



A *Pedi-Press* Feature Series

Cultivating Connections Corner

September 2026 Edition



Back to school photo highlight
from Dr. Xanthi Couroucli –
featuring her grandson Jonathan
Josef Bender (JoJo) first day!

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Welcome!

Dear All,

Welcome to the September edition of Cultivating Connections! As we settle into a new school year and the rhythms of a new season, this month invites us to pause and reflect on what it means to embrace a new beginning.

A new school year brings fresh routines, new experiences, new challenges, and plenty of opportunities for growth—for the children and families we serve, as well as for ourselves. In pediatrics, we're reminded every day that transitions are a natural part of growing and learning. They can be exciting, but they can also bring uncertainty, adjustment, and the need for a little extra support.

With that spirit in mind, the Wellness Collective is focusing this month on navigating change, embracing new beginnings, and finding ways to care for ourselves along the way.

Whether you're adjusting to a new routine, setting new intentions, or simply taking a moment to reflect, we hope this month's resources and activities offer inspiration, connection, and a little encouragement as we step into this new season together.

Here's to new beginnings, meaningful connections, and making space for wellness along the way. We're so glad you're here!

Warm regards,
The Department of Pediatrics Wellness Collective

Baylor
College of
Medicine

Texas Children's
Hospital



Embarking on a New Chapter

As we step into new chapters, it's worth remembering that life rarely unfolds the way it does in the media. Our paths are nonlinear, filled with unexpected turns and inflection points. Rather than seeing these moments as setbacks, we can use them as opportunities to reflect, learn, and grow. Below is a great book that explores this idea beautifully.



Life is in the Transitions: Mastering Change at Any Age by Bruce Feiler – book review by Dr. Joan Shook

I recently finished ***Life is in the Transitions: Mastering Change at any Age*** by **Bruce Feiler**, the author of *Council of Dads* and *The Secrets of Happy Families*. Most of Feiler's work explores what gives life meaning and inspired several TED talks on the same theme. In *Life is in the Transitions*, he examines a different dimension of human experience: What happens when life does not go as you planned? He explores how we make our way through significant disruptive experiences and emerge stronger from them.

He starts the book by describing a brief period in his life during which he experienced a very serious illness, near bankruptcy, and the onset of significant mental illness in his elderly father. He was upended by the confluence of these events and unsure how to reorganize himself so that his life could go on.

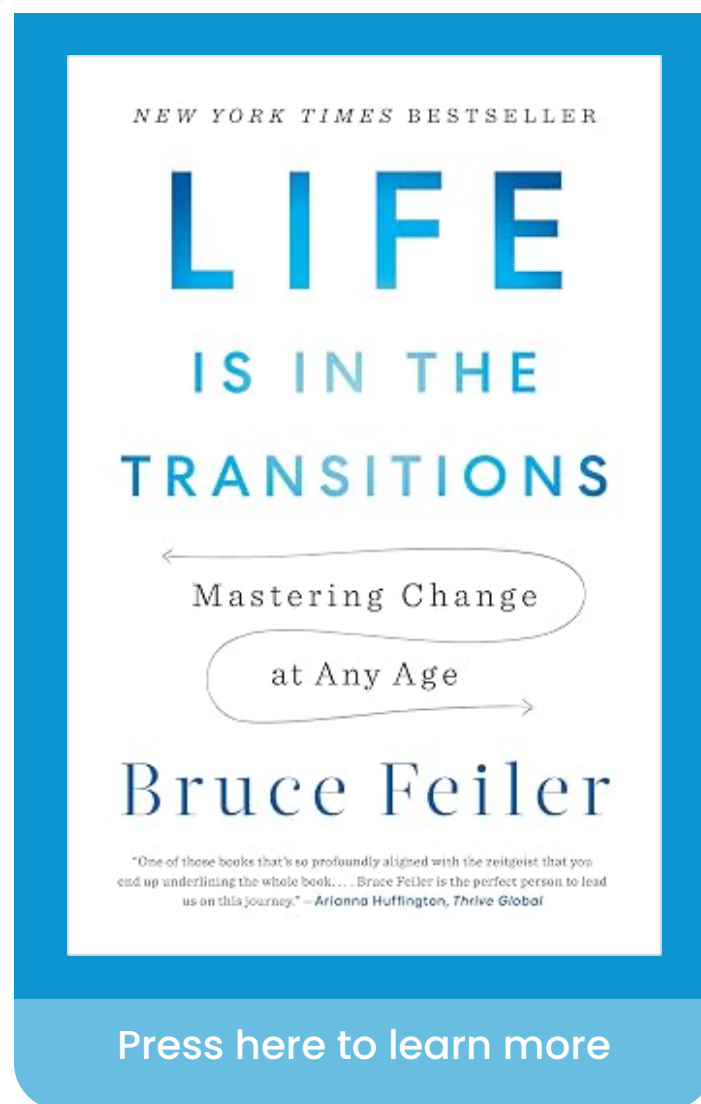
He realized that, like most of us, he had a linear mental model for his life (finish school, go to college, find a job, start a family, advance in his career, etc.) but these events disrupted that model and made it difficult for him to understand what was happening to him and what should come next. He came to realize that life is not smooth and linear but rather full of disruptive events ("transitions") which make life nonlinear and sometimes confusing.

Feiler became curious about whether others experienced disruptions in the same way. Over the course of three years, he interviewed hundreds of people from all over the country about their lives. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed. Using that information, he developed an understanding of life transitions and crafted tools to help others understand them also.

Feiler found that no one's life is linear and that transitions occur every 18-24 months during adulthood: one in 10 disruptions is a major event that he calls a lifequake. He found that we successfully resolve lifequakes in three stages: leaving the past behind; working through what has been experienced; and embracing the changes that have happened because of the events. These stages can last for months to years, but successful completion of the stages is possible and results in tremendous personal growth.

To help us on the journey to resolving these crises, Feiler developed a practical toolkit for processing disruptions and managing the changes. His strategies include reflecting on the stories we tell ourselves, drawing on rituals and relationships, trying new things, and eventually finding a way to incorporate the experience into a revised understanding of who we are and where we are going.

Feiler is a master storyteller and with that gift, he teaches us essential messages in *Life is in the Transitions: Disruptions in life* are not detours from the path. They are part of the path. Reflecting deeply about times of change in our lives allows us to transform them into periods of personal growth. The book is readable, relatable and very wise.



[Press here to learn more](#)



Reflections Through Every Stage

Whether you are new to our community, stepping into a new role, or preparing for retirement, we are excited to support you on your journey. To help guide and inspire you, we have gathered reflections, advice, and lessons learned from faculty members, both past and present, who have navigated life's many stages.

Their experiences offer valuable insights, encouragement, and wisdom for every point of the journey.

Advice for incoming faculty



Reflections from Our Faculty: Embracing a New Phase from Dr. Rabbia W. Naeem

My move from Pediatric Hospital Medicine at Stanford in California to Texas Children's Hospital in Houston was initially driven by family, but professionally, it has been such a wonderful surprise!

Working at both the West Campus and The Woodlands has provided opportunities for clinical growth and exposure to diverse and complex patient populations, while also allowing me to expand my interests in quality improvement, research, and faculty development. Most importantly, I have found incredibly supportive colleagues, mentors, and friendships that have made TCH and Houston feel like home.

My advice to incoming faculty is to stay open to new opportunities, seek out mentors and collaborators, and take the time to build both professional and personal connections—you may be surprised by how many new doors a transition can open!



New Chapters, New Perspectives: Insights from Recent Faculty from Dr. Ahmed Q. Hasan

I trained in New York, so transitioning to Houston and starting at Texas Children's came with some differences in clinical practice and workflow. Everyone was incredibly welcoming and supportive, which made the transition much easier.

The shadowing shifts were also very helpful. They gave me a chance to learn the workflow, understand the differences in practice, and get comfortable with the new environment before working independently. I always felt supported, even after I started working independently, and there was always someone willing to help or answer questions.

My advice to incoming faculty would be to take advantage of opportunities to shadow, ask questions, and lean on the people around you. The transition can feel like a lot at first, but having a supportive team makes a big difference.



Reflections Through Every Stage



TCH West Campus HemOnc Team with donations for the YOLO Camp for adolescents with cancer.



Christus Children's HemOnc Team celebrating the start of Childhood Cancer Awareness Month in September 2026.

For those taking big leaps

Carrying Community Forward with Dr. Parth S. Mehta

Transitions have a way of reminding us how much of our professional lives has relationships as the foundation. Leaving Texas Children's after 22 years was difficult, not because I questioned the opportunity ahead, but because I was leaving a community of colleagues, mentors, and friends who had become an important part of my life.

One thing I learned quickly, however, is that moving does not require leaving those relationships behind. I continue to stay connected with colleagues & friends at TCH, both personally and professionally. Those relationships remain important to me, and in many ways my move to San Antonio has simply expanded the community I am grateful to call mine.

Coming to CHRISTUS Children's and stepping into a new leadership role required a different kind of relationship-building. I knew that I could not arrive with assumptions about what the organization or the people needed. My first responsibility was to listen—to understand the history of the program, learn from the people doing the work every day, and appreciate both what was already working well and where there were opportunities to grow.

Trust, particularly during transition, is not something that comes with a title. It develops through consistency, being accessible, listening carefully, and following through. I have tried to approach my relationships with our physicians, advanced practice providers, nurses, and staff in that spirit. Over time, those individual connections begin to create something larger: a shared sense of purpose and community.

Perhaps the biggest lesson from this transition has been that community is not tied to a building or an institution. It is created through people and relationships, and those relationships can span institutions and cities.

My advice to anyone facing a significant transition would be to resist the temptation to focus only on what you are leaving or where you are going. Carry the relationships that you have built, remain genuinely curious about the people you are joining, and give yourself time to belong. A transition does not have to mean exchanging one community for another. Sometimes, it simply means your community becomes bigger.





For those retiring Reflection with Dr. Jefferey Starke



Retirement as Reinvention

As I think about retirement, I don't see it as the end of my career. I see it as another opportunity for reinvention. Over the years, I've learned that careers in academic medicine rarely follow a straight line. Even the most successful careers have their ups and downs. If you were to graph them, they would look more like a sine wave than a steadily rising line. Some opportunities arrive exactly when you expect them. Others appear unexpectedly and take you in directions you never imagined.

One lesson I've learned is that the broader your experiences, interests, and skills, the more opportunities you create for yourself. Many of the most meaningful chapters of my career were not part of some master plan. They came from staying curious, saying yes to new challenges, and being willing to adapt when circumstances changed.

That same mindset has helped me think about retirement. Rather than focusing on what I'm leaving behind, I'm focusing on what comes next. Retirement is simply another transition, another chance to explore new interests, contribute in different ways, and continue learning.



To do that well, resilience matters. Change is rarely easy, even when it is positive. There are always adjustments and uncertainties. Resilience is what helps us recover, adapt, and move forward when things don't unfold exactly as expected. It allows us to embrace change instead of fearing it.

If there's one piece of advice I would offer, it's this: Think of your career as an adventure. Keep your eyes open. Pay attention to opportunities as they arise. Realize that you may not always know where the road is leading, and that's okay. In fact, some of the best outcomes come as a surprise.

Most importantly, know yourself. Understand what gives you energy, what aligns with your values, and what does not. Whether you're early in your career, in the middle of it, or preparing for retirement, that self-awareness can help guide the decisions that lead to a fulfilling next chapter.





Social Connections and Relationships

With Drs. Ankhi Dutta, Lacey Schmidt, Kelley Slack, and Lara Shekerdeman



Feigin Ice Cream Cake Celebration – Woodlands Faculty

The Woodlands Feigin Ice Cream Cake Celebration was held on **Friday, August 14, 2026**. Organized by **Dr. Rachel Marek**, TCH Woodlands CMO, the celebration continues a cherished annual tradition of preparing **Dr. Judy Feigin's** famous ice cream cake using her original recipe.

The tradition honors the legacy of **Dr. Ralph Feigin** and **Dr. Judy Feigin**, who welcomed trainees to monthly birthday celebrations centered around Judy's beloved ice cream cake. This year's celebration was especially meaningful as it coincided with the anniversary of **Dr. Ralph Feigin's** passing, offering an opportunity to reflect on his lasting impact on pediatric medicine, education, mentorship, and the generations of physicians he inspired.

Over the years, Woodlands Ice Cream Cake Day has grown beyond its origins as a birthday celebration to become an annual opportunity to recognize the accomplishments, milestones, and contributions of Woodlands faculty. This year's gathering celebrated the many awards and honors received by Woodlands faculty during the 2025-2026 academic year, including Clinical Excellence Awards, NRF Awards, HEART Awards, Surgical Awards, Shamrock Awards, and BCM academic promotions.

The celebration brought together faculty and leaders from across the department, including **Dr. Debbie Sukin**, **Dr. Lara Shekerdeman**, **Dan DePrisco**, **Dr. Kelley Slack**, and **Ketrese White**, who joined in recognizing and celebrating the outstanding achievements of the Woodlands team. Additionally, **Dr. Debbie Sukin** share memories of growing up making ice cream cakes with her mother!



Psychology Pop up with Dr. Lara Shekerdeman

On August 28, 2026, **Dr. Lara Shekerdeman**, accompanied by **Drs. Kelley Slack** and **Lacey Schmidt**, our departmental organizational psychologists, visited **Dr. Karen Price**, Psychology Division Chair, and **teams across the Psychology Division** to connect directly with faculty and staff. The visit provided an opportunity to share refreshments, highlight available resources, and engage in meaningful conversations about the successes, challenges, and priorities shaping the division.

At the heart of the visit was a commitment to listening. Faculty and staff were encouraged to openly share their perspectives, experiences, and ideas, creating a valuable exchange between leadership and the people who drive the division's mission every day.

If you are interested in having **Dr. Shekerdeman** visit your group, reach out to **Jennifer Fernandez** at jxfernan@texaschildrens.org



Physical and Lifestyle Well-Being

With Dr. David B. Allison

Keep moving through change

When schedules, workplaces, or living arrangements change, physical activity can be one of the first routines to be displaced. I have found that the most effective response is not to wait for life to “settle down,” but to make physical activity part of establishing the new routine.

The scientific case for regular physical activity remains strong. Both aerobic exercise and resistance training offer important, partly independent benefits, and both deserve a place in most people’s routines. A fitness expert once offered this advice: *“When people ask me what type of exercise they should do, I say it is easy. If you like weightlifting, lift weights. If you like Pilates, lift weights. If you like yoga, lift weights.”* It is, of course, a joke—but it captures a serious point: resistance training is valuable, and it is often underemphasized.

The evidence on maintaining activity supports several practical approaches: decide in advance when and where activity will occur; start with manageable goals; use prompts and reminders; practice the behavior; and build in some form of accountability. A systematic review by Howlett and colleagues found that longer-term physical-activity interventions were more likely to sustain behavior change when they included action planning, instruction, graded tasks, practice, prompts or cues, and self-monitoring or rewards. **Which you can [read here](#) to learn more!**



The social dimension matters as well. Shortly after coming to Houston, I began working with personal trainers at the gym. That gave me someone to talk with, exposure to new techniques, and some useful encouragement. Over time, I have made friends at the gym and have even met scientific colleagues and students there.

I also enjoy taking colleagues, mentees, and mentors on hikes or to the gym, often followed by long and enjoyable dinners. These occasions are good fun, but they also create time for serious scientific discussion. Many of the best conversations about research do not occur in a 30-minute Zoom or Teams meeting. They occur on a trail, during a workout, or over dinner—when a conversation can develop, pause, wander productively, and return later to a question someone has reconsidered: *“Wait—what about this?”*

I often hear people talk about work-life balance. I prefer the idea of work-life integration. I do not stop being a scientist at a particular hour, and I do not stop being a human being at a particular hour. Exercise, food, friendship, intellectual challenge, and science need not compete with one another. They enhance the experience of one another like BBQ, coleslaw, and cornbread.

When I organize a hike, gym visit, or dinner with colleagues and mentees, I make one expectation clear in advance: everyone should come prepared to talk about science. So far, so good.



Development and Growth



COACHING FOR OPTIMAL REFLECTION
AND EFFECTIVENESS

with Dr. Jessica Casas

The Back-to-School Talk We Had on the Living Room Floor

As the back-to-school season approaches, the aisles fill with checklists, new backpacks, and supplies. But as a pediatric palliative care physician, executive coach, and mom of two elementary school girls, my mind often drifts past the logistics and toward the emotional toolkit my daughters will actually need when they walk through those classroom doors and beyond.

This year, instead of a formal sit-down lecture, we did it our way: sitting cross-legged on the living room floor, building with Legos, and chatting about who we want to be this year.

Decide who you want to be, not just what you want to do

We started by looking beyond grades and achievements. I asked them, *"At the end of this school year, what three words do you hope your friends use to describe you?"*

One of my daughters immediately answered, *"I want to be a lion!"* — Yes, baby, be the lioness! Have the courage to try things even when they are hard. The other answered, *"A good friend."* This led to a wonderful conversation about what that truly means: being trustworthy, sticking by one another, and showing loyalty and dependability. It was a beautiful reminder that whether we are in elementary school or the professional workplace, we can all strive to be good friends and colleagues.

Then, they both shouted, *"Kind!"* Yes! We always have the power to be kind and extend kindness to **ourselves** and to the world. I told them, *"You have the power to change someone's entire day by choosing to be kind."*

Learn to distinguish mistakes from identity

Building on that foundation of courage and kindness, I wanted them to know how to handle the inevitable stumbles of a new school year. There is a vast difference in how we talk to ourselves after a setback.

I reminded them that saying **"I failed"** is a different narrative than **"I made a mistake."** The latter is a temporary event; the former can easily morph into a limiting story about who they are. We had just read a book about Michael Jordan, and I shared his perspective on how missteps pave the way for growth:

"I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."

Build your personal support team

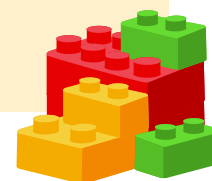
Of course, navigating courage, kindness, and mistakes isn't something we are meant to do in isolation. That led naturally to our final conversation: who makes up our circle?

We discussed who they could turn to and ask for help when things feel heavy, reminding them that it takes immense strength to ask for help or to simply say, *"I don't know."*

As our Lego tower grew taller, so did our connection. We thanked each other for being each other's primary support team while admiring our colorful creation. Here's to a year of learning, growth, and failing forward!

To connect with the CORE Coaching Program,
please click the button below.

To connect, click here!





Institutional Wellness Resources

Introducing the TCPO Wellness and Engagement (WE) Council

with Drs. Andrew Chu and Rathi Asaithambi

The Texas Children’s Physician Organization (TCPO) has formed the Wellness and Engagement (WE) Council to champion the well-being and engagement of our clinicians and APPs across the organization.

As pediatric clinicians and researchers, we are laser-focused on delivering the highest quality care to our patients and finding solutions to the most challenging diseases. However, as has been well-documented particularly since the pandemic, many of us have steadfastly done this work at the expense of our own well-being. Texas Children’s leadership has recognized the many storms our faculty have weathered - sometimes literally - including the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, systemic healthcare challenges (and associated moral injury), and eroding public trust in our medical system. Together, these have contributed to a growing sense among clinicians of loss of agency and the feeling that our collective tank is running dry.

Addressing this starts with finding specific, tangible ways to better support our faculty amid ongoing and future challenges. The WE Council is composed of frontline representatives across Texas Children’s, representing every department and campus including Texas Children’s Pediatrics. Representatives from the Department of Pediatrics (DoP) include:

Department of Pediatrics Representatives:
Rathi Asaithambi, MD - PHM
Andrew Chu, MD - GI



At-Large DoP campus representatives:
Janani Sundaresan, MD - West Campus, PHM
Mark Tabarrok, MD - North Austin, EC
Daniel Mahoney, MD - Medical Center, Palliative Care



APP representative:
Thomas (Tommy) Fraiz, PA-C - PICU



Our purpose is to connect local physician and APP voices with enterprise well-being strategy, reduce silos, and support high-impact changes that improve clinician experience and quality of care.

In practice, this means translating what we know about the needs of our clinical and research faculty into concrete recommendations for Texas Children’s leadership. Our initial efforts will focus on the challenges highlighted in recent assessments, including the AMA Organizational Biopsy and the AAMC Faculty Engagement Survey. While these surveys provide vital “birds-eye” insights into the state of our faculty, critical input from Wellness/Listening Rounds and direct conversations with frontline clinicians provides much-needed granular detail. Together, this data will enable us to make actionable recommendations to Texas Children’s executive leadership. We are organizing our early priorities using evidence-based frameworks, including the Stanford Model of Occupational Well-Being.

We are still setting up our Council, so stay tuned. There will be much more to come, and Pedi-Press will be an ongoing vehicle for communicating with the Department of Pediatrics community. In the meantime, please feel free to reach out directly to any of us with suggestions and questions. We are here to serve you, we want to hear from you, and we are listening!



Let us know how we did!
**Scan or press this QR code to share
your thoughts!**



If you're interested in wellness or would like to join our wellness initiatives, please contact us at **DOPCC@texaschildrens.org**. We also welcome submissions of wellness tips, stories, and ideas that support well-being and help foster a more connected, supportive environment!



A quote to remember

"Whenever you find yourself doubting how far you can go, just remember how far you have come."

