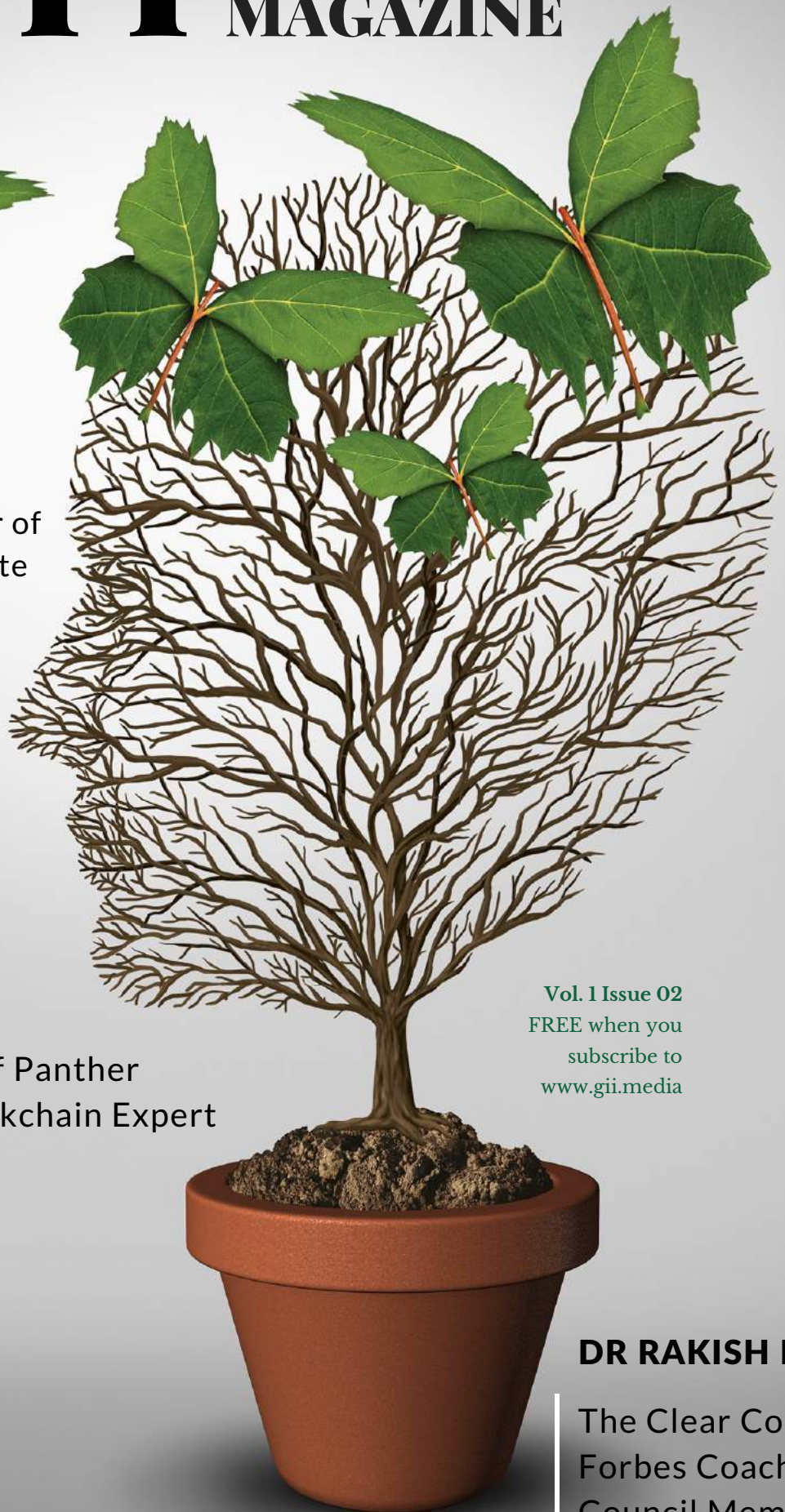


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THE NON-LINEAR NATURE OF SUFFERING & SUCCESS

Richie Harkam, Founder of Hark Angel and Return on Resilience, shares his gruesome near-death experience of being T-boned on a motorbike, the revolutionary knee transplant that saved his life, and how he is scaling his philanthropic goals TEN times over.



It's the first time in years I've seen Richie, mind you, we are on zoom. We happily reunite amidst the digital shortcomings of a weak internet connection and immediately get into some dope reflections of a life lived so boldly. Richie recounts his wine submersion event in Newcastle, 2013. He had just returned from Kenya and was already on the next adventure, burying wine into the Australian ocean to see how sunken vs unsunken would taste. On the scuba dive down in the depths of the sea, he recalls one particular diver with a prosthetic leg.

"I remember thinking that would literally be the worst thing that could happen to me in my life. As a winemaker, as a basketball player, as a person. My identity revolved around being very physical, going to the gym, being strong."

To give some background, Richie is a motivational speaker and entrepreneur who has co-founded several successful businesses such as Energy Alliance, the Australian College of Physical Education, and Harkham Wines.

It was merely a year later that he found himself facing the very same future as that diver.

THE ACCIDENT

I will never forget hearing this story firsthand from Richie just months after the accident. His PTSD was clearly in attendance. We sat having gold-plated eggnog, his home was scattered with books like “The Power of Now” by Eckhart Tolle and he still looked frustrated, albeit accepting of his much-needed cane. His Pomeranian Nahla learned to navigate around it with the cutest demeanour.

He revealed with empowering vulnerability the moments after he had been T-boned by a station wagon. It was on the night of the 16th April 2014.

The screams, the cringing pain that held and squashed him metal to bone, and the devastating fight to survive that became his life. That was back in Christmas 2014 when things were fresh, and since then he has had eight recoveries.



“Eight going back to zero. My hopes, in the beginning, were so high before an operation. Then you go through the pits of hell; the screwing, hammering, sawing, knocking. You barely feel alive and can't pee on your own. Six weeks, sometimes two months of recovery pass and you still have hope.

But then six months later, you find out that it didn't work.

I've seen the depths of human suffering. I've been there. I've been in a room where people have died or were dying. I've been awake when there are needles the size of my hand in my leg. I've injected myself 365 days with the steroids that cause cancer, which gives you depression, anxiety and sleep issues. My veins in my arms collapsed, literally, because I had that many needles put inside of it.

During those four years I underwent a handful of operations, a golden staph infection, was tormented by chronic pain and was stuck in hospital beds for months at a time. I started to lose my sense of identity.

Then, after the seventh failed operation, they suggested amputation.”

THE ANGEL THAT SAVED HIM

It was a world-class procedure done this revolutionary way, perhaps even the first in the world. Throughout history, surgeons had tried and failed at knee transplants, but when the lucky stars aligned for Richie they managed to use a graft of a knee transplant from a young boy. For another time, he filled his heart with hope. Dr Christian Krettek in Hanover Germany used only a graft with living cells rather than the whole joint with a live meniscus and cartilage.

“I remember being out for 20 hours and actually stopped breathing and was reintubated. I felt suffocated. I've gone through the worst of the worst of the worst now right? I can't even tell you what I've felt in terms of suffering. Every step of recovery was a punch to the face. I would get to my car in the morning and I would leave my key upstairs and I would just burst out crying because I knew the pain that I was going to have to get if I walk upstairs again. You understand really to the core, what suffering is when you go through that and if you're able to come out the other side of that, then you're able to see life in perspective.”

The journey to Resilience

Richie became a new version of himself. Pre-accident Richie was a beacon of athleticism and one of my fondest moments was of him recounting his time living with the Massai people in Africa. They adored him so much that they gave him special wristbands. The height a man could jump was symbolic of his strength and Richie had some game from being on the basketball court.

I still marvel at that contrast. Rich went from the epitome of using his body to using a cane, crutches, and a wheelchair from 34 to 38 years old.

“I talk about a lot of self-inquiry, visualization, and going within yourself during chronic pain. It was actually the Maasai warriors who taught me about not feeling pain or not acknowledging it and switching your mind off from it. I did have that training within me, but I didn't ever need to access it or use it until years later. It definitely helped me.

But I really didn't know the strength or resilience that I had until I had used it.”

As an entrepreneur Richie explains that sometimes you end up going back to zero, you have to understand how to rebuild, and for him resilience is at the very core of that.

“Everything in your life is there as a vehicle for your transformation. Use it.”

– Ram Dass



Once Richie realized that life was not happening to him but for him to gain experience and wisdom he knew that his future was forever changed.

“You want to be a Ninja where you don't get too excited and you never get too sad. You want to get to a point where you can just try your best in every situation. Almost where things just roll off you. There's going to be an opportunity to go through with minimal damage all the parts of survival pain. You adjust to the swings. Like when you invest money, you don't want to see the swings. You just want to see the straight-line correlation through the timeline.

I call it banking resilience.

The more you go through, the more you have in your resilience bank that you can call upon the next time. Not much gets to me right now. Of course, it gets to me, but not much because I've been to the pits of hell. I've banked resilience. I died, I've come back to life.”

THE NON-LINEAR NATURE OF RECOVERY

There is a natural imperfection that comes when working through the struggle before you get to the growth stage. An important distinction to make is where you take control. You have an accountability to how you show up for healing, how you recover and rebuild while still allowing yourself to be where you're genuinely at.

“My recovery, anyone's recovery, anyone's trauma, is never linear. Let me tell you, I got right to the point where I was going to keep my leg or lose my leg. Not that I would ever have done it, but I did think that it would be easier for me to be dead and suicide of course came to my mind. I am human after all. So what I'm saying is when you're going through shit, think about all these steps. The biggest thing is to adopt a positive mindset and push through. That is a real test of a true entrepreneur. How much can you keep pushing when there's no light in the tunnel? Because 99% of people give up and that 1% or less, than 1% that can keep pushing and going, they reach the Holy Land”

PRINCIPLES OF RESILIENCE & EGO STRENGTH

Richie describes ego strength as an individual's ability to maintain their identity and their sense of self in the face of pain, distress, and conflict. He has found most benefit in consciously raising the tolerance for frustration and stress by positively reframing scenarios and banking resilience using these steps;

1. **Identity** explores how trauma alters our identity and how the choices we make to find hope define our post-trauma identity.
2. **Integration** demonstrates how a person's post-trauma identity is integrated into the new reality through adaptive event processing.
3. **Inner Influence** describes finding the ability and strength within yourself to uncover opportunities in hardship and collect 'Return on Resilience'. Mindfulness, self-compassion, and self-inquiry are key concepts in Inner Influence.
4. **Inspire** is about going beyond overcoming adversity and finding the broader meaning and purpose that derives from the crisis.





POST TRAUMATIC GROWTH

“I would never be able to be the person I am today without going through that, and that's the overwhelming theme of eternal resilience. We need strength to grow. We need trauma to grow. We need to go through the hardship of life. To adapt, to become better.

How crazy is the world right now; 50% of people go through a divorce, one in five people experiences depression in their life, one in four people suffer from anxiety, one in ten have serious doubts about a relationship that they're in right now. One in ten people will use sleeping tablets and can't sleep. One-third of people have body image issues, people self-harm. One in ten people say they won't have a drink tonight and they just can't help themselves. Almost everyone is going through struggles in life. So the question becomes; *how can I dig into my struggle to experience growth, where is my strength?*

For me to be able to do that I needed to first go through a lot of sadness before I could find my strength”

Richie sums up the general process of suffering as per the 'Kubler-Ross Model' and the 5 stages of grief. First, you deny it until you are forced to accept it. Then comes anger when you are accepting the situation, and with that comes bargaining with life and wanting things to have been different. This can lead to depression before ultimately you find the meaning, that is if you are searching for it.

The first thing is to actually acknowledge that there's something that's going on in your life. And then another part is compassion and monitoring your self-talk. Richie proudly highlights his Return on Resilience Podcast interview with 100-year-old Holocaust survivor and author of "The Happiest Man on Earth", Eddie Jaku. I could hear the monumental adoration for having had the privilege to meet and interview him before his passing. For Richie, hearing Eddie's story facing years of Nazi brutality whilst being held in the Auschwitz concentration camp weighing only 27kg, surviving both Cholera and Typhoid, was the epitome of resilience.

Alongside setting up Return on Resilience with the flagship podcast, Richie asked some deep questions about what his new goals in life were.

Enter Hark Angel.



HARK ANGEL

Since the accident it became common for Richie to want to do things ten times bigger than he did before, because he had a new capacity for achievement with his resilience.

"People always asked me, what do I want to do in my life? And I always said I want to help kids in Africa when I'm older. Before my accident, I was volunteering with this guy in a slum called Kibera, which is in Nairobi. It's one of the biggest per-capita slums in the world. Around 20% of people have HIV. When you walk in there literally is an assault on all your senses.

We were going through giving medication to people in the slum and it was scary. There was disgusting rubbish piled up, people peeing and pooping on the side of the road. They lived on top of each other with no plumbing, no waste disposal. No other option. Then we went through this kind of school. The kids were a little bit sick, some of them didn't look very well. There was a little boy playing with a Coca-Cola can. It was his toy. Other kids were crying. They had yellow eyes and I later learned they were HIV orphans whose parents either died or dumped them and left. I wondered what was going to happen to those kids, I was worried that their lives were doomed. I realized that none of those children chose that world. They didn't do anything wrong in their life to be in that world. It wasn't their fault. They were thrown into that world.

"It really hit me. Their only way out is by empowering through education. It's the only real way that a child can change their life and break the cycle of poverty."





"Fast forward till after my accident, it was only when I got the transplant from this young boy and I was laying in my hospital bed that I felt like it was my duty to write a letter. In the letter, I explained to the boy's father that I set out to build schools in third world countries and that I want to build a school in his son's honor. I wanted his son's spirit to live on through all these children. I thought I can never repay him but I can change the lives of all these children. I asked him for his son's name or initials to dedicate a school in his honor, but the father never wrote back. At the time, I had my winery Harkham Wines, and thought, the boy is like an angel to me. So I called him the Hark Angel.

"I initially wanted to build 10 schools, but instead with all my banked resilience, I set out to build 100."

Richie and the team at Hark Angel, despite the pandemic, have completed the eighth school in the Bone Kwin Village. I have no doubt that with all his resilience, he will overcome any obstacle to reach his 100-school goal.

In typical fashion, he closes the interview with humility and a heartfelt Ram Dass quote, "*We're all just walking each other home.*"

