Ryan Clark (Full Text)

Claire: What are you most passionate about?

Ryan: I'm actually most passionate about people. I think the reason that I like doing my job and the reason that I do the stuff I do is for people. I worked at agency jobs and I did work for clients, and part of it was really fulfilling, but at the end of the day I wanted to do something for myself. I also had all of these friends that were doing really cool things; they were opening up bars and coffee shops and their own little ventures, and I didn't have any way to help them. So how I ended up at Virb building websites for every-people is because I wanted to help create some way for people to get their passions online, and to be able to share that with other people.

I think one of the biggest areas of growth I've had over my quote-on-quote professional career, is realizing that there are just so many more things that are important than your job. Like, I love my family, I love being here at home and being able to watch my son grow up, I love my coworkers and interacting with them and building things with them. I really feel like that sort of camaraderie is really important—like making time for my friends to go grab a beer.

It's that sense of balance that people think, a lot of times, you have to sacrifice it in order to become passionate. You have to become a weird recluse and go away and follow your thing, like write that novel for seven years and never talk to anyone else. I like just being around and living my life with my friends and my family, and letting that kind of inspire and direct the sort of work that I'm doing creatively every day.

Claire: Why do you like people so much? I feel like most designers kind of hate people.

Ryan: Designers and creators in general…it's a very introspective process. Like a lot of times, I illustrate for me, just because I have an idea or I want to do something. You can create something and feel fulfilled in that, and I think lots of people do that, but I think creating something someone else is going to interact with—creating something for me is cool in and of itself—but when I get to build something that's going to help someone, or when I get to even just make a poster and send it to somebody, and they send me an email or a note saying "Oh my gosh, I loved that! I gave it to my wife or to my friend," just that sort of enriching other peoples' lives is really important to me. I feel it's almost a greater calling than just being an artist and creating things for myself.

Claire: Was there a specific time in your life when you decided to start making things for other people, and how hard was it to make that choice? Did you have to sacrifice anything?

Ryan: I started off doing agency work, and like I said, I just wanted to create stuff for myself. So the only thing I really had to sacrifice was time. I was right out of college and working like 65 hour weeks at my agency building stuff for GM and these big companies where in college you'd said "Oh man, I want to grow up and I want to build something cool for a company on TV." Or at least that's the idea you had in your head. And I'm doing it, and realize "Man, I'm exhausted. I'm exhausted and I'm tired and I'm not fulfilled." So I started making t-shirts for bands, and just drawing and illustrating, and started selling my

random designs for a couple hundred bucks, and it was the most rewarding experience. I was just making things and I was helping other people that liked it and wanted to use those things.

So I switched at that point, and I changed to a different agency which was about creating things for ourselves and building products. The idea was that we were going to use our client work as a way to fund the stuff that really mattered to us.

Claire: What agency was that?

Ryan: It was called Forge. It was just a bunch random of guys in Dayton that had all come out of a couple different agencies and had sort of the same ideas. So, we started doing that and it was fantastic, and I loved it. From that point on, I realized that I didn't want to do client work at all. I loved creating things and I loved having my own product. That's when I had the opportunity to join Virb, and that's when I switched over to there.

It was weird because the sacrifice wasn't really there. I wasn't really sacrificing money—that was pretty much the same either way. At my first job I was doing 90% of the work I didn't want to do, and 10% of the work I did. And every job that I took, that got more and more balanced and better. So now I'm doing 100% of the work that I want to do!

It's funny, because Virb is incredibly fulfilling, but at the same time, I'm like: "Oh, I want to make some posters!" or "I want to make wooden blocks for Asher, or for my new baby on the way." So, I still have all these weird ideas. I almost don't know if those ever stop. It kind of just overflows, and it has to go in all these different directions.

Claire: Have you ever thought that maybe you do actually just want to make posters all the time?

Ryan: Oh yeah! I've definitely thought that. Over the last couple months, that's something I've really been wrestling with: "So what do I REALLY want to do?" Jobs, they change, products change. Right now, I'm building a fantastic website builder, but 10 years from now, am I probably going to be there? Probably not. What is that going to turn into?

It's strange. We have these generations of people we've grown up with. My grandpa taught at a local high school his entire life, and basically did HVAC on the side. My dad, he was an engineer and then he was a pastor, and he's been doing that for 40 years. I look back at my life, and I can't hold a job for more than 3 years. I have, like, professional ADD. I look at my twitter feed, and it's "I'm going over here and doing this and now over here and doing this." I think that we're so connected and plugged in—we have so many opportunities to do crazy things, and there's all these tools to even help you do them. How much harder was it to start a business in 1984 than it is to start a business now? I can do kickstarter and have a whole group of people that are following this thing that I'm building.

I think there's always that thing in the back of your mind. "Am I doing all day the stuff that I want to be doing?" So, I have to constantly ask myself that question. I think that's how I ended up where I am now. At all of the steps it took to get to where I am, the answer to that question was always "No. I'm not doing the stuff I like during the day. I'm doing the stuff I like at night when everyone else is sleeping. That's the stuff I really want." But now, the stuff that I'm doing during the day is the stuff that I like! And the stuff that I do at night is really just for fun. In a weird way, that's become my hobby. My hobby is the really random ideas that I have, but my love and my passion is what I spend all of my day doing.

Claire: So you got there!

Ryan: I got there! I got there and I'm only 30 years old, and I think: "Am I not supposed to get there until I'm 50?"

It's strange, because….it's weird to feel content, I think. Because you're sort of force-fed the idea that you always have to be moving forward. And you think, "What if I just really love where I am? Is that okay? Does it seem weird to all of my peers that I really just like where I'm at? I'm doing cool stuff."

Claire: So it's this fluid thing. You're content but you're also open to change.

Ryan: Yeah. When you work on a product, the real challenge is being content with where you are now, because you're constantly working on things now that no one will see for 4 months, 6 months. You're constantly looking ahead and dealing with the deficiency that you have right now. That was really the hardest part about moving from the agency world where you have so much closure at the end of a project—you launch a project, you ship it, you bill it, it's done. But now I have this living, breathing entity and it's never really finished.

It dawned on me one day: the thing that I'm launching today is the thing that, 6 months ago, I was telling myself: If I could only just get this done. If I could only just launch this thing for my customers or for my friends. Today I'm actually accomplishing a goal that I had six months ago. So, I shouldn't really be worrying about the goals that I have six months from now. You have to be able to basically be in the present. To be happy with the thing that you're building at that time, and not constantly be looking forward.

I think that applies to the broader scheme of the stuff that I'm involved in. I love what I'm doing right now. That doesn't mean that I don't have weird other dreams or I don't think of random ideas in the shower and think "That would be awesome! I'd love to do that." I think that there's still a time and a place for that. I think we maybe get too hung up on having "a" thing. What if your life was just made up of these 15 different little projects that you ran? I know people that do that, and it's got to be super fun.

I think we're all blessed with a creative mind, and I really do think that the second that you stop thinking about one thing, you will start thinking about something else. When I've gotten in a slump at work, that's when all of the sudden I have crazy ideas about other stuff. It doesn't turn off. It's just like a hose. You can try as much as you want to bottle it up, but your creativity, that weird passion you have, is going to come out, somewhere. I think it's just channeling it to the right things that's really the hard part.

Claire: What does it take for you to feel satisfied at the end of a day?

Ryan: I love to create. I think the days I feel most satisfied are the days when I get to actually create something, whether it's wire framing or designing or coding. There are some days where I'll spend all day just talking. I hate talking all the time. Client meetings, meetings with my coworkers, stuff like that. I'm kind of one of those less talk more rock people. I just like to do stuff, all the time. So the days when we're actually building things and launching things are the days I feel really fulfilled.

Also, the days when I really get to interact with my family. If I spend all day at my computer building stuff or being creative, I still won't feel fulfilled at the end of the day. If I get a chance to build some trucks with Asher's legos, or if I get to have lunch with them, that's where that balance comes back in. I need that balance in order to feel like I'm fulfilling all the different responsibilities and roles that I have.

Claire: What drives you to choose happiness now, today? What's wrong with you, basically?

Ryan: I think the trap is that, every day, you'll tell yourself that you're going to spend time with your family tomorrow. I guess I learned that lesson at a super young age. I'd just gotten out of college and told myself that it was time to grind away, that that was what was expected of me. And then I looked back on 3 years of my life and I had this strange sort of regret. I know that it maybe got me some opportunities that I wouldn't have had, but what was that sacrifice? I was surrounded by people that had also continued on that path, but had been doing it for way longer than I had. I'd look at people and say, "Okay, you're really

well known, you run an incredibly successful business, but you never see your kids or your wife." And I'd think "Do I want that? In 20 years, is that where I'm going to find myself?"

It was almost a cautionary tale. I decided at that point: My life is going to be about balance. It's going to be about enriching the lives of the people around me and doing what I think is creative, and doing what I'm passionate about, but not at the expense of all of the relationships around me, or at the expense of my own health and sanity. I think that being overly passionate, you can work yourself until you're sick and about to keel over.

I think we don't respect rest and play as much as we should. Some of my best ideas have come when I'm riding my bicycle around and I'm like "Oh my gosh, I've got a great idea for how that UI can work on that Virb thing!" It's wild, because you don't tell your brain "Okay brain, now you're gonna think about Virb and you're gonna come up with some great ideas." It just comes whenever it wants. So I want to go have fun with my friends. I don't want to make sacrifices now, because I feel you'll constantly make those sacrifices and when you're done you'll look back and realize you sacrificed way too much, and you didn't get what you wanted in return.

I have friends who thought they had to do something, or thought they wanted to do something, and they can't find "it." I always tell them, "Dude, it does not matter how much money you make. If you wake up every day and hate that you're going to work, you have the wrong job." I feel that everyone was meant to do something. There's something that we're good at, that we're meant to be doing. When you find that, the level of satisfaction you find in that is incredible, because you wake up and you're excited about the stuff you're going to do that day. You're not living for 5:00 when you clock out and drive home and you actually get to do the stuff you like or spend time with your family.

My goal has always been to do what I love for a living, and I think the challenge is figuring out what that living is. I could sacrifice everything, all this other stuff, and move to a bigger city and get a higher paying job, and disappear for a while, and I would have a ton of monetary wealth, but is that really what's most important to me at the end of the day? To me, the answer is really no. If I'm providing for my family, which I'm doing, and I have a creative outlet, which I'm doing, and still having time to take care of all the other aspects of my life—to be a good friend and be a good husband and a good father—those are the things that I think trump a lot of those other things I think a lot of those other people want to sacrifice for.

Kyle: We've been talking about this thing recently that Claire heard: The days are long, but the years are short. We've been trying to figure out the things you do in a day that make you happy, because the length of your life will be found in the day. Can you relate to that?

Ryan: Yeah, definitely! When you have a kid, your parents will inevitably tell you "Watch out, it goes real fast." Everyone tells you that, and you're like, "Whatever, life is like suuuper long." But, they're right. My son is 3 years old, and I feel like he was born 3 weeks ago. Really, it flies.

That's the thing—you have to really be in the moment, because it's the stuff that you do today that's really going to matter. We don't have hundreds of years. It's about "What are the ways I can impact people today and enrich people's lives today?" Those are the things that I want to do, because I think so often we think about tomorrow. I think: I'm not entitled to tomorrow. Tomorrow may not happen for me.

I think the more you live that way, the better off you are. Because you start to really cherish the now, the present, the people that you're around. It's awesome to be able to talk to you guys—it's taking those weird opportunities where you think "I'm super busy, we've got corporate mergers and things going on…" but I'm never going to get that chance again. Heck yeah, I want to meet those people, I want to see what they're up to. It's those opportunities, that's the stuff that I love. I love people!

At the end of the day, the products that I build and the posters that I make….those will come and those will go. But the relationships I build and the interactions that I have with people, that's who I am. At the end of the day, my life is built up of all those things, and I want to be remembered for that stuff, not for the little

things that I've built.

Claire: While trying to live this life in the present, what about long-term goals? Is there anything you're afraid you'll never accomplish?

Ryan: I had a really hard time with that question when you sent it over. I feel like I've been asking all of my friends, and no one has had an answer for me yet. I have no goals, anymore. No professional goals. When I graduated college, I wanted to be a creative director someday. That was a personal goal, and another goal was "I want to own something, run something." And you think, "Oh man, that's gonna take a lifetime." Then, you do it, and you're 30…and you're like, okay… I keep on asking my friends "So what are our long term goals here?" And none of us really know.

I like what I do, I like my family, I like doing stuff. I'm putting money into retirement, so I'm not totally living for now, I'm trying to do responsible stuff. But I think at this point, I just want to create. I want to be fulfilled in what I do. I think you realize it's not really about a set of accomplishments, professional accomplishments.

My goals this year were to spend more time with my son, to visit or work in at least 9 states—super random. I just wanted to come up with a reasonable number; I'm all about achievable goals. I didn't want to say all 50, who goes to all 50 states in a year?! I mean, you guys are well on your way, but for those of us with houses and families…[laughs] Anyway, I wanted to read more books, I wanted to start riding a bike, and those are my weird accomplishments for the year.

Claire: How are those going?

Ryan: Great, actually. When I got to Michigan next week, that'll be number 9. So, we're working. We're getting stuff done here. [laughs]

I don't know. When you're 24, you're like "I want to be a creative director at a multi-million dollar agency" and 10 years later you're like "I would like to ride a bike, and maybe spend more time at home." It's strange. I feel like some sort of professional failure, but I'm super pumped about it. [laughs]

Claire: Talk about some of your communities.

Ryan: I think community is super important, and there's different rings of community that we live in. The super close one is my family. I love my family, I love being at home with them. That's one of the biggest blessings that I've been given, just the chance to be as connected to them as I am. It gotten to the point where I can't even imagine the day where I used to leave and go away for 8 to 12 hours and then come home. I just can't imagine doing that anymore. Hopefully I never have to go back to an office job again.

Claire: I noticed there's no door between your desk and the rest of the house. Do your wife and son just come and talk to you whenever?

Ryan: Yeah!

Claire: I don't think I could handle that.

Ryan: [laughs] It depends. We sublet an office downtown, so when we really need to get away, when I really need some alone time, I can go do that. I've heard weird stories about people who work at home, though. Somebody had, when they were wearing a certain pair of shoes, you couldn't come talk to them, because they were in the zone or whatever. I thought that seemed like a jerky thing. You're wife's like "Hey,

what do you want for—" and you're like [points] "Shoes? Excuse me." [laughs] That's terrible. I'd never want to do that to somebody.

The way that I work is really schizophrenic, it's really off and on. I'll bust on something for a couple hours, and then be done. And I'll go play with Asher and build some legos, which is also a very creative activity. But when you stick yourself in front of that computer and say "Create things!" the pressure is almost too much.

It feels way more organic to not have to have a super rigid structure. I'm not one of those tomato timer people, who says "I'll focus for 25 minutes, and then give myself a 3 minute break." I'm more like…I'm gonna work, I'm gonna make some coffee, I'm gonna talk to my wife, I'm gonna play with my son, I'm gonna work some more, I'm gonna have lunch, I'm gonna work…And then it feels more like just an expression. It's part of my day. I guess I got rid of all of the divisions that a lot of people have to have. I feel like I'm always working, because even when I'm driving around with my family I'll have ideas of crazy stuff I want to do. I think embracing that, thinking we don't have to be so in a box with what our work is and when we're going to do it, is good.

So my family is by far my most important community. They're the people I love the most. And I have my coworkers and my friends. I'm lucky, because three of the guys I work with are here. Our team is remote, we've got people from LA to NYC and everywhere in-between—Austin, Texas and Albany, New York. But I have guys here, so it's really awesome to be able to communicate with them face to face.

They're also the guys that I work with the most, because they do all the front-end stuff and I do half of the designing and all of the directing, so that's awesome. And I have my community of friends. I love to surround myself with people who don't do what I do. I think a lot of times we want to surround ourselves with people that are exactly the same. I feel like that's a disservice, because I learn so much from my friends that don't do this all the time. We all struggle with different things, and do different things; my best friend runs a service shop for cars, and the stuff that I learn from him and glean from him is incredible. I have friends that own coffee shops and friends that are policemen, and I hate the idea of taking all of our creative people and us becoming our own little clique of "We're the creatives, and we only associate with other 'professional creatives'."

I think it's good to learn a respect for what other people do. Like I said, people are meant to do something, whether it's being a policeman, or being a designer. I don't think that there's some inherent worth that makes those things super different. I just love people for who they are. I think a lot of times, it's easy to get yourself in that bubble. To only surround yourself with people that are the same. I think it's refreshing to realize that you're part of a much bigger community of people, and there's a value that we can add to that. That's actually why I like Virb so much, because we're a website builder, but it's for the everyman. I can meet anyone on the street, and they are a customer, or a potential customer. Whether you own a bakery or a coffee shop or a restaurant, or whether you are a photographer or some kind of creative professional. I guess I just like the idea of being accessible to those sort of things, because I think there's a way we can bring value to what they do. I think we're better off when we're all helping each other like that.

Claire: Talk about a hobby of yours.

Ryan: Hobbies are funny. Can hobbies be creative, too?

Claire: Yeah! They're yours, you own them. They can be whatever you want.

Ryan: Everyone's like "What do you do for fun?" And I'm like "I do the same stuff that I do for work? Hmmm." That line gets real blurry sometimes. When I'm not designing for Virb, and building that stuff for my quote on quote 'day job,' I'm usually either fixing up my 130 year-old house, or riding a bicycle, or spending time with my family, or creating other things, like making random posters. Just dreaming up

ideas for projects to work on with friends. I think that when my day job ends, that's when the crazier ideas come out. I worked on a project with the guys at my old agency called "A Modern Eden." It was all about creating digital and analog products for kids. That's definitely not my day job, and it was kind of a hobby, because we thought it would be super fun to create something to enrich the lives of our children, so we made a bunch of iPhone apps, and decals and posters and stickers. I think that's the weird stuff that I do for fun, and some people would say that that's still design, but it just comes out. I can't stop doing it. My hobby is still doing the stuff I do for work, just not for work.

Claire: Have you ever had an urge to do something crazy or off in another part of the world, but then you think "Well I can't because of blah blah blah…"

Ryan: That's a good question. I think…I really want to take a road trip across America. I realized a couple week ago: you sort of get stuck in this thing where you have a house and live in a certain place. I work remotely, and I work at home, and it's almost like freelancing because all I need is a wifi connection and I'm there. It dawned on a little while ago: Why am I always here? Literally, physically here? Next week, I'm taking a bunch of the guys from work and we're going to Michigan and working for a weekend in a cabin in the woods. And we're also taking some time off and hiking around and doing actual awesome things. But it's been a sort of exciting revelation that I don't have to physically be in my office at my home in order to do the things I want to do. So I really want to pick up my family and just move them and get an RV or something crazy, and just see the sights. I love to travel and visit new places and so does my wife, and I want Asher to like to travel. I want to instill that sort of idea in him, too. So what I'd like to do is pick them up and take them around and not be so stationary all the time.

Claire: If you had to pick one word only to summarize your advice to other creatives, what would it be?

Ryan: This really was the hardest question. I think that my word is going to be "humility." I would say that being humble is not something that designers, creators do inherently well. It is at its core a very intimate, personal experience, building something and crafting something. But I also think that no man is an island, and the biggest thing I've learned is where I fit in all of that stuff. I don't want to chase other people's idea of success. I like being who I am, and being okay with that. Maybe there's a better word for that than humility, so I just mean being who you are.

I'm not the best designer that there is, I'm not the best illustrator that there is. I have so many people I look up to. I think it's so easy to be self-centered when you're doing something so personal. It's so easy to take all of that focus and turn it around to you. I think we live a much more enriched life when that stuff is actually turned back around to the people that we're around all the time, to our families and friends and coworkers and peers. I feel like that's when we're really using the talents that we're given to better other people around us, and I think that that is so much more fulfilling than just creating something personal for myself.