

Why we should ask “Why Questions.”

I remember the striking cover of *The Way Things Work* written by David Macaulay sitting idle on my dad’s bedside table when I was only about six years old. It was fatter than a textbook, and the words on the cover were illustrated to be built out of different things. Screws, wrenches, scaffolding... other random, mechanical bits and pieces. They were drawn like a collage to create each letter of the title, which was plastered across the entire cover. That kind of aesthetic always plays well with our dads, doesn’t it?

I never read it myself, but for some reason the book with its eccentric, whimsical cover is permanently etched into my memory as this big, technologically dense work of ‘manly’ things. As I grow older, the vivid memory of that cover continues to return to me from time to time, but its meaning has evolved. Now, *The Way Things Work* represents to me a careful, thoughtful study of how the world is shaped—by design and decision-making – to understand and meet people’s needs. Take a jacket zipper, for example. Before appreciating how it slides cleanly up and down its teeth, we might first imagine why a jacket needs a zipper in the first place. Why not use buttons – or neither? The answers to these kinds of questions reveal not just practicalities but also the nature of human choice: the quiet interplay of necessity, constraints, and ingenuity.

...Because very little around us is truly random. I believe that we are generally products of our environments, meaning that we learn to behave in ways that are functions of our past and present circumstances. But just as we are sometimes “victims” to uncontrollable circumstances, so too are the individual units of an environment that creates those circumstances. If a child grows up in a home where one parent is often absent, for instance, it’s no surprise they might seek out others for guidance and to act as role models. And the absent parent’s choices, too, are shaped by their own circumstances, past and present. We are all, in a sense, part of a larger system—each decision a product of interconnected variables. Any given circumstance should not be considered a static state of being, but be imagined as a maelstrom of these variables, each derived from their own functions and *their* variables. And when we begin to understand each and every ‘thing’ around us in this way, we are granted what feels like supernatural clarity of the world. In other words, we gain some insight into “the way things work.”

When we take this perspective, it can open our eyes to the hidden layers of intention and complexity in every little corner of our lives. That zipper on your jacket? Its size, design, and functionality reflect countless choices made by people who understood human

needs, just as your decision to attend class today, apply for that job, or give your dad a call reflects the intentionality and meaning behind your own choices. By examining the origins of things—whether objects or actions—we can better understand not just how things work, but why they are the way they are. And in that understanding, we find a kind of clarity: a way to see the interconnectedness of everything around us.