

LIFE DESIGN BY DELETION

A Practical Essay To Get Your Life Design Started

by Richard Banfield



Designing A Life by Deletion

For twenty years I made things by adding. Then I spent ninety days trying to improve my life by taking things away. It worked. Here's what I did.

For two decades my job was to add. My design agency designed and built products — around seven hundred of them. The craft was always some form of addition dressed up as improvement: another feature, another flow, one more bit of friction sanded off so the thing felt effortless. I was good at it. I wrote books about it. I got paid to make life smoother for millions of people I'd never meet.

Then, last summer, I did the opposite. For ninety days I deleted.

The real reason I started is a little embarrassing. In essays on Substack, Medium and LinkedIn, and in rooms full of people, I'd been talking about finding peace and happiness through subtraction.

My pitch was that you don't need a new life, you need to put down all the crap that isn't serving you. Good story. I just wasn't living it. I was prescribing a medicine I hadn't swallowed, and at some point you either stop talking or start taking your own advice.

So I took it.

Here's the story I was living, and I'd bet you're living some version of it too: that more is progress. That a full calendar means a full life. That the books on the shelf represent what's inside your head, the house is the proof, the standing commitments are what make you reliable and therefore worth something.

Nobody sat me down and taught me that. Culture, ambition, the vanity of an identity of being “so busy” and capable and surrounded by his own accumulation. It's propaganda, and it has been broadcasting in my head for years.

Via negativa is the counter-idea. It isn't mine; I took it from others like Nassim Taleb, who took it from philosophers and theologians who defined God by what God is not. The principle is simple and deeply unfashionable: you often improve something faster by removing what's wrong with it than by adding something new. Subtract the harmful,

and what remains is stronger. A doctor does more good telling you to quit smoking than by prescribing anything. You get it.

I wanted to know if it worked in my life. So I treated myself as the prototype.

I didn't have a checklist but I did know where to start and what signs to look for. If you're looking to unfuck your life, and you're looking for a place to start, here you go...

First, I wrote it all down. Every item I owned, all the commitments, every important relationship, every project I was working (including side quests), every possession that took up room.

One long, uncomfortable list. Not judging it. Just to see it. You cannot subtract what you can't see or acknowledge.

Then I asked one question of each item: is this adding to my creativity or the quality of my relationships or is it draining them?

The trick here is not to think about each thing, but to *feel* what that thing brings up in your gut or chest. If it felt constricting, or made my stomach knot, I put an X next to it. If I felt expanded and open when I read the item, I put a check next to it.

That part required an investment of time, but the effort was straight forward.

For the items I wasn't sure about, I ran the smallest possible experiment. What I've come to call thin-slice experiments. I didn't blow anything up immediately. For example, I stepped back from a project for a bit. Or I declined a standing commitment once and watched what actually happened, which was usually nothing. I stopped texting to the friend who was always saying "yeah, we should definitely get together" but then never made the commitment to get together.

Thin slices. Just enough data to get a feel for whether it was worth continuing or not.

Once I had clarity over those ambiguous things on the list, I actually made the cuts.

Some of it was physical, and more drastic than I'd planned. I downsized hard. I sold my house, which was too big after my wife had died and my middle son moved out. A few things made it to storage, but the furniture, bikes, and all the stuff clogging up our closets we either sold or donated. The wardrobe went down to essentials. Most of my books went to the library, which for a man who'd built a sense of self out of shelves, was a small heresy I'm still a little proud of.

I also went cash-only for a stretch and started delaying purchases on purpose, deliberately reintroducing friction to everyday purchases.

The irony of what I was doing was not lost on me. I'd spent twenty years engineering friction out of other people's lives and now I was reintroducing it. I'd always assumed less friction is better. It's the entire religion of good product design. But strip too much friction out of a life and you strip out the texture along with it. The waiting, the effort, the resistance: that's not a flaw in the experience, it often is the experience. Removing obstacles is not the same as improving something. I'd spent two decades conflating the two.

Not all of it fits in a donation box. The harder subtractions were the relationships that had gone one-directional, and the version of me that needed the big suburban house and the expansive book shelves to feel like enough. The forcing function was that whatever we couldn't carry wasn't going to stay in our lives.

I also used the move to cut the cord. No more streaming services, no Amazon Prime delivery, no subscriptions that didn't really matter. That translated to no TVs and almost no screens. We still have our phones and a desktop for projects that need a bigger screen. If we want to watch a game, we go down to the local restaurant.

It wasn't easy, but it was one of the most liberating experiences of my life.

Before committing to a new house I decided to live house-less for 90 days. Fortunately, a family member had an in-law apartment above their garage. A studio with a bathroom. It was just my 10-year old and myself so a studio was enough. It made the perfect temporary home for us over the summer. This part made sense for us, but I'm not recommending you live on someone else's couch unless you want to.

We also used the opportunity of not having a house to travel as much as possible. Spain, Portugal, Maine and a week in the Azores with no laptop and only a small bag of clothes. That was a great lesson, which made me realise that carrying a laptop around was inviting busy work. If you don't have it with you, you don't create opportunities to use it. I gave my laptop away and haven't missed it.

Here's where we find ourselves today. The temporary downsizing became permanent. I live in a small two-bedroom now, walking distance from my family, with my youngest son. Less house. Less stuff. Fewer commitments pretending to be obligations. And somehow I have more room. More attention. More time to do what I want to do, because I'm not managing my stuff.

I'm wary of turning this into advice, because the moment subtraction becomes another program to optimize, it's just another addition. So I won't tell you what to remove. I'll only tell you what I found: most of us are not one acquisition away from the life we want. We're a few subtractions away from it.

If you want to try it, start where I started. Not with a purge. With a list, and one question. See what feels right in your gut.

— Richard

If you're new to my writing and to Second Harvest, let me introduce myself. As part of our mission to help people make the second half of their life, the best half, I run experiments on myself to learn how to be more at peace and happier. Then I write my findings down and suggest practical ways to use them to overcome what's blocking you.

These experiments always start with the stories we have in our heads. You know, the stories that keep you small, block your growth, and sabotage your best laid plans. I call these stories *domestic propaganda* because they are often our brains' way of keeping us compliant. I write about the ways that you can become aware of your internal stories and then change them to work with you, not against you.

Together with my partner, Devon Warwick McDonald, we also run a club for people looking for guidance on big life changes, workshops, webinars, and retreats. If that's interesting to you, please join us. Thanks!

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