

## The New Old-Fashioned Way: Do It Yourself

It's been three days since the police let us go, but I'm still feeling pretty shaken up about it.

It's hard not to get paranoid when you've been arrested for taking a picture of a wheelbarrow.

Here in Juba, the old capital city of the relatively new country of South Sudan, this is supposed to be the dry season, but it's been raining every day. Juba is relatively developed compared with a lot of other cities and towns in this country, but most of the roads near our hotel are still unpaved, so I've gotten a great firsthand lesson in mud. There are two kinds of mud here: the normal brown mud that you're used to and a strange black slippery mud that feels sort of like molasses under your feet. It's almost impossible to walk on. Everywhere you look, someone has fallen and gotten covered in mud. No one seems too upset about it; they pick themselves up, don't stop to wipe themselves off, and they continue on their way.

In fact, every time someone falls in the mud here, people laugh. It's kind of disconcerting—your first reaction is, man, how rude, but then you realize that it makes its own kind of perfect sense.

You fall, you laugh.

Because you're not dead.

Such is life in a war zone. At least, that's how it feels to me, having spent a few days here among people who have faced unimaginable

horrors. After what they've been through, I guess they have greater concerns than whether they happen to have mud on their clothes.

The rain doesn't seem to want to stop, and my biggest concern is that if it doesn't stop, the authorities may not let us take off from here. They're telling me the runways are too wet, and our plane is too heavy, and we won't be able to land in Yida, the site of a 70,000-person refugee camp near the Sudan border. And if I don't get out of here and get to Yida soon, I may go stark-staring crazy. Everything my team and I have been working on for months has led up to this: the trip to Yida.

So we are, quite literally, stuck in the mud.

Sitting here in limbo has given me some time to reflect on what we've been referring to as "this insane thing we're doing"—it'd be way too overblown to call it our mission, and we're way too disorganized to call it a plan. But we have a distinct goal ahead of us. Just a few months ago, I had the idea of coming to Africa when I first heard about Daniel, a boy whose arms were blown off in the war. About the same time, I had first heard about the possibility of creating new prosthetic arms, not through normal medical channels, but in a very do-it-yourself crazy hacker way—my way, in short—with an off-the-shelf 3-D printer.

And that's when the idea first occurred to me that I could make those arms for Daniel.

And I decided to try to do it.

While we've been waiting here in Juba to leave for the camp where Daniel is staying, I've gotten to meet a lot of people, and while there's a normality to their lives—no matter where you go, people do what they do, they get up and they go about their business and they eat and visit and try not to fall in the mud—there's a jitteriness to it all, too. The sense that violence and hostilities are never far beneath the surface either in the contested areas of Sudan or here in South Sudan, and that they are getting ready to explode again. That creates a real tension in the air. You can almost taste it.

These people have seen bombs rain down from the sky. They've seen their children's arms blown off right in front of them, their wives and husbands and children and babies and grandmothers killed, for no apparent reason. Being in their presence, you can feel the sense of impending disaster, like smelling rain in the air just before a storm.

Someone told me yesterday that every single person in this city has an AK-47 in their home. Probably an exaggeration, but still a pretty frightening thought.

We were taking some background photos the other day to document this insane thing we're doing and to pass the time before we leave to make the arms. As we were shooting the pictures, some children came running up to us, saying, in various languages, which our translators helped us keep track of, "Photo! Photo! Take my photo!"

Just when we were taking some photos of a nearby hut—a small structure with a blue wheelbarrow in front of it—a man who appeared to be a soldier, in a starched tan shirt and overly large aviator sunglasses, said something about the photos. But from his tone it was most certainly not "Take my photo!" The next thing I knew, we were all being hauled down to the police to explain what we were doing there.

Suddenly, I realized how very little I knew about South Sudan and how to accomplish what we were planning to accomplish.

I am not a medical person by trade. Nor am I a fabricator or a 3-D printing expert; nor do I know much about Africa, bombs, the SPLA—the Sudan People's Liberation Army—or just about anything we're doing, for that matter.

I'm a producer. I work on films and TV shows, I make commercials and trailers, I create videos for clients of all stripes. I've done the credit sequences for some big movies and the graphics for some others. I've started a few businesses, sat on some boards, launched some nonprofits.

So after the police decided not to detain us, and we were left to cool our heels in the rain and the mud in Juba, waiting for our

chance to get up to the refugee camp in Yida, there was one question hanging in the air.

How the hell did I get here?



I had tried to ignore that question on the initial flight over to Johannesburg from Los Angeles. That flight had been delayed a day because my dog Georgia, our beautiful brown boxer, my faithful friend for sixteen years, was dying, and it didn't feel right to leave without saying good-bye. We struggled all day about what to do—should we euthanize her before I left? It felt wrong. It felt like I was rushing it. So I delayed my flight the next day, and by the evening it was clear that she was waning, so we scheduled the doctor to come to our house at nine o'clock that night, and we all said our good-byes to her, my wife Caskey and our three boys and I.

The doctor was late; he showed up at the house at 9:37 p.m., precisely three minutes after Georgia miraculously popped up like a jack-in-the-box and started walking around the house, eating her food, and drinking her water. So when the doctor showed up and she started barking at him like crazy—and she's not the kind of dog who usually barks at visitors—he said, “Um, I'm not euthanizing her today. She's just not ready to go yet.”

We took that as a very good sign, good karma for the trip. But on the flight over, as I caught up on my reading—books like *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky*, a harrowing account of three of the Lost Boys of Sudan—I started coming to terms with where I was actually going. In Sudan, warring tribes and armies kill indiscriminately, rape indiscriminately, torture women and children and grown men. Journalists are as unwelcome as the ever-present mosquitoes, only easier to get rid of. I imagined my last words on this earth being “I am not a journalist!” and I realized how little I was really prepared for the journey ahead of me.

But I had also spent the last two years in the company of ex-

traordinary gentlemen and women—crazy lunatic gentlemen and women, to be precise. I was taking this trip on behalf of Not Impossible Labs, a company I'd created to try to solve medical problems that seemed to be unsolvable, and beyond that, to solve them in a very Do-It-Yourself kind of way. To get around the big medical companies, the big insurance companies, the big everything. To just get our hands dirty and take the backs off things, figure out how they work, and jerry-rig something new that could do the job just as well and then give it away for free.

The people who populated our lives now, the people who were helping me along this wild and crazy path, defined themselves as hackers and “makers”—which is how I defined myself now, too.

That's what this book is about. It's about Doing It Yourself and redefining what it means to Do It Yourself.

A light rain was falling outside the plane, and I found myself hypnotized by the blinking red light on the wing, as I thought about the concept of Do It Yourself. It's as old as the loom and as new as the 3-D printer. Some say DIY is actually changing the way the American economy itself works. I'm not sure about that, but it sure is changing the way I work. And changing the way we think.

I am an executive producer by trade, and I could have executive-produced this trip—meaning, I could have secured the funding, hired the personnel, arranged the travel, laid out the itinerary, imbued the team with the goals of the mission, been the cheerleader and the scold and the teacher and the planner and all the other things that an executive producer does. And then I could have sent everybody on their way with my sincere best wishes.

But at some point, I guess, the do-it-yourself concept actually involves doing it yourself. So instead of executive-producing this trip, I found myself on this plane, in the rain, in the dark, doing something far different than anything I'd ever done before.

In a few hours, I would be landing in Johannesburg. I'd spend a week, at best, learning how to make a mechanical hand with a 3-D

printer and some parts we'd picked up at a hardware store—using techniques that others have taken months to perfect. To distract myself, I turned my attention to the in-flight movie *The Blind Side*, in which Sandra Bullock adopts a poor kid who happens to be a great football player. Toward the end of the film, I found myself crying, tears slowly dripping down my cheeks, mimicking the rain that was streaking the airplane windows. In-flight movies always seem to make me cry; something to do with the jetlag and the strange air and the helpless feeling of being propelled at 600 miles an hour in a big metal Tylenol capsule, and the blind faith inherent in that activity.

But if I'm being honest, I was probably crying for another reason.

As the movie ended, I got up to walk around the cabin a bit before we touched down. The sun started coming up on the left side of the plane. A new day was beginning, in more ways than one, for me. Behind me, back in LA, my boys were going to get ready for their first Halloween without me and, quite possibly, our first Thanksgiving apart as well. Ahead of me—well, I had no idea of what was ahead of me.

But in this transition moment—between my past and my future, really—I found myself contemplating the answer to that overwhelming question: What had brought me to this place, this place where I was taking a leap of faith into the unknown? Where I believe that there are ways to defy the odds and the naysayers and your own insecurities and accomplish what everybody tells you is impossible. How had I gotten to this place where that was going to be put to the ultimate test?

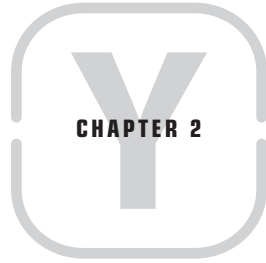
Could I really make the impossible possible?

And could I do it in a way that's translatable—that I could share with others, so they could make the impossible possible as well?

I didn't know the answer to that.

But I did know one thing.

I was about to, quite literally, stake my life on it.



## Yes Is So Much More Fun

I should make one thing clear right away.

I did not set out in life to be the guy who goes to the Sudan with a 3-D printer, trying to create new arms for a kid who had his blown off in the war. I did not set out in life to create a foundation and a company that invites people to write in about their unsolvable medical problems, or to put together teams of hackers, artists, poets, philosophers, and crazies of all stripes to see if they could solve them.

I did not set out to discover the power of Yes or the stunning energy that comes from surrendering yourself to the Not Impossible way of life. I did not set out to discover what that surrendering can do for your business, or what it can do for your soul, although in the years that followed, the power of Yes became all-consuming, the guiding light that lit my days and warmed my nights and showed me where to plant my feet if I wanted to stand up straight.

I did not set out to do any of those things.

I set out to go surfing.

It was coming on New Year's Eve, at the turn of the millennium (or the turn of the calendar to 2000, anyway; the purists say that the millennium didn't really start until 2001, but I have very little need in my life or my business for purists). My wife, Caskey, and I decided to celebrate the momentous day in Costa Rica. A few days later, we broke off for a little mini-vacation-in-a-vacation at a B and B in Mal Pais, a tiny village on the Pacific side of the country.

We couldn't have gotten more out of the way, which is what we wanted. We were a thousand miles from the crowded break that I surf back home, and as we drove our four-wheeler down a dirt road to the beach, nearly putting our wheels in a ditch to avoid the kids coming back from the beach on motorcycles, one hand on the handlebars and a surfboard under the other, their day already done as ours was just beginning, from the look and feel of it it might as well have been a million miles away.

When the waves are pumping, the break off Mal Pais is a challenging place to surf, which is what I was looking for. Some breaks are easy to read, and some breaks are a challenge. Ever since I was a kid, it was the challenge that turned me on: If there wasn't a little bit of danger to what I was doing, a little sense of jumping without a net, I didn't see the point.

You have to be a little like that in business, I think. If you're always worrying about what-if-I-fail, you're never going to give yourself much of a chance to succeed. And there's nothing quite like surfing in cross-currents and sudden swells to remind you to live only in the moment and think only of success: The moment you start to doubt yourself, you're never gonna make the drop.

Caskey was reading on the beach and I was paddling out and getting ready to catch a wave, feeling pretty good. There are moments out there on the surf, when the sun is glinting off the water in a thousand shimmering diamonds of light, when the wind is offshore and the spray of the breaking waves seems to hold the droplets of water in the air for just an extra moment before letting them settle back into the ocean, when this is the only place you can imagine ever wanting to be, and all is right with the world.

And then some big hairy guy paddles up and yells, "Hey! Yo! How you doing?" and screws up the whole thing.

I mean, no kidding, you're surfing by yourself in a desolate little town, you've traveled a thousand miles from your home break, and all you want is to have the break to yourself. Not to share it with



some loud dude with bright orange ear plugs who's crowding your wide-open space.

When I look back on it now, though, there's something karmic in that moment. There I was, trying to put a wall all around my world, a high round wall with me at the center of it, and that wall was knocked down. When I look back on it now, there's no better symbol of everything that I was about to learn, everything that was about to happen to me.

But that's now. That wasn't then. Then, all I could think was: Shut up. Go away. Let me return to my perfect moment.

That was not to be.

"Ubi! Ubi!" the guy yelled at me. At first, I didn't think he was speaking English. I speak Spanish pretty well but couldn't figure out what he was trying to tell me.

"Ubi! You?" he yelled over the crash of the waves. Do I . . . ubi? I wasn't sure what to say.

"Lo siento, amigo, no entiendo," I tried. Sorry, pal, I don't understand.

"I said I'm Ubi," he yelled back. "Who are you?"

Oh.

We jabbered away for a while, floating along on our boards, and after a few minutes, I realized that Ubi was a pretty nice guy. Loud, mind you, since he had the ear plugs in, but a really nice guy, in fact. The more we talked, the lousier I felt about skewering him in my mind for a jerk who'd stolen my personal surf spot. I mean, here I was, some tourist who'd gotten here five minutes before he had, and I'm acting like I own the beach, so who's the jerk? Fortunately, Ubi was such a jovial and outgoing guy, any tension that I might have projected washed over him like the next wave headed for shore. We surfed together for a couple of hours, and on one of the passes I noticed that he seemed to have come with someone, a woman, and she had struck up a conversation with Caskey under the shade of a big, wild, overgrown palm tree.

When we finally padded into the shore, he introduced her as his girlfriend. She was stunning: statuesque and stately, with perfect hair and perfect skin and perfect everything else. And what crossed my mind was what crosses the mind of any man who meets a supermodel-hot woman with a not-so-perfect looking guy: What the hell is she doing with him?

As the day passed on into evening, and we hung out and met for drinks later on, I figured it out. Ubi was one of the most fun, effervescent guys you'd ever want to meet. He was even bigger than he seemed in the water—six-foot-five, somewhere north of 270 pounds—but his personality was twice that size.

We had lunch with them, and dinner, and the next day at breakfast we walked into the dining room, and he was frantically waving his arms for us to join him. By this point I was feeling that fun's fun, but a romantic getaway's a romantic getaway, and it seemed like Caskey and I hadn't spent five minutes alone together since we'd met Ubi and his girlfriend, so I begged off, and I swear, his face dropped so fast I thought his chin was going to crash into the cornflakes. It wasn't until later, when I met up with him for a drink in New York, that I got the full story. When I asked him how his girlfriend was, he laughed hard and loud, then explained: He was sorry he'd been so emotionally clingy down in Costa Rica, but as beautiful as that woman was, she was driving him batshit crazy on vacation, and they'd broken up right after that.

Somehow, having had that experience together made us into fast friends—like we'd known each other for years—although with a guy like Ubi, I'm guessing that's not hard. Just a nice guy, loud as the engine on my '64 Wildcat and twice as powerful when it comes to driving a party forward. In the months and years that followed, he was around a lot, and we developed a phrase: Want to have a party? Just add Ubi.



Over the course of the next seven years, a lot of things changed in our lives—Caskey and I moved, we had children, we started businesses, we bought a house. But a few things stayed constant. One was date night; the more complicated our lives became, the more important it was to have a ritual that reminded us that there was something beyond work by day and diapers and feedings by night. Don't get me wrong—I love my three boys with a passion that surpasses words or understanding—but at least once in a while you need to go have dinner and see a movie alone with an actual grown-up who you're actually married to and has seen you naked and still loves you.

Another thing that stayed constant in our lives was Ubi. Caskey and I had moved into a nice new house in Venice Beach. We installed an electronic combination lock on the front gate because it wasn't the best of neighborhoods at the time, but most of our friends knew the combination from house-sitting or babysitting or just coming by at some point, and a few of them used the knowledge to just walk in unannounced when they felt like it. And on this particular night, as we were primping for our date night, that was Ubi.

“YO! YO!! WHAT'S GOING ON!” he boomed, more a statement than a question. He had another friend in tow, a guy named Rojelio, who was as quiet as Ubi was loud.

“Hey, man,” I said. “How you doing? We're getting ready to go have dinner and see a movie at the—”

“No, you're not!” Ubi interrupted. “You're coming with us!”

It takes about five seconds for disappointment to turn into curiosity, less when you know you're surrendering to the inevitable. Somehow I knew that no matter what I said, we were going to wind up bending to the force of Ubi's will. He was so up and excited—I mean, even for him, this seemed like a high moment—that I didn't even bother to argue. I looked over at Caskey, and by the smile on her face, I could tell she was thinking the same thing.

I love Caskey for a million reasons, not the least of which is that she somehow puts up with me and all my craziness, but among those

million reasons is this: Saying Yes is just a lot more fun than saying No. All of our lives together have been defined by the same thing that defines the work I've started to do: It's all about learning to take that leap of faith. Whether it's something monumental, like changing your life based on the flip of a coin—a story I'll get into a little later—or something tiny, like letting the last person who walked in the door decide what you're doing tonight. Everything begins by taking the part of you that has the false illusion of control and gently pushing it out the window, so that other part of you—the part that's willing to take the path that opens up in front of you—can begin to have some fun.

We found ourselves saying yes even before we knew what Ubi had in mind. Turns out what he had in mind sounded pretty interesting anyway: We were going to go to some kind of graffiti art show to benefit an artist who'd been stricken with Lou Gehrig's disease. I've always been a fan of graffiti art—I know a lot of people aren't, but I think it's a very real expression of very real feelings, done in a very real way. It's honest. It's a little crazy. And it's way outside the rules—all things I can respect and relate to.

The sun was going down over the palm trees of Venice, and the streets took on that beautiful and slightly sad glow that LA gets from the last glint of light bouncing back from the Pacific. The faint sounds of the Saturday night Venice Beach drum circle could be heard in the distance as we all crowded into my 1974 white-and-blue International Scout and headed to Culver City.

Ubi was the catalyst, the enzyme, the beginning of a chemical reaction that would change—well, everything.



At the time, pop-up galleries, restaurants, and events were just finding their way to the emerging art district of Culver City. I knew by the location it would be cool, but I wasn't expecting what happened when we walked through the door: We were instantly transported by

the graffiti—in space and time—to the grittiest downtown streets, to the underside of railroad trestles and the tops of warehouses and the sides of railroad cars.

It was a little strange, seeing all that graffiti out of its normal context, in big posters mounted on white walls—gigantic explosions of colors, huge names written in interlocking, three-dimensional, mind-bending shapes and blasts of pink and purple and green and black and red and a few hundred other colors that don't even have names, all coming at you at once.

The place was packed with hip-looking dudes and their beautiful girlfriends, all dressed to impress. Many of the men were artists who'd done pieces for this show. Ten of them had decorated three-foot-high spray-paint cans as characters with feet, each artist using his own distinct style. A palpable energy emanated from the room, from all these people, although their demeanor around people who were not of their group was sort of reserved. Their art, for the most part, is essentially illegal, so they're not used to having their faces associated with their art in public. A lot of kids, sixteen, seventeen years old, were running around with black books, getting the artists to sign them with their tags (although, to be accurate, graffiti isn't generally called "tagging"—that's associated with the gang side of graffiti art—when these famous LA artists at the show put their art up on a building or wherever, they call it "getting up"). Anyway, these kids were psyched, like they'd been let loose at a Grammys party—only they didn't give a damn about rock stars. To them, these artists were the stars, up close and personal and signing their books, and nothing could be better than that.

Caskey had a huge smile on her face, and she was staring at this one really colorful poster, high up on the wall in front of us. It was a copy of a graffiti artist's name, as he'd spray-painted it on walls in Los Angeles in the 1990s.

It took me a second to untangle the letters in my mind, but then I could read it:

Tempt.

Tempt One, it turns out, was something of a legend in Los Angeles. Each city, Rojelio had told us earlier, had its own kind of graffiti style. The old-fashioned New York subway-car “taggers,” for example, were very different from the style of Mexican American graffiti artists known as “cholos”—originally a derisive term, now used as a matter of pride. Tempt was one of the first to fuse those styles into something new, something distinctly Los Angeles, and the graffiti artists who came after him treated him with enormous respect.

Ubi and Rojelio wandered over and caught us being caught up in the painting.

“Man,” I said to him, “I’d really like to meet this artist. Is he here?”

Rojelio responded. “No, man,” he said. “That’s the guy with the ALS. That’s the guy who this benefit is for.”

I was blown away by that and took a step back, and for the first time noticed that someone had painted a portrait of Tempt in black and white, next to his graffiti. It was a surreal juxtaposition: in the portrait, Tempt was smiling and serene, but the contrast of his muted face in shades of gray, next to the vibrant colors that were so full of life, was haunting and a little painful.

I’d like to say I was moved to do something to help at that moment, but it wouldn’t be true. There are so many times in life when the right thing to do taps you on the shoulder, but you don’t turn around, you don’t listen. You just sigh and move on. We spent a lot of time at the exhibit, talking to some of the artists and having them tell us about their pieces. In the end we bought one of the cans—a yellow spray-paint can created by the LA legend who goes by the name Slick; it had big red feet and a giant smile with a gold tooth.

When I got home, I went online to learn more about Tempt and found out he was just as significant a player as his fellow artists were making him out to be that night. He’d “gotten up” all over town—and not just on walls, but in museums as well. His art had been



An early piece of Tempt's artwork.

on display in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. I watched an interview with Tempt on video, on which he proudly and defiantly talked about graffiti art: "It's something that can't be tamed," he said. "It's wild and it's free, the very essence of the word 'freedom.'"

It was very sad to realize, as I watched him, that this significant voice had been silenced.

And then I got up from the kitchen counter where I usually check my email at night when everyone is in bed, closed the computer, put the sculpture on the mantel, and went upstairs to bed.

The next day, we woke up, and went about our lives.