

The Daily Helping Episode 293:

Ayse Birsell

Ayse Birsell: [00:00:01] Older people, actually they don't fear aging because they're thrilled to be alive. And they said the thrill is not gone. The thrill is on. And I thought, I want to talk about this. I want to make individuals aware. And I also want to make corporations and entrepreneurs aware that this is an incredible opportunity for growth.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:00:31] Hello and welcome to The Daily Helping with Dr. Richard Schuster, food for the brain, knowledge from the experts, tools to win at life. I'm your host, Dr. Richard. Whoever you are, wherever you're from and whatever you do, this is the show that is going to help you become the best version of yourself. Each episode you will hear from some of the most amazing, talented, and successful people on the planet who follow their passions and strive to help others. Join our movement to get a million people each day to commit acts of kindness for others. Together, we're going to make the world a better place. Are you ready? Because it's time for your daily helping.

Thanks for tuning in to this episode of The Daily Helping podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Richard. And we have a really brilliant guest to share with you today. Her name is Ayse Birsell. And she's one of the world's leading industrial designers. She has designed hundreds of products from toilet seats to office systems to potato peelers, even concept cars. You've probably held or set on something she's designed for Herman Miller, Knoll, Target, Toyota, among many others. Her work has earned her several nicknames, Queen of Toilets. We're going to have to talk about that one. Queen Bee and Design Evangelista.

Interior Design Magazine awarded her best product of the year designer in 2020 and named one of the most creative people in business, according to Fast Companies. Also shortlisted among the world's top eight coaches by Thinkers 50 for Marshall Goldsmith. Her newest book, which we're going to talk about today, Design the Long Life You Love, is available in stores everywhere. Ayse, welcome to The Daily Helping. It is awesome to have you with us today.

Ayse Birsell: [00:02:23] Dr. Richard, I'm so happy to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:02:27] Absolutely. So, I want to dive right in. We're going to get to Queen of Toilets, but I want to first kind of jump into the Ayse Birsell time

The Daily Helping Episode 293:

Ayse Birsal

machine. Let's go back and tell us what puts you on the path you're on today. How did you get here?

Ayse Birsal: [00:02:44] So, I was born and I grew up in Turkey and in a family of lawyers. And one thing about lawyers that's interesting is they're pessimists because they constantly think about the worst-case scenarios. And I wanted to be an optimist, and I wanted to be creative. And so, first I thought architecture. But then a family friend came to tea and talked to me about industrial design using a teacup as an example. And I fell in love with the human scale of doing designing products. And I was like, that's what I want to do and that's what I've been doing. As you mentioned, I've designed almost everything.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:03:29] So, did you study over Turkey? When did you come over to the States?

Ayse Birsal: [00:03:34] I did my undergraduate in Turkey and then I came to the States. I had a Fulbright to come to New York, to Pratt Institute to do my Master's in Industrial Design. You know how New York is, if you can make it here, I couldn't go back after like two or three years here. And I'm now a New Yorker.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:03:55] There you go. There you go. So, let's talk industrial design. You said it was the teacup was the example. So, what I'd love to know, and you're known for this, as being able to design your perfect life. So, talk to us about elements of industrial design which could apply to people in their personal lives listening to the show.

Ayse Birsal: [00:04:18] Yes. And that's the part about optimism. So, design is a problem-solving discipline. If you don't have problems, you can't design. So, we love problems. And our life is full of problems. And the way a designer approaches that, instead of going there are so many problems. We're like, yes, there are so many problems. And that's the opportunity. So, that's the optimism of design that I try to teach people and I give them a process, which is my design process that I use to design all these things, but now adapted to our life and work. And it's a step-by-step process and it really takes your problems and turns them in, helps you see them as opportunities.

The Daily Helping Episode 293:

Ayse Birsal

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:05:13] So, in psychology, we might call that cognitive reframing, where you take a look at something from a different perspective. So, let's talk --

Ayse Birsal: [00:05:21] It's all about reframing. Well said.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:05:24] Yes. So, let's talk a little bit about this book. And I'm curious because I know that -- and this is not your first book, but what was the specific impetus for writing this one? Why did you say, you know what, I really need to put this book out in the world?

Ayse Birsal: [00:05:39] It's actually quite simple. Eighty-seven percent of Americans fear aging, and I'm one of them. That's why I wrote the book. I was sandwiched between my young kids and my parents. And I could see that there are so many things, services and products for kids and so little for my aging parents. And I thought, I'm next, I'm going to do something about this. And with that, we had great opportunities. One of them was a year long research. We had a grant to basically collaborate with people who are 65 to 90 and ask them to design their life. And we did it east, west and south, basically New York and New Jersey, LA and then Mississippi. And after that year-long research, we learned something very, very surprising, unexpected. And that was older people actually, they don't fear aging because they're thrilled to be alive. And they said the thrill is not gone. The thrill is on. And I thought I want to talk about this. I want to make individuals aware. And I also want to make corporations and entrepreneurs aware that this is an incredible opportunity for growth.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:07:11] And it's something that you could take the knowledge from that 60 to 85-year-old demographic and give it to somebody who's 26, who picks up your book, and is able to write their ship for the next 60 years. I love it. So, with that backdrop --

Ayse Birsal: [00:07:27] Dr. Richard, you read my mind. I love it. Yeah. I shouldn't have said it better. Yeah.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:07:34] This is what they pay me the big bucks for, right? So, with that context then, take us through -- well, first, I want to dive a little bit deeper into

The Daily Helping Episode 293:

Ayse Birsell

that data you collected. So, other than finding that in older adults, that spark for life was still there, they weren't afraid of dying. What were the other major things that your research discovered and then what were the things you discovered that were most surprising to you?

Ayse Birsell: [00:08:06] So, one of the things that was most surprising to us is, first of all, that this era didn't exist before. So, in the 1950s, people, their life expectancy was 60 to 65. Today, life expectancy is 75 to 80. And when you map that out 0 to 20, 20 to 40, 40 to 60, it used to be cut off more or less at 60, but today you have another era which is 60 to 80 and that is an amazing gift of time. And that didn't exist before. To me, that's like the invention of moving pictures or automobiles or space travel. Like we get to live something that didn't exist before. And so, that's where a lot of the information comes from, is when you look at that, you take the long view of life, one of the surprising things was people in their 20s and you mentioned like somebody in their 26, 27, what they could do with these lessons, but somebody in their 20s and 30s and somebody in their 50s and 60s, they're more alike and similar than different. And I'll put it in a nutshell, and you'll know what I'm talking about. It's sex, drugs, and rock and roll. And that was surprising. It was a little shocking.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:09:53] So, I now have this image in my mind indelibly burned into my brain of senior citizens partying in lewd and lascivious behavior. So, thank you for that.

Ayse Birsell: [00:10:05] Yes. And you captured it.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:10:08] Very interesting. But again, it tells us that the human experience is universal, right? Like it transcends age. And you took demographics from all over the country, and you found that there were these common threads. So, that's really interesting data. So, we're 10 minutes in. Somebody's listening to this. They're still here, like I'm in. I want the world's most creative industrial designer to tell me how to design the world's greatest life for me. How do you do it? No pressure.

Ayse Birsell: [00:10:44] No. Yeah. Thank you. The most important thing is to give yourself permission, because a lot of people don't. But one of the things that I learned from our research as well is there's some really great research done around what

The Daily Helping Episode 293:

Ayse Birsal

people regret when they're dying. And the number one thing is, and I'm just quoting this, I wish I had the courage to live a life true to myself, not what others expected of me. So, this process of designing your life is about creating a life that's true to yourself. It's an original life that is based on your values, that looks like you, feels like you, coherent with how you want to live. And it requires that you give yourself permission to do it and care less about what other people think.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:11:54] I love language.

Ayse Birsal: [00:11:55] It's kind of like an antidote. Sorry, I didn't mean to talk over you.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:12:00] No, not at all. I wanted to circle back a word you use because language is powerful. And you use the word coherence. So, in the context of you designing the perfect life, what does coherence mean to you?

Ayse Birsal: [00:12:14] Coherence means that being aware of our values and that a life well lived is a life that matches, is coherent with our values. And our values are not static. Some of them are, but some of them change. Like my values, I'm a working mom today, but my values from when I was not a mom to when I'm a mom have evolved. And my values now in my 50s are different than what they were in my 20s. And I find from helping people design their life, but also from my own life is when something is challenging, like COVID was very challenging, a recession is challenging, moving to a new country is challenging, or being let go of your job is challenging. In these moments, we tend to forget our values because everything gets kind of shook up. And so, if you want to design something, whether it's a chair or your life or your work, it has to be coherent with your values. And that's what I do.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:13:34] I love that. So, the first step in designing the perfect life for you is really getting granular clarity on what matters to you down deep inside. What are your values? So, values, check. What's next?

Ayse Birsal: [00:13:52] We're going to circle back to that.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:13:54] Okay.

The Daily Helping Episode 293:

Ayse Birsal

Ayse Birsal: [00:13:55] One of the things that I do is I get people to deconstruct their life. And deconstruction is a fancy word for seeing what something is made up of. And so, when we say our life or work, it's a very dense topic and there are many things inside of there. And I just ask people, just get whatever idea you have about your life or work or friendship, whatever it is, out onto paper so you can see it. So, you break it into its parts and you map it out. And that's because that's how I start designing. When somebody asks me to design a toilet seat or a chair or an office system, I break it apart and try and understand what's this made up of. And then realize in doing that, you break the connections that you assume are between things. And that's very liberating and it changes the way you think about things.

Dr. Richard, I'll give you an example that I use with people. And I tell people, imagine, like take your phone or your black camera. And just open it up and break it apart into all its parts and pieces. And then I say, can you put this back together? And most people tell me no. And I'm like, okay, that's deconstruction. When you pull apart your life and start to see the parts and pieces, it doesn't want to go back the way it was before. And that's the beauty of it because you want to do something new with your life.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:15:35] You said most people tell you they couldn't put the phone back together. How many people have told you they could put the phone back together?

Ayse Birsal: [00:15:41] You notice? All right, I learned my lesson.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:15:47] So, we have coherence to our values. We have taking our life and deconstructing it. What's next?

Ayse Birsal: [00:15:59] I want to answer that question. You know who told me? I had a roomful of leaders from 3M.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:16:06] They could do it, of course.

Ayse Birsal: [00:16:08] Yeah. And I asked them question. Exactly. They said, "Yeah, I could do it". I was like, would it work? Yeah, it would work. I have one example for this crowd.

The Daily Helping Episode 293:

Ayse Birsal

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:16:17] Well, I don't think we have too many engineers. Hello to all our engineer fans in the audience. But generally, but your point is well taken. When you take your life and you spread it apart and you look at every aspect of your life, you can see what are the pieces you want to keep and what are the pieces that you want to discard, I think is the message, which is really cool.

Ayse Birsal: [00:16:38] Exactly.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:16:39] Okay. So, take us to the next level here. What comes next?

Ayse Birsal: [00:16:41] The next level is helping people think about those things and gather inspiration. So, one of the things is connecting people with their superpowers and kryptonite, which I think you also think about. And making them see that we do have superpowers, but we also have kryptonite. We're not perfect, you know? And then I get them to think about their heroes, people who inspire them.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:17:13] I love this. So, this sounds like a SWOT analysis, but on steroids, right? And you're talking about who are their heroes, who are their mentors, these things. So, we're identifying who are the people that have added value to your life, who are the people who have kind of been your foil or nemesis maybe is a better word for it. And then figuring out your kryptonite and your superpowers is important too.

Ayse Birsal: [00:17:42] Yes. And I usually do these dualities intentionally, the positive and negative. So, I get people to think about their challenges. But then there are opportunities because often the challenges are the opportunities, and that's what design really gets you to think about, reframing, right. And so, if somebody is complaining about my house is small, getting them to think, but it's easy to clean. So, things like that. And it's really powerful when that happens. And then what to avoid, because if you can figure out what to avoid, you can be intentional about taking those things out, creating new habits, and creating space and time for things that you want to include. One of the - - I have this amazing friend, bestselling author Mark Rider. He came to one of my workshops and afterwards he said, you know, what you do is kind of like -- do you remember Karate Kid?

The Daily Helping Episode 293:

Ayse Birsal

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:18:51] Of course, yes.

Ayse Birsal: [00:18:53] I love karate because I do karate. And it's kind of that wax on, wax off, wax on, wax off. So, I do a lot of wax on, wax off. You don't know what's going to happen. And then, boom, you've designed your life.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:19:08] This is great.

Ayse Birsal: [00:19:09] I think one thing I wanted to circle back to is when we were talking about who is this book for. I just wanted to say that, I mean, the book is a love letter to my daughters, who are 18 and 19 and all the young people so that they have these lessons from older people, younger in life. Then, it's a love letter to my parents, especially my mom and older people we've learned so much from because they're amazing. And sometimes they forget they're amazing. So, I just want to say, look, these are all the lessons I learned from you. And then it's for people who are in their 40s and 50s to say, you don't need to fear aging. Yeah, you lose some things, but you gain some amazing things, and here they are. I just wanted to circle back to that. If some of your listeners are in different ages, this is how they can think about it.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:20:17] I didn't ask you about the queen of toilet stuff. All right, so how did that all start?

Ayse Birsal: [00:20:21] Oh, I was like, happy I was off the hook on that. So, how did that happen? I designed the world's what's known unofficially as the world's most comfortable toilet seat. And that makes me the Queen of Toilets, one and only.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:20:39] Okay. Maybe we'll put a link to the toilet seat in the show notes as well for those who want to take action. In all seriousness, this has been really, really enjoyable. I can't wait to get my hands on the book. As you know, I wrap up every episode by asking my guests a single question, and that is, what is your biggest helping, that one most important takeaway that you'd like somebody to walk away with after hearing our conversation today?

The Daily Helping Episode 293:

Ayse Birsal

Ayse Birsal: [00:21:06] All right. So, Dr. Richard, you want me to tell you about it or you want me to show you?

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:21:13] Well, I think you should show. I think you should show me.

Ayse Birsal: [00:21:16] Yeah, right. Because design is you learn it by doing. So, okay. Tell me a hero of yours, somebody who inspires you. And this could be somebody you know, family or friends.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:21:30] Living, dead, doesn't matter?

Ayse Birsal: [00:21:32] Living, dead, doesn't matter. Or somebody you know of. You don't know them personally, but you know of them. And they inspire.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:21:41] My father. I want to go with my father.

Ayse Birsal: [00:21:44] Why? What are his qualities?

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:21:47] Honest, loyal, hardworking, an entrepreneur through and through, and gave to others even when it didn't benefit him. And in fact, even when it hurt him, he would -- he was a dentist. And I talked about this before. He would give away dentistry to kids, like he would rebuild their mouths, the kids who were being picked on and those families that couldn't afford the dentistry. And I once asked him why he did that when I was really little, because he used to hang out in his office when I was a kid over summer breaks and stuff. And he said, because it's the right thing to do and he could have made more money. He said, I could make more money if I chose to help fewer people. So, my dad was always my hero.

Ayse Birsal: [00:22:30] Oh, that's so beautiful. Thank you for sharing your dad with me and with the listeners because, Dr. Richard, those are your values. You're honest, you're loyal, you're hardworking, you're an entrepreneur through and through, somebody who does the right thing. That's you.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:22:49] Wow.

The Daily Helping Episode 293:

Ayse Birsal

Ayse Birsal: [00:22:50] So, I would say the apple hasn't fallen far from the tree. This is my way of asking people and everybody who's listening to us can try this themselves and with their family or friends. But this is how I ask people what their values are. This is what you design with. This is how you make choices. And it's good to try it out once a year. And it could be more than one hero but this was beautiful.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:23:23] I love that. That was a really cool exercise. Thank you for doing that. And tell us where people can learn more about you online and find this book.

Ayse Birsal: [00:23:34] Great. And the book is Design the Long Life You Love, and they can find it on Amazon and any other online bookstore or their favorite neighborhood bookstore. And then for me, they can find me at Aysebirsal.com/newsletter. And that's A-Y-S-E, B like boy, I-R-S-E-L.com/newsletter. And the reason I say that is then you subscribe to my newsletter, and you'll know what I'm up to.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:24:08] Awesome. And we will have show links to everything Ayse Birsal at the show notes in thedailyhelping.com. Can't actually promise we'll have the link to a toilet seat or not but who knows, maybe my team will surprise you. But this has been awesome. Thanks so much for spending some time with us today on The Daily Helping.

Ayse Birsal: [00:24:25] Thank you, Dr. Richard. This was lovely.

Dr. Richard Schuster: [00:24:28] I'm glad you loved it. And for each and every one of you who took time out of your day, thank you as well. If you like what you heard, go give us a follow on Apple podcast and leave us a five-star review, because that is what helps other people find the show. But most importantly, go out there today and do something nice for somebody else, even if you don't know who they are and post it in your social media feeds using the hashtag #MyDailyHelping because the happiest people are those that help others.

The Daily Helping Episode 293:
Ayse Birsal