

Episode 18:
What Is "Post Traumatic Growth?" Expert Interview with "Jolt"
Author Mark Miller

Segment	Who	Copy
Intro	Mark Miller	<p>For years, I attended the annual Encore Conference where the Purpose Prize was presented. The Purpose Prize is this, sort of, they used call it the MacArthur Genius Award for people over 60. It was people who were doing really amazing social entrepreneurship missions later in life. And you'd meet dozens of people at these conferences who were doing this kind of amazing midlife career jobs to new careers with social purpose.</p> <p>And over the years, interviewing these folks, you know, you'd explore what the motivations were. And I started just noticing this pattern that a fair number of them, not all, but really, a noticeable number were motivated to change their careers following a very traumatic life event. And after a while, I could just, sort of, like, sense when the story was coming and say, "I am about to hear something awful." And I was just really interested in that aspect of the story. So, as a journalist, what do you do? You decide to write about it.</p>
		INTRO MUSIC
Podcast Overview	Andy Levine	<p>Welcome to Second Act Stories, a podcast that looks at people who have made major career changes and are pursuing more rewarding lives in a second act. I'm your host Andy Levine.</p> <p>In this episode, we're going to mix things up with an "expert interview." Every 8 to 10 episodes, I sit down with someone who has studied second acts and see what we can learn from them.</p> <p>So today we're going to spend the next twenty-plus minutes with Mark Miller. Mark is a veteran journalist who has covered the retirement beat for a dozen years. Today, we're talking with him about a book he recently wrote called "Jolt: Stories of Trauma and Transformation." I read it from cover to cover and thoroughly enjoyed it.</p> <p>I sat down with Mark at his home in Evanston, IL and had a conversation about "Jolt" and what it can tell us about Second Acts.</p>
	Andy	<p>So, I'd love to kick off and just start with giving us a little about your background and the work you do. Sort of, the Mark Miller elevator speech, let's say.</p>

	Mark Miller	<p>Sure. Well, I'm a journalist specializing in coverage of retirement and aging. And so, I write about a wide array of topics inside that frame. It's everything from the personal finance side of retirement to health care to public policy.</p> <p>So, even though retirement is the beat, I've actually written a lot about midlife career changes and career strategies and, you know, a range of other topics really. But I try to take, sort of, a holistic view of the beat rather than strictly the money side, which is of course important, but I think there's a lot more to it than that.</p>
	Andy	And you've been covering this beat for how many years now?
	Mark	More than a decade.
	Andy	Okay
	Mark	Yeah. I first got involved in this well, back around, well, 2004. So, I was involved in the startup of a magazine and a website here in Chicago, where I live, for the Tribune Company that was focused on, kind of, the notion of reinvention of retirement. That's how I first got my feet wet in the area.
	Andy	Okay. So, earlier this year, you wrote a book and it's called "Jolt: Stories of Trauma and Transformation." Tell us how the idea for this book came to you.
	Mark	<p>So this really was an outgrowth of the career-oriented writing that I was discussing a minute ago. One of the themes that I've reported on very frequently over the years is people doing mid-life career reinvention with an idea of a new career with purpose. So this relates to the encore.org movement. You know, all the work that Encore has done around second careers with social purpose.</p> <p>And for years, I attended the annual Encore Conference where the Purpose Prize was presented. You know, used to do this, the prize still exists but it's not done by an Encore anymore, it's now at AARP. But the Purpose Prize is this, sort of, they used call it the MacArthur Genius Award for people over 60. It was people who were doing really amazing social entrepreneurship missions later in life. And you'd meet dozens of people at these conferences who were doing this kind of amazing midlife career jobs to new careers with social purpose.</p> <p>And over the years, interviewing these folks, you know, you'd explore what the motivations were. And I started just noticing this pattern that a fair number of them, not all, but really, a noticeable number were motivated to change their careers</p>

		<p>following a very traumatic life event. And after a while, I could just, sort of, like, sense when the story was coming and say, "I am about to hear something awful." And I was just really interested in that aspect of the story. So, as a journalist, what do you do? You decide to write about it.</p> <p>So I, pitched a story about this phenomenon to the "AARP Magazine" and they said "yes" and so I started doing the reporting for the story, and now I find out as I'm doing the reporting that there's a whole school of clinical psychological research about this phenomenon of people who go through traumatic life events but come out the other side with a growth experience and going off in a new direction. And the psychologists had given it the name post-traumatic growth syndrome. So, now I'm thinking to myself...</p>
	Andy	And you'd never heard never heard of this before?
	Mark	Oh, I'd never heard of that.
	Andy	I'd never heard of it the first time I read your book, by the way.
	Mark	<p>Yeah. And there's been a lot of clinical writing about it and some writing about it for lay audiences, but given where I was focused, I didn't know, I just was hearing the stories. I came at it from the stories. And I was just knocked out by the stories. And then I find out that it's a recognized phenomenon in psychology. So, at that point, I'm thinking myself, "Oh, it's a thing. It's not just me hearing the random stories."</p> <p>So I write the story for the "AARP Magazine." It was 2015, it was well received. And I still felt like there was a lot more to do with it so I started thinking about expanding it to a book. And so, the book goes way beyond just career change though. That was the impetus, or you asked question how did I get interested in it and that was the start point. But the book expands well beyond just people who changed their careers to a wide array of types of transformations that can occur, and also looking at a very wide array of types of traumas.</p>
	Andy	So, for our listeners, if you had to define post-traumatic growth, I mean, what's the simple definition of it?

	Mark	<p>The simple definition of it is something that just shakes and rattles your world to your core. That, you know, we all walk around with this notion of what our lives are. You know, our worldview. You know, "This is the world I live in, this is the house I live in, the job I do. Family, friends, community." It expands outward from there. And a traumatic life event can just cause people to question everything about that and re-examine everything. And the post-traumatic growth experience really is people who have that need to assemble a new sense of meaning in their lives because their sense of meaning has been blown, has been shattered. And so, they're putting their lives together in new ways that can be very interesting.</p>
	Andy	<p>So, in this book...and I counted somewhere around 20 to 25 different stories. And some are couples, some are individuals, but people have gone through this life-changing trauma: Loss of a child, major illness, life-threatening accident, terrorist attack, you name it. You've covered just a large gamut. I'm wondering if you could pick out one...and I hate to say your favorite because I'm sure they're all, like, almost like children to you, having profiled them or whatever, but pick out one and, maybe, just as an example, walk us through a little bit of their change. Maybe one that, you know, perhaps is your favorite or one that sticks out to you as particularly powerful.</p>
	Mark	<p>Right. Well, there are so many as you say. And I don't regard them as children but I do refer to the people in the book as my characters, even though they're real people. One that I think is worth telling in this moment, in particular, is the story of a woman named Lucy Macbath who was a flight attendant for Delta Airlines living in Georgia. And in 2013, her teenage son was murdered, his name was Jordan Davis, was murdered in what was to become one of the better known as Stand Your Ground cases in Florida.</p> <p>He was out riding with some of his buddies, they pulled into a 7-11 parking lot to go in and get drinks, snacks, whatever. And they're playing real loud rap music in their car and somebody pulls in next them and a fight ensues over the music. This guy is yelling at them to turn the music down. One thing leads to another, they're arguing. And this guy pulls a gun out of his glove compartment and starts firing into the SUV, and 17-year-old Jordan Davis loses his life.</p> <p>And Lucy, who has never been a particularly political person, goes through this remarkable transformation where she feels compelled to get involved in the fight to curb gun violence. And she gave up her career and wound up becoming a national spokesperson for communities of faith and for the, you know, African-American community, she's African-American, for every town for gun safety. And she did that for a number of years. And now she's a candidate for Congress.</p>

		<p>So, you know, what a dramatic transformation. There were a number of people in the book who are like that who are, sort of, on a social mission and have devoted their lives to very tough causes. There are a couple people I profiled who are prominent, death-penalty abolitionists who are themselves family members of murder victims. I spent time traveling with this group that works to abolish the death penalty.</p> <p>They do campaigning on this issue every year and they have some pretty stunning personal stories but they came out of trauma with a need to, number one, forgive the killers of their own family members, but also seeing in their own minds that this kind of retribution punishment, the death penalty, was no solution for them and, you know, was a cruel, unusual punishment that the government shouldn't be inflicting. Then one, in particular, Marietta Jaeger who's now well into her 80's who lost her daughter 40 years ago to a serial killing has devoted her entire adult life to fighting the death penalty. And just an amazing woman, so.</p>
	Andy	<p>Her story is quite incredible in terms of her actually helping the FBI to find the killer. I mean, it's quite an amazing tale that you weave on that, but I just wanted to give people a sense of this, a little slice of this and that sort of thing.</p>
	Mark	<p>Yeah. And some of the stories are less traumatic than that too. So they're not all, you know, this kind of...they're not all, you know, stories about murder or explosions. There are those stories that are very traumatic. We saw a couple of stories about people who survived terror attacks, plane crashes, you know, the whole gamut of it. But some of them are more subtle emotional stories as well. And they're not all transformations to social purpose and political causes. Some definitely are.</p>
	Andy	<p>One that really struck me and it struck me...I'm gonna take you into this. This is Molly MacDonald who goes from this life of privilege in suburban Detroit to financial ruin and divorce, cancer, near homelessness. And somehow, she starts a nonprofit called The Pink Fund. But to me, one of the most interesting moments in the book is when you asked her, "If you could wave a magic wand and erase all these problems and go back to your safe suburban life would you do it?" And the quote that you have her saying in there, which I thought was amazing is, "I lost everything that I thought had value and found what really does." Is this a common theme among survivors?</p>

	Mark	<p>Very much so, yeah. And I asked that question, the magic wand question, to everybody in the book. And the remarkable thing is I found nobody who had a fundamentally different answer than the one I received from Molly. Now, there are variations. And certainly, somebody like Marietta who lost a child, for example, or somebody who lost a spouse, if they could wave a magic wand and bring back the family member, of course they would. I'm not suggesting that. But even those people told me that they so highly value the subsequent growth experiences that they've had that, you know, would they say they wouldn't trade it back? Not exactly. But they're in a place where they really recognize the profound growth and change that they've experienced.</p> <p>But this is a common answer that you get from people who have had post-traumatic growth experiences. And it's, I thought, one of the more profound findings. And I think it also... I get asked this question a lot about, "Well, what can the rest of us learn from these stories?"</p>
	Andy	I wanna ask that. That's important.
	Mark	<p>Well I think it relates to this point you're raising, that's why I'm bringing it up. Is that if you stop and contemplate that somebody has gone through this painful experience and yet, wouldn't trade it back, that tells us something about how valuable the experience is. So, set that off to the side for a sec.</p> <p>The other piece of this is, you know, trauma is just a part of human existence. Everybody experiences traumatic events. Now, they're not all as traumatic as some of the ones we're talking about, but trauma is just part of living. So, one of the lessons I think or things that one can draw from the book is how can you... And I had to hesitate to use the word "use" your own traumatic life stories, but not just slide past them but to use them as opportunities to stop and think about what we're doing.</p> <p>And then, are there ways to experience change without trauma? Because, you know, your podcast is about people who are making changes in their life, they yearn to make changes. I'm sure a lot of your listeners who are people trying to figure out...</p>
	Andy	Wanna change.

	Mark	How can I make change happen in my life, right? Well, these are folks who are, sort of, forced down the chute on this by something that hit out of the blue. But really, isn't it possible to stop ourselves in our tracks and say, "I really am gonna make change happen." We can do that. I mean, I don't think that it's fundamentally necessary to have the painful traumatic event to make change happen, but it takes a lot of work. And it's taken a lot of work for these people too. But they had no choice. These, really, people had no choice but to rebuild their lives and find new ways to make sense of things.
	Andy	It is interesting, you know, after reading your book, I went back and looked at the 16 people I've profiled so far in my podcast and I tried to apply, kind of, the lens of Jolt to them. Nine of the 16 I would describe as Jolt survivors. And I'm wondering how that strikes you? Does that feel about like what you would anticipate?
	Mark	It doesn't surprise me to hear that. And, in fact, one of the people who was really kind of a mentor and guru, for me, on this book is Marc Freedman, the head and the founder of Encore. And Marc and I have talked about this quite a bit, Marc wrote the forward to the book. And he says that a healthy share of the people who come through Encore are post-traumatic growth profiles. And like I said, I first got interested in this because I noticed it is such a predominant theme at the Encore Conference. So, no, it doesn't surprise me. Now, when you ask the clinical psychologists, the academics who research this, to say, "Well, how frequent is growth happening following trauma?" The kind of tongue-in-cheek answer that you get is anywhere from 30% to 90%.
	Andy	That's a bit of a wide range.
	Mark	It's a little wide. And the reason it's wide is that it really depends on how you define growth. So, you know, growth could be as something as subtle as "I wake up every morning with a new appreciation of what it is to be alive. I have a higher appreciation and love for my family members and friends, I'm more attentive to them." That is growth, but it's a very subtle growth experience as compared to some of the stories that we've just been discussing.
	Andy	Starting your own non-profit or that sort of thing.

	Mark	<p>The sort of more external thing. So, they don't have a real solid number on this but I think it's fair to say it's something... You know, another question I get asked a lot is where do I find the stories. The truth is they are hiding in plain sight. They're all over the place. And I mean, I found some of my best stories just...they were just mentioned incidentally in a newspaper article.</p>
	Andy	<p>One of the chapters you have, which I'd love for you to expand upon a little bit is titled, "A Radical Sense of Empathy." And you describe how Jolt survivors have this powerful urge to help others. So, help us understand what you learned and why you selected that as a separate standalone chapter.</p>
	Mark	<p>Right. So, we all have levels of empathy for others. And I describe it as moving in concentric circles. In the smallest center circle we have empathy for immediate family and friends, and maybe our neighborhood, our community, and coworkers. I mean, it moves out in circles, but as the circles get further out, the connections of empathy weaken because our ability to relate to people falls off.</p> <p>And so, in particular, when you see stories in the news about something going on halfway around the world, you know, an awful disaster or a human crisis of one type or another, famine, drought, you know, we read all these stories about...it's difficult for average folk to, sort of, empathize. But there is this phenomenon in post-traumatic growth that really blows apart, widely expands or radicalizes, as I say in the book, the ability to empathize across a much, much wider range of those concentric circles.</p> <p>So, an example, one of the stories I tell in the book is that of a couple named Liz and Steve Alderman, a couple with several children living in the suburbs of New York. In their early 60's, he's a physician, she's a former teacher, stay-at-home mom. Their youngest son, Peter, is in the World Trade Center on 9-11 and dies in the World Trade Center on 9-11.</p> <p>And you know, in their deep grief over the next couple of years, they're trying to find some way to memorialize their son and make sense of this disaster that's befallen them. And she gets involved in some groups that are working on the 9-11 memorial, she's doing this, that, and the other and nothing feels right.</p> <p>And one night, she's up late at night as she often was, because she couldn't sleep, watching ABC Nightline, and there's this piece about a Harvard psychologist who's doing work in post-conflict societies in Africa, setting up mental health clinics to help trauma victims who have gone through, you know, the most unimaginable traumas of watching their entire family slaughtered before their eyes. And this is a</p>

		<p>psychologist who's working trying to work on the ground in some of these countries to help restore some sense of mental health and provide mental health services through clinics.</p> <p>And something in this report just grabs Liz Alderman by the throat and she can't stop thinking about it. And she said to me, "I wanted to reach out through the TV screen and hug these kids who I was seeing featured in the broadcast," And from there, you know, she and her husband are off to the races, they go to talk to this person at Harvard. They wind up starting...this is now, well, over a decade ago, they started a foundation...they call it a foundation but it's really not a foundation in the classic sense, in Peter's name, the Peter C. Alderman Foundation.</p> <p>And what they do is they work to set up mental health clinics in post-conflict societies in Africa and Southeast Asia, primarily. It's a very successful, small, nonprofit organization. It's been cited as, you know, one of the best new nonprofit startups of the last decade. And, you know, they find themselves in this place they could have never imagined. And I bring up their story here to this point of the radical sense of empathizing and wanting to work with people halfway around the world. You know, lots of nonprofits were started in the wake of 9-11. A lot of the work was very close to the ground.</p>
	Andy	This was across the world.
	Mark	This was across the world and nothing directly related at all to what had happened to them. And I mean, Liz says to me that the people they work within these clinics have gone through trauma far worse than she did. You know, mothers who have watched their entire families killed in front of them. So, that ability to reach out across the world, I think the Alderman story is maybe the best in the book that describes this radicalized sense of empathy.
	Andy	You mentioned something else in the Alderman's story that is also a theme that you said that the transformation is not fast. Usually, it takes several years and takes finding your way, and missteps, and different directions, that sort of thing. Can you expand upon on that a little bit?
	Mark	Yeah, I guess I'd say that the timelines vary quite a bit. But yes, generally speaking, it's not an overnight, "Hi, this is what I got to do." It does take time. There are people in the book who it seems like there was a quick snap thing but I think they really were cogitating and thinking beforehand and then something just, kind of, pushes them over the edge and they're off to the races.

		<p>So, I tell the story of a lady named Amanda North who was a tech exec in the West Coast who was injured in the Boston Marathon bombing. Not badly, thank goodness, but it was a near-brush kind of a trauma. And she'd already been very dissatisfied with her career, feeling like she needed to move on and do something with more sense of meaning. And literally, sitting in the hospital ER the night of the attack with her daughter who had been running in the marathon and was also okay. But she's just sitting there at the hospital and cooking up this idea for a new business she wants to start that's gonna be a website that helps sell artisan products from third-world countries and, you know, help people create businesses and revenue...</p> <p>But it was an idea that was already, kind of, cogitating in the back of her mind but it was literally, light bulb is off, "This is what I'm doing. Life is too short." But yeah, there's no one cookie-cutter, as you'd imagine, pathway, it the timelines.</p>
	Andy	<p>So, let me take this a little bit more of a personal direction. So, I'm curious. Your biggest take away from the experience of writing "Jolt," and also, did it in any way change the way you approach your own life?</p>
	Mark	<p>Yeah. Well, it reinforces some things that have been important for me, I'd say, over the last decade or so of my work. I mean, I'm somebody who's been very fortunate in life in that I have not experienced, you know, any kind of awful traumas of the type that I describe in this thread.</p>
	Andy	<p>That you describe in this thread.</p>
	Mark	<p>I mean I've gone through some career trauma, like so many of us have in the last decade in trying to...especially in the journalism field which is a traumatized business. We're a traumatized business.</p> <p>But at the time that I went out of the world of full-time work and left the last full-time job that I have. It really was out of a sense of life is too short. I'm not gonna keep trying to muck along with this. I got to go out and forge my own path." And it turned out to be one of the best things I ever did for myself, but it was very much out of a keen sense of, you know, you don't get forever. You know, and I think, a keen understanding of that idea of mortality is another thing I deal with in the book can really help people get off the dime and move forward.</p> <p>And so, that was of a lesson I think I learned over this last decade because it's been one of the happiest experiences or the decisions that I made career-wise. And the book just, kind of, reinforces those lessons for me, because there are so many people in the book who fit that description of saying, "I got to</p>

		get moving." And so, that I think is one of my takeaways is just kind of a confirmation to me of the urgency of now if you will.
	Andy	So, just sticking with that for a moment. Maybe leaving the book because you've profiled and you've talked to a lot of people that have had changes midlife and have gone on different paths and that sort of thing. If you were advising a friend over a glass of wine, let's say, you know, who said, "Gosh, I'm very frustrated in what I'm doing now, this doesn't feel right but I'm scared to change." You know, is there advice that you would give to people who are, you know, hesitant to take that leap?
	Mark	Right. Well, I think there's different types of fear involved, especially when it's career. Some of the fear can be economic, for example, but some of that could just be fear of the unknown. And I think, as a general matter, what I've always written about with relation to career reinvention is, you know, take some small steps. If you think this is the direction for you, find a way to do some volunteer work and see what it's really like. Because I think a lot of times, people have an idea in their mind about what something is gonna be like that bears no relationship to the reality of what it's like. So, find a way to start taking some small steps. It's easier to do that. It doesn't require as much courage, let's say. You know, you're still doing whatever it is during the day...
	Andy	But you're testing something on the side.
	Mark	Yeah. And you start to meet people who are doing it and start to network and be open to help and advice. I think that sometimes people are not. You know, one of the questions I do deal with in the book is who is more likely and less likely to have this type of post-traumatic growth response? And the psychologists are hesitant on that point, the research is unclear, but there does seem to be some evidence that women are more likely than men to experience post-traumatic growth. And one of the reasons is that women...this is a gross generalization, but women tend to be a little more open in the way that they deal with issues and they're more likely to approach friends, family, mentors to work through problems. Men, you know, we tend to hold stuff close to the vest. This is an unhealthy feature, you know, of being male. And so, you know, there is this evidence though that women have this, somewhat, higher tendency to experience this growth phenomenon. And I think, again, taking out of the trauma realm, back to your question, that seeking some help and advice is a really good thing to do.

		OUTGOING MUSIC
Thank-You and Show Credits	Andy	<p>So that's my interview with Mark Miller, the author of Jolt: Stories of Trauma and Transformation. Mark's an exceptionally talented storyteller and I really enjoyed his book. It's available in paperback at both bookstores and online at Amazon.</p> <p>In our next episode I'll introduce you to Eva Levias Andolina who is one of the characters that Mark profiles in "Jolt."</p> <p>If you're enjoying Second Act Stories, I really hope you'll consider sharing it with others by becoming a "Second Act Advocate." All you have to do is visit our website, "Second Act Stories.org," and click the "Spread the Word" button in the upper right-hand corner of the home page. It will take you less than 60 seconds to sign up as a Second Act Advocate. I'll notify you when a new episode comes out and ask you to share it with your own social media following.</p> <p>And if you are thinking of starting your own second act, we hope the interview with Mark will "jolt" you into action and help you find a new path.</p> <p>We hope you'll keep listening. A new "Second Act Story" is just around the corner.</p>