



ANDY PETRANEK

STEPPING UP

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**A newsletter, written with joy, for the curious, adventurous,
and modern-day action-takers of the world.**

<<First Name>>,

Before you get any further, I want to let you know that this is not my “normal” newsletter.

You see, this year has been a challenging one for me (one of the reasons you haven’t heard from me each month this year). And rather than taking the easy route of just getting back to “business as usual”, I decided to share from my heart, tell the truth, take a risk, be vulnerable, and let you in on things that I never share publicly... the struggles, insecurities, stress, anxiety, and fear that has gripped me for much of the past 9 months.

Don’t worry, this isn’t a “call for help” as I’ve been blessed with amazing coaches, friends, family members and mentors who have helped me work through it. And though it’s still present, the volume is way down from where it was earlier this year.

But as I learned over the course of the year, sharing experiences like this can be incredibly healing. When I was really going through the thick of it, hearing stories from others about similar struggles (the good, bad, and ugly), helped me to feel seen, related to, and not so alone. And since then, each time I’ve shared, it’s gotten a little easier, and has taken some of the weight and pressure off.

(misunderstandings) that I've been telling myself. The biggest of these is the misunderstanding that to be accepted in the world by others, and to succeed in life I must hide any weakness, show only my strengths, and always appear strong, courageous, capable, and unneeding of help from anyone. Whew... even that is hard to say.

The full story starts below... Warning... it's long. If this point is as far as you make it, no worries... thank you, really... for reading this far, and rest assured, I'll be getting back to my "regularly scheduled format" in future emails.

Andy

I've built up quite the image of myself over the past 25 years. Ever since working my ass off to be accepted into one of the world's best music schools to play the trumpet (Eastman), and then working to earn the honor of serving as United States Marine... I've made it my priority to show the world how strong, tough, capable, resilient, and "good enough" I am. My need to prove this comes from an age-old story I've been telling myself - that life is about measuring up, succeeding, being strong, looking good, and never showing your weakness. It's an operating system has been running me, usually invisibly, for the past five decades.

This invisible strategy has worked incredibly well. It has lead to a happy, fun, exciting, adventurous, and meaningful life that has offered me many opportunities, blessings, and success over the years.

That's why even now, after 8 months of seeing it through a completely different lens, it still comes as a surprise when I experience fears and insecurities about "normal" life that are completely opposite of the way I've been used to experiencing them for the past 50 years.

For example, this time of year (Thanksgiving, Christmas, plus my birthday that's sandwiched between the two) has always been one of excitement, joy, cheer, laughter, and fun. It's always been a time that I look forward to - where I get to spend time with family, away from work, acknowledging all the blessings in my life and preparing for the renewal of the New Year.

But when I woke up the other day, I felt the complete opposite... f*cking stressed out, anxious, and overwhelmed. Afraid about the future. Avoiding Instagram because of the way I use it to judge myself as not measuring up to all the other "happy and successful" people out there. Wanting to just "give up" on life. Feeling helpless, and hopeless... and incapable of my ability to prove my worthiness, as I used to do so

This all started back in May of this year and not just out of the blue. There were a combination of triggers... the political climate, the negativity of any and all news in the world, financial stresses of raising a child and living in one of the most expensive cities in the world, and a significant decline (for the first time ever) in the participation in and revenue generated by the Whole Life Challenge. Without going into too many details, let's just say that I assumed that my business, based on its success over the past 7 years, would automatically be my retirement parachute, my future personal financial strategy for anything my family might need.

With this downturn, suddenly that picture wasn't clear - at all. And, in spite of nothing really yet happening as a consequence, I related to it, and to myself, as a failure and saw my demise, thinking, "Finally... after all this time, they've found out what a fraud I am... in spite of what they might think, I'm weak, insecure, unsuccessful, incapable, a failure, and don't have a clue what to do about it."

After making a series of ill-fated decisions that made many of our internal team's struggles worse, "it" happened. I suffered my first ever panic attack. Having never had one before, I was clueless as to what it might be, or why. And then, when it didn't just go away and I struggled with the inability to sleep, constant worry/anxiety, uncertainty, and fear everything (a case of the "What if's..."), I started to think something was seriously wrong with me.

It was such an abrupt change from my normal happy-go-lucky demeanor. Prior to then, I had a way of being that always saw the glass half-full, was strong, optimistic, full of energy and enthusiasm. I understood fear, worry, and anxiety in concept, but I had never had a meaningful or deep, direct experience of them, so there was no real space for thinking or feeling this way. This new state of being was also something I was incapable at the time of just "shaking off", as it continued, unchanged, for months.

Never before had I felt a sense of fear, dread, or worry about the future. Now, it was all I thought about. I woke up every single day uncertain, wondering how I would make it, on that day, and in this life. Every path lead to my ultimate demise... like it was my downfall in life was going to happen imminently - in every part of my life. It was terrifying. Interestingly, I was able to see the illogicalness of it all - as my life, in all reality, hadn't changed a bit, and was truly wonderful. But in spite of that, these struggles continued.

And though I regularly felt like I wouldn't make it through each day, obviously I did.

Now, it's almost 7 months later, and I have a little more perspective on it and I wanted to share with you four things that helped me through - in case any of you are

1. Taking things one day at a time... sometimes one hour at a time.
Anything that involved me projecting myself into the future put me into a tail-spin. The antidote, the practice of taking things one day at a time, focusing on one thing I could do, each day, each moment, to affect my life, move it forward, and make that minute or hour work... worked.
2. Finding the gratitude and appreciation for my friends, family, and close inner circle... and their contribution to my life.
When I was feeling my worst, gratitude often stopped the spin. When I was able to stop and focus on the amazing parts of my life, the blessings and opportunities, and for the people responsible for helping to get where I am... I felt loved and connected, and it helped me breathe and move forward.
3. Daily Habits. A list of about 10 practices that I did every day, without fail, that created stability for me as I went through it.
Thank goodness for years of daily habit practice... as those too could have gone by the wayside. No matter how bad I felt, I practiced my daily habits like clockwork. I almost NEVER felt like doing them. In fact, usually felt like doing the exact opposite. But I remember saying to myself, "Just fake it 'till you make it." And so I'd begin...

My routine consisted of some or all of the following: Meditating (5-20 min), journaling, stretching, exercising (Peloton and CrossFit at CFLA were godsend), walking the dogs, reading/listening/learning (kindle, books, and youtube became favorite daily activities), repeating affirmations, sleeping, drinking water, taking contrast showers. These all became monumentally important, helping me to realize that as bad as things felt, these were still things I could do. They became daily baby action steps - ones that helped me make forward progress (in spite of feeling helpless to do so.) And though they only took up a small part of the day, they helped give me positive forward momentum.

4. Courage to share. At first I put myself into "solitary confinement", thinking this was crazy, and was something I could handle and get through on my own. The last thing I wanted to do was share it with anyone.

As I mustered up the courage to stop internalizing and start talking to people who loved and cared about me about what was going on, I started to find out that I wasn't alone. Much to my surprise, many shared stories their own stories of struggles with panic attacks, anxiety, fear, and uncertainty. And in a strange and amazing way, it was a relief. I started to feel not so alone, not so scared,

lived in for 5 decades was the outlier, and perhaps this newly discovered way of being was more like what it is like to be fully “human”.

To this day, I am deeply grateful and appreciative of the willingness of my wife, family, and friends to take the time to listen to my struggles, make sure they knew they were there for me, and to open up and share their own stories like mine.

As I was doing this, another crazy thing happened... I started to connect more deeply with others. They would share a story of struggle, loss, or pain, and I would feel their pain in me (usually resulting in the shedding of many tears). Their fear, anxiety, or desperation became so present for me, so alive. I used to think I knew what it was like to empathize with someone. While I understood the concept... this... this was the real deal.

It was amazing really... for the first time in my life, I was able to fully understand, feel, connect, and empathize with the magnitude of other's struggle. Of the risks taken, challenges overcome, and fear/anxiety experienced by them as they went through things in their own lives. While I could sympathize with their struggles before, this was connecting through empathy, and was on an entirely different level.

As I made it further into the year, I started to consider the possibility that perhaps this year of uncertainty, struggle, fear, anxiety, and pain had been one of the greatest opportunities for growth and one of the biggest blessings of my life - one I should be grateful for.

And now as I write this, I realize how many things about it I AM truly grateful for. It has connected me to a part of my humanness that I knew only in concept. It has taught me through experience that pain, fear, and anxiety are absolutely real, are a normal and real part of being human, and are not easily just “shrugged off”. It has helped me appreciate others WAY more, as I now feel what it's like to be in a state of helplessness, hopelessness, fear, and anxiety about the future. And, it has helped me be a more whole, complete human being.

I know the journey is not over, as I'm still experiencing struggles each day that cause me fear, anxiety, and worry. But I see now that that is just part of the game, it's normal, and doesn't define me, or inherently mean anything, it also lets me know that I'm human... and no matter what, I can make it through.

I'm grateful to each of you for your part in my life. I appreciate your willingness to listen to all of this, and to perhaps, see something in it for yourself or someone you love. If not that, then just your willingness to be there to listen. It means a lot to me...

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