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Context to the nugget

Bruce speaks about how he was leading a reasonably successful and predictable life till his 40s where he experienced multiple events that shook his world. He was diagnosed with an adult onset pediatric cancer (a 9-inch tumor in his femur), his father tried to take his life 6 times in 12 weeks, his father's family business almost became bankrupt and his mother went through health challenges. He speaks about how he discovered the power of stories in healing his father's situation and in making sense of what was going on. That eventually led him to pursue the life story project where he spoke to thousands of people and analyzed all the data with the management thinker Jim Collins and his team.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And maybe just if it is okay with you if we could sort of talk about that? If you could talk a little bit about your 40s and what led you to being curious about some of the topics that we would be talking about.

Bruce Feiler (RS): So, I had a back-to-back-to-back set of experiences. First, I was diagnosed with cancer as a new dad of identical daughters. In fact, my cancer was so nonlinear, I had an adult-onset pediatric cancer, a 9-inch tumor in my femur and so, I went through this horrific year of chemotherapy, I was on crutches for two years, I kind of rebuilt my leg and I... it was a traumatic experience as you might imagine. That was the year of the great recession in this country and then my family owned a bunch of real estate, I almost went bankrupt and then my dad who has Parkinson's got very depressed and tried to take his own life; six times in 12 weeks he tried to kill himself. And he had always been the patriarch of the family. I grew up in a family business and so this was sort of a deeply unsettling event. We were struggling with business matters, my brother had to step in. Like you he had been a consultant in his case at Boston Consulting Group and he had to take over the business. We were dealing with my mother on all sorts of medical challenges that were really very kind of hard to even talk about. But I am the story guy and so I started this exercise with my dad where every Monday morning I would send him a question about his life, tell me about the house you grew up with, the toys you played with, how'd you become an Eagle Scout in the American Boy Scouts? How did you join the American Navy? How did you meet mom and it was I have to say the only thing that sort of brought him joy and meaning that just this idea of telling these stories and here's a man who had never written anything longer than probably a 50-word memo in his life kind of a very much of a businessman of the kind of mid-twentieth century America and yet he kind of started pouring out these stories and he backed into writing what became a 50,000-word autobiography and it was this incredible transformation. It was this incredible transformation and what happened was I would tell everybody else this story somewhat sheepishly, you know, this is in America where it is still uncomfortable to talk about mental health issues, suicide was not then as it

is even not now something that was openly talked about in social settings. But it turned out everybody had a similar story of a daughter who tried to kill herself, or a boss who stole money or, you know, stage IV diagnosis or a sudden death or addiction problem. Everybody had some internal story that they were just desperate to tell that they never had an outlet for. And I actually happened to be at a Yale reunion when I was hearing all these stories and I called my wife and I said, you know what, no one knows how to tell their story any more, like something's going on, like everybody says they are living life out of order, like they've gotten to a point in their lives where suddenly they can't even understand their lives and I have got to figure out how to help. And what I did was I created this thing as you know called the Life Story Project, where I spent what became years' crisscrossing like the United States collecting hundreds and hundreds of life stories of Americans of all ages, all walks of life; people in work crises and personal crises, people who lost limbs, lost homes, changed careers, changed religions, got sober, got out of bad marriages; this incredible array of otherwise unspoken life upheavals. And then what happened was I had a thousand hours of interviews, you do them for a living, you know, that's a lot and 6,000 pages of transcripts and I got, you know, I got a team of 12 people following this model that Jim Collins and my friend who wrote the management book Good to Great and we spent a year analyzing them kind of arguing about them debating trying to find some patterns in there that could help all of us in times of change.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This insight from Bruce reminds me of my conversation with Indranil Chakraborty (IC), the author of the book "STORIES AT WORK". He speaks about the notion of story listening. How do we ask the right questions for people to share their stories with us? As somebody who works with individuals in helping them improve their effectiveness and in making meaningful life decisions, I find that this is a crucial skill that I need to develop to really get leaders to share their stories. In the world of business, we are used to 3 things, 4 things and there is so much emphasis on brevity that sometimes, we find it hard to ask and tell stories. Indranil speaks about the notion of "STORY LISTENING". The art of asking and tuning into another person's journey.

IC: *"So, the person to credit with the word story listening Shawn Callahan is the term he coined its basically says how do you collect stories and the reason we need to be looking at this differently from just the obvious which is if we just go and say tell me a story because tell me a story in business context doesn't work. So, if I come to you saying tell me story of great application of knowledge and you will look at me and say what did you smoke last night whereas you do have various examples from your work life of great application of knowledge, I am sure you have. Now I need to frame questions in a way that will help you really go back to a moment in time because that's where the memories are right - a moment in time. So, the kind of questions that you need to face to take you there so one of the things that will take you there if I tell you another story which is about application of knowledge so I say you know Deepak in this company they had this this what a brilliant application of knowledge. Sometimes stories trigger stories because you remember another moment in time where something like that happened. So, one way to elicit stories is to tell another story another way to elicit stories is to actually turn the story pyramid ups and down. What is the story pyramid and you have been in McKinsey so I am sure you read the whole book a which is the most important question is "WHY"? Pyramid Principle? No this is not the pyramid principle this is basically saying that question pyramid so the most important question is "WHY" then "HOW" then "WHAT" the country cousin because somewhere is not important "WHEN" and "WHERE". The problem with this when it comes to elicit stories is the "WHY", "HOW" and "WHAT" are opinion generating questions. Why does project go wrong in this company you are not gone get a story? It will say because of you know they are underfunded or don't have management over sight. How do you choose a great trainer oh you*

choose a great trainer by doing A B C. No stories? But I would have turned this pyramid and put “WHEN” and “WHERE” question is the most important. When was the last time you actually got the right trainer and how did it happen? That will take you to a moment in time and get me a story. Where did you last see the great application of knowledge it will take you to a moment in time and get you a story. This process of asking question that take you to a moment in time and get a story is what we called a story listening.”

DJ: Do tune into my conversation with Indranil Chakraborty if this is of interest.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Indranil Chakraborty that is referenced: [Story listening](#).

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Bruce Feiler - Nuggets

- 70.00 Bruce Feiler - The Full Conversation
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- 70.02 Bruce Feiler - Happy Families and Agile Development
- 70.03 Bruce Feiler - What is the shape of your story
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- 70.06 Bruce Feiler - Make sense from scars (not wounds)
- 70.07 Bruce Feiler - Shape-shifting instead of resilience
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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock 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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