



Guest

Bruce Feiler is an American writer and television personality. He is the author of 15 books, including Council of Dads, a book that describes how he responded to a diagnosis of a rare cancer by asking a group of men to be present in the lives of his young daughters. His latest work explores the power of life stories. Drawing on interviews with Americans in all 50 states, he offers strategies for coping with life's unsettling times in his new book, Life Is In The Transitions, published in May 2020. Informed by the sifting and coding of life story interviews across America, Feiler examines what gives our lives meaning. Adam Grant called the book, one of "The 20 New Leadership Books for 2020".

In our conversation we speak about the notion of anytime life transition, how resilience might be the wrong attribute to have during transitions, the three phases in a transition, the power of stories in navigating transitions and much more. In a world where the rate of transitions we all will go through is increasing by the day, this conversation is a goldmine of insights that could help us make sense of life and move forward with intention.

Context to the Conversation

Welcome to the 70th Conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast. I am your host Deepak Jayaraman. I work with leaders and organizations and help them play to their unique potential by getting to understand their unique context and by helping them with choices around where to go and how to grow. In this podcast series, we feature conversations from leaders from different walks of life on three themes - leadership, transitions and careers.

My guest this time is Bruce Feiler. Bruce Feiler is an American writer and television personality. He is the author of 15 books, including Council of Dads, a book that describes how he responded to a diagnosis of a rare cancer by asking a group of men to be present in the lives of his young daughters. The book was the subject of a TED Talk and inspired NBC drama series Council of Dads. His latest work explores the power of life stories. Drawing on interviews with Americans in all 50 states, he offers strategies for coping with life's unsettling times in his new book, Life Is In The Transitions, published in May 2020. Informed by the sifting and coding of life story interviews across America, Feiler examines what gives our lives meaning. Adam Grant called the book, one of "The 20 New Leadership Books for 2020".

Without further ado, let us get into the conversation with Bruce Feiler.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Bruce, thank you so, much for making time for the Play to Potential podcast, excited to have you.

Bruce Feiler (RS): My pleasure. Thank you very much for inviting me.

DJ: And Bruce, I would love to dive into the book that you wrote recently about transitions, but before we go there, I would love to learn about you. I learnt about the question that you ask a lot of people that you meet, the shape of your story. Give us a sense of your journey and how you got to doing what you do now and why do you do what you do?

BF: I love this question which shape is your life and I love it in part because my answer is very conventional. I have you know I am... I think of myself as a conventional person who has lived an unconventional life and if you would ask me the shape of my life at the beginning of this journey of mine say five years ago, I would have said a line, you know, an up and down line with some good news and bad news, but I would have given the answer of a line, which I now think of actually as a quite boring and uninteresting answer. But to answer your question directly, I am a person of place and so, I always begin my story in a place and so, in this case, it is the place I was born which is Savannah, Georgia in the American Southeast. For those of you who don't know the story of Savannah, it was kind of backbone of the 13th and final colony of the colonies back in the 18th century and it is pretty deep in the American South and kind of in some ways the most distinguishing characteristic of Savannah is that when General Sherman from the North during the American Civil War famously burned Atlanta, the capital of Georgia and "marched to the sea" he got to Savannah and the Savannahians fled across the river into South Carolina, and he did not burn Savannah. So, 80% of the buildings that were standing in 1800 are still standing today. And the reason that's important is the American kind of historical preservation movement of the 1960s really was kick-started in Savannah. So, it is an exquisitely beautiful place, deeply attached to its history and kind of famed for its use in Hollywood movies. So, I came from a place that's very sticky. And so, I am a fifth generation American Jew from the South; that's rare and I am a southerner, both of those are big storytelling traditions and sort of storytelling kind of collided in me in sort of a lifetime of telling stories. So, just to kind of hurry the story along, I moved from the South to the North, I went to Yale and then from Yale, I went to Japan in the 1980s. I was born in 1964 so, I show up in Japan in the middle of the boom decade of Japan in the 1980s and I start writing letters home on crinkly airmail paper like you are not going to believe what happened to me and when I got back to Georgia six months later everybody I ran into said I loved your letters and I was like great have we met and it turned out that my grandmother had xeroxed them and passed them around and they sort of went viral in an old-fashioned sense of the word and I thought if this is that interesting to all these people like I should write a book and it doesn't work this way, but I sold my first book at 24 that was thirty-one-and-a-half years ago, and I have basically never held a job since.

DJ: Wow, wow. Of the various things you have done Bruce, one of the things that appealed to me was you spent some time in a circus? And the reason I ask is I am a ball juggler, I learnt juggling when I was in the UK a couple of decades back. I was curious about if you want to sort of shine the light on that particular experience?

BF: I also learnt to juggle when I was a teenager and I used to joke and I put myself through high school doing birthday parties for children; you are doing juggling and pantomime and when I was at Yale, I ran a children's theater. And so, what happened to me was I was in Japan for many years and I wrote a book about that. I went to Cambridge and got a Master's in International Relations and I wrote a book about that experience. And then I wanted to come back to America basically not having been in America in almost a decade and so, I joined the circus. And I bought a Winnebago, which is one of those kind of homes on wheels and I did 201 circuses in 99 cities and 16 states and

we had it all, I mean, we had tigers and we had elephants and we had women who hung by their hair and we had a human cannonball and I was a circus clown and I wrote this book called *Under the Big Top*, which was sort of my way of reconnecting with America. I used to love the fact you know that I had gone to Yale and I had also been a circus clown and that's sort of the two sides of my personality and I am very much of a performer. Even in our brief conversation you can probably pick that up. And so, then I kind of continued this experiential kind of way of living and I wrote a book about American country music and then what happened just to kind of move the story kind of closer to the present is that I figured look, I am a writer now, I can't deny it but I hadn't really read the Bible. And so, I put the Bible by my bed and it kind of gathered dust and I went to see a friend in Jerusalem and on my first day my friend started pointing out places that actually were where historical events in the Bible had taken place and I thought well, here's an idea what if I travel along the route and so, I wrote this book called *Walking the Bible*, where I went to all the places in the Hebrew Bible. That became a thing, spent a year-and-a-half on the bestseller list, six months later was 9/11 and I got thrust into the interfaith dialogue and conversation in the world and so, I went back and forth more or less for a decade to the Middle East writing books about religion, interfaith relations. I made a television series on American television called *Sacred Journeys* with Bruce Feiler, where I went on six pilgrimages around the world including Kumbh Mela in India. In fact, when you and I were taping this conversation, I believe the Kumbh Mela is going on right now. So, I got... I sort of traveled the world being interested in this kind of connection between identity, religion, the past, the present, the future and this, you know, was very much of a linear life I would say in the way I look at the world now. I had figured out what I wanted to do early, I had done it for no money, I had some success, I got married, I had children and this was sort of that fantasy that we all have of an upward trajectory and then it was kind of thing that most destabilized me and led us to the conversation we are about to have is that life in my 40s just began to just beat me up and kind of wallop me and come at me from all directions.

DJ: Hmm-hmm. And maybe just if it is okay with you if we could sort of talk about that? If you could talk a little bit about your 40s and what led you to being curious about some of the topics that we would be talking about.

BF: So, I had a back-to-back-to-back set of experiences. First, I was diagnosed with cancer as a new dad of identical daughters. In fact, my cancer was so nonlinear, I had an adult-onset pediatric cancer, a 9-inch tumor in my femur and so, I went through this horrific year of chemotherapy, I was on crutches for two years, I kind of rebuilt my leg and I... it was a traumatic experience as you might imagine. That was the year of the great recession in this country and then my family owned a bunch of real estate, I almost went bankrupt and then my dad who has Parkinson's got very depressed and tried to take his own life; six times in 12 weeks he tried to kill himself. And he had always been the patriarch of the family. I grew up in a family business and so this was sort of a deeply unsettling event. We were struggling with business matters, my brother had to step in. Like you he had been a consultant in his case at Boston Consulting Group and he had to take over the business. We were dealing with my mother on all sorts of medical challenges that were really very kind of hard to even talk about. But I am the story guy and so I started this exercise with my dad where every Monday morning I would send him a question about his life, tell me about the house you grew up with, the toys you played with, how'd you become an Eagle Scout in the American Boy Scouts? How did you join the American Navy? How did you meet mom and it was I have to say the only thing that sort of brought him joy and meaning that just this idea of telling these stories and here's a man who had never written anything longer than probably a 50-word memo in his life kind of a very much of a businessman of the kind of mid-twentieth century America and yet he kind of started pouring out these stories and he backed into writing what became a 50,000-word autobiography and it was this incredible transformation. It was this incredible transformation and what happened was I would tell

everybody else this story somewhat sheepishly, you know, this is in America where it is still uncomfortable to talk about mental health issues, suicide was not then as it is even not now something that was openly talked about in social settings. But it turned out everybody had a similar story of a daughter who tried to kill herself, or a boss who stole money or, you know, stage IV diagnosis or a sudden death or addiction problem. Everybody had some internal story that they were just desperate to tell that they never had an outlet for. And I actually happened to be at a Yale reunion when I was hearing all these stories and I called my wife and I said, you know what, no one knows how to tell their story any more, like something's going on, like everybody says they are living life out of order, like they've gotten to a point in their lives where suddenly they can't even understand their lives and I have got to figure out how to help. And what I did was I created this thing as you know called the Life Story Project, where I spent what became years' crisscrossing like the United States collecting hundreds and hundreds of life stories of Americans of all ages, all walks of life; people in work crises and personal crises, people who lost limbs, lost homes, changed careers, changed religions, got sober, got out of bad marriages; this incredible array of otherwise unspoken life upheavals. And then what happened was I had a thousand hours of interviews, you do them for a living, you know, that's a lot and 6,000 pages of transcripts and I got, you know, I got a team of 12 people following this model that Jim Collins and my friend who wrote the management book Good to Great and we spent a year analyzing them kind of arguing about them debating trying to find some patterns in there that could help all of us in times of change.

DJ: Wow, and I would love to talk about the transitions project Bruce in a minute. But before that off the various books you have written, I wanted to sort of pick up on one of the things that you talk about in your earlier books in the book *Secrets of Happy Families*, you sort of compare families and what they do and you say that families could learn from the agile development process and I was truly intrigued by you connecting the dots between, you know, what we can do at a family level with agile that one talks about in the Silicon Valley context. Could you talk a little bit about that piece of insight?

BF: Sure. So, I... what happened was I am the father of identical daughters and we were raising our daughters, they were born in 2005 and when you have twins life's coming at you from all different areas, and we sort of got through that initial phase where we were playing what I call defense and we were ready to start playing offense, right? Human beings have something that no other species really only one or two other species of the thousands of animal species on the planet, we have something that no other species has which is that we everybody else when you stop weaning a young member of the species that the young member of the species can reproduce on its own. Humans don't have that; we have this decade if you will between when I think of his potty training and the prom right the first step to the first kiss and that's a decade during which we learn to be social, to interact, to connect with others. That's where we essentially learn the values of what it means to be part of the family and to be kind of a good citizen and a good member of society. And so, I was interested in how you do that and essentially at with this one we were a hundred years after Freud and every parent that I knew was sort of confused because circumstances have evolved, right, the way we were raised by our parents was sort of different and so, yet there was all this wisdom out there whether it is negotiation studies, which was invented at Harvard as you know in the 1970s of how you solve problems or teamwork of how you work on a sports team or how the, you know, I want to talk to Warren Buffett's financial advisor on how to manage money with children and sort of one idea that kept coming up over and over again was this idea of I'll pronounce it the way that we do here in the United States of agile, you know, agile grew up in the 80s, it was a kind of a backlash to an idea that everything was top down, right, that managers would issue orders to executives, executives would issue to managers and managers to team members and this began in software development and it came back that 93% of the projects were late and irrelevant and life

had moved on so quickly during the interim where they were trying to solve these problems. So, agile, which essentially began in Japan and then a group of people in the United States put it together and I interviewed some of the founders of this was like let's be more adaptable, like let's talk every day, let's have a meeting once a week and let's have big information radiators like billboards kind of whiteboards of everybody knows what everybody else is doing. And what happened inevitably is this took over you said Silicon Valley and then it went to GE and TED does it which is one of the reasons I gave a Ted Talk on this topic which anybody can find on the Ted website now. People began to realize that being more adaptable, getting ideas from the bottom up not just the top down and so what happened was it began to migrating into families as in the West as you know we have many more women involved in the workplace, three quarters of women, we have dad's much more involved in parenting. And so, I went to see all these families working with agile development and it just powerfully changed our family and as I have introduced it to the world it has been adopted much more widely and sort of the idea is like your basic checklists in the morning. So, that the parents are not, you know, what are the two most difficult times in every family? The hour after everybody wakes up and the hour before everybody goes to bed. And so, the idea was like give the kids more power like this is your checklist, this is what you are expected to do. We still have, in my family, we have been doing it for more than a decade now, we just had one yesterday, a weekly family meeting where we asked three questions directly taken from agile. What went well in our family this week? What did not go well and which problem will we agree to work on in the week ahead and you have this safe space where children and parents everybody can put ideas on and work on them and you can say we'll try this and we'll try that and a week later if it is not working you can adapt because families are changing all the time. And I think what's powerful about the Agile idea is adaptability and the idea that this week someone's got a presentation, next week, you know, grandma may have a cataract surgery, the week after somebody has a ballet recital, the week after somebody has a big sporting event like lives are changing all the time and so you... it is a structure in which it gives a safe space to manage that change and make sure everybody's communicating with one another.

DJ: Wow. And when do you have that conversation? Is it on the dinner table or do you create a separate?

BF: Oh no, no, it is not on... now you're getting like the person about me that's spent many years thinking of religion and sacred space. So, no, it is not at the dinner table, in fact, nothing can be at the table and when someone brings it, dad's the one that says no. So, we in fact do a little ritual where we have a kind of we play a little game called ma-ma-ma where everybody mimics one another and we sort of enter what amounts to a kind of sacred space where it is like other, it actually happens to be at the table where we will eat dinner an hour-and-a-half later, but this moment transformed into a place where everybody gets to be heard, where conflicts get resolved, remember that thing that everybody was yelling and screaming about on Tuesday, this is where we are going to bring it up and settle it and try not to do it again. So, it is very ritualized. We make some... we do a little tap-tap-tap on the table, we do a ma-ma-ma, it is very ritualistic. If someone doesn't want to ask the words in the way I want the words asked we do it again, and then we leave it. Everybody goes back to their chaotic lifestyle and it is not like we are perfect but it is a mechanism in fact for handling imperfection.

DJ: Wow, wow. Just moving along Bruce, I want to sort of move to the book in question *Life Is in the Transitions*. I wanted to sort of go back to the question I asked you upfront. What is the shape of your story and you speak about asking that question to each individual you interviewed as part of this journey? What makes this question special?

BF: Let me tell you how I stumbled into the fact that this question might be interesting. I started thinking a little bit about shape and how people's lives kind of take different shape. And so, kind of on a whim when I first started thinking about this, I started saying to everybody I would meet what shape is your life and some people said a line and some people said a basketball and some people said a circle and I thought okay, this is interesting but it is not, it is kind of like a party game at three in the morning and the answers are not really relevant in some kind of core way. And then one day I was talking to my friend Michael and Michael grew up in New Jersey and now he runs a beauty salon and he is also an artist and I said to him what shape is your life and he says a heart. I was like no, no, no, you don't understand Michael. I am asking like if you think of like the ups and downs of your professional and personal life, like what shape is your life and he said a heart. And I am like no, no, no, you don't really understand. He said Bruce you don't understand. My professional life has had a lot of ups and downs. My personal life has had a lot of ups and downs, but the shape of my life is a heart because the most important thing to me is relationships and if my relationships are solid, I don't care so much about the ups and downs of my life. And that's when I realized whoa, there's like an aspect of being alive that I am not really thinking about and people define their lives in different ways. So, that was the sort of the human element and then what happened one day I pulled a book off my shelf and it was one of those things, you know, in the movies where you like you take a book off the shelf and the shelf moves and it turns out there's like a hidden room in the library or Dan Brown who wrote The DaVinci Code turns out to have one of these rooms in his castle in France. Well, I feel like I pulled a book off the shelf and I ended up in a different room that I never knew was there and what was in that room was the fundamental idea that our lives take a different shape and that every culture has a kind of paradigmatic shape. So, in the ancient world, if you think about this, in the ancient world, they did not have linear time. So, they did not think of their lives as a line or ups and downs or a stock market or any kinds of things that we see now. They thought of their lives as a cycle because that was the agricultural calendar. And so, in ancient religions nobody tried to have their own path, you tried to kind of recreate sort of the path of the Gods. Now in the West, it was actually the Bible and then ultimately Chris Judaism and Christianity and Islam that introduces the idea of a linear line, right? So, you think of the story with Adam and Eve and the Patriarchs, Abraham Isaac and Jacob. These are the ideas that God is suddenly acting in history. So, in Europe, in the Middle East they believe that life was a staircase up to middle age and then a staircase down. Now, if you think about the way most people think of our lives today, we think of midlife as the bottom, right, like it is a staircase down to middle age. And so, this is opposite. Now, you think about that what that says is you are going to peak at middle age. That means no reinvention at 40, you have no new relationships at 50, no retiring from one job and then going to do a different kind of job, you peak at 40, look how rigid that is. And it really was with the birth of Science in the middle of the 19th century that the idea of linear progress gets introduced and you can look at any aspect. I am reading a lot and I am reading a lot now about work, right, because I am working on a new book about the work stories that we tell ourselves. So many basic building blocks like the idea of work, the idea that work was a place different from where you were on the farm or a small family kind of shop that you were running. That never really happened until the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, the idea of vacation, the idea of retirement like the idea of a career and all of these ways that we talk about life as linear progressions, okay, the corporate ladder, right, the path of your career like rags to riches you can go time and again these were all invented constructs in the late 19th and 20th centuries as people thought that life was linear. The five stages of grief, the hero's journey, the eight stages of moral development over and over again. Why because that's what they were seeing in the world. Erikson, who came up with the 8 stages of moral development said he modeled it after the conveyor belt, the assembly line at the factory. So, now what's going on is with chaos theory and networks and the internet we now know that life has periods of stability and instability, periods of periodicity and non-periodicity. We know that life has chaos and is moving in lots of directions and our lives are an interconnected web. So, we look at the world differently, we

even look at the world of business different and yet we haven't updated the fundamental way we look at our lives. And so, the kind of the essence of what I have been doing is trying to get people to break out of these linear constructs of life that you know that you are going to have one job, one relationship, one spirituality, one source of happiness from adolescence to assisted living. That happens to some people; it is an incredibly stark minority. So, even the idea that every job is going to be a progressive job, that every job is going to pay you more money and it is going to have a bigger title, that is not the way most people live their lives. And so, the essence of what I am doing is trying to get people to realize the think of their lives, their work lives, their personal lives as narratives that have these swivels and turns and pivots and take all different shapes and to normalize the idea that the linear shape that those of us of a certain age grew up with and we are still haunted by that that's dead and we have these nonlinear lives which take all different shapes and they involve many more life transitions. And so, life transitions are a skill that we can and must master.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. This insight from Bruce reminds me of my conversation with Lynda Gratton (LG), professor at London Business School and the co-Author of the book 100 year life. The crux of the book is about the fact that given advances in healthcare, all of us are likely to live a long life and possibly end up working till our late 70s or beyond. That has a profound implication on how we think about our lives in terms of health, career choices, skill building, relationships, finances and so on.

LG: *"many people pick up the idea that our life is going from three stages to multistage and why three stage? I mean, you know full time education, full time work, full time retirement to something which is much more personal or in terms of you know, what do you want to do? But also multistage so, we expect education for example to go right away through people's lives, we expect people to work now much longer than perhaps they thought would and also the idea of retirement we are almost suggesting that you redistribute some of that retirement age right back into other parts of your life so you take sabbaticals or you take time out or you do paternity leave or whatever you just want to do so really that was the catch phrase I think for our book the Hundred Year life which is how do you build and maintain and navigate a three stage life."*

DJ: *At a macro level if you had to look at, where are the blind spots when you see people going about their lives and when you see your research and what you come up with, off the various things that you have discovered what are the two three things that you think are people most oblivious to if I may ask it that way?*

LG: *Interestingly obviously the books had a big impact on the way I think about my world and so on and I think the two areas that I really think we need to focus on, one is life-long learning, I think too many of us think that once you have done college that's it, you can read the odd book but that's just not going to be enough, all of us will have to upskill i.e. learn parts of your job that are more valuable and more difficult or reskill i.e. learn to something completely different and we need to do that right the way through our life and luckily technology is there to help us to do that. I think the second area that's come out is health, because we wrote the hundred year life, if we spent more and more time with medical people who are looking at aging and longevity and they all say the same thing take exercise sleep 8 hours at night and that's what I now do."*

DJ: If this topic is of interest, do tune into my conversation with Lynda Gratton. You can find it at the Speakers section at playtopotential.com

If you are deriving value from the podcast, do consider paying it forward to Antarang foundation, a non-profit I work with closely. You can look them up at playtopotential.com/payitforward.

Do also take a moment to rate and review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you are consuming this content. Might seem like a trivial move from your end but it makes a big difference in people discovering this podcast and in speakers getting convinced that this is worth their time. Lets now go back to the conversation with Bruce Feiler.

DJ: And in the book, you make the distinction between what you call disruptors and lifequakes. Could you tell us a little bit about what these are and how they might affect our lives differently? And maybe just to pick one of the parallels you draw you talk about 52 different disruptors that you had sort of discovered in your research and you equate that to a deck of cards. So, just say more about these two and how you see the deck of cards play out in our lives.

BF: So, let's go back in the story a little bit and let me just remind you that I did not go in looking for disruptors or lifequakes or life transitions or any of this stuff. I went in with the basic idea of let me ask people to tell me the story of their lives and let me listen very closely and let me try to hear what they are saying and find patterns and takeaways that can help all of us and the big idea that emerged here is that the linear life is dead, it has been replaced by the what I am now calling and in fact coining the nonlinear life and that involves many more of these kinds of life disruptions. And so, I made a master list of all the disruptive events that people described to me and I cross-referenced that with sort of very careful analysis of public data on relationship challenges and health challenges and business challenges and every kind of possible problem that is disruptive. And I ended up with a list of 52 items and yes, I called these disruptors. And what's and these... the parallel to a deck of cards was unavoidable and they are kind of... so I nicknamed them the deck of disruptors but there are five suits not four and so they kind of are divided... I am actually going to open the book which I have here in front of me and I am going to talk about sort of so, you can actually hear me rustling the pages, right? This is real live podcasting maybe you can actually hear me putting my glasses on. So, the five categories are love so, relationships, that's the biggest number of disruptors and that could be an illness of a child, the death of a partner or the divorce of your parents, getting married. And by the way, this will come up a little bit later but some of these disruptors are positive events, right, like getting married is a positive event, but it is still disruptive in every way. So, the second most popular in terms of the number was identity so that could be a change in your living situation, that could be change in sexual practices, being homeless or change in gender identity. Then beliefs so that's changing your political views or your religious views, or maybe you become more observant or less observant or maybe you go on a kind of sabbatical or a pilgrimage of some kind. Then work actually was kind of small on the list. So, that's a change in work responsibilities, changing jobs, changing careers, sexual harassment maybe you got public recognition, may you retired, and then the last would be body. So, that would be a chronic illness, a mental illness. So, the thing about these disruptors is that they come much faster than people really are acknowledging. So, that my data show that we go through one disruptor every 12 to 18 months. That's three dozen in the course of our adult lives. But here's the thing most of them we navigate pretty well, we are actually pretty good at this pace of change and so we get through it. But one in 10 of these becomes a much bigger change and that leads to what I call a lifequake. And so, a lifequake is kind of a massive, kind of sudden burst of change. It is either because one of these events is very big or more common and this is an idea that I am prepared to say I just never read in the literature of human development. And that is that these disruptors tend to clump, right? Just when you are thinking about leaving your job, you know, your wife gets cancer, right or just when you wreck the car your daughter has an anxiety disorder and your mother-in-law needs surgery. So, for whatever reason they clump; I actually think the reason is sometimes coincidence but more often it is like one disruptor kind of weakens our

immune system. So, when we are weakened something that would otherwise be a small disruptor kind of tips over to become a lifequake just because we are tired or exhausted or we are just sort of in the mood to change or sort of, you know, whatever let's throw caution to the wind and now is the time to really okay everything's already destabilized, my partner has got an illness and my child has a problem and you know what I might as well change jobs. It is just something about the confluence of them leads us to kind of push in some ways and embrace change. And here's the I would say signature piece of data from this entire experience and that is the average length of a life transition that comes out of one of these lifequakes is five years. So, if you think three to five in a lifetime, it takes us four, five, six years to get through it. That means 25 years; And so, that's why this book is called *Life is in the Transitions* to realize if you are just kind of grit or gravel or kind of, you know, kind of grind your way through these you are missing half of your life because they are difficult and we can get into the steps of how you navigate them. But these are potential opportunities for growth and renewal and if you don't look at them that way you are missing essentially nature's way of telling you now is the time to rethink and reimagine your life.

DJ: Yeah. Just picking up on that Bruce you talk about we having moved from the notion of a midlife transition to a whenever life transition. What are some of the big shifts we need to make to thrive in this paradigm?

BF: So, the first thing I think would be helpful to have this conversation would be to realize that the idea of a midlife transition was a kind of brief accident of history that we now know to be not an accurate description of how we live. So, the idea was really originated in the 1950s from a Canadian psychologist named Elliot Jaques, who when he first introduced the idea was laughed out of the room literally in London, and then he published paper in the early 1960s and he did not talk to anybody, did not research this in any way; he read 300 biographies of famous men. And in fact, he said I did not even read biographies of famous women because women have menopause and it would throw off the whole idea. Well, if menopause which is half the population experiences would throw off your idea like maybe there's a problem with your idea and not the problem with women and then this idea was picked up by two researchers, one at UCLA and one at Yale and then the idea was popularized by a woman named Gail Sheehy, an American journalist who wrote an article and later a book called *Passages* about this idea and she popularized the idea of a midlife crisis. And the idea was that everybody does the same thing in their 20s, everyone does the same thing in their 30s and then everyone has a "midlife crisis" that begins at 39-and-a-half and must end by 44. That's how prescriptive it was and the problem is, is that this is a bunk. Like we have these life disruptors, we have these lifequakes and they happen whenever they happen. Some people are born into a lifequake; maybe one of their parents dies or maybe their parents are getting divorced. Other people have a lifequake when they are teenagers that a parent dies or they get an illness or there's a natural disaster. Other people have them in their 20s or 30s, 60s, 70s, they happen across the life. I mean just take the idea of a pandemic, okay. The entire planet has been going through a lifequake and a life transition since the pandemic first kind of became something that we all had to deal with. So, if you are between 39 and 44 you are having a midlife crisis, but if you are between 24 and 29, you are also having a life crisis and if you are between 67 and 72 you are also having a lifequake. So, the point is these happen across our life often when we don't want them or when we least expect them. So, that's the first thing to realize. The second thing to realize is that the lifequakes that we experience in our lives they may be voluntary or involuntary. 53% of lifequakes in my study are involuntary. So, what's an involuntary lifequake? An involuntary lifequake is you lose your job or you get a diagnosis or there's a natural disaster or there's a pandemic or your spouse cheats on you, okay? That's an involuntary lifequake. But 47% of lifequakes are voluntary. So, what's a voluntary lifequake? You choose to change your profession, you choose as you in fact did to move back home to take care of an aging relative, you cheat on your spouse. So, what's interesting is that there's a

kind of a generational impact on this. So, like if you take the kind of a construct of baby boomers and gen X'ers and millennials like X'ers get this idea that life is nonlinear more intuitively than do baby boomers and millennials even more. So, millennials have kind of intuited or learned the idea that life involves more moves and job changes and we know by all data across multiple countries that people are spending less time in their jobs, and they are moving to jobs more frequently. So, it's much more instinctual for younger people than it is for older people those of us kind of 50+ we are kind of haunted by the ghost of linearity. But so, back to this framework. So, like the lifequake can be voluntary or involuntary, but the life transition that comes out of it must be voluntary. You must choose to lean in and make the changes. So, anybody listening to us that feels like they are in a lifequake or one of these moments where they are unsure life is coming at you from all directions that may be beyond your control or maybe something that you are trying to control but one thing you can do to control it back to your initial question is say I am going to pick one aspect of this and that's the transition I am going to go through. I am going to work on my personal life, or I am going to work on my beliefs or I am going to work on my professional life or I am going to spend more time with my children or give more back to my community or whatever it might be. So, pick one of the things that you are dealing with and let's say that's the transition that you are going to go through.

DJ: Hmm. And one of the related points you make Bruce is the ability to share a life story in high definition. And you also say that a lot of us face a writer's block in the way we narrate our stories. Any guidance to people who are trying to make sense of their journey and one of the related points if I may bring that up as well you talk about focusing on scars rather than wounds in terms of making sense of what we are going through. So, can you talk a little bit about how we can sort of process what we go through?

BF: So, I think that the foundational way to think about this is that everybody listening to us could just stop for a second and listen kind of summon up that story that goes on in the back of your mind kind of on low level, the story of where you came from and who you are and what's important to you and what you have done in your life and where you are right now, where you want to be going. Like, if you got a call right now that a loved one was in the hospital and you went rushing to the hospital to take care of that person you would imagine the time that you spent with that person, what do they mean to you and what you would say to them. That story that is kind of running in low volume in our minds all the time. That is the story of who we are, okay? And that we now know is not just part of who we are, it is who we are in a fundamental way, right? Life is the story that you tell yourself. And what we are talking about fundamentally with lifequakes or life transitions or crises or upheavals or whatever names have been given to this over the centuries, it is fundamentally a breach in that story. And so, one way to think about this is that is that a kind of a lifequake is a disruptive event and that the life story is the healing event. Like that's the way that you make sense and make peace with the disruptive event. It is in effect an autobiographical occasion. And so, the point about stories are told from scars not wounds is when that life upheaval is at its rawest in effect when it is still an open wound you can't fully tell the story yet because you haven't gotten through it. That's somehow that the act of getting through it and piecing it together and determining what it means and sort of deciding a new direction of where you are going, that's the process that turns the wound into a scar that finally allows you to tell the story. It is why in the seven tools that I have in the book *Life is in the Transitions*, the last one is to unveil the new story because it is at the end of the process that you can finally piece together the various experiences and actually in effect add a new chapter to the story of your life that accommodates the loss of the loved one, the loss of income, the loss of a job, the loss of legs, the lack of beliefs that you used to have, the new political position that you have taken, the new relationships that you have formed. That's the way to think about this is that a lifequake is an autobiographical occasion when we have to kind of re-tell re-think re-tell and then re-share the story of who we are.

DJ: Hmm, and you also talk about the fact that resilience may not be the right language in dealing with some of these themes and you use the phrase shape-shifting and say that shape-shifting is a better paradigm than resilience in terms of dealing with some of these lifequakes and transitions. Can you say more here on this notion of shape-shifting?

BF: Well, let me first of all just say that there has not been a more fetishized word in business and in life in the last decade than resilience and the problem with resilience is that resilience is one of those words and ideas that grew up back in the linear age, back when our lives were shaped by the factory and by industrial manufacturing. Resilience actually is a term of physics that began with a spring. And so, the idea was that you would pull the spring and how resilient “the spring” was, was how far the spring would spring back into its original position. So, that implies that you go back after going through a life transition and some people go back but frankly many more people go sideways or forward or to a different direction altogether. So, resilience is not the model and the pandemic is a perfect example of this. If you think when this first happened, we all thought oh, we are going to wait six weeks and we are going to go back to normal. Well, it is we are looking at a year plus at this point and what we’ve now learned is we are not going back, we are going to a different place. And in fact, that’s why when we get in as we go forward in this conversation and start talking about the various kind of stages and phases of a life transition that the first one is to say goodbye to the world that is not coming back, the world without the loved one or without the job or without the title or without the legs or whatever has been lost in the original lifequake. So, instead what happens is that we rethink what’s important to us. And so, the kind of the quick and dirty on the idea of the shape back to the original shape conversation we were having is that there are kind of three pillars we have to how we make meaning in our lives. I call them the ABCs of meaning. And the A is agency, what we do or make or create. The B is belonging, our relationships, our colleagues, our friends, our loved ones, our co-religionists, people we volunteer with. And then the C is a cause, a calling, a purpose or something higher than ourselves. So, we all have a way that we kind of balance these. I am an ABC, I am a writer so, I am very agentic, I am very involved with family and a very active dad and cause is kind of less important to me. My wife Linda Rottenberg who started and runs an organization called Endeavor that supports high impact entrepreneurs in 50 countries around the world, she’s very cause oriented. She gets back to entrepreneurs all over the planet. Then she’s very agentic because she’s you know a founder and a builder and a social entrepreneur. Relationships yeah, she tolerates the rest of us. So, she’s like the CAB. So, what tends to happen when we go through a lifequake is that we rebalance like maybe we have been working very hard and we want to spend more time with our family or maybe we have been a caretaker or caring for an aging relative or a child and maybe we are now moving on from that and we want to give back or maybe we have been giving back in our career, we want to do something more for ourselves. So, what tends to happen in these lifequakes is because they are sort of breaks in the normal, they are opportunities and, in some ways, I would even say obligations to rethink what’s most important to us and allows us to kind of breathe, take stock and maybe then shift our priorities somewhat.

DJ: Hmm. And you talk about the three-step process in a transition, Bruce, the long goodbye that you spoke about, the messy middle and the new beginning. And what I found interesting was you go on to say that each one of us has a superpower to be effective in one of these three. Why so, and can you tell us a little bit about what makes this middle messy?

BF: So, first of all the three stages. So, there are three stages to a life transition that in off itself is comforting to realize that there is a form to them. The first is the long goodbye, where we kind of confront the emotions that we are experiencing and say goodbye to the life that we are leaving behind. The next is the messy middle where we shed certain habits and create new ones. And then the last one is the new beginning where we sort of unveil our new selves and kind of update our personal story. And the way people have talked about, I mean, let’s remember there hasn’t been a

major book on life transitions in 40 years. The last one was in the 70s and this idea of sort of life transitions was actually begun more than a century ago by a German anthropologist named Arnold van Gennep and everywhere people talk about, every writing about transitions in the first hundred years of psychology said that we must go through this process in a linear order. First, we say goodbye, then we like go through the wilderness and then we have a new beginning. If there's one definitive thing that I am prepared to say is that that's just flat wrong. In fact, we go through these phases in different orders. Like I don't even know that much about you, but you used to be a consultant. So, my guess is you are really good at the messy middle, right? You are probably very good at analyzing and making lists and like figuring out, like how you are going to get through it with multiple options. Like my guess is that that's your superpower like we are all good at one. But if that... by the way is that true, is that true?

DJ: Possible, because I have a lot of flying miles trying to make sense of complex situations and sort out complex ideas into simple... sort of make sense of complex ideas. So, you might possibly be right.

BF: Right, if that's the case then the odds would be that maybe the phase that you wouldn't be good at and I won't put you on the spot here would be the long goodbye right because that's confronting the messy emotions, right? That's accepting that you are afraid right or you are sad, right or you are ashamed by what's going on. Like maybe you are ashamed that you have lost your job or what you did when you drank too much or maybe you are fearful like how am I going to live without this job or this status that I have become used to or maybe you are just sad like you realize, okay I have really grown as far as I can in this current job or this current business and I have got to move on to a new situation. And so, everybody is good at one of these phases and bad and I am like, that's okay. So, let's start where you are good, maybe you are good at making lists, maybe you are good at the emotion or maybe you are good at like, you know, reaching out to somebody else and asking for help. Let's start there, let's get confident because remember this process is going to take a while. So, let's start where we are good like get some momentum and then we can go back and deal with some of the phases that we are uncomfortable with. Because I will tell you this, going through a life transition is a very emotional experience and the emotions are going to affect you. So, if you try to pretend that you can get through it without that you are not really going to get through and you are going to find your own a new job in two years and you still haven't dealt with the emotional baggage that you feel and you are going to be feeling stuck again, So, dealing and confronting and surfacing these emotions is incredibly powerful, especially if that's not something that you naturally tend to do.

DJ: Hmm, and you use an interesting word here Bruce, facticity. You say that a lot of us need to accept the harsh reality that's often staring at our face. Can you give us some examples on how you saw people face up to what was staring at them?

BF: You are such a consultant; you love facticity. I love facticity too; I love this which is like this I can't deny this situation. Like the facticity of the situation is I had a 9-inch tumor in my left femur. I remember actually I went in to the hospital for the biopsy and my mother had come up from Georgia to be there with me and she came into the emergency room and she did her thumbs up and I was like, I don't have cancer and she was like, oh no, no, you have cancer, just that the biopsy went well, right. So, like you have to accept the facticity of the situation. I have two three-year-olds, I have a wife who works, I have a 9-inch cancer, what am I going to do, okay? That's a facticity. The facticity of the situation is that I am in a business that has been decimated by the pandemic. The facticity of the situation is there are five of us who vied for a certain job at this corporation and I am going to be one of the four that did not get this job. Like that's a difficult situation and I may be forced into a difficult process that I am uncomfortable with, but you are not going to go through that process unless you accept that process. So, the acceptance literally accepted is the first of these

tools accept that that you are in this position, accept that it is emotional and accept that you are going to be going through this transition whether you opted for it or whether it opted for you.

DJ: Hmm. And in the book, you also talk about, I love the part where you refer to a scene from Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade where Harrison Ford needs to take a leap of faith across a canyon and you liken it to the period of transition. Say more here. How do you see the link between that scene and your research after talking to thousands of people?

BF: There is something about the fact that the great stories of every faith involves going into the wilderness in some aspect. It is in the Hebrew Bible. It is in the Hindi tradition where you go into the forest. It is in the Buddhist tradition. It is in the Muslim tradition, okay. It is in the story of all of the great mythologies have somebody going on a journey of some kind and that journey in a fundamental way is leaving what is secure and safe and going into this period of lack of confidence and wilderness and transformation and fear. So, at the first phase is the long goodbye where you accept it and you use rituals in some way. The next step involves taking a step and going through that process and that brings you to the Indiana Jones scene where let's remember here, he's in one place and there's a cliff and there appears to be no bridge. He actually has to take a step and then the bridge appears after he takes the step. That's what it is like to go into this messy middle and it involves two processes fundamentally. The first is to shed some habit some way of life. Maybe it is shedding your... maybe you like having a job and it is shedding that comfort of stability. Maybe it is shedding a habit that maybe you have been a people pleaser and you have stayed around something for too long, and it is taking you too long to say goodbye and you realize you have to stop trying to please your boss. Maybe you have to stop trying to live up to the expectation of your parents that dare I say it, okay. Maybe your parents have fed you these expectations that you must have a certain status and you must bring in a certain kind of money and you must do something that you don't want to do and you are I would rather do something that I want to do or maybe you have to say I want to stop making money and I want to start giving back to society you want to shape shift. So, you have to shed some expectation. This is the first half of what the messy middle involves and then the second half is absolutely astonishing acts of creativity. Once you shed things from your life you suddenly have room to try new things, okay. Maybe it is a new habit, maybe it is a new skill, maybe you start to paint, maybe you start to dance, maybe you start to sing. Like people literally do actual things. Like think when the pandemic happened everyone was posting pictures about learning to bake, right? That was the... I may have been the only person who was not surprised by this because even the act of baking something small is an act of re-imagining. If you can imagine that you can bake something and that you can eat that and that little act of imagining that creation allows you to imagine that you can make and bake and create your new life. And that's what happened, it begins with small steps just like Indiana Jones sometimes on a bridge that you don't even know is there.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. Something similar came up in my conversation with Herminia Ibarra (HI), Professor at London Business School, who has studied transitions for several years.

HI: *"when you are making a transition people think you are going from A to B but you don't you go from A to this transition thing which we call liminality in our technical jargon to be. So in between you neither here nor there and it's horrible because you lose your identity anchors and so in that space it behoves you to be a little bit more playful because you are neither here nor there so that means you don't have to be consistent you can try, you can talk to people about jobs you would never consider or you can do things that are pretty much out of character but you know you are*

trying to learn something and that can be very freeing because we don't often give ourselves permission to deviate and so the two principle are you said divergent exploration and delayed commitment."

DJ: A lot of us grow up with strong identity anchors (I am a Partner in this firm, I am a CEO here, I am a successful entrepreneur etc etc). As we think about what next, we try to hold on to our past identity anchors and look around but the reality is that the possibilities start emerging only when we shed the past. The aperture of the opening of possibilities is inversely proportional to the speed at which we are running and the firmness with which we hold on to our past identity anchors.

If this topic is of interest, I would strongly recommend Herminia Ibarra's book Working Identity. We also discuss some of the key insights in our podcast conversation. You could just go to playtopotential.com and go to the speakers section. You will find Herminia Ibarra there on that list. Lets now get back to Bruce Feiler.

DJ: And on a related theme Bruce, you say that transitions take longer than you think but no longer than you need. I guess the question here is how do we avoid the feeling of restlessness and an identity vacuum and a need for closure when we are in the messy middle. What are some of the tactical thoughts you might have for people to get comfortable taking that leap of faith and walking in the wilderness?

BF: Well, there's the tell, there's the tell that for you the long goodbye is difficult. It is going to be messy; it is just accepting the fact that every story ever told about change has a period of messiness in it. And I think to me the way I would look at is first of all these are the greatest stories ever told. Why are these stories still told in every culture on the planet? Why their pilgrimage is going on right now in the lives of everybody listening to this? I don't care if you are in India, if you are in England, if you are in Japan, if you are in China, if you are in Mexico; all of these cultures have stories of pilgrimage and what a pilgrimage is fundamentally about, about leaving a comfortable place, going to an unknown and uncomfortable place, having some sort of experience and then bringing wisdom back with you. These are the stories that cultures have been telling for 10,000 years kind of like what makes you think that your story is going to be simpler. It was a myth that our stories are linear and never have conflict, okay? So, the first thing is to realize that all stories do including your story and that half of your life is going to be spent on a pilgrimage, a journey, a trip into the wilderness of this nature. Do you want to turn off your mind and heart and soul and skill set from learning from half of your life? Are you so darn good that you can just say I am going to learn from the half that stability? Look at any of these stories and the breakthroughs occur in the wilderness. So, realize that your story is fitting into a pattern that all stories have and therefore it is what's uncomfortable that is where the growth occurs. Think about being like a lot of people in the pandemic I have been exercising more and I was taking a class or something they are talking about what is the act of actually lifting a dumbbell, it is actually tearing the muscle so that the muscle can grow back, like we are wired to grow by tearing and rebuilding stronger. That is how our bodies are made and that's how our careers are made too.

DJ: Hmm. A related question Bruce, money. I was curious about what your research showed in terms of how people related to money in the way they experienced some of these transitions. Is there any, I know I am asking a broad question here but did you see any big patterns in the role that money played in the way people experienced transitions?

BF: Let me begin by saying about this question that any conversation about money is a conversation about values, okay? Money in and off itself has no intrinsic value; money only has the value that we

give it, okay? So, when we are talking about money, we are talking about all the things around money. It has to do with status and fear and shame and how we think of our own identity, it has to do with providing for our family and our sense of confidence and pride and how we provide for our families, but also, we need to provide for our families and make sure they are comfortable and stable if in fact money is going to be vulnerable. It has to do with how we relate to our loved ones, our friends, our family, our spouses, our children, our parents but ultimately money is really a source of meaning. And so, the couple things I would say quickly is it is obviously easier if you know you are going to go through a transition if you could put some money aside to give you the freedom of doing what you want. Obviously, everybody does not have that luxury. And so, then they are in a situation of perhaps having to rely on a spouse or rely on a parent or a child which has a lot of emotion and maybe shame attached to that. But the other thing I would say is I would just want to emphasize especially anybody who kind of is the primary breadwinner in a family that enormous numbers of people actually make professional transitions in which they personally choose to make less money because they want to do something that gives them more meaning. So, there are countless stories where people say, I want to stop earning money in a job I don't like and switch to a job that allows me to give back. And if you were that kind of person or I want to take a half step back in my career and make less money for a time because ultimately that new job is something I prefer to be doing and over time I can begin to make more money. Because the truth is there are many, many more paths to financial success today. We have side hustles, we have consulting, we have opportunities to do things on the internet and help people in faraway places. So, the truth is in this current kind of nonlinear world first of all taking these kinds of steps is less shameful and painful than it might have been in the past. Second, the idea that you might want to get off the corporate ladder to have a child, to spend time with an aging relative, to have a sabbatical and then it is much easier to get back on that corporate track, than it ever would have seemed imaginable a generation ago and there's also multiple ways and a kind of freelance gig economy side hustle world to make money along the way so that the job that gives you more meaning can ultimately catch up in what it pays.

DJ: Hmm, and I love what you said and, in a way, I am coming up to the five-year mark since I moved out of the corporate world to do what I do now and what's interesting you said is if we take a long-term view the money might be lower in the short run but if you enjoy what you do and build capability over time, then even the financial piece more often not could be taken care of if we are thoughtful about it. Would that be a fair way of understanding what you said?

BF: Oh, absolutely and I mean, I am at the beginning of this work story project as I call it now. And so, the data isn't really in but I am having two or three conversations like this a day now and I would say, you know, just back of a napkin I would say half of the people who go through a work transition take less money in the short run. That is not a hyper rare thing anymore; that is an increasingly common thing.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is Deepak Jayaraman here again. I want to speak about the work of Ashley Whillans, a professor at Harvard Business School who has written the book Time Smart. She says that we are all taught to give importance to time value of money but we often don't think about money value of time. She actually goes on to talk about two types of people – Taylors and Morgans. Morgans are the ones that care about money and are a bit outside in when they think about transitions. Taylors are the ones that value time and are more inside out about their choices. She goes onto say that her research shows that Taylors end up making more money than Morgans which is fascinating if you think about it. Do look her up at the Speakers section at playtopotential.com if this is of interest. Lets get back to Bruce Feiler now.

DJ: Talking about corporate leaders Bruce, in the book you talk about having rituals when we go in through a transition. Did you see any particular patterns in the kinds of rituals that leaders in the corporate world had whether it is around the retirement or whether it is in their 40s?

BF: Well, the first thing I will say about speaking to leaders here, you know, I talked to a lot of corporations and I would say a couple things. The first thing I want to say is that the traditional membrane that divides work life from family life, kind of professional issues from personal issues is a much more porous than it has ever been and I personally believe and I just wrote a piece in Harvard Business Review about this that the pandemic is going to essentially obliterate that distinction. You have three quarters of women in the West now working outside the home, you have three quarters if not not even more dads much more involved in parenting. So, those traditional barriers have gone away. The pandemic where suddenly work from home is a regular occurrence and as we all know most corporations are saying that that work from home or more flexible work situations are going to be increasingly common and like a lot of these trends it is going to begin in Silicon Valley where they are sort of saying work from home forever already, but it is going to percolate out into the rest of the business world from perhaps more cutting-edge industries in many situations. And so, I think that the idea of men working from home is going to make a lot of these family issues that used to be much more gender restricted be much more on top for corporations. But the larger point that I am saying here is that because lifequakes are so common because we spend a half of our lives in transitions, the idea that a manager can say to an employee anymore oh, you take care of that personal issue and leave it out of work, that has just gone, that literally cannot come back anymore, because the truth is somebody who is unhappy in their life transition, unhappy in their personal life is not going to be effective in the workplace and we need a way to bring it in the workplace. But if we bring it into the middle of every single meeting, it is going to be a disaster. This is where rituals come in. This is where things like family, you know, the family meeting idea of we are going to put it in a safe space. So, you need some mechanism in a corporation to first of all allow people to save space to talk about their emotions and not believe where their difficulties and not believe they are impinging on their progress or ability to succeed in the company because it is really... let's just understand what has happened, you know in corporations the idea of a kind of a paternalistic community where the corporation makes a lifelong commitment to the employee and the employee makes a lifelong commitment to the managers and to the company, that's dead. You know, both sides are less dependent on each other and therefore one way to keep people involved is to find a way for them to be themselves more at work. And I think rituals whether it is set aside meetings or once a month opportunities or social things that can happen or even rituals that saying goodbye to the past and sort of expunging these difficult times, corporations are already doing this and that's only going to grow as we move into a kind of post-pandemic world in which the personal lives and personal transitions of employees are absolutely now on the docket of the responsibilities of their leaders.

DJ: Hmm. And just in the context of the work I do Bruce, what's been your observation of the role a coach or a sounding board can play in helping people navigate a transition? What are some of the ways in which you see them adding value for people to shape-shift effectively through a transition?

BF: I love that question actually and think about a... think about your childhood dinner table if you will for a second and think about how this is really the kind of breeding ground where we learn how to tell stories, right. So, what did you do today? Okay, let's just say that you and I were brothers. I will make you the older brother and I will be the younger brother in this dynamic. And you and I went off to on a fishing trip and we are coming back and we are telling the other members of the family whether it is just our parents or grandparents or siblings or whatever and what's going to happen? But I say, you are the older brother, I am the younger brother here. I am going to start telling the story. So, oh my gosh and threw the bade into the water and the fish came and what are

you going to do? You are not going to be eight words... I am not going to be eight words into the story before you interrupt me and you tell me and you start correcting my story. I am going to you said, that's not what happened, I did it, no, no you did not do this, I caught the first fish. What are we doing? We are actually... there's actually a kind of a geeky social science word for this. We are co-narrating this story.

DJ: Hmm, hmm.

BF: That's what a coach does. A coach, a friend, a mentor, a neighbor, a loved one helps you tell the story. And sometimes you are improving the story and sometimes you are asking a question that maybe the story teller doesn't think of, sometimes you are reflecting a pattern back to the teller. This act of co-narration is a fundamental and beloved and critical part of being human being is sharing your story with others. It could be your brother or sister, it could be your family, it could be your colleague, it could be your spouse, it could be a therapist. What does a therapist do but in a sense a kind of co-narration and I think that what the coach is doing is helping you hear things in the story that you may not hear or see things in the patterns that you may not see and ultimately if it works help you a little more efficiently get to the meaning that the meaning making part of the storytelling because fundamentally a lifequake is a meaning vacuum with a kind of normal building blocks of what's important to us are stripped away. And what the life transition is, is restoring the meaning making and why any outsider is important is they can help us tell the story perhaps a little more efficiently and get to the wisdom that's there that sometimes we are not able to see.

DJ: Beautiful. I love the way you connect it back to how we tell stories as children on the table. So simple yet so profound. Just as we wrap up Bruce, this podcast is titled Play to Potential. In all the work you have done over the last several years you have been curious about multiple topics ranging from parenting to circus to transitions and much more. What would you say in summary for us to play to our potential? What are some of the thoughts you want to leave the listeners with?

BF: I will tell you a parenting story on my way to answering this beautiful question. So, I am the dad of identical daughters as I have said here a few times; they are teenagers now, and I used to read to them when they were young and then they started to read to themselves and I stopped reading to them at night which I deeply regret. But then when they got a little older, I started reading to them again and there is a story that's beloved by American girls called A Wrinkle in Time and I had never read this. I had like never read the canon of girl literature like A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, which is maybe the closest thing I have ever read to a perfect book. And so, I was reading A Wrinkle in Time to my daughters and as you know, it is about there's a scientist dad and there's this daughter Meg and this dad disappears and goes off into some sort of intergalactic place and then Meg has to go bouncing using physics and woopy woo's from the planet to planet and stage to stage. And so, she goes bouncing and bouncing and bouncing and bouncing and finally she gets to the inner sanctum where the dad essentially is being held hostage waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting for this and finally the girls and I have girls about this age and I am the dad reading the story and I shut the book. I have never read this book and I say to my daughters what's going to happen now, who's going to save the day? So, what do my daughters say, or what would anybody's day say? Dad's gonna save the day, dad's gonna save the day and I was like, I am your dad and I would like that to be true, but the dad's not going to save the day. Who's the hero of the story? Meg? Meg is going to save the day. Open the book and read and that's what happens. Dad and Meg are reunited, but Meg has to save the day because Meg is the hero of this story and that's the point. We want to think of our life as a fairy tale. We want to be the hero and we want to have the happy ending, but you can't get to the happy ending at first without going through the dark woods and then who shows up in the dark woods? A wolf shows up and that's what I am here to say as sad as it might sound, as painful as it might sound, a wolf is going to show up in your story. It might be a wolf, it might be an ogre, it

might be a dragon, it might be a downsizing, it might be a diagnosis, it might be a death, it might be a tornado, it might be a pandemic; but when the wolf shows up, we want to shutter our eyes and we want to look away, but we can't do that. The hero has to get over around or through or somehow get past the wolf. That's what makes it a fairy tale. Not the hero and the happy ending. It is the difficult time in the wilderness of the woods and it is the wolf. So, anybody out there facing a wolf right now your job is to get through around or over the wolf. It is not going to be easy, but I can tell you I have spoken to hundreds and hundreds of people, they all get past their wolf and that's when you become the hero because if there's one thing I learned you asked me to sum up my views, we cannot reach our potential unless we become the hero of our own story and we can and we will.

DJ: Beautiful. Bruce, it has been a real honor having you on the podcast. Lots, lots to chew on and reflect on and think about but I must say this has been one of the most profound conversations I have had at the podcast. Thank you so much for being generous with your time and insights.

BF: My pleasure and I hope we get to cross paths in person someday soon.

DJ: Absolutely. Look forward Bruce. Thank you.

BF: Bye. Bye.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Thank you for listening. Hope you found the conversation purposeful. I personally liked how Bruce spoke about the role of a Sounding Board/Coach and how they can help in co-narrating a story and getting to a meaningful place. I hadn't quite thought of my work along those lines but now that when I think about it, it's quite true. In my experience of working with leaders, one of the elements often is introducing them to Search Consultants and helping them navigate some of those conversations. These are relationships that I have gradually cultivated in the Indian ecosystem after I moved on from EgonZehnder. This phase can often be a lonely and an unnerving process when you need to pitch yourself across multiple people. The leaders often tell me that my helping them shape their stories after really getting to know them and with the past familiarity of the Search process is of immense value to them when there is no one else that is taking their side. For them, the fact that they can have one person around them to navigate this phase rather than zero people is of huge value. They say that this Zero to One jump for them in terms of having a Sounding Board is valuable in this otherwise high stakes, messy and lonely process.

Just a couple more messages before we wrap up. If this conversation was of interest, do tune into the podcast conversation with Dr. Herminia Ibarra where we speak about transitions and with Dr. Lynda Gratton where we speak about the notion of a 100 year life and the implications it has for us.

Do take a moment to rate and review the show on Apple Podcasts or wherever you consume the content. Do also consider paying it forward to Antarang Foundation, an organization that works with young adults from challenging backgrounds and helps them get into the world of formal work. You can know more at playtopotential.com/payitforward

Thank you for listening and look forward to having you at one of the subsequent conversations at the Play to Potential podcast.

End of transcription

Nugget from Lynda Gratton that is referenced: [100 – Year life](#).

Nugget from Herminia Ibarra that is referenced: [The perils of foreclosure](#).

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Bruce Feiler - Nuggets

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- 70.02 Bruce Feiler - Happy Families and Agile Development
- 70.03 Bruce Feiler - What is the shape of your story
- 70.04 Bruce Feiler - Disruptors and Lifequakes
- 70.05 Bruce Feiler - Midlife to Whenever life transition
- 70.06 Bruce Feiler - Make sense from scars (not wounds)
- 70.07 Bruce Feiler - Shape-shifting instead of resilience
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- 70.10 Bruce Feiler - Role of money in transitions
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- 70.12 Bruce Feiler - In Summary - Playing to Potential

About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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