

Resilience Success Story

Stuart Taylor - A Story of Four Hats

Stuart Taylor leads our Australian Practice. In January 2002 Stuart was diagnosed with a Grade 3 Brain Tumour. In January 2012, against the odds, he celebrated his 10 year anniversary. In this first part of a two-part newsletter, Stuart tells his life story leading up to and post this event. Part 2 will unpack his lessons learnt.

Hat #1: Cub Scout Hat



I was born in a small rural NSW town, one month before man landed on the moon, as the youngest of three. I was raised by loving parents in a catholic family with strong values and strong role models. My parents were both of high intelligence and self-actualisation with successful small-business backgrounds. I was a high-performing student who placed very high expectations on my results from a very early age, ultimately leading to dux at secondary school level. Frequent positive feedback, awards and accolades reinforced these expectations, arguably to the point of dependence. That dependence unquestionably lifted my stress profile and bedded down a strong fear of failure and pursuit of perfection. This first phase of my life up to the age of 17 is well represented by my **Cub Scout Hat** (me the perfectly behaved rule-taker). An upbringing of happiness, nurturing, rule-taking, striving, “doing the right thing”; complicated with growing perfectionism, stress and need for approval.

The Hat Changer

My “cub hat” was eventually removed by two hat-changers. First was acceptance and induction to the Australian Defence Force Academy. For me a place of deep friendships forged in adversity AND becoming a man. The second was watching my father die from a heart attack, me 21, he 49. I will never forget the sense of shock and blur on the 2 hour drive from the regional hospital to home. It took years to move past this event. Deep sadness and anguish. Life would never be so innocent.

Hat #2: RAAF Officer Hat



On graduation I was posted my RAAF Amberley where I put on my second hat – **RAAF Officer Hat** (me the fast track leader). This was a time of challenge, learning and opportunity; a time to thrive and strive. Fair to say that I was on a mission with strong confidence in my capability; and perhaps a tinge of arrogance. This period of growth catapulted me into the most amazing experience in the consulting division of KPMG. Quickly adjusting to the commercial environment, I was leading and facilitating business redesign programs with large corporations. I was on the fast track to partnership and some would say “a dash for cash”. High pressure. High excitement. High stress. Long hours. Loads of travel. A change of focus saw me shift out of consulting to corporate with Heinz Food in various management roles; again on a path to seniority and success. During this period I met my wife (wearing my officer hat, of course) and had three beautiful children in quick succession.

The Hat Changer

In January 2002, while at Heinz, my “Officer hat” was brutally removed. I had been experiencing sharp pains in my head over a period of six weeks. I eventually found time to see a GP who suggested tablets for my sinus issue. On instinct, I requested a brain scan, which resulted in a diagnosis of a brain tumour grade 3; prognosis 2.5 years left to live. Oh my God!

Hat #3: The Bandana



Three children, eldest 5. Moving forward one day, sledge hammer the next. Our life, my life, had just hit an impasse. I

naively fell into robotic, scientific, rational mode to research and understand the disease and consequences. In retrospect, I was in a blur of self-delusion and shock. The emotional reality eventually hit when breaking the news to a close friend who had lost her husband to brain cancer during pregnancy. Fear, sadness, anger and anguish all took hold. One of the toughest gut-wrenching realities was the phone call to Mum to let her know the news. Within days I was swept into the medical chain and had interviewed and chosen a neurosurgeon. Within a fortnight I was prepared for a craniotomy. By the eve of the surgery, my whole extended family and friends had gathered – understanding that brain surgery may result in less optimal outcomes. For me, the hour and minutes before the anaesthetic were pulse-raising. The 10 second countdown created an anxious loss of control then In reality, it was easy for me. I was informed after the surgery that the lunch at a nearby restaurant had largely been a waste of money by my family as everyone pushed their food around the plate and ate little. Surgery was a great success with clear scans.

Radiotherapy soon started and my third hat - **the Bandana** (me the vulnerable) – became my headdress. How amazing was the support from our family and friends. People that didn’t really know us were reaching out to help. Heinz organised daily transportation to take me to and from radiotherapy – a gesture that took a huge load off my amazing wife who was already dealing with enough.

A Time for Change

During this giddy time, I spent an amazingly impactful, emotionally draining and spiritually enlightening 10 days with The Gawler Foundation exploring complementary approaches to match the conventional. I will never forget arriving at the foundation and seeing all these sick people. Then realization quickly hit – I too was sick. I was no longer bullet proof. I needed to change. This was a time to surrender and start again.

This was a time of harsh reality and mixed dilemmas. One minute making peace with the reality and eventuality of death and dying while also aiming to beat it. It didn’t help that I started attending funerals for many of the friends I had made while at The Gawler Foundation. How is it that life and lives can change so dramatically, so quickly? Such impermanence.

With the unbelievable support of my family I went about resetting my whole life to give myself the best chance of living beyond the prognosis – exercise, nutrition, mindset, optimism, meditation and spirituality. I became the family project. My self-discipline kicked in. The third hat generated so much willpower and determination that there was no way I was going to let this beat me. There was no problem implementing the new regime. I drank more carrot juice and vegetable juice in that first year than I care to recall. My wife – a pillar of courage, positivity and love. My sister – a source of wisdom and guidance. A formidable team.

A Momentary Lapse of Reason

After about 2 months I went back to work at Heinz. After another two months on my birthday in June 2002, I remember sitting at my work desk at the end of a tough day and said to myself – what am I doing here? I have just had the most life-changing experience and now I am back doing what I was doing. I had not really taken the message from this experience. I could not continue doing what I was doing. I was not coping. That week I decided to take a year off to truly heal AND find out what life was all about.

The Hat Changer

So, I set out on a spiritual quest to find out what I did want to do with my life. I started in book shops, coffee shops and mind-body-spirit expos. This journey was not going to be easy. So many perspectives, so much confusion. Boy, was it exciting. I remember one of my (corporate) friends saying to me “you are so lucky to have the opportunity to take time off to explore”. My first thought was “lucky? Brain tumour?”. With more thought I replied by saying “You too can explore. You don’t need to wait for a major life event”.

During that year of spiritual exploration, I reconnected with the founder of The Resilience Institute, Dr Sven Hansen. Given my career history AND recent journey, he floated the idea of me joining The Resilience Institute. By early 2003 I had joined The Resilience Institute in Australia working with large organizations on building resilience for peak performance, happiness and health. I am now part of The Resilience Institute’s global entity as well as leading the Australian arm and loving what I do. What an amazing and rare privilege to find meaning in work and life! What a privilege to work with so many wonderful organisations and people and have human conversations for positive change.

Hat #4: TBA

My **fourth hat** remains unnamed yet continues to take shape as my spiritual journey unfolds. Perhaps, appropriately, this hat will never be labelled. Instead staying open to the possibilities of future challenges, opportunities and contributions. Perhaps this fourth hat incorporates elements of its predecessors. I hope I will maintain the vulnerable, inquisitive, exploring, compassionate attributes of the Bandana. I hope I will maintain the drive and determination attributes of the RAAF Office Hat. I hope I will not lose the childish nature of the Cub Hat. I do know that this hat will see my level of consciousness continue to be awakened and lifted in a world that is in desperate need of awakening.

A Time for Celebration

In 2004, we celebrated my 35th birthday with a huge party as this marked the prognosis period of 2.5 years. At the 5 year mark, my wife threw a “Thank God You’re Here” party. As each year has passed, there were more perfect scans, more parties and more confidence that I was on the path to full health. In January 2012, I celebrated my 10 year anniversary as I continue to go from strength to strength.

A Time for Reflection

In many respects the third hat has been my favourite. Prior to January 2002 my definition of success was about title (read acceptance by others), material wealth and happiness (yet to be defined) –in that order. This mix caused a lot of challenges – driven pace of life, high stress, continual judgement of myself by myself and continual evaluation of other people’s judgements of me. To say I experienced an enormous awakening is an understatement. It undoubtedly made me realise that my definition of success was making me sick. This wake-up call fuelled a

massive motivation to be a “better” person with stronger humility, self-care, self-worth, and clearer meaning and purpose. More than this, it stimulated my desire to use my strengths to contribute to improving the lives of others in an empathic and compassionate way. Who could have written a career plan for a naïve airforce Aeronautical Engineering Officer to evolve into the area of liberating human performance sustainably.

12 Pillars of Resilience - Lessons

A decade of significant personal growth. With the power of hindsight, I see twelve major themes emerge that I regard as “pillars of resilience” or resilience tenets. These themes I believe were fundamental realisations in my recovery and continued growth.

They are...

1. Focus on what you can control and ignore what you can't
2. All fear-based emotions (including stress) are due to a negative forecast of an imaginary future based on past experience. Stay in the present!!
3. When in doubt, breathe out. Take time to chill out.
4. Without physical energy, there is no resilience
5. Resilience is armed by positivity (of emotions and thoughts) and humour
6. Perfectionism and over-caring are the natural enemies of resilience
7. Life is not fair
8. It is not the environment that causes your emotions and behaviours; it is what you believe about the environment. We always have choices
9. Physical, emotional and cognitive resilience can be used for good or evil; it is how we put

our spirit into action that leads to sustainable resilience in self and others.

10. Resilience is a team sport, not an individual sport. Compassion through healthy relationships, leadership and connection is the key.
11. Playing to our strengths leads to stress mastery, confidence, performance, happiness & resilience
12. Mindfulness of body, heart, mind and spirit gives us the opportunity to make better choices

While I can in no way claim absolute mastery and adoption of these themes, through meditation and focus, I have come a long way. It has not been without challenges, questioning long held beliefs and battles for mastery. May the journey continue!!

Stay tuned for the follow up to this Newsletter. In Part 2 Stuart will unpack his 12 Pillars of Resilience.