, having to do with our values, personality, and personal history. However, our professional context slowly writes itself into our identity, whether we mean for it to or not. The jobs we take, the projects we say yes to, the clients we keep—these all become mirrors we start to believe. I hadn't realized how much my identity was shifting until I couldn't recognize the designer I was becoming. The change didn't come all at once, but through small moments and projects that were slowly piling up.

Now, as a design educator, I've begun integrating ikigai into the way I teach. Not only as a career tool, but as a self-awareness tool. I ask my students to consider not just what they want to make, but why they want to make it, and for whom. I don't need them to know the answers right away, I just want them to practice asking better questions. Questions that consider their place in the system, their stake in the outcome, and their role as designers with influence.

Ultimately, we aren't just shaping layouts and interfaces, we're shaping culture. I believe that when designers consider their way of being, they stop contributing to systems they don't believe in and start designing the worlds they actually want to live in.

FINDING YOUR CAREER IKIGAI

AN EXERCISE

These questions are from the podcast episode titled *Find Your Life's Purpose With the Japanese Philosophy of Ikigai* by the Back from the Borderline podcast. Actively answering these questions helped me find commonalities between the answers, assisting me in determining that becoming an educator was extremely aligned with my career ikigai.

Try answering these questions, and then see parallels across your answers. Actually write them down, don't just ponder. Your career ikigai will start to show through similarities and common themes. Really stretch yourself to think outside the box. My answers included things like "juggling" for things I'm good at, "less social media" for what the world needs right now, and "dancing" as something that makes me happy. These answers had nothing to do with what I thought could relate to my career, but they were helpful in getting me to expand my thoughts.

Some reminders from the podcast:

Saying yes to your ikigai will require you saying no more often.

You need to create rock solid boundaries to respect your time.

Start small to help the world by simply making gestures of kindness.

- 1 What do you love, what brings you the most joy?
- 2 What are you good at? What skills do you have?
- 3 What do you think the world needs most right now?
- 4 What skills do you have that you can monetize?
- 5 What would you like to see change in the world?
- 6 What in your life right now with no changes makes you happy?
- 7 What kinds of tasks at your current job give you the most pleasure?
- 8 Why do you get out of bed in the morning?
- 9 Have you had any life changing moments that provided you clarity?
- 10 What do you do on Saturday morning when you have nothing to do?

LONELINESS IS UNIVERSAL.
IF DESIGNERS DON'T
RESPOND TO IT, AN
WHO WILL? EPIDEMIC

Reading *Seek You: A Journey Through American Loneliness* by Kristen Radtke challenged me to consider how loneliness is a shared cultural context—one that quietly shapes how we relate to ourselves, to others, and to the world. Radtke discusses recent studies stating that over half of Americans report feeling lonely on a regular basis, and chronic loneliness has been shown to have the same health impact as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. Through a blend of memoir, visual essay, and cultural critique, she illustrates how loneliness is both individual and systemic. It's an emotional undercurrent that affects most of us deeply, even if we rarely speak of it.

One of the most interesting studies Radtke outlines is from the University of Wisconsin. In the study, monkeys were kept in total isolation by a group of scientists at the university. The animals were separated shortly after birth and observed how their behavior changed in relationship to the amount of time they'd been alone. Monkeys who were isolated for less than six months went through a dramatic period of shock when they were first introduced to non-isolated peers, however they eventually joined the colony within a few weeks.

However, monkeys who were alone for a full year were worse off. When introduced to non-isolated peers, they were so aggressive toward the isolated ones that scientists had to pull out the loners for fear they would be killed. The longer the monkeys had been alone, the less likely the rest of the colony were to accept them, and the more likely they were to try to kill them. Radtke states:



“The weakness of an outsider is repulsive to someone desperate to stay inside. . . The less one interacts with others, the more likely they are to build narratives around themselves that reinforce an impulse toward isolation. They may make concessions for people they’re close to, and assume the worst about the intentions of those they’re not.”

It seems like, as a society, we have defaulted to an impulse towards isolation, even when our psyches crave connection. We were designed to be creatures that connect, but as our tech advances, so does our isolation. We no longer rely on having to interact with people to survive. But, life isn’t just about surviving, it’s about thriving, and how can we thrive if we feel alone?

It’s a strange thing to realize how many people are quietly carrying loneliness. Radtke makes a compelling case: Loneliness isn’t just personal, it’s cultural, systemic, and urgent. Her book reveals a truth many of us already sense but rarely acknowledge. And because so few of us admit to feeling lonely, we assume we’re the only ones in it. But we’re not.

It’s an epidemic. We live in a world that often fails to nourish our need for belonging. And yet, we’re wired to need each other. The cost of disconnection is visible not just in public health statistics, but in the quiet ache so many carry. As designers and educators of design, I believe we have a unique position within this crisis. We are the people who shape systems of interaction, who decide how information is communicated, how environments are navigated, how voices are heard or ignored. We don’t just have the skills to make pretty things, we have the power to make meaning and express the human experience. And in a culture of growing isolation, this is what people are starving for.

Design has the power to make people feel seen and related to. It can validate an individual, reflect a shared experience, or make someone feel a little more human in a moment of disconnection. For students stepping into this field, that kind of perspective can be extremely motivating. If we can teach them that they’re not just learning technical skills, they’re learning how to craft meaning for themselves *and* for others, the work becomes deeply human. They can reflect on what they care about and how they can contribute as creators. If we start to teach and design with this perspective in mind, we can be significant contributors to how the future is shaped and how culture shifts.

Loneliness is universal. If designers don’t respond to it, who will? How can we remind someone, however subtly, *you are not alone*?



JOHN KEATING

DEAD POETS SOCIETY

WE SHAPE **OUR**
IDENTITY THROUGH
INSIGHT WHEN
WE **DEFINE**
OURSELVES BY
WHAT WE **DREAM**
OF, HOW WE MAKE
MEANING, AND
WHAT WE STAY
ALIVE FOR.

INTUITIONS

CHAPTER

THREE

What is a graphic designer? Google says it's "a person who combines text and pictures in advertisements, magazines, or books." ChatGPT says it's "a professional who uses visual elements like typography, imagery, and layout to communicate messages and create visually engaging content across print and digital media." This isn't what I'm interested in when it comes to design. Notice that I haven't once discussed typography, imagery, hierarchy, or creative tools. I haven't talked about branding. I haven't brought up color theory. I haven't even talked about design psychology. This book isn't about the *making*.

For the last two years, I actually have struggled with the making. I've had a bit of an identity crisis with my "graphic designer" label because of this. If I'm not drawn towards making things, how could I conceivably call myself a graphic designer? What gives me the right to be a leader on design teams, teach design students, or even talk about design as whole if I didn't lean into the design making?

I suppose I don't want to be a graphic designer. But is that true? What really is a graphic designer? Are we not an accumulation of our thoughts, beliefs, values, experiences and actions? If I am having an ethical crisis of designing for the current society, doesn't everything I love about design become an ethical question? Have not I been primed to produce work that survives consumerism? Do we not live in a world that teaches us how to work to live without contemplating life?



WHO
ARE YOU?

I feel as though I've been groomed into corporate aesthetic, and I've been desperately trying to unlearn my way out of it. But I have been taught how to be a "good" graphic designer. I have been taught that the only way to survive is to follow the principles of design, use color theory to your advantage, and convince the user that they need what they are seeing.

I don't want to be in the business of survival. Of convincing others to agree with things I'm not particularly sure I believe in the mission statement of. The way we interact with each other is an ethical question. The way the robot can write our words to one another for us is an ethical question. The way I sit here and teach students how to survive in the corporate machine is an ethical question. A career path of graphic design is an ethical question.

Unless we change the context.

I call context the container that gives meaning to everything we do. It's the who, what, where, when, and why that shapes us. The environment we design in, whether physically or mentally, can either reinforce or reshape who we are as creators, who we create for, and why we create. If graphic design is simply about making things pretty and convincing others, can I make beautiful things that shift perspectives in a positive way? Graphic designers have a skill set that goes beyond typography and grid systems. We are able to see how things connect to one another, and we can bring them to the light for others.

I want to help people live. Truly and fully live. To find and feel purpose. That's what everything ends up leading to. That's why I'm so fascinated by understanding how Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor's characters are in all of us. It's why my leadership style takes on the more empathetic role of the team captain than the coach. It's why career ikigai is so important to me. It's why I write. I want to not only connect with others, but help them connect with themselves, cherishing every moment. Maybe all we need is a mindset shift to help us feel less alone.

So, I suppose I *do* want to be a graphic designer. But, I want to be someone who approaches design with a deep, reflective mindset, considering not just the aesthetics and functionality that we are all taught, but also the ethical, cultural, and existential implications of our work. I want to talk about why certain designs exist, how it shapes the human experience, and our responsibilities towards society, nature, and the future. I don't want to be limited to graphics, I want to converse across disciplines. I want our impact to be in the forefront of our minds, not an afterthought. I want the practice of design to innately consider the ethics of what we do. If designers can consider who they are and who they want to be in the world—in the *system*—then we can use our unique skills and abilities to really change it for the better.

I used to call myself a nihilist, because I believed nothing mattered. But that was me believing we got to choose our own purpose in life, not that we are predisposed to a purpose by a higher power. I now realize that I'm an existentialist, because I have always believed we get to live the most meaningful life we want. It's up to us. I think we have choice in making our life matter or not, but many of us are just in survival mode.

So, what is a graphic designer? Maybe it's not just someone who arranges type and image, but someone who shapes meaning through choices. If context alters identity, then the environments we work within, the clients we serve, and the systems we



support shape who we become. Who we become shapes what we make and why. Design is never neutral. It always reinforces or resists something. That's why I can't separate design from philosophy anymore. I want design to be a reflective act, a practice of asking *why am I doing this?* I want design to help people live, not just consume. I want it to connect us to ourselves and to each other. If designers understand the context of what they believe in, then they can create more intentionally for a world that they are helping shape, whether they know it or not.

The most important thing we'll ever design is the context we choose to live in, because that will determine who we are.

O ME! O LIFE!

Oh me! Oh **life!** of the questions
 of these recurring,
 Of the endless trains of the faithless,
 of cities fill'd **with** the foolish,
 Of myself forever reproaching **myself**,
 (for who more foolish than I, and
 who more faithless?)
 Of eyes that vainly crave the light,
 of the objects mean, of the struggle
 ever renew'd,
 Of the poor results of all, of the plodding
and sordid crowds **I** see around me,
 Of the empty and useless years of the
 rest, with the rest me **intertwined**,
 The question, O me! so sad, recurring—
 What good amid these, O me, O life?

Answer.

That you are here—that life exists
 and **identity**,
 That the powerful play goes on,
 and you may contribute **a verse**.

WALT WHITMAN

DEAR READER

Dear reader, I ask you this: Who are you? When the labels are stripped away, when the perception of others isn't there, *who are you?* What is it that you believe in as a human that walks through this current world? What is it that you do that makes you feel alive and brings you fulfillment? What is it that you dream of? What is it about the world that makes you feel less alone in it?

This book has been my attempt to answer these questions. Not with conclusions, but with analyzing my context. Because identity isn't formed by one thing in isolation; it is an ever-changing spectrum of our essence. You either form it passively or actively. It's a collection of what you consume and how you interact with the world. And you can decide it all.

You are the main character of your life. You are also the director. The universe will set the stage for you, but what is it that you will do with it?

I beg of you, dear reader, shift your context, and contribute your verse.

It's what we stay alive for.

Rian

VERSES IN CONTEXT

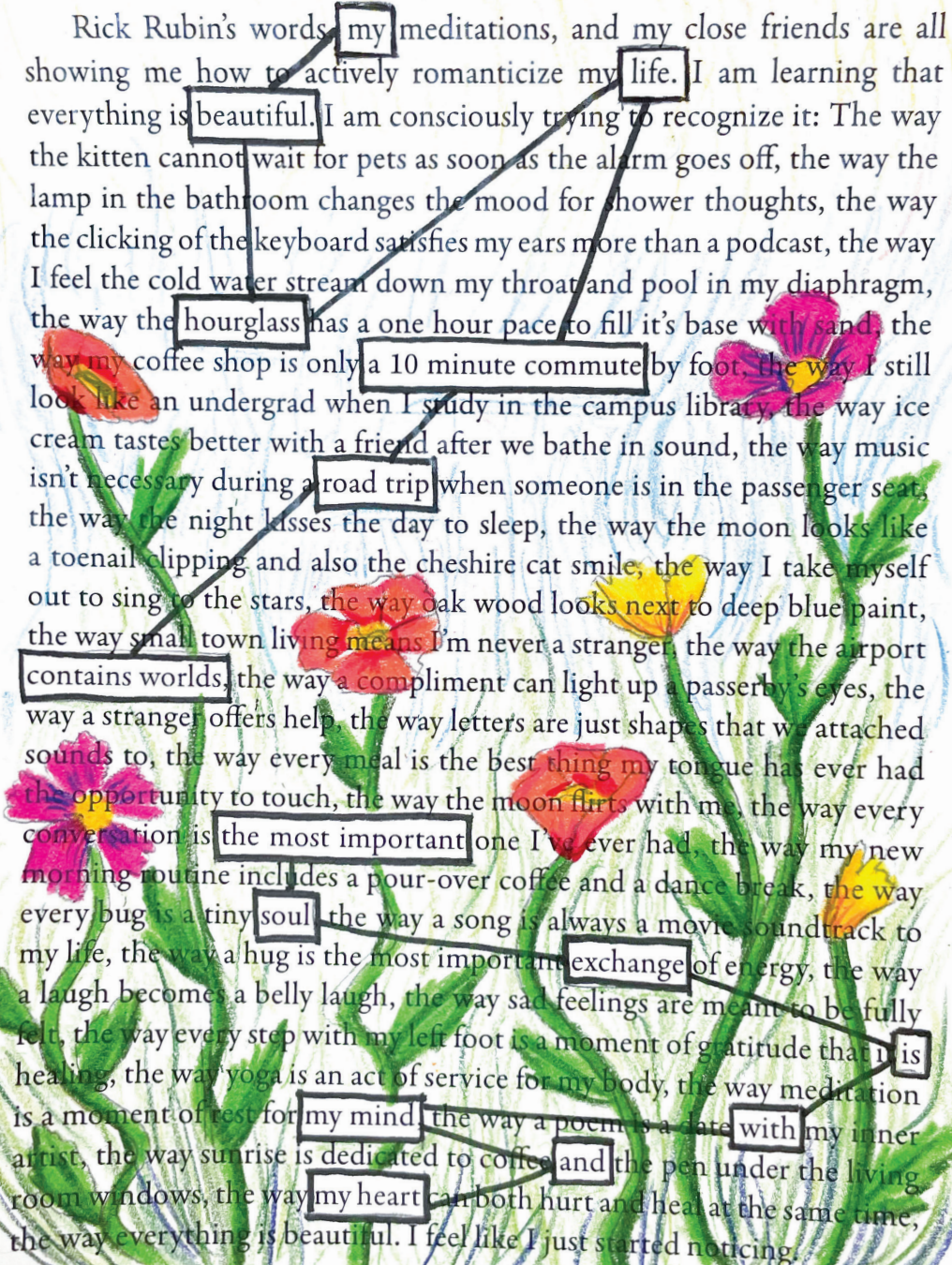
To close this book, I wanted to offer something collective.

What you'll see in the following pages are blackout poems created by my friends using the same source text of a lyrical essay I wrote. Each of them was given the exact same material, the same context.

Just like design, just like identity, context alone doesn't determine the outcome. It's what we bring to it. Each poem is a reflection of its maker—their perspectives, their beliefs, and their way of seeing the world. They turned my words into their own. From the same content, the same context, they pulled out different truths. What they each made is beautifully different.

That's the point.

I'M A ROMANTIC



Rick Rubin's words, my meditations, and my close friends are all showing me how to actively romanticize my life. I am learning that everything is beautiful. I am consciously trying to recognize it: The way the kitten cannot wait for pets as soon as the alarm goes off, the way the lamp in the bathroom changes the mood for shower thoughts, the way the clicking of the keyboard satisfies my ears more than a podcast, the way I feel the cold water stream down my throat and pool in my diaphragm, the way the hourglass has a one hour pace to fill it's base with sand, the way my coffee shop is only a 10 minute commute by foot, the way I still look like an undergrad when I study in the campus library, the way ice cream tastes better with a friend after we bathe in sound, the way music isn't necessary during a road trip when someone is in the passenger seat, the way the night kisses the day to sleep, the way the moon looks like a toenail clipping and also the cheshire cat smile, the way I take myself out to sing to the stars, the way oak wood looks next to deep blue paint, the way small town living means I'm never a stranger, the way the airport contains worlds, the way a compliment can light up a passerby's eyes, the way a stranger offers help, the way letters are just shapes that we attached sounds to, the way every meal is the best thing my tongue has ever had the opportunity to touch, the way the moon flirts with me, the way every conversation is the most important one I've ever had, the way my new morning routine includes a pour-over coffee and a dance break, the way every bug is a tiny soul, the way a song is always a movie soundtrack to my life, the way a hug is the most important exchange of energy, the way a laugh becomes a belly laugh, the way sad feelings are meant to be fully felt, the way every step with my left foot is a moment of gratitude that it is healing, the way yoga is an act of service for my body, the way meditation is a moment of rest for my mind, the way a poem is a date with my inner artist, the way sunrise is dedicated to coffee and the pen under the living room windows, the way my heart can both hurt and heal at the same time, the way everything is beautiful. I feel like I just started noticing.

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THE ALARM IN MY
MIND
STARTED NOTICING

Annalyse, who was there from the very start, reading every word, listening to every ramble, and helping shape the work when it was still just a jumble of thoughts. Your patience and insight gave me a compass.

Emilee, who moved in during the thick of it and quickly became my creative sound-board. You fed me ideas (and food) when I was so deep in it I couldn't see where I was going anymore. Your presence got me through the end.

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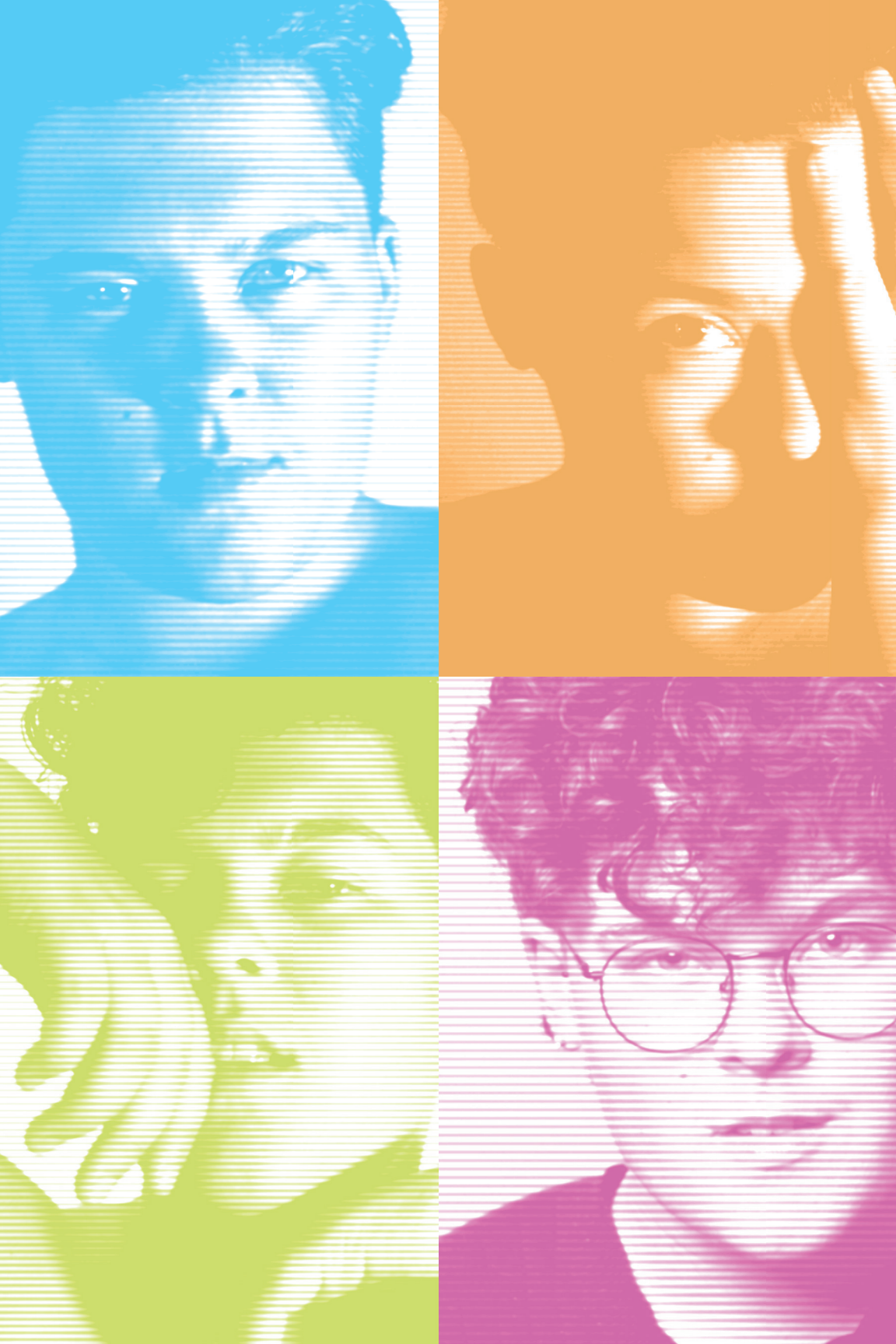
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Annalyse Davis

*Written and designed by Rian Kasner
Vermont College of Fine Arts, 2025*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rian Kasner is a philosophical designer, educator, and writer exploring the intersection of identity, ethics, and creativity. With a background in graphic design and a deep commitment to questioning, Rian's work challenges the boundaries of design as a corporate function and re-imagines it as a tool for self-inquiry, cultural critique, and meaningful connection. As a university instructor, Rian encourages students to ask questions, trust their instincts, and prioritize meaning over convention. Through writing, teaching, and collaborative creative practice, Rian invites others to consider not only what they make, but *why* they make it.

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Just breathe and be you.
That's so much more than enough.

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