

[Transcript] Conversations / Stories of starting over: Charles Lomu

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In a garage in Blacktown, in the western suburbs of Sydney,
Charles Lomu is a youth worker who teaches young guys to cut hair.

This wasn't the original plan for his life,
but Charles is pretty happy with the way things have turned out.

In his early years, Charles lived with his grandparents in Tonga,
reading the Bible with his grandmother and helping out his grandfather.

Charles moved back to Australia and he became a talented rugby player,
but then he went off the rails for a while.

After a stint in prison, Charles tried his hand at various jobs.

He'd been cutting hair all his life,

but he now discovered that barboring gave him peace and friendship and independence.

And more than that, it gave him an opportunity to lift up other young guys who were like him once.

And so he took in five apprentices and taught them not only how to cut hair,
but also how to open up and talk and to make their way in the world.

Hi Charles, welcome.

How are you doing Richard?

I'm well sir, thank you.

You still do the barboring workforce in your barbershop setup in your garage.

What kind of a setup have you got there?

I've got a simple setup with just two stations and I've got one station that I take after,
look after myself and then next to me I have another station that I'm training my daughter in
and my wife also shares that station as well, so she does braiding as well.

And together we deliver a service that's more focused on the type of hair culture that we're into
open style hair culture.

And it's quite simple and I just love the fact that it's in the home environment,
it just helps my children see that there are other ways that they can make a living
and still have time for family.

You'll notice six fades.

What does that mean?

Six fades, yeah.

So when I first started barboring before I actually took barboring on as a career,
I actually did some music, recorded an album and signed a record label and I did some music
and my artist name was Six Pound, which comes from a story that's tied to my village back in Tonga.

What's the story?

Can you tell that?

Yeah, the story is my grandfather's village back in Tonga.

It's called Lee Matua in the Island of Ava'u.

And in that island the story goes that they had this event that they were all preparing for
for a special noble that was coming by.

And the women of the village were preparing all the catering and the food
and part of it was they made this order for these six pound tins of corned beef
that were meant to be delivered to the docks the day before the event
so that they could have it featured at the event.

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And what happened apparently was that the order came the day after the event. And so the women of the village went down to the wharf and to express their disappointment as the orders of six pound tins of corned beef came off the boat and landed on the wharf they grabbed the tins and started just smashing the tins around the wharf. And so the onlookers saw that the women of my grandfather's village were doing this and they became labelled the six pounders. And so that was all my life growing up. Whenever we have a wedding or we have a special occasion in our village the tins of corned beef always come out and they perform this smashing on the ground. The ritual smashing of the corned beef. So this is an act of anarchy and it's kind of a built-in as a musician at the time. That's pretty cool. Yeah, so I took on that title, six pound to pay homage to my grandfather and then when I went into barbering I went with the name Six Fades but now I've changed it to Lumbel Fades. Right, that's the way of cutting the hair on the guys you can't? Yeah, it's a way of cutting the hair so that it graduates from a short length to a longer length but we do it in an urban cultural way so it goes from like a skin fade from a razor length to like a longer length but yeah, it's pretty fancy. Before in the back of the day you just asked for a blend. Now there's like a taper fade, a skin fade, a low fade, a high fade, a burst fade. Yeah, there's all different types of fades now. Right, isn't it all fine art, is it? To get it right? Yeah, sure is. Because I'm guessing if it's not even it looks terrible. So you've got to get it right, exactly right then, don't you? Yeah, that's exactly right. Yeah, so you've got to, there's a lot more focus on understanding how your clipper works so you've got to understand the features on every single clip and what each feature, each setting can do and then that allows you to be able to control the actual fade in the haircut. So it's like a paintbrush except in reverse, in other words you're taking stuff off rather than putting stuff on the canvas of the head. Absolutely. I think I've noticed about the difference between the way men and women get their hair cut. Headdressing salons are pretty lively places. A lot of chat going on, women are pretty happy to be there, they're having a good time. It's different with the barber thing. Guys when they come in, and I think I'm like this too, pretty nervous, you know, and a bit shy. I think what guys are trying to say to the barber is, can you make me look cool, mate? But that sounds bad so they won't say it. What do you think is going on there, the nervousness of guys when they come in to get their haircut? Yeah, I think with men, what I've found is that sometimes men don't want to admit

that they care a lot about the way they look.

What they do.

And I can see which one's more than the others.

Just by the way, every little step of the haircut, they're checking over my work.

So I think for a lot of men, it might be a bit of a challenge.

But I am finding that over time, many in general are becoming a lot more high maintenance.

And so they are becoming a bit more aware of their grooming.

You and I having a bit of a chat, I'm asking you questions, you're answering my questions.

This is what you're doing when you cut hair?

Yeah, basically, I think it's the best way to spark conversation is asking questions.

And the mindset I always keep in mind, and I share with a lot of the young ones that I teach barbering too,

is that always remember that the customer knows is the expert on his own story.

And if there's anything that he knows better than anyone, it's their own story.

So just ask questions.

You try to keep your questions pretty open then rather than very pointed.

Yeah, always open, always open.

And there's your general questions like how's your day or you got much planned on this weekend.

They're the general ones and they're just depending on their response and sort of guide the conversation from there.

Do they get stuff off their chest, these young guys, when you're cutting their hair?

Yeah, I've had a lot of those experiences where we've had some really in-depth conversations and conversations that I guess for some reason when they're in the barber chair.

There's just this level of trust that a barber, I take it as a privilege that we have that customers or our clients feel like they can speak to us.

And I think it has a lot to do with the fact that it's one-on-one.

And one-on-one I find maybe isn't something that a lot of males are comfortable with putting themselves in that situation to have a one-on-one deep and meaningful with another male.

But when you're going for a haircut, I feel like the haircut disguises the fact that there's a one-on-one deep and meaningful conversation going on.

So one of my cousins who's been a long time barber, he said, one way you can always view barbering is it's two friends catching up and the benefit out of the bonus out of that is they get a haircut out of it.

As they're sort of getting stuff off their chest, the other thing is ideally they're looking better and better too, they're looking sharper and sharper as the conversation goes on.

I'm not even kidding you, I'm sure that's therapeutic, I'm sure that's helpful to them as that's going on.

Yeah, I agree. I think it is therapeutic and the fact that they know that they're coming to you and that they know that you're going to make them look good when they leave and feel better about themselves, I find it is therapeutic.

I find the comment that I hear the most when the haircut's finished is just what I needed.

Oh, really? That's lovely. What a nice thing to hear, really.

So they walk out just standing a bit straighter and feeling a bit taller as they walk out?

Yeah, the confidence is an instant boost of confidence, yeah.

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Here's their music in the room and a guy's singing while all this is going on?
I don't have a guy singing, but I do have music playing on the speaker.
But it all depends too if I, depending on the clientele that I have for the day, I'll look over my booking list, my appointments for the day and that will help determine what music I play.
So I have some clients who like to listen to, say, older R&B.
Then I've got some clients who like to listen to new music.
But then I have clients who are older than myself and I love the depth of knowledge that they have of the music they're into, say, from back in the 70s.
And so I'll play the music and then I'll ask them for just a conversation basis.
And then I'll ask them, like, is anyone you recommend I should listen to?
And I always find that it becomes a journey of experience for myself as well.
And that's another way into talking about all kinds of things, just starting a conversation with music.
Like I said at the beginning, you spent your earliest years in Tonga with your grandparents.
What would they do to you when you were little, Charles?
My grandparents, to me, were like my mum and dad.
In the Tongan culture, we have this thing called busiaki.
And busiaki basically means it's the same as an adoption.
So I was adopted out to my grandparents and I'm the second of seven siblings.
So my grandparents took me to Tonga with them after I was born.
And I lived there with them until I came back to Australia just before I started my schooling years.
What pictures of Tonga do you have in your head? Can you remember much of that time at all?
I don't remember much of that time at all.
But I remember when I went back again when I was eight with my grandmother,
and we went to go and look after my great-grandmother there.
But my grandmother told me a story of when she took me there when I was after birth.
She was at the airport when we were changing flights.
And what had happened was because the flight was delayed to the next day,
we had to stay in the hotel.
But that day at the airport, someone had done a bag snatch on her
and she had all these food for me to feed me with.
And so they put us in a hotel that night.
And she said she just remembered that when she saw the bed,
when she walked in the hotel and saw the bed,
she was unworthy to sleep on the bed.
So she just put a sheet on the floor and then myself and her,
we just laid there and had a sleep overnight on the floor.
And then we went on our way to Tonga after that.
How religious was she?
Very religious. She was very religious.
I'd say more than religious.
I'd say she was very spiritual,
because I find my grandmother was more about the doing
than the doing what I'm trying to impress other people.
So she would always be the type of person that would wake up every morning

reading the Bible, go in her bed, reading the Bible and praying.
And when I was young, I used to love listening to her read,
but then she would take the time to explain some things to me
and explain to me the principles of the things that she was reading.
And she was just someone that I felt was a teacher to me.
And that's one thing I always valued about my grandmother and my grandfather
was that they would sit me down and teach me things.
And it was never done in the way where it was dressed with guilt
or done in a way where it was forceful.
It would sit down, help me understand.
And it would hit my heart all the time and I would feel like what I'd done was wrong.
I'd really feel it and it would make me feel like I didn't want to disappoint them.
Obviously she was a really good and kind person.
I wonder why she thought she wasn't good enough for that bed
or is that the right word for it in that hotel room
or was the bed, was she just distressed full of luxury?
I wonder what that was. What do you think?
Yeah, my grandmother, she came from like very humble beginnings
and so my grandmother's father, my great grandfather had died when she was young.
And so my grandmother had to leave school when she was young
to help take care of her siblings
because her mother now had to take over her father's role
and start travelling to the plantation to bring the food home.
And so she had to step into the mother's role and be the housewife to look after her younger siblings.
And so my grandmother was always appreciative of just the simple things
and she wasn't used to luxury.
So growing up whenever we sat down to eat and my cousins, we sat down to eat
and my grandmother would feed us all and we were full.
If there was any food left over, my grandmother would sit there and eat everybody's leftovers.
Because she just saw that would be a waste of food if we threw it away.
It's a nice way to make a point. Rather than force the kid to eat the plate if she does it,
then that's kind of cool, isn't it? That's clever.
So you came back to Australia to start to go to school.
You're living with your dad and how was your dad with you?
Was he different in the way he tried to bring you up?
I think it was a challenge for my dad because I looked at my grandfather as my father
and I yearned to be my grandfather all the time.
So when I came to live with my dad, I think the difference was my dad was feeling the pressure
of working to provide for seven kids or just trying to provide for a household
and living in the Western world.
In the hectic city.
And trying to get used to just the hustle of the new life in the Western world.
And so I felt like my father had a lot on his plate.
And so I could see the contrast of my grandfather and my father's way of dealing with things.

My father didn't have the time that my grandfather had to sit down with me discuss and quality time. My father was always working hard.

When he came home, he was really tired.

And so I just saw a big contrast in the quality time that I had with my father.

But he was a man who wanted good for us.

But I think just the pressure was a big match for my dad.

It sounds like your grandparents were really good at kind of communicating with kids in a kind of loving and moral sort of way.

Was your dad affectionate with you and your siblings?

When my father's generation, I feel like affection was something that was meant to be just understood.

Like you were meant to look at the hard work he was doing.

He went to look at the fact that we have food in the fridge and to understand that he loves us.

Right. That's got to be just understood. It's just implicit.

Yeah, absolutely. And that's so I never really heard the words. I love you from my father.

Was that seen as unmanly, do you think?

Did he do that sort of a thing?

I mean, I think it's interesting because the word, the translation of Aatu in Tongan, which means I love you.

We say it a lot in Tongan. It's actually such a normal part of the way we talk.

So if someone leaves your house, you say, you naturally say, I love you.

But saying it in English, it seems so different because it's not a natural thing you would say.

So growing up, I probably heard those words more when we were like being disciplined.

So maybe it's more like, yeah, right.

So maybe it's more like the local culture in Australia that was more like that because we don't do that very often in Australia.

Sometimes happens, but you don't traditionally say, I love you as someone's walking out the door.

What did he want for you?

He wanted for me and my brothers to all be professional rugby league players.

Why rugby league players? What did he think that would do for you?

I'm assuming he was a fan of the sport, but what did he think that would do for you?

I think he thought that it would be the best chance for us to succeed, to earn a good living and also help the family out financially and just set us up on a good path.

So I'm not too sure at what point that became an idea to my father,

but what I feel was when he took us down to the local football club,

the old Saints, to start playing footy and started to see how much we enjoyed playing the game and then started to really gravitate to understanding how the game works and that.

And I guess we probably were effective at it.

And my father thought, this is probably a worthwhile investment.

Did you enjoy it back then?

Yeah, I think I enjoyed it.

I think I really did enjoy it because I think playing at that time in my life,

I think playing football in the club that I went to,

it helped me to, I guess, learn how to just meet and start communicating with other people,

to get used to people outside my family circle because we have a tight family growing up. We only really stuck to ourselves.

And so going to play football was my time where I got to hang around other people.

I guess we'll just be exposed to other people where we were doing something that we enjoyed, where there was a coach who became invested in me as all that was outside of my family.

And I really enjoyed it. I found it fun when I was a kid, yeah.

Who coached you when you first started?

Yeah, we had a woman coach by the name of Robin Connor.

Was that unusual at the time to have a woman coach for a bunch of big, strong rugby leg-buying boys?

Yeah, I think it was. I mean, I didn't really recognise it at the time because she'd actually been coaching us since we were really young, under sevens.

And just over the years, she just remained our coach.

Yeah, I honestly looked at her like a mother.

She was an Australian woman and I would spend a lot of time visiting and they would spend a lot of time picking me up for games and just keeping me involved.

And I just remember when they'd go out on family holidays

because they had a son that was the same age as me. His name was Luke.

We became really good friends, so they'll take me away with them on holidays.

And yeah, I really enjoyed just the life lessons too I'd learnt from Robin.

I still remember a time when we were sitting here watching another team's game, having conversation with the boys and Robin was invested in watching the other game and she was just observing the way the other players were playing.

And we're just having a general conversation and I swore in the conversation.

And I saw Robin's attention just completely switch off the game.

She turned her attention to me and she said, what did you say?

And I knew straight away I must have done something wrong.

And she basically addressed it and she said, don't you ever use that language?

And I respected her so much for pulling me up.

And I just respected the fact that this was someone that I had a lot of respect for and when she pulled me up for that, I didn't have a problem with that.

She's always been like a mother to me, so she said this to me, she must really care about me.

So I listened to her.

And there came the day when you were a teenager and the word came in that your grandfather in Tonga had died.

How were you told about that?

Well, my grandfather, when I was growing up, I always promised my grandfather, I would tell my grandfather and my grandmother that one day when I can drive, I will buy a car and I'll take you guys driving anywhere you want to go.

And I will become your driver and traveling because my grandfather never drove, my grandmother never drove, so I always promised this to them when I'd get older.

And I remember one day I was asking my grandfather, would you ever visit Tonga again?

And he said to me, I'd only go back there to lay to rest.

That's the only time I'd go back there.

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So we had this conversation and that was that.

And then one year came during my teenage years and my grandfather was getting ready to travel to Tonga.

And so we're all saying goodbye to him.

And I remember going to say goodbye to him and he was really emotional.

And I was like, Grandpa, don't be too worried.

I'll see you again. I'll see you again.

But he was really emotional.

And so when he went to Tonga, he ended up passing when he was in Tonga.

And when he passed, my mind went right back to that conversation we had where he said he'd only go visit again to be laid to rest.

And so I was a bit like, the way the news came to me was, I was in bed, it was a summer holiday.

I had my cousins over, we were in bed, just lying down sleeping in like a normal school holiday.

And the news came, Grandpa had passed.

And I remember getting up and I was really, I didn't want to believe it.

And so I had to go over to the house where he lived and everyone was there.

And that's where I found out that it was true.

It was a reality.

And I lashed out, you know, I was just sort of, I just sort of was in a rage because I couldn't believe that it actually happened.

I don't think I ever prepared for this moment for this time.

And so didn't you think it would come one day?

And I mean, it's the way of the world.

It's the way of things.

You just went ready for it though.

You hadn't given it much thought.

Yeah, it's true.

You know, you're right.

It is the way of the world.

And for some reason, I just never thought about them going passing.

I just took it for granted.

I think that I had them there all the time.

I never thought that I never thought about the fact that there will become a time where I would have to go on without them.

I suppose it was a bit like losing a parent rather than the grandparent too, wasn't it?

Yeah, it was.

That's harder.

I think it's one thing to lose a grandparent when you're a teenager, but to lose a parent.

Yeah, that's how it felt to me.

That's how it felt to me.

It was the closest person in my life I'd ever lost.

And so when I found, when I got the news, this was right on during the time where I was just,

I was just starting to take rugby league from local level into representative level.

And so my father had organised for us to attend some trials to start getting introduced into the

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younger grades and the NRL clubs.

And so the club that we were going to trial first of all was the Sydney City Roosters.

And so when this funeral happened around the same time, I just thought,

okay, I'll be going to Tonga for this funeral.

I didn't think anything else of it.

So what happened was the family gathered together and a decision was made that they would send a certain number of the family members over for the funeral.

And I automatically thought I'd be included.

And then I was told that I wouldn't be going because my father said,

I have to play the trial game for this rugby league game to try and make it into the representative club.

And so I didn't have a choice in that.

And that, I think, was something that really aided me.

And it'd feel like a betrayal or something.

Yeah, I just thought, like, this is an opportunity to say goodbye.

I will never have again my opportunity to say goodbye is right now.

And so I had to live with that.

But it was something that harboured a lot of resentment in me for that.

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You were saying before after your grandfather died,

your dad didn't want you to go to Tonga to go to his funeral because you were up for some rugby league trials.

What did that do to your feelings about rugby league after that point?

It changed the way I viewed the game.

It went from something that I actually enjoyed, really enjoyed playing,

to becoming something that prevented me from having that opportunity to say goodbye to my grandfather.

So poisoned it?

Yeah, and I sort of viewed that from that point on.

I'm no longer playing this game for me.

I'm now playing it for my father.

And I just lost that person or enjoyment for the game after that.

How self-destructive did you get at this time, Charles?

Yeah, at this time I started drinking a lot.

And I started to distance myself from people who were actually, you know, beneficial.

You know, for me, the people that were actually like Robin Conner, my grandmother,

I started to distance myself because a lot of my cousins,

I feel like I could actually talk to them about this because they viewed him as a grandfather and they viewed their father as a father.

But I viewed my grandfather as my father.

And so for a lot of my cousins in that, even though they knew how close our relationship was, you know, I felt like they couldn't really understand where I was coming from.

So I kept it to myself and I started acting out in a lot of the habits that I picked up.
So a lot of drinking and then slowly a lot of the recreational drugs that came with it.
And just a lot of rebelling against my parents.

Did that lead to petty crime for a while?

Yeah, so eventually I ended up hanging around a circle of friends that I would catch up with
and we started getting involved in petty crime and just to make money to support our habit
for drinking and this will be a weekly thing I'd be doing.

And it just ended up eventually to the point where we got in trouble with the law, with the police.
And then when the pressure from the police kept mounting up and I kept getting in trouble with the
police,

then my father felt that he couldn't control it anymore
and ended up sending me away overseas to New Zealand to live with family.

How did things change once you got to New Zealand?

Well, it was a bit tough because before I boarded the plane, my father said to me,
when you get to New Zealand and people ask you whose son you are,
you make sure you don't mention me and your mother's name.

And so I boarded the plane with those last words from my father.

Oh, that was hurtful. That must have been so hurtful.

Very. It was very hurtful. But I boarded the plane and I thought,
I'm just happy to get out of Australia right now.

So I got to New Zealand, living with family and then the change of atmosphere.

I didn't know hardly anybody except for my cousins that I was living with was refreshing for me.

So I started getting just joining the local community at volleyball games up the road.

So I turned up every afternoon, not hardly knowing anyone playing volleyball.

You got all these big island men jumping up and spiking the ball at little kids.

So I was learning. I felt like it was a training I had to learn to be confident
to be able to attend these volleyball games every week.

Eventually got to know the guys, then felt like a little brother to these guys.

And I really enjoyed the experience.

But through that experience, it made me want to sort of develop more of a spiritual side.

And that's where I started in New Zealand for me.

What kind of spiritualism are we talking about?

So I actually wanted to get back to what my grandma used to do and read in the Bible.

Got a church?

Yeah. I started going to church and I started just visiting and trying to rebuild my relationship with
God.

And I just wanted to go back to a lot of what my grandmother said.

And I remember one of the most popular accounts that my grandma used to read to me
was about a young person who was lost in the woods and God called him back.

And I thought to myself, I'm the young person at that time.

I need to be called back.

So I ventured out on my journey then.

And I was in New Zealand for a little time.

I started working in the strawberry farms, which was beautiful for me

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because it was all other Tongan workers there.

And when lunchtime came, everybody brought the pots out, the lunchboxes out.

Everyone brought it out.

We all sat under a tree and everyone was passing the food around.

And I'd never seen that before.

I thought, wow, this is a whole different experience.

And so we'd sit there and eat together.

I never really knew anyone until I got to that job.

And it was just, I felt it was fulfilling for me at that time in my life

because I was going through a time when I was a bit haywire

and it grounded me again back to the roots that my grandma taught me about.

That sounds so nice.

Why did you leave?

What brought you back to Australia?

Well, what brought me back to Australia was I went for a holiday in Tonga.

And my father and my siblings and my mother went to Tonga as well.

We all agreed to meet there for holidays.

And then without my knowledge, they arranged for me to have a ticket to come back to Australia.

So I came back to Australia because there was an opportunity to return to representative football again.

So I came back to Australia to play football.

And how did that go?

How did you go once you were back in Sydney again?

Well, when I got back, even though it wasn't something that I agreed upon,

I tried to just try to do my best with the circumstances.

And I discovered really quickly that there were a lot of unresolved issues.

We'd never ever spoke, never had a dialogue conversation about what had happened.

It was just expected that I was supposed to slot back in and just go.

And so I felt like all of those unresolved issues just came up.

I couldn't keep them down.

And so because of that, my father and my mother and I agreed that I should leave home because my father was worried that my example might rub off on my siblings.

So I left home.

Oh, there's heavy shame in all of that, isn't there?

Yeah.

And your self-respect must not have been great.

How old were you when you left home?

17, 18, 17, going on 18, yeah.

And what happened once you were out of home?

So when I went out of home, I was living in a boarding house.

And at the time, I felt like I had freedom.

And I learned very, very quickly some things about life that I didn't know.

Now you've got to start paying your own rent.

Now you've got to start buying your own food.

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You've got to wash your own clothes.

And I was with a fortunate at the time I was in a relationship where a young girl was helping me out.

And so I settled in Redfern at the time.

And then things went bad again?

Yeah, things went bad again.

My relationship with a girl ended up falling apart.

We had a child and we actually got married in that short time.

And by the age of, let's say, 21, I was divorced.

And I really felt depressed from that.

But at that time, not knowing I was depressed, I just went right back to the drinking.

And that sort of had me caught up in that habit for a while.

So interesting you were able to talk about what you were feeling back then.

You've really got all the language for it now.

But maybe you didn't have the language for what you were feeling back then?

Yeah, I surely didn't at the time.

And at the time, it was something that I was just dealing with internally.

I wasn't vocalizing or speaking to anyone about it.

And everybody around me was like, drink it away.

Don't worry about it.

Let's just go out and have fun.

But same thing.

I just had more pent up unresolved issues inside that I hadn't dealt with and no one to talk to.

And so I just got back into the habit again.

And that sort of held me down for a long time.

And the saddest thing for me was I still regard that as probably the biggest, probably the most regretful experience of my life.

And the reason being was I think about my son.

And I think about how he had to endure an experience of some circumstances.

My oldest son, that he had nothing to do with.

And that's something that I felt always made that probably the most regretful experience for me.

So you were sent to periodic detention at one point.

What did that mean?

How does that normally work?

Yeah, so periodic detention, you usually have to turn up at five o'clock at a point.

They meet, you pick you up.

Then you get locked up until Sunday.

And then you come out.

It's like a last straw before you go in the full-time lock up.

And so I had to do that for nine months.

Right, to give you a taste of prison.

So you go, well, I'm not going to go there again.

That's the idea?

Yeah, that's exactly right.

And I think the only reason why I had that as an option was because I had children.

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And I had that I was responsible for providing for.
So they were trying to give me a last chance.
And so I did that for nine months.
And while I was in there, I really started thinking about my spirituality again,
because I had stopped it.
And I thought I really need to get in touch with my spirituality.
Was that a product of loneliness too, do you think?
Yeah, I think I realized that when I was disconnected with that,
with staying in touch with reading things that were keeping me positive,
giving me good direction and guidance,
I found that I would always turn back and go down the wrong path.
So I tried that.
But in there, I found it really tough because of the atmosphere.
Yeah, were your fellow inmates unhelpful or helpful or a bit of both?
Oh, it's more like you're surrounded by in an atmosphere where everyone's trying to protect their
manhood.
And for me, I never really bought into it.
Never really got sucked into that because I always felt like I felt when I was in there,
I always felt like these aren't bad people.
These are just people who made bad decisions because I'd have one-on-one conversations with guys
and then I'd see how they were in the yard in front of everybody else.
And I recognize that there's a big front going on for a lot of people.
So that's how I viewed things.
And I thought, I'll try and rebuild myself.
But I just struggled because you don't really have that kind of support.
Sometimes in there, unless you've got more than yourself, someone motivating you.
And that came during my time I was doing that sentence.
A guy came in and it turned out that he knew someone else that was a mutual friend between us.
Was he a fellow prisoner or someone else or a youth worker or something?
So he was a fellow prisoner.
He was a fellow prisoner.
So he came in and he said that I heard that you were studying the Bible with a friend of mine.
I said, yeah, I was.
And he said, yeah, so was I.
I was studying too.
But he said, I was about to get baptized.
And I said, how are you supposed to get baptized and you're here in jail with me?
And then he said, well, before I decided to get baptized, I realized I had some warrants on my name.
And I felt that it wouldn't be right for me to go ahead unless I go and clear my name.
And so he turned himself into the police station and he ended up inside with me.
And so he helped me rebuild my spiritual journey up.
And he's another big formidable type of guy, too.
So when we both realized we were on the same journey, we were in different pods.
So we decided, why don't we approach the security guard in the jail and ask him, could you let us

share the same cell?

And he looked at us and he said, you're joking, right?

And we're like, why?

And he said, why would I put two big guys together in the same pod?

So he said, you guys will probably just try to get together to try and take over or run a muck in your pod.

And we were like, no.

He thought the two of you were going to essentially become the co-kingpins of the prison.

Is that what he thought?

He thought, well, just of that pod, you know.

And I like what Jack said to him.

Jack said to him, if you allow us to sell up together, the only thing we want to do is share things with the prisoners,

the other inmates that will actually make your job easier.

And to my surprise, the guard there let us sell up together.

And so while I was there, Jack was sharing a lot of things to me.

But it wasn't until this one other inmate said to Jack, Jack, I love what I'm learning and I love these things that you're sharing.

But, you know, my wife's not going to have me except me doing this stuff.

And I was just there relaxing, laying down, just daydreaming.

And Jack turns around and says to him, well, you can learn as much as you want of this stuff and taking as much knowledge as you want.

But if you're not willing to do any of it, then it all means nothing.

And I sat there thinking to myself, wow, all these years I've been acquiring knowledge and I haven't put it to use.

And so when I finished my sentence, then I ended up really committing to my spiritual journey and it became a life-changing experience for me.

Do you think you learned that lesson in an even broader sense?

Like, you know, you've been acquiring all this knowledge, practical knowledge, apart from spiritual knowledge,

but more worldly knowledge about how to go about things in the real world?

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

I learned that anything in life, if you have good ideas and you don't put it into action, then they just remain good ideas

and means nothing to anybody having good ideas.

You've got to actually materialize it.

And it helped me in all areas of my life, even with my wife when I'm dealing with my children.

I might have good intentions for my kids, but if it comes out in a way that's just interpreted to my child as anger and fear,

then I find like those good ideas don't mean anything until they're interpreted and translated across in the same way.

So once you got out of periodic detention, what did you do?

Once I got out of periodic detention, I just focused on my family.

We ended up moving out of the area.

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We were living with family and we decided for the first time in me and the mother of my kids' experiences, the first time ever we decided we're going to up, move into an area we've never lived in before, away from everybody else, and we're going to start our own journey. And so we moved to Blacktown and for the first time moved away from everyone and we started our own journey. And we're just trying to focus on family, trying to focus on working, trying to focus on, you know, just the simple things. Family routine at home, trying to focus on helping the kids with their school, you know, just focus on simple things. And it was a huge game changer for us. How long did it take you to realise you might be a barber? Like for money, I mean, rather than just cutting the hair of members of the family. Yeah, well, I started cutting hair, I think, in 1992. Oh, when you were a kid? So I was about 12, 13 years old. I started cutting hair because my cousins used to cut hair at the back of my grandma's house. And so I used to love sitting there and watching them cut hair. And because they had migrated from Tonga to Australia, they were doing, they were sort of living like they were in Tonga. So they were cutting each other's hair in the backyard where my father was like, no, no, no, go get your haircut from the barber shop, you know. So we'd go to the barber shop, but I'd go to my grandma's house to watch them cut hair, and I was more fascinated with that. And so I ended up picking up the clippers. They ended up letting me start to cut hair, and I got the love for cutting hair then. But it wasn't until, so I'd been cutting hair ever since I was high school, through my journey everywhere I went, I was always cutting hair, cutting friends here, cutting families here. When I started working, I was cutting hair after work. I'd come home and just cut hair for everyone and anyone that I knew after work absolutely loved it. But then in 2014, I was doing the same thing, coming from cutting a friend's hair. And he said to me, you know, I'd pay you to do this. And I said, oh, that's nice things, right? But I enjoy this, just doing it for fun. Again, you have the knowledge, but not the action here. Yeah, and he said something to me that really changed my mind. He said to me, you know, it's actually scriptural for me to pay you for your services. It's the right thing to do. He said, because you're a man that's a father, and you're looking after a family, and while you're out here cutting my hair, I'm taking time away from your family, and it's also costing you electricity. And it's only right that a man should compensate another man for his services and his hard work. That was the plan. That was the idea that started it.

And I was like, really?

And then I had another friend who came for a haircut.

And he comes with this little box that looked like a tissue box.

And it was an empty little box.

And he said to me, this is from my wife.

And she said, you have to start charging now for haircuts.

And she won't allow me to come back here for haircuts if you don't charge me anymore.

If you don't charge me.

So I started off with \$5 haircuts and just eventually just kept growing.

And as my client till base kept growing, I started slowly just decreasing my time for my day job and ended up doing barbering full time from home.

Did it let you reclaim the idea that you once had with Rugby League before the bad times, that you might actually enjoy what you do?

I absolutely love what I do.

And you're right.

And I think the thing that made me really go deep into thought was, I thought, how did it take me this many years to not see an opportunity in something that I love so much I was sitting right under my nose?

George Orwell says, the hardest thing in the world to identify is the thing that's right in front of our nose most of the time.

Or the hair on our head, maybe in disguise.

Absolutely.

So in 2016, you're in a 10 week course for five young Islander guys, mentoring them in the art of barbering.

The original five, as they call themselves.

It's kind of a thing, isn't it?

The original five.

Yeah, the original five were a group of young guys from out Western Sydney.

And they came and joined the first barber program that I was invited to host from home, from our setup at home.

And yeah, we took them through six months of training.

Every Thursday night, we take them through teaching them about the origins of barbering, teaching them about the history of the trade,

and then also talking to them, teaching them about customer service, and then into the actual craft of barbering.

And then after that six months that we took them through that training, we ended up hosting an exhibition at the local art centre in Blacktown.

And so these young guys had the opportunity to start cutting hair for people in the community who came to sit in the chairs over a period of time.

I think it was like a couple of weeks or a month that we had that exhibition going.

So they were now able to take everything that they learned in that six months and now put it into practice with people they'd never met before.

So out of that original five, one guy in particular,

he was the one that probably was unsure of why he was there in the start.

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When we interviewed the original five, I remember this guy named Kiko. He said to me, I asked him, what brought you to this program today? And he said, I only just tagged along with my other friend because he said that he was coming here and he said, why don't I just come along? So he came along and he actually turned out to be the guy that went on to manage barber shops and he's still working as a professional barber today. I saw a story on the feed on SBS that Pat Aboud did with you and those guys. And I heard them talk, they're lovely men. And what's interesting hearing them talk is, again, they have that kind of, good language, emotional language. They can talk in a way that not a lot of young guys really can about how they think and they feel. Is that just like a kind of a fun, or not a fun, but an interesting byproduct? Is this something you really want them to have? Like this is what you have. Is this what you want them to have or want them to learn from you? Yeah, I think barbering is a platform that allows that for us to be able to share that with young people. And I feel it's something that's really, really important because going back when we talk about all those times when I never had an opportunity to talk about this unresolved issues and this pent up resentment, I felt like the way I expressed myself was opposite to, was really reflecting the way I was feeling. So with these young guys, I really wanted to give them the opportunity to learn how to communicate openly with other people with all different walks of life. Because I felt like coming out of school, you spend from the age of five to year 12, you're used to just spending most of your time around your peers. But once you leave year 12, in the big world out there, you've got to learn how to talk to all different people. And communication is key in the barber shop. Sometimes I feel like communication is so key that if you're great at your customer service and great at treating people and great at communicating with people, that you still be able to survive in this industry even if your haircuts are shocking. People, I think people remember more how they feel at the end of the day. So if you know how to treat people in a way where you make them feel important and your haircuts can be average, you still be able to make an honest living. It seems like you've become the man that your grandparents really wanted you to be. You've got a lot of their best qualities. Is that what you want to be? Is that what you've been aiming towards? Yeah, very much. As a father, the way I father, a lot of times I reflect back on the feeling that I've received, the way I felt from the way that my grandmother and grandfather trained me. So with my own children, as they get older, I notice every single part of their journey requires a different type of father. So when my older children went into teenagehood, some of the things that I thought I had to hold on,

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they taught me that, okay, I need to adapt here.

And so one thing I keep in mind all the time is asking myself,
is how did I feel when I was at that age and what do I wish was said differently to me
that would have allowed me to respond differently.

And so a lot of those times I tuned back into how my grandfather and my grandmother conveyed a
message to me.

It's been really lovely speaking with you, Charles. Thank you so much.

Thank you, Rich, for having me.

You've been listening to a podcast of Conversations with Richard Fidler.

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