

THE REALITY SLAP

HOW TO FIND FULFILMENT
WHEN LIFE HURTS

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Introduction

THE SLAP AND THE GAP

When was the last time you received a reality slap? We've all had plenty of them in our lives: those moments when life suddenly deals us a painful blow. It's a shock, and it hurts, and it knocks us off balance; we struggle to stay on our feet, and sometimes we fall.

The reality slap takes many different forms. Sometimes it's so violent, it's more like a punch: the death of a loved one, a serious illness or injury, a freak accident, a violent crime, a disabled child, bankruptcy, betrayal, fire, flood or disaster. At other times the slap is somewhat gentler: that sudden flash of envy when we realise someone else has got what we want; those sharp pangs of loneliness when we realise how disconnected we are from others; that burst of anger or resentment over some sort of mistreatment; those short, sharp shocks when we catch sight of our reflection and we don't like what we see; those painful stabs of failure, disappointment or rejection.

Sometimes the slap quickly recedes into memory: a passing moment, a brief 'rude awakening'. At other times it knocks us senseless and leaves us wandering in a daze for days or weeks. However, whatever form it takes, one thing's for sure: the reality slap hurts. We don't expect it, we don't like it, and we definitely don't want it. And, unfortunately, the slap is just the beginning. What

comes next is much harder. For once the slap wakes us up, we then face *the gap*.

I call it ‘the reality gap’ because on one side is the reality we have, and on the other is the reality we want. And the bigger the gap between those two realities, the more painful the feelings that will arise: envy, jealousy, fear, disappointment, shock, grief, sadness, anger, anxiety, outrage, dread, guilt, resentment; perhaps even hatred, despair or disgust. And, whereas the slap is usually over quickly, the gap can persist for days, weeks, months, years and even decades.

Most of us are ill-equipped to deal with large reality gaps. Our society doesn’t teach us how to handle them or, rather, it doesn’t teach us how to handle them effectively, in such a way that we can thrive and find lasting fulfilment. Our first instinct, whenever we encounter a reality gap, is to try and close it; we take action to change reality, so it conforms to our wishes. And if we succeed, the gap closes and we feel good. We feel happy, content or calm, with a sense of achievement or relief. And this is all well and good. After all, if there’s something we *can* do to get what we want in life — and if it’s not a criminal activity, and it doesn’t go against our core values, and it’s not going to create even bigger problems for us — then it makes sense to go ahead and do it.

But what happens when we *can’t* get what we want? What do we do when we *can’t* close that reality gap; when someone we love dies, or our partner leaves us, or our kids move overseas, or we can’t have children, or our child has a serious disability, or someone we want to be friends with doesn’t like us, or we lose our eyesight, or we are diagnosed with an incurable or chronic illness, or we’re not as smart or talented or good-looking as we would like? And what happens when we *can* close the reality gap, but it’s going to take a long, long time to do it; how do we cope in the meantime?

I once read an article that claimed all self-help books could be lumped into two categories: those that claim you can have everything you ever wanted in life, if only you put your mind to it; and those that claim you *can't* have everything you want, but you can still lead a rich and rewarding life. This book is definitely in the second category.

To be honest, I am amazed that people buy books in the first category. If you look closely at anybody's life, from Bill Gates to Brad Pitt, from Buddha to Jesus, from the rich and famous and powerful to the beautiful and strong and smart, you will see that nobody gets everything they want. It is impossible. During our time on this planet, we're all going to experience disappointment, frustration, failure, loss, rejection, illness, injury, ageing and death.

If the reality gap is small, or it seems like we can close it relatively quickly, then most of us handle it reasonably well. But the bigger it gets, and the longer it stays open, the more we tend to struggle. And this is why 'inner fulfilment' is so important. Inner fulfilment is a deep sense of peacefulness, wellbeing and vitality that you can experience even in the face of a large reality gap: even when your dreams don't come true, your goals aren't achieved and your life is harsh, cruel or unfair.

This is very different to 'external fulfilment': those good feelings we have when we manage to conform reality to our wishes; to close the gap, to achieve our goals, to get what we really want in life. External fulfilment is important: we all like to achieve goals and get our needs met. But external fulfilment isn't always possible. (If you think it *is* always possible, you're definitely reading the wrong book. You should read one of those books that claim you can have whatever you want simply by asking the Universe and believing it will deliver.)

In this book, then, as you've probably gathered, we're going to focus on inner fulfilment: a deep sense of wellbeing and peace that we cultivate from within ourselves, rather than searching for it outside ourselves. And the good news is, the resources that enable inner fulfilment are always available to us; they're like a bottomless well deep inside us, from which we can draw whenever thirsty. However, just because this is our focus, it doesn't mean we give up on all our worldly pleasures, desires, wants, needs and goals; we'll certainly look at how to close the reality gap, if and when it can be closed. What it *does* mean is that we no longer depend upon things outside ourselves for our sense of wellbeing and vitality; that even in the midst of great pain, or fear, or loss, or deprivation, we can find a sense of peace and comfort within.

Twenty-two Blind Men

You probably know the old story about the three blind men and the elephant. Just to refresh your memory, three blind men approach the ringmaster of a circus. 'We want to know what an elephant is like,' they say. 'Can you let us touch one?' The ringmaster agrees and allows them to touch his prize elephant who, luckily, is very friendly and accommodating. The first blind man grabs the elephant's trunk and feels it all over. 'Gosh,' he says, 'an elephant is just like a python.' Meanwhile, the second blind man is running his hands all over the elephant's leg. 'It's nothing like a python,' he protests, 'it's like a tree trunk.' At the same time, the third blind man is feeling the elephant's tail and says, 'I don't know what you two are talking about. An elephant is like a piece of rope.'

Of course, all three men were accurate in their observations, but each one of them held only one piece of the puzzle. And this book is somewhat similar: I liken it to *twenty-two* blind men exploring an

elephant. Each chapter will bring you into contact with one aspect of the elephant — sometimes a large part, like the trunk, and sometimes a smaller detail, like an eyelid. Eventually, by the end of the book, the elephant will be revealed in all its glory. (I even thought about calling this book *The Elephant Within* but it just didn't have the same ring.)

The elephant in question is called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy or ACT (which is said as the word 'act', not as the initials). ACT is a scientifically based model for enriching and enhancing human lives, created by US psychologist Steven C. Hayes, based on the concepts of mindfulness and values. If you're new to these concepts and how they help us thrive in the face of life's challenges, then this book will give you a gentle but thorough introduction. But, if you are already familiar with these concepts, then this book will help you to gain new insights, remind yourself of the things you had forgotten, or revisit old places and discover something you hadn't previously noticed.

The chapters in this book are designed not only to open up your mind, but also your heart. In some I'll be playful and light-hearted, and in others I'll be deadly serious and share deeply personal stories that may even bring a tear to your eyes. I like to think of them as windows opening onto a magnificent landscape: they enable you to appreciate where you are; they extend your view, allowing you to see further and more clearly; and they open up possibilities for new directions.

So please take your time and enjoy the journey. There is no need to rush. Each time you touch the elephant, savour that contact; each time you open a window, appreciate the view. In this way, step-by-step, and moment-by-moment, you will learn how to find fulfilment when reality hurts.

PART I
AFTER THE SLAP

Chapter I

THE FOUR STEPS

I didn't see it coming. Around the time of my fortieth birthday, reality was treating me so well, I thought, 'Maybe life *really does* begin at forty!' Everything seemed to be going my way. After twenty years of writing and five unpublished novels, my first book was finally about to be published. I loved my work as a therapist and life coach, and my career was heading off in new and exciting directions. I had excellent health, a strong marriage and wonderful friends. But all of that paled in comparison to the greatest joy in my life: my beautiful baby boy, who was then eleven months old. I have never known anything like those overwhelming feelings of love, joy and tenderness that a parent feels towards a child.

Like most new parents, I thought my son was the most beautiful, intelligent baby in the whole wide world — and I often fantasised about his future life. He would be so much smarter than me in every way — and unlike me, he would excel at sport, be super popular with all his schoolmates, and be a big hit with the girls when he got older. Then he would naturally go on to university and develop some high-power career. Ahh, the wonders of 'fantasy land'.

By the time our son was eighteen months old, my wife and I were

concerned that he was lagging behind in his developmental milestones. Among other things, he wasn't walking, and he had very few words. So we took him to a paediatrician and had him assessed. The paediatrician checked him out thoroughly and assured us he was just 'slow' to develop, as 'boys often are'. He told us not to worry and to come back and see him if we had any more concerns.

Well, three months later, our concerns had grown significantly. Our son still had very few words, still wasn't walking, and seemed to understand very little of what we said to him. So we took him back to the specialist. More tests followed: two hours of intensive assessment. And again the specialist told us there was nothing wrong: our little boy was just slow to develop; he would soon catch up; nothing to worry about.

Over the next two months, we became increasingly worried. Our son often seemed 'spaced out' in his own private world. He was almost two years old now and still not walking. He was getting around by shuffling on his bum; it looked cute and funny, but it troubled us. And he had started some odd behaviours, such as rolling his eyeballs, grinding his teeth and staring out of the corner of his eyes at parallel lines on walls and floors. He was still hardly speaking and he did not even seem to know his own name.

So we went for a second opinion. The new paediatrician was very concerned and immediately arranged for a thorough assessment, which included a speech therapist and a psychologist. And just five days before my beautiful baby boy turned two, he was diagnosed with autism.

My world crumbled. I have never felt such pain in all of my life.

'Autism' is one of those words like 'cancer' or 'AIDS': when you hear it in everyday conversation, you can't help but shudder. And when you hear it as a diagnosis applied to your own child, it's like

someone sticking a knife into your gut and twisting it around, and then slowly pulling your intestines out through the wound.

I cried, I sobbed, I howled. I didn't know it was possible to hurt so much. I've broken bones, been seriously ill, and witnessed loved ones die, but the pain of those events was miniscule compared to this.

* * *

Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross famously described the 'five stages of grief' as denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Although she was specifically referring to death and dying, these stages also apply to all types of loss, shock, crisis and trauma. However, they are not discrete and well-defined stages, and many people don't experience all of them. Also, there is no fixed order in which these stages occur. They frequently happen simultaneously; they tend to ebb and flow and blend into one another; and often they seem to 'end' and then 'start again'.

For reality slaps of a less violent or dramatic nature, you might not experience any grief, but for major crises and losses, you almost certainly will go through at least some of these stages, so let's briefly discuss them.

'Denial' refers to a conscious or unconscious refusal or inability to acknowledge the reality of the situation. This could manifest as unwillingness to talk about it or think about it; or as trying hard to pretend that it's not happening; or as a pervasive sense of unreality — walking around in a daze, feeling as if it's all just a bad dream.

In the 'anger' stage, you might get angry with yourself, or others, or life itself. And of course, anger has many close relatives that frequently drop in: resentment, indignation, fury, outrage, or a strong sense of unfairness, injustice or betrayal.

‘Bargaining’ means attempting to strike deals that will alter the reality; this might include anything from asking God for a reprieve, to asking a surgeon to guarantee the operation will be successful. It frequently involves lots of wishful thinking and fantasising about alternative realities: ‘If only *this* had happened’, ‘If only that *hadn’t* happened’.

Unfortunately, the ‘depression’ stage is misnamed. It does not mean experiencing the common clinical disorder known as ‘depression’. Rather it refers to the normal emotions of sadness, sorrow, regret, fear, anxiety and uncertainty, which are natural human reactions to loss and trauma.

Finally, the ‘acceptance’ stage refers to making peace with the reality gap, instead of struggling with it or avoiding it.

I found in the months that followed my son’s diagnosis, I went through all of these ‘stages’ many times over. At the time of writing this book, it has been over three years since that reality slap, and I have learned and grown much during that time. And although the slap is now a distant memory, the reality gap it unveiled still remains open. Therefore, as we go through this book, I will share with you my journey, to illustrate many of the principles within these pages. I have to say, at risk of it being a cliché, that although my journey has been long and hard and painful, it’s also been incredibly rewarding. Along the way, there’s been a huge amount of sadness, fear and anger, but there’s also been plenty of joy, love and wonder, and I fully expect that you will find the same on your own journey.

Of course, your reality gap may seem very different to mine — and also to those of other people you know. Divorce, death or disability; illness, injury or infirmity; depression, anxiety or addiction: they all *seem* to be very different from one another but, beneath the surface, they are all very similar. In each case, we face a

big gap between the reality that we've got and the reality that we want. And the bigger that gap is, the bigger the pain. And the bigger the pain, the less effectively we cope. So in this book, I'm going to outline a strategy that will help you deal with any sort of reality gap, no matter how great or small, and no matter whether it's temporary or permanent. This strategy will help you to close that gap, if and when it can be closed, and to find inner fulfilment when it can't be closed (either temporarily or permanently).

Basically, this strategy involves four steps:

- Hold yourself kindly.
- Drop the anchor.
- Take a stand.
- Find the treasure.

Let's take a quick look at these now.

Step 1: Hold Yourself Kindly

When we're hurting, we need to be kind to ourselves. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done. For most of us, the default setting of our mind is to be harsh, judgemental, uncaring or self-critical (this is especially likely if you believe that you created your own reality gap).

We all know self-criticism doesn't help us, but that doesn't stop it from happening. And popular self-help approaches, such as challenging our negative thoughts, or repeating positive affirmations, or practising self-hypnosis, do not work for most of us in the long term; our minds continue to be harsh, judgemental and self-critical. So we need to learn the art of self-compassion: how to hold ourselves kindly and gently. We need to learn how to support and comfort ourselves, and how to handle our painful thoughts and feelings effectively, so they have less impact and influence over our lives.

Step 2: Drop the Anchor

The larger the reality gap, the greater the emotional storm it unleashes within. Waves of painful feelings crash through our bodies and painful thoughts blow wildly through our heads. When we get carried away by this storm of thoughts and feelings, we are helpless; there is nothing we can do but desperately try to save ourselves from drowning. So when that storm hits us, we must drop anchor and ground ourselves, so we can take effective action. Dropping anchor doesn't get rid of the storm; it just holds us steady until the storm passes.

Step 3: Take a Stand

Whenever we encounter a reality gap, it helps to ask ourselves this question: 'What do I want to stand for in the face of this?' We can stand for giving up on life, or we can stand for something far more meaningful. We can stand for something that matters, deep in our heart: something that dignifies our suffering and gives us the will and the courage to carry on.

Obviously, we can't turn back time. We can't undo whatever it is that has happened. But we can choose the attitude we take towards it. Sometimes when we take a stand, we can close the gap, and at other times, obviously we can't. But the moment we take a stand, we experience vitality; we may not have the reality we want, but we do have the satisfaction of living with purpose.

Step 4: Find the Treasure

Once we have put the first three steps into practice, we will be in a very different space mentally. And from this space, we will be able to find and appreciate the many treasures life has to offer. This last

step may sound impossible, especially if you are currently in the midst of great anxiety, sadness or despair — but it is not. To give you a dramatic example, a few years ago a friend of mine suffered a tragic loss: her three-year-old daughter died suddenly from septicaemia. It was the most heartbreaking funeral I'd ever attended: an outpouring of grief without end.

What amazed and inspired me over the ensuing months was the way my friend continued to find fulfilment. In the midst of her unimaginable sorrow, tormented and shattered by her loss, she did not lose touch with all that remained in her life. At the same time as making room for her grief, she reached out and connected with her family and friends, her work, her religion and her creativity. And, in doing so, she found love, joy and comfort. Her pain did not disappear; I doubt it ever will. Her reality gap did not close; how on earth could it? But she was able to appreciate the reality *around* that gap; to appreciate how much life still had to offer.

If you don't have children yourself, you may not realise just how remarkable this is. Personally, I can't think of anything worse than losing a child. Many parents become severely depressed or suicidal under these circumstances. But it doesn't have to be that way. We do have a choice, even though our minds often say that we don't.

This then, is the final step of our journey: to find the treasure buried beneath all our pain. That doesn't mean we deny the pain is there, or we try to pretend that it doesn't hurt. Rather, it means we acknowledge the pain is there *and* we also appreciate all that life has to offer.

At this point, you may notice your mind protesting; it may insist that your case is different to everyone else's; that your life will remain pointless, empty, miserable or unbearable unless your reality gap is closed. If so, rest assured: those are perfectly natural thoughts that

many people have when they're new to this approach. And if I try to convince your mind that its comments are wrong, I will almost certainly lose. For example, I could start quoting the vast amount of research on ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy), much of it published in leading psychological journals, which shows it is effective with everything from depression and addiction, to reducing stress at work and dealing with a terminal diagnosis of cancer. But your mind could easily dismiss all this with one comment: 'That doesn't mean it will work for me.' And I can't argue with that. There's a very good chance this approach will help you, but I can't *guarantee* it. However, I *can* guarantee that if you stop reading simply because your mind says, 'This won't work', then you definitely *won't* get any benefit from this book!

So, how about we just let your mind have its say? Let it tell you whatever it wants, but don't let it stop you. Let it chatter away like a radio playing in the background while you keep on reading, and see if you can be curious about where this leads you. Because although our minds like to think they can predict the future, really ... who knows what might happen?