

Summon the Courage to Enter the Dark Room

“If you’re going through hell, keep going.”

—Winston Churchill

So how do you launch a business, even with less than nothing, and somehow get to the point at which some of the largest companies in the world want to buy you?

What’s the first step?

The first step is into the dark room.

The dark room is what confronts everyone who is not living the life they’ve imagined for themselves. Who is professionally unfulfilled. Who finds that condition unacceptable.

And who is determined to do something about it.

And also those who determine that doing something about it involves developing a product or service, then launching it, either within an existing company or doing so independently on their own.

It's one thing to have an idea. Actually making it a reality is another entirely. Actually bringing it to life requires facing a moment of truth.

What's that moment like?

Imagine you're standing in front of a door that leads into a room. A dark room, a room completely devoid of light.

Dark rooms are frightening, potentially filled with peril. There is tremendous ambiguity involved.

It's natural, and certainly rational, to walk away from a situation like that. To not enter the dark room. To stay where you are, where you can at least see what's around you. Where you're comfortable.

But it takes courage, which is often irrational, to enter that room. And to have the door close behind you.

You're now alone. In utter blackness. Not sure where to go. Not sure what to do.

No one is comfortable in a situation like that. It's unpleasant at best, and often terrifying.

So what do you do then?

You search for sources of light to illuminate the dark room. Sources of light that will allow you to navigate your way around the room. That will allow you to be successful in the room so that you're not operating in the dark.

Those sources of light are not always obvious. They can, in fact, take years to locate.

Both Jack and I did enter dark rooms, and we both spent years in them, years in which we often found ourselves in absurd situations doing things we never thought we'd do.

What was it like? What were our darkest moments? Why did we stay in them for as long as we did? Why did we persist?

How did we find the lights to illuminate our dark rooms, so that we could see the paths we needed to be successful? To live the lives we had imagined for ourselves?

LIFE IN THE DARK ROOM: DAVE

So my girlfriend just financed my new food company, American Connoisseur, by signing for a \$2,500 credit card loan and I set up shop in a 300-square-foot former break room in a vacant office in a small industrial park in tiny Sylvan Lake, Michigan.

You don't get much for that kind of money, even in the early 1990s. Washable walls and ceiling, a couple sinks; fortunately, my landlord had just closed a TCBY yogurt shop he owned, so he let us borrow a stainless steel table. For equipment I ran to K-Mart and purchased two standard household blenders, some one-quart plastic pitchers, and four funnels.

I found a bottle supplier in downtown Detroit, along with a spice importer, and would make the 35-minute trek one way in my car for supplies. I could fit 35 cases of bottles in my trunk and would buy 20-pound bags of dehydrated garlic, onion, oregano, and basil, all of which would go in my back seat. I'd travel back to our plant with my windows open, even in the winter, to try to dilute the pungent odor from the garlic, but nevertheless the smell would permeate the fabric of the seat upholstery and would last for weeks. For just about everything else—salt, sugar, and canola oil—I'd go to Sam's Club.

To make our marinades I'd measure the ingredients into the blenders, mix them, pour them into a plastic pitcher, put a funnel in the bottle, and fill them, then seal them and label them. All by hand.

The blenders invariably broke down every few weeks—I soon learned the hard way that canola oil seeping into the control panel is not a good thing—and I'd run back to K-Mart to buy \$30 replacements.

We did have air conditioning but, ironically, we had no heat. I kept calling my landlord, who lived in the Bahamas for half the year for tax purposes, if that tells you anything, and he just kept telling me to keep flicking the switch on the thermostat and the heat would kick in.

Apparently, the \$300 per month in rent I was paying him under the table did not justify a significant capital expenditure budget.

We kept flicking that switch, but nothing ever happened. I wasn't, though, going to let something like the lack of heat stop me. I was in business, and that was all that mattered.

I estimate we did the first 400,000 bottles this way, through five Michigan winters. We could see our breath when we first walked in. My parents gave me a couple of space heaters and after a while that, coupled with our body heat, brought the temperature up to a relatively humane level.

No worries in the summer, however, as again we had air conditioning.

For the most part we'd make our product at night, and in the day I'd balance my time between the various commission-only jobs I arranged, either selling commercial real estate or life insurance, while also trying to market my line of premium marinades.

I was actually getting some nice publicity, even being interviewed by the Food Network on their daily "TV Food News and Views" show.

After taping my segment with one of their hosts, *The Dean & DeLuca Cookbook* author David Rosengarten, he was kind enough to escort me out of their Manhattan studios down to the street.

Rosengarten was also at the time the New York City restaurant critic for *Gourmet* magazine. I asked him whether he had any idea how much money he spent dining in Manhattan per year.

"Funny you should ask that," he replied. "They have me use a dedicated American Express Gold Card for all my restaurant meals for the magazine. Just last week I was looking at my statement, and so far this year I've charged just under \$95,000 to the card."

This was in early November. Nice work if you can find it.

And sure enough I was getting picked up by local food retailers and then by a few national accounts as well. T.J. Maxx, for example, who had just started selling specialty food, and even QVC, who featured my marinades for years.

Although accounts were buying my products, getting it to them was another story.

Heat wasn't the only thing I was lacking in my little makeshift 300-square-foot kitchen. I couldn't afford a forklift either.

Every time I needed to ship an order, I'd wheel all our product out on a cart into the parking lot, load it onto a pallet on the truck by hand, stretch wrap it myself, and use the truck's pallet jack to get it into the back of the trailer.

After a while it was difficult to even get trucks to come, as sometimes they'd be there for upwards of an hour.

One day a woman, Michelle Marshall, came out into the parking lot. About a decade before, she had started a specialty food company of her own, launching a British pub style mustard she called Mucky Duck, and by chance her kitchen was directly across from mine.

I'd like to think Michelle felt sorry for me, seeing me loading pallets in the snow. In reality she had a doctor's appointment and could not get out of the parking lot, as the truck was blocking her way. She blessedly offered to let me use Mucky Duck's forklift.

That soon became a standard practice for us, and I befriended her as well; I thought she was terrific personally and professionally and believed she had developed a great product, verified by the fact that Mucky Duck Mustard won the 1996 World Championships of Mustard.

A few years after that chance first meeting, after I had been encouraging Michelle to partner with me, she said she was retiring and moving to Phoenix and that if I wanted to buy Mucky Duck, now was my chance.

We closed on the company three weeks later, an all-cash deal that the bank financed 100 percent, with my dad guaranteeing the \$108,000 loan.

I figured at least I was consistent: I founded my first company via financing courtesy of my girlfriend and I financed my first acquisition via my dad's credit worthiness.

So now I owned a mustard company, which was very exciting. Even more exciting was that I finally had a somewhat professional commercial kitchen to work out of, and at that time I defined "professional" as having a place with heat and a working forklift.

The day after we closed on the Mucky Duck Mustard Company, we moved across the parking lot to our new professional commercial

kitchen. After moving a vertical spice rack we had against the wall in our old American Connoisseur space, one of my employees looked at me, somewhat aghast, and called me over to that wall.

“Uh, Dave—you want to take a look at this?”

I walked over, somewhat concerned, and could not believe what I saw; it was a second thermostat. I flicked the switch, just as my landlord had implored me to do so many times, and sure enough the heat came on. Just as we were leaving the space for the very last time.

An even bigger surprise was waiting for me when I showed up for the first day of production as the new owner of the Mucky Duck Mustard Company.

Most American mustards are made with mustard flour and vinegar that is mixed with maybe turmeric and, when whipped together, comes out as mustard.

It was just my luck, though, that I did not buy an *American* mustard company but one that produced a *British* pub style mustard, which typically have more personality than their U.S. cousins; they're made with eggs and sugar and employ a multi-day process to produce.

So I soon found myself getting up at 5:30 every morning to go in and break eggs for that day's production, something I did for years, and one day I looked back and estimated that the hands that are typing these words now have conservatively broken 800,000 eggs in their lifetime.

Things they don't teach you in grad school. . .

But I wasn't the only one in our family breaking eggs. My then-girl-friend-now wife Jill, whose signature on that \$2,500 Discover credit card loan launched our company, was pregnant with our first child, our son Christian. On her days off from her job working at the cosmetic counter at Neiman Marcus, she would join us in our kitchen and break eggs as well.

As Jill's due date drew closer we found ourselves in our OB-GYN's office and he informed us that Christian was breached and that as a result he'd have to be delivered by Caesarian section. We were thus able to pick a date and time in which Christian would be born.

We subsequently picked a Monday, which the doctor thought was great; then he suggested a time: 11:00 a.m.

I asked if we could make it later that day, as I had a truck coming that morning that I'd have to load. Thus, we scheduled the appointment for 1:00 p.m., and our eldest son was brought into this world about 45 minutes after 1:00 p.m.

The mustard order went out as well that day.

At this point I was six years into my entrepreneurial adventure, still not making money, certainly not enough to raise a family and live on, still piling up debt. Jack and I did not even know each other yet; in fact, we would not even meet for another five years, but it was at this time that his entrepreneurial adventure was beginning, and he was enduring similar experiences with Garden Fresh.

LIFE IN THE DARK ROOM: JACK AND ANNETTE

Like me and my marinades, Jack too started with blenders in the back of his Clubhouse Bar-B-Q restaurant on a little red Formica table.

“It would take me about 20 minutes to make six pints, which I thought was pretty good,” Jack recalls. (Today six pints of Garden Fresh Salsa roll off our assembly lines every nine seconds.)

It wasn't long, though, before he sensed that he had something special on his hands. “People started coming from 20 miles away just for this salsa. We couldn't believe it.”

As the crowds grew and as more stores in the surrounding area started carrying Jack's salsa he and his wife Annette eventually walled off part of the Clubhouse Bar-B-Q's dining room and converted that to salsa production. They soon realized, though, that their restaurant did not have the cooler capacity to handle their new production levels.

So they rented an 8-by-20-foot walk-in cooler and located it in the back alley of the Clubhouse Bar-B-Q even though doing so violated the local zoning ordinances. Annette soon found herself running outside into the often muddy alley to get their raw materials, then at the end of the production session running finished product back out to it.

It was at about this time that Fox2 News did a story on Jack. “It didn’t even dawn on me that we weren’t exactly up to code,” Jack recalls. “That didn’t happen until the city manager showed up the next day.”

Together, though, he and the city manager did find a 3,000-square-foot vacant former video store, with the notion that Jack and Annette would convert the space to salsa production.

Before they could, however, they had to petition the city to change the zoning from commercial to industrial.

Jack remembers the city council meeting in which he tried to do just that: “Some of the council members were against the zoning change, saying that the highest and best use for this space was still commercial, not industrial. So I told them I’d set up a card table just inside the front entrance, that I’d call it a ‘store,’ and promised to sell a pint of salsa to any member of the public who walked in for \$2.50.” This was good enough for the council, and the zoning change was approved.

Although we were located 15 miles apart and were not to meet each other for another five years, both my American Connoisseur Gourmet Foods/The Mucky Duck Mustard Company and Jack and Annette’s Garden Fresh Gourmet were both now operating out of 3,000-square-foot production facilities.

As I was getting up at 5:30 a.m. to go in and break eggs for that day’s production, Annette would arrive at the former video store an hour earlier than that to move all the packaging materials from the production floor out to the parking lot, just so they’d have the room to produce Garden Fresh Salsa.

When it rained or snowed, which happens often in Detroit, Annette would run out to the lot and cover everything with tarps.

This was after she’d label the salsa cups the previous evening, at home, by hand. She says, “I’d do about three cases of empty containers, and that would get us through the next day’s production.”

That would be enough for about 1,500 pints of salsa, or 60 batches worth, which would take Jack, Annette, and their crew of seven upwards of 10 hours, a task that today takes Garden Fresh less than 10 minutes.

Even with all the packaging materials outside, there was still not sufficient room in the old video store for refrigeration, so Jack came up with an ingenious idea.

He'd have his tomatoes dropped off in a refrigerated trailer and move all the tomatoes to one side. They'd then draw down on the tomato inventory throughout the day and store the finished salsa product on the other side of the trailer.

Back inside the plant, Annette would be personally "lidding" every pint by hand. "They all had to be perfect," she says.

When that day's production run was completed, Annette would break out a 12-pack of Corona beer for herself and their employees to enjoy as they cleaned the plant. Finally, they'd move all their extra packing materials back in from the parking lot to the shop floor and call it a day.

But Jack's day was far from over.

He would deliver the fresh salsa himself, often at night, as that was the only time some of the large accounts he had started to land would receive deliveries.

The deliveries did not always go smoothly. . .

One morning, after a particularly long production session the previous day and after delivering product all night, Jack was driving home. After being up for close to 24 hours, he could no longer keep his eyes open, so at red lights he'd put the car in park, close his eyes, and wait for the driver behind him to honk his or her horn when the light turned green, waking Jack up to continue his march home.

After a few years, Garden Fresh was picked up by a major Midwestern chain, Meijer, and Jack was delivering salsa to one of their distribution centers when his truck hit a deer, doing \$10,000 of damage to Garden Fresh's only delivery vehicle.

When the tow truck arrived, the driver told Jack he knew of a shop nearby that was open and could repair the truck in maybe a day or so. Jack would hear nothing of it.

"You've got to take me to the Meijer distribution center first," he told the driver. "I can't be late on this order."

The driver was incredulous, but Jack insisted and paid him an extra \$300. Meijer did receive the order via Jack's truck that was ushered into the distribution center via a tow truck. The guys at the receiving dock were as incredulous as the tow truck driver; they had never seen anything like this.

Shortly after, Jack received a call from the deli buyer at the largest chain in Florida, Publix, an account he had been trying to land for months.

"You've been calling me forever," the buyer said to Jack. "Someone just cancelled for tomorrow afternoon, so if you want to jump on a plane and get here at 3:30, the appointment's yours."

Jack told him he'd be there. What he did not tell him, though, was that he could not afford a plane ticket, and, even if he did fly, Jack did not trust UPS to get his product there in good condition for the meeting. He subsequently packed his car with fresh salsa samples and drove straight through the night, making the 27-hour trek to Publix' headquarters in Lakeland, Florida.

When Jack pulled up to the security gate the guard, "a dead ringer for the Maytag repairman," Jack recalls, came out and asked whom he was there to meet. Jack was so tired he could not remember the name of the Publix deli buyer, Raul Garcia, so he said the first thing that came to his mind, which unfortunately was not the buyer's name but the name of the Columbian Coffee mascot.

"Juan Valdez," Jack told the guard.

"Never heard of that guy," the guard responded, and subsequently told him to get out of the car and ordered security to check it as Jack frantically called Annette to see who he was supposed to meet with.

After Jack got the name right, the guard said, "We got that guy" and let Jack proceed into corporate headquarters.

So Jack had his meeting with the Publix deli buyer, but did not get the account. That would not happen until years later, after we had become partners.

Today, however, Garden Fresh is the number 1 brand of fresh salsa at Publix, and we also produce their private label salsa as well. They're one of our top ten customers.

A few months after that, on the eve of Jack and Annette's wedding anniversary, Jack had made arrangements to make a delivery to an upscale account in Grand Rapids, about two and a half hours from Garden Fresh's plant.

Jack felt bad about missing their anniversary, so he invited Annette to come with him and reserved a special honeymoon suite at one of the premiere hotels in Grand Rapids.

About halfway between Detroit and Grand Rapids, though, the beleaguered Garden Fresh truck blew a rod, and it was all Jack could do to even move it to the side of the road. Worse yet, Jack could not leave the refrigeration unit running all night so all the salsa for the next day's delivery was at risk.

So he walked up the highway exit ramp into a nearby supermarket and loaded a shopping cart with 50 bags of ice. He then walked back out to the highway, with the shopping cart full of ice, and proceeded to pack the salsa in the ice to keep it cold through the night.

It was then that Jack realized he had spent nearly all his cash on the ice. Luckily, Annette had a \$20 bill and the two of them scurried across the highway and spent the evening in a \$29 motel room.

"Let's just say it was at that moment I realized the honeymoon was over," Jack recalls. And by "honeymoon" Jack was not referring to his marriage to Annette. He was referring to the thrill of getting a business off the ground.

It was a feeling I was very, very familiar with.

I can smile now about how we made our first 400,000 bottles of marinade by hand with \$30 store-bought blenders in a 300-square-foot kitchen with no heat. I do so fondly because, as dire as our circumstances might have appeared to me, it was the most "romantic" time of my business career.

The thrill of having developed a product that someone actually wanted to buy was palpable. Then receiving positive feedback in addition was just an incredible adrenaline rush. That was all I needed to survive.

Resources and profit, or the lack thereof, didn't matter; that would all come later, I believed. For now just the joy of pursuing a dream, of taking

the first steps toward living the life I had imagined for myself, that was enough to live on, enough to live for.

As the years go by, though, you begin to realize that maybe delayed gratification, manifesting itself in the form of increasing debt and physical hardship, is not all it's cracked up to be.

In other words the honeymoon does end.

IRRATIONAL PERSISTENCE

What Jack and I both learned was that, as much courage as it takes to even enter the dark room, sometimes it takes even more courage to stay in it, as sometimes the room gets even darker before you begin to see the light.

My darkest moment is not something I can smile about. Still.

I had developed that line of salad dressings made with whole cloves of garlic. I was genuinely proud of them. I thought then and still do today that they're the best of their class on the market, and one region of Costco had agreed to test them.

It was a huge order for us, 12 full pallets, and we finished producing it in the morning. My crew then departed, and I worked into the late afternoon in my office waiting for the truck to arrive.

It was late winter and the weather was awful, truly as bad as it gets; cold but not cold enough to snow, with an incessant rain. Any UPS driver will tell you that he'll take snow over a cold rain any day, which has a bone-chilling effect, made worse this particular day by a howling wind.

When the truck finally came, I put on my rain gear and started loading the pallets with my forklift. Another thing they don't teach you in grad school is how to operate one of these puppies—talk about things you never thought you'd be doing with your life.

I'd load a pallet onto the truck, then hop on the bed of the truck to move the product to the back with the driver's pallet jack.

The beds of most commercial transport trucks are essentially steel rails with ridges between them, and when they are wet they're slick.

As I was pulling one of the pallets backwards, I slipped and was heading toward the sidewall of the trailer. I could not hold onto the pallet jack and soon found myself falling, back first, uncontrollably, into the side wall.

Anyone who has ever been in an auto accident knows of the sensation that while you're in the midst of it seems to last indefinitely, even though in reality it is over in an instant. Time seems suspended.

That's what I was experiencing at that moment. The time it took between my hands leaving the pallet jack and the time I hit the wall seemed like an eternity. I remember realizing that I had completely lost control of my circumstances, that this was truly going to be painful, and furthermore I might be seriously injured. I thought for sure I was going to break my back.

Hitting the wall was like a scene out of cartoon, where the character splats up against a barrier and slides down into a heap—that's exactly what transpired.

My first reaction was one of surprise, and some relief, that I was not hurt, but then I just looked around at my surroundings. I was in the back of this unlit truck in this tiny industrial park in suburban Detroit. I was freezing cold, wet, and on the bed of this truck sitting in a pool of water grateful that I thought I could get up.

I cried that night as I was driving home, wondering what the hell I was doing with my life and how it could ever get to this point.

I was in my mid-thirties, with a wife and a young son. Well-educated but still paying off my student loans. Hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt with a company that had never made money, was still not profitable, and frankly had no chance of being so anytime soon. I was selling life insurance at night to make ends meet, all the while spending my days breaking eggs in the morning and putting whole cloves of garlic in salad dressing bottles in the afternoon and operating a forklift in the most miserable weather imaginable.

I just didn't see a way out for myself. On top of that, I had recently had a discussion with a friend of mine who told me he was thinking about retiring soon because his stock options in the tech company he was working for were doing so well.

And yet, I never even considered stopping. Stopping would have been the rational thing to do, but to me, at that time, it would have meant giving up on a dream, and I still believed dreams could come true. Even if they took a long, long time.

And I was used to waiting a long, long time for my dreams to come true.

During that summer I spent in France, I traveled to Paris almost every weekend and was fascinated by what I saw, and by what I felt. It simply possessed a beauty and an elegance that I did not think was possible, and coupling that with the populace speaking a different language made me feel like I was in another world. I loved it. . . everything about it.

There was one spot in particular that I found particularly poignant; it was a small concrete bench on the banks of the Seine, just across from Notre Dame Cathedral. I was just 20 years old at the time, but I promised myself if I ever decided to share my life with someone I would ask her to do so on this very bench, on the banks of this river in the shadows of this ancient cathedral.

It was at that same age that I met Jill in college, and we started dating shortly thereafter. We stayed together while I was in grad school in Washington and she was working in retail in New York. We both moved back to Detroit after I graduated.

As the years went by, people often wondered, very often aloud, when we'd get married. We were approaching common law, after all, as we had been living together for so long.

I knew exactly why we were not getting married, though. It was because my company was not profitable enough for me to afford a trip to Paris to propose to her on that park bench on the banks of the Seine. I just had to get engaged in that fashion, no matter how long it took. Anything less would be a compromise.

When we were 31, however, again a mere 11 years after we had met, Northwest Airlines (since bought by Delta) ran a deal for a round-trip ticket to Paris for \$299. Fortunately, I still had enough room on my credit card for a purchase of that size.

I bought the tickets, but then realized that Jill did not have a passport. Wanting the trip to be a surprise, I had to be creative.

One morning I told her we needed to get our pictures taken for personalized credit cards (back then companies were at times putting your picture on your cards). I used that head shot of her to fill out a passport form, forged her signature, and sent it all to the passport office, paid for expedited processing, and after about a week we were legally able to travel to Paris.

The day before we were scheduled to leave, I surprised her with the trip, telling her I was attending a food show in Paris and that I had made arrangements with her boss at Neiman Marcus for her to be able to come with me.

The following day, after we had landed and checked into our hotel room, I walked her to that very same simple bench on the banks of the Seine and asked her to marry me. It was then she realized there was no food show, that we were in Paris for this reason and for this reason only.

She also realized there was no ring. I could barely afford the money for the expedited passport service, and I certainly did not have enough money for anything else.

My biggest surprise of that moment, though, was realizing the sensation of a dream coming true. I had wanted to propose to someone in this manner for 11 years and now it was happening. I remember thinking: this was worth the wait.

So for me, persisting with my business, despite how irrational it all might have seemed to an outsider at the time, was the only option my heart would allow.

I just could not fathom not living the life I had imagined for myself.

And no matter how long that took, I believed it also would be worth the wait.

Jack tells me he never considered stopping either, and his circumstances were more dire than mine, by virtually every measure: older, more debt, bigger family to support. When I asked him why he kept going, he replied in the simplest manner possible: "We did what we had to do."

ILLUMINATING THE DARK ROOM

So I just kept going, believing that I'd figure it out, that somehow, some way, someday I'd find the source, or sources, of light that would illuminate that dark room.

So that I could finally see what I was doing. So that I could find the path that would allow me to navigate my way out of the mess I found myself in.

Prior to going to that food show in New York, where I would introduce myself to Jack, I was in discussions to merge with another food company. I was exploring buying yet another, believing combining my distribution network with theirs would be the answer I was looking for—not that I had any money to buy another company, but that had never stopped me before.

Jack was also looking for sources of light, which would allow him to stop operating in the dark, operating blindly. Which would illuminate a path to success for him and his family.

Which is why he was at that food show in New York, too. He had just opened his new plant, had feared he had overbuilt, and needed to grow, and grow quickly, to make it all work.

When you're looking for sources of light to illuminate the dark room, you'll find that they come with varying degrees of intensity.

When you're in a dark room, any light, even something as small and innocent as a night light, will help.

Introducing myself to Jack, and the two of us subsequently becoming partners, were floodlights. The dark rooms we had entered into so long ago, 11 years for me, almost twice that amount of time for Jack, were finally illuminated.

I, after a lost decade, had finally found a company I could build, and partners with whom to do it.

Jack finally had a platform on which he could operate a real food plant profitably and a partner with whom he could rapidly grow Garden Fresh Gourmet.

What we soon learned, though, was that, if you want to grow your company, you never completely leave the dark room.

You're almost always living with ambiguity. You're constantly accepting more and more risk.

If you are intent on growing, it will require approaching yet another door, a door that leads to an even bigger room that is just as dark as the one you just left.

If you want to grow, you'll have to enter that room, too, then begin the process of searching for additional sources of light so that you can navigate your way around that room also.

And those dark rooms keep coming and coming.

They certainly did for Jack and Annette and me, once we became partners. And they certainly don't get easier to enter as you grow, but at least we weren't in our respective dark rooms alone any more. We were now in there together.

Secret 1: Your Dark Room

Dark rooms exist in all of our professional lives, whether you consider yourself an entrepreneur or not.

What if you're NOT an entrepreneur at heart? I believe that in everyone there is a small but important part that is. There are times in your life when you have taken risks and things have either worked out, or they haven't, but you knew taking the risk was the right thing to do.

Being an entrepreneur does not necessarily mean starting your own company. There are entrepreneurs operating within existing companies, both large and small. Doing incredible things. Creating significant value for themselves, their colleagues, and their owners.

So wherever you might find yourself right now, there are probably opportunities in your life that represent a "dark room" for you.

Where you assess there is a void between the level at which you're living your life and the level at which you want to live your life.

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Doing something about alleviating that void may involve a large or small amount of risk.

Taking on that risk, taking action despite an uncertain outcome, is challenging.

There's a certain mindset required to take that first step into that dark room, one that demands you accept ambiguity, that insists you be comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Acquiring that mindset doesn't come naturally to everyone.

So often we need both perspective and guidance.

Perspective in the spirit of Martin Luther King's words: "You don't have to see the whole staircase. Just take the first step.

And guidance once you do that.

I've been there—in the dark room where I was operating blindly. Where I could not see where I was going.

Looking back, my biggest surprises are how hard it was to be there and how long it took me to get out of it.

It's not always necessary, though, to spend as much time in the dark room as I did. A lost decade. Or as much time as Jack and Annette did. Multiple lost decades.

Use the secrets we learned the hard way, through experience, so that you can learn them an easier way, through ours.

But you've got to take that first step. If you do, amazing things are possible.