

TURNING POINTS

LESSON TWO



CASCADING LIVES
DIGITAL TOOLKIT





Lesson 2: Turning Points

We all live through events that change the course of our lives. In this section, students read two biographical stories about turning points. They learn that turning points aren't random and they aren't completely within our control. They also consider how even though turning points feel very personal they are often part of a much bigger shared issue.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Understand the life course perspective and consider how it is different from other ways to think about a life
- Identify a variety of types of turning points, including relationships, health, and economic circumstances, and be able to identify them in specific life stories
- Examine how public issues, such as a pandemic or a recession, can be a turning point for a lot of people

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What makes something a turning point as opposed to just a "bump in the road"?
- What happens between turning points?
- Why do we often feel like we are going through things alone even when many other people are going through something similar?

MATERIALS

- Biographical stories for Jenifer and Liz

CONCEPTS

- Life course: The life of any individual can be looked at as a series of events that are impacted by the society in which they occur. Some paths are easier to travel and others are more difficult.
- Turning point: A significant change in the life of an individual that alters their life course and leads to new dynamics, tensions, and possibilities.



ACTIVITY: BEHIND THE STORY

When we think about economic position, we often think about it as fixed in place. But, it is really always caught between the push and pull of individual choices and larger forces, like a boat charting a course through choppy waters. It takes work to even stay in one place and a storm could come along and knock you off your planned path. The idea that we should pay attention to the sequence of life events - particularly to big events - and how people navigate them is called the life course approach. This differs from thinking about people as having a fixed destiny - whether that be doom or greatness - and differs from casting individuals as being all powerful and able to control everything that happens to them.

In this activity, students are going to start out by thinking about the big events, changes or upheavals that have occurred in their life or in the lives of the people they know. These can be anything that really mattered, positive or negative, that the student had control over, or that they did not. It could be quitting a job, having a new sibling, going back to school, parents getting remarried, or anything else. As a class, generate a list of all the kinds of turning points students can think of. Then, sort them into categories (e.g. economic, health, personal).

Now, form small groups and read Jenifer's story and identify the turning points. Have students talk about how things could have gone differently for Jenifer. What was within her control and what was not? Why did Jenifer make the choices that she made? Share students' ideas as a class.

At various points in Jenifer's story, the personal troubles she experienced were part of a much larger set of public issues. Assign students to a group numbered 1-to-3. In the group, students should do some guided investigation to examine the issue associated with a number and discuss how this shapes the way one thinks about Jenifer's story. Have all groups share with the class what they learn.

1. Immigration and Education: <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/educational-attainment.html>
2. Parenting Children with Disabilities: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/service-array/services-disabilities/youth/disabilities>
3. Immigration in Boston: <https://globalboston.bc.edu>

Now, have students read Liz's story. As they do, they should identify 3 turning points in her life and think about what public issues could be behind her personal troubles. They should discuss what kind of research they could do to understand more.

Lastly, as a class, discuss what sorts of things can help someone weather unexpected life events.

BONUS ACTIVITY:

Have students pick a fictional character or famous person and imagine that they had the chance to interview them about their lives. How might they answer the following three questions: What was the biggest turning point in your life? How did you get through it? What could have gone differently?



SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

- Poverty line: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/poverty-economic-mobility/poverty-guidelines/prior-hhs-poverty-guidelines-federal-register-references/2021-poverty-guidelines>
- Median Income: <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2020/demo/p60-270.html>

SUGGESTED ANCHOR TEXTS

- *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller
- *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck

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We invite you to visit our website, www.brandeis.edu/cascading-lives, to access the full Cascading Lives Digital Toolkit. There, you can also find additional resources produced by the Cascading Lives Project.

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Lesson 2: Turning Point Stories

JENIFER: I'M A DIFFERENT KIND OF HEALER NOW

Jenifer is from the Central American country of Honduras. She is married and has two sons, ages 7 and 14. Her life is focused on caring for her younger son Julián who was born with life-threatening medical problems.

Jenifer grew up in a small city in Honduras in a loving and close-knit family. Her parents worked hard to provide for their four children. When Jenifer was twelve, the family lost the farm they had owned because of debts. After this Jenifer's father traveled to the U.S. to find work and to be better able to support his family. To supplement the income received from her father, her mother took in laundry at home and sold cakes and pastries. Although struggling to make ends meet, her parents made sure that all of their children received high school and university educations. Thinking back on her childhood, Jenifer says "I realize now that we lacked a lot of material things. But things like love, education, parental care - we had all of that. Our parents gave us education and they gave us a strong work ethic."

Jenifer applied herself to her studies. She knew that doing well in her school was the way for her to do what she had always wanted: "Ever since I was a little girl, my only dream was to become a doctor and heal the sick."

In her late twenties Jenifer graduated from medical school and began working as an emergency room physician while training to specialize in obstetrics and gynecology. This was a triumphant time for Jenifer and her family. Becoming a doctor was a remarkable achievement for a young woman from a working-class background. Against the odds, she had moved into a high-status profession. After attending medical school in the capital, she returned to work in the small city in which she grew up. She enjoyed treating patients from her own community.

Looking back on her life in Honduras before coming to the U.S., Jenifer says, "It was a beautiful time in my life." She was in her early thirties, happily married, and the mother of a lively five-year old boy. She was working in her dream profession. She had family and friends around her. She and her husband Victor were financially comfortable. They owned their own home and car and had the means to care for Jenifer's mother who suffered from kidney disease. The future looked bright.

Then the comfortable life that Jenifer had worked so hard to build came tumbling down. When she was expecting her second child, doctors told her it was a high-risk pregnancy and that the child would most likely not survive. Desperate to save their son, Jenifer and Victor decided to go to the U.S. where the medical facilities are more advanced than in Honduras. Their plan was to return to Honduras soon after the birth of the child: "I came here with just one goal - to give my son the advanced medical care he needed. I came for that sole purpose. I did not come here to stay."

After arriving in Boston, Massachusetts, Jenifer gave birth to Julián. Born with multiple disabilities, the baby underwent several spinal surgeries in the first year of his life. Jenifer felt her heart break; she knew that his life was precarious and uncertain. For a whole year she spent days and nights sitting by Julián's bedside at the hospital, tending to him and praying for his survival. Victor worked full-time and also cared full-time for their older son Aarón. At that time, they didn't know anyone in Boston they trusted enough to help care for him. Knowing that it would jeopardize Julián's life, they pushed aside any thoughts of returning to Honduras.

Seven years later, Julián lives at home with his family in a town outside of Boston. The family has remained in Boston to ensure that Julián gets the best possible medical care. Julián is confined to a wheelchair and has limited use of his arms and legs. Along with taking him to frequent medical appointments, Jenifer devotes herself to making sure that he is getting the



meticulous round-the-clock care that he needs to survive. Victor and Jenifer take turns caring for Julián at night. The ventilator that he needs to breathe has to be cleaned every hour. Their only times of respite are when home nurses, whose services are provided through state insurance programs, come to monitor and care for Julián. The pandemic years of 2020-2021 were especially difficult for the family. For several months Jenifer and Victor thought it better to forgo the visits of home nurses so as to reduce the number of people coming in and out of the house. They worried about Julian becoming infected, given his medical vulnerabilities. Taking care of Julián without the assistance of trained caregivers took a huge physical and emotional toll on them.

For Jenifer, Julián's birth presented life-changing consequences: "Being the mother of a child with special needs has changed my life completely. I had to leave my country, leave my job, leave my profession." Living in the U.S has been difficult for Jenifer as she struggles to learn the language and ways of a new society. She longs to see her mother and other relatives in Honduras. Jenifer has worked all her life but given the intense demands of caring for Julián, she cannot imagine having paid work that takes her away from his bedside. After taking some classes she now bakes homemade cakes and pies to sell, much like her mother did in Honduras: "This year I have been making pastries from home for friends and family. This has been my only job, if you can call it work, but it is more like a hobby, nothing more. Really, financially I depend on my husband; the whole family depends on my husband."

LIZ: AN UNEXPECTED PATH

Liz is a 36-year-old white woman who lives with her partner in a city outside of Boston. Since her teenage years, Liz has suffered from a chronic illness. She now works as a circus performer and owner of a booking agency for performers.

When Liz was nine, her parents divorced, ushering in a time of great emotional upheaval: "I was in that pre-adolescent, angsty phase when

Despite the losses she has experienced, Jenifer does not regret the decision to move to the U.S. She believes the move saved her son's life. She is grateful for all of the support they have gotten for Julián from hospitals, schools and social service agencies. The church that she attends has been a great source of comfort and community. She has joined a support group for the parents of children with special needs that has become an anchor in her life. Besides exchanging information about medical and social services, the support group is a place where she and other parents can share their feelings and experiences without judgment.

Jenifer misses her past life. But, she also appreciates all that she has learned in the process of caring for Julián. She is committed to helping other families like her own, who face the daunting task of finding appropriate medical and educational services for a child with special needs: "I am a mother who advocates for her children and who helps other mothers to advocate for the special services their children need to do well." In these ways she continues to be a healer. Maybe a different kind of healer than what she used to be in Honduras. But still, a healer.

the divorce happened. I had a hard time dealing with it." After the divorce, Liz and her brother continued to live with their mother, a former homemaker who began working at a non-profit organization. Her father, a doctor, soon remarried and Liz and her brother had scheduled visits with him at his home where he lived with his wife and stepchildren.



Liz and her brother attended public schools in the well-off suburban neighborhood in which they grew up. Liz excelled as a student and graduated as valedictorian of her high school class. She entered the Ivy League university that both her parents had attended, intending to major in languages, especially French and Spanish. As a teenager, she imagined that her future would include an intellectually stimulating career, maybe as a professor at a college or university.

During her college years, the chronic immune illness from which Liz had been suffering since her late teens flared up dramatically. She suffered from severe bouts of dizziness, muscle aches and debilitating physical and mental fatigue. In spite of many visits to doctors and consultations with multiple healthcare providers, no one was able to offer a diagnosis or a cure. She felt frustrated by the insistence of doctors that she was physically fine, but suffering from depression. Eventually she ended up in a medical facility where she was finally diagnosed with an immune illness.

Physically unable to attend school, Liz left college in her third year and moved back in with her mother. "Having my mother just be there for me emotionally was a huge support. She listened to me and helped me get the right foods and medicine, and access to medical care. I needed financial help since I could not work. She and my dad helped me pay the medical and treatment bills. I was finding that holistic medicine and experimental treatments were what really made a difference for me and a lot of that is not even covered by insurance."

After moving back home, Liz started to look for things she could do while going through treatment. In college, she had enjoyed being a part of the juggling and fire-spinning club: "It was a hobby for me. When I was at my mom's I started practicing on my own as a way of being physically active that didn't require too much of me. I was getting more and more into it and I decided to reach out to see if there were other people in the area with the same interests. It was a pivotal moment for me when I realized there

was a whole community out there and people who had careers in circus arts. I went to Burning Man, which is an annual event in the desert in Nevada for artists and performers and I was inspired by that. But I never really had a plan to get into performance as a profession or way of making a living. It kind of happened organically and slowly over time."

Over the years, Liz has learned to cope with the demands of her illness, which include the need to constantly monitor symptoms and adjust treatments. She has learned to live with the uncertainties of how her illness will develop in the future. Despite these pressures, Liz has become an established circus artist. She offers performances that combine art forms like acrobatics and hooping with music and light shows. She has her own business - a booking agency for circus performers. Liz also has a part-time administrative job at a non-profit organization. Liz's true passion, though, is performing for live audiences.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, Liz felt like she was "falling off a cliff." With shows and bookings canceled, she lost a big chunk of her income. She was furloughed from her administrative job while her partner, a managerial employee in a client services company, was able to work at home for much of the time. Liz collected unemployment payments for several months. To support her booking company, she also received a small business loan from the federal Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), established in 2020 through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act). These resources, in addition to her savings, cushioned her from economic hardships at this time. Liz has always been able to turn to family and friends with knowledge and expertise in finances for advice about how to manage her money. With their guidance she has opened investment accounts and is planning for her financial future.

Prior to the pandemic, Liz and her partner had been planning to buy a house in a different town. While the rent was affordable where they were



living, they had a difficult neighbor above them. They also felt unsafe in the neighborhood, having experienced several incidents of petty crime and vandalism. Liz planned to put her savings into a down payment while her partner applied for a bank loan because he would more easily qualify than her, given his full-time job. But as the price of houses rose, they became increasingly frustrated with what was available to them at an affordable cost. Finally, they decided to relocate to a rental apartment in a different town. The rent is higher, but there is more space and the neighborhood is safer.

By the spring of 2021, as COVID-19 vaccinations became available and pandemic restrictions eased, Liz saw a sharp uptick in requests for her to perform in person. The booking agency business also began to pick up. Liz is thrilled with the work and the chance to perform in person, which she loves doing. But she remains anxious about the future, given the news of new COVID-19 spikes.

In reflecting on her life as a performer, Liz sees it as an “unexpected path” that emerged out of her illness. She is grateful that she has found a career that she enjoys and is compatible with her lifestyle. “I had to change directions because of my illness. It’s been an unexpected path, but you know, I love what I do. I love the flexibility of the work. And it’s introduced me to so many cool people. It’s given me an identity, a community where I belong.”