

DRAFT

It's Always Darkest Before Coffee

I wake up. Heart racing. Wide awake. 4 a.m. *Fuck!* Stare at the ceiling. Overwhelmed. Anxious. The momentum from the week before lost. Forgotten. And then that running monologue starts. Stuck in your head like an inane but catchy pop song. Like when you go into a shop and maybe the “Despacito” remix by Justin Bieber is playing, or maybe it’s “Look What You Made Me Do” by Taylor Swift. And then the fucking song is stuck in your head the rest of the day. At 4 a.m. my lyrics are dubbed over, repeating in a virtual loop: *Am I going to hit projections this week – If I don’t make payroll I’m gonna freak – I can’t face failure – Just wish I could sleep later ...*

It’s driving me crazy. That inner voice. The monologue. Now the dialog. The back and forth. Just shut up! I did the right thing. Right? They were happy. They gave me the deal. But now this. I’m sure I’m right, but ... Uncertainty creeping in. Uncertainty and self-doubt, the kiss of death. Shit, if the sun would just come up and I could get some coffee at The Grind.

6:30 a.m. Coffee is hot. Dark roast. Rich and bitter. Amazing how many people are on the road to work. So many sour faces grimacing against the low sun. It’s the sun! My dashboard pings. Something’s up. I looked down at the display. Two tires low on air pressure. Wow, what if a tire blew, I crashed, I died, and I didn’t have to deal with this bullshit anymore? Wait! Whoa! WTF am I thinking? Guess it’s not always darkest before coffee.

2:00 p.m. My dad calls. We talk bullshit superficial stuff for a minute. The weather. The gym. Plans for the weekend. Then he says, “Hey, you OK? You don’t sound that great.” That one question turned into a more meaningful conversation. I needed to talk. I realized I was more than just temporarily bummed out. I was burnt out. And depressed.

On the surface all seemed great. In a few short years after dropping out of Lehigh University, I had built a million dollar apparel business. Had just broken 300 stores carrying our line. And had six full-time employees. Mostly bootstrapping it. No one knew what was going on internally, but in February 2015 there was a pressure cooker about to explode. Manufacturing delays were killing the spring line; there were late nights talking to the vendor in China; I’d ruptured a disc in my back that hobbled me; cash flows were never good that time of year; and I felt increasingly isolated. With these setbacks being unacceptable and frustrating, I buried burden on top of burden, not wanting to show any kind of weakness.

Now, feeling better with just one phone call, I decided to just start talking with a few close peers about the heightened stress, anxiety, and loneliness in dealing with all the challenges, both personal and business. Not surprisingly they were going through the same shit but didn’t talk about it because there was, as one of them termed, mutual

intimidation. In other words, show no weakness. *Mutual intimidation*. Like we're fucking countries on the verge of war. A media blackout. Censorship. Silence.

Yes, we entrepreneurs know it's going to take hard work; we know there are risks; but many Millennial and Gen Z entrepreneurs, myself included, simply do not expect and are not prepared for the intensity of the emotional and mental rollercoaster with its unique challenges and uncertainties. In a subsequent conversation with my dad, I suggested we do something about this; namely, tackle the rollercoaster straight on, laying bare the realities and the unique challenges. We started talking to a lot more Millennial and Gen Z entrepreneurs to hear their stories.

To get at the blood, guts, and sweat of it – not to sound too melodramatic – we wanted to hear challenges and solutions from the street level, from those immersed in the struggle to succeed. From people like me so we could help people like me. No slick-sounding bullshit platitudes from tech billionaires. At the same time, it's definitely not all gloom and doom; to the contrary, we're always digging for multiple solutions and paths forward because one size certainly doesn't fit all in our uncertain world. To date our interviews cover the startup spectrum: some are bootstrapping, some have accelerator support, and some have VC money.

Ultimately, it doesn't matter what phase of the entrepreneurial journey you, me, all of us might be in. What matters is you absolutely need to be performing as best you can at all times to handle the massive workload, the multi-tasking; to make important decisions, sometimes really quickly; and to deal with pressure points and stress. I think of it this way: I need to be on point for every phone call, for every meeting, for every decision, because just one bad call-meeting-decision could implode my business.