



Stefan Sagmeister:

Hello, everybody. I run a design studio in New York City and every seven years I close that design studio to pursue little experimental things that there never seems to be time for in a regular year. In that year we don't take on any clients. That was the phone message recorded. I am back since four weeks, now, of course, it is incredibly busy and as Kurt just mentioned. Even though I opened the studio very much with what I wanted to do, combining music and design, it -- over the time, the more we did it, the more adapted I became, and the more boring it became. The work started to look the same. This is a real glass eye in a die cut of a book and then a couple of years later, very similar, a perfume bottle in the die cut of a book as a packaging. So, if I look at the trajectory of our lives in the west, we spent the first 25 years learning, then there is another 40 years of working tacked on, and then there is 15 years of retirement and then we die. And I think it could be helpful to take five of these retirement years and intersperse them into the working years.

[Applause]

Not only because it is enjoyable and I have done two of those little yellow brackets and it is enjoyable, but also because it make sense. Like this way the work that I am doing in those years is actually going back not only into my studio, but, you know, in every such a small way back into society, rather than just benefiting a grandchild or two. And my guess would be then if I finally actually retire, I actually do know how to do it. There is a psychologist from the University of Virginia who I met him and admire a lot -- Jonathan Haidt -- and he talks about work in three ways. Look at it as a job, nine to five by events that you hope that the weekend is coming. You can look at it as a career, you are probably more engaged. You have more invested in it, but every once in a while you, or definitely in my case I thought is this really all worth it all that hard work. And these sabbaticals were really the best strategy that I have ever come up with to make sure that the job remains a calling. I think so many of us, definitely myself, went into this job, or studied it or went to art school thinking it is a calling and then adapted later.

First year I spent in New York, year 2000. This year I wanted a different influence. If it was not going to be New York it didn't make sense to have another big city, it didn't make sense in Tokyo or London. Since it was a landscape it was clear it is not going to be U.S. or Europe because I know both of them too well and it didn't seem enticing. I didn't want to do Africa or South America because I didn't know them well enough and I wanted to work right away, rather than spend the first three months looking for that perfect spot. So Asia it was. The most beautiful landscapes I had seen there was Sri Lanka and Bali. Sri Lanka had the civil war going on. Bali it was -- it was like a two-minute decision, and it is absolutely gorgeous there. Landscape-wise it is a very craft-oriented society. You can get a lot of things done, people are kind, the culture is intact and of course when I arrive there, probably the first thing that I really needed was mosquito repellent typography and some sort of way to get back on to all the many dogs that surrounded my house. I counted 99 wild dogs altogether, so they put -- rate them all on their own individual tee shirt, one tee shirt per dog. In Bali, of course you can have these all hand-painted with a slightly threatening message on the back of the shirt.

[Laughter]

I also renovated my studio while I was gone and I needed furniture. The furniture that I really loved I couldn't afford and the stuff that I could afford I didn't like, so one of the things that we did in Bali was design furniture. This, of course, is still, with the dogs in mind and you can actually get that stuff done. I think there was peace between me and the dog by the time this lamp was made. A table or coffee table that contains 330 compasses, and we had custom cups made with a magnet hidden inside that make those compasses go crazy. A very design-y, talkative, verbose chair that tells the story of where it is standing. And I did also start meditation for the first time in my life, never had an interest before. Bali seemed to be the right place to try it out and it really, I really did get some there. I have to admit, though, now that I am back in New York, it is somewhat more difficult. I did too surprisingly little reading, but did read this book by this guy Danny Gilbert, psychologist of Harvard. Most interestingly, I had taken it to Bali and in the foreword he says that he actually wrote the book while on sabbatical, and it turned out to be quite influential on many things that I tried.

This guy's name is Ferran Adria. Many people around the world think he is the single best chef working today in the world. Has a restaurant north of Barcelona called elBulli, where he is open only seven months in the year and then he is closed for five months to experiment with a full kitchen staff. It worked out pretty well for him. I just saw the 2008 numbers; in 2008 he could serve 8,000 dinners throughout the year and he had 2.2 million requests for reservations, which I guess allows him to pick and choose fairly properly.

Here is our little list of companies that are more successful than me. Since the 1930s, if you are an engineer at 3M, you will get 15% of your time to pursue whatever you want. A couple of projects came out of that; Scotch Tape and Post-it developed while the engineers were pursuing their own goals. Google, of course, famously gives 20% to everybody who works there to pursue as they wish, and they have been doing quite well recently.

Did anybody in here ever conduct a sabbatical? Very few, maybe five hands, I can see. So, if you saw those hands getting up, ask them how it worked out for them. In my case, the most important thing was to put it into the book, to actually think, Oh, in that end that year I want to do this and just put it out. And then I told as many people as I possibly could about it so that when it came closer and closer I couldn't possibly chicken out of the whole thing. In the first year, I had made this giant mistake of not making a plan thinking that this whole gigantic vacuum of time would come out, somehow come in handy, didn't happen. The requests, I mean, we said no to all clients, but the other requests from design students, magazines; this, in fact, of course kept coming in and I became my old -- my own intern because, of course, it is much easier to answer e-mail than to actually think or sit down and do something, and I always use the e-mail excuse of not having to do something new. This time I already came with a proper list that really outlined what I wanted to do. On the plane over to Indonesia I ordered that list into a hierarchy, what is important, what is not so important and that got either one or two or three or four hourly timeslots every week. And I needed the list for about maybe three months to really keep -- to really start the whole thing and then I could throw it out because by then so many projects were running.

The effects of it -- clearly it was fun, clearly I felt, I felt much closer to design. If I look at the whole eight-year period, one year off, seven years studio, it actually worked out financially. And maybe just as important, if I look at the seven years that followed the first year, almost anything that I really am happy with came out of thinking of that single year. So, I will show you some tricky things that has come out of the first sabbatical.

This eight years ago was pretty new to me, and shortly after we reopened, we got this job to design a logo and an identity for a music center in Porto in Portugal built by a star architect, Rem Koolhaas, who is a fairly significant shape. I promised the client we, for sure, will not do an architectural identity because they always leave the content on the side and you wind that pieces empty shells. I failed and had to call up the client a week before the presentation that they built it in any way mostly, also because Rem Koolhaas that I found the presentation again to the city of Porto called the building itself a organization of various layers of meaning, which I once translated from architectural speech into regular English understood as logo making. So, once I got that the architect looks at the building as a logo, I just -- we could treat it as the high-res, the most high-res version of our identity. We put a little mask over it, built down, looked at it from every single angle, stopped it six times north, west, east, south, top, bottom, got the six shapes, color them in a very peculiar way by having a friend of mine write us the Casa da Musica logo generator. A simple piece of software, custom-written, connected to a scanner, you put the Beethoven image in and within a fraction of a second you will get the Beethoven Casa da Musica logo. The stills and, of course, this works for everything. If you then actually have to design a Beethoven poster, the logo will always fit on it because the logo information and the poster information is exactly the same, not just from a visual point of view but also from a conceptual point of view, of course.

If Frank Zappa's music is performed as it was, the logo looks like this, if it is Philip Glass or The Chemical Brothers or Lou Reed -- all people who played there -- it looks like this. Internally, the president of Casa da Musica, or the musical director, get their own little portraits onto their business cards, and when it came to sub-brands as this full blown orchestra that lives in the building with 105 musicians, it became more transparent -- the truck that they go on tour with, or a smaller orchestra of contemporary music, the remix ensemble. And Porto is a workable town, there is a good number of pedestrian songs, so its posters actually made sense, and they made these limitations that we could only use the shape on the posters. So, this is Donatoni, Chopin, Mozart, La Monte Young, you can pick the shape and make type out of it. You can grow it underneath the skin. You can make an illustration for a family poster event in front of the house, or a rave in the parking garage underneath the house, weekly programs, educational services.

Another insight or another thing that I thought about in that first sabbatical was that I really wanted to see if I could do something else outside of selling and promoting, which I love, I have nothing against it. My parents were sales people, so I am not empty selling whatsoever, but I did think that there should be something else and probably a number of you who have mentioned it have seen this publication before. So, we packed them at the very end of this process, basically at the end of the seven years into one publication. I just show you a couple quickly. These were a whole lot of bananas on the wall -- green bananas, and yellow

bananas. On the opening day, they said, "Self-confidence produces fine results." That is three weeks later, four weeks later, five weeks later and you see the self-confidence almost comes back, but not quite. These are some photos visitors sent.

And then the city of Amsterdam gave us a plaza to do something on it. We used the stone, the existing stone plates as a grid. And figured to get 250,000 coins from the national bank in Amsterdam and they could deliver three different kinds to us, brand new, shiny euro cents, medium-used ones and quite old ones, dark ones, so we had three different darknesses and there is 100 volunteers over a whole week. We put that stuff up and it reads, "Obsessions make my life worse and my work better." Very purposefully designed in a floral pretty kind of way so that a viewer would have this little moment where you would have to decide, Do I want to take the money because it was unprotected or do I want to keep the piece alive. Now, what happened was that we had no guards there and we felt people are going to take money over time. And so, in the first evening a guy came with big bags and shuffled as much as he could, but the neighbors surrounding the plaza had fallen quite in love with the whole piece, so one of the neighbors called the police. And the police, the Amsterdam police in their fantastic wisdom, came, they saw, they decided that this artwork needs protection. And they sweep the whole thing up and took the coins into protection in to police headquarters. And I think this is also a video of one of the neighbors took from their windows.

[Music]

This is for the whole seven days, obviously whenever it gets dark, it is night and I think, yeah, here you see the police sweeping the whole thing up. So, after a little bit, this really was all that was left over.

Now, one of the projects that we did start in Bali was a movie on happiness and, of course, being the graphic designer you have to start with the title, so we asked these pigs to make the titles for us, but it was a little bit too funky. And I wanted something more fairly grace, so we asked the duck. They did a pretty good job, but somehow too girly. And in Bali, of course, my studio was only about ten minutes away from the monkey forest and monkeys I guess are supposed to be happy animals, but their legibility, I don't know, still have problems. Then, of course, you know whatever you don't do yourself never gets done properly, so at the end we schlepped up on those little palm trees ourselves. And this is going to take on for another two years, I think, until there is more to show there than just titles.

Now, last time I was up on this stage in Boston, we had just done these parts of the things I have learned which says, "Complaining is silly. Either act or forget." In the meantime, I have traveled quite extensively -- not just Indonesia, but pretty much around the world and found that, well, maybe complaining got a little bit less in Lisbon by this billboard was hanging about. Designers pretty much around the world very much love to complain. And they complain about very similar things, so I would want to do this itsy-bitsy experiment, and I need your help for it. So, I would actually ask you to all get up. I know it is a pain the ass in the middle. Wow! That is excellent. And there is a second theory partly involved with my sister who started singing in a choir seriously -- that really changed not only her happiness,

but definitely her well-being. So, I would love you to -- ask to sing a song with me. You are going to know the song. It is basically high-end karaoke because Ludwig van Beethoven wrote the song. But, what I am going to ask you is not just sing it somehow lamely with me, because I am -- well, for one thing I am a terrible singer, but I am not very embarrassed, so I don't mind if I stand up here singing terribly. But, I would want you to sing this with me, we will have the words up, like you really mean it because the exercise is only going to work if you actually really mean it. So, okay, the melody I think runs once through. You know that thing though. I think it runs once through.

[Music]

All my clients drive me crazy, never show no guts at all. For the peanuts that they pay me, they get logos 10 feet tall.

Wants to see three new directions for tomorrow's drop deadline. Picks the worst and mixes sections, we wind up with Frankenstein.

All my clients drive me crazy, never show no guts at all. For the peanuts that they pay me, they get logos 10 feet tall.

The CEO just cc'd me, left the tiff with her PA. Now she needs it ASAP, DVD went M.I.A.

All my clients drive me crazy, never show no guts at all. For the peanuts that they pay me, they get logos 10 feet tall.

Stefan always shows the same stuff, seen it all on ted.com. New York clients are not that tough, he should work where I am from.

All my clients drive me crazy, never show no guts at all. For the peanuts that they pay me, they get logos 10 feet tall.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[Applause]

Kurt Andersen:

You can't go wrong with a German accent, Austrian accent and Beethoven and being told to do things to large audiences. It always works, it always works. I, in the roughly few minutes we have, I am really curious about some of the nuts and bolts of this sabbatical idea. For instance when you first told your friends and colleagues and employees that you are going to do this, what was the reaction?

Stefan Sagmeister:

Well, I was, on the first sabbatical, I was really, I felt like this was such an unprofessional thing to do. This was during the first Internet boom that I actually for a while considered just to lie and just tell everybody I am having -- I am doing this gigantic job, so for a year we can't

take on any work, and I am glad I didn't. I mean, for one thing I didn't do in my life -- I never did really did well with lying, my memory is much too bad. And when I finally told them the reactions were, specifically from clients, surprisingly positive. Almost, I mean the stark reaction that I got from clients was jealousy, but expressed jealousy. Maybe it was mock jealousy like, Oh, I would really love to do that, but nobody was -- meaning, well, I also told everybody two and a half years in advance, so we didn't leave anybody hanging, you know last minute, oh, you are out.

Kurt Andersen:

Yeah.

Stefan Sagmeister:

You know, fuck you.

Kurt Andersen:

And with your, with your employees, I mean, do you, what happens to them during this year?

Stefan Sagmeister:

Well, it just worked out well. In the first year and for the first time, I had a guy called Hjalti Karlsson work with me, who at that time has been with me for five years and he needed probably the little kick in his behind to open up his own studio. And he opened his own studio with our then intern, Jan Wilker, and they have been doing fantastic ever since.

Kurt Andersen:

So, this was just a way to fire somebody is really what it's about.

Stefan Sagmeister:

Yeah, I don't think that Hjalti would see it that way. I think now that they are doing great.

Kurt Andersen:

Yes. And then, but you have employees ongoing, so they know when this is coming.

Stefan Sagmeister:

Yes.

Kurt Andersen:

So, they know that they are going to be --

Stefan Sagmeister:

Yeah, let's say like the last two designers had worked with me, Richard The and Joe Shouldice they knew when they were hired that it is going to be maximum of two years. Richard went to MIT to teach. Joe actually stayed in the studio and kept kind of a low-level profile, not because I had originally planned it that way, but just it happened to be that Joe is such an unbelievably organized calming personality that I thought, oh, that could be nice that he finished a good number of jobs and when the renovation, oversaw and all that stuff.

Kurt Andersen:

And my last question is what was the one in this last year, what was the one request from a client or prospective client for work that you found it hardest to turn down?

Stefan Sagmeister:

Oh, that is an easy answer, Obama. At that time, though, this was under -- the campaign had asked us to design something during the primaries. And I really wanted to do it, really wanted to do it, but it was in the -- it was I think a couple of days before I was supposed to go to Bali and we were crazed. And when I -- and I took half of the day out to really think this through and when I thought it through at that point in the primaries, the last thing Obama needed was somebody like me or us. So, when I really looked at it, the only reason for me to do it was basically to jump on to the bandwagon fairly lately because I actually early on was a Hillary man. And so, it just seemed, it was more like if I would now move the whole thing, and, you know, create these posters for Obama, I would do it actually for myself rather than out of serious concerns that this could put him over the edge. The people who would react to posters that they would do -- he had them all. It made no difference. So, you know, and Shepard Fairey and other people had already -- they, you know, the Shepard Fairey poster was by that time already out. It was nowhere as huge as it is, you know, turned out to be, but it was differently already printed. So, that in retrospect -- so, even that I have an explanation for and everything else, I mean, there were a couple of big clients and lucrative projects, you know, among them a certain vodka company who asked us, we said no, but did it anyway that is all there is, a little annoying, but other than that --

Kurt Andersen:

Applause for Absolut, I think. Stefan, it is a pleasure always to look at your work and to see you. Thanks very much.

Stefan Sagmeister:

Thank you.

[Applause]

[Music]