Long Life Learning **Podcast - Yale School of Management Executive Education**
Episode 5—Bonnie Wan
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Kavitha Bindra (00:06)

Hi, I'm Kavitha Bindra from the Yale School of Management. This is *Long Life Learning*, a podcast where we sit down with thought leaders and innovators to discuss living with inspiration and vitality. This season, we're having conversations about midlife and longevity and ways that inspire purpose and connection in anticipation of our new program, the Experienced Leaders Initiative, also known as ELI. For our fifth episode, I'm delighted to be speaking with Bonnie Wan. Bonnie is the creator and bestselling author of *The Life Brief*, as well as partner and head of brand strategy at Goodby, Silverstein and Partners. She's been named Chief Strategy Officer of the Year and an AdAge leading woman. She's also a member of the advisory board for ELI. We're so lucky to have her invaluable insight as part of an ongoing conversation on the board, as well as here in the studio today. Bonnie, welcome to the podcast.

Bonnie Wan (01:05)

Kavitha, thank you for having me. It's such an honor to be here.

Kavitha Bindra (01:09)

Well, we're thrilled to have you. And, per tradition, we've been starting these interviews with a question about an Eli core value: curiosity. When do you feel you first started embracing the power of curiosity or a curiosity mindset in your own life?

Bonnie Wan (01:26)

Well, I think we'd have to rewind really far back into my childhood. I immigrated from Taipei, Taiwan when I was six years old to Los Angeles, California. I didn't know English, I didn't know the culture, and it was really hard to be an outsider on the playground, at school. And I realized the one thing that could puncture my anxiety or my sense of being left out was to tune into my curiosity. And I think that was my first fixation and fascination with human behavior, which much later led me to become a strategist. But this idea of, “Oh, let me study what's happening on the playground,” that distracted me from the fact that I wasn't included as part of it.

Kavitha Bindra (02:17)

Yeah, I think that's so interesting, that sort of outsider perspective. And I almost wonder if the US is a particularly creative space, mainly because we are a nation of immigrants and people are coming in with sometimes an outsider lens and adopting that mindset, that curiosity mindset, to really help create a sense of belonging.

Bonnie Wan (02:39)

I love that reframe. I never thought about it, but yes, the mix and diversity that is the United States, right? It's such a buffet of interactions. A buffet of cultures and experiences and languages and points of view. So yeah, it is very rich versus a country that is very monocultural.

Kavitha Bindra (03:02)

Right, exactly. It's very easy to make a natural jump from curiosity to a topic that I know is near and dear to everything you do, which is creativity. Tell us why the notion of creativity and all of its partner skills is such a rich and energizing source of vitality for you.

Bonnie Wan (3:20)

Well, I feel so lucky to have grown up in the sandbox, the creative sandbox of advertising and marketing because it's such an idea driven, idea led space. What I love about that is I can see how in many other space. We tend to fall back into what I call binary choices. Yes or no. This or that. Stay or go. And what I love about creativity is it's the practice of expanding what's possible, filling in the space between black and white, being around what I call misfits, people who have always had a fixation and fascination for what could be versus what is. And they see an invitation in being told no or that something is impossible. And there's this fiery spirit that comes out of them.

I work with Jeff Goodby, who is one of the legends of advertising. And what I love about his master mindset is he's always looking for how do we flip a narrative or break a taboo or as he'd call, "Be a vandal in the world." Steal component parts from different spaces in life and reassemble them in a way that's completely unexpected and blows people's minds. Because in advertising we work with attention, attention is something that is so scarce right now as business moves at such a accelerate speed and culture moves that fast, and our lives are so ambiguous at times. Creativity really anchors us to put on a beginner's mindset, ask questions, and also just allow ourselves to drop in deeper, below our minds, below our intellects and access different parts of ourselves—call it the gut, call it the instinct—and steep ourselves in playful possibility.

Kavitha Bindra (5:16)

I also love that playfulness is inherent in the sandbox idea, that play is so necessary for getting in a space where you can be creative. So something we've been thinking through with each of our guests this season is about your relationship to longevity and specifically how you conceive of the stage of life ELI Fellows are entering now. Do you have any particular language you use to describe this stage in life?

Bonnie Wan (5:44)

Yes. The first two words that come up for me as wise beginners.

Kavitha Bindra (5:48)

I love it.

Bonnie Wan (5:49)

How do you intersect the wisdom and experience and expertise you've gained, then take on the beginner's lens? Take on the lens of a student again to give yourself permission to pause and reflect and play again. I'm learning in my own life right now that the transition is really awkward from going from established leader, teacher, expert. To someone who is awkwardly stumbling through things, led by questions, not answers. I'm finding in my own life the beauty of having the wisdom of an expert without the need to always have an answer. And being a beginner allows me to really lean into my curiosity and awkwardness, make mistakes. But then there's the knowing that deeper side of ourselves where our wisdom resides, and that's the piece that always shows up even in the messiness of being a student now. Now as I bridge from brand strategy to life and leadership strategy, there are lots of things that I'm discovering for the first time, yet it's anchored in the beauty of the knowing, the wisdom that I have gained over 30 years of navigating new terrain.

Kavitha Bindra (7:08)

I love that language, the wise beginners, because it really almost denotes like a magical space or a magical period where exactly as you said, you have what should seem like conflicting impulses: the beginner's mindset with a more experienced mindset, but yet you're bringing them together in a way that really can be really harmonious. I love that language.

So tell us about life briefs. To my understanding, this was a writing exercise you undertook back in 2010 during a moment of crisis, and just this year you've released a book entitled *The Life Brief*. What was the point of origin for the Life Brief and how has it led you to where you are today?

Bonnie Wan (7:50)

Well, as a trained strategist, a lot of my craft is being able to see things, see the essence of things. You know, what's at the heart and what's the heart of meaning for a certain situation? A problem? A brand? A company? And now, with life briefing, a person. So I'm really trained to see, but when I was in the throes of my own life in 2010, it was just complete fog. I was exhausted. I was angry. So all of my emotions were really leading the way, and I couldn't see anything. In fact, I had a lot of stories I held in my head about my situation—being the sole breadwinner, therefore, really working hard to make it in my career while being a parent of three young kids under the age of five. And I had a lot of stories about my marriage and about my partnership with my husband that were not true, but felt very, very real at the time in my exhausted state.

And what I had been trained to do as a strategist was to sort and separate truth and essence from noise. Yet in my own life, I was just confronted and steeped in the storm of noise, my feelings and stories in particular. And then when I hit a really dark stage, I was in my childhood home, in my childhood bedroom, and I gave myself a pause and permission to collect the data. Because as strategists, what we do is collect the data. What's the research? How do we unfold it? There's hard data, quantitative data, but then there's emotional data when we do interviews and get to know people at the very human and emotional levels, what is coming through for them. So as a reflex, I gave myself pause and allowed myself to get nakedly honest. And the question I asked myself was, what do I really want?

And not in the sense of, “What's my mood? What am I craving?” And certainly not, “What do my parents want for me? What does my husband want?” or “What do my children need?” It was really, again, naked honesty about what do I want for my marriage, for my family, for myself? And I just allowed myself to free write. And that was a way of capturing it and also creating spaciousness inside me by getting it all out. I call it brain dumping now, which is allowing yourself to be nakedly honest and not edit, not judge, just pour it out. Even if it's messy, it doesn't make any sense, it's all over the place. And when I had exhausted myself that night in writing, I was able to step back and look at the pages and I saw a new story, and it did not match the story that was in my head.

And that story was: It wasn't that my marriage was broken. It was that I had a broken relationship with time. And the fascinating thing with writing things down and seeing a new problem, a new story emerge… Your mind, your brain immediately leaves the old story and goes to the new story and says, “How do I fix this?” Or, “Where do I take this?” And that's what happened. And that was my first discovery that, oh yes, when we allow ourselves to get messy and be nakedly honest with ourselves, and we capture it in a place where we can disconnect or create distance between our thoughts and our feelings, now we get to approach those thoughts with curiosity, and that reveals a treasure trove of insight that then leads us down a new path.

Kavitha Bindra (11:38)

Do you mind me asking how many pages you produced that night? Like, how much came out of you?

Bonnie Wan (11:44)

Oh gosh, I can't remember right now, but I don't know, maybe seven to 10.

Kavitha Bindra (11:50)

Wow.

Bonnie Wan (11:51)

It was just a lot of scribbling and I was writing big, it was messy. I wasn't trying to be neat and formed, and I think I call the first part of the life briefing process, get messy so that you can get clear. Only when you get clear, does action organically and naturally fall out. A lot of people just skip the strategic part, which is the messy. How do we collect the information and the ingredients for clarity?

So it was a lot of stuff. And it was wet writing because I was crying as I was writing. The tears were pouring out. And it was such a release. It was cathartic in that moment, but really insightful. It was like a lightning rod when I realized. It wasn't that I wanted to separate with my husband, I actually wanted more time with them. More meaningful time, not the kind of time we were spending, negotiating, arguing, critiquing each other, competing with each other. And I find this working with companies too. Companies can get very insular in their view. Narrow, and so caught up in what's happening around them in the competitive landscape, that they lose sight of what's right there in front of them, which is what makes them magical, unique, authentic.

And I had lost sight of how I was showing up in my life. And what I realized was I was spending and spilling my time instead of investing it, and I was giving it away at work to friends, to other people. And that left me with nothing when it came back to my marriage. So that first life brief, which was a declaration of how I wanted to shift my time in a really sharp and sticky way, the name of that life brief was “Take our Time.” Which meant take back my time, make it intentional and slow down, slow it down. I was rushing and running in my life. It was chaos. And when I was able to distill it to that singular north star, that became my compass every morning. To really look at my schedule, look at how I was spending my time. And also what I was saying yes to and what I was saying no to. And that really flipped everything.

Kavitha Bindra (14:04)

Wow. Thank you for sharing that. In the book, you have some fascinating things to say about the nature of time and how your relationship to time has changed. So, you know, we've just been talking about that a bit. To whatever extent you feel comfortable sharing, would you be willing to tell us a bit more about what led to this reexamination of your relationship with time, and what you learned from that experience?

Bonnie Wan (14:28)

Yeah. I was able, in that 2010 iteration, to see and then confront patterns I had of showing up. I had a hard time saying no. I wanted to be generous. So I was overly generous. I could see the ways at work that I wanted to be the hero, prove myself. I saw the ways that I was constantly proving myself and not trusting that the ways that I was showing up at work were enough. In fact, more than enough. But I just kept giving. It was an infinite well.

It's funny because “take our time” is now back in play in my life, 15 years later. Lots of circumstances have changed. My children have grown up. Work has evolved. I launched a book. But I find myself smack back facing the same pattern, the same problem. Which is: giving my time away and not giving myself

the spaciousness I found I need in order to do something well. The life briefs I've written over time, some of them keep coming back into play.

Kavitha Bindra (15:34)

Why do you think some of those have come back? You know, you talked about taking back your time, yet you're finding the urge to people please or say yes is creeping back in. And what– why do you think that happens? Do you think you become perhaps complacent in a certain routine or way you're doing things? Just curious if there are sort of safeguards that can be put in place to help preserve that new mindset that you've created.

Bonnie Wan (16:03)

Yeah, I think we all live out patterns. I'm an achiever. I'm an Enneagram three, so I always see a mountain. There's never a mountain that I don't want to climb. So, as the circumstances change in our lives, as our lives evolve, we tend to confront or run up against the same challenges. I launched my book in January and came back to the agency as a leader, and both were happening at the same time and peaking. And I had the capacity to hold it all, but then I realized, "Oh my gosh… guess what's being sacrificed?" All the richness of my family, my friends, my marriage again. The brief itself becomes the reminder, "Wait, wait, wait, wait." Once you name it, once you name the pattern and you name how you want to break it, it's always there available to you.

I could feel in my body, the exhaustion, the burnout of holding it all. And then I could look down in a way and see that the things that really mattered to me were starting to have tension and really stretch beyond capacity. And then the brief came back up to mind. "Wait a second, take our time, slow it down." I knew what to do this time around. It was no easier because I had to unplug a lot of things that I felt very committed to. But we ended up moving our family, relocating, flipping our financial situation, so that I can again, create the spaciousness for me to hold the things that matter right now, let go of the things that I had outgrown, and recommit to the relationships that matter most.

Kavitha Bindra (17:45)

Wow. Those are some pretty big steps you took to recommit to the life brief. That's really interesting. So how do you envision a technique like writing life briefs, playing a critical role in the journey of self-discovery and transition that ELI Fellows are about to undertake? And again, I'd love to hear a little bit more about those pretty big steps that you took to reclaim that time.

Bonnie Wan (18:10)

Well, the power of writing is so potent and foundational. I talked a little bit about it earlier, but when we write and capture in writing, there's a few things that happen. We clear space from inside ourselves for new ideas to emerge. For new thoughts, revelations. When we reread what we've written, we get to meet it with curiosity and unpack more. It also invites deeper honesty because when you read what's on the page, you immediately have a reaction. "Oof! That's not quite true." Or, "Oh, I'm hiding a little bit there," or, "Maybe I'm lying to myself." Or "What's *not* on the page that is coming up through my body?" So you really get to have this relationship and you get to distance yourself from the emotions. And you get to start to see patterns over time. There's a poet who I've studied with, his name is Roger Hausden, and he says, "Writing rearranges the furniture of our minds."

And I love that because writing is an act of commitment in a way, because what we choose to put down, they invite our minds to rearrange the stories again that we've held or the scripts that we've been operating around. I know in the ELI program, writing is going to be really foundational, and I'm excited

for that. Someone mentioned that there's going to be some memoir writing, which I find wonderful because when we look back, how do we connect the dots between seemingly random parts of our lives? It's data collection for me as a strategist, that's how I see the writing. When we collect the ingredients, we get to see new relationships between the dots and we get to connect them in new ways.

Kavitha Bindra (20:00)

We actually had a conversation with Stephanie Dunson, who's going to be working with the ELI Fellows on some reflective writing exercises. And one thing she talked about was using reflective writing as a tool to create vulnerability and to be able to create bridges with other people. And I thought that was so interesting: Writing as a tool to create a space of vulnerability, rather than creating a product. Vulnerability being not the origin, but the destination. And I thought that was really an interesting perspective.

Bonnie Wan (20:34)

I love that. Yes, I think there are two forms of writing that I invite in the life brief. The first is what you're talking about: letting the pen lead and see what opens up. See what comes out. So, discovering the vulnerability or creating a portal *to* vulnerability through the writing. And writing as an act of discovery and exploration. And then the second way to write is to write for clarity. That's in part two of the life brief process, which is now we're taking all that exploration and we're zeroing in on the stuff that is sacred, non-negotiable, immediately causes a surge in our bodies when we reread it. It's like, ah, yes, that's the vitality in it. And now we get to write into an essence and get really, really clear about what matters most and what we want from those pieces. I love writing can be a gateway to exploration and expansiveness as well as sharpness and clarity.

Kavitha Bindra (21:39)

So you referred to the origin of all of this for you as asking the question, “What do you want?” And you're now working to help people reconnect to that question. Why do you think so many people fall out of practice asking this question, and how can they activate the motivation to live out the answer?

Bonnie Wan (22:00)

Well, we're taught from very young ages what we're supposed to want. David Brooks in his book *The Second Mountain talks* about that there are two mountains. And most of us are taught to climb the first mountain from a very early age. It's, “Go to the right university. Get that degree. Know what you want to do. Jump on that career. Meet the right partner, and then we will feel fulfillment.” Yet, as we know, not everyone gets to that peak. Some fall off, or are knocked off by tragedy or loss, and they find themselves in the valley. Others who have hit the peak, find themselves wandering when they're there. “What's this restless hum that I feel? Why do I still feel emptiness?”

And either from the valley—the trenches of tragedy or from the peak of that first mountain—there's a subset of people who then embark on the climb of the second mountain. And that second mountain is uncharted terrain. But you are the compass on that. Your wisdom. Your experience. Not the stories of success or the metrics that you've been handed or inherited. Those all go out the window because you *nailed* those on the first mountain. Or you've seen that they don't really fit what you really, really want. And the second mountain is navigated by the question, “What do I want?” So we're shedding what we're supposed to want in order to practice and engage with, in our heart of hearts, what do we really, really want?

Just right here, right now, can we drop into that? Am I being pulled by what I really want for the next moment? Or am I meeting some “should, could, would” kind of answer? And we all have housekeeping, by the way. This doesn't mean shed all your responsibilities and only do what you want. And that's going to be different for everyone. Some people get really nauseous when they arrive at what they really want and they think, “Oh God, I don't know how I'm going to get it. But yes, that's what I really want. That's coming up through my veins and my DNA.”

And what I love about people in the creative spaces—and these aren't just artists; creativity is a mindset—they're really in touch with their gut intuitions. They're led by ideas, and that sensation of craving, or longing, or desire. And desire is that thing that creates the friction, that builds the momentum, that fuels us forward.

Kavitha Bindra (24:48)

Can you tell us a little bit about your writing process? I have friends who have a very regimented schedule that they use. And then I have other writer friends who have a very particular process where they get everything out, then leave it for several hours, then come back and edit. And that works for them. So just curious, as you were playing with these different processes for writing your first book, what sort of stuck for you?

Bonnie Wan (25:16)

Well, I had to really create spaciousness for the ideas to bubble up first. And I like to write in really crisp, sharp language and then order them in order to get my outline. So I had to collect all the ideas, the big strains. And then when it came to filling it out, I had to speak it first.

And what I love about our new world of technology is everything's recorded and easily transcribed. So what I realized is I'm not a blank page writer. I can't just sit down, regimented as your friends are, and say, okay, from 6:00 AM to 10:00 AM I'm going to write and I'm going to fill it all out. What I had to do was speak out three chapters at a time. Have AI transcribe it. Have it laid out. And I'm a wicked editor. I love the editing process.

Kavitha Bindra (26:12)

In 2022, your named chief Strategy Officer of the year—a huge honor. And I would be curious to hear you unpack some of the nuances in what it means to say “I'm a strategist,” in taking on both professional and personal goals.

Bonnie Wan (26:29)

Strategy is the art of seeing. It also is a study of the human experience. How do people move through the world? What motivates them? What feeds and fuels them? And what gets them to change? Either their perceptions, or point of view, or their behavior more importantly. It called to me from a very young age. I also love studying heroic icons of history, Martin Luther King, Helen Keller, Amelia Earhart—people who really braved life and death circumstances in order to pursue a sense of purpose or passion that they were just called to.

And so I was a really different chief strategy officer than all of my predecessors. I was raised in the industry by white British men. They were really skilled at being lone wolf leaders. Mic drop moments, just walking into the room, having the clarity, dropping the smarts. They were often the smartest people in the room. But that wasn't my way of doing it. I was a really good listener. I liked to listen and draw out the ideas and the strategy from the people in the room. As a dear strategist friend of mine says, “Make the room smarter,” instead of, “Be the smartest person in the room.”

And that was really hard for me at first to create the conditions or the strategy to appear within a room within a set of people, because I had a lot of imposter syndrome on, “That's not the way it's done.” And so it was a huge surprise when I was named Chief Strategy Officer of the year. It was a really proud moment, not because I won the award, but it helped me see that maybe the industry was embracing a new way of leadership. I saw maybe a different set of values starting to be embraced in business. And I think that is what modern business is doing today.

Kavitha Bindra (28:31)

We're of course, thrilled to have you as a member of the ELI Advisory Board. I'd love to hear a little bit about what excites and energizes you about this partnership with the Yale School of Management. What do you hope ELI Fellows will get out of the experience?

Bonnie Wan (28:47)

So many things. But first and foremost, they're going get the permission to create space to get a clear sense of who they are and what they want. And that is going to be your compass. ELI is creating the space for everyone to go inward and really excavate with clarity who they are. And at the same time, ELI exposes you to people and resources that are wildly different than where you come from and your previous experience.

Really important and different to this program is: it's an incubator approach to education. So you're not only thinking and aspiring and visioning, but you're going to start acting on your ideas. You're going to start experimenting, and you're going to get all the scaffolding to hold you to it, all the resources and people and community to hold you through the start. Because kickstarting what's next is often the hardest part. How do I start? And ELI doesn't leave you after the program because the momentum continues. You're going to have lifelong community of friends and colleagues and co-creators. A really exciting approach to education.

Kavitha Bindra (30:04)

Do you have any stories you can share with us about individuals whom you feel are thriving in their third act of life?

Bonnie Wan (30:12)

I've been reading Marshall Ganz. He has a new book out called *People, Power, Change*, and I think he's in his late eighties. Don't quote me on his age. But he has a quote. He says, “My career has changed many times, but my calling has remained the same.” He is an organizer of democratic movements, starting with Rosa Parks to Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, Obama… He just really understands how to organize people through relational power and helping communities really steep in their own resources., and he's done it across so many eras and so many chapters. And no w he's a teacher, lecturer, author. I just love this idea that you can have many, many career acts, but pulled through the same thread of calling. It's very life brief-y to me because we are all our own distinct brands, if you will. We all show up with this intoxicating blend that no one else has that is distinctly uniquely us. And when we think about the next act, it's really about where we want to apply that.

Kavitha Bindra (31:26)

And finally, Bonnie, we'd love to end by asking: what books, videos, other resources should listeners check out next if they want to find out more about what we've discussed today. And what's inspiring you?

Bonnie Wan (31:40)

Well, I already mentioned David Brooks' *The Second Mountain*. And I hands down love that because it really is describing this next act that ELI is creating the space for people to explore and not just explore, but act on. Because joy is on that second mountain, on that next mountain. So I think David Brooks captures the why behind Eli so beautifully. And then of course, Rick Rubins' *A Creative Act*. Because I believe that life is the ultimate creative act. We procreate. That's how we come into the world. Creativity is the source of aliveness and vitality, as you had said upfront in this conversation. It is the fuel that will help not only us thrive till our very last breath, but it will create new legacies, new roadmaps distinctly born from our unique DNA and makeup.

Kavitha Bindra (32:41)

Bonnie Wan, thank you so much for joining us today. It was such a pleasure talking with you.

Bonnie Wan (32:46)

Thank you, Kavitha. Thank you so much for having me.

Kavitha Bindra (32:55)

Long Life Learning is a production of Yale School of Management Executive Education. The podcast is produced by Rebecca Barry, and was co-founded by Tracy Sheerin, Kristen Sorek West, Kelly Jessup, and me, Kavitha Bindra. Special thanks to the Yale SOM Media Team for their tech expertise and use of their studio, especially Froilan Cruz, Abrahaman Texidor Sr., Jessica Rogers, Donny Bristol, and Enoc Reyes. This podcast would not have been possible without help from Ben Mattison, Joanne Legler, and many others. Our theme song is "How It's All Connected" by Yan Perchuk.