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# THE PREFACE TO DISRUPT EVERYTHING

James Patterson

## Here's a promise: Disrupt Everything will help you deal with the most powerful and misunderstood force in this fast-changing world—disruption.

#### Disruption is a force of change.

Some of us, maybe most of us, stubbornly resist change, even when it's clearly in our best interests. But resisting change can leave us left out, left behind, and left feeling lost, cheated, and angry. It shouldn't be that way. And if we're open to *effecting* change, it doesn't have to be that way.

Disruption can be scary, but it can also be an agent for positive change. Virtually every company, and virtually every employee from top to bottom, needs to be open to disruption and play a part in positive change. That's right: Everybody has a part to play.

In 2022, I visited Nashville several times while Dolly Parton and I were cowriting a novel, *Run, Rose, Run*. That February, I visited my old graduate school, Vanderbilt University, to give a guest lecture titled "The Power of Disruptions" to business students in Professor Patrick Leddin's leadership class. I began by challenging (disrupting) the students in an unusual way. I asked them if they were living a good life. Or had they been getting on one treadmill after another for most of their lives? Was that treadmill routine satisfying for them? Basically, were they happy?

I reassured the students that I wanted all of them to lead good, satisfying lives and that managing disruptions would be important—more important than they could imagine. Today, whenever I give a speech—whether to a corporate group, to college students, or to people at a book event—I ask the audience members whether they are living good lives. And now I'll ask you the same question: Are you living a good life? Are you passionate about your job? About your employer? About your future? How is your family life? How are your relationships with friends and coworkers? Are you able to balance your work life with your personal life?

I love my job. That's because I don't work for a living; I play for a living. The reason for this–100 percent–has to do with managing disruption.

Several significant disruptions led to my becoming CEO of the country's leading advertising agency, J. Walter Thompson. I then disrupted my life in a major way by changing careers and eventually becoming the bestselling writer in the world.

Equally important, or maybe even more important, has been the effect of disruptions on my home life. I love my wife. I sometimes joke that if Sue ever leaves me, I'm going with her. I love our son, Jack. The three of us have always discussed and negotiated significant changes—disruptions—in our lives.

## Disruption can be scary, but it can also be an agent for positive change.

My successes, as well as my weathering of bad luck and personal tragedy, have arisen from my ability to understand and make use of disruption in positive ways.

I became the CEO of J. Walter Thompson North America at thirty-six. I got there by disrupting the norm, which spurred growth and much higher profits for the firm.

When I was twenty-four, I was living out of a tiny room in a low-rent hotel on West 51st Street in New York City. The wallpaper in the room had thousands of pentagons on it, and some former occupant had drawn an X through every single pentagon. I needed to get out of there, fast.

But how? Back then, I didn't know I needed a disruption, but I did need one. Badly.

To secure an entry-level job as an advertising copywriter, you were required to present a portfolio of clever ads. I wanted to work at J. Walter Thompson because Thompson was the biggest and most powerful ad agency, but I had never taken an advertising or marketing course.

What I did was disrupt the hiring process. I hand-delivered a portfolio of ads to the New York office. This wasn't a disruption; it was the status quo. But the next week, I delivered a second portfolio. And the third week, I delivered a third portfolio. I was definitely disrupting the normal process at JWT.

The company hired me in the fourth week.

Years later, when I was promoted to head of the New York office at JWT, the product wasn't good. We needed better personnel. It was time for another disruption. We ran an ad in the *New York Times*. The headline was straightforward: "Write If You Want Work." There were six questions, six problems to solve. I promised to hire writers based on the test and a single interview.

Here is one of the problems applicants had to solve: "The ingredients listed on the tin of baked beans reads: 'Beans, Water, Tomatoes, Sugar, Salt, Modified Starch, Vinegar, Spices. Make it sound mouthwatering."

Over the course of the following years, we hired over forty writers based on that single very disruptive ad.

During this time at Thompson, I was writing novels on the side. Writing was my real passion, my dream job.

Next came the biggest disruption of my life. It happened on the New Jersey Turnpike, of all places. One beautiful summer Sunday, I had to leave my house and go back to work in New York City. As I headed north, traffic on the turnpike was bumper-to-bumper. But on the other side, the southbound side, there were almost no cars.

Every ten or fifteen seconds, I would hear this sound:

Whoosh.

Whoosh.

I didn't need to be in bumper-to-bumper traffic heading to a job I no longer really cared about. I needed to be on the other side of the road. I needed to be writing novels full-time. But to do that, I had to walk away from a powerful, high-paying job.

So I quit my steady job. It wasn't an easy decision.

#### I realized that my mission was to get on the other side of the highway. . . . I needed to be writing novels full-time.

When I started writing full-time, there was an unspoken rule in the publishing industry that most authors should only publish one book a year. That rule didn't make sense to me, so I started writing two, then three, then more than half a dozen books a year. At first, my publisher, Little, Brown, resisted—but then the people there saw that disruption working like nothing they had ever seen before.

Next I started collaborating with cowriters. Another big disruption. Then I took up co-writing with famous people and groups—President Bill Clinton, Dolly Parton, Viola Davis, the Albert Einstein estate, and the Michael Crichton estate. More successful disruptions followed.

Advertising books on television—a first for my publisher. Writing in many different genres—suspense, love stories, kids' books, graphic novels, narrative nonfiction, memoir. I created BookShots—novellas that can be read in around the time it takes to watch a movie.

As I write this, I'm the bestselling writer in the world.

At least that's what my publisher tells me.

Of course, the other side of the coin is that unfortunately, we all have to deal with disruptions in life that involve setbacks and personal tragedies—the kind of disruptions capable of sinking any of us without a trace.

In fact, as I write, our world has never felt more chaotic than right now.

But we can be better prepared. For economic disruptions like the ones in 2008 and 2020. For worldwide disruptions like COVID-19. Even for personal medical emergencies that can break our hearts.

And you know what? Unpredictable disruptions are going to keep coming at us like speeding meteors. They always do.

Where do you want to go?

In business, and in life, there really isn't a ceiling. The best way to demonstrate that is to take some chances. Enthusiasm and hunger are trademarks of people who succeed. Those are familiar qualities, right?

What you're doing is not easy, but you've learned a lot of lessons along the way. Now is the time to start practicing them. And I mean really practice. When you practice, you perform a task repeatedly until you get better and better at it. Practice is another way of making change—disrupting your daily reality to produce a better result.

So how do you get there?

My own daily goal is to get back to doing what I want to do. Nowadays, that's less about being the number one novelist than it is about having a balanced life.

If I were to create a blueprint, or a mission statement, it might look something like this:

There's a story for everybody.

Don't get in the way of the story.

Tap into something in the psyche.

Get interested in the people in the middle.

Provide cathartic emotional experiences.

Now you try it.

Say you're an employee moving up the ranks in the company where you work. Say you have a talent for logistics. Your mission statement might look something like this:

Streamline the process.

Figure out what's not working and why.

Figure out what is working—and amplify the company's strengths through your actions.

Or say there's a product that's been lighting up your imagination. You've created it and become an entrepreneur. You've founded a company and a brand to market that product.

At its simplest, a brand is just a symbol of the trust established between a group of people and what you're offering them—just trust. If you pick up product X, you won't be able to stop using it. That's it: Go ahead and make your company indispensable.

Make your product the one that stands out.

Take the mystery out of the business.

Reach more people—and different kinds of people—by listening to their feedback.

Here's a mission statement for us all, no matter what our professional roles are.

Get your business life in sync with your personal life. Your loved ones want the best for you. Give them your best. The heart and mind can help you to get serious about a job, about changing careers, about starting a car wash, about following a leader's vision at work, about improving someone else's vision through your own ideas. It's the heart and mind working together that help you select a path moving forward and commit to it. That's definitely what happened to me as a writer. I also think it's what happened to Patrick Ledden when he saw an opportunity. Patrick took a leap of faith when he left his prestigious role as a professor at Vanderbilt University to speak to audiences around the world about disruption.

My guest lecture about "The Power of Disruptions" in Professor Leddin's leadership class and his decision to devote himself to speaking on the topic led to us co-authoring a book together.

Our mission is to help ordinary people—people like you, like Patrick, and like me—deal effectively with unexpected disruptions. We want to help people lead better lives by managing—and even profiting from—disruption rather than letting disruption manage us.

It's the heart and mind working together that help you select a path moving forward and commit to it. Everybody has a part to play. Large or small, all companies and institutions have mission statements. For these to be best put into practice, every employee needs to buy in—but these same employees also need to be willing to change how they do their jobs in small and large ways. They need to be able to disrupt. Employees who want to advance, at any level, have to be seen as positive disrupters. Entrepreneurs—anyone who wants to start their own businesses—absolutely have to understand how to make disruption work positively for them.

The purpose of *Disrupt Everything* is to make disruption a positive force, helping you change your life for the better.



#### Info



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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

James Patterson is the most popular storyteller of our time and the creator of such unforgettable characters and series as Alex Cross, the Women's Murder Club, Jane Smith, and Maximum Ride. He has coauthored #1 bestselling novels with Bill Clinton, Dolly Parton, and Michael Crichton, as well as collaborated on #1 bestselling nonfiction, including *The Idaho Four, Walk in My Combat Boots*, and *Filthy Rich*. Patterson has told the story of his own life in the #1 bestselling autobiography *James Patterson by James Patterson*. He is the recipient of an Edgar Award, ten Emmy Awards, the Literarian Award from the National Book Foundation, and the National Humanities Medal.

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