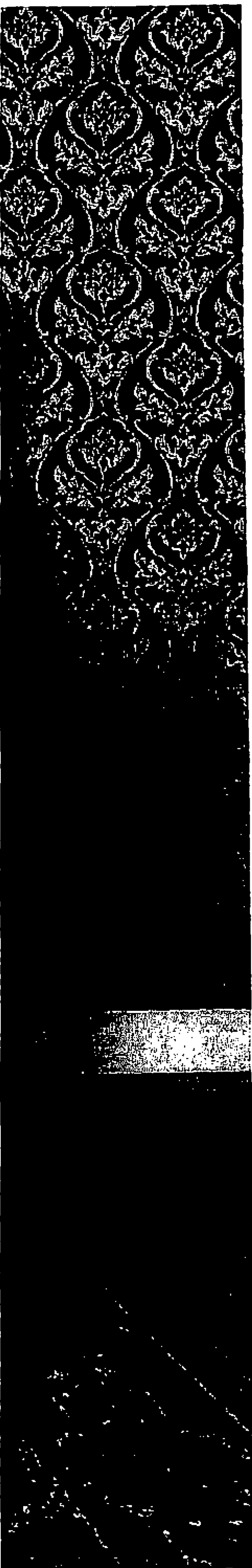
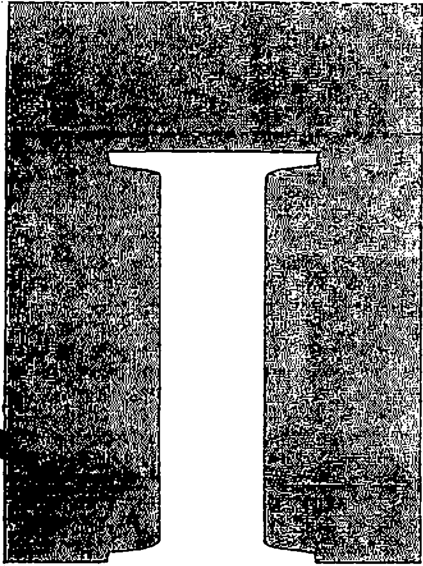


THE NON LINEAR LIFE

By Bruce Feiler

ALL HUMANS EXPERIENCE MAJOR DISRUPTORS AND "LIFEQUAKES," AS THIS YEAR REMINDS US. PROFOUND CHANGE IS BEST NAVIGATED BY UNDERSTANDING THE FIVE PILLARS OF LIFE TRANSITIONS.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **KYLE GRILLOT**



USED TO BELIEVE THAT PHONE CALLS DON'T CHANGE YOUR LIFE, then I got one that did. The caller was my mother. The message: "Your father is trying to kill himself."

My father—a navy veteran, civic leader, and Southern gentleman—was never depressed a minute in his life until he got Parkinson's, a disease that affects your mood as well as your mobility.

My family, always a bit hyper-functional, dove into this crisis. My siblings focused on business and medical matters, but I'm the narrative guy. For 30 years I had been exploring the stories that give our lives meaning. I began to wonder if my father might need a boost to restart his life story. So one Monday morning I sent him a question.

"What were your favorite toys as a child?"

He answered that question, then another. This routine continued for years until my father, who had never written anything longer than a memo, backed into writing an autobiography. It was the most remarkable transformation any of us had ever seen.

And he wasn't alone. As I shared this experience with others, I heard example after example of people who had gone through similar, unsettling life experiences and had lost control of their personal narratives.

"My wife went into the hospital with a headache and died the next morning."

"My daughter tried to kill herself."

"My boss is a crook."

"My sister is an addict."

Everybody was saying: "My life has been upturned, my dreams shattered, my confidence punctured. The life I'm living is not the life I expected. I don't know how to tell my story anymore."

I recently spent several years trying to figure out why we're all so overwhelmed by our lives and how we can make sense of them. I crisscrossed the country, visiting all 50 states and collecting hundreds of life stories of Americans of all ages in all walks of life. People who had lost homes, lost loved ones, changed careers, changed genders, left cults, got out of bad marriages.

Physicist-musician **BRIAN WECHT,** see page 56.

I then spent a year coding these stories for 57 variables, from high point to low point, from what emotions people struggled with most during times of change to what advice from friends was most helpful.

I called it the Life Story Project.

Three takeaways emerged. First, the linear life is dead. The once-routine idea that our lives pass through a uniform set of stages, phases, or "passages," with predictable crises on birthdays that end in zero, is hopelessly outdated. The notion that we'll have only one job, one relationship, one sexuality, one spirituality is dead.

Second, today we live nonlinear lives. My data show that each of us will experience three dozen disruptors in our lives—one every 12 to 18 months. Most of these we get through with relative ease, but one in 10—or three to five in our adult life—become major "lifequakes" that lead to massive life transitions.

My signature finding is that the average length of these transitional phases is five years. That means we spend half our adult life in this unsettled state. You or someone you know is going through one now.

Finally, navigating transitions is a skill we can, and must, master. The most exciting thing I uncovered is a set of tools for coping with these periods. Some of these skills come to us naturally, others we have to learn, but everybody is eager to improve.

With that in mind, here are five truths about transitions; many of these findings contradict a century of thinking about these defining life periods.

Transitions Are Becoming More Plentiful

John Mury was born to an American military dad and a Korean mom who divorced when he was 9, leaving him angry, bitter, and divided between two worlds. Two weeks into college in Pittsburgh, John was walking along a street and heard the voice of God. He became a believer, transferred to a Bible college, then moved to Massachusetts to open a church. He also married and had three children. "Cleverness and hard work were my idols," he said.

John then experienced a horrific epidemic of disruptions, a pattern of clustering that is so common I've given it a name: pileup. I'd heard of two-car pileups: Henry Ferris was fired from his job as a book editor just before his wife left him for another man. And three-car

PHOTOGRAPH BY **MOYA MC ALLISTER**

pileups: Amber Alexander lost her boyfriend in a car wreck, her grandfather to a stroke, and her aunt from an overdose, all within six months.

John experienced a 10-car pileup. First, his wife was diagnosed with gastric cancer and had her stomach removed, then much of her intestine, followed by a double mastectomy. Next, one child was diagnosed with autism, another with Asperger's, and a third with distress. On top of that, John's brother, who moved nearby to help, died unexpectedly; John's church failed; and he was medicated for mood disorders. Soon, his marriage buckled.

"My cleverness and hard work were not going to work anymore," he says. "I needed help." So he switched jobs, focused on his family, and opened up about his struggles.

By almost any measure, the number of disruptors we are experiencing today is growing. A disruptor is an event, positive or negative, that interrupts the flow of everyday life. Data show we will have more jobs in our lifetime and more moves; half of us will change faiths; sexual fluidity is rising; and we're facing an epidemic of depression, anxiety, and suicide.

I tallied up all the disruptors I'd heard about and found 52. I named this list *Life's Deck of Disruptors*. The closest analogy is the Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory, created in 1967 by psychiatrists Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe. Most items are similar, but the differences are telling, including some everyday annoyances—major holidays, family get-togethers—that I had rarely encountered.

Holmes and Rahe have eight categories about work, but none about starting your own business or nonprofit. They have divorce, but not custody battles. And none of the more contentious social flashpoints of our time appear: They have no sexual harassment; no mental illness, suicide, or addiction; no public humiliation, which has become more prevalent because of the internet.

I plotted all the disruptors I heard about, based on age, and found they follow no set pattern. Crises aren't just for midlife anymore; urges to overturn our routines don't follow charts printed in undergraduate textbooks. Life changes happen when they happen, often when we least expect them.

My data show we will experience one disruptor every one to two years—that's more frequently than many people see a dentist. One in 10 will be so big that the person will undergo a major life change. Considering nine in 10 of us live with other people, that means virtually every household in the United States has at least one person in it who's undergoing a significant life reorientation. It's time to see us for what we are: a people perpetually in flux.

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Transitions Are Nonlinear

Fraidy Reiss was the second youngest of six in an ultra-Orthodox Jewish family in Brooklyn. Her father was "extremely violent and abusive," she says, so her mother moved out with the children. At 18, Fraidy was put into the marriage pool. Her first match confessed to trying marijuana, so Fraidy rejected him. Her next match got into fistfights on two of their first three dates. Because Fraidy had spent her "one reject card" she agreed to marry him.

He threatened to kill her on their wedding night. "I'm going to wrap my fingers around your neck," he said. "I'm going to squeeze until you take your last breath." Both his father and her mother rejected her pleas for help. "I was a 20-year-old stay-at-home mom and housewife, and I hated my life."

Ten years into her marriage, a friend slipped Fraidy the name of a therapist, who used the expression *domestic violence*. When her husband broke down the door days later, Fraidy called 911. Fraidy was the first person in her community to get a restraining order, and the head rabbi forced her to retract the claim the next day.

Fraidy stayed with her husband for the next five years. During that time, she squirreled away cash in a cereal box and enrolled at Rutgers. Her mother sat shiva for her; her husband escalated his violence. Eventually, Fraidy filed for divorce, graduated with a 4.0 average, and was elected valedictorian. She got a job as a reporter and founded an organization, Unchained at Last, that helps women escape forced marriages.

A century ago, the German anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, who invented the term *rites of passage*, said transitions can be divided into three phases—*separation*, when you leave the past; *margin*, when you isolate yourself; and *incorporation*, when you rejoin the world. Van Gennep's model has been repeated virtually unchallenged ever since. William Bridges, author of the influential 1979 book *Transitions*, said these stages

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER TSAI

must happen *in that order* for transitions to work.

One of the clearest findings of the Life Story Project is that this linear model of life transitions is wrong. Even worse, it is dangerous to those who believe they are expected to follow a prearranged order.

Instead, people go through the emotional stages of life transitions—what I call *the long goodbye, the messy middle,* and *the new beginning*—according to their own, idiosyncratic fingerprint. People gravitate to the phase they're best at—their *transition superpower*—and bog down in the one they're weakest at—their *transition kryptonite.*

I asked everyone which phase they found most difficult. The largest block, 47 percent, said the middle, but like Fraidy Reiss, who found leaving challenging, 39 percent—not that far off—said that saying goodbye was the hardest. Fourteen percent named the new beginning.

Simply put, there is no single way to go through a life transition. Just as life is nonlinear, transitions themselves are nonlinear. While this lack of a blueprint can sometimes feel overwhelming, the good news of experiencing transitions—or living life in general—out of order is that we're freed from the shackles of expectation, whether they come from our parents, our neighbors, or ourselves. We can make our own choices and decide what brings us peace.

Transitions Take Longer Than You Think (But Not Longer Than You Need)

Chris Howard grew up sickly in a part African-American, part Choctaw-American family in Buffalo, New York. He was chubby, suffered from asthma, and was declared dead after he briefly stopped breathing at 18 months. Unable to play sports, Chris collected spiders and dreamed of being a marine biologist. But after earning a pre-med degree at the University of Miami and marrying his college sweetheart, he enrolled in a creative writing graduate program at Cornell.

It was such a bad fit, he sank into depression and his marriage fell apart. "I was living off beans and rice for months, seeing a therapist, going to the gym four days a week," he says. He reached out to friends to ask for help and was overwhelmed by the response. "They said, 'I will buy you a bus ticket; I will buy you a plane ticket. Take a week, take however long, just come and stay with me and we'll rebuild together.'"

And he did. He began teaching game design in Harlem, started dating men, and worked with priests and monks to rebuild his life: a year of health, a year of mourning, a year of flying trapeze, and more. Finally, he moved to San Francisco and got a job in user experience design for corporations.

How long did this transformation take? Six years.

The moment in my conversations that was universally the most awkward was when I asked people how long their major life transition took. Even the most well-spoken individuals stammered and stumbled and seemed reluctant to admit what turned out to be our most consistent finding: longer than they wanted.

The average, and most common, length: five years. Three-quarters said it took four years or longer. Again, multiply these figures by the number of transitions we're likely to face—three, four, five, or more—and it's clear that transitions are a lifetime sport that no one is teaching us how to play.

There is an upside to our ineptitude. With a little work, we can get better at transitions. There are skills we can learn and mistakes we can avoid. Also, these times do end. Sure, some emotions might linger and some scars might endure, but more than 90 percent of people said their transitions ultimately did come to a conclusion. Transitions take longer than we think, but not longer than we need—and not forever, either.

THE AVERAGE LENGTH OF A TRANSITION IS FIVE YEARS. THEY TAKE LONGER THAN WE THINK, BUT NOT LONGER THAN WE NEED—AND NOT FOREVER, EITHER.

Transitions Are Autobiographical Occasions

Christian Picciolini was born to struggling Italian immigrants in 1960s Chicago. Sent to live with his grandparents in the suburbs, Christian felt like an outsider. When he was 14, Christian was smoking a joint one day and a '68 Firebird screeched to a halt in front of him. A man with a shaved head got out. "He grabs the joint from my lips, smacks me in the head, and says, 'That's what the Communists and Jews want you to do. You're Italian.'"

That man was the founder of the Chicago Area Skinheads. Overnight, Christian became a zealot. He tattooed his body with Nazi propaganda; he participated in gang attacks; he eventually became the group's leader.

Four years into this life, some black teenagers walked into Christian's local hangout. "I was belligerent and told them this was my effing McDonald's and they had no right to be there." Christian started beating up one of the teens, but when the boy looked him in the eye, he recalls, "I thought, *This could have been*

FRAIDY REISS grew up in an ultra-Orthodox Jewish family in Brooklyn and was married at 18. Her husband threatened to kill her on her honeymoon, trapping her in a decade of abuse. Emboldened by a therapist at 27, she filed a restraining order, enrolled in college, and eventually secured enough resources, and confidence, to leave.

my brother, my mother, my father. It was my first moment of empathy."

Christian got married around this time and had two sons, but his wife moved out and took them. By the time Christian left the movement, he had lost everything. For the next five years he drank heavily and used cocaine. Finally, a friend forced him to get a job; he covered his Nazi eagle tattoo with Jesus on the cross. ("It was the only thing wide enough to hide it.") He also wrote a magazine article denouncing his past.

"The publication of that article was pivotal for me," he says. "It helped me overcome my shame." The following year he cofounded a nonprofit that helps former extremists renounce violence.

The term *autobiographical occasion* was coined by sociologist Robert Zussman in 2000 to describe the moments in our lives when we are "called on to reflect in systematic and extended ways on who we are and what we are." Zussman mentioned job applications, confessions, and reunions.

But beyond these more contained situations, my conversations showed that any lifequake is an autobiographical occasion: It obliges us to reassess who we are and modify our life stories. In my own life, getting married was an autobiographical occasion, as was having twins and, later, cancer. My father was clearly having an autobiographical occasion when he lost the ability to work, walk, and bathe himself.

I asked all those I interviewed whether their biggest transition occasioned a rewriting of their life story. Three-quarters said yes. Many, like Christian Picciolini, said they didn't realize at first that the experience would trigger such a re-evaluation.

This pattern suggests that while academics and clinicians have come to

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PHOTOGRAPH BY **JENNIFER S. ALTMAN**

training. A similar program is planned for physicians who get sued.

Yoga Is No Match For Moral Injury

Wellness programs teaching many means of self-care are standard fare for burnout, and they are now being adopted in healthcare settings and medical schools. Exercise has its well-recognized virtues, but yoga is no match for moral injury.

"Teaching people to meditate, making them more resilient—the problem doctors are facing is not about the individual at all," says Wendy Dean. "Doctors are caught in the double bind of taking best care of patients and meeting the demands of the system: Make sure that you have enough volume. Make sure you're billing correctly. Make sure not to refer anyone outside the system. It's impossible to serve two masters at once."

Language is important. Burnout, says Simon Talbot, implies a lack of self-care skills. Moral injury implicates the environment physicians work in. Two years ago, Talbot was feeling increasingly stressed and decided to test himself on a widely used burnout scale. "I looked pretty bad, but like any good clinician I decided to be scientific about it. I read the literature." He got a coach. He started yoga. He changed his diet. "I felt great when I was on the beach. But coming back to work on Monday mornings, I felt exactly the same as I did before. The environment was eating away at me."

At the time, Dean was working for the Department of Defense, and Talbot had some grants through her office. They got to talking and realized there was a parallel with "wounded warriors." Doctors were working hard, but unable to do what they felt was the morally right thing to do. "There is a place for mindfulness," Talbot believes. "There is a place for yoga and resilience. But they are not reasonable ways to fix a structural problem."

There are in fact no easy ways to solve a structural problem. Changing the culture of medicine is a start. But physicians believe that the burnout problem will be solved only when MDs are able to talk to their patients again. ■

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understand that a big part of meaning-making is adjusting our life stories, most people still don't think of their lives in this way. Simply understanding that our lives are stories that get interrupted regularly can go a long way to giving us a sense of agency and purpose.

Transitions Are Essential

Christy Moore, who grew up on the coast of Georgia, always hated school. In kindergarten she pretended to vomit at the bus stop; in high school she played hooky and hung out at the beach. The summer after her junior year, she became pregnant. Six weeks later, she and her boyfriend Roy were married. He dropped out of school and got a job at KFC; Christy dropped out and got a paper route.

"I thought, This not only ruins our lives, this completely changes the trajectory of our lives," she says.

In the next eight years, Christy and Roy had three children. They eventually scraped up enough to buy a Japanese restaurant, but when Roy needed multiple surgeries, tumbling them into debt, she realized they needed security.

Then something unthinkable happened. Christy used to take her daughter to the library for toddler time. One day, she plopped down in a comfy chair and grabbed the nearest book. It was *Wuthering Heights*. "I didn't understand half of what I read." Next she grabbed *To Kill a Mockingbird*, then *Pride and Prejudice*. As she made her way through the shelf of classics she found the answer she was looking for. She would go back to school.

On the day her youngest entered preschool, Christy drove straight to the local university. "I cried the entire way," she admits. She earned a bachelor's degree in respiratory therapy, then a master's degree, and finally, 24 years after dropping out of school, a doctorate in adult education. She had gone from GED to Ph.D. Today she counsels students on nontraditional life paths.

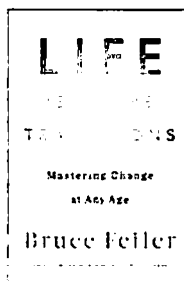
"Although my life is completely out of order," she says, "if I had done it in the expected order, I wouldn't have the husband I have, the children I have, or the life that I have, which I adore."

The single most powerful idea that emerged from years of listening to life stories is that all of us go through tumultuous periods—and not just once or twice, but multiple times in our lives. As long as we have to do all this heartrending and heart-mending, along with the rebalancing of sources of meaning that comes with it, why don't we spend more time trying to master these changes?

William James said it best a century ago: *Life is in the transitions*. We can't ignore these central times of life; we can't wish or will them away. We have to accept them, name them, mark them, share them, and eventually convert them into fuel for remaking our life stories.

The Italians have a wonderful expression for times of upheaval: *lupus in fabula*. The *fabula* is the fairy tale of our lives; the *lupus* is the wolf that keeps showing up. *Lupus in fabula* means "the wolf in the fairy tale." Italians use it as the equivalent of *speak of the devil*. Just when life is going swimmingly, a wolf, an ogre, a dragon, a diagnosis, a downsizing, a death appears. That, of course, is what happened to me so many years ago, to my dad, to all of us at one time or another. We come face to face with a wolf and have no idea what to do.

And that's OK. Because if you banish the wolf, you banish the hero. And if there's one thing I learned from this project it's that we all need to be the hero of our own story. That's why we need fairy tales. They teach us how to slay our fears and help us sleep at night. Which is why we keep telling them year after year, bedtime after bedtime. They turn our nightmares into dreams. ■



Bruce Feiler *is the author of six consecutive* New York Times *bestsellers, including* The Secrets of Happy Families. *His latest book is* Life Is in the Transitions: Mastering Change at Any Age, *from which this piece is adapted.*