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Context to the nugget

Bruce speaks about how our stories often take different twists and turns that we don't really anticipate beforehand. He speaks about how non-linear our lives have become and how life transitions are a skill that we all must master to go through this effectively.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): 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?

Bruce Feiler (RS): 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 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

End of nugget transcription

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

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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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