Designing Hope

Jeremy D. Cherry

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"Where there is no hope, it is incumbent on us to invent it."

— Albert Camus

Hopelessness has become quite fashionable, I'm afraid. People who act as if they are excited about the way things are going are not merely uncool. It's worse than that: they're naive.

As the slogan goes, *if you aren't angry, you aren't paying attention.* A generally hopeful disposition, then, becomes a sign of willful ignorance—or, at the very least, of having the wrong priorities. And so we resign our own hopes to a box in the attic with other juvenilia— the stuff of childhood.

To hope, it seems, is *unserious.*

Among many other things, what I find most lovely about this work by my friend and colleague is that it is unapologetic in this regard. You will not find a cynical phrase in its entirety. I would describe the writing as *guileless*, which some thesauruses—I was surprised to learn—list as a synonym for naive. I would like to take a moment to trouble that assertion.

Having known and worked alongside Jeremy Cherry for many years, I can attest that his thinking on these things is not rooted in a lack of knowledge. Rather, I believe he writes from within the sort of insight that can render conventional knowledge just that: conventional. His is not a life free from adversity. His own

design practice is not easy or flippant. Moreover, he does not consider these ideas lightly. This is the writing of a designer making his way through a vocation that is quicksand for many. The hope he describes is allusive, yes, but it may also be the only solid ground.

I suppose I'm saying that the author comes to his subject with admirable seriousness, and we would do well to take him seriously, however unfashionable that may seem.

Many of us have been trained to think and speak about hope as if it were a genetic trait: either you have it, or you don't. Still others believe hope is stylistic; the outward trappings of an optimist. Here, Jeremy is proclaiming that hope is something we can—and must—do.

Not because we are unafraid, or selfless, or little gods, but because the work of what he might call hopeful design must be accountable to a future we hold in common. And a significant aspect of the work of a designer is increasing our fidelity to that shared aim. This is the work of imagination and persuasion. And in my time with the author, it has been a great privilege to see him—on projects large and small—take up these two pursuits in what I can only term the discipline of hope. It's something he conjures that I find simultaneously professional and radical.

I see this discipline unfolding in three steps.

Situate yourself in the future. Do a little time traveling as you enter into any design process. If we approach our work from where we wish to go, we have a much better view of how to get there. This kind of vision requires careful tending or it quickly grows stale. Jeremy lives out of this preferred reality and relishes the toil of its continuing renewal.

Imagine the conditions of flourishing. Get outside yourself. Seek out the weakest creatures and systems and place them at the center of your work. What would it take for them to be whole? Does this project, no matter how small, afford the possibility of change in that direction?

Choose the prerequisites for those conditions. Sounds simple enough, but I actually suspect this is the radical part. It is so much easier to describe flourishing than it is to make the decisions that foster it. We must become the holy fools of innovation. So often, hope is hiding in plain sight just waiting for someone to point it out.

We are designing the future we will inhabit, and it is in no way fixed. We must become hopeful enough to choose a better way. Adopting this approach is no guarantee of good outcomes, but I view it as the precondition for Jeremy's assurance that this better way is even possible. His approach might be the first three

steps toward some inner alchemy that transforms hope from a noun into a verb. From that quiet thing collecting dust in the attic to the absurd and beautiful shape of our preferred future.

If you're able, I would encourage you to read this book the same way it was written: with plenty of room to breathe. Sit down and read a chapter and then stop. Let the ideas ride with you for a while. Try not to overanalyze it. Then, come back and read the next chapter. You'll find that the ideas themselves spiral out from the ones that came before. Echoing and revisiting. It is not a treatise so much as a lyric, and like all things that are true, it will convince you if you let it.

Hope is a bird with a sprig of something green when you've been at sea for forty days. But it is also a forbidden bar mitzvah in a concentration camp. It is a wedding proposal in a cancer ward. Mandela, who knew a thing or two about suffering, said this: "May your choices reflect your hopes and not your fears." I believe this book, for Jeremy and those of us working alongside him, is just such a reflection, however silly it may sound, and whatever the data might say. However dark a given night, may this book remind us that we always have just enough light for *Designing Hope*.

— Z. Bryant
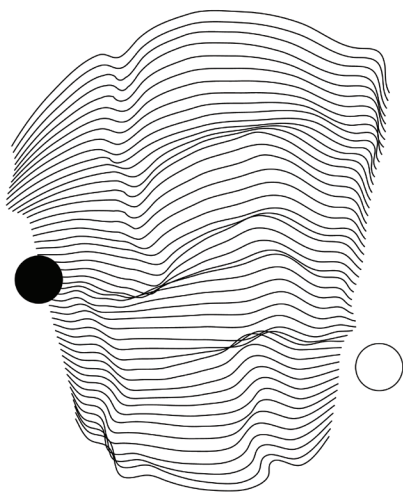
Modernity offered me a choice: become a salty, old designer or offer a solution. I could contribute to the noise or search for clarity amongst the chaos.

As someone who's spent my entire career in digital design, I've grown discontent with the direction of the trends. A high emphasis is placed on efficiency, engagement, aesthetics, and profitability, leaving no room for responsibility. The machine stops for no one. We've replaced accountability with a funhouse mirror distorting reality enough to lead users to believe they are to blame for their own plight. Addiction, isolation, and depression have all been exacerbated by the products that promise connection and community. This reinforces the lie that something must be wrong with *us*, not the design.

In this bleak future, humans are merely pawns in the capitalist churn of technology. Our attention has become currency, and in this economy competition is inhumane. However, the problem of irresponsible design is so much bigger than the sum of its parts. Data, privacy, and sustainability are critical topics to discuss but the larger, looming issue is much more human. It lies within an outgrowth of industrial apathy.

I also found that these patterns of valuing profit over

people weren't at all unique to my area of expertise. I've spoken with countless print, environmental, architectural, graphic, and instructional designers that echo a similar sentiment. Which is to say, this apathy isn't just a digital problem. It's a design problem.

This led me to an existential crisis. Would I simply succumb to a nihilistic conclusion that we've lost our compassion for others or would I encourage others to remember our shared existence? While cynicism can be tantalizing, I chose the rockier path of hope.

Designing Hope is best viewed as an arm-wrestling match between pride and responsibility. I'm seeking to grapple with what hopeful design could look like across a wide spectrum of design disciplines. While certain practice areas have no shortage of nuance and expertise, this book strives to rise above technical theory, seeking out the heart of the matter. Design should be compassionate.

Now that we've covered what *Designing Hope* is, let's briefly talk about what it's not. It's not a self-help book for designers. Though I hope it does help you, it has to be viewed through the lens of our shared communities. It's not a dogmatic navel-gaze. It would be pure hubris to assume that I have the right answers to the ever-evolving issues we face as designers. It does, however, aspire to be the beginning of a conversation, not the conclusion.

In short, if you create things for others *(you do)*, this book is for you.
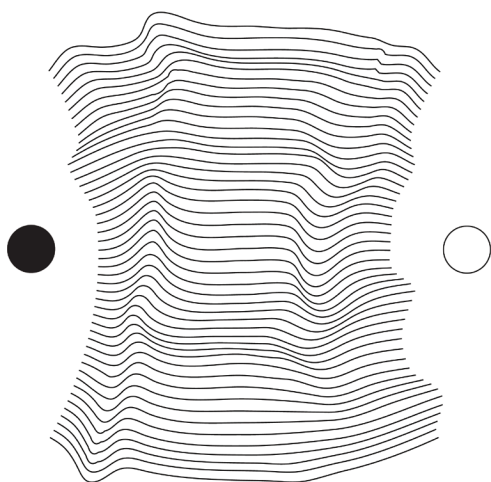
Design is so much more than creating pretty things.

It challenges the status quo and creates change: change that can solve some of the world's toughest problems simply by advocating for the humans impacted by them. Design is not passive, self-serving, abusive, dishonest, or greedy. Design is *hopeful*.

I became enamored with design at an early age. At that time, I don't even know if I considered this fascination "design" at all. It looked more like trying to make sense of my surroundings by searching for a better way to accomplish things. This early belief that a better way is possible has fueled my career.

Design is the vehicle that has allowed me to help others believe that what they are doing matters and that their story deserves to be told well. I've spent the last decade telling stories through brands and screens, and what I love most about that is the wide spectrum of people that this discipline has allowed me to serve. Whether it is a local medical clinic, multinational nonprofit, or centuries-old university, I've had the honor of working with organizations based all over the globe.

Our practice as designers is a beautiful discovery of what's often already around us or, as Michelangelo put it, what's already living within the marble. This

discovery doesn't start with an answer. It starts with a question.

Questions are a part of life. They form our conversations, and they inform our work. They're foundational to who we are as humans. Show me a human, and I will show you an infinite ocean of curiosity. But my favorite thing about a question is that it provides room for hope.

For several years, I have become enamored with one particular question:

How do we design with hope?

It's not an overstatement to say that asking this question changed the trajectory of my career and my practice as a designer. Asking this question made everything feel more consequential, more meaningful. Not only that, asking this felt so timely. In an age where we can barely rationalize the progress and innovation being made, considering this has made me pause and think more clearly. What I came to realize is that hope once felt elusive, unfashionable, and naive; however, now it felt like the only way to create meaningful work that effects lasting change.

So, after several years of endless thought and a lot of red ink, I decided to formulate a definition to this framework of hopeful design.

Hopeful Design: A design framework that creates hope by practicing in an ecosystem, honoring that community with its solutions, and sharing in the responsibility of its outcomes.

Though it feels really complex, I assure you that it's beautiful in its simplicity. Easy? No. But simple? Yes.

Simplified, hopeful design can be broken down into three main principles:

Be curious: Learn your surroundings from within an ecosystem.

Be compassionate: Form solutions from experiential learning.

Be humble: Share responsibility no matter the outcome.

You can view this entire book as an exploration using these very principles to answer the question I've been wrestling with all these years. Each chapter seeks to fill in the blank,

Hopeful design _____.

Each chapter also ends with a practice, seeking to move the abstract into praxis. These methods are meant to form meaningful habits and rituals in our design processes. To change the way we design, first we must change the way we think.

Hopeful design teaches us that there are real people in real places behind every sketch that could cover a whiteboard. It provides us with an entirely new vantage point if we let it. I'll begin with a warning: allowing hope to creep into your work will change everything. So if you are interested in the status quo, this framework may not be for you.

May we design with purpose.
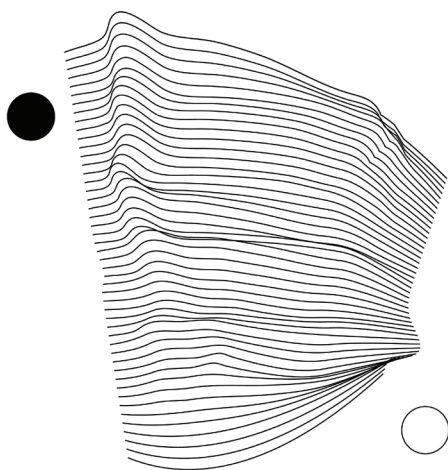
Designing Hope

Every designer contends with a certain restlessness. Something beckons from within, whispering that the world around us could be better. It's a type of idealism that feels attainable. And so, as designers, this restlessness fuels us to take a closer look and ask, "Is a better way possible?"

This question can feel rhetorical, but we usually have an internal answer—something that sounds something like, "There's got to be a better way to do this." And there's a confidence in this refrain. Rather than pure perfectionism, it's the drive to keep improving. No one with a designer's intent sets out to make something more difficult, complex, or convoluted, though these attributes can become unintended byproducts when pursuing improvement.

We must learn to channel this restlessness into betterment because it is also true that constant critique and analysis can become fertile ground for cynicism. This drive for better is beautiful. It can lead to innovation and reinvention. When we lean in a little closer, we realize this drive is hope.

Answering fear

Over my lifetime I've gotten to know fear intimately. I was an anxious kid, always finding new things to lose sleep over. As a child, adults chalked it up to a vivid imagination. Then the teenage years came, and physicians blamed my anxiety on hormones. Phrases like, "You will eventually grow out of it," were efficient ways of giving false assurance to my panicked mind. Even then I knew that there was something different about the way my brain was wired. The suffering was a visceral reality.

What I didn't expect was for anxiety and depression to follow me into my adulthood. It culminated in me being diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). GAD is a fancy medical term for anxiety getting in the way of your everyday life. Sufferers commonly have persistent and uncontrollable worry about everyday situations. In my lived experience, I've found that anxiety is chronic fear that feels paralyzing and unsurmountable. It's a looming cloud that never seems to fully vaporize, always forcing you to have a keen sense of your next move. Most troubling, it's numbing. It makes it near impossible to enjoy just about anything. This includes the things in life I value most: my family, my community, and my work.

Hope became more than just a nice strategy emblazoned upon a motivational poster. It became my med-

icine. I quickly realized that true hope had an answer for fear in its expectant confidence. Hope is a muscle that requires constant exercise. Often I've found that hope presents itself as a choice. Hope is always present, it just requires the right eyes to see it. It often appears very blurry just upon the horizon, taking time to come into focus. What is encouraging is that anyone can learn to see it. However, it will require us to redefine some terms that have lost their power in our lexicon.

Changing our definition

Hope is a word that creeps its way casually into my daily conversations. I hope it won't rain today, just as I hope the coffee pot isn't empty. It's a word we've given a new, social meaning. It's an expectation that can have even the most mundane requests. However, my favorite definition of the word is often listed right below our casual definition in the dictionary. This definition is powerful in describing a feeling of trust, a confident expectation.

Webster himself wrestled with its definitions in his *1828 Dictionary*.

> **Hope:** A desire of some good, accompanied with at least a slight expectation of obtaining it, or a belief that it is obtainable. Hope differs from wish and desire in this, that it implies some expectation of obtaining the good desired, or the possibility of

possessing it. Hope therefore always gives pleasure or joy; whereas wish and desire may produce or be accompanied with pain and anxiety.

This first definition plants the seed of possibility. It seeks not only to define what hope is but also to reaffirm what it isn't. It even ends with a veiled warning that "wish and desire may produce or be accompanied with pain and anxiety." This distinction is crucial in my work. His second definition gets closer to the hope I've grown to know and love.

Hope: Confidence in a future event; the highest degree of well founded expectation of good.

I don't think hope is simply an antidote to the restlessness I spoke of earlier; I think it goes much deeper. Webster arrives at it in defining "the highest degree of well founded expectation of good." Hope comes when we are searching for the good, beautiful, and true. It's not about convenience, comfort, or efficiency. It's about what is *good* for others.

Hope requires morality; it requires a point of view, an answer to this question. Hopefulness can be jarring for people not used to encountering its authenticity. When we peel away the lifeless exoskeleton of our modern definition, we find true hope rooted in humility. And *real* hope can get you in a lot of trouble, so proceed with caution.

Hoping for others

Hope's confident expectation fuels us often in spite of our clients. If clients had a confident approach, and the skills to implement their goals, they likely wouldn't have hired us. We're aren't hired to wish or simply desire a better way; we're hired to discover it.

Throughout my design career, I'm continually surprised by how often I encounter hopelessness. Hopelessness can be a destructive force spreading like wildfire within the organizations that we are seeking to help. Its spark is easily carried on the wind of our words. It only takes one hopeless word to carry this spark of despair to a project.

And this isn't simply on the client side of the equation. Like most of us, I get a good laugh from client horror stories. I'm sure we've all been informed that "we'd love to see the logo bigger," and "I wish it would pop more." However, these moments can quickly snowball into the collective villainizing of the people we're seeking to support. This cynicism can lead to hopelessness in our own practices, viewing our clients as roadblocks rather than patrons. After all, they are funding an effort that helps people in need.

A designer not only has tremendous opportunity to provide hope to those interacting with our work, but we also have a responsibility to do so. Without hope

we would have no confidence that the solutions we offer bring about any meaningful change. Those who seek us out do so with the intention of bringing a decisive, assured voice to the conversation.

I have a strong suspicion that a lot of the negative feedback that creates designer/client horror stories stems from a lack of confidence. When we self-examine how we act in times of low self-esteem, we notice that the patterns are no different when scaled to the size of the organizations that we're serving. It seems glaringly obvious, but it's worth the reminder: Organizations are just a collection of people. We shouldn't treat them like lifeless, inanimate things.

We have a propensity to use language in design that inherently creates inanimate entities. Words like "brand," "product," and "application" begin to feel sterile when they become too commonplace in our vocabulary. And they become completely lifeless when divorced from the real people that they are serving. These final products are only as powerful and organic as the real-life interactions they foster.

Providing light

It's our job to generate hope not only in our processes, but also on behalf of those whom we are serving. Just as hopelessness can spread like wildfire, so too can hopefulness. Sometimes it takes a while for our clients

to rekindle hope in their mission, brand, or product, but that simple spark left smoldering can generate a flame. The larger the organization, the longer these effects can take to spread out to the edges.

Before a pen touches paper, a marker touches a whiteboard, or a pixel is pushed across a screen, we must start with hope. Clients seek a final product, but they also come to us because they want another eye to recognize the value in what they're doing in their community.

To our clients, hope often doesn't feel anything like a confident expectation; it feels more like a pipe dream. In the absence of hope our clients can feel stuck. I've experienced this many times working with clients who have just spent an enormous amount of time, money, and energy into a strategic venture. Whether it's research, content strategy, or even a large-scale branding project, the excitement usually wears off really quick when our clients have to pivot to executing on expensive advice. They are often left with a large, heavy toolbox with no instructions of what to do with it.

We have to remember that hope can be taught. It's our responsibility—better yet our privilege—to redirect our client's expectation toward an attainable future.

More than blind optimism

The truth is that hope will take hard work. True confidence doesn't come without the proper amount of elbow grease. Blissful ignorance can be quite good at perpetuating blind optimism.

However hope doesn't come without belief in an outcome. Hopefulness is a form of optimism that looks for the true and beautiful rather than endlessly searching for the imperfections around us. Paying closer attention to the systems around us reveals their troubled nature. Offsetting this harsh reality with blindfolded positivity isn't hope at all but rather foolishness.

Maybe the confidence aspect of hope is informed by experience. Maybe it comes from trusting the discipline. Regardless of its source, we know that it comes from an intimacy with the problems we're solving. You cannot solve what you do not know. We have to hear from real people and live among their words. Only then can we have the confidence to begin removing their barriers.

Advocating through design

My biggest fear upon the technological horizon is that we'll lose our humanity in the quantification of our lives. Data is now so easy to capture and analyze. We can use it to mold minds creating persuasive traps for

users to fall into. Our confidence can stop being informed by *hopefulness* and can start to be informed by *manipulation.*

There's such sadness in seeing this play out in our society. Faces are transformed into numbers, and numbers are quite easy to manipulate. This manipulation may start upstream of our audience interacting with our design, but it creates a vicious cycle that sends our processes into a tailspin. Visions of success appear like a mirage in the desert when we're seduced by dehumanized data. We learned this in kindergarten: The game is much easier if you cheat. Allowing hope to power our practice is much harder to do than create a cheap spike in analytics.

These persuasive traps are just as tantalizing to our clients. Tension between our clients and their users can make that fragile line feel quite taut. This is where our hope has to influence both parties.

We can't stop at simply hoping on behalf of our clients; we have to hope for their users as well. Advocating for users is something we will have to do repeatedly. It can be exhausting to constantly redirect the attention to the people we're serving, but it serves as a necessary reminder to us as designers. We don't just serve clients; we serve their users.

We navigate this taut line between our clients and

their users like a high-wire act. At times it can feel as though the feat is impossible. Sometimes advocating for usefulness looks like letting go of grand aesthetic visions or solutions that make your brand the hero. More often it looks like sitting with real people, hearing their struggles, and allowing your work to simply react to those realities. This is advocating for users. It isn't creating problems for your work to solve. It's creating lasting solutions to issues real people are experiencing.

This approach also affirms our pivot to hope being a confident expectation. When I begin to encounter challenges I can confidently ask, "Did I listen well enough?" Stories often illuminate the pathways. Remember the solution is often right in front of us, living in the stories of both our clients and our users.

What hope requires

In our daily work, hopelessness can cause us to respond cynically with phrases like, "It's just not my job to _____." (I'll let you fill in the blank.) Encouraging our clients is often out of scope, inefficient, and doesn't always favorably impact our profit margins, but I believe it's our job and the source of a wealth of hope.

True hope calls us to have courage and endurance. It will take time to foster within ourselves and even more time to foster within the organizations we're serving.

We must remember that though a spark can cause a wildfire of *hopelessness*, so too can it shed the right amount of light to foster *hopefulness*. The time required shouldn't deter us from seeking hope as our end.

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PRACTICE:

01. Talk about hope.

There are topics that we neglect because we feel like they should be assumed. Hope is the foundation, so it's well worth mentioning. It's OK to tell those you're serving that hope is your goal. Speak it into existence.
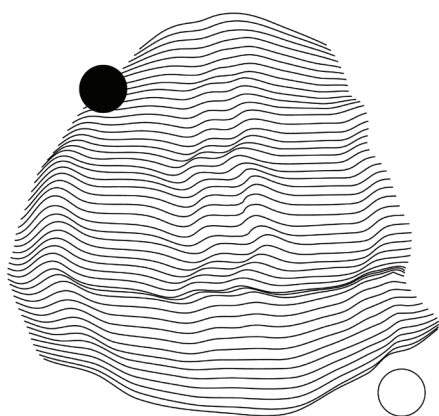
Refining Intent

Refinement is something that all designers do organically. The practice can come so naturally that often the problem isn't in the iteration itself but in knowing when to stop. For most of us, self-control often looks like knowing when to put down the pen. Many of us can agree that intent is burdensome, yet to think well about intent, we must first think well about refinement.

The practice of refinement is an ancient one. You can trace it back to when humans first began making things with their hands. It is laborious and often taxing—on not just our bodies but also our minds. In our modern design practices, refinement has evolved into iterative design. However, the mental image that still captures me most is that of blacksmithing or elemental purification. It takes great friction, force, and elbow grease to work out the imperfections. The toil of refinement is what makes the finished product feel right or complete.

And so refinement should conjure the same feeling in our work. We should look at our work with pleasure and assurance, knowing that it took valuable energy to mold.

If left unchecked, our own intent often gets convoluted in the smoldering foundry of refinement. Honestly assessing our own intent might enable us to course-correct and better move toward the problems we're seeking to solve.

The pitfalls of prideful design

Designers love being heroes because humans love being heroes. It's incredibly fulfilling to have someone applaud your work. This instinct within us often catalyzes our design processes. But our hero complex can also seduce us into solving problems that don't actually exist. And this is where our pride comes into play. We can so quickly project challenges onto the world around us that aren't real roadblocks at all.

Intent requires us to keep this tantalizing desire in check. I've found that once I remove the false layer of heroic design, humble vulnerability can cut to the core of my intentions. Through collaboration and critique, we can ask others to help us refine the foundation of our approach. With the right eyes on our work, we can hopefully avoid the pitfalls of prideful design and embrace design practices motivated by true compassion.

Designing with compassion isn't cheap sentimentality, and it requires more than just sympathy. This type of design requires an empathetic approach to our creating. Only by beginning to understand the plight of those

whom we're seeking to help can we start to resolve the issues at hand.

Embracing critique

Refinement is quite difficult to do in a vacuum. Anytime we open our laptops or grab our set of tools, we naturally hop right into refining our work. It is a fundamental aspect of design. It's why software has a save function; it too knows you're never really done.

In design school, receiving critique was one of the hardest practices to learn. I remember the shaky knees and clammy hands that accompanied any presentation. I'd often deliver lines with a shudder, awaiting the onslaught of opinions. I also remember the resounding advice regarding this constructive feedback: "Don't take it personally," and, "You have to separate yourself from your work." It was incredibly hard not to internalize feedback— and darn-near impossible to separate myself from my work.

After a decade of getting more and more comfortable with critique, I've found that only one of those pieces of advice is worth its weight in gold. It's probably a good idea to separate yourself from your work. Because design is personal. Its outcomes impact real people in real places. It often advocates for refining environments and forming new ecologies. It will involve us interacting with the actual hands that will touch our work. I can hardly think of something more personal than that.

It's important for the people we serve to have a say in our work. After all, it's serving them. I think about this idea of ownership often. From my perspective, design ownership looks more like stewardship or resource management than it does a signature on a piece of artwork. When a project is complete, the keys are handed over not only to the paying customer but also to the community it's serving. The final design is theirs to continually refine, theirs to determine its value.

Embracing this new reality of relinquished ownership may sting at first because it's uncertain. However, with practice, I think we will find it to become the most freeing aspect of our work. Allowing others into our work can complicate a lot of things because we humans are good at that. Yet to truly refine the intent behind our work, we have to embrace others and their critique. And this dialogue—between our point of view and theirs—becomes our lifeblood.

The danger in assuming

Assumption is poison to design. Design thrives on a certain kind of intimacy with people and problems, and we cannot solve what we do not know. Assumptions are shortcuts that appear appealing for a variety of reasons. I'd like to spend some time unpacking this idea so that we can better avoid the enticing fantasies of assuming.

On the surface, decisions informed by assumptions can

look aesthetically pleasing. An unfounded solution is often quite sexy. However, it is a roadmap that leads to a dead end.

Products founded in assumptions begin to crumble when transferred into real hands, and users are left scratching their heads at the proposed solution that has nothing to do with their reality. There are a thousand apps for alarm clocks, checklists, and inboxes, when really we just need a loud noise to wake us up, a box to check, and one inbox to deliver that email. Are there endless ways to perfect how to be woken up by a smartphone? Of course. Is a new alarm clock app solving any new problem? Probably not. Sadly, this realization often takes a while to sink in. How many times have we grativated to new products like moths to a flame? We use these products, and then after a while we start to realize that the product might actually be using us in return since the issue it "solves" was never an issue in the first place.

We do the exact same thing in our design process when we start with a solution instead of the problem. Often the solutions are quite simple. Not easy, but simple. Users often have an idea of how to fix their issue, but they rarely have the resources to accomplish the solution. Design reflects back to people the reality that they hope to see. But only by hearing that vision and letting go of our assumptions can we facilitate the solution.

Refining the future

Refining our intent is patient, iterative work that cannot be done alone. Seek out a community that you trust to speak into your work. This will create an atmosphere that not only fosters refining feedback but also welcomes it and will only further the effectiveness of your design.

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PRACTICE

02. Embrace real people.

Sure, people are messy. They are often hard to understand and even harder to love, but they are who we serve. Whether our design is directly or indirectly serving our audience, we know our design will impact real people. Finding community with others is risky, but its rewards allow us to realize a more complete design vision.
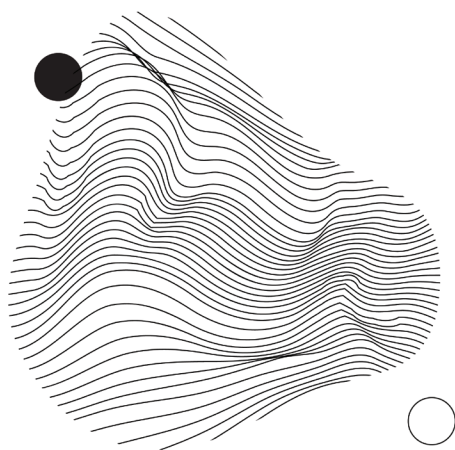
Impacting Humanity

Our Earth is complex, our galaxy vast, and our universe an infinite mystery. Coexisting alongside cycles of mystery are laws of nature powering life on our planet. A natural order exists all around us in the created world.

Our diverse ecosystem catalyzes the design process as humanity yearns to make sense of all the processes at play around us. In design, we seek to add clarity to our daily lives and our shared human experience. And the best design embraces the beauty of this communal, human identity rather than detracting from it. It reminds us that we are a part of a natural order. I remember marveling the first time I used an astronomy app on my smartphone. Being able to point my device to the sky and interact with the stars was incredible. It didn't just make me *feel* more connected to nature; it reminded me of the reality that I already *am* connected to the world around me.

When design becomes untethered from humanity, things begin to fall apart. The same sense of natural connection I mentioned above can be commandeered by a synthesized illusion of connection. Take social media

for example. We aren't actually interacting with one other. We're really interacting with an intelligent, algorithmic platform that transmits our messages. We can abstract these interactions behind words such as "like." But that double-tap on a screen is an entirely different action compared to sharing the same physical space as someone or being able to receive a nonverbal cue from a friend. A digital thumbs-up does not equate to the warm smile of a neighbor. These digital interactions can foster real, genuine connection between humans, but only if they catalyze interactions that happen outside of digital walls. Bad design can degrade culture, create chaos in communities, and infuse noise into nature's harmony.

With our work set against this societal backdrop, a bigger question echoes: How do we honor the humans impacted by the decisions we make in our design process?

Humanity over efficiency

We can probably all agree that humans are magnificent beasts. We've spent millennia trying to understand ourselves. Though progress speaks for itself, colossal questions remain unanswered. It's humbling to realize how little we know about planet Earth, much less our own bodies. I once attended a panel of the world's leading gastrointestinal scientists and writers. Even they admitted to how little they understood about the human gut.

It doesn't just stop with our stomachs. Mystery shrouds our neural paths making even the brain itself an enigmatic code to crack for both psychologists and neuroscientists alike.

Humans are also incredibly inefficient creatures. We're high-functioning mammals with a lot of emotions. And so while our animalistic brains can get the better of us, we're still pretty complicated organisms.

Design quickly becomes messy work because of the humanity powering it. Modernity places a high value on efficiency. We simply don't have time for mistakes. It can seem like the goal of progress is to eliminate the need for humans. They're just too imperfect. In this idealized world, there's no friction. Everything runs smoothly, and humans would only screw things up.

With this mindset, we treat each other as hurdles. Design can quickly devolve into loathsome cat-herding when we think people are getting in the way of our perfect intentions. "They're not using it correctly!" is a common refrain from disgruntled designers. Almost always, it's a *designer* problem, not a *user* problem, when things don't go the way we want them to. For this reason, in a designer's arsenal, a mirror is an invaluable tool.

It can be hard to separate ourselves enough from the design process to inhabit the minds of our users. We can glorify our methods so much that our audiences become

second to the way we think design should be done. Yet good design creates space to embrace *all* the hands that will interact with it. Any platform that doesn't have the ability to communicate back to its audience with human communication may be too abstracted from reality. Whether it's a problem of scale or a byproduct of technology, there must be faces behind the interactions we have for them to be truly meaningful. I think of the ubiquitous digital interaction of *liking* or *favoriting* something. Though there are circumstances where anonymity is important, and even responsible, that gesture means nothing to the end user if it can't be attributed to a real person. Design is personal. We have to remember the simple reality that it's humans creating things for other humans.

Design as ecology

Design is ecological work. It is only as important as the space in which it lives and breathes. While some of the best design transcends time and place, its genesis existed within an organic system. Its recipients had beating hearts and thinking minds. I immediately think of one of the most famous maps of all time, Massimo Vignelli's New York City subway map. He knew in embracing that design challenge that there would be real humans clutching that map in their hands. For some it would provide simple, practical navigation, but for others, it would be the only way to journey through an over-

whelming metropolis of complexity.

Design impacts humans. And through individuals, design impacts the ecosystems, environments, and cultures that humans inhabit. Design molds and shapes our perception of our lives. And so design's value completely rests upon its usefulness to living things.

It's also incredibly personal work. Our design solutions follow people into their daily, intimate lives. Think of the sheer amount of heartfelt communication that telephones, pens, and envelopes have facilitated. Those objects became more than simple tools; they became touchstones of our existence. This empathic shift can become overwhelming. I can often obsess over arriving at the *right* answers because I want to do right by the users that I'm serving directly and, more importantly, indirectly.

There can also be fear in releasing work into the wild. It's a daunting task to see if things go according to plan. While plenty of anxiety has been generated around this reality in my career, I've come to find it one of the most freeing aspects of my work. What I'm designing already belongs to *them* not *me*. Creative ownership fosters amazing ideas. And yet, it is only in realizing that our work *doesn't* belong to us that we can confidently watch it flourish in its natural habitat.

Good design honors life by fostering this co-ownership. When our shared solutions point to what it means to

be human, the final product reflects a communal sense of accomplishment.

Numbers with names

There's tremendous power in the act of naming. The word "design" derives from *designation.* Marking or designating something gives it context, meaning, and purpose. So much of what we do as designers is establish vocabularies as a foundation for collaboration. However complex the process, it has to start with a name.

Often it's only when we can name something ourselves that we draw closer to it. There's a reason we introduce ourselves by our names to one another. As humans, we greatly value this differentiation from the rest of the animal kingdom. There's value in being able to connect a face with a name.

When names are taken from us, it feels dehumanizing. I recall John Proctor's famous line from Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*: "Leave me my name!" His name becomes his only tie to a semblance of humanity in the tragic drama of his life. All else has been taken from him. Regulators in the penal systems also know this tactic, as inmates are stripped of their named identities and assigned cold numbers in their place. Their freedom and their sense of identity are stripped away.

Though we as designers may not employ anything re-

motely close to these harsh psychological tactics, we can abstract users' identities so much that they get lost in the blurry masses of personas. Metrics in the form of bar charts and line-graphs have a way of distancing us from the beating hearts that we manipulate to prove our successes. We've also watched this play out among the design ethics conversations of our time. We know that we can use data to make better decisions, catalyze innovation, and refine our work. We also know that we can use data to remove the actual faces from the raw numbers we collect. This information can also be used to manipulate those we are seeking to serve.

Humans not hurdles

I've come to discover that the further a designer is from the real people that are interacting with his or her work, the blurrier these faces get. Technology has allowed us to connect with people all over the globe, yet we still create great distances between ourselves and our users.

The ugly truth is that sometimes we're just lazy. While natural, thoughts like, "Getting to know the users is someone else's job," or "I just don't have the time or budget to talk to that many people," can be dividing forces that dehumanize the design process.

One of the most deeply satisfying aspects of design is its inherent humanity. Everyone is allowed to have an opinion on what good design looks, feels, and sounds

like. Though many final products have deep complexities beneath their polish, the experience of them is still something anyone can sense.

Rather than viewing humans as hurdles, what if we saw them as invaluable guides in our design process?

Observing the fingerprints

Empathy will always be relevant. Its use in our pop-culture lexicon may fall in and out of fashion, but its transcendent power will remain. Understanding the lives of others is an invaluable skill that is built slowly over thousands of interactions and deciding to listen rather than speak. I believe that a keen sense of empathy is what differentiates average designers from excellent practitioners.

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PRACTICE

03. Embody compassion.

Though you may serve in the role of designer, you are also someone else's user. Allow this to foster empathy that can evolve into active compassion. Design the products you would want to use. Inhabit the lives of others through genuine relationships and design from this new understanding.
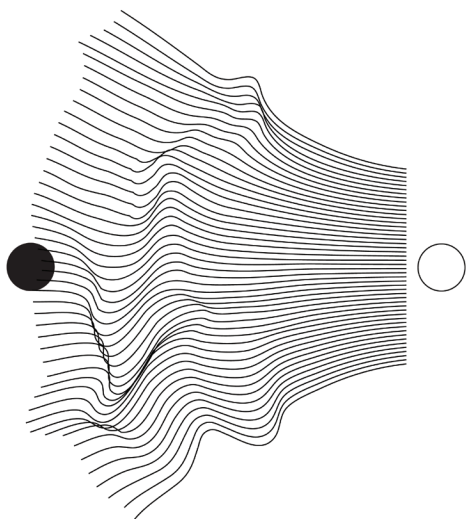
Tooling Curiosity

Tools are vital. Our days are made exponentially easier than every generation before us because of them. Tools power our lives and our professions, and whether analog or digital, tools are how we work.

Designers have dynamic tools at their disposal. Hardware, software, and gadgets of the trade have never been more accessible or easy to use. Even artisanal tools have attainable learning curves, and we have an infinite sea of online tutorials teaching us to make just about anything we have the wherewithal to attempt.

The wide availability of tools, however, can also be distracting. In reality, designers only need to perfect one tool: curiosity. All else is peripheral.

Insatiable curiosity

Curiosity can be maddening. How nice it must be to view an object and experience it in real time without immediately attempting to reverse-engineer it. Our interest drives our devotion. In other words, curiosity is the designer's fuel. Begging us to learn something new

about our surroundings, curiosity brings insight into the ordinary. When we stop long enough to pay attention we see that our environments are filled with the fingerprints of others. We create our value by observing humans in time and space. It is only by seeing where footsteps naturally tread that we know where new paths are needed.

Whether informed by pure curiosity or compassion, this human-centric approach to studying systems will allow us to create from within rather than spectate from outside the glass.

A series of inquiries

Questions are foundational to human interactions. We exist in a call-and-response world and depend upon conversation. We are social creatures that communicate not only through nonverbal cues but also through words laced with endless meaning. Conversation isn't just an evolutionary adaptation. We communicate with one another for pleasure, not just for practicality. We ask questions because we are inherently curious. Humans long for intimacy with one another. We feel known when we answer the questions of others and see others live out this new knowledge.

Designers should be experts in asking insightful, targeted questions. Though we can treat question-asking as a soft skill, I'd argue that it's more crucial than any tech-

nical expertise we can develop. In our question-asking and answering, we pause and reflect, making room for contemplation. And especially now in our accelerated, modern context, a series of inquiries can be invaluable in our work. Simply, it means we've paused long enough to be thoughtful and compassionate.

Questions also foster empathy. By actively listening to responses, we begin to form a mental image, placing ourselves in the scenarios being described. Active listening also helps us battle against our assumptions by hearing directly from those we're serving. Asking the right questions can refine our work better than the countless hours we could spend searching for solutions on our own. In the right conditions, this inquiry-driven empathy should drive us toward informed action.

For most of us, big questions can feel unsettling. They're difficult to ask ourselves and even more nerve-racking to ask those we're serving. People tend to be more comfortable at the surface level. We see this mirrored in our casual conversations. We don't greet each other with, "Hi, I'm Jeremy. What's your deepest fear?" We must first break surface tension in order to dive deeper, and it's in these fathoms of curiosity that we find the heart of design.

Often the projects will start at this surface level. It's not difficult to create metrics for success from the endless feedback spewing from boardrooms. In my experience,

clients usually come with a well-articulated idea of what success looks like. These can often be distracting goals. We must get to the heart of the issue first. I often start by trying to learn more about my client's mission. This sounds cliche, but it's true. It's really important to me to hear someone be able to articulate why it is that they do what they do. This isn't a trick question. Often where this question naturally leads is to folks letting you in on their dream of what they hope to accomplish. You may see where I'm headed. Organically, this leads to folks beginning to open up about what is keeping them from achieving this grander vision. This clarity only comes through allowing there to be space for questions. If you immediately start marking up a whiteboard with ideas, you will miss the critical insight that lies behind a thoughtful question.

Overemphasis on mechanisms

As an Eagle Scout, I was raised to appreciate tools. I was also trained during those adolescent adventures to relish the scenarios in which I had limited tools—like the reality show fantasies we have about being helicoptered into an undisclosed location, with only a Swiss Army knife in hand. Maybe not *everyone* has these fantasies. However, only when we're without the instruments or systems we need can we fully appreciate their value.

I fear that design communities overemphasize the role

and importance of tools. Design literature is often aimed at developing newer, more efficient ways to use tools or hacks to make life easier. Competition has reached a fever pitch in this sector as well. Every day I see another essay written to persuade me to jump ship to a rival design tool, each option promising a brighter path forward.

Because we're tempted to make our tools like extensions of ourselves, we tend to forget that their purpose is to actualize our craft. In other words, our vision to design supersedes the tools required to bring our idea to fruition. This doesn't chip away at the inherent value of tools; it simply puts them in their proper place. Some tools upon the horizon have proven themselves to be so abstract that we aren't even sure what their eventual use could and should be.

There's an entertaining debate happening in the tech world around robots creating art. Sure, a robot could master Rembrandt's lighting or Van Gogh's impressionistic strokes in the span of an afternoon. It could likely master tools and algorithmically learn our tastes and produce art to match. But would it produce meaningful work informed by the lived human experience? Definitely not.

Just when advancing technology tries to push toward polished perfection, we collectively bend back towards something much more human. Whether in a low-fidelity recording or hand-lettered type, we yearn to see

human hands in the work for it to interest us.

A lighter toolbelt

Most tools are simple to learn. While we face some growing pains when we embrace them, they usually involve repeatable steps and can become muscle memory with enough time and energy.

But designers need fewer tools.

I can hear Dieter Rams in the back of my mind repeating, "Less but better." Tools can often get in the way of our work. Many times I've forced an idea into reality using the flashiest technology when I just needed to make it work on paper. Calling for a lighter toolbelt doesn't diminish tools' importance but rather pushes for them to be conscious and deliberate.

A curious way forward

Curiosity connects us not only as designers but also as humans. When we allow our senses to study the world around us, it's amazing how refreshing our solutions will feel. We'll imagine on behalf of real people in real places and in real time. This spirit of curiosity is our greatest tool.

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PRACTICE

04. Ask better questions.

One of the most human things we can do is build community through conversation. Dig for intimate insight through the questions you ask. Don't absently inquire but rather actively listen to people and surroundings, allowing your questions to form organically.
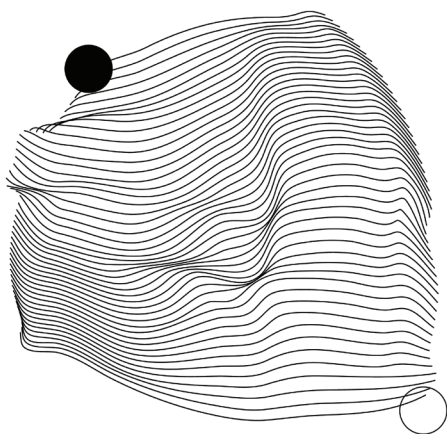
Translating Integrity

Integrity is a virtue admired by all and cultivated by few. The harsh reality is that honesty isn't always rewarded by humans. We have countless success stories that seem to teach us that altering the truth never hurt anyone. We remediate our collective conscience with contagious phrases like, "It's just business" and "What they don't know won't hurt them."

Few of us were taught these lousy tactics by our loved ones. I've never met a grade-school teacher endorsing dishonesty, yet it's at an early age that we discover that half-truths can be handy shortcuts. To developing minds, often the hardest aspect of honesty to convey is that duplicity wounds others. Deceit isn't purely an outgrowth of pride; it's bred in the absence of empathy.

Hopeful design is costly to us because it's vulnerable work. But we can't let this risk paralyze us.

Trust grows slowly

Building trust takes time. While there are some people we encounter whose integrity is palpable and magnetic,

most of us have to know someone intimately to fully trust them. This was put on full display during my time as a camp counselor. I could subject group after group to countless team-building exercises all in the name of building trust.

Even while I coached these teams of youngsters along, I knew in the back of my mind that I too was scared of the Trust Fall. We all know this bit: You climb a ledge and blindly fall backward while your team attempts a catch, and then once it's over you all hug it out. One of the "lead by example" parts of this exercise was that I, the facilitator, would also complete a trust fall. This would happen most often with folks I had known for 24 hours at best. Relational trust between us had not yet been built. We barely knew each other, but I had to expect them to catch me. Ironically, it wasn't until they watched their camp counselor sacrifice the health of his spinal column to people he *didn't* know that they got the confidence to trust the friends that they *did* know.

Trust is contagious, but we have to see it to know it's real. I also believe that trust can be transmitted. I grew up in a small town where I experienced this every day. Word of mouth about each other was something that my fellow Southern Virginians took very seriously. It was bigger than the phrases I was taught like, "Do what you say you're going to do." and "You're only as good as your word." Trust moved from person to person. You knew you could

trust a stranger because someone you cared about trusted them first.

While that transaction does require a great deal of faith, it is still laid upon a foundation of human relationship. And this is something that grows slowly.

Evolving transparency

We've often combatted the problem of trust with transparency. The simplified thesis goes something like this: The more you know about us, the more you'll trust us. However, what we discover is that disclosure doesn't equal trust. While transparency is a good and valuable virtue, it's often only when users can see how things are made that they can fully appreciate their value.

However, it isn't enough to simply demystify your process. "How does it work?" is one of many questions to answer. Communicating your intent honestly builds lasting trust. We've seen how this has been crucial in the consumer goods economy. We want to know more about the mission of the brands we purchase. It's why our public discourse has reenergized words like *authenticity*. We're tired of facades and more hungry for truth than ever. When people discover that your design is unfeigned, they will naturally lean in.

An honest transmission

With the world at our fingertips, via the technology in our pockets, truth feels enigmatic and elusive. Yet when we lean into the fundamental aspects of what makes us human, we see that trust is built through relationship. There's no substitute for meaningful interactions and time spent with one getting to know one another. These experiences are the foundation of trust. Let's stop trying to replace trust with novelty and immediacy.

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PRACTICE

05. Build trust slowly.

Spend time evaluating what authentic transparency could look like for your clients and recommend it with kindness. Model this practice by letting clients in on your processes, allowing them to see your intent from the frontlines. This will prove fertile ground for trust to grow.
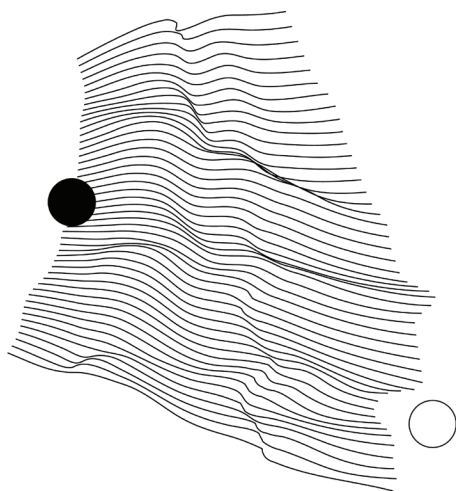
Honoring Engagement

Our attention spans have become the backbone of an economy. Our gaze has never been more valuable. The designed world doesn't stop simply at rewarding our attention; it demands it.

Design is founded in persuasion. Don't add any subtext to that statement; its truth lies in its purest form. We are creating things that are engineered to persuade our users to go from point A to point B. Sometimes an easy sell, we start by convincing others that they should consciously choose to leave point A in order to get to point B. And we make thousands of decisions informed by designed, persuasive pathways every single day. Though we've gotten better at allowing our subconscious to handle these kinds of choices, these neural pathways compete for our limited attention on an infinite loop.

Persuasion in its essence isn't an evil endeavor. Most often the reason we're persuading users is that we believe that whatever lies on the other end of that choice will improve their lives. Persuasion is woven into the fabric of human connection. We are constantly *persuaded by others* to make informed decisions about how to live

each day and how to fill our time. All the while, in the inverse of this is also true. We are constantly *persuading others* on how we think they should make their own decisions. We tread into dangerous waters when the attention we're seeking from our users is commodified. The stinging truth is that we all have a finite amount of time. And where there is a depleting resource, reverence should also be present.

Commodifying attention

You've no doubt heard the phrase "time is money." What a terrible economic principle. It's presented so matter-of-factly. But it's just bad critical thinking. Pause. Think about it for a minute.

The more you rationalize it, the more the logic crumbles. Time represents a natural constant, a rule of nature tied to the celestial body we happen to be orbiting the solar system upon. Money however is a currency. It's a denomination within a system that derives its power from shared meaning. Our concept of time doesn't change nature's measurement of time. We've all experienced time seeming to move faster or slower in our lives; however, our experience of time doesn't change the length of a second. In contrast, the value we place on currency in our systems and societies absolutely affects not only its perceived value but also its market value. It's dangerous when we start to conflate a law of nature that

unites humans with a societal construct that can fiercely divide humans.

Words like engagement and attention are often thrown around without nuanced distinction. I'd argue that we're *really* just talking about time. Specifically, our users' time. That's the real backbone of an attention economy. The reality that we all have a defined amount of time has been forced into a scarcity model. When we begin to sell the idea that time is an owned commodity that should be protected, rather than a shared resource we are all organically bound to, we put our audience's wellbeing at great risk. There is great reverence in naming, acknowledging and respecting this constant in our lives and in the lives of others. Time is not a new commodity that must be hoarded and fiercely protected at all costs. No product is creating more time in your life. Products and media are simply presenting other ways to use the time you already have. It seems like such an obvious reality that we hardly think well about it. Marketing succeeds in selling a narrative of "having more time to ourselves," because we haven't stopped to think about whether the proposition even makes logical sense.

What is a limited resource is our attention. Attention is anatomically bound to our brains and neural networks. We've all bought the modern lie that multitasking is a skill we all should foster, yet it is something that our brains don't do very well naturally. Focus is crucially im-

portant not only to our survival as mammals but also to creating meaning in our lives.

We can only pay attention to so much at one time. Howard Rheingold said it best in his book *Virtual Community*, "Attention is a limited resource, so pay attention to where you pay attention." Unlike time, we do have the capacity of choosing what we pay attention to as long as we can think clearly. It's when our judgment is abused and incentivized by addictive patterns that we lose the clarity required to fully appreciate the limited attention we possess.

What does good design have to say about honoring our users' time and attention? When the time and attention of others devolve into a commodity, they become tied up in a fierce competition that leaves users in the crosshairs of economic interests. These competitive tactics can often look like using shortcuts to gain more of our audience's valuable attention instead of respecting their humanity.

Using neurological advantages like creating more dopamine, which creates the experience of pleasure and gratification, in users through reward-motivated behavior is one example we all experience in many of the digital landscapes we navigate on a daily basis. When we expect something new like a notification, email, or reward, the anticipation is enough to allow for this neural release that generates euphoric pleasure. Brains can be hijacked

by these engineered schemes without even consciously realizing the attention that has been spent searching for the next dopamine high or how much time has elapsed in that insatiable quest.

No one is exempt. Designers and humans alike find these manipulative patterns of holding the attention of others very seductive and easy to subconsciously gravitate toward. And so dark patterns form out of these good intentions. Many businesses, organizations, and brands truly believe they are worthy of users' time and attention. And while they may be right, the tactics they employ to hold that attention matter tremendously.

Like persuasion, engagement itself is not inherently malicious. There are many valuable ways to use our time consuming media. However, ethical issues arise when people use our products with the hopes of executing tasks quickly and are instead enticed into a mindless, addictive activity. Many platforms we interact with first show us their idea of a good use of attention before allowing us the choice to select that path. Infinite scrolling is a wonderful example of this problem in the modern era. Endless content never allows the user the space to even decide to stop. When we begin to eliminate choice from our designed experiences, we begin to eliminate the freedom of our users. We're effectively forcing people to stroll through the gift shop.

Designing responsibly requires a more holistic view that

considers a life beyond the time spent with our media. Addicts are not free, so it is only by removing addictive hooks that we can create liberated users. The same users have rich lives apart from the content they consume.

Remembering our place

This discussion quickly becomes inseparable from our previous explorations into intent and integrity. We have to start with the basics by evaluating what we hope our design will achieve. Form adds flesh to the bone structure of function. Every design begins with the hope that people will do something. It is only by considering the value of users' engagement that we can create something that honors our audience fully as humans. Efficiency alone can't be our goal.

We all say we believe in the golden rule. (And if we don't, perhaps we've failed the psychopath test.) We can even view it through a design lens: Design only the things you would want to consume. However, if we truly practiced the counter-cultural demands of the golden rule, we would have no dark patterns or endless cycles of manipulation infecting our discipline.

There's a razor-thin line between persuasion and manipulation among our ethical standards as designers. What's even more problematic is that this already thin line gets blurry when users can't tell the difference between the two tactics. Habits can be really hard to break because

we're often not aware that they are forming in our consumption patterns. It helps to think about the media we're creating in its proper place in the lives of our users. I view media as a tool that has a distinct purpose. Even if its purpose is for entertainment or immersion, there is a use nonetheless. I think it's really important to remember that a user's experience with your product is just one tiny aspect of their daily lives. Though that interaction may have tremendous implications to their livelihood, the time spent with the media itself is inconsequential when compared to many of the visceral aspects of our existence. Tangible experiences like the embrace of a friend, the feeling of genuine community, or an immersive encounter with nature will always supersede the time we spend with media.

It's similar to peering at the stars through a telescope. The sheer size of our universe should humble us as we drift through the galaxy on this pale blue dot. This humility should be carried into our work. It requires us to think differently about how audiences engage with our work. It requires us to redefine what makes media successful.

Rethinking metrics

If human history has taught us anything, it's that the emergence of new technology rarely comes with lengthy discernment. It's not in technology's DNA to slow down. So we adopt these advancements and only

ask where we're going once we're deep down in the cave running out of rope to lead us back. Engagement metrics are no different in this regard. Capturing data about how users interact with our products was once the white whale for marketers. The days of "If we only knew the numbers!" have passed. Now there are analytics for everything. However, what's happened with this endless quantification hasn't looked like wisdom. Rather, it's looked like an obsession.

"If only we could get them to spend more time with our product" becomes the pipe-dream we fantasize about without ever asking why they need to spend more time with our products. What if our products are designed to work efficiently, engineered to be functional, and devised to be helpful?

"Wait a minute," you may ask. "Wouldn't that mean that they would spend less time with our media?"

BINGO!

It seems so simple it just might work. Yet, it feels like swimming upstream. We've created confusion with goals that do nothing but create mindless users. We aren't honoring the fact that they may want to do something else with their time besides get hypnotized by endless content.

But therein lies the rub: Addictive behavior is better for

the bottom line. Drug dealers have known this for centuries. Is this model good for humans? Of course not! Again, addicted people are not free. Causing users to be addicted to your platform may create a consistent revenue stream, but it will never contribute to humanity's greater good.

Advocating for users

What should happen when you're designing something that you know could negatively impact the mental health of your users? As designers, we must advocate for our users. It will take more effort. It won't be as efficient. It may even cost us more money. However, it could lead to a healthier society of people who aren't preyed upon by the media they consume. Let's strive to foster communities of engaged users — not hopeless addicts.

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PRACTICE

06. Slow down.

Slow down and note how certain designs make you feel, physiologically and mentally. Especially make note of times when interactions cause anxiety. By experiencing these realities yourself, you can gain perspective on the pitfalls you may inherently create through your work.
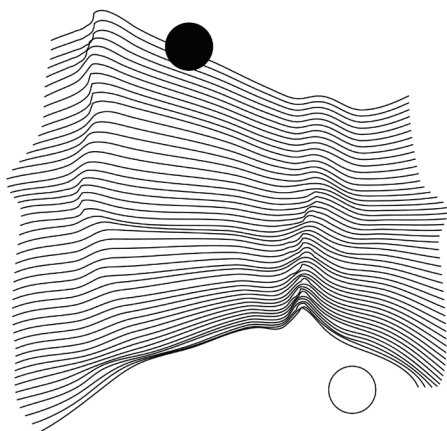
Navigating Complexity

Humans long for simplicity. It's in our DNA to desire our surroundings to be accessible and understandable. And yet often our own complexities get in the way of this noble aspiration.

This drive for simplicity also reveals our tendency toward nostalgia. We become sentimental about the past because times seemed simpler "back then." This can lead us to believe in false memories rather than accepting that our memories are quite malleable. We know, deep down, that times weren't simpler, like our retelling of them would suggest, and yet we cling to this reassuring sentimentality in our lives.

And as designers, we mold this kind of perception. We long to create simplicity out of the confusion that surrounds us. The truth is that many facets of our natural world are quite complex. Our own anatomies illustrate that we are an intricate amalgam of perplexing systems. How do we make sense of it all?

As designers we are also translators. We translate complexity into clear communication. Though we can char-

acterize a lot of our work as simplification, often what we are doing is clarifying rather than reducing.

There are countless metaphors for the role of the designers. Grasping for the right one shows that even defining our practice can be quite complicated. However it's in navigating this intricacy that we embody a pivotal role for a designer: guide.

Friction and tension

Complexity is daunting. The more complicated something is, the more anxiety it produces. In the very beginning of this book, I mentioned the tension between our clients and their users. It would almost be easier if it were a simple highwire act; however, as guides, we become experts navigating this complex balance.

Some designers shy away from tension. Concepts like tension and friction are often discussed pejoratively in our discipline. We see their presence as something that must be eradicated. We believe in fallacies like, "Good design is easy," and "Good design must be intuitive." The truth is that design can be easy *and* intuitive, but these aren't always requirements for hopeful design.

I often wonder about the idealistic world we design in our heads. These tantalizing illusions aren't just problems isolated to designers; they influence our entire culture. Progress has made us all anxiously await the days

when everything will be simple. What we fail to pause and ask, "What happens when everything is easy?"

In a world with no tension or friction, what has value or meaning? This isn't purely a rhetorical exercise. It speaks to the worth of navigating complexity well. Something that's simple doesn't always mean that it's also easy. Some of the most simplistic principles are the most difficult to embody.

The natural world exists and thrives because of the physical properties of friction and tension. Don't believe me? Trying wearing bowling shoes on an ice rink or hanging wet clothes on a Slinky. Physics is necessary to our existence. It doesn't just govern our physical world but our social lives as well. Intimacy even relies on these elements. Though counterintuitive, real community is formed around the tension that vulnerability brings to relationships.

Not everything should be easy and some things won't be intuitive. While these statements are true, we can still embrace simplicity while acknowledging the need for necessary friction.

I've found that the designers that I most admire don't shy away from these realities. They flourish in them. There's wisdom in being able to walk confidently into the convoluted grayness that forms between our clients and their audiences. While guides are often unnecessary to navi-

gate well-trodden trails, they are quite comfortable in the wilderness.

The topography of trends

The ever moving and changing current of design can also be hard to navigate. We're in an age where our work can be viewed by anyone with a screen. And the amount of inspiration fueling our creativity is seemingly infinite. Naturally, this continuous melding of ideas begins to form trends.

The word "trend" has a couple of definitions. The first commonly used meaning is tied to aesthetics or fashion—something timely that's in favor. The second definition, however, describes a flow or current. It's directional and moves forward.

We can look back in design's history to see this trend meandering through new landscapes.

Sometimes this flow is headed in the right direction. It's easy to identify that it's progressing toward a desirable outcome. I think of the renewed emphasis on privacy that is taking place in the technology space. Advocating for users' privacy seems to be a trend headed in the right direction. But this isn't always the case. There are times when the pushing current has more momentum than substance. It's like this in our practice: Before we take a blind plunge into the rushing waters, we must evaluate

their course.

We have to remember that only time evaluates trends. Wisdom looks like being able to pull from past experience to determine whether the current is moving toward a collective good. Trends tend to happen in cycles naturally. Once we've experienced a cycle or two, we'll have more confidence which trends we should move with and which ones we should move against.

Becoming guides

Two of the most formational summers of my life to date were spent guiding rafts down the New River Gorge in West Virginia. Regardless of its clever name, the New River is an incredibly old river. It has meandered its way through some rugged, alpine terrain. This creates not only some adrenaline-spiking whitewater but also presents its fair share of dangerous complications.

Training was terrifying. Navigating the current's intricacies felt impossible. But when I took the river one rapid at a time, spent countless hours studying it, and trusted the current, it suddenly didn't feel so treacherous. Simplicity could be created even within the chaos of nature.

I never thought my seasons on the water would influence how I thought about design. Perhaps its lessons are still settling into my practice. What I've found is that the principles I learned in that time aren't all that different

from the natural flow we navigate in design. I learned that to the clients I work with, design challenges seem like navigating rushing whitewater on a raft. The landscape is too complex and the solutions seem too shrouded in the possibility of failure. And yet clients only need someone who can take on the challenge one aspect at a time.

Navigation requires familiarity. It's only through time spent within an ecosystem that you can truly understand its intricacies. It doesn't always mean you have to know the exact map, but you've been through topography like this before. Things don't feel completely new. Our familiarity with the complexities of design is what helps us communicate simply to our clients and, in turn, to their users. It's in time spent staring at the challenge that we form simple solutions. Once we see where feet are treading we can start to form a path that adapts to humans in their environments. I always loved seeing this process take shape on my college campus. A well-trodden footpath blazed from thousands of steps would eventually kill the grass. The next year, that path would become a sidewalk. This was a process that responded to the humans who would go on to use its solutions.

These natural paths form all around us. It simply takes time and energy to discover them. I can often feel defeated when I can't seem to figure out a solution to a

challenging problem. It usually takes the eyes of another person (often a non-designer) to say, "Shouldn't you just _____?" The other maddening aspect of innovation is often that insight happens once your work is living in the wild. As long as we're human, we are going to miss something the first time. But in this weakness comes an incredible design principle: iteration.

Try, try again

Design is meant to be iterative. Our lives are in constant flux, and even the most mundane aspects of our lives tend to change over time. This means our needs as humans will also change. Designing for humans can feel like chasing after a moving target with a bow and arrow because that's what we're doing.

It's nearly impossible to form a solution that will last forever. I don't think anything we create was meant to last forever. Our work's stagnation quickly becomes a disservice to those using it. We must iterate upon our design for it to truly serve the people who will benefit from it. This requires a great deal of time and energy. It requires talking to real people in real places, which isn't very efficient by our cultural standards. It also requires an immense amount of humility to constantly put our own work under the microscope. But at the end of the day, it's not about us. It's about them.

It seems like the world would be so much easier if we could just set our design into motion and stop tinkering with things.

But there we go again.

Why does it need to be easy? It can be so tempting to fall for this train of thought. Let's be honest: It's just laziness. Frustrations with others and their needs is poor self-reflection on our part. I don't know about you, but I'm grateful someone is iterating on our behalf, constantly searching for simplicity for my good. So, again we prove the golden rule for design. Though we aren't always our own users, shouldn't we compassionately design the things we'd want to consume? Now I think we're onto something.

Creating clarity

Creating simplicity from chaos is toilsome work. However, through its challenges we find the reward of solving real issues. Experiencing complexity builds empathy through perspective. We mustn't project complexity onto our processes but rather discover it within ecosystems. This is where we will start to create real clarity.

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PRACTICE

07. Iterate & repeat.

Exercise humility. Continually come back to the reality that you may not get it right the first time. Rather than allowing this truth to defeat you, use it to empower your design.
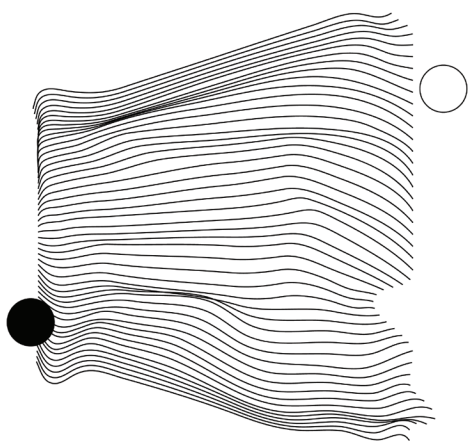
Building Community

A wise counselor once reminded me that you never really see your own face. Sure, you can see its reflection, but you never *really* see yourself. The mirror is an approximation. To *truly* see yourself requires the eyes of another.

We're a social species. And though we pride ourselves on our superior intelligence amongst the animal kingdom, we can't escape this truth. We need each other. It sounds cliche, but its implications are life altering.

Humans were created for community.

Today, we feel more connected to one another than ever before in history. But it's just that: a feeling. Are we truly connected to each other, or are we settling for an abstraction of authentic community? True community is messy. It builds slowly, with great sacrifice, and lacks in selfish ambition.

I often treat my role as designer like that of Atlas, the condemned titan of Greek mythology. Pridefully, I think it's my responsibility to keep that globe hoisted upon my shoulders. It must be my burden to carry.

There's a problem, and I must solve it. However, what I've grown to realize is that there's no power in this approach to design.

The solution doesn't rest solely upon your shoulders, or mine, but is shared by the ecosystem you are entering into. A designer's goal is to build community. Our mission is to serve our neighbors, or even our neighbors' neighbors, and in doing so, see new relationships form between you and your users.

Many designers shy away from these relationships because they become complicated quickly. However, it's only through our shared experiences that we can bridge the abyss we've made of modern community.

Embracing community

The word *community* comes from the Latin word communis, which means "common." This definition points to the foundation of community: our shared humanity, existence, and experience. Astronauts speak about the overview effect, in which seeing the fragile globe from space creates a complete cognitive shift in their awareness. From that altitude, borders disappear, war seems irresponsible, and all of life feels connected. Though seeing the human race through this lens can be passed off as oversimplified globalization, its truth remains. As long as we're all submitting to Earth's gravity, we form a community.

Community is risky. It requires vulnerability and allowing others into the places of our psyche that we'd rather keep locked away. The heart of community is no different in design. We were never meant to design as siloed individuals.

We fight against this idea of interdependence in individualistic cultures. We're often bred to be self-absorbed in how we define "success." Mirages of success are problematic, but I think our reality involves much deeper work.

The type of community that designers really need is broader than other design practitioners. While living in a design bubble can be comfortable, we need a diversity of feedback to the work we're creating. That includes feedback from those who may not operate out of the same design principles we do.

Our community extends to both the people *we're* serving and to the people *they're* serving. It includes all those impacted by our work. And their perspectives matter deeply. They refine our design.

Inches away, miles apart

Technology has promised humans a lot of things over the millennia of our existence. And though most of these claims can be chalked up to futuristic idealism, there's one modern promise that troubles me. A lot of the prod-

ucts we interact with vow to bring about connection. I think it's how casually the word "connection" is used that concerns me.

Our wired world has given the word "connection" a new meaning. And not just electronically but also socially. We've grown to replace real connection with a simulation.

Authentic compliments and conversation have been replaced with gestures upon a cold sheet of glass. Personalities formed by countless experiences have been reduced to avatars within a steady stream of curated content. When did we start to lose the humanity in it all? We often exist just inches from one another yet are mentally miles apart.

It's precisely when we try to eliminate our need for each other that things begin to unravel. It requires tremendous humility to rely on a community. Shared life troubles the pride we hold in our much coveted self-reliance.

Historical arcs bend in both directions, so I think it's only a matter of time before we see the foolishness in our individualism. This isn't just a realization for our users; it must be the calling of the designer as well. We must first admit that we need others so that we can design responsibly.

Creating connection

It would be silly to pretend as if this state of individual-

ism isn't layered and nuanced. Technology has allowed people to reach each other at all times. Conference calls can connect the entire globe and traditional offices can be replaced by internet connections. What is lost when we begin to create these wide spaces between ourselves and the "other"? When we cannot observe the reactions to our work with our senses, sharing the same space and time, we lose the transcendent experience of being together. There is something chemical and magical that happens when we share the same air.

Proximity isn't popular within our industry, or even our generation. Thinking well about physical location to one another forces us to face the fact that we need each other to do meaningful work.

This isn't to say that our digital connections aren't meaningful. Only when they spark true relationships and shared experiences in our real, tangible world do they truly foster and even create community. I've grown to distrust products that keep luring me into their labyrinths, creating addicts in the process. However, my anxiety lessens when I meet a couple that met online, an addict in recovery because of an encouraging message, or a healed relationship because of a post.

Design has a tremendous knack for creating meaningful connections amongst people. The work we create often acts as the catalyst for something much more important than the service our products facilitate. The most pow-

erful by-product we can offer other humans, however, is hope. Our solutions must honor the ecosystems they represent—forged through our time spent getting to know the intricacies of those systems. That's how we build community—through having a stake in the game. When we share in the responsibilities of our outcomes we see irreplaceable trust form.

A shared life

It's an undeniable axiom that experiences have more meaning when they are shared. When we take the time to look for the humanity in others, we will seek to create solutions that honor our shared life. We will grow to learn that where our design stops our true, tangible experiences begin. Only there we will find freedom.

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PRACTICE

08. Share responsibility.

Don't shy away from responsibility. It's only in this shared experience that meaningful trust will form between you, your clients, and your users. It's a commitment to refinement rather than arrogance.

A BETTER WAY IS POSSIBLE.

A better way is possible.

It will take more effort. It won't be as efficient. It may even cost you more money. However, it could lead to a healthier society of people who aren't preyed upon by the designs they interact with.

We have a choice to pursue design either with hope or with fear.

May we always choose *hope*.

Hopeful design teaches us that there are real people in real places existing in real time behind *everything* we create.

May we design with purpose.
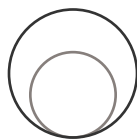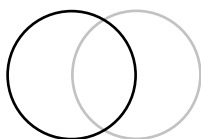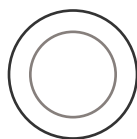
Hopeful Design is a design framework that creates hope by practicing in an ecosystem, honoring that community with its solutions, and sharing in the responsibility of its outcomes.

PRINCIPLES

Be curious.
Learn your surroundings from within an ecosystem.

Be compassionate.
Form solutions from experiential learning.

Be humble.
Share responsibility no matter the outcome.

01. Talk about hope.

There are topics that we neglect because we feel like they should be assumed. Hope is the foundation, so it's well worth mentioning. It's OK to tell those you're serving that hope is your goal. Speak it into existence.

02. Embrace real people.

Sure, people are messy. They are often hard to understand and even harder to love, but they are who we serve. Whether our design is directly or indirectly serving our audience, we know our design will impact real people. Finding community with others is risky, but its rewards allow us to realize a more complete design vision.

03. Embody compassion.

Though you may serve in the role of designer, you are also someone else's user. Allow this to foster empathy that can evolve into active compassion. Design the products you would want to use. Inhabit the lives of others through genuine relationships and design from this new understanding.

04. Ask better questions.

One of the most human things we can do is build community through conversation. Dig for intimate insight through the questions you ask. Don't absently inquire but rather actively listen to people and surroundings, allowing your questions to form organically.

05. Build trust slowly.

Spend time evaluating what authentic transparency could look like for your clients and recommend it with kindness. Model this practice by letting clients in on your processes, allowing them to see your intent from the frontlines. This will prove fertile ground for trust to grow.

06. Slow down.

Slow down and note how certain designs make you feel, physiologically and mentally. Especially make note of times when interactions cause anxiety. By experiencing these realities yourself, you can gain perspective on the pitfalls you may inherently create through your work.

07. Iterate & repeat.

Exercise humility. Continually come back to the reality that you may not get it right the first time. Rather than allowing this truth to defeat you, use it to empower your design.

08. Share responsibility.

Don't shy away from responsibility. It's only in this shared experience that meaningful trust will form between you, your clients, and your users. It's a commitment to refinement rather than arrogance.

Jeremy D. Cherry

Jeremy is a designer, writer, and educator. Relentlessly optimistic about the power of design, he lives by the words "A better way is possible." With over a decade of experience telling stories through brands and screens, he has worked with clients from a wide variety of industries based all over the globe. He currently leads the digital design practice at Journey Group in Charlottesville, VA. He writes and speaks about the intersection of digital design and ethics, seeking to add hope back to the conversation. His work has been featured by Creative Mornings, Communication Arts, Framer, Humane by Design, Modus, UX Collective, Sidebar, Smashing Magazine, Story Matters, and Web Designer News.

jeremydcherry.com

An ardent thank you to...

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Josh Bryant for making this book accessible online.

Journey Group for championing this book.

My family for supporting this lifelong venture.

Jesus for being the singular source of hope.

Foreword

- "Where there is no hope, it is incumbent on us..." *en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Camus*

Introduction

- "...as Michelangelo put it, what's already living within the marble." is based on 2 quotes from Michelangelo Buonarroti: *artsandculture.google.com/entity/michelangelo/m058w5*

  - "The sculpture is already complete within the marble block, before I start my work. It is already there, I just have to chisel away the superfluous material."

  - "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free."

01. Designing Hope

- For more resources on Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) visit Anxiety and Depression Association of America. *adaa.org*

- Both definitions of "Hope" are sourced from *Webster's Dictionary 1828*.

03. Impacting Humanity

- "I immediately think of one of the most famous maps of all time, Massimo Vignelli's…" *artsandculture.google.com/entity/massimo-vignelli/m0c_x5j*

- "The word "design" derives from designation…" *merriam-webster.com/dictionary/design*

- "I recall John Proctor's famous line from Arthur Miller's The Crucible…" *en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Crucible*

04. Tooling Curiosity

- "Rembrandt's lighting…" *https://artsandculture.google.com/entity/rembrandt/m0bskv2*

- "Van Gogh's impressionistic strokes…" *artsandculture.google.com/entity/vincent-van-gogh/m07_m2*

- "I can hear Dieter Rams in the back of my mind repeating…" *artsandculture.google.com/entity/dieter-rams/m0bp_jq*

08. Building Community

- "I often treat my role as designer like that of Atlas…" *en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlas_(mythology)*

- The word community comes from the Latin word communis…" *merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community*

Acknowledgments

- Learn more from my incredible colleagues & collaborators at Journey Group. *journeygroup.com*

Additional Formats

- Find additional formats including free eBook and audiobook versions online. *hopeful.design*

Additional Resources

- Keep up to date with my favorite design resources. *jeremydcherry.com/resources*

Colophon

- This book is proudly typeset in two families available for free on Google Fonts. *fonts.google.com*

  - IBM Plex Sans *fonts.google.com/specimen/IBM+Plex+Sans*

  - IBM Plex Mono *fonts.google.com/specimen/IBM+Plex+Mono*

  - Cardo *fonts.google.com/specimen/Cardo*

Designing Hope is a book that explores creating compassionate work for humans. It defines a design framework that creates hope by practicing in an ecosystem, honoring that community with its solutions, and sharing in the responsibility of its outcomes. It's equal parts manifesto and practical guide. It strives to rise above technical theory, seeking out practical compassion. In short, if you create things for others *(you do)*, this book is for you.

Jeremy D. Cherry is a designer, writer, and educator. Relentlessly optimistic about the power of design, he lives by the words "A better way is possible." With over a decade of experience telling stories through brands and screens, he currently leads the digital design practice at Journey Group in Charlottesville, VA. He writes, speaks, and teaches about the intersection of digital design and ethics, seeking to add hope back to the conversation.

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