

Life Is in the Transitions

Bruce Feiler, the ABCs of Meaning, and the two jobs of the messy middle

Why This Companion Exists

The slides gave you headlines — two jobs, three letters, one reorder. This is where the research behind them lives, and where the work gets done. Three things in these pages are things to actually do, pen in hand: the Keep & Release worksheet, the Meaning Audit, and the design of your first experiments. Everything else is browsable — read it when a claim from the evening needs its footing.

Ten minutes with the Meaning Audit is the most useful ten minutes in this packet. Do not do it tonight. Do it this week, rested, with coffee.

Feiler in Five Minutes

Bruce Feiler set out to understand how people get through major life changes, and did it the slow way: for the Life Story Project he collected and coded hundreds of life stories — hours-long interviews across every state, age and occupation. Life Is in the Transitions (2020) is what the data said.

His headline finding is that the **linear life is dead** — the expected script of one career, one marriage, one hometown, one retirement party no longer describes anyone's actual life. Instead, life is nonlinear: a **disruptor** arrives every twelve to eighteen months — roughly three dozen in an adult lifetime. Most are absorbed and forgotten. But about one in ten grows into what Feiler calls a **lifequake**: a change massive enough to reorder the meaning of your life. The average adult faces three to five of them, the average one takes about five years to move through — and, contrary to the assumption that they ambush us, about half are voluntary. A man who chose his own retirement date is inside a chosen lifequake. It counts anyway.

THE NUMBERS, IN ONE PLACE

A disruptor every 12–18 months · about three dozen per lifetime · roughly one in ten becomes a lifequake · three to five lifequakes per adult life · about five years each · about half of them chosen. Do the arithmetic and it comes to something like twenty-five adult years spent in transition — which is Feiler's point. Transition is not the interruption of life. It is half of it.

The Three Phases — His Names for the Crossing

PHASE	WHAT HAPPENS	YOU HEARD IT TONIGHT AS
The Long Goodbye	Saying farewell to the life that is ending — and the identity that ran it. Grief belongs here.	Bridges' Ending. The \$1.0 Threshold lines.
The Messy Middle	The long, disorienting stretch where the old rules are gone and the new ones have not formed. Feiler's data says two activities move a person through it: shedding and creativity.	Bridges' Neutral Zone. Tonight's whole second movement.
The New Beginning	The new self debuts — usually quietly, usually later than hoped, and usually marked by a ritual, a project, or a story finally told in the past tense.	Bridges' New Beginning. Your Charter, read aloud in the spring.

The phases do not run in order for everyone. Feiler found people enter wherever their quake throws them — but nobody skips the middle.

THE TWO JOBS OF THE MESSY MIDDLE

Job one is **shedding** — deliberately setting down habits, routines, delusions and identities that belonged to the life that ended. Job two is **creativity** — trying new things: projects, experiments, new skills, new rooms. Feiler's finding is that the shedding comes first, and that it is the half men skip.

Why do we skip it? Engineering professor Leidy Klotz found the mechanism and published it in *Nature* (2021): **subtraction neglect**. Asked to stabilise a wobbly structure, almost everyone adds a pillar; almost no one removes the destabilising piece — even when removal is free and faster. We do not reject subtraction. We fail to consider it. A retired man's calendar fills by March for the same reason: adding is the only move his instincts propose.

The theological version was said first and shorter: *"He must increase, but I must decrease."* — John 3:30. The subtraction question is finally not a productivity question.

WORKSHEET · KEEP AND RELEASE

Ten minutes. List what you are consciously carrying into the second half, and what you are consciously setting down. Chosen release, not involuntary loss — the things taken from you at retirement do not go on this page. Only what you now choose to put down.

I AM KEEPING (it still serves who I am becoming)

I AM RELEASING (it served who I was)

Pick one. Circle the single release that would create the most room, and name the first visible step of putting it down — the resignation email, the unsubscribed feed, the standing meeting declined. Do that step within thirty days, and tell your triad which one you picked.

THE ABCs OF MEANING

Feiler's taxonomy of where meaning comes from — all of it, for everyone, in every life story he coded. Not three options to pick from: three sources every man draws on in some proportion.

LETTER	WHAT IT IS	THE DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION
A • Agency	What you do, make, build or create. For forty years, work supplied it on a schedule.	<i>Does this give me something to build — or just something to fill the day?</i>
B • Belonging	The people who know you — family, friends, neighbours, colleagues. Relationship, not proximity.	<i>Would anyone here miss me if I stopped showing up?</i>
C • Cause	A calling — something higher than yourself, that will outlast you.	<i>Does this matter to anyone beyond me?</i>

Five Losses, Three Targets

Since Session 1 you have carried five named losses. They fold into the three letters — which turns five griefs into three targets your experiments can actually aim at.

THE FIVE LOSSES (SESSION 1)	THE LETTER THEY WERE
Mastery · Structure · Identity	Agency
Relationships	Belonging
Purpose	Cause

The Reorder

Feiler's transition claim is not that a lifequake erases your meaning. It is that the quake reorders where meaning comes from — a new dominant source emerges. In his coded stories the pattern repeats: a person enters the quake with one letter leading and exits with another, and almost nobody notices the handoff while it is happening. The plant manager whose week quietly reorganises itself around his grandson's Tuesday: Belonging moved to first, and nobody announced it.

WHAT IS HIS, AND WHAT IS OURS

The ABCs, the reorder, the lifequake numbers — all Feiler's. Using the ABCs as the checklist your experiments test is our application of his framework: his own mechanics for the messy middle are shedding and creativity. We think it is a fair extension. He did not write it, so do not quote it back to him.

Order, not rank. Cause is not the "highest" letter and the goal is not to climb to it. The order is a compass bearing, and every man's true north differs.

WORKSHEET · THE MEANING AUDIT

Two steps, twenty minutes, from Feiler's *The Search* (2023). He calls the practice **personal archaeology** — digging through your own layers to find what was always load-bearing.

Step one — the postponed dream. Feiler treats this as the more important step. Answer both parts in writing:

What dream have I postponed for most of my life?

If I do not pursue it in this third act, will it still be available later?

The honest answer to the second question is usually no — and that is what moves a dream out of the someday column.

Step two — the hundred points. Allocate 100 points across Agency, Belonging and Cause — twice. Once for the man you were at your career peak, once for the man holding this pen. The points are zero-sum on purpose: meaning is not infinite, and the forced trade is where the information is.

	PAST YOU (career peak)	PRESENT YOU (today)	GAP (present – past)
A • Agency			
B • Belonging			
C • Cause			
Total	100	100	—

FOUR RULES FOR HONESTY

Numbers before narrative — allocate first, explain after. Past You means the peak, not the average. The points are zero-sum on purpose. Nobody sees this.

Reading Your Gap

It is a compass bearing, not a score — there is no correct allocation, and the letters are an order, not a ladder. (Feiler publishes his own: he runs Agency-heavy. It is not a personality type.) Six patterns come up in rooms like ours:

IF YOUR NUMBERS SAY...	IT USUALLY MEANS...
Agency fell hardest	The most common result here. The answer is a project with a name, a deadline and a visible result — not more meetings.
Belonging low in both columns	Easy to miss because nothing changed. This is the one that surfaces about eighteen months after the last day. Take it seriously now.
Cause rose on its own	That is data, not sentiment. You are readier for mission work than you think.
Cause always high, never moved	Check that it is tested rather than assumed. An untested Cause behaves like a value; a tested one behaves like a calling.
Nothing moved	Either the retirement is very recent, or you flinched. Redo it in a month.
Everything moved down	Arithmetically impossible on a zero-sum scale — so what you recorded is flatness, not reallocation. Worth a conversation with someone you trust, sooner rather than later.

WORKSHEET · DESIGNING YOUR EXPERIMENTS

Now the two halves of the evening meet. Burnett gave you the method — small, cheap, reversible prototypes. Feiler gave you the target — the letter your audit says is starved. Design three. A two-hour experiment beats a six-month plan you never start.

EXPERIMENT 1

What I will try (small, cheap, reversible):

The letter it tests (A / B / C) and why:

When I will run it (within 30 days):

What a “fit” would look like — the evidence:

EXPERIMENT 2

What I will try (small, cheap, reversible):

The letter it tests (A / B / C) and why:

When I will run it (within 30 days):

What a “fit” would look like — the evidence:

EXPERIMENT 3

What I will try (small, cheap, reversible):

The letter it tests (A / B / C) and why:

When I will run it (within 30 days):

What a “fit” would look like — the evidence:

The Ninety-Day Review

Put a date on the calendar ninety days out. On that day, three questions per experiment: Did I actually run it? What did it tell me about its letter? Does it graduate — into a rhythm, a commitment, a Charter goal — or does it retire with thanks? A prototype that does not fit is not a failure. It is information you could not have had any other way.

WHERE THIS LANDS IN YOUR CHARTER

Nothing in this companion is spent once. Each worksheet is raw material for a section you will write later — which is the reason to do them on paper, now, rather than in your head.

FROM THIS COMPANION	INTO THE CHARTER
Keep & Release	§3.0 My Subtractions — the full required page. Your circled release is its first entry.
The Meaning Audit	§1.4 My Caring Shift — the audit in prose (“at 40 I cared about... now I care about...” — and §2.1, your Mission Statement. A mission built on your largest gap stretches you; one built on your highest letter describes the life you already have.
Your three experiments	§3.1 Goals & Action Plans. The experiments that graduate become the goals.
The reorder question	§1.0 and §1.1 — which letter led your first half is half the story you are about to write.

And one sentence to keep in your pocket, filled in from your audit — a third-act stem:

“In my third act I will build _____ (Agency), alongside _____ (Belonging), in service of _____ (Cause).”

GOING DEEPER • FOUR IDEAS WORTH THE DETOUR

The Should Train and the Want Train

In *The Search*, Feiler’s interviews keep surfacing the same fork: a life scripted by shoulds — inherited expectations about what work and success must look like — versus one steered by wants. His advice for the third act is blunt: get off the should train. The first half almost had to run on shoulds; it is the half with tuition bills. The second half running on them is a choice.

Comforters, Nudgers and Slappers

When Feiler asked people what kind of feedback they wanted mid-transition, three helper types emerged: comforters (“I love you, you’ve got this”), nudgers (“I love you — and have you considered...”), and slappers (“I love you. Get up.”). Men in transition need all three and tend to recruit only comforters. A working triad supplies the other two on purpose. Know which one you are asking for — and which one you are avoiding.

Happiness Is a Moment; Meaning Is a Story

Feiler’s distinction rhymes with the Brooks slide you saw tonight: happiness is a present-tense emotion, but meaning connects past, present and future into a single story. That is why the Three Markers homework and the ABCs are one assignment, not two — the markers recover the story; the letters name what the story was carrying.

The End of the Linear Career

Feiler’s data dismantles the assumption that work is a ladder climbed once and then left. People change jobs and directions far more often than the script admits, and the “career” assembled afterward is a story told in retrospect. The liberating implication for a retired man: whatever you build next does not have to match, continue, or justify what came before. Nonlinear is normal. It always was.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Bruce Feiler, *Life Is in the Transitions: Mastering Change at Any Age* (Penguin Press, 2020) — the Life Story Project, the lifequake, the ABCs, shedding and creativity.

Bruce Feiler, *The Search: Finding Meaningful Work in a Post-Career World* (Penguin Press, 2023) — the Meaning Audit, personal archaeology, the should/want distinction, the nonlinear career.

Leidy Klotz, *Subtract: The Untapped Science of Less* (Flatiron, 2021), and Adams, Converse, Hales & Klotz, “People systematically overlook subtractive changes,” *Nature* 592 (2021) — subtraction neglect.

William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life’s Changes* (1980; 40th-anniversary ed. 2019) — endings, the neutral zone, new beginnings.

Bill Burnett & Dave Evans, *Designing Your Life* (Knopf, 2016) — prototyping a life; the Odyssey Plans.

Fact-check note for facilitators: “hundreds of life stories” is deliberate — published counts differ. “About half” of lifequakes voluntary is Feiler’s own phrasing. Both are the safe things to say aloud.