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Context to the nugget conversation

Ayse speaks about her origins growing up in Turkey in a family of lawyers. She speaks about how she moved towards architecture and subsequently into Industrial Design. She goes on to describe how the Financial Crisis of 2008 got her started in the space of Life Design.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Ayse, of the various transitions or reinventions you have been through in your life, one of the reinventions that struck me was how you moved from being a designer of things to being a designer of things and being a designer of life. Can you talk a little bit about when you started bringing your attention to the element of life design?

Ayse Birsel (AB): Absolutely. You know, Deepak, sometimes we say something in our life and we do not realize the importance of it. And that happened to me with Design The Life You Love because I was part of WPO, which is Women Presidents Organization and this is a group of women that we get together to collaborate and to help each other and to learn from each other. And one time, we did an exercise, where we were asked to define our, I guess it was our mission in one sentence. And I was young and I was kind of bored and I wanted to say something funny that had to do with design. So I said, my mission is to design the life I love. And I said it in the moment and I do not know why I said that but it stuck with me and then years later when I developed my own design thinking process, deconstruction reconstruction, the two things came together and I thought to myself, hey, if I think that our life is our biggest project and now I have my own process, can I apply this process to my life as kind of like the ultimate test, right, and that is how it happened.

DJ: Wow, and you also talk about that being triggered a little bit by the economic situation at that time, right. One of the themes I am curious about is how constraints sometimes lead us to creative solutions. So can you throw a little bit of light on the context in which you started focusing on life design as well?

AB: Absolutely. In 2008 when the economy crashed, you know, I had a very successful design studio in New York, but almost all our clients took their work in-house. And it made total sense for them, they were cutting budgets and, you know, we were on the outside. But I did not see this coming and so it was really a very hard one year for us where we did not have any active projects. And that is the time when I, at the urging of one of my dearest friends and collaborators like Caplan, she said, why do not you use this time, now that you have all this time, to think about how you think because you think differently. And that was like a lifesaver for me. And I used that year, where nobody wanted to work with me, to think about how I think. So it was kind of like a deep dive into my head and into my heart and to figure out how I come up with new ideas. And the fact that one person valued my

thinking made all the difference. And I developed my own design thinking process, deconstruction reconstruction, yeah.

DJ: Fascinating. And I think if I fast forward to today, the last couple of years, just because of COVID, I come across so many people that have been pushed to a certain corner, but have used that as a springboard to something else, which is fascinating.

AB: Absolutely. I mean for us as well, COVID changed the way we work and, if I may, I started these weekly Virtual Design The Life You Love Teas during COVID as a way to help my community and see if they needed anything. And we are now up to Design The Life You Love Virtual Tea number 89, we are almost at a 100. And the amazing thing was, this is the thing that helped me through COVID. I thought I was helping people but it was the other way around, it helped me have a community of amazing people and the chance to meet with them every week. Things that we would never do, right, if it was not for these challenges.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I experienced the Financial Crisis of 2008 differently. I was working with McKinsey in the US at that time. My father was diagnosed with late stage Colon Cancer in the Spring of 2008 and that got me to move back to India, hit the pause button and take care of his treatment. I spent the next 6 months with him in Chennai in India and that gave me some perspective on what gave me energy. I felt I got my energy from the people side of things. While he passed away in Oct 2008, my default option would have been to go back to the US. But my wife and I decided to pitch our tent in India and I transitioned to Executive Search in EgonZehnder. None of that would have happened if not for the Twin shocks of 2008 which was a combination of my father's cancer diagnosis and the Financial Crisis. Now that I look at the events from a distance, I see the transformation opportunities that these events possess.

This also reminds me of my conversation with Bruce Feiler (BF) – Author of Life is in the Transitions. He has spoken to 1000s of people who have experienced Life-quakes and how they have come out of it. He says that sometimes we focus on the notion of resilience. He speaks about the notion of shape-shifting through these passages of play!

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: I love the framing – ABC – Agency, Belonging and Cause. Lifequakes like the Covid pandemic are a great opportunity for us to take a step back and figure out what matters to us and rearchitect a life that is consistent with our current life context.

If you would love to know more, please visit the conversation with Bruce Feiler at playtopotential.com. You might also like the Theme – Reinventing Self in the Curated Playlists section of the website.

Thank you for listening.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Bruce Feiler that is referenced: [Shape-shifting instead of resilience](#).

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the 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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Podcast Transcript [86.01 Ayse Birsal - Journey to becoming a Life Designer](#)

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