A NEW SKILL FOR A MULTI-ROLE LIFE

TRANSILIENCE



RICCARDA
ZEZZA

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Riccarda Zezza

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Foreword

A few years ago, early in my career, I was invited to a dinner that had a lot riding on it. The UK head of my company was visiting while I was up for promotion. I understood that I was being assessed so I spent the evening hunting for the impressive thing to say, the clever line that would catch people's attention. The harder I hunted, the further I retreated into myself. I was sitting at a table full of interesting people, saying almost nothing.

I didn't get the promotion that year. The dinner was not the only reason, but I know why I struggled. It wasn't that I lacked the skills to be good company; my friends and family see me in storytelling mode all the time. The pressure of the moment had somehow buried the very skills that the moment required.

I've come to believe that this small, very human story is one of my most important learnings and it's not really about me at all. It's the issue that almost everyone faces: the gap between *having* a strength and *believing you can use it* in a new and sometimes frightening context. I have spent much of my life

since then watching that gap trip up people who deserved better. More recently, I have been trying, with someone far wiser than me on this subject, to close it.

That's Riccarda Zezza, the author of this book.

Over time, I stumbled into the recognition that the capabilities you build in one role sometimes carry into the next and sometimes remain hidden. It took me decades to see what Riccarda has spent her career studying, structuring, and proving. She calls this capacity *transilience*: the ability to carry your resources across the roles of your life. She has put a rigorous framework around it, tested through ten years of research and the reflections of more than 70,000 people. This book is her method.

What moved me to build something *with* Riccarda was the realization that the gap I'd struggled across alone is getting wider for everyone else, and fast.

We're all seeing the news that AI is becoming more capable and starting to affect jobs across industries. For many people who haven't yet worked closely with it, AI looks like a wall. It's a new and intimidating skill that seems to require courses, credentials and experts. The gap between what people have and what they believe they can do has stretched

into a chasm. The irony is this: **the capabilities an AI world actually demands are the most human ones**. They are curiosity, the instinct to ask the next question, the willingness to engage, the capacity to listen and to judge when something is *off*. Early research also suggests these are the same capabilities that keep us sharp as we work with AI rather than dulled by it. People already have these. They've been building them their whole lives, as parents, as friends, as caregivers.

People simply can't see that what they already are is exactly what this new world needs.

The blindness to these uniquely human skills falls hardest on the people who can least afford it: those returning to work after time away, parents, veterans, anyone whom automation has displaced and then told to "reinvent themselves." They already felt the chasm. AI has made it feel uncrossable. It is not.

I'll tell you about one person I'm thinking of as I write this, because she is exactly who this book is for.

She spent more than a decade in the pharmaceutical industry becoming genuinely expert in clinical document management, experienced in the relevant regulations and

highly specialized processes. She was the kind of person whose job was to catch what was wrong before it reached anyone else, to apply an entire system of quality in her head, to train the people who came after her. Then automation made her role redundant. Now she is being coached, as so many are, to reposition herself: *say you can supervise AI, say you can review the quality of AI's output.* She is terrified, because she's never done it before, and the fear is burying the very strengths that would carry her through, as it buried mine at that dinner.

But look at what she's actually carrying. More than a decade of being the human checkpoint on high-stakes work; of knowing, often before she could explain why, when something wasn't right. That is *judgment*, and it is the capability that AI, for all its power, cannot be trusted to do alone. She is not learning to supervise quality. She has *been* a supervisor of quality her entire career. Additionally, as a mother of two young children, she has spent years orchestrating competing demands with no clean handoffs, triaging under pressure, anticipating needs before they're spoken and running the most demanding supervisory loop there is.

She doesn't need to become someone new. She needs to recognize who she already is. That recognition, multiplied

across millions of people who feel the chasm widening in front of them, is the point.

This is why Riccarda and I are establishing the **Research Institute for Skills Transfer**, and why we have made a deliberate choice about *how* we build it.

We are building it as a **non-profit**, and we publish our research openly: if the goal is to help people see and transfer the strengths they already have, especially the people automation has hit hardest, then the knowledge needs to belong to everyone. Skills transfer should be infrastructure, not a privilege. So we share what we learn, invite others to build on it, and measure our success in the number of people who walk into a daunting new room carrying strengths they finally know they have.

And we are not stopping at a book. The Institute is building tools for people, and the partners who serve them: a short, guided conversation that surfaces the strengths you've built across every role of your life, maps where they transfer into the future you're facing, and leaves you able to name and prove what you have. The book gives you the idea. The tools help you apply it. Partners can use the same tools to help the populations they serve make the same crossing, at scale.

I keep coming back to that dinner table, and to the woman being told to reinvent herself. The skills were never missing: the pressure had simply buried them. Remove the pressure, restore the belief, and what was already there comes back to the surface.

That is what this book does. It removes the pressure long enough for you to see what you've been carrying all along. Riccarda has given us the map, the Institute is building the tools, but the strengths are already yours. They always were.

Saideep Raj
Co-founder, Research Institute for Skills Transfer

INTRODUCTION

Dancing with Complexity

To be just yourself, in a world that does its best,
day and night, to make you like everyone else,
is to fight the hardest battle a human being can fight.

E.E. Cummings, A Poet's Advice to Students

When, at the end of a short exercise, I ask if anyone has found traits they'd like to carry from one role to another, a girl raises her hand: "I have: from athlete to student, I'd like to carry over being precise and competitive."

I'm at a high school, during a shared school management session, and once again I realize that transilience comes naturally to us: we grasp it instantly and we'd all know how to use it.

Yet, every time it surprises and moves me, just as it did the first time, more than ten years ago, when on the subway I ran into a participant from a workshop I'd led a year earlier.

As she greeted me, she exclaimed, "I am using transilience every day!"

At school, as well as in training classrooms, we're taught that we must look outside ourselves for the skills we "lack": we have to take assessments to identify the gaps we need to fill, and then take courses to bridge them - but these gaps keep reappearing over time as the world changes and challenges multiply. So, we take courses to learn how to relate to others, courses to enter the workforce, courses to manage change, courses to become creative, courses to develop leadership skills. Gaps, so many gaps, pointing to the things we don't know how to do, and courses, so many courses, to fill them, to fix what isn't working in us, to make us more "suitable."

But what if that isn't the problem? What if we already possess the skills needed for a new role on the horizon or for an existing one that's changing… but in other roles? What if the problem is that we don't see them and don't realize we can transfer them from one role to another?

I have read thousands of reflections on transilience collected by the Lifeed Observatory, which has engaged over 70,000 people in ten years, and the data open up a world of learning that rewrites what we thought we knew.

> We are many things, and if we view them as a synergistic system rather than one in conflict, our resources can be transferred between our roles in every direction: from home to work, from sports to family, from difficult situations to ordinary ones and vice versa.

If we put into circulation the *things* we are and the resources they bring with them, our effectiveness, our awareness, and, above all, our self-confidence increases. We discover that being many things - however tiring, because it is true that time is limited - means having more resources at our disposal to succeed: it means being able to count on a broader "area" of ourselves. And it is a powerful discovery, especially if we make it when life challenges

us with a transition that throws into crisis who we have been up to that point.

Think of the effort we put into having a stable identity, into presenting ourselves to the world in a certain way, and how all of this wavers when something changes and we no longer know how to feel about ourselves or how others see us.

In those moments, we may reach a point where we no longer know who we are, and what saves us may be a perspective that recognizes that "we are all many things."

The small car stopped on the bike lane of a two-lane city street. Nervous cyclists weave around it, risking being hit by cars; others stop and wait for it to move, grumbling louder and louder. The car doesn't move. Inside, an elderly woman is also motionless; she seems to be waiting for someone. Maybe she parked haphazardly, however it seemed most convenient to her, heedless of traffic rules? The tension mounts, and stereotypes rush in with explanations that offer no comfort: elderly, incompetent, overbearing...

I get close enough to peek inside the car and notice on the dashboard, loosely tacked on, a black-and-white photo of an elderly gentleman. It looks like a photo from a headstone; I sense that the woman's husband has recently passed away, and I imagine that in the past, he was always the one driving the car. And so, the incompetent, elderly driver becomes, in my eyes, a widow in distress: empathy kicks in and I forgive her everything. The anger subsides, and tenderness takes its place.

If we could see everything that people are, everything that happens in their lives, and what's in their hearts, we'd get angry less often and understand each other better.

For me, it's like this every time I walk into a room or walk down the street. I look at the people around me and see them as children, parents, friends, sisters, brothers, immigrants, scholars, sports enthusiasts, engaged in daily negotiations among the thousand things they are: many responsibilities that come with many characteristics, and therefore many abilities.

But I also realize, as I look at them and they look at me, how constant the effort is to hide such a wealth of identity, to present ourselves to the world in only one role at a time. Yet, the ability to acknowledge the complexity of our lives without fear goes even beyond our capacity for daily coexistence: acting with others while being aware of the multitude of things we all are changes social processes. It becomes a political act in which seeing multiple roles means "putting more on the line."

In the Oslo negotiations of the 1990s, the Norwegians who served as mediators had a simple yet radical insight: instead of keeping Israelis and Palestinians locked in a meeting room, they had them live together. The Norwegians established some unwritten rules: everyone ate together; they went for walks together; they stayed in the same building, with shared spaces; they were encouraged to share parts of their personal stories.

This decision to have them share meals, walks, and informal time together had a specific goal: to get them to stop seeing each other solely as "political enemies" and begin to get to know one another as people, fostering respect and an initial sense of trust.

The unwritten rule was: not just formal meetings, but shared time. At breakfast, they met in sweatpants, not in suits and ties. At lunch, they talked about their children, their fears, their exhaustion. In the evening, some smoked together; others shared stories of what it was like to grow up in Jerusalem or Gaza. The "enemy" slowly ceased to be an abstract concept and became a face, a story, a tone of voice.

A tactic that is almost a "protocol of relational transilience":

the context changes: not a formal table, but a home, meals, walks;

rigid roles are suspended: not just "minister/Palestine Liberation Organization representative," but a person who eats, laughs, gets bored, talks about their children;

new associations are activated: the "enemy" is linked to stories, faces, and everyday gestures, not just labels and conflict.

From the perspective of transilience, Oslo is a perfect laboratory: the content of the negotiations changes, and so does the setting of the roles. The official representative, the expert, the politician remain in those roles, but alongside them, others emerge: the parent, the friend, the temporary colleague in a shared experience. In that hybrid space, people can shift resources from one role to another: the listening they use with their children, the patience they use with elderly parents, the curiosity they use with friends.

It is this silent shift that opens the possibility of an agreement. The conflict does not vanish, but the "other" is no longer just a label: they are someone with whom you have broken bread. In this sense, even before it was a political treaty, Oslo was an experiment in how changing the space around people can change what people are able to see in themselves and in others.

The outcome? However futile it may seem to us today, that was the first and only time Israel recognized the PLO as the representative of the Palestinians, and the PLO recognized Israel's right to exist.

Transilience is a concept (more precisely, a "meta-competence") born with "*master*"—the learning method I created with Andrea Vitullo in 2013—because we needed a new word[1] to define the capacity our resources have to "travel from one role to another". We had seen this clearly with mothers, who brought a new kind of maternal leadership, a new meaning of power, and many other key skills to their professional roles, but we sensed that it wasn't limited to them.

> Transilience translates the identity complexity we all possess into an ability.

We are all many "things," among which we juggle every day. But the narrative we construct highlights only one aspect: scarcity. The scarcity of time, attention, and energy that means we

must "divide ourselves" among the many things we are. Science, however, tells us that this is only part of the story.

Research on the complexity of the self reveals that we are made to live with this multiplicity and can benefit from it. Having many roles is like having many places at our disposal: places where we expend our energy, certainly, but also where we can invest, find motivation, and express different dimensions of ourselves. This research also shows that we can learn from ourselves and from who we have been. When we take on new roles, we do not start empty-handed: we already carry a wealth of meanings and resources that support us, while also being enriched and transformed by each new experience.

Our very biology, as neuroscience confirms, is programmed to change by breaking patterns: this is what makes us the wonderful species we are –or could be.

Complexity is within us, and this is a crucial insight today, as complexity is part of our lives through the constant changes we undergo, both as individuals and as a society. The constant effort to simplify and be "less" than we are is no longer sustainable: it leads us to live in a fiction of reality that offers no real solutions. But, above all, it is unnecessary: if we learn to accept and use our human complexity, we will realize that we have everything we need to understand, choose, and decide, even in the face of the complexity of a changing world.

> Taking a closer, more courageous look at the richness of our identity will show us that, instead of fearing it, we can dance with complexity: first within ourselves, and then outside ourselves.

From this self-knowledge arises a new kind of leadership, one that draws strength from what we usually avoid: from the aspects of our lives that we today call obstacles or disruptions, from the personal and caring dimensions, from the places where we invest our intensity and feelings.

Because, as transilience demonstrates, it is in those realms that we naturally recharge and find meaning: it is there that we develop the abilities that give us an edge, that allow us to sense things before we understand them, and to feel what we will later be able to think.

And it is there that our motivation to continue being agents of change is born, along with our ambition for a humanity that will always have something more and better to offer: a special vision, one worth living for.

It is a vision that overturns old models of power: one in which the desire to act arises from a self-awareness that broadens the scope of responsibility and, consequently, our horizons; that stops the waste of resources and, in doing so, recovers just what the world needs.

This book, in introducing and describing the new competency of transilience, draws on over ten years of research conducted with research centers and universities using data collected by the Lifeed Observatory, which has been working with companies since 2015 to activate life-developed competencies in the workplace.

The book is structured into five chapters.

In the first two, we examine the origins of the problem in a society that systematically diminishes our identity and wastes our skills, generating stress and conflict, and how this can change if we begin to view our complex identity as a set of resources we can mobilize through transilience.

In the third chapter, we explore the scientific mechanisms that make transilience possible: breaking stereotypes, self-enrichment, and self-efficacy are resources that already belong to us, but which need to be reactivated to reveal a completely new landscape brimming with possibilities.

In the fourth chapter, we see what happens when transilience comes into play: even though it is a skill that we naturally possess, today it requires a conscious effort to begin using it, and a reward for results to motivate us to do so.

In the fifth chapter, we place this ability within a broader context: we imagine what a "transilient society" would look like, what resources we would recover, and how our perception of the change and uncertainty in which we

live would shift. Transilience makes us better suited to the contemporary world, but for this to happen, many things must change.

To help us picture a concept this new, in these pages we will find:

1. **scientific foundations** of transilience, with sidebars for readers who want to go further;

2. **concrete examples and results** of its application in various contexts: from the workplace to prisons, from illness to aging, from caregiving roles to volunteer work;

3. **quantitative and qualitative data** showing the richness of our identity complexity and the opportunity, including in economic terms, of making our resources transilient;

4. **voices and first-hand accounts** from people who have experienced transilience and, through their own reflections, have made it real and immediately usable in everyday life (to them goes all my gratitude for the openness and generosity with which they embraced it);

5. and finally, **a few prompts for trying it out right away**– seeing what happens.

We already have transilience within us: it comes naturally to us.

What prevents us from using it is a culture that simplifies and reduces us, forcing us to live in permanent conflict between the things we are.

To reclaim it, we must know that it exists, understand how it works, and, above all, change the narrative of what it means to "be all that we are."

Showing all parts of ourselves with confidence, to ourselves and to the world, is not an expression of a big ego; it is not an act of vanity: it is taking responsibility for all that we can be and do.

And, as Simone de Beauvoir said, the time has come to accept *the great adventure of being ourselves.*