

CHAPTER 23:

CONFRONT REALITY

“You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end -- which you can never afford to lose -- with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.” –

James Stockdale

There were no two ways about it. I was skint. Cleaned out by a combination of poor business decisions, undue optimism and stubbornness.

The healthy pipeline of prospective clients I had been building had evaporated away, a few debts were building, and it felt like nothing I was doing seemed to make even the slightest difference. I was financially hedge hopping³⁸, and the ground was getting very close.

When I wasn't in front of a client³⁹, my mind state plummeted. I had lost belief in my ability to make a living from what I do, and I had no idea what I might do instead. This strange state went on for months.

One morning, out of sheer frustration, I grabbed a pen and pad. I looked up and wrote down every penny I owned, owed or was owed. It was an ugly table of numbers, but it wasn't as ugly as the version of it that my mind had made up.

I tore the table of numbers from the pad, stuck it to the wall and turned to a fresh page. On this one, I listed all the ideas I had that could help me move forward, from approaching loan sharks to the wildest trading plan. I filled three pages with my thoughts.

A simple three-prong plan emerged, which I then took the courageous step of sharing with a few close and trusted confidantes. They helped me tune and hone it.

It worked, and within a few months, I pulled myself out of the dive and at least stabilised myself. I was reading for the next chapter of my life.

³⁸ Hedge hopping is a term pilots use for flying dangerously close to the ground.

³⁹ I can always access my optimum state when working with others.

James Stockdale was the most senior ranking Naval Officer to be captured and taken prisoner during the Vietnam war. He spent seven years in the infamous Hanoi Hilton and was regularly beaten and tortured.

When he returned home, he was asked about the type of people who survived that kind of ordeal. He explained that optimists or pessimists never made it.

Optimists kept thinking, 'we'll be out by Christmas', but after multiple disappointments, they 'gave up and died of a broken heart'. Pessimists never believed the ordeal would come to an end. They gave up hope.

His philosophy became known as the Stockdale Paradox. This is the idea that we must always have faith that we will get through situations (and the fact you are alive and able to read these words is evidence of that). Still, we must also be willing to confront the reality of where we are now, no matter how brutal or ugly it might be.

When our current circumstances become challenging, and we can't see an obvious course of action available, it is easy to descend into denial or look for blame outside ourselves -the very opposite of responsABLE.

The optimist may keep a positive mindset and think that it will all be fine. However, the pessimist loses faith in their ability to find an exit from where they are.

Excessive positivity or negativity is an unhelpful position from which to figure out and execute the correct sequence of actions to move us forward.

They both require that we delude or lie to ourselves.

In challenging circumstances, we need to be able to trust our judgement, rationality and intuition. Lying to ourselves makes our own thinking untrustworthy.

Neither an optimist nor a pessimist; a realist.

From a position of realism, we can objectively observe a situation to understand what is actually present and what is or isn't available that we can use, including:

1. The skills, knowledge and experience that we can apply to the situation.
2. The connections and relationships we have that may be helpful to us.
3. The assets we have access to (money, materials, possessions and other tools).

When we do this, we may find that circumstances are not as dire as our wild imagination can make them seem, and we have far more resources available than we thought.

Wherever our starting point may be, there is always a way forward. It may not be easy or even comfortable, but it is there.

When we are moving forward again, we can reflect on how we got to the position we found ourselves in. What were the intuitions, thoughts and signals that we missed or failed to act upon that led us to the point we reached? How do we make sure that we don't miss them in future?

This is how we refine our ability to calibrate ourselves and 'show up' more effectively next time.