



EPISODE 115 Real-Time Transition Story - Dr. Alec Jacobson **Part 1**

With guest Dr. Alec Jacobson

SEE THE SHOW NOTES AT: www.doctorscrossing.com/115

[0:0:00]

AJ: “I just didn't want to be miserable either. And I saw so many people, classmates, residents, attendings, who I had worked with that I just could clearly tell that they were miserable with what they were doing and I really did not want to follow in their footsteps in that way.”

HF: Welcome to The Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. If you're questioning your career in medicine, you've come to the right place. I'm Heather Fork, a former dermatologist and founder of The Doctor's Crossing. As a master certified coach, I've helped hundreds of physicians find greater happiness in their career, whether in medicine, a nonclinical job, or something else. I started this podcast to help you discover the career path that's best for you and give you some resources and encouragement to make it happen. You don't need to get stuck at the white coat crossroads. So, pull up a chair, my friend, and let's carpe that diem.

Hello and welcome back to the Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. You're listening to episode number 115. You are in for a real treat today, guys. We are doing something that I've never done before on the podcast. But before I go any further, I wanted to share with you a comment I received about my LinkedIn for Physicians online course.

“Hi Heather. I finished your LinkedIn course including the bonus on informational interviews, and I want to give you a huge thank you for creating such a detailed and very

www.doctorscrossing.com/115



informative course. The LinkedIn for Physician's course was easy to understand and it was particularly helpful that you demonstrated all the different features and examples. The downloadable sheets were very helpful to review each module.

I was using LinkedIn already, but I learned about a lot more features to use and this course definitely enhances my LinkedIn experience. I highly recommend this very thoughtful and informative course to anyone who wants to get a better understanding about LinkedIn and how to use it.”

Oh my gosh, I am so appreciative of her unsolicited feedback. This was exactly my goal for the course where you could watch the videos and be able to optimize your profile and learn how to use this great networking platform all on your own.

If you would like to learn about my LinkedIn course, there is a link in the show notes for you with more information. You can also go to the doctorscrossing.com website, hit the products tab at the top of the page, and as a special for the month of February when this episode is airing, I want to give you some Valentine's love. There is a discount code you can use to have 15% off of the course. The discount code is LINKEDIN15. That is LINKEDIN15 for 15% off of the course. I'll put the code in the show notes as well and it will be good until the end of February 2023. Now onto our episode.

I was saying we're going to be doing something completely new on the podcast and I think you're going to really love it. I have a wonderful guest who is at the beginning of his transition process and he courageously agreed to come on and share his journey with you as it is unfolding. It takes a lot of guts to do this and I am incredibly grateful to Dr. Alec Jacobson who will be joining me in just a minute.

Alec is finishing up his fourth year as a pathology resident. He has done exceptionally well in medical school as well as in residency. However, as you will hear, Alec has determined that practicing medicine is not the path he wants to pursue. In this episode,

www.doctorscrossing.com/115



we are going to hear how Alec decided to go into medicine in the first place and why he is at a crossroads at this time.

Alec will be sharing some steps he is starting to take in this early phase of his transition and how it feels to be closing one door when the new door is not yet revealed itself. I would like to give an incredibly warm welcome to our first in real time transition guest, Dr. Alec Jacobson. Alec, my friend. Welcome.

AJ: Hey, Heather. Thank you so much for having me. It's great to be here.

HF: Well, as I said, I am incredibly grateful to you. I've been wanting to do this reality show in a way for a while, and you said yes, and I am so happy.

AJ: Yeah, it's really cool to be able to publicize my journey in some ways. Obviously, this is a very scary process. There's a lot of uncertainty out there for me and my journey and my career transition. But as I reflected on this whole process, I felt like it's really important to just be transparent with people and put it all out there that this is what I'm going through and it's okay that there's a lot of uncertainty and that this process is kind of scary in some ways.

HF: No guts, no glory.

AJ: Exactly.

HF: I think they say that good things come to those who wait. I would also say good things come to those who are willing to put themselves out there and this is huge. So, thank you again.

AJ: Yeah, I'm really excited to be able to share my journey with people and hopefully it helps some people along their way and figure out what exactly they want for their lives.



HF: So, where would you like to begin, Alec?

AJ: I think we can probably go back to the beginning just a little bit about my backstory and how we got to this point. I grew up with a family of doctors. I'm sure that many people can relate to this. My dad, brother, uncles, cousins, they're all physicians. And so, medicine was really the only career path that I knew. And I was also a smart kid. I did well in math and science. And so, pursuing this path felt pretty natural for me.

When I got to college, I quickly realized that the pre-med courses didn't really interest me and thankfully I took a mandatory writing class. I really enjoyed it. One of the professors took me under her wing, and so I decided to major in writing and rhetoric. And that was an amazing experience because it allowed me to be creative, allowed me to be expressive, and it allowed me to use this part of my brain, this non-science part of my brain that I had not been using, that I hadn't been using for a long time.

That was a great thing for me to kind of branch out and do something a little bit different than the classic science pre-med pathway. But at the same time, I think I knew that this writing major was really going to just be a means to help me stand out on my med school application. And that's more or less what it did. I applied to med school as an early assurance applicant and I got accepted to med school after my sophomore year of college.

And so, at that point, I certainly felt like I was set in a lot of ways. I felt like I had made it, I was going to be a doctor, my life was really headed in a nice direction. And I think as I reflect back on that time, I realized that I had done so much of this just blindly without really even thinking critically about what I was doing, thinking about my decisions. I was just on this path and I was going to do whatever it took to get there.

HF: When you thought about being a doctor, what images came up for you? What thoughts did you have at that time, if you remember?

AJ: I really remember wanting to be a pediatrician. I had been a summer camp counselor and I loved working with kids. And so, for me, it felt pretty natural to take that skillset and something that really interested me into pediatrics. That was something that I certainly envisioned for myself. Of course, like everyone else entering medicine, I just wanted to help people and I felt this would be a good way for me to do so. And I think it didn't quite hit home what I was getting myself into until I actually stepped foot and got into med school.

HF: Okay. Yeah, you're absolutely right. This is a common story and it plays out differently. How was it when you got into medical school?

AJ: Starting med school was really tough for me. Not only was it extremely difficult, but I think for the first time I was having to confront head on what it meant to be a physician and everything that this career path entailed. And I remember really envying my classmates who I felt were there for the right reasons. They knew that this is where they wanted to be. They knew that they wanted to be a doctor.

And for me, I felt like I was there because it was the only career path I knew and I just felt like I didn't have that passion, that fire that a lot of my classmates had to continue down this path and become a doctor.

That was really early on that I was having these thoughts and basically three months into medical school, I decided to go home and tell my parents that I was quitting, that I was dropping out of med school.

And to be fully transparent, it took me about a month just to even build up the courage to have that conversation with them. It was extremely, extremely difficult to get the guts

to go home and have that difficult conversation with them but eventually I did. And I don't think it's important to get into the nitty gritty of that conversation, but it was encouraged to me to at least finish out that first year of medical school. And so, I agreed.

I think part of that reason is because I wasn't super confident in my decision at that time. It was scary to be dropping out of med school. There was a ton of uncertainty surrounding it. I was leaving this path that was going to set me up for the future. And so, the easier thing was to just stay put, was to stay in school. And that's exactly what I did.

And as I continued on, in that first year, I actually saw myself do exceptionally well on exams. And that only made it harder to want to leave. I felt like because I was doing so well that I was actually in the right place. And I was actually listening to this Hidden Brain podcast the other day, titled "Who do you want to be?" And there was this amazing quote from it that said, "The irony is the better one does at each stage, the harder it becomes to ask if you're actually doing what it is you want to do." And I just relate to that so much and I find that to be such a powerful quote. Because as I continue to do well in school, I convinced myself that this is where I should be. And so, that really allowed me to continue on the path of medical school.

HF: You were doing really well in medical school. You had some big doubts, but then you decided to do what your parents recommended and finished the year. Do you remember, Alec, on a scale of zero to 10 about how you were feeling in terms of "This is really right for me and I'm enjoying it" with 10 being I'm really happy here.

AJ: It was probably a two or a three. It was really low to be honest, and I felt really miserable with what I was doing. And to me, this whole path had just become something that I had to endure. It was certainly not something that I was enjoying. I think really the only part that I was enjoying was the people I had met along the way and my classmates. But aside from that, it was really tough for me and it was hard for me to find much enjoyment with what I was doing in med school.

HF: You were applying yourself and you were working really hard and doing well. What was it about it that you were not enjoying?

AJ: I think for me the one thing that I was really struggling with was just how immersive and all-encompassing I was seeing that being a doctor was. It was not a career to be taken lightly. And as I continued on in medical school, I saw that in order to be successful, you had to really be passionate about what you were doing. You had to really care about taking care of patients, and that had to be really what you wanted to do with your life. And for me, I just felt like I had other interests and I didn't have that passion. I didn't have that fire to be a doctor, and I think that's just plain and simple how I was feeling about it.

And to be honest, I just didn't want to be miserable either. And I saw so many people, classmates, residents, attendings who I had worked with that I just could clearly tell that they were miserable with what they were doing. They were not happy with their lives, and I really did not want to follow in their footsteps in that way.

HF: Even though you were at about a two to three out of 10, which means you weren't really happy here, you went on. How did you end up going on to residency?

AJ: Yeah, I remember going through my clinical rotations and just one by one I crossed them off. As I mentioned before, I didn't feel that drive that I felt was required to do really well as a clinician in these fields. And I wasn't left with many options at that point. And to be honest, I thought about not even doing a residency at all, but A) I felt like I had done too well to not pursue a residency and B) I felt like in a way I couldn't be the only person in my class to not pursue a residency. That was just something that people didn't do.

And so, I opted for an elective in pathology, and the people were nice, they were excited to have me there. And I thought histology was fairly interesting. And that's more or less

what it took to get me to apply into pathology. I certainly appreciated that it was fairly far removed from clinical medicine. I thought maybe there was a chance that in that way it could be something that would be a good fit for me.

And I also took a little solace in the fact that I was the only student in my class to go into pathology. And so, in some ways it felt like an act of defiance to do something that was really different from the rest of my classmates.

HF: It's almost like you were trying to have more control over your destiny in an interesting way. So, you got into pathology residency and you've done exceptionally well. How has that been for you?

AJ: Yeah. I have a lot of really positive experiences from residency. Not only did I learn to be an anatomic and clinical pathologist, which has been pretty cool and I've learned a ton in that way, but I've also learned a lot of soft skills that I feel like will be super helpful for me in a future career. And things that I would not have learned elsewhere unless I did this residency.

Things like being a leader, being a much better communicator, both with clinicians and patients, being a good collaborator, getting good at relationship building. So, all these things that I feel like will be invaluable for me moving forward. However, I really just had this feeling in my gut that I was in the wrong place. I saw my colleagues feel really excited about learning pathology, and honestly, I could not have felt farther from that.

So, I think I felt like a square peg trying to fit in a round hole. I just felt like I was in the wrong place. And I think coming to terms with that decision was really hard. I certainly thought that pathology was going to be a good fit for me, and I kind of quickly realized that, again, I felt like I was in the wrong place and that this was not the path that I wanted to continue down.

HF: It just came to me. I know this sounds really stupid, but in a way, we're doing an autopsy on this process, obviously, you are still alive, we could call it a biopsy, but we're really looking for what went wrong like you do sometimes to find the answer. Anyway, I'm curious, did you have any more discussions with your parents after that initial one, especially when you were really not sure about residency and going on?

AJ: Yeah, during residency I talked with them very, very regularly. We have a very open relationship in that way, and I made it clear pretty early on how I was feeling that I was not enjoying my residency, that in many ways I was feeling miserable and not engaged with the work. So, they were certainly privy to that information and they really understood what I was doing and they understood how I was feeling.

I think that something I didn't tell a lot of people about was what I wanted to do about it and that there was a chance that I might actually try and get out of medicine and pursue something different. That process came a little bit later on for me, and I think it came on a little bit later because I had to mentally accept that that's what I wanted.

I think as I mentioned throughout this whole journey, I did so much self-convincing that this was the right path for me and that I could find something, whether it was in medicine or in pathology that would ultimately be the right fit for me. And just coming to terms with the fact that "No, this is not where I want to be and I value my happiness and my mental health and my life too much." Coming to terms with that took a lot of time and reflection and energy honestly. But I'm very happy that I was able to come to terms with that and just accept that this is where I'm supposed to be and it's okay that I'm feeling this way.

HF: What do you think, if you could identify maybe one or two top reasons why it's been so hard all along to really listen to yourself?

AJ: I think part of it is I took a personality test and found out that I'm a type three achiever.

HF: The Enneagram?

AJ: The Enneagram, yes. And I think my story is really type three kind of to a tee where you set your eyes on a goal and you're going to accomplish it no matter what, even if it is completely removed from what you actually want. And in the process, you kind of put your feelings in a box because they're going to interfere with you accomplishing that goal.

I think that's precisely what I did, and it was just scary. It's so much easier to just continue down this prescribed path. Everything is laid out for you. Go to med school, then you go to residency, then your fellowship, then you're an attending. And it's all laid out for you and it really doesn't require too much thought. Giving it that thought and kind of listening to that little voice in your head, it's scary because it's just so much easier to continue on and not think about it.

HF: I appreciate you sharing that because that is very true about the type three especially. They are prone to what's called the success disaster. And I use that term disaster lightly. I didn't coin that term, but it implies that you can be very, very successful as an achiever at something that you're not heart connected to. And what did it feel like for you, Alec, when you realized what you had done by putting your heart in a box?

AJ: It was a painful realization. To be frank with you, it's something that I'm still kind of grappling with and still coming to terms with. I think one thing for me that really highlighted this about me was my grandmother passed away during residency and I remember just feeling like I didn't know how I was supposed to react. I didn't know at the funeral what type of emotional response I was supposed to be having. And I remember trying to cry and I just couldn't do it.

I didn't think about it too much at the time but now as I reflect back on it, it's really disturbing, honestly, to think about. I think that really points out how far removed I had gotten from who I thought I was and who I want to be. Again, I just became so focused on this goal, so focused on just the tasks in front of me that I lost sight of who I was and I lost sight of just being a human in a lot of ways.

HF: It's interesting you say that because I'm a type three too, and when I started my dermatology practice, my grandmother died and I didn't cry and that would disturb me too, that I couldn't cry. I feel like something similar happened to me and it is a painful realization. But the good news is that we can put that heart back in our body, we can take it out of the box. And I feel like you're really doing that. So, tell us a little bit about where you're at right now in this process.

AJ: For me, as I mentioned, one of the hardest things and biggest parts of this process is just coming to terms with my decision that I want something else. And coming to terms with the fact that I want to leave clinical medicine, it's scary because I'm leaving again, this set path, I'm leaving stability, I'm leaving a good salary behind to be able to follow my heart and to be able to follow something that I feel like is right for me. That is the first part of the process and I feel like I've done that now. I've come to terms with my decision. I've accepted that I want something else.

I think even before I did all that, I did a ton of research on my own about what else is out there. I remember like late night Googling about other nonclinical options. I was obsessed with looking up people who had left their prestigious careers to go on to do other things. I discovered your podcast along the way, which was really inspiring and made me feel like I was not alone in some of these feelings and this desire to leave clinical medicine.

I felt like I was decently well-equipped with knowing what else might be out there at least in some ways, knowing that there were other options for someone like me. And so,

at this point, I'm really trying to do a lot of the work to achieve my goal of getting a nonclinical job. And there are many steps to that process.

HF: You talked earlier on about the interest and love of writing and rhetoric and how you had gotten really good feedback about your abilities. How is that playing in now, if at all?

AJ: Yeah, it's really interesting because like you mentioned, I have always loved writing. I felt like I've been pretty good at it my whole life. And so, my eyes really lit up when I learned about the field of medical communications. And at this point, that's something, that's the field that I feel like interests me the most in the field that I would like to pursue for a future career. It would just be really nice to be able to get back into writing and get back into some of that more creative side and more expressive side of myself. I'm really excited to be able to pursue something like medical communications.

HF: Yeah, I think it's a wonderful area and we just had a podcast about it. I think this is something worth pursuing for you, even though you have so many things you could do. I really believe that there are lots of directions. And we haven't talked too much about this, but just because I know you a little bit, you have incredible leadership potential. I think working with people, helping in any organization that wants to make transformation happen, I really see you in a leadership role. I don't know how you're necessarily going to get there, but I just really believe that's where you're going.

AJ: Yeah, that's really kind. I appreciate that. I certainly have always felt like I've been a natural leader and I would love to be in a leadership position moving forward. I certainly understand that by making this type of career change, I'm not ready to just jump right into a leadership role in some ways and that I'm going to have to pay my dues and learn about some of these nonclinical industries before getting to that point. But I'm ready for that and I'm excited for that.

HF: We're excited too, and what's so much fun is we're going to be with you every step of the way. Just know that all these people who are listening right now are here and they're here to support you. You're not alone. No one's alone in this.

AJ: Yeah. That's really cool. I certainly felt alone in this process. I felt alone in medical school in a lot of ways. I felt alone in residency. And it's so nice to know that there's this community of people who are supporting me and people who want something else for their lives, and people who feel that change is possible and that they can put their happiness first.

HF: That's great. We're getting close to the end here. I want to ask you one thing and then also have you share any other thoughts you have, but I'm curious, Alec, what does it feel like to be more connected to your heart? Have you noticed anything different since you've really been listening more to it?

AJ: That's a really interesting question. It's taking me some time for sure. It's not something that once I decided that I could leave clinical medicine, that I immediately became in touch with my heart and my emotions again. I'm acknowledging that it's going to take some time. It's almost like a healing process in a lot of ways to try and reunite the body and the heart or the emotions who had become separated during this process.

I'm certainly trying to do some things to assist in that process like meditation, for example, is something that I'm trying to make a fundamental part of my life that just sit and be present and to just feel. And I think that's something that so many of us who pursue these paths don't do. We're just going, going, going, and that's how we lose touch with ourselves. That's how we lose touch with our emotions because we're not giving ourselves any time to sit and just be present.

I'm not in a position to be preaching about this really, because I of course had gotten so detached from my body and from my emotions, but I'm working on it and I feel like

that's going to be a really helpful thing for me to get back on track. But it certainly feels good to know that. It's okay to feel. It's okay to be emotional. It's okay to get sad and it's okay to just express what you want to express and do what you want to do. That's been a really, really nice part of the process for me.

HF: That is fantastic advice. And what you're really describing is you're connecting with your internal GPS. And if we don't listen to it, we're going to go off course and if we can't hear recalculate for a long time, we're going to be far off course before we hear that voice. So, that's lovely. Do you have any last thoughts that you'd like to share with the listeners?

AJ: Yeah. I actually wrote an article recently kind of highlighting some of my experiences and my career journey and touching on some of the more emotional parts of this journey. I felt like it was important for me to put it on paper and get back in touch with that creative side of myself. And it was also very cathartic to do so. I wrote this and I just recently published it on LinkedIn if people want to go check that out.

I think the last thing I'll say is that listening to that small voice inside your head is really hard. And it took me eight years to finally succumb to it and build up the guts to make a change in my life. And as someone who's experienced all this, I think it's so important to give that little flame some oxygen and to try not to smother it because when we smother this little voice in our head, it comes back and it comes back even stronger. And I know that for a fact.

I think it's so important to think about why you're feeling this way, to sit with it and nurture it, and that it's okay to be feeling this way if you're having some of these struggles or some of these internal debates. By giving that flame some life, you'll be able to figure out what it is that you truly want.



HF: That's excellent advice. And I can try listening to it when it's a whisper and don't have to wait till it's screaming at us. So, this has been really wonderful, Alec. I'm so honored to have you and I'm looking forward to when we catch up with you again. I'm not sure exactly when that will be, maybe three months or so. We'll have you back on the podcast. So, everybody stay tuned for chapter two with Dr. Alec Jacobson. Thank you, Alec.

AJ: Thank you so much, Heather.

HF: All right guys. I hope you really enjoyed this episode. I will have the link to Alec's article that he wrote on his LinkedIn profile so you can read his story and also be the link in there for the LinkedIn course and the discount code. Thanks so much for listening, don't forget to carpe that diem and I'll see you in the next episode. Bye for now.

You've been listening to the Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. If you've enjoyed what you've heard, I'd love it if you'd take a moment to rate and review this podcast and hit the subscribe button below so you don't miss an episode. If you'd like some additional resources, head on over to my website at doctorscrossing.com and check out the free resources tab. You can also go to doctorscrossing.com/free-resources. And if you want to find more podcast episodes, you can also find them on the website under the podcast tab. And I hope to see you back in the next episode. Bye for now.

[00:30:21]

Podcast details

END OF TRANSCRIPT