



Like all of us I was in a state of shock after September 11th. The trauma and madness of the event stirred up all the fears about annihilation and uncertainty of my earliest childhood. For six or seven weeks I could think of nothing else and spent my time trying not to feel powerless and impotent. I wanted to use my skill and training as a designer to affect the situation. I was not alone in this regard. Many designers in and out of New York, feeling they had a public responsibility, produced images and words to help us deal with this unprecedented event. I felt proud to be part of a profession where serving the needs of the public was considered appropriate and necessary. I'll get back to this idea later in my talk, for now let me show you a few slides about what I tried to do.

All I ever wanted to do was to make images and create form. This instinct for form-making seems to be something that is very characteristic of our entire species. It's one of the things that almost defines humankind. I like the idea of cultures that do not have an idea of art as a separate activity from their daily life, such as many African groups, where there isn't a word that approaches the idea of art. They are very interested in containing magic but that is another thing. Among the Balinese, there is no word for art. They just say 'we do things the best that we can.' Which is a nice way to think about what we all do. I am going to tell you everything that I know about the practice of design. It is a sort of collage of bits and pieces that I have assembled over 50 years. It includes a lot of things I've said before but I've repackaged them rather attractively. This is what I've learned.

Number 1. You can only work for people that you like.

It took me a long time to learn this rule because at the beginning of my practice I felt the opposite. Professionalism inferred that you didn't necessarily have to like the people that you worked for, and should maintain an arms length relationship to them. As a result, I never had lunch with a client or saw them socially. Some years ago I realised that I was deluded. In looking back, I discovered that all the work I had done that was meaningful and significant came out of an affectionate relationship with a client. Affection, trust and sharing some common ground is the only way good work can be achieved. Otherwise it is a bitter and hopeless struggle.

Number 2. If you have a choice never have a job.

One night I was sitting in my car outside Columbia University where my wife Shirley was studying Anthropology. While I was waiting I was listening to the radio and heard an interviewer ask 'Now that you have reached 75 have you any advice for our audience about how to prepare for your old age?' An irritated voice said 'Why is everyone asking me about old age these days?' I recognised the voice as John Cage. I am sure that many of you know who he was – the composer and philosopher who influenced people like Jasper Johns and Merce Cunningham as well as the music world in general. I knew him slightly and admired his contribution to our times. 'You know, I do know how to prepare for old age' he said. 'Never have a job, because if you have a job someday someone will take it away from you and then you will be unprepared for your old age. For me, it has always been the same every since the age of 12. I wake up in the morning and I try to figure out how am I going to put bread on the table today? It is the same at 75, I wake up every morning and I think how am I going to put bread on the table today? I am exceeding well prepared for my old age' he said.

Number 3. Some people are toxic avoid them.

This is a subtext of number one. There was in the sixties an old geezer named Fritz Perls who was a gestalt therapist. Gestalt therapy derives from art history, it proposes you must understand the 'whole' before you can understand the details. What you have to look at is the entire culture, the entire family and community and so on. Perls proposed that in all relationships people could be either toxic or nourishing towards one another. It is not necessarily true that the same person will be toxic or nourishing in every relationship, but the combination of any two people in a relationship produces toxic or nourishing consequences. And the important thing that I can tell you is that there is a test to determine whether someone is toxic or nourishing in your relationship with them. Here is the test: You have spent some time with this person, either you have a drink or go for dinner or you go to a ball game. It doesn't matter very much but at the end of that time you observe whether you are more energised or less energised. Whether you are tired or whether you are exhilarated. If you are more tired then you have been poisoned. If you have more energy you have been nourished. The test is almost infallible and I suggest that you use it for the rest of your life.

Number 4. Professionalism is not enough or the good is the enemy of the great.

Early in my career I couldn't wait to become a professional. That was my complete aspiration in my early life because professionals seemed to know everything - not to mention they got paid well for it. Later I discovered after working for a while that professionalism itself was a limitation. After all, what professionalism means in most cases is limiting risks. So if you want to get your car fixed you go to a mechanic who knows how to deal with transmission problems in the same way each time. I suppose if you needed brain surgery you wouldn't want the doctor to fool around and invent a new way of connecting your nerve endings. Please doc, do it in the way that has worked in the past.

Unfortunately in our field, in a so-called creative activity – I've begun to hate that word. I especially hate when it is used as a noun. I shudder when I hear can someone called a creative. Anyhow, when you are doing something in a recurring way to diminish risk or doing it in the same way as you have done it before, it is clear why professionalism is not enough. After all, what is desirable in our field, is continuous transgression. Professionalism does not allow for that because transgression has to encompass the possibility of failure and if you are professional your instinct is not to fail, it is to repeat success. Professionalism as a lifetime aspiration is a limited goal.

Number 5. Less is not necessarily more.

Being a child of modernism I have heard this mantra all my life. Less is more. One morning upon awakening I realised that it was total nonsense, it is an absurd proposition and also fairly meaningless. But it sounds great because it contains within it a paradox that is resistant to understanding. But it simply does not obtain when you think about the visual of the history of the world. If you look at a Persian rug, you cannot say that less is more because you realise that every part of that rug, every change of colour, every shift in form is absolutely essential for its aesthetic success. You cannot prove to me that a solid blue rug is in any way superior. That also goes for the work of Gaudi, Persian miniatures, art nouveau and everything else. However, I have an alternative to the proposition that I believe is more appropriate. 'Just enough is more.'

Number 6. Style is not to be trusted

I think this idea first occurred to me when I was looking at a marvelous etching of a bull by Picasso. It was an illustration for a story by Balzac called *The Hidden Masterpiece*. I am sure that you all know it. It is a bull that is expressed in 12 different styles going from very naturalistic version of a bull to an absolutely reductive single line abstraction and everything else along the way. What is clear just from looking at this single print is that style is irrelevant. In every one of these cases, from extreme abstraction to acute naturalism they are extraordinary regardless of the style. It's absurd to be loyal to a style. It does not deserve your loyalty. I must say that for old design professionals it is a problem because the field is driven by economic consideration more than anything else. Style change is usually linked to economic factors, as all of you know who have read Marx. Also fatigue occurs when people see too much of the same thing too often. So every ten years or so there is a stylistic shift and things are made to look different. Typefaces go in and out of style and the visual system shifts a little bit. If you are around for a long time as a designer, you have an essential problem of what to do. Incidentally, it's popular for designers to claim they have no style but this is generally not true. Most good designers have developed a vocabulary, a form that is their own. It is one of the ways that they distinguish themselves from their peers, and establish their identity in the field. How you maintain your own belief system and preferences becomes a real balancing act. As a career progresses the question of whether you pursue change or whether you maintain your own distinct form becomes difficult. We have all seen the work of illustrious practitioners that suddenly look old-fashioned or, more precisely, belonging to another moment in time. And there are sad stories such as the one about Cassandre, arguably the greatest graphic designer of the twentieth century, who couldn't make a living at the end of his life and committed suicide. But the point is that anybody who is in this for the long haul has to decide how to respond to change in the zeitgeist. What is it that people now expect that they formerly didn't want? And how to respond to that desire in a way that doesn't change your sense of integrity and purpose.

Number 7. How you live changes your brain.

The brain is the most responsive organ of the body. Actually it is the organ that is most susceptible to change and regeneration of all the organs in the body. I have a friend named Gerald Edelman who was a great scholar of brain studies and says that the analogy of the brain to a computer is pathetic. The brain is actually more like an overgrown garden that is constantly growing and throwing off seeds, regenerating and so on. And he believes that the brain is susceptible, in a way that we are not fully conscious of, to almost every experience of our life and every encounter we have. I was fascinated by a story in a newspaper a few years ago about the search for perfect pitch. A group of scientists decided that they were going to find out why certain people have perfect pitch. You know certain people hear a note precisely and are able to replicate it at exactly the right pitch. Some people have relative pitch; perfect pitch is rare even among musicians. The scientists discovered – I don't know how – that among people with perfect pitch the brain was different. Certain lobes of the brain had undergone some change or deformation that was always present with those who had perfect pitch. This was interesting enough in itself. But then they discovered something even more fascinating. If you took a bunch of kids and taught them to play the violin at the age of 4 or 5 after a couple of years some of them developed perfect pitch, and in all of those cases their brain structure had changed. Well what could that mean for the rest of us? We tend to believe that the mind affects the body and the body affects the mind, although we do not generally believe that everything we do affects the brain. I am convinced that if someone was to yell at me from across the street my brain could be affected and my life might changed.

That is why your mother always said, 'Don't hang out with those bad kids.' Mama was right. Thought changes our life and our behaviour. I also believe that drawing works in the same way. I am a great advocate of drawing, not in order to become an illustrator, but because I believe drawing changes the brain in the same way as the search to create the right note changes the brain of a violinist. Drawing also makes you attentive. It makes you pay attention to what you are looking at, which is not so easy.

Number 8. Doubt is better than certainty.

Everyone always talks about confidence and believing in what you do. I remember once going to a class in Kundalini yoga where the teacher said that, spirituality speaking, if you believed that you had achieved enlightenment you have merely arrived at your limitation. I think that is also true in a more practical sense. Deeply held beliefs of any kind prevent you from being open to experience, which is why I find all firmly held ideological positions questionable. It makes me nervous when someone believes too deeply or too much. I think that being sceptical and questioning all deeply held beliefs is essential. Of course we must know the difference between scepticism and cynicism because cynicism is as much a restriction of one's openness to the world as passionate belief is. They are sort of twins.

Number 9. Solving the problem is more important than being right.

Ultimately, if we're lucky, we begin to understand that always being right is a delusion. There is a significant sense of self-righteousness in both the art and design world. Perhaps it begins at school. Art school often promote the Ayn Rand model of the single personality resisting the ideas of the surrounding culture. The theory is that as an individual you can transform the world, which is true up to a point but as someone once said 'In the battle between you and the world, bet on the world.' One of the signs of a damaged ego is absolute certainty.

Schools encourage the idea of not compromising and defending your work at all costs. Well, in our work the issue is usually all about the nature of compromise. You just have to know when compromise is appropriate. Blind pursuit of your own ends which excludes the possibility that others may be right does not allow for the fact that in design we are always dealing with a triad – the client, the audience and you.

Ideally, making everyone win through acts of accommodation is desirable. But self-righteousness is often the enemy. Self-righteousness and narcissism generally come out of some sort of childhood trauma, which we do not have to go into. It is a consistently mischievous element in human affairs. Some years ago I read a most remarkable thing about love, that also applies to the nature of co-existing with others. It was a quotation by Iris Murdoch from her obituary. It read 'Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real.' Isn't that fantastic! The best insight on the subject of love that one can imagine.

Last year someone gave me a charming book by Roger Rosenblatt called 'Ageing Gracefully' I got it on my birthday. I did not appreciate the title at the time but it contains a series of rules for ageing gracefully. The first rule is the best. Rule number one is that 'it doesn't matter.' 'It doesn't matter that what you think. Follow this rule and it will add decades to your life. It does not matter if you are late or early, if you are here or there, if you said it or didn't say it, if

you are clever or if you were stupid. If you were having a bad hair day or a no hair day or if your boss looks at you cockeyed or your boyfriend or girlfriend looks at you cockeyed, if you are cockeyed. If you don't get that promotion or prize or house or if you do – it doesn't matter.' Wisdom at last. A week or two later I read a joke that I haven't been able to get out of my head. A butcher was opening his market one morning and as he did a rabbit popped his head through the door. The butcher was surprised when the rabbit inquired 'Got any cabbage?' The butcher said 'This is a meat market – we sell meat, not vegetables.' The rabbit hopped off. The next day the butcher is opening the shop and sure enough the rabbit pops his head round and says 'You got any cabbage?' The butcher now irritated says 'Listen you little rodent I told you yesterday we sell meat, we do not sell vegetables and the next time you come here I am going to grab you by the throat and nail those floppy ears to the floor.' The rabbit disappeared hastily and nothing happened for a week. Then one morning the rabbit popped his head around the corner and said 'Got any nails?' The butcher said 'No.' The rabbit said 'Ok. Got any cabbage?' My last rule is based on an article I wrote in the AIGA Journal some years ago and also refers to the sense of public responsibility I mentioned in my opening remarks.

Number 10. Tell the truth.

The rabbit joke is relevant because it occurred to me that looking for a cabbage in a butcher's shop might be like looking for ethics in the design field. It may not be the most obvious place to find either. It's interesting to observe that in the new AIGA's code of ethics there is a significant amount of useful information about appropriate behaviour towards clients and other designers, but not a word about a designer's relationship to the public. In daily life we expect a butcher to sell us eatable meat and not to misrepresent his wares. I remember reading that during the Stalin years in Russia that everything labelled veal was actually chicken. I can't imagine what everything labelled chicken was. We can accept certain kinds of misrepresentation, such as fudging about the amount of fat in his hamburger but once a butcher betrays our trust by knowingly selling us spoiled meat we go elsewhere. As a designer, do we have less responsibility to our public than a butcher? Our meat is information. Everyone interested in licensing our field might note that the reason licensing has been invented is to protect the public not designers or clients. 'Do no harm' is an admonition to doctors concerning their relationship to their patients, not to their fellow practitioners or the drug companies. Incidentally, if we were licensed, telling the truth might become more central to what we do.

I went to Las Vegas for the last AIGA convention. Someone once claimed that Vegas was the greatest single work of art the human species has yet produced. I was staying in a hotel called the Venetian, which had more clouds painted on the ceilings of the hallways than had ever been executed in 15th century Venice.

I went up to the reception desk and I said 'I understand that there is a Grand Canal here' and she said 'Yes we have one here.' I said 'Where is it?' She said 'One flight up!'

What a concept. The earth reeled beneath my feet when I thought about it. I took the stairs up and there indeed was the Grand Canal with gondolas and gondoliers who will cheerfully take you to St. Marco Plaza, which was just around the corner in perpetual twilight. If you sit in the plaza even though it is under a plaster ceiling, the waiter will ask you 'Would you like to sit inside or outside?'

One day the plumbing broke down and the ghastly smell started to fill the game rooms. Actually it was very much like Venice in the summertime. I wondered if they might be doing this intentionally. Is there such a thing as a virtual smell? I never found out but on the way back I took a flight that I thought might have been influenced by its proximity to Las Vegas. When I got on board a stewardess came from the back of the cabin carrying steaming towels. I had never seen towels steaming that much – they were billowing. I realised as she approached that the steam wasn't coming from the towels. The source was a wineglass she was balancing on her tray. 'What's in glass?' I inquired. 'Dry ice,' she replied. 'Is that for the drama?' I asked. She said 'yes.'

So I tried to imagine the meaning of all this and where the decision to do it was made. In the boardroom? The advertising agency or perhaps on the flight? Who benefits? I wondered. Could the thinking be that if the glass were steaming enough people would remember and next time they book a flight they would want to go with an airline that had steaming towels? Because if they paid attention to hot towels they might also be attentive to whether the plane was going to land or not. How about the man in the last aisle who put a steaming towel on his face that was ice cold and immediately thought that he had had a stroke. I don't know exactly why this bothered me but it did.

One must start with the presumption that telling the truth is important for human survival, but at this moment of relativism and virtuality, I'm not sure how many would agree on what truth is or how important it is in our private and professional lives.

But we must begin somewhere. The question becomes a professional one, because as designers or communicators (the preferred current description), we are constantly informing the public, transmitting information, and affecting the beliefs and values of others. Should telling the truth be a fundamental requirement of this role? Is there a difference between telling the truth to your wife and family and telling the truth to a general public? What is that difference?

Two years ago, as I was doing the illustrations for Dante's Purgatory, I got very interested in the Road to Hell and designed a little questionnaire to see where I stood in terms of my own willingness to lie. So here it is -- 12 steps in the Road to Hell. I personally have taken a number of them.

1. Designing a package to look bigger on the shelf.
2. Doing an ad for a slow, boring film to make it seem like a light-hearted comedy.
3. Designing a crest for a new vineyard to suggest that it has been in business for a long time.
4. Designing a jacket for a book whose sexual content that you find personally repellent.
5. Designing a medal using steel from the World Trade Center to be sold as a profit-making souvenir of September 11th.

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6. Designing an advertising campaign for a company with a history of known discrimination in minority hiring.
 7. Designing a package for children whose contents you know are low in nutrition value and high in sugar content.
 8. Designing a line of t-shirts for a manufacture that employs child labour.
 9. Designing a promotion for a diet product that you know doesn't work.
 10. Designing an ad for a political candidate whose policies you believe would be harmful to the general public.
 11. Designing a brochure for an SUV that turned over frequently in emergency conditions known to have killed 150 people
 12. Designing an ad for a product whose frequent use could result in the user's death.

The range goes from making a package that seems a little bigger to somebody's death. The interesting thing is how slippery that slope is and how easy it is to move from stage to stage until you arrive at the ultimate human sin. But then again, why talk about it. This discussion has been going on since the dawn of history. But something occurred to me the other night. Imagine that the butcher goes out shopping one morning and before he makes his first purchase a vision of the rabbit's face comes to him. He thinks about how adorable that rabbit was, even though a bit of a pest, and at that moment he decides to buy a pound of cabbage instead of a pound of nails.