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# What Matters to Thomas Girard

by **Debbie Millman**

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*Debbie Millman's ongoing project "What Matters," an effort to understand the interior life of artists, designers, and creative thinkers, is now in its third year. Each respondent is invited to answer ten identical questions and submit a nonprofessional photograph.*

**Thomas Girard** is a Canadian design scholar, UX consultant, and author whose work bridges typography, education, and cultural inquiry. He is the host of the **UNIQUEWAYS** podcast, a TEDx and Sorbonne speaker, and the author of **Son of Greg Girard**.

*Pronouns: He/him/his*

### **What is the thing you like doing most in the world?**

Teaching. There are reasons that develop over time – like how you learn as much as you pass on, or how it's really a form of facilitation. Those are true for me. But more simply: it energizes me. I get a buzz being around students and sharing knowledge, and that feeling stays with me for the rest of the day. It's also a way of helping others, which matters to me.

### **What is the first memory you have of being creative**

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The first memory that comes to mind is from art school, in my late teens or early twenties. It was winter in Canada, snowing hard, and the heating in our place barely worked. I had a drawing project due the next day, no inspiration.

Eventually I accepted that inspiration wasn't coming. I grudgingly grabbed a piece of particle board, different papers I'd collected, thick pens, whatever I could find, and went out into the park across the street. It was freezing. But the trees stood out to me that night. I began making imprints of their textures – rubbing the bark.

I came back with something I was genuinely proud of. I presented it the next day to mixed reception. But that night taught me something I still carry: you don't wait for inspiration, you go and meet it.

### **What is your biggest regret?**

I don't really have regrets. Whatever got me here, got me here, and I'm happy with it. Luck. Privilege. Ambition. I have those. Maybe that combination is why I don't feel the need to look backward.

### **How have you gotten over heartbreak?**

I don't think I get over heartbreak. I only attach deeply when something feels purposeful, something that transcends time. But I'm not attached to the idea that I have to be with

someone forever. I think of relationships as helping each other along the way.

If parting is what happens, then I can still be grateful. The purpose was complete. The heart doesn't like that answer, though. So maybe the truth is: I don't really know.

### **What makes you cry?**

Happiness.

### **How long does the pride and joy of accomplishing something last for you?**

It depends on the modality. If it's a book, it might last a week. If it's teaching a class, it lasts the rest of the day, and then fades after a night's sleep.

Some things last longer. If my writing is published – not self-published, but published with an audience – then the pride continues as long as people are reading it, critiquing it, or even criticizing it. If it's a talk that lives online, that has staying power too. My TEDx talk, How to Feel at Home in the Airport, still brings me pride years later.

### **Do you believe in an afterlife, and if so, what does that look like to you?**

Strings, in a kind of string-theory reality. Dreams. Alternate perceptions. Possibilities of different realities, or this exact one lived through different ideologies or ontologies. It feels too limiting to believe there isn't something beyond this.

### **What do you hate most about yourself?**

When I can't make a decision. I give myself a hard time about that. A close friend in my teens once said I hated losing and was an excellent staller. So probably anything in opposition to that.

### **What do you love most about yourself?**

I work on things until I'm happy with them, especially myself. I don't enjoy sitting around when there's work to be done. So maybe what I love most is process: either I'm learning to love myself more, or I'm already there and so it's complete.

### **What is your absolute favorite meal?**

A big kale salad. With kale at just the right temperature.

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## Debbie Millman

Named “one of the most influential designers working today” by Graphic Design USA, and “one of the most creative people working in business” by Fast Company, Debbie Millman is also an author, educator, brand strategist and host of the podcast Design Matters.

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