

Finding Your Path with James Beng Lee

Interview Transcript

Julia Lessing: Hi, everyone. Today, we're talking about finding your path. And to have that conversation, I'm delighted to be joined by a special guest, James Beng Lee. James is an actuary, a life coach, and a business advisor. And for as long as he can remember, he's been fascinated by human development. And he's been on a quest to answer two key questions. What makes for a successful life? And what makes people change? James, thank you so much for joining us today.

James Beng Lee: Hey, Julia, it's so good to see you. Thanks for having me on.

Julia Lessing: I'm so excited to have this conversation. And I know this topic is going to be so helpful and will resonate with so many listeners. And James, it's been a while since we've seen each other in person. And you've had a bit of an unusual kind of actuarial career path. You're not doing so much traditional actuarial work anymore. Can you tell us a bit about what you're doing now?

James Beng Lee: Absolutely. Well, firstly, I'm on the other side of the world. I'm actually in Vancouver, Canada. So, we came here about 14 months ago. Yeah, time spent exploring this part of the world. I'm with my lovely wife and two young boys. And yeah, I just love connecting into local community here. Most of my time is actually spent running my own coaching and consulting practice called LiveHolystic. And basically, yeah, I coach and advise businesses and individuals, particularly corporate leaders, entrepreneurs and artists, people who feel stuck and a bit discontent despite the external success they've achieved so far. So really, my role and support is to help them reorient their life towards a new chapter of flourishing and adventure.

So yeah, look, the metaphor I use is kind of the life of the treadmill, treadmill at the gym. I have nothing against the gym, by the way. But I guess it describes the life for me prior to 2019. And basically, there was lots of movement in my life, whether it was being part of a corporate startup, youth mentoring, church leadership, traveling, etc. But I was really confused because I felt stuck despite the movement. And if you think about the gym and being on the treadmill, it's almost like there's so much movement. But from another vantage point, looking in, it's almost like you're stuck in the gym. And I didn't realize that.

And it was at that point in 2019, late 2019, that I was open to this possibility, metaphorically, of getting off this treadmill, this way of living, and stepping outside the gym. And so, for me, it's actually been this interesting last three to four years where I'd almost say there's been this, you know, if you've been running on a treadmill for so long and try to get off and try to get out of the gym, you can't do that because you actually are disorientated.

So really, the last three or four years has almost been this rebalancing, just getting my feet on the ground, so to speak, and then being able to step outside into this new life for me. And so that's what I do now. It's effectively helping people who have been on this cycle, on this pattern of life, and they're looking for some transition. And it's really helping them with that period of time. Look, it doesn't have to be three to four years, but it's definitely that movement and transition from the treadmill to what I call the trail.

Julia Lessing: The treadmill to the trail. Wow. So, it's so fascinating to hear you talking about that analogy, James, because from the outside, so many people, most people that know you would think of you as having had success in the business world. You were well-known as a leader in your community, so active in your church. So, I guess the definition of success from the outside, but it sounds like what you were experiencing was that you were on this kind of treadmill while reaching and striving for that kind of external definition of success.

James Beng Lee: Yeah, absolutely. It's really what I've come to know is, and maybe I'll put it this way, like there's so much we could talk about success, but a few things I've kind of discovered along the way is one of them is when it comes to success, things aren't what they seem, and I think we can all think about, and I'm probably included in that as you've mentioned, but we could probably think about different parts of society. You could pick numerous examples across life today, whether that's in church, corporate life, government, media. We could think about the recent Will Smith example at the Oscars, and where we can have a view of success, and yet you scratch below the surface, and it probably isn't what you expected, and so I think a starting point is not to take everything at face value, like things aren't what they seem, and for me, I think I realized that my success or the view of success was limited.

So take the treadmill example again, is what I was focused on was, okay, what kilometres, or now miles in North America, how much I racked up, and the speed I was going, and the incline, that was what I was focused on, right, and I could look at that, and that's, I think, what people around me valued, right, so it's almost like, yeah, and now it's then in comparison to other people's, what they're getting on their treadmill. So, when you look around, you're like, oh, I'm successful because versus others, I've gone further, or I'm going higher, or I'm going faster, and yet, like I mentioned, from another angle, I'm still stuck.

There's almost this broader level or broader definition of success, and what I realized is I had some level of, if you call it surface level success, external success, but maybe not what I now know is like soul level success, like that deeper, deeper success that goes below the surface, and I'll give you an example. So, I was at the dentist the other day, and as you do, you know, everyday life, and I go in there, and I'm expecting this like half an hour, 45-minute clean, right? I'll do it, just get on my way.

Then the dentist was like, "OK, James, I've checked you out," (like, again, this is my first one in Vancouver), so like, "I've checked you out, we've got a few options. One of them is, we can just do the surface level clean, and you'll be fine, and you'll have white teeth, or we can actually do the actual clean that you need, and that's actually going to be three

sessions of two hours, and you have some bone density issues that are showing up, some gum things," and she was like, "I don't know who you've seen in the past, or what you've been doing, but what would you like?" And it made me think about this whole idea of success, right? Like, I can do the clean and look okay, but it's short term, or I could go under the surface and get the actual transformation I needed.

And again, this stuff, this is the thing, Julia, it's not necessarily Instagrammable. Again, like, I don't want to show my teeth necessarily, but metaphorically, it's almost like some of that success, when I say, when I'm talking about soul level success, and this kind of alignment, where your beliefs match up with your actions, that people don't necessarily see, that is a deeper level of success. And I think that is part of the journey that I've been on, to not settle for that surface level, but to really take the time, take the effort, the investment to actually go, well, what is success for me, personally?

And if I could give you just a quick example, just with my son's soccer team, our youngest is Caleb, and I just listened to the soccer coach here in the suburb we live in, which is Richmond, and he just spoke to the parents, and he was like, you know what? I just want you to know, parents, that the aim isn't necessarily to win, right? And you could go "What a terrible coach!" But he was saying, he was so confident in his abilities, he's like, we can win because I know tactics that can get the ball to the striker and then just shoot the goal and our team will win all the time, right?

But what's going to happen is the team's not going to grow, you're not going to grow your mids and your backs, and the striker will just be one-dimensional. And he said, "I'm wanting your children to be able to play five different positions well in five to 10 years." And I'm like, "OK, I'm on that train. I'm with you. I get it." And I probably previously, prior to this journey, would have been that parent that's like, what are you doing?

Julia Lessing: We want them to win.

James Beng Lee: Yeah. Let's go.

Julia Lessing: Yeah. Yeah. Show me the results. Yeah. So, sounds like, you know, previously success was more of that sort of quick win superficial visual, other people can see it. But your definition of success now is a different, a deeper soul-level version of success. So how would you describe what success looks like for you now, James?

James Beng Lee: Yeah, look, I think one of the things, even before I share that is just to say that if we don't determine our success, it will be determined by us. And actually, the alert is, we are already living with some definition, whether we consciously know it or not. And so, our success is picked up in the different environments. I'll give an example. For me, my parents came from Malaysia. We had the migrant story. And so, it was success that I grew up with was get good grades and get a good job. And I've come to appreciate why, but that was the environment I grew up with from a family dynamic perspective.

In terms of the corporate business life, what was told or modelled was the higher you go, or the bigger the team you have, or the higher salary, that means you're more successful. If I think about the church context and anyone in faith-based communities, for me, it was the message I got was the more you were serving or seem to be serving, the more spiritual you've become. And so, if I can put that into melting pot of the James success definition at a subconscious level, it was higher productivity, seen with status, seen serving. And for you, Julia, for other people listening, it's going to be different as well.

Julia Lessing: Yeah. So, for you, it was those external signs of productivity and servant and contributing, doing, and outputting. It was what you were doing and what people could see, what was visible from the outside. That was what was seen as success, getting the good grades, getting the good job, being a leader, giving back, all those things. But you felt like you were just on this treadmill doing those things. You could do them, but how did you know that that wasn't what your definition of success was? What were the signs?

James Beng Lee: Yeah. Look, they probably were there, but I just wasn't aware of it. Honestly, when you're on a treadmill and the kind of life I was on, it was busy. So, I think time is definitely a factor, having the ability to step away, the ability to reflect. And so, I didn't always have that opportunity.

And so, when it comes to, I would say, probably signs of unhealth, the ones I have seen and I've really connected with is, I think one of the first things is we tend to escape. And when I say escape, it's almost this escaping, particularly discomfort. It could be uncomfortable feelings. It could be some fears. It could be a moment where someone disrespected me at work or said something about my performance. And I might say, "Oh, whatever." But really, I've held that inside somehow.

And so, what we tend to do is we go to things to escape. And that's different for all of us. It could be shopping. It could be online activity, social media. It could be, I'm just going to travel and get away from this. It could be I'm going to start a new venture to distract me. I'm going to find new friends because I don't want to have that hard conversation with my current friend or my current relationship.

And for me, you know, the two things for me was work. I'd bury myself in work. And I think the distinction for me was what made it confusing was it would be volunteer work. So, it was almost this thing of whether it's spirituality or just this is I'm doing it for good. It was still a way I could get away from uncomfortable things in my life. And another one was pornography. And so, you know, we all have the ways that we cope and ways that would almost say unhealthy coping mechanisms. And I had those. It's going to be different for every person. And here's another one, by the way, which is I think another indicator I see in myself, but also people I work with now is when we're over focused on other people. Right. And so, it kind of can be this it can be this comparison in the sense of, oh, I can feel better about myself because I'm looking at someone else's life and maybe they're not doing as good as me. And that can make me feel better temporarily.

But again, I'm, again, escaping into someone else's life rather than being able to focus on myself and maybe the stuff I need to work on. And so, at a deeper level, my actions aren't connecting with my beliefs. And I'd call that misalignment, like there's a misalignment between my deepest desires, my deepest beliefs, and the behaviour and the actions and the thoughts that are coming out. Psychologists would probably use the term something like cognitive dissonance, where there's just some chaos kind of happening, we can kind of feel it. And, yet there is this misalignment.

So, I remember this moment, this vivid moment where I was in New Zealand, at the time doing a corporate startup. And I remember my, I was traveling a lot that year, in particular. And I remember my family, my wife and two boys, I went to Canada for a trip from Sydney. And I was going to surprise them, I was thinking, oh, they don't know I'm coming, I'm going to surprise them and travel from New Zealand. But then, there was an obligation for me to go back to Sydney, to pretty much help out my church and, you know, just be there. Because one of the leaders wasn't there. And you know what, I, to this moment, I regret that. To this day, I regret that decision. Because what was happening was, I was so focused on pleasing people and people approving of my performance, that it showed me, again, action to deep belief was misaligned. My deep desire and belief was, I'm a family person, I'm focused on my family, I want to spend time with them. And that's what I've said. And yet, when push came to shove, that didn't happen.

So, so there's some misalignment. And if I'm honest with myself, I've got some unhealth, I've got something that I need to work on. And now I know what that is. But at that time, it's like, I didn't have the support, I didn't have the language, I didn't have the emotional maturity. None of that was present in my life. It was just almost black or white. Am I performing or not? Am I succeeding from the definition that other people have for me or not? And that's why it's just such a, at some level, is a complex, big thing that we need to work through. And I can understand why we sometimes might not want to go there, because it does feel painful and hard to lean into this, the tough stuff, right?

Julia Lessing: Yeah, it does. It does. And you're not alone there, James. I mean, sometimes we can think that we, the challenges that we're facing or those uncomfortable feelings or that misalignment or that sense that something's not quite right. Sometimes we can look at those external indicators and it can be hard to identify that misalignment. It can be hard to call it what it is because, you know, we justify that, oh, but it looks good on paper, but we're ticking all these boxes, and everyone thinks we're doing well.

So why do we not feel okay? Why do we not feel like we're living the right life? We're on the right path. And you've given some really interesting examples there about how we do cope with that misalignment, how that shows up. And when we find ourselves doing those unhealthy coping strategies, and like you said, they're different for all of us, that they can be red flags or indicators that maybe we're not living in alignment, that we do have some misalignment in our lives.

So, what did you do once you made that discovery that you weren't living in alignment, that although you had some maybe less socially acceptable coping strategies, but also some

very socially acceptable coping strategies, like just working harder, giving back more. I mean, that's a common trap for so many of us. And we think that that's just, oh, but it's good. We're just working harder and we're giving more to our community. How did you, when you realised that things weren't going well for you, what did you do?

James Beng Lee: Yeah, look, for me, it really started with actually someone sharing with me about this group, this support group that I could talk to about some of the challenges I was facing. And in particular, it was doing an external assessment and realizing that at a clinical definition, I was addicted to different things. And I would never, and people would never say, I'm addicted, right? Like this word addiction is something that I'm like, I'd reserve for, this is the judgmental side of me coming out, critical side of me coming out. Oh, that's the other people, they're addicted, like they're addicts. And yet the clinical definition really talks about addiction as something where there's some level of disturbance or dependence in our life.

And so, you think about that, and we think about our lives and go, "Ooh, what is something where it's kind of disturbing me a bit?" Like it's just interrupting the life that I really hope for, or my family hopes for, or I hope for my family. And secondly, we're something where it's almost become a crutch, like a dependency. And with a crutch, it's almost like, well, you only meant to have a crutch for a little bit. At some point, you meant to get off it. But it's holding you up at some level.

And so really the starting point is someone external to my circles, or whether that was an assessment, and it became people, right? It became coaches, it became support group leaders, and people that were really were able to help me and build me with different tools, and in particular, presence and love, in a different way to what I had experienced. And so, I would say, yeah, I needed someone to show me a different vantage point. Again, I'm going to use a treadmill over and over again, because it's my life, it's the way it's operated.

Julia Lessing: So many of us, yeah.

James Beng Lee: Yeah, again, that I had a limited view. And so, I was so focused on the kilometres, the height, the speed, that was my predominant measure of success. And that was reinforced by my environment, by the way, my different environments. I needed something outside of that environment to be able to say, James, actually, from an objective point of view, and also trying to uncover what I deeply desire, things aren't matching up. And this is what seems to be the challenges. Do you want to go on a journey to face into those? Do you want to go on a journey towards probably, I'll call it now like holistic health, like just actually being whole as a person, to look at the parts of your life that maybe you've suppressed and to go on this journey.

And so, I'm really happy to share openly about pornography. It's something that, and we could do that another time. But just to say that that's been part of my story as an unhealthy coping mechanism. I know there's different views on it. Some people might say it's okay. Some people don't say it's okay. But whatever that line is, for me, it was an unhealthy way that I was coping and supporting my performance, as was work.

But like you said, work was seen. Something like pornography is unseen. And it's not something like cocaine, where you can see the lines. You can see what's happening, the scars, etc. And yeah, so all that to say, having someone outside my circle and environment, someone that I could trust, someone that could provide a safe space, and I also had to be willing to let go of, at some level, the life that I was living, and to go on this journey into the unknown. And that's a scary thing at different levels. But for me, it was like, I know this is what I got to do. I just know that I can keep going the way I am. But there's got to be, there is something more. And back to that point of things aren't what they seem. I wanted to take this journey.

Julia Lessing: Thanks for being so honest and open about your coping strategies, James, because whilst overworking or working hard is sort of almost seen as a, and that can certainly be an addiction for so many of us, but it's seen as a very socially acceptable and almost like a badge of honour sometimes to be overworking. But to have another unhealthy coping strategy, in your case, pornography, whether it's, you know, for others, it might be, you know, using overusing alcohol or substances or, you know, whole bunch of things, but there's so much shame that can come with that as well. And to be able to actually not just recognize that it's an issue, but to be honest and open and to be able to share that because we are all human, we, and we do all suffer and we do all have those different challenges and different unhealthy coping strategies that come up for us, whether we choose them or not.

But to be able to break free from those so that we can live a different life without those dependencies, and as you said, disturbances as well, because those things do get in the way of our lives, even though they might help us in the moment, cope with whatever those uncomfortable feelings are that we're having or the misalignment in our lives. They help us in the moment, but then, you know, in the medium and longer term, they cause other problems for us. So, thanks for being so brave and sharing that with us.

James Beng Lee: Oh, no, you're more than welcome, Julia. Like I've come to embrace that's part of my story and that it's been something I've been exposed to at a young age and what I've come to realize is, and by the way, I think it's important to say, there's been moments in my life where I'm like, I just want to get rid of this, like, you know, and I want this miracle, right? I want this sudden, like, this thing to be taken away from me and what I realized is that didn't happen and yet I'm so thankful for the last three or four years where it hasn't been almost this, if I could say the word, deliverance from something immediate, this instantaneous, like, it's done, but it's been this three to four years, step-by-step process of transformation where I've got to understand the neuroscience behind it.

I've got to understand my brain patterns. I've got to understand so much about myself that I would not, I would not exchange this last three to four years for anything because if I got that instantaneous, whatever you call it, almost rescue, reprieve, I couldn't do what I'm doing now. I couldn't be helping people who experience not exactly the same thing, but something where they're like, you know, I have this dependency. I have this disturbance and I don't know what to do. And I've tried things, but I don't know what to do with it. And

I know I can speak to, like, I can connect with those people. And it's not like I'm going to fully like, just I'm going to guarantee I'm going to solve it exactly for you. But you know what? We're going to go on this journey of discovery and adventure, and it's going to be painful at times, but we're going to lean into some of your fears, and we're going to lean into some of those hard feelings and discomforting things in your past and in your present. And there is hope that we can step through.

And so, look, Julia, it is tough, and there are consequences to our actions, for sure. And yet, at the same time, I hold that there is such a hope for us to transform our lives. And it has to happen below the surface, is what I'm going to say. If we just want the surface thing, that's, you know, I'm just going to say it straight. It's going to be short term. It's going to be, we get to a mountain, and we're like, yay, and we can, but it's going to be exhausting. And the next mountain will come up. Yeah, it'll be the next mountain. It's like, oh, again, it's like, so that's where the dissatisfaction, that discontentment comes in. We don't know how to celebrate because we're just onto that next thing.

And meanwhile, inside, we're holding this thing or whatever it is, that it would almost be that success. That's why I say soul level. It's like, if I can work through this stuff, that's success. And I know that that then impacts the people around you in a good way, your relationships, the kind of work that you do, the way that you work, what you really deeply desire, not just what is the impulsive desire that we tend to have and that we feed off and we go after, but actually that what's really deep inside us, that we've always either wanted to do, we've always had as a part of our life, but we never got there because we're always going after whatever was the strongest, more impulsive desire.

Julia Lessing: So much in there, James, and so many more questions that I want to ask you, but thank you so much for sharing your story with us, your journey with us, and what it's been like for you to be living on that treadmill where you're at the top of the leader board and everyone knows it, and you're thinking, I must be doing the right thing because I'm at the top of the leader board and I'm faster than everyone else, but feeling like there wasn't something quite right, and that that was manifesting in some unhealthy coping strategies as well, some socially acceptable, some less socially acceptable, but what they were helping you in the moment, but they weren't helping you longer term and they were causing a disturbance and a distraction for you as well.

And so that when you realize that actually maybe you weren't meant to be on the treadmill, maybe you were meant to be a bike guy, or maybe you're a music guy (which I know you are!) or that just because you were the fastest on the treadmill compared to the others around you didn't necessarily mean that that was what you were supposed to be doing and what was your definition of success.

But that once you could get off that treadmill and explore some other options, and now you've trained as a coach to be able to help other people get off that treadmill and to walk with them in their journeys of finding that alignment and finding success in their lives as well.

Such an inspiring story and I'm so excited for your clients who can have that help and support from you as they get off the treadmill and find their new path. James, I want to ask one more question before we wrap up today and it's this. If you have one tip that you'd like to share with actuaries who are wanting to make more conscious, authentic career decisions and find their path, what would it be?

James Beng Lee: Straight off the bat, I'd say don't settle for surface level success. I mean, underneath that, it'd be where possible, I'd encourage you to take a step back and consider not just career but your whole life. And I'm talking about, you know, not being tied to short-term sprints that are exhaustive, but this kind of idea of a long-term adventure, where you have the valleys and the mountains and all the in-between, not being pulled just by your strongest desires, which are not often our deepest desires. And I have to say, the encouragement is to get the support that you need, whether that is a coach, a counsellor, or a leader, just someone that is independent at some level, that can be objective, that might not be in your current circles and that can give you a different perspective. So yeah, that is my encouragement.

And I just want to say, whoever's listening, that there is a life for you. You have your life as it is now and you also, if you are experiencing just kind of this nagging or regret might be building up in your life, I want to encourage you that lean into that and don't just go over it and say, oh, I'll work it out one day. But I encourage you just to take that next step and to start that journey.

Julia Lessing: That's great advice, James. And for people who are on the treadmill and wanting to talk to you about maybe getting some help about getting off, how can they find you?

James Beng Lee: Absolutely. Well, feel free to directly contact me, James at liveholystic.com. I'd love to hear from you. You can also visit the website, which is liveholystic.com and I'd love to get to meet you and hear some of your story and see if I can support you or there may be someone else for you.

Julia Lessing: Thanks, James. We'll put those links in the show notes as well. James, it's been wonderful talking to you today. Thank you so much for sharing your experience and your tips. And thank you so much.

James Beng Lee: Thanks, Julia. Thanks for having me on.