

# ARCADE

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## IGNITION

### Designer on a Journey

Jane Savage

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Fire

I have been a *fire keeper* and participant in several traditional Lakota sweat lodge ceremonies in my life. The key to keeping a good fire is a clear mind and a prayer of good intention. The Lakota way is an intense, earth-based spiritual practice, whereby in the sweat lodge one can aggressively burn off that which ails you. Ever on a search for spiritual expression and self-improvement, I was curious and attended an Ananda service that involved an ancient Vedic fire ceremony. It was a very gentle fire set in a chafing dish fueled by sacred oils. Prayers were written on small pieces of paper to be offered to the fire and burned. From American Indian to East Indian, the spectrum between these two forms of spiritual practice is extreme in terms of purifying with the fire element. From these deep experiences, I realized how necessary it was for me to keep alight my own mystical flames, whether or not I had access to these rituals on a regular basis.

On the cover of Sir Ken Robinson's book, *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything*, there is a graphic of a flame. It's safe to assume that the element to which he's referring is fire. I first learned of Sir Ken by watching a video of him speaking to the class of 2009 at my alma mater. He is a leading thinker on creativity and human potential.

He was recently in Portland speaking at Powell's Books to promote his latest work. I found him delightfully inspiring. Sir Ken gave many examples of artists, musicians, mathematicians and athletes whose lives had fallen into place by following their passion and being in their element.

One man in the audience asked Sir Ken, *What if you're passionate about a lot of things?* His answer was that you will have little time for the others once you focus on one or two. But his main point was that it's more of a challenge for people to figure out what their passions are versus having too many. In my mind, Sir Ken is a modern day Prometheus, who took fire from the gods to give it to the mortals; using his wisdom and research into the creative drive, he aims to ignite the untapped potential in the lives that he touches.

His case is that when you find your passion, your life falls into place. For most of you reading *ARCADE*, you are likely connected to the design or architecture field or have an avid interest in it. In the beginning, it may have been a struggle to find your creative path—it certainly was for me.

I grew up outside of Boston, and I was lucky enough to be in a school system that had a great arts program. When my art teacher in high school asked me what I was going to do for college, I told her I was going to study engineering and play lacrosse. *No you're not. You're going to get your portfolio together and go to art school*, she directed. She invited design schools to give us slide shows of their programs. When it hit me that I had to be a designer, I felt like I was on fire. I was worried thinking about how I was going to convince my parents to let me go, but willfully determined to have my way. There was a recession; I watched them talk my brother out of studying architecture five years earlier, and I wasn't going to let them talk me out of design. My mother, in helping my case to sway my father, told him that I had been drawing my whole life. Ever since I was a young child she kept a pen and paper in her purse for me.

I read about a study that stated the evidence of career choice is written in your DNA—based on traits passed through your parents. This explains why twins separated at birth often adopt similar if not identical career choices. We have our work programmed into us.

My creative ability came through my father's line. His mother was a talented dressmaker and artist in the Philippines. He told me stories of how she would create precise drawings of him. I wish I had those drawings, but sadly she and her stories were lost in WWII. My father's family was broken apart. Given a choice to stay with his distraught father or go to his strict maternal grandmother, he chose the latter, setting in motion a path of choices that eventually led him to the U.S. where he would meet my mother, who was from the southern Philippines. On our last visit to the Philippines, I realized that it was highly unlikely their paths would have crossed there. They had to meet in the U.S. and follow their destiny, so that my life could fall into place.

In *Faces of America* on PBS with Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eminent cellist Yo-Yo Ma recounts his father's wisdom, "...it takes three generations to make a musician: 1 – to get out of poverty, 2 – to go to college, 3 – to master the instrument..." I look at my five year-old son, and there's not a doubt in my mind that he will be the master of whatever he chooses.

Many people came before me so that I could add up to who I am today. As a designer, I'm constantly refining and re-defining my role because I am doing the same with my self from a spiritual point of view. I am blessed to have found the path of design. I have all the tools, and I still wonder: *What is it I am here to do? What is it that will honor the legacy of those who have come before me? What will be my legacy?*

Every creative person I talk to is wondering about their true purpose and legacy. There are a lot of frustrated or misguided artists and designers out there. The state of the economy hasn't helped. All the artists I know, except for one or two, are in survival mode to stay in the lines of financial security and healthcare benefits. The planet is having a financial and environmental resource crisis, causing us as consumers to reconsider our consumption. We as designers are rethinking how we conscientiously address the consumer's needs. In addition, Sir Ken argues, we are also having a human resource crisis because we've barely scratched the surface of our collective human potential.

In 2006, I led a group of designers from Nike on a trip to Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan sits on the western shores of the Caspian Sea at the crossroads of Asia, the Middle East and Russia. Known as the *Land of Fire* it's a country full of natural resources of the petroleum kind. We had an opportunity to visit a tourist site eternally aflame due to fissures in the earth seeping natural gas. There were no barriers safeguarding us from the undying blaze, so we could get beside the heat as closely as we wanted.

Our project in Azerbaijan was to teach design and art to displaced children from the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Their school was on one floor of a clean but dilapidated summer sanitarium near the sea. The rest of the rooms in the building were one-room apartments where many of the children lived crowded with their families. Many of us came back from this trip in a state of unease—returning to our comfortable lives with a humbled sense of perspective.

Quite a number of designers on the trip are no longer with the company, having left to pursue opportunities more fitting with deeper needs. It's not clear what the trip may have inflamed in my travel companions, but for me it affirmed that my path as a designer includes inspiring creative potential.

I can only imagine that at least one of the 80 kids with whom we worked may one day be inspired to follow their own dream to be an artist or a designer. Each of these children is an extension of that land, with gas fissures of possibility waiting to be set alight—no different than the fire my own high school art teacher kindled in me. They will go on and pass the flame and the world will be altered.

I think that artists and designers who've been lucky enough to find the creative path owe it to themselves and to each other to channel. Prometheus. Ken says in his book that each child has a singing voice that's like ringing a bell. I'd say then that each person has a creative expression that's like a flame. It can be as small as a gas leak, waiting for ignition. It's easy to recognize someone at their creative best—it's like they are on fire. You know the feeling when you are doing your creative best—it's as if your belly is burning.

I am on the creative path. You may be, too. Light the flame. Touch lives. Change the world.

*Ignition.*

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