

SESSION 3 · PARTICIPANT GUIDE

The Messy Middle

Navigating Transition

“You must go down [thru the valley] before you can go up.”

— Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward*, slightly modified

Navigating Transition · Building Brotherhood · Igniting Jubilee

Name:

Date:

THIS MORNING'S ARC

1 · 30 min

Review & Discussion

Phases. Losses. Two voices. Not a lecture — a conversation. Where are you this morning?

2 · 60 min

The Messy Middle

Feiler and Bridges on the messy middle. Prototypes, not plans. You write your three markers.

Review is not recap. It is re-entry. Come prepared to speak.

THE WHOLE PROGRAM IN ONE PICTURE

You will see one painting this morning — two summits with a valley between them, and a fruit tree standing in the valley. It is not decoration. It is the entire program in a single frame, and it is worth knowing how to read it.

1 · THE FIRST SUMMIT

Success and building the foundation

Establishing an identity, building the container, the goal-oriented journey. Fluid intelligence — raw speed and innovation — is what carried you up this one. Most men climbed it well. That was never the problem.

2 · DOWN INTO THE VALLEY

The lifequake, the breaking of the container

Rohr's crack. Feiler's lifequake. The messy middle. This is the transition — and a man does not go around this valley. He goes down into it. This morning you are standing in it.

3 · THE VALLEY FLOOR — WHERE THE WORK IS

Harvest the past. Plant new seeds in every domain.

This is the part most men miss. The valley is not a waiting room. The tree in the picture is the answer: roots and faith underneath, WHO I AM as the trunk, and the Ten Domains as the fruit already on it. You harvest what your first half actually grew — that is the Harvest Charter — and then you plant new seeds in each domain. TENDING is the daily work. BROTHERHOOD is who does it with you.

4 · EQUIPPING — AND THE SECOND CLIMB

You climb on what you grew down here

The word at the bottom of the picture is the hinge. The harvesting and the replanting are what equip you. No man climbs the second summit on leftover strength from the first — he climbs it on what grew in the valley, and he climbs it roped to other men. Then: significance, meaning, legacy. Jubilee.

Down into the valley, harvest the past, plant new seeds in every domain, and come out equipped to climb the second summit — with other men. That is the whole thing.

The ten domains	Charter Appendix C · the domain paragraphs (1–8)
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Harvesting the past	Charter §1.1 My Story · §1.3 Strengths & Gifts
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Planting new seeds	Charter §3.1 My First Steps
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Brotherhood	Charter §3.2 My Rule & My Triad
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MOVEMENT 1 · REVIEW & DISCUSSION

Where You Left Session 2

You closed Session 2 with four lines for §1.0 My Threshold, to write into the Charter itself. Open to §1.0 — done or not yet? If a line is still blank, that is useful information, not a failure: the third one in particular is hard to answer before you have the vocabulary this session gives you. This morning we check them, and you can add to line three in the margin.

What I am setting down	The roles, routines and identities that end with this chapter.
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What I am carrying forward	What comes with you — and is worth carrying.
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What still deserves to be mourned

Grief that is named tends to open a door; grief that is skipped tends to lock one.

What I am asking Christ to carry

Some of it is too heavy to put on a shelf. “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” — 1 Peter 5:7

Also bring to the opening, one short line each: Three at the Table — one sentence on what you heard from her; Falling Upward in brief — one sentence that landed; Practice of the Week — one moment with “Ask the second question.”

Two Voices, One Passage

Two credible thinkers address the same human transition from different angles. We do not pick a winner. We let them build on each other.

Richard Rohr

Falling Upward (2011)

The first half builds the container. The second half is where the contents finally appear.

FIRST HALF · Building the Container

Proving, achieving, building reputation. Career identity, ego, binary thinking.

THE FALL · Cracking

Retirement, loss, crisis — what cracks the container open. Not punishment. Curriculum.

SECOND HALF · Revealing Meaning

Being and giving. The true self emerges. Both/and thinking. Crystallized intelligence — wisdom.

David Brooks

The Second Mountain (2019)

The first mountain offers happiness. The second mountain offers joy.

FIRST MOUNTAIN · Ambition

Status, success, the résumé self. Real happiness — conditional on the next win.

THE VALLEY · Reckoning

Where the climb meets meaning’s question. Bitterness or discovery — each man chooses.

SECOND MOUNTAIN · Commitment

Marriage, vocation, community, faith. The eulogized self. Joy rather than happiness.

“The first half is not wrong. You need the container. The tragedy is getting stuck in first-half tasks your entire life.” — Rohr

Retirement Is an English Outlier

Almost every other language reaches for ripening, joy, rest, or wisdom. Every culture except the modern American one frames this transition as an arrival rather than a departure.

Spanish · jubilación	From the same Latin root as Jubilee — you do not retire, you enter jubilation.
Hebrew · gimla'ut	From gamal: to ripen, to deal bountifully. The same root as “weaned child” in Psalm 131.
Japanese · kanreki	At 60, one full zodiac cycle complete. You wear red — the colour of new beginnings — and are treated as reborn.
Chinese · tuìxiū	Stepping back to rest in order to transmit wisdom to the next generation.
French · retraite	A dignified strategic withdrawal to regroup — not defeat, repositioning.
German · Ruhestand	The state of Ruhe — not mere inactivity but settledness, inner stillness. More shalom than nap.
Xhosa / Zulu · ikhehla	The elder crosses into wisdom-bearing status. Not a stopping — an investiture.

Do you identify more with any of these than with “retire”?

Key Distinctions

HAPPINESS vs. JOY	Brooks: the first mountain gives happiness — real, conditional, ego-driven. The second gives joy — self-transcending, rooted in love and commitment. Joy endures. Happiness fades.
DEFAULT vs. PURPOSEFUL	Leider & Shapiro: most men lived the first half “by default.” The second half offers freedom to live on purpose — not by what the calendar dictated, but by who you intend to become.
FLUID vs. CRYSTALLIZED	Arthur Brooks: fluid intelligence (raw speed, innovation) peaks at 30–50. Crystallized intelligence — wisdom, pattern recognition, teaching — rises throughout life. The men who fight this shift suffer. The men who lean into it flourish.

Joy endures. Happiness fades. The second half is the first season you live on purpose.

One Passage • Avodah

The Hebrew word avodah means both work and worship. Your calling has never been primarily about your job title — it has always been about serving God. Retirement shifts the form of service but not the fundamental calling.

We may retire from a job, but we never retire from a calling.

SCIENCE CONFIRMS THEOLOGY

IEA, 2013 40% increase in depression risk after retirement.	IEA, 2013 60% increase in physical conditions after retirement.	Hagerty • U-Curve Happiness rises in the 60s and 70s — for the men who navigate the transition rather than avoid it.
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A Third Voice • James Hollis

James Hollis, a Jungian analyst, adds psychological depth to what Rohr and Brooks name spiritually and morally.

The slides give you four headlines. This is the version with the reasoning in it.

An Adaptive Strategy	The self you built in the first half was not a lie and it was not a failure. It was an adaptive strategy — assembled early, mostly out of your sight, to survive your family, please the people with authority over you, and succeed at what was in front of you. Hollis calls it the provisional personality. It worked. That is exactly why it is hard to put down: nothing argues for a strategy like thirty years of it paying off.
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Then It Cracks	The second half does not begin when you decide it should. It begins when that provisional self cracks — usually through something you did not choose — and a larger life presses through the gap. Hollis’s question is the sharpest one in this session: is the life I am living the life that wants to live through me, or the life I constructed to meet others’ expectations? Most men cannot answer that at 45. They can at 62.
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Loss and Liberation Are Inseparable

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot studied people in what she calls the third chapter and found the two arrive together — never one without the other. Every generative transition means holding contradictory impulses at once: looking backward while moving forward, grieving your competence while embracing being a novice again. Men who insist on feeling only one of the two get stuck. The grief is not evidence that you are doing it wrong.

The Willingness to Be a Beginner Again

This is the specific capacity that predicts growth in the second half — and it is the one a successful first half most erodes. The engineer who takes up drawing birds, the executive who starts piano at sixty-four: what unlocks them is not talent, it is the willingness to be visibly bad at something in front of other people. Her finding is that 50 to 75 can be the most transformative years of a life. It is not automatic. It is available.

“Is the life I am living the life that wants to live through me — or the life I constructed to meet others’ expectations?” — Hollis

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION • A TIME OF RENEWAL

2 Cor. 5:17 If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!

Romans 12:2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Phil. 3:13–14 Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal.

Isaiah 43:18–19 Forget the former things... See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

Ps. 92:14 They will still bear fruit in old age; they will stay fresh and green.

Gal. 6:9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

OPENING DISCUSSION

The facilitator will choose two or three of these.

- 1 When you hear “life has two halves,” does that ring true? Which half do you feel like you’re in right now?
- 2 What was the “container” you built in your first half? What were you most proud of building?
- 3 Has there been a “fall” in your life that taught you more than your successes? What did it open?
- 4 David Brooks says the first mountain gave you happiness; the second offers joy. Have you tasted the difference?

MOVEMENT 2 • THE MESSY MIDDLE

The Losses We’re Setting Down • A Knapsack Callback

In Session 1 we packed for the second summit. In Session 2 we asked what goes in the Knapsack. This morning, the five losses. Some of them are grief. Some are weight you were never meant to carry this far.

Identity	We grieve the title. We set down having to prove it.
Structure	We grieve the calendar that ran the day. We set down a clock someone else owned.
Relationships	We grieve the daily colleagues. We set down ties held only by obligation.
Mastery	We grieve being the one who knew. We set down always having to be the expert.
Purpose	We grieve a mission handed to you. We set down a purpose someone else chose.

Which of these losses is actually a weight release for you?

Grief well done lightens the Knapsack. It is not failure. The pack gets lighter. That’s not a tragedy. That’s the curriculum.

Change Happens To You. Transition Happens In You.

William Bridges distinguishes change — what happens to you, on a date, in an announcement — from transition, the interior process of becoming someone new. Transition always begins with an ending, not a new beginning. Bruce Feiler (Life Is in the Transitions) names the three phases The Long Goodbye, The Messy Middle and The New Beginning; the descriptions below are after Bridges.

PHASE 1	PHASE 2	PHASE 3
The Long Goodbye	The Messy Middle	The New Beginning
What is over is over. Grief is appropriate. Most men want to skip this. Skipping it is the cost.	Not failure. Gestation. Most of what matters in transition happens here — in the disorientation between worlds.	Emergence, not arrival. The new identity surfaces gradually. You will not always notice the moment it began.

“Every transition begins with an ending.” — William Bridges

The Messy Middle is the longest phase. Do not be in a hurry to leave it.

The Four Phases of Retirement • A Map You May Recognize

A second map, for men who like their phases concrete. Riley Moynes interviewed hundreds of retirees and found four phases most can name from the inside. It is the same terrain as the three phases — walked at street level. The two maps overlap rather than line up exactly, but some parallels are direct: Loss and the Long Goodbye, Trial & Error and the Messy Middle, Reinvent and the New Beginning.

PHASE	WHAT IT IS	ON THE THREE-PHASE MAP
1 • VACATION	The honeymoon — sleep in, travel, golf. Real, and it wears off, usually inside a year or two.	The Long Goodbye has begun, but it has not landed yet.
2 • LOSS / LOST	The sinkhole. Structure, identity, relationships, purpose — the losses arrive together, and most men are surprised by how hard it hits.	The Long Goodbye lands. Grief is appropriate here.
3 • TRIAL & ERROR	Experiments — some fit, some fail, and the failures are information. This is where the work of this session lives.	The Messy Middle. Burnett's prototypes and Feiler's two jobs are the tools for this phase.
4 • REINVENT & REWIRE	The men who push through reinvent themselves — almost always in a way that involves serving others. The ones who get here call it the best chapter.	The New Beginning. Emergence, not arrival.

The phases are not a staircase — men cycle back. The point of the map: if you are in the sinkhole or the experiments, you are not failing. You are in phase two or three of four.

Prototypes, Not Plans • Burnett & Evans

The question shifts. First half: what will I do? Second half: who will I become? You do not answer that by thinking harder. You answer it by running small, cheap, reversible experiments and reading the evidence.

PROTOTYPE 1

Think big. Test small.

A two-hour experiment beats a six-month plan you never start. Small bets, fast feedback, real evidence.

PROTOTYPE 2

Many ideas, not one.

The second half is not a destination you arrive at. It is prototyped into being — from several directions at once.

PROTOTYPE 3

Failure is data, not verdict.

A prototype that does not fit is not a failure. It is information you could not have had any other way.

“All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better.” — Ralph Waldo Emerson

Hope is not optimism. Hope is the willingness to prototype the future.

The Messy Middle Has Two Jobs

Bruce Feiler collected hundreds of life stories for The Life Story Project and found that the messy middle asks two things of a man — and that he reliably does only one of them.

JOB ONE

Shed

What you set down. Habits, routines, delusions, identities. The shedding comes first, and it is the half men skip. Leidy Klotz named the mechanism: subtraction neglect. Given a structure to stabilise, almost everyone adds a pillar rather than removing the one destabilising piece — most people never even consider removal.

JOB TWO

Try

What you take up. The experiments on the page before this one — small, cheap, reversible, several at once. This is the job you are already eager for. It does not work until the shedding has made room for it.

“He must become greater; I must become less.” — John 3:30

Men arrive ready to add. By March the calendar is full and nothing has changed. There is a place for this in your Charter later — §3.1, My First Steps, which opens with what you set down. This morning, just notice whether your instinct is to add.

What the Experiments Are Testing · Feiler's ABCs

Your experiments are not random searching. Bruce Feiler, who collected hundreds of life stories for The Life Story Project, found that meaning is not one thing — it is three. Retirement is a lifequake. It does not take your meaning. It takes the three places you used to get it.

A

AGENCY

What you do, make, build or create. For forty years, work supplied it on a schedule.

ASK

Does this give me something to build — or just something to fill the day?

REPLACES Mastery · Structure · Identity

B

BELONGING

The people who know you — family, friends, neighbours, colleagues. Relationship, not proximity.

ASK

Would anyone here miss me if I stopped showing up?

REPLACES Relationships

C

CAUSE

A calling. Something higher than yourself, that will outlast you.

ASK

Does this matter to anyone beyond me?

REPLACES Purpose

A lifequake does not erase your ABCs. It reorders them.

This is Feiler's finding across hundreds of life stories. The question is not whether you will have meaning — it is which of the three leads now. Most men arrive with an order they never chose and have never examined. Roughly one disruptor in ten becomes a lifequake, and the average one lasts about five years.

Source: Bruce Feiler, *Life Is in the Transitions* (2020) · *The Life Story Project*.

What Hollis Suggests for the Second Half

Name the Provisional Self	The first-half identity built to please and perform is not who you truly are.
Heed the Summons of the Soul	Shift the question from “What does the world ask of me?” to “What does my soul ask?”
Recover Personal Authority	Stop living the script others wrote; reclaim the right to author your own life.
Face the Shadow	Integrate the disowned parts suppressed to build the first-half container.
Choose Enlargement Over Comfort	Take the path that enlarges you, even when it frightens, over the one that merely reassures.
Pursue Meaning, Not Happiness	The second half is measured by meaning and depth, not the security of the first.

Many Voices, One Passage • How This Morning Gels

We put a lot in front of you this morning — Rohr, Brooks, Bridges, Feiler, Burnett, Hollis. They are not six theories to choose between. They are voices describing one valley from different ridgelines, and their testimony agrees. Transition is a season with a shape: an ending that cracks the container, a long disorienting middle where meaning gets reordered, and a new beginning that emerges rather than arrives.

What a man does about it is three moves. **SHED** — Feiler’s first job, Hollis’s provisional self, the setting-down lines of §1.0. Chosen release, not involuntary loss. **EXPERIMENT** — Burnett’s prototypes: small, cheap, reversible — each one testing Agency, Belonging and Cause. **WRITE** — harvest what the first half grew: your Three Markers, your Charter. Look again at the Two Summits picture near the front of this guide — the valley floor is where all three happen.

Every voice this morning named the same valley. Three moves carry you through it — and the third starts now.

CLOSING DISCUSSION

- 1 Which of the three — Agency, Belonging, Cause — took the biggest hit when you stopped working? Which one is quietly rising?

- 2 Name one experiment you could actually run in the next thirty days. Small, cheap, reversible — and specific enough that someone could ask you next month whether you did it.

CLOSING · OPEN YOUR CHARTER

Fifteen minutes, in this room. Charters open. Nothing is read aloud, and nothing is collected.

§1.0 My Threshold — check the four lines

You wrote these into the Charter after Session 2. This morning is a check, not a rewrite. If a line is blank, write it now. If it is written, reread lines three and four now that you have been taught that every transition begins with an ending, and add what you now see in the margin, dated. Do not erase the first version.

Write these in your Harvest Charter at §1.0, not here. Eight minutes.

§1.1 Step One — the Peak Marker

Then turn to §1.1 and write the first of your three markers: a time you felt most fully alive — most yourself, most capable, most in your element. Three sentences. Peak is the safe one, which is exactly why it gets written here rather than alone at ten o'clock on a Thursday.

Write this in your Harvest Charter at §1.1, Step One. Seven minutes. The valley and the turning point go home with you.

“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” — 1 Peter 5:7

MY THREE MARKERS · HARVEST CHARTER §1.1, STEP ONE

Three scenes. Three sentences each. That is the whole assignment.

Where this goes — and why it is not a worksheet

These three markers live in your Harvest Charter at §1.1, Step One — not on this page. That is deliberate: a loose handout has a half-life of about nine days on a kitchen counter, and you will need these markers again at Session 5, at Session 7, and in the pastoral review. Write them where you will still have them.

Dan McAdams calls these nuclear episodes — not the biggest events of your life, but the scenes you have replayed and drawn the most meaning from. They are raw material, not finished prose. You will revise them, and that is expected.

1

PEAK MOMENT

what you were made FOR

A time you felt most fully alive — most yourself, most capable, most in your element.

What was happening? What made it a peak? What does it tell you about who you were made to be?

FEEDS §1.3 Strengths & Gifts · the Signature

2

VALLEY MOMENT

what you were made OF

A defining hardship — something that broke, or threatened to break you.

What happened? What did it cost you? What — if anything — did it forge in you?

FEEDS §1.0 My Threshold · §1.4 Faith Foundation

3

TURNING POINT

WHEN you became who you are

A moment when something changed — a decision, a loss, a word, a meeting.

What was the before? What was the after? What is different about you because of it?

FEEDS §1.1 the arc below · §1.3 the Caring Shift line

THREE SENTENCES

Per marker. No more. Men who write pages this week will have nothing left for the narrative work at Session 5.

PRIVATE

Nothing is read aloud. No one reads these but you.

IF YOU ARE STUCK

Start with the valley. It is almost always the easiest to find, and it usually surfaces the turning point on its own.

DUE SESSION 4

Monday, November 30, in the Charter at §1.1. Session 4 opens with “open to §1.1 — done / not yet.” Session 5 reads the story back for its arc.

Scratch space, if you want to think on paper before writing in the Charter:

THE COUPLES CONVERSATION · YOUR MAIN WORK BEFORE SESSION 4

Session 4 is about the marriage this transition lands in. It works only if you arrive having actually had a conversation — not having read about one. This week your job is to ask and to listen, not to present conclusions or to solve anything.

Three rules

1. Ask, then stop talking. The goal is to find out something you did not already know.
2. Do not defend. If an answer stings, write it down rather than correcting it.
3. One sitting, unhurried. Not in the car, not while something is cooking.

Ask her these two

- 1 What do you think is the biggest gap between us in how we imagine spending our time in this half of life?
- 2 If our time together were shorter than we hope, what would make these years worth living — and what would you most want us to do together?

Then write, before you forget

What surprised you? What did she say that you would not have predicted?

What did she seem to want that you have not been giving weight to?

Bring this page to Session 4. You will not be asked to read it aloud.

HOMWORK BEFORE SESSION 4 • NOV 30

About 100 minutes over the two weeks (no session Thanksgiving week): Couples Conversation about 45 min · Three Markers about 30 min · the Two Halves reading about 20 min · Practice of the Week about 5 min. Session 4 is Monday, November 30. Bring your Charter and the Couples Conversation page. Two things finished beats seven started.

DO • REQUIRED

- 1 Complete the Couples Conversation on the previous page. This is the main work this week and Session 4 depends on it. About 45 minutes.
- 2 Write your Three Markers in the Charter at §1.1, Step One: Valley and Turning Point, three sentences each (Peak was written in class). Due Session 4. About 30 minutes.

READINGS FOR THIS WEEK • RECOMMENDED

Required first. Going Deeper only if it calls to you.

- 1 The Two Halves of Life: Reader's Companion — Rohr and Brooks compared. Bring one sentence that landed. About 20 minutes.
- 2 Couples Conversation Guide & Worksheet — the main work this week (the pages above).

GOING DEEPER • OPTIONAL

Take these if you want them. No one is behind for leaving them.

Feiler Companion: The ABCs of Meaning

Bruce Feiler, Life Is in the Transitions. If Agency, Belonging and Cause landed this morning, this is where the research behind them lives.

Hollis Reference Note

James Hollis, the second half of life. What does he say the second half asks of you? The six practices on the earlier page are the short version.

GOING DEEPER QUESTIONS • FROM SESSION 1 • OPTIONAL

These need reflection more than answers. If one pulls at you, write a few lines on the Personal Notes page.

1. Rohr's "false self" and Hollis's "provisional personality": how much of your career persona was genuinely you — and how much was the role?

2. Jung: "We cannot live the afternoon according to the morning's program." What morning program are you still running?
3. Have you allowed yourself to grieve what retirement took away? Or did you skip straight to the vacations and hobbies?
4. Hollis: "Is the life you're living the life that wants to live through you?" What comes up?
5. When was the last time you were truly a beginner? What would it mean to embrace that vulnerability?

PRACTICE OF THE WEEK • LET THEM FINISH

Practice	Let them finish
How	When they stop talking, wait two beats. Then speak.
From the Toolkit	1 • Listen
Rooted in	James 1:19 • "Quick to listen, slow to speak"
This week	Tried it this week ☐ • Bring one moment to the room.

Try it at home first: the Couples Conversation is the perfect place. It is on the Practice of the Week card you received at Session 2. Session 4 opens with "Tell us one moment with this week's practice."

RECOMMENDED

Text the men on your left and right one sentence: how you walked out this morning. Brotherhood is built between sessions, not during them.

Coming at Session 4 • The Marriage Retirement Lands In

Two callings, one covenant. The scaffolding that held a marriage in place for thirty years comes down when the work does — and what was always there becomes visible. Come having had the conversation.

PERSONAL NOTES

Use this space during the session, or afterwards while it is still fresh.

“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

— Frederick Buechner

This morning you took the first step of writing your way there.

Wise Men Still Seek, Knowing Their Why’s

— Frederick Buechner

This morning you took the first step of writing your way there.

Wise Men Still Seek, Knowing Their Why's