

# TEN

## A boy, his tumour and an extraordinary adventure

I don't remember how long the pause lasted between receiving the 'news' and whatever happened next, but it seemed like an eternity. It's actually quite hard to describe... it was like everything kind of slowed down. First my breath, then my heart, and then my vision began to blur until the world around me just seemed to stop.

Only hours earlier things were 'normal' and now here I was, sitting with my Mum in my doctor's office in Castle Hill, receiving the news that would change everything. A 17cm tumour growing from my spine. Filling my chest cavity. Cracking my ribs. Crushing my airway and lung. Encroaching on my spinal cord. Wrapped tightly around my thoracic nerve.

I was about to embark on one of the greatest adventures of my life... although at the time I felt anything but excited.

On August 17, 2005 after weeks of endless tests and scans, Dr Phillip Spratt and Dr Timothy Steele took 9.5 hours to skilfully remove the tumour from my body. When I eventually opened my eyes in the ICU I was given the news that the operation had been a huge success and that I would eventually make a full recovery.

Earlier that morning, as they wheeled me down to the operating theatre, I can honestly say I was the most terrified I had ever been. I had so many thoughts colliding in my head, trying to assess all the possible outcomes and what they would mean. The hardest moment without doubt was saying goodbye to my family and my best friend Ashley, not knowing whether I would ever see them again.

I now look back on the moments of fear and vulnerability as perhaps the greatest gift I could ever have been given as a young man. They allowed me to reflect, take stock of what was important and challenge the way I was investing my time. Like most young men, up until this has happened I had thought I was invincible and that I had all the time in the world to figure things out. Now I had realised that I was wandering aimlessly down a path of mediocrity – lacking the courage to forge my own path, ignoring the signals my heart had been sending and chasing someone else's definition of success.

2015 is a milestone for me in many ways. I will celebrate my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. It marks ten years since my surgery. I celebrate ten years chasing a career and now leading an organisation that I am deeply passionate about. I reflect on ten years passionately creating and performing music, ten years of traveling and ten years of amazing friendships that span the globe. Earlier this year I received a special award for completing ten climbs up Mt Kilimanjaro in Tanzania.

Words cannot express how grateful I am to live the life that I do.

I do often think though... why did it take such a drastic event for me to figure all this out. I seem to encounter people all the time who are suffering the same way I was. It is as if there is some invisible virus that spreads through our society like a poison. A virus that paralyses people and stops them from fully experiencing the amazing life that is available to them, if only they had the courage to go and get it.

Perhaps the trigger is things that have happened, or the fear of things that may or may not happen down the track. Or maybe it is things that people have said, or concern about things they may or may not say. Perhaps it's because people have become trapped in the vicious game of comparing themselves and their success to others. I think I had probably experienced a little bit of all of these things at times, as most of us do.

I now know that life can be far more simple than we make it. For me, it's like this: Do what you love. Do it to the best of your ability. Surround yourself with love. Respect everyone. And don't get so caught up in worrying about tomorrow that you miss the beauty of today.

I haven't made a million dollars, I don't have a master's degree or doctorate and I have no idea how much money currently sits in my superannuation fund. But I would say that ultimately I am happy and content – and for me that is the only real indicator of success.

As I hit the 10 year mark of this awesome adventure I thought I would share my ten most valuable life lessons/strategies in hope that they can enhance your experience of the world inspire you to be the best that you can be.

**1. Forgive yourself and others for everything that has happened in your past**

You can't go back and change the past, no matter how hard you try. There is no doubt that you have made mistakes, and perhaps someone else has made mistakes that have had an impact on you. All you can do is take the learning from whatever has happened and move on. By holding onto negative emotions you are only further hurting yourself so love yourself enough to let go.

**2. Only invest your time and energy in people and experiences that serve you**

Be ridiculously selfish when it comes to your own wellbeing. If you are doing something, or spending time around someone that is no longer serving you then respect yourself enough to leave. Invest your time and energy wisely, with the things and the people that bring your life joy.

**3. Take yourself on adventures**

The world is a fascinating place. It is rich, complex and intricate and has so much to teach us. Leave your bubble and start exploring new horizons. Spend time offline.

Listen to peoples stories. Be curious about everything. The whole world is your classroom (and your playground) – so ask yourself – where are you going next?

**4. Listen to your heart**

Trust your instinct. It is a powerful force that somehow knows the way a long time before your head does. If your instinct is telling you to take a certain path, or perhaps to leave something behind and move forward... trust it.

**5. Shoot for the moon, even if you miss you will land amongst the stars.**

Get excited about the future. Figure out what you want, how to get there and then go and make it happen. Let your dreams and goals grow and evolve as you do, and don't be afraid to ask for help along the way. If you ever feel like you are standing still, take some time re-evaluate and refocus. Finally, never underestimate what you are capable of – your spirit is more powerful than you know... trust me.

**6. Stop comparing yourself to others.**

Comparison is the enemy of happiness. Define YOUR values and chase YOUR own success. Be happy for people around you realising whatever success means to them. Its OK to want more – but want more because YOU want it ... not because someone else has it and you don't.

**7. Be better tomorrow than you were today**

Nobody is perfect. Don't be afraid of making mistakes – embrace them. Learn from them. Welcome constructive feedback and try to look at criticism objectively and constructively. Seek opportunities to grow and value continual self improvement.

**8. Belong to something**

Go and attach yourself to a cause... a movement... a group of people that like doing things that you do. Join a club (or lots of clubs), volunteer somewhere, stand alongside people and fight for things that you care about. Find your tribe.

**9. Make other people happy**

In my experience, making other people happy is perhaps the most fulfilling thing you can do. Hand out plenty of compliments, make people laugh and smile, cook someone you love a beautiful meal, perform random acts of kindness to strangers, or go out of your way to make someone's day. See how it feels...

**10. Life is better shared**

My final, and perhaps most important lesson has been that your life can only ever be as beautiful as the people you share it with. The time you spend and experiences you share with friends and family are priceless. They will be your anchor through the

challenging times, and enhance the moments of joy and happiness. These people will shape who you become.

Life doesn't wait around – it'll pass you by before you know it and one day it will all be over. While your heart is beating and you have air in your lungs you have the opportunity to make the most of every minute. Time the most valuable resource that we have – and once it passes us by it never comes back.

I don't believe in luck - I believe in reward. I don't believe that good things, or bad things happen to people - I believe that things happen and that it is up to us to choose what we make of them. I don't believe that anyone is born greater than anyone else. I believe that everyone of us will leave a mark on the world – the nature and extent of that mark lies solely within us.

So look up, open your eyes, dream big, follow your adventurous spirit, fill your heart with love and go do great things.

With love and gratitude,

Matt

*Matt Kershaw is the CEO of The yLead Association Inc. – a not-for-profit organisation that empowers young people to be the best that they can be and inspires them to make a difference.*

**\*\***This piece is dedicated to the staff at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney, my family and friends, and all of the incredible people I have been fortunate enough to spend time with over the last 10 years.