



## Reading Group Guide

# LIFE IS IN THE TRANSITIONS

Mastering Change  
at Any Age

Bruce Feiler

*New York Times* Bestselling Author of *COUNCIL OF DADS*

*New York Times*  
Bestseller





## About this Guide

The questions, discussion topics, and other material that follow are intended to enhance your group's conversation of Bruce Feiler's *Life Is in the Transitions*, a groundbreaking and deeply human investigation into the ways society has shaped our life narratives over the generations, and how individuals can reclaim a sense of agency, resilience, and healing during life's inevitable and unexpected transitions.

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## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

### Introduction

1. Bruce opens the book with the emotional story of his father and how the storytelling project he did with his dad inspired his quest to collect life stories across the country. How did Bruce's personal struggles—from his cancer to his family—help shape his experience working on the book and your experience reading it?
2. Bruce's Life Story Project combines the old-fashioned technique of collecting stories with the more modern approach of analyzing those stories for data, themes, and takeaways that can help anyone going through challenging times. The same applies to how he put together the book. How do you think the mix of stories, data, and analysis affected you while reading *Life Is in the Transitions*?
3. Bruce worked on this book for many years and completed it before the pandemic. Yet it was published in the middle of the pandemic. How did the timing influence how you read the book?

### Lifequakes

4. Bruce draws a distinction between *disruptors*, which are more everyday breaks in the normal, and *lifequakes*, which are larger on the Richter scale of consequences and have aftershocks that last for years. How do these terms resonate in your life? Do you think the number of disruptors and lifequakes in contemporary life is growing or shrinking? Why?
5. Bruce's research shows that we go through three to five lifequakes in the course of our lives and they last an average of four to five years; that means you or someone you know is in one now. Is that true for you? Are you, or is someone in your family, in a lifequake today?
6. Bruce divides lifequakes into voluntary and involuntary, personal and collective. The pandemic is the first collective-involuntary lifequake most of us have lived through. How does going through a lifequake with others affect the experience? What are the positives and negatives?



## Transitions

7. Bruce talks about the three stages of transitions—*the long goodbye*, *the messy middle*, and *the new beginning*—and says that each of us has a *transition superpower* and a *transition kryptonite*. Thinking of your own transitions, which of the three phases are you good at and which are you weakest at? Why do you think that is?
8. Using Bruce’s model, if you’re in a life transition now, which phase are you in? Did you pick up any techniques or strategies to make this part of your journey go better.
9. In chapter 9, Bruce writes about getting lost as part of the messy middle of transitions. Reflect on a time when you or someone you know got lost, what they discovered in that period, and how they returned.
10. While not all transitions or lifequakes have to do with death explicitly, there is a commonality between Bruce’s discussion of transition and the grieving process, as discussed in chapter 8. How does his nonlinear model of transitions compare with the popular idea of the “five stages of grief” and other clichés about grief and mourning?

## The Transition Toolkit

11. Bruce identifies seven tools for navigating life transitions—Accept It, Mark It, Shed It, Create It, Share It, Launch It, Tell It. Which one most surprised you? Which one are you good at, which one do you need to work on, and which one did you get motivated to go out and try?
12. One of Bruce’s findings is that the top three emotions people struggle with in their transitions are fear, sadness, and shame. Guilt, anger, and loneliness also came up. What about you? What is the hardest feeling you grapple with in times of change?
13. Have you ever performed a ritual in service of working through a transition, whether or not you knew it at the time? What kind was it—personal, collective, name change, or cleansing—and how did it make you feel?
14. If you could pick one habit from your life to shed, what would it be?



**15.** Bruce also talks about astonishing acts of creativity that people turn to—singing, dancing, cooking, painting, writing. What new skill or talent have you embraced during a difficult time?

**16.** The importance of sharing your transition with others is one of Bruce’s tools and a larger theme of *Life Is in the Transitions*. In the conclusion, he tells the story of bonding with John Mury who had a ten-car pileup and the moving story of his own father, who found hope and purpose in revisiting his own life story. What insight did you gain in how to get through your own lifequakes?

## The Life Story Project

**17.** Bruce shares many of his interviewees’ stories throughout the book—Loretta Parham, whose daughter died in a car accident leaving her to raise her two granddaughters; Chris Waddell, who turned his life-altering injury into Paralympic success and also climbed Mount Kilimanjaro; Fraidy Reiss, who left her religious community to protect herself from her husband; Ann Ramer, who had two children with multiple cancers; Tiffany Grimes, who worked to accept her partner’s transition to a new gender; and Zach Herrick, who lost his face in the Afghanistan war. Did any story or stories resonate with you in particular? Whose transition did you most cheer? Whom would you most like to meet?

**18.** Have you experienced an “autobiographical occasion”? If so, was it on a private or public scale?

**19.** If you could do a Life Story Project based on Bruce’s questions with anyone in your life, whom would you choose? (PS: If you’d like to have Bruce email your loved one a question every week, please visit [brucefeiler.com](http://brucefeiler.com).)

## The Shape of Your Life

**20.** Bruce spends a lot of time debunking the idea of the linear life and exploring how our lives take all different shapes. He also discusses how many people grew up with the idea of linearity and are still haunted by that idea. Are you one of those people? Have you struggled to accept that life is nonlinear or did an event earlier in your life teach you about life’s ups and downs?





**21.** One of Bruce’s questions is, “Looking back on your life story, do you detect a central theme?” Having read the book, what answer would you give?

**22.** Consider Bruce’s provocative and creative question, “What shape is your life?” What shape comes to mind for you? And which of the ABCs of meaning does it fit into—line (agency), circle (belonging), or star (cause)? What does this reflect about your general tendencies toward prioritizing your *me story*, your *we story*, or your *thee story*?

## Beyond the Covers

**23.** One theme of *Life Is in the Transitions* is that younger generations are more open to the nonlinear life and more accepting of the quickening pace of person change. If you can, find someone of an older or younger generation whose upbringing was different than yours and discuss how your experiences with linearity and nonlinearity, stability and change are both similar and different.

**24.** Bruce replicates his Life Story Interview at the end of the book. You might enjoy using these questions to write or talk about your own life or that of someone you love.

## Suggested Further Reading

*The Secrets of Happy Families* by Bruce Feiler

*How to Be Alive* by Colin Beavan

*The Other Side of Sadness* by George Bonanno

*It’s OK That You’re Not OK* by Megan Devine

*Grit* by Angela Duckworth

*The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg

*Man’s Search for Meaning* by Viktor E. Frankl

*Resilient Grieving* by Lucy Hone

*Real Change* by Sharon Salzberg

*Option B* by Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant

To add your story to future efforts of the Life Story Project, for information about doing a Life Story Project with a loved one similar to the one Bruce did with his dad, or to contact Bruce directly, please visit [brucefeiler.com](http://brucefeiler.com).