

Skip the Failure Porn and Other Surprising Success Advice – James Altucher with Dave Asprey – #794

Announcer:

Bulletproof Radio, a state of high performance.

Dave Asprey:

You're listening to Bulletproof Radio with Dave Asprey. Today, we are going to talk about experimentation, about skipping the line. And my guest today ran and started more than 20 companies, and only failed at 17 of them. He's investor and advisor to about 30 more companies now, from tech, to energy, to healthcare, biotech. He's also a well-known author and podcaster. And I'm talking about James Altucher. By the way, hey James.

James Altucher:

Dave, thanks so much for having me on the podcast. It's a reunion. I remember the last time we did a back-to-back podcast, you were on mine I was on yours, was right around the time I was starting to do standup comedy. And I even asked you for advice then, and you said just take a deep breath and feel love for the audience right before you walk out. And I've since then performed probably well over a thousand times, and I always do that the second before I perform.

Dave:

Dude, that's awesome. You never told me that before. I think it connects with that, because I do that every time I go. Even if I do an Instagram Live, I make it a practice to do that just to... you send something, I think people feel it. Well, you're doing something right in comedy. I have a whole bio of stuff you've done. You've lost \$15 million down to \$143, and you've experimented, and just ridden things up and down. Every time I interview you I'm like, "You did what?" And this time, you wrote an opinion piece, a high integrity, this is what I think, and Jerry Seinfeld, which is a comic a few people have heard of, wrote a rebuttal piece to it. So you've been kind of out there lately, just talking about the future of what you think is happening in New York. And you looked at the whole experience as an experiment, and that's what your new book is about, it's about experimenting and how you can skip the line and all. How did pissing off all New Yorkers, including Jerry Seinfeld, how is that really an experiment?

James:

Well, I didn't write the article designed to piss people off. I really saw as part of this economic lockdown, there were things happening in New York City that were starting to get at a critical level, and I felt everybody was in denial. The governor, and the mayor, and the average man on the street. A lot of business owners were not in denial because they were going out of business.

Dave:

It's brutal.

James:

A lot of employees of those businesses were not in denial, because they were going unemployed. New York City is the city with the highest unemployment rate now in the country. Everything I wrote about in August has been coming true. But at the time... and by the way, in the article I write about my love affair

with New York since I was born, and I write about how I don't want this to happen, and I write about how I was searching for solutions. I think people didn't really think about that. It triggered their cognitive dissonance, and rather than engaging with solutions and with the issues, people just attacked me, including Seinfeld. Who, Seinfeld, I will say this about Jerry. He loves New York City, and like everyone else he was sort of offended by what I was saying. But nobody addressed the actual issues. They just, Jerry included... and by the way, then some family members, ex-girlfriends, people started writing articles left and right, just insulting me. No one actually addressed any of the issues.

But Jerry Seinfeld, it's the first op ed piece he's ever written in his life. He wrote it in a full page in the New York Times, and he spent the whole article just insulting me. And he's very good with insults. He was very powerful with his insulting. So yeah, the experience there was, A, I'm always trying to push the envelope a little bit with my own writing. It's always very important for me not just to write a story, but to have an impact and write something that no one else has written. Otherwise, if somebody else has written it, what's the point of me writing it? I'm just going to add to some echo chamber. So every article, I always do a test and I'm sure you do this as well because we've even discussed this, of how you always... I always hear you say things like, "And nobody's ever written about this before, but I wrote it [inaudible 00:04:28]." So I do the same thing. I always do a gut check, is this new? Is there some part of this that's new, either in terms of the content, the facts, the story, whatever.

Then the other thing I always ask myself is, am I afraid to publish this? Is there something that I'm a little bit afraid of? Because then I know I'm pushing past my comfort zone, and I'm going to learn something one way or the other. And so the interesting thing that I asked myself, I said to myself, "Why am I afraid to hit publish on this," right before I hit publish. And it was because this was the first time in at least over a decade, I can't remember ever. This is the first time I ever wrote an article where I talked about something very pessimistic that I was seeing all around me, which was the conditions in New York City. But I did not have optimism at the end. I did not have a solution for the problems I was mentioning. I was just trying to get people out of denial. Normally I will say, "Oh, this, and this, and this is happening, but don't worry because this is what looks like will be happening after that," and it's optimistic because I'm usually an optimistic person. But this time, I was struggling to find a solution, and that's what I, basically was the article, was that I couldn't figure out a solution.

So I think a lot of my initial readers were sort of like, "This is odd. He doesn't have..." they were expecting kind of a way out of the misery by the end of the article, and I didn't have it. And I felt bad about that. Which again was for me the experiment. The real experiment was, can I sit with not being the optimist everybody expects by the end of this article? And then I saw this massive, massive reaction. I mean, huge radio hosts were reading the articles live on their shows or podcasts the next day.

Dave:

Joe Rogan read your article, right? That's pretty epic.

James:

Yeah, Joe Rogan, yeah. He mentioned my article on at least three or four different podcasts. I was on every media outlet about it. And then all these people were really trashing me. And I want to say I was getting about 10 hate tweets a second for a while in that first week. And then I thought it had died down, and then a week later Jerry Seinfeld has this op ed in the New York Times where he calls me a putz. He basically insults me in a variety of ways. And I figure, okay, I try to look at the upside, which is that hey, at least my writing hit home enough that all these people reacted strongly to it, and I hope maybe that will make a difference. And in fact, it was the one thing that Mayor de Blasio and Governor

Cuomo agreed on, was how much they hated me. And so it was the first time I had seen them agree on anything in years. So I thought, okay, I'm accomplishing something.

But then it was weird just how many people I knew started unfriending me, including in the case of some family members, some people who had been friends of mine for many years. And then some friends of mine told me they were being unfriended by their friends, because they were defending me. So I have somebody I work with was wearing a T-shirt that says The James Altucher Show, and he was harassed walking his dog in the middle of the street in New York. And so all these strange stories. Everywhere I went, people were like, "Oh, you're that New York City is dead guy." And even four months later, one person, well known guy, insulted me. And I'm like, I called him and I'm like, "Look, you were accused of X, Y, and Z and I had your back. You were on my podcast, you explained your side of the story. Why would you say that about me?" And he was just like, "Well enjoy your moment of fame." And I'm like, I'm not trying to be... I've written 25 books, I'm not-

Dave:

You're already kind of famous, James. I don't think you needed more. You have like a million followers on LinkedIn. People listen to you right? You're not doing it for fame. [crosstalk 00:08:33].

James:

Yeah, I said that. I said that, "I'm not even trying for that. I'm trying to help New York City." I specifically said I'm not trying to be famous. And this guy, his response was, "I know. You know how I know? Because I am famous." And just everybody went straight-

Dave:

Tell me who it was. Who was this?

James:

Oh, I'll tell you after the podcast. I'll tell you after the podcast.

Dave:

He's been on your show. Come on, everyone's going to go to your show and then find [crosstalk 00:08:53].

James:

No, no, no, because he's a good guy. I think he was just, I don't know, agitated for whatever reason. That's the other thing I learned, is that everybody has their own agendas and I can't really assume... it's always a mistake to assume malice, although who knows what he was going through that day. I don't know. But yeah, it was intense.

Dave:

Yeah, I love that. It's a mistake to assume malice. Because if you think you know what's going on in someone else's head, that's ego. Because there's no way you can know, you can only measure behaviors, right? And they can be done out of trauma or they can be done out of malice, you just don't know.

James:

And the reality is, I did write an article that in... I didn't realize, and maybe I should've. I didn't realize how much cognitive dissonance it would trigger. So I wrote an article with facts, so people couldn't really argue with the article. It was just facts. But a lot of people have made life decisions, very important life decisions, to either buy a place in New York or move their family to New York, or take a job in New York. And here I was questioning these decisions at a time when maybe they were scared. And again, the only reason I did that is because I felt people were in denial, that maybe up to 80 or 90% of restaurants might close, one-third of small businesses might close in New York. And so I wanted to get... for people to get out of denial. And I've even tried searching for solutions since then, and I've talked to a lot of government officials or economists or whatever.

But it was also an experiment on writing in a variety of ways. Every time I write or start a business, or let's say do standup comedy, or do investing or a podcast, I always try to push some envelope. I try to do some experiment, because that's the fastest way you learn. There's this rule popularized by Malcolm Gladwell, and before that Professor Anders Ericsson, called the 10,000 hour rule, which says if you do 10,000 hours of deliberate practice, which means repetition with a coach and fast feedback and then more repetition. That's rough, but that's it. If you do that, you'll be among the best in the world by the time you hit your 10,000th hour, roughly. And I don't like that rule. You and I are both in our 50s, and many people, whether you're in your 20s, 30s, 40s, or 50s, it's okay to change your interests. It's okay to change jobs, change careers. It's okay to do what you love.

And if you think that you need 10,000 hours once you switch interests, I wanted to prove that wrong. I was getting personally frustrated and I was almost tying my hands behind my back, because I was following that rule. And I'm like I don't... when I switch interests now, I don't want to spend 10,000 hours. And so that's when I realized through much trial and error that all my theories about the 10,000 hour rule were not working out. But this other aspect, experimenting where you're always trying to push the edge, push the envelope of whatever it is you love. And I could get more into detail, but it was through what I call now the 10,000 experiment rule that I really was learning anything I wanted in a very quick amount of time, combined with some other techniques. And so I decided, you know what, this has been so life changing for me, I'm going to write about it. I wasn't going to write another nonfiction book. I wanted to write a novel. And then I ended up writing this book. I was so in love with these ideas, and how much it had helped me.

Dave:

It's a powerful book, because the 10,000 hour rule, it's actually crippling. Because it says, because with no enhancements, no proper technique, you just put your head down and plow through it, you'll eventually get some results. This sounds suspiciously similar to what they told me when they said, "Just eat low calories and exercise all the time, and eventually you'll lose weight." And I'm like, 18 months later and I'm still 300 pounds, like maybe this advice sucks. Maybe it'll work someday, but no. And the reason the 10,000 hour rule works is because that's how long it takes to myelinate nerves. Assuming that you insulate your nerves so that they can carry electricity faster, assuming that you do that at the standard rate. Well gee, what would happen if we hacked the rate of myelination of nerves with the electrical currents or with nutrients, so you could learn faster? Oh my God, that maybe it's a 5,000 hour rule. Assuming it has to be 10,000 hours, it kind of makes me mad. So you kind of blew holes in it in your book and I like that. And now you have 10,000 experiments instead of 10,000 hours, I could get behind that and I like that.

James:

Yeah, because think about your career and Bulletproof Coffee. It's not like you became the "Best guy out there," or one of the best in the world at developing a food company. No, what you did and what many successful people do, is they change the industry of what they're trying to be the best at. So what you did was you basically figured out through hacking on yourself and through scientific research, you figured out what combination of nutrients and foods and drinks would create health for you and others, and then you created a food company around that. And if you go to any industry, or career, or passion, or interest, the best people don't just become... like the best guitar player doesn't just become really proficient at guitar. He plays the guitar in a different way, or she plays the guitar in a different way than anybody else has previously. They changed the nature of the industry or the interest they're trying to be great at. And through experimenting, that's how you can do that. Oh, what if I'm Jimi Hendrix and I'm experimenting with playing guitar with my teeth, or playing guitar so it sounds like a human singing? Well suddenly I've just changed the way people listen to guitar if I experiment enough with that.

And that's true in every single industry on the planet. The 10,000 hour rule, your right, it's crippling. It takes 20 years. But if you could basically define, if you could really pursue what it is you love and know why you love it, and then experiment with new ways to push the frontier in this new interest that you love, you're going to be the best at how you now have individually defined the category.

Dave:

You sound a little bit like Naveen Jain, another friend, the founder of Viome who's been on the show several times. That guy has mentored me. And just a great human.

James:

Love Naveen by the way, he's been on my podcast as well.

Dave:

Oh, okay. Good deal. So your listeners and my listeners all know Naveen. But same thing, he's like, you have to go to a new industry if you want to do something different. Because if you grew up in that industry, you'll just do the same as everyone else. So there's a great argument for kind of the thesis behind your book. But I want to know, why did you call it Skip the Line?

James:

Okay, it's interesting because I've changed interests and passions many times in my life. And sometimes, I'm even sort of self-critical. Like oh, maybe I'm just a dilettante. When you try to be the master of many, you end up being mediocre at all, and master of none. But every single time I've ever changed careers, and I'm not saying, oh, I went from being a physicist to an astrophysicist. I went from being a computer programmer, to pitching TV shows, to being a venture capitalist and a hedge fund manager, professional writer, standup comedian, chess player, professional poker player. I've done a lot of different things. And I tend to get obsessed when I change interests, so I have to be good. And I always struggle with this, and maybe you experience this. For instance, when I first wanted to get involved in investing and potentially be a hedge fund manager, I remember someone telling me, "You can't do this. You've got to work at a bank, you've got to get an MBA then maybe you work at a hedge fund. Then maybe when people know you they, 10 years later you can start your own hedge fund and then build up. You can't just start a hedge fund. Nobody can do that. You've got to pay your dues. You can't skip the line."

And the phrase, "You can't do that and you can't skip the line," have been told to me every single time I've ever changed interests. Like I wanted to try being a standup comedian, and other comedians who had been doing it 15 or 20 years said, "Look, you've got to pay your dues man. You can't

just skip the line. You've got to do open mics and you've got to do this." And I'm like, I've been public speaking for 20 years. I have an audience. Why can't I do it? And I'd get, "You can't do it." And they'd get angry. "You can't do it. You can't skip the line. You've got to pay your dues." Those things have been said to me every single time. So it starts off that this is basically a message back, that after all is said and done I have in many cases skipped the line. Now it takes hard work still, and it takes some courage and it takes ignoring the people who say can't.

And Dave, you discussed this in your book as well. Dealing with the can'ts of like, "Well I can't eat like this, or this will be too much willpower for me," or whatever. People don't understand that when other people tell you can't, they are the ones who can't do it. And they're just afraid of you changing and leaving them behind when they can't do something.

Dave:

I love that so much. In fact, I miss hanging out. I want to come once travel is a little bit more doable. We're going to have to hang out again, because man, you just nailed so many things in there. I remember one of my favorite articles, so I came up with a new process for coffee, about mold, toxins in coffee and all. And it was on Coffee Hacker or Coffee Snob, one of the big coffee websites. And this guy's like, "Look, I did my research on Dave Asprey, and I have been a roaster for 20 years. And this guy comes from the tech world. And he can't have done what he says he's done, because we've been thinking about this for a long..." and I'm like you douche bag. I flew to Guatemala and we put in different infrastructure, and I have the president of Specialty Coffee Association on camera with me doing it, and you're telling me that I didn't do it? And it's that can't. But it's the same cognitive dissonance, yes, that got people pissed off in your article about, "Hey guys, we have a problem in New York because small businesses are crashing everywhere, and they're the foundation of the city's uniqueness," right?

So that cognitive dissonance, when you say you can and they believe they can't, I think it creates fear. And then when people get fear, they stop thinking and they start just sort of insulting. Which is what you felt, and certainly we both have dealt with that from changing industries. What's the hack for that? Do we just ignore the people who say can't? Should we make fun of them? What's your best advice for people who are doing things that they can't do, that they're doing?

James:

Well first off, all of the above about people who say can't. And not that you should waste precious time thinking about all these people who are kind of rooting against you. They might not feel like they're rooting against you. They might kind of pretend that they're rooting for you. But the reality is, they're rooting against you, because they don't want you to change or literally skip the line. But the issue is, let's say you're passionately interested... let's say you've been, I don't know, a dental assistant for the past 35 years, and now you figure... or let's say you just graduated college and you're tired of your major, and you don't know what you want to do with your life. Well the answer is, if you start exploring the space of the things that you love doing, there's always a way to A, get better at it so that you're in the top 1% of your field. And in order to do that, you also have to monetize what you're interested in. So there's always a way to monetize, no matter what you're interested in. And people don't really believe that, but it's true, and I've seen it in every single industry. I'm sure you have as well.

And so this book Skip the Line is about not only how to get better quickly, and I give many techniques for that. But it's also how to understand your field enough that you could skip the line as well from a practical level. How you can monetize what it is you're interested in. If you're interested in making TikTok videos, great. Now there's also a different skillset involved in learning how to monetize something and then scaling it into a full business and so on. Like if I had a new cup of coffee I was

making, I maybe could make that new cup of coffee, and maybe it's the best cup of coffee in the world. But I also need the skills involved to persuade people that this is a good idea, and I need to understand the basics of monetizing something and scaling something so that it can be a much bigger business, like for instance you have with Bulletproof. So it's those two angles basically. Getting great at something you love, which is always a pleasure. And mastery, a feeling of mastery is among the cornerstones of positive psychology. And of course, if you want to devote that kind of time into something, you have to make money from it. And these are the two things I try to show in the book.

Dave:

It makes a lot of sense, but I think you missed a major theme in the book when you just summarized it there. And you talk about the value of being curious. Steven Kotler just came on the show. He wrote *The Art of Impossible* recently, where he's going into some neuroscience here. And it turns out being curious puts you in a flow state, which magically makes it easier to acquire new skills faster than you're supposed to be able to.

James:

So I write a bit about the neurochemistry of mastery in the book, and I've also spoken with Steven Kotler about the flow state, and Andrew Huberman about neurochemicals, and a bunch of other people as well. The whole point of doing a podcast was so that I could learn about these things, and then incorporate them to make my own life better. And I've talked to a bunch of interesting people about peak performance, including a young man named Dave Asprey. And the reality is, he's right. The flow state is important. But there are a lot of components to the flow state. And one thing is, you don't have to love what you're doing to be good at it, but it really helps to love what you're doing. And this is related actually to something you and I have discussed, about eating and dieting, particularly in regard to your last book about fasting, which is that human life activity requires energy. And how you eat kind of changes your energy levels, and how you sleep changes your energy levels.

But also if you don't love what you're doing, every day it's going to require more energy to do the activities you have to do. Because the first piece of energy you have to spend as you have to convince yourself, "Oh my God, I have to do this again?" And you have to kind of talk yourself into doing something you don't want to do. Whereas if you love what you're doing, which is why it's important to love what you do, you require much less energy to get started, and to do it, and to explore the nuances of it, and to truly reach mastery in it. And this is very important. Energy is everything in terms of success. The person who has energy, competing against the person who doesn't, is going to win. So that's why it's good to love what you do.

Dave:

Man, I love that. And there's kind of a debate. Gary V's been on Bulletproof Radio, and he's kind of the king of, if you don't like it, shut up and do it anyway, because you're going to eat ramen for two years and eat caviar for 20. And sort of lean in, don't follow your passion and make some money already and then follow your passion. But really kind of the opposite of what you're saying. But then Dan Sullivan, who's a master, runs Strategic Coach, who's done coaching for me. And he's like, "Set everything you do in three buckets. Stuff that takes energy, stuff that is neutral, and stuff that gives you energy. Don't do anything that takes energy, do the minimum amount of stuff that's neutral, and do everything that gives you energy. Everything else, hire people." So I like Dan's approach, and I'm allergic to Gary V's approach. But it seems like Gary V's getting some results, so are you sure that you have to only follow what you love?

James:

Well, let me explain it a different way. When you want to pursue something that you love, chances are that you aren't pursuing tic-tac-toe. Nobody says, "Boy, I want to be the best tic-tac-toe player in the world," because it takes five minutes to figure out how to be the best tic-tac-toe player in the world. Anything worth doing is difficult. So if you want to be a professional race car driver, you're not just going to get in a car and hit the accelerator. You have to learn all the skills, and then you have to do the things I say in the book about experimenting and some of the other techniques I describe. And by the way, it's going to suck most of the time. When you're just starting a business for the first time, it's going to suck most of the time. If you want to be a professional tennis player and you're rising up through the ranks, chances are you're losing more games than you're winning, because you keep rising through levels of resistance. You play stronger and stronger players, and you probably are losing a lot. And that's a miserable experience, particularly because you love it.

If you want to be a musician, most of the time when you're beginning, you can't play the music you want to play. You have to learn it. And so most things that are worth doing that you love are going to suck most of the time. So you have to love something enough to break through the suck barrier. And I see what Gary's saying, and by the way, Gary loves business. So he might not know what it's like to not. He's been doing things he loves since he graduated college. He was selling wine, he loves wine. He does business, he loves marketing. You could tell, he's a kid in a sandbox doing this stuff. Whereas I've had jobs I haven't liked, and I get depressed. It takes too much energy. I start performing poorly at it, I go broke, which is something I've done quite a bit.

And the flip side is, the past 10 years for instance, I mostly have focused on writing, podcasting, and then doing standup comedy. And I do business activities, but these things are not the sort of things where, oh, I'm going to make \$100 million performing at a comedy club at night. No, it's something I love and I'm passionate about. And life is over at some point, and if all you did was, "Well, I started a hedge fund. I was miserable for 25 years, but now I garden every day as an 80 year old." That's not the life I wanted to live.

And then I started hearing, particularly during this economic lockdown, half of workers or 40% of workers filed for unemployment insurance. People were being thrust onto the street and scared. But then I would ask, "Well what do you love doing?" "Well, I've been an accountant for 57 years, but I really love cooking barbecue pork." So I said, "Why not rent space in a commercial kitchen and make your 10 favorite recipes, upload a menu to Uber Eats and Grubhub and now you have a restaurant? Give it a try for a weekend." It's an experiment. There is no downside to that experiment, and the upside is enormous. Because if you get a lot of orders that weekend, maybe that'll encourage you to do it the next weekend or throughout the week, or add to the menu, or even start another restaurant. Because a restaurant now is just a menu, it's not a physical location.

And so there's always ways to experiment, and potentially get good, and validate an idea, and express your own vision of this industry that you love. Maybe you want to make sushi with barbecue pork in it, so you're combining... you're doing fusion of Asian food and Tex Mex or something, who knows. But it's an experiment.

Dave:

You're going to piss off all of Japan and all of Texas with what you just said. I can't imagine the hate tweets you're going to get, man.

James:

I keep telling people, do sushiritos, which is like a sushi burrito somehow.

Dave:

They're pretty cool.

James:

Yeah. And I discussed this, I have a chapter in the book called Idea Calculus, which is ways to take an idea in an area that, again, that you're very interested in, and sort of massage it in various ways to make it even a better idea, or to make it uniquely you. And that's always key. I love using comedy as an example, because it's an extremely difficult skill. There's no skill such as standup comedy. People say, "Oh, what if you have a good sense of humor?" That's one micro-skill of comedy. Another is, are you a good performer? Are you good with a crowd? Are you good improvising? Are you good with stage work? Are you good with doing voices? Are you good with writing? And just like business, there's no one skill to business. There's sales, marketing, negotiating, ideation, coming up with ideas. There's execution. All these things. There management, leadership. All these things are completely different skills. If you're good at marketing, you're not necessarily a good manager of people. But it doesn't mean you shouldn't be in business. It just means every skill can be broken into micro-skills, and you should focus on the micro-skills you love most of all.

And so this is part of skipping the line, which is like you just said, maybe outsource what you don't necessarily love. But experiment with the things you love, that you could really move the needle on. And at least start off that way, and that's a good way to skip the line and make a presence in whatever industry you're in. So you had skills as a writer, because you were able to explain what Bulletproof Coffee was. You had skills defending your position, you had skills ignoring people who said, "Hey, you're not a food guy. You're not a coffee guy. You can't do this." So you were able to go to Guatemala and figure this out, and figure out what experiments to perform to prove to yourself that this works. And you catapulted, you're like one of the top coffee companies in the world outside of Starbucks. So you skipped the line.

Dave:

Well there's a few other bigger ones, all owned by a couple big conglomerates. But at least it's a known brand, I'll give you that. I'm still working on out Starbucks-ing Howard.

James:

You'll do it.

Dave:

This is totally funny and it's completely irrelevant to this interview, but I have to tell you because you're going to laugh. Years ago, I had hired someone as a consultant who was the first employee of Starbucks. Because I was like, "Hey, I don't know this industry. I need someone who's got decades of experience." And this person ended up parking next to Howard outside his \$10 million coffee shop in Seattle. And he hadn't seen her in a while, and he's like, "Hey, what's going on? What are you doing?" And she's like, "I'm at this company called Bulletproof, and they're putting butter in coffee." Quote from Howard Schultz, he says, "I hope they paid you upfront." So there you go. You just reminded me of that, I haven't thought of that in years.

James:

So yes, so A, this is the biggest guy in the business just trying to squash you before you even begin. That's like a gut instinct for him is, "Oh, this person is even thinking of making coffee? He must be squashed." That's like a gut reflex for him. But you did something else there that's very important, and I write about this in the book. It's called the plus/minus>equals technique. So you hired somebody who was the first employee of Starbucks. Who better for you to learn from? You don't have to take 100% of his advice, but who better for you to learn from than someone who's been through it and kind of is at the top of the ladder? Okay, so that's the plus side.

Then there's the equals side. So the equals are other entrepreneurs who are at your level, and you compare notes. Like okay, what are you doing for social media? What are you doing to track your email lists? What are you doing to process transactions or to get new customers? So your equals are people who are rising up with you and sharing some of the same experiences. And if you surround yourself with good people, your equals are all hitting the edge of industries just like you're trying to do. And then there's the minus, which is not negative, but it's just like, okay, well who am I going to teach? Because if I can't explain what I'm doing, then I don't truly understand it. So just as much time as you get coaching from the plus, you also have to spend you doing the coaching with the minus, or you did it through your books, like you wrote The Bulletproof Diet, which was a great way to explain what it is you do. And that's what really got a huge wave into the business.

So I'll give you a quick example. When I was a young kid, I was a chess Master. And of course, life then gets in the way, and other things. And you have kids, you have mortgages, you have responsibilities. And so if you don't practice a game like that, like chess or tennis or poker, you start to lose your ability. It'll atrophy. And so I decided fairly recently I want to get just as good as I once was, if not better. Maybe even a lot better. And I figure this is a great opportunity to apply the techniques in my book. So in terms of breaking up the micro-skills, the plus/minus/equal part, the 10,000 experiment rule, these are all things I didn't know when I was 18 and rising up through the chess world, but now I know them. So I quickly hired a very good instructor. I also started giving lessons, again, for the first time in 30 years. And I broke apart the micro-skills and made sure I spent time at the micro-skills that I thought were most important, and now probably after about a month or so, I'm back to maybe my all-time high strength. And now, maybe I'll get stronger than that. But we'll see. But so far, this experiment is going pretty well.

Dave:

It's amazing, all the little nuggets that are in the book about just not putting your head down and doing what you're told to do all the time. Because it seems like that's what a lot of people do, but oftentimes I wonder, are they as curious as me? People say to me a lot, "Dave, you're weirdly curious, or you're like a child." And you have that too. You're just incessantly curious about things. Is that a character trait that you have that's driving a lot of this, or is that something that people can build?

James:

I think a little bit of both. I think you're right, people don't get better if they don't have curiosity. Another question is, how do you find something that you love enough to be curious about? If I had to work in, I don't know, marine biology, there's nothing wrong with studying animals that live in the sea. But I'm not interested in that at all, so I would not be curious about anything. If that was my job, I would not be curious about anything, and the person who was would quickly skip past me even if we started at the same level.

But when you love something, you figure, well, what if I try this? What if I try this? What if I market like this? What if I give a talk at a tech conference about a coffee company? What will the

reaction be? Or what if I decide to put MCT oil in the coffee, what will happen? What will my blood look like a month later? So you feel eager to learn things. And yes, curiosity is critical, because without curiosity, you won't be able to construct good experiments. An experiment is something that has little downside, enormous upside, and is pretty fast to do. And I'm doing experiences all the time in every area that I'm interested in.

And again, I'll use comedy as an example where I had two problems in the very beginning. One is, every comedian in the world when they first start gets occasionally heckled. So I needed to learn how to deal with that. And then also, comedians need to learn how to have a good punchline that will get people to viscerally laugh, people who are strangers to them. So here's what I did. I did a small experience. Instead of waiting for the next appearance on a stage, I went onto a subway. And every subway stop, I went from subway car to subway car and would do standup in front of a, by definition, hostile audience in New York City. And I only had a few seconds to make them laugh, so I had to be really tight on the punchlines I was doing. And so this was an experiment for me.

Dave:

Wow, that takes balls.

James:

I went on there with a friend of mine who had a video camera, and I said, "Okay, I can't do this. I'm too scared." And then I said, "Why don't you just turn on the video camera?" And then as soon as he turned on the video camera, I started going at it. And the experiment didn't necessarily work. It wasn't like, "Oh my gosh, this is the greatest thing ever. I'm making all these people laugh." It was as I expected it would be. But I got through the experience, I learned, and that's the key is that you... sometimes it's better to fail at an experiment, because you learn what not to do. And you have a story. No one wants to hear a successful story about, "Hey, I was on the subway doing comedy, and then they gave me a Netflix special." People like to hear, and it's a great story to tell, "Everybody laughed at me, not with me, and then I made a little video of it and tried to make it like a late night talk show, and I showed it to an agent and he laughed at it. Meaning at it, not with it." And so on.

So experiments are always good stories. And I experiment all the time with writing, with podcasting, with business. And again, the key is if you have little downside and enormous upside, you keep doing these experiments because eventually you'll, not only will you learn from each one, but eventually you'll hit the huge upside part of experimenting, and those are always pleasurable.

Dave:

In the book, you talk about failure porn, and you say that it's not good for people to indulge in it. What is failure porn, and how is what you just said not failure porn?

James:

Yeah, so failure porn is when you see all these books or blog posts like, "Oh, 10 years ago I had just failed at my first business, and I was also a drug addict and getting a divorce." And then blah, blah, blah. "And now, because of that experience, I'm able to be a success." And I don't really think that's true. I think failure is miserable, and it's just the worst feeling in the world. I hate it. I never want to fail at anything ever again. I do not think there's an upside to failing, particularly in a big way, unless it's part of this experiment mindset where there is no word for failure in an experiment. In a well-structured experiment, you would never see a scientist saying, "Well, I guess I'm a bad physicist. I failed at this

experience." No, it just didn't work, so they learned something. So maybe stars weren't formed by hydrogen and helium. Maybe they were formed by lithium according to this experiment.

So it's not bad to be wrong, it's not bad to fail. Someone asked Thomas Edison, "How does it feel to fail 10,000 times," because he tried 10,000 different wires before he made a light bulb. And he said, "I didn't fail 10,000 times. I just learned 10,000 ways how not to make a light bulb." And there really is no failure in the realm of experimentation. And I call it failure porn, because I see too many people think that a criteria now for writing their success story is to write their failure story first, and it's just not true. Don't be proud of failure just because that was on the way to success. A lot of people fail and then don't succeed.

Dave:

You know, it's funny. There's a proven recipe. It's called the hero's journey, right? And they actually teach this in influence courses and marketing courses. And you'll see, it's almost like they're filling out a form. Some people are like, "I'm going to be an influencer," and then they have their, "I failed. I looked out over the chasm, I closed my eyes. I leaped, and that's..." something happened. And I mean hey, mine's I worked out a lot, I was super fat, everything was screwed up in my health, and I had to take some action. This is what happened. But it feels like it lets you connect with people though, and for about two years I'm like, I have told this story so many times that I never want to say it again. I feel like, doesn't everyone already know?

So I did, for a couple years, I did a bunch of talks. I used to give three or 400 talks a year before COVID, where I'd be traveling around, just sharing stuff that I think matters. And when I didn't tell the story in the first 10 minutes, that experiment failed. People would just not connect, it wasn't believable. But you put in the, we'll call it the failure porn elements where, you know, it actually did kind of suck to weigh 300 pounds, and this is what it was like. And it lets people connect. So why is that a bad thing?

James:

Right. That's not a bad thing. So like you said, there's a structure to every story, the arc of the hero. And when I write about business I say, first, the hero is reluctant. That's the first part of the arc of the hero, is that the hero is very reluctant, and then there's some call to action. So when you were 300 pounds, you were reluctant to change the diet until you had some call to action. Maybe a health scare, or a business scare, or you saw how people treated you. There was maybe a significant call to action, that's what began your journey.

But that's just one part of the story. I think a lot of people sort of think failure is the glamorous part of the story, and how they survived something. So that's what makes it porn, is that it turns this... People say, "Oh, I read porn for the stories." It's usually a pretty bad story when it focuses just on that, and it's usually a pretty bad story when it focuses just on failure. You have to have, "Okay, here's who I met along the way. Here's what I tried along the way." And you have bigger and bigger problems until you finally achieve some success, and you come back to tell the story.

So the hard times, you're right. It makes you appear vulnerable, and it's just part of the story. It's not part of the story to glamorize. And also, a lot of times people say... they accentuate it, because they think it makes their story exciting. But you could just tell it, and it's the first part of the story and that's it. It's not the end of the story.

Dave:

I know a guy you should have on your show. He was on recently, Scott Barry Kaufman from I want to say Columbia.

James:

Yeah, yeah. I know Scott.

Dave:

Psychologist or psychiatrist. You know Scott? Well he talks about-

James:

Oh yeah, Scott's been on my podcast.

Dave:

He has, of course. There you go. So we like to learn from similar people. But his idea of suffering narcissism is what I'm hearing you talk about, where we all know about grandiose narcissism. "I'm so good, therefore I deserve." And suffering narcissism is, "I have suffered, therefore I deserve." But the reality is, "I have suffered and I did something about it, and therefore I deserve."

James:

Right, and I fell victim to both.

Dave:

That little nuance is the difference between failure porn and a good story.

James:

Right. And I have fallen... I remember one time I went broke, and I literally was saying to myself out loud. I was so upset and I was like, "How could this be happening to me again? I think I'm a smart guy. How could I be dead broke again?" But yes, what gave me let's say a bounce back from that, or some success after that, was not that I had experienced failure. It was that I really studied and examined what was happening in my life, and experimented with different things I can do to see what makes me happier, what makes people call me back, what makes me move the needle in terms of success in an industry that I've just changed to. So I didn't learn that from failure, I learned that I had to... The only thing you learn from failure really is that you've got to do something different, but you don't know what it is yet because you haven't done it. So you have to experiment to learn these things, and that really becomes the stories. So for instance, there was one time I did an experiment which I believe we've talked about before, where I threw out all of my belongings and, everything. 100% of everything, and I just lived for several years in Airbnbs. I would live from Airbnb to Airbnb.

Dave:

Yeah we talked, I think that was our first interview. Right. It was fascinating.

James:

Yeah. And it was an interesting, for me it was an interesting experiment, because I don't like to own a place and I don't even like to... in New York City, it's very hard to rent a place. It's like a full-time job to try and rent a place. You need so much paperwork. You need high school teacher recommendations and your SAT scores practically. It's very difficult to rent [inaudible 00:45:38]. And I figured I was going through something in my life, I didn't want to deal with all that. So I figured, why don't I just live in Airbnbs? And I didn't want to put things in storage. I couldn't even deal with that. So I just said to a

friend of mine, "Take all my stuff. Do whatever you want with it. I never want to see it again, I'm never going back to that apartment. The lease is ending." And then I just started living in Airbnb. That was an experiment I did for several years, and then finished it.

Dave:

So are you renting, or did you buy?

James:

I'm renting right now, so I'm renting in... I'm experimenting with living in Key Biscayne, Florida, instead of my usual New York City. And just experimenting. And people say, "Well, if you had kids what would you do?" I have five kids between me and my wife. And the kids are a little bit older, but even when my kids were younger and I was doing this Airbnb-ing, they lived with their mom, but when they stayed with me they would kind of research the area I was living in. And if there was a lot of good stores or restaurants, they would come and stay with me longer. And so I always had to think about where would they shop, where would they eat, that sort of thing.

Dave:

And you're in Key Biscayne, which is-

James:

And it was cheaper in some ways.

Dave:

Key Biscayne is pretty much 90% New Yorkers anyway though, right? Isn't it?

James:

No, it's like 60% South American. But a lot of New Yorkers.

Dave:

Oh is it really? Okay, cool. Because some parts of Florida are heavily New York and some aren't, but my Florida geography is kind of limited to Ft. Lauderdale, because I used to work out there. Now-

James:

Yeah, no. And by the way, socializing is very hard for me. That's part of my experimenting as I fit into a different culture here.

Dave:

Okay, so you're pushing your boundaries with experiments all the time, which is... it's amusing, at least for me it is. Just always thinking, "I wonder what will happen if," and I'll try that. Okay, getting back to your book, there's a lot of wisdom in here. And maybe my favorite part of it was chapter 11, which you call Frame Control.

James:

Yes.

Dave:

What is frame control?

James:

So most of the time... so basically, it's an idea of persuasion, that in a high stakes situation, let's say you're negotiating for your salary with a boss, let's say you're doing standup comedy so it's you and a crowd of strangers. Let's say you're having a problem in a relationship. In some high stakes situations, it's not like you're trying to manipulate anyone or even persuade someone. But in those situations, at any given point, one person has the frame and the other person doesn't. So, and that decides who is basically in control of that situation. And most of the time, that doesn't mean anything. Because you and I, we don't have bad intentions towards each other, so we're allowed to share the frame.

But let's say you're asking your boss for a raise. Your boss probably has the frame in the beginning, and it's your job to sort of get the frame so he feels almost obligated to give you the raise or something. So that chapter is about all the different ways to kind of take control of the frame. When you're doing comedy for instance or any kind of public speaking, sometimes you can feel the audience start to drift. They're losing interest, you're starting to lose the frame. And the audience is an X-ray machine. They can see that the speaker or the comedian is losing the frame, so they start talking louder because now the audience as a single body is in control of the frame, and then it's all over for the speaker or the comedian or the teacher or whatever. So being aware of these techniques in frame control is very helpful in a lot of areas of life. And there's all sorts of techniques I give in that chapter about when to realize that you're not in the frame, that you don't have the frame, or if you're not in the frame how to get it back.

Like if you're asking your boss for a raise, one simple technique is what I call the advice technique. So let's say, Dave, you're my boss and I want a \$1,000 raise. I'll go in there and I'll say, "Listen. I've been working really hard." I'm a programmer working for you, let's say. "And I've been working double the hours because of these layoffs. But you're the master of negotiating. Give me advice. Pretend you're not my boss, pretend you're a friend. Just give me advice. I want to ask for a raise. How much should I ask for, and how should I ask you for it? I'm legitimately asking you for advice." So that's what I would say to a boss, and I've used this technique 25 years ago with a boss.

And they, now you're giving them status so they feel a little flustered. "Oh, I've got all this status all of a sudden." And so they have a cognitive bias now, to give you good advice. And then later, they'll have a cognitive bias to not reject their own advice. So their odds are stacked against them on rejecting you for the raise. So that's like a frame control technique.

Another one is to point out what someone is doing. Let's say I don't like to vote okay, and I didn't vote in this last election. And let's say I told people I wasn't going to vote. Someone might say, "Well, this election's the most important election ever. And if you're not voting, that's a vote for racism and fascism." And then you could say, "Listen, are we talking about racism or are we talking about how one vote out of 150 million is going to change the election? What are we actually talking about here?" And so kind of just labeling that they're trying to move to a false equivalence is an important frame control technique. I'm not going to argue about voting, that was just an example. But those types of-

Dave:

We talked about that the first time I was on your show, we talked about voting. Yeah. Totally, that's right. You're an anti-voter, right?

James:

Yeah, but I'm not anti... so here's an experiment I did. So I wrote about not voting, and everybody debated me. And they said, "Well, you don't have the right to a voice if you don't vote," which is not true. Voting is a-

Dave:

No, that is a false statement.

James:

Right. Voting is a constitutional right, but it's certainly... taxes are an obligation, it's not a right. But voting is a right, not an obligation. And so the question is, why is everyone saying I don't have a voice? So on November 4th, the day after the election, I went to fec.gov, which is the website for the federal elections commission, and I filled out all the paperwork. And so now I'm officially a candidate for president in 2024. Because, okay, I didn't vote. But now I'm officially running... according to the US government, I'm officially running for president, and maybe now I'm allowed to have a voice to all the people who said I didn't have one.

Dave:

That's so subversive and hilarious. All right. I love your sense of humor.

James:

By the way, everybody should run for president, and state your views and your platform.

Dave:

That is truly awesome.

James:

Yeah. And there's always things to do to experiment, and to push, and to move the needle. Like if business, I had an idea during this lockdown. What if... we're always wearing pajamas now because we're never going in to work. Well, pajamas almost by definition are the most comfortable clothes you can wear. You wear them to sleep. So what if I designed a line of clothes that was outerwear for pajamas, or pajamas for outerwear? So you could wear them outside, but they have unique designs, but they're made of the same materials as pajamas. So for two or three months, I wore nothing but pajamas. I wore them on planes, I wore them going to a restaurant or going to travel to somebody's house or whatever. And it was an experiment. I didn't make a clothing line, but that's what experiments are. Most experiments don't work out, they're just there for you to learn something that you're interested in. And there was no downside of me doing this, other than looking a little silly sometimes, which is usually the case even when I'm not experimenting.

Dave:

I love that, just sense of relentless curiosity. It's a hallmark of creating cool stuff. Some of the time anyway. I don't think outerwear pajamas would've been on that list.

James:

Well, it was even more than that. I was thinking of... I was wearing copper infused pajamas, so I found fabric that was made out of copper, because copper is-

Dave:

It's antimicrobial.

James:

It's antibacterial, yeah. So I figured maybe this'll be a healthy thing.

Dave:

Okay, that makes some sense. Now, your book is full of knowledge. I mean, it's dense. It's very readable, but it's got a lot of wisdom in it. One of the other things that stood out was chapter 23 towards the end, you say What to Tell Your Kids. And you had a list of things to tell your kids. What are some of the top, like what are your top three things from that list that just stand out? Things that you think are most important for parents to tell their kids?

James:

You know, I think it's important that kids not... and this is not specifically on the list, but don't follow the script. So your parents are going to give you a script of how you should live your life, because they care about you and they think they know best. Your professors are going to give you a script. Your boss is going to give you a script. Your friends and peers and colleagues are going to give you scripts. People you read about, you're going to get scripts from them about how one should live life. And the important thing is, you can live whatever life you want. You don't have to follow these scripts. Many people have been miserable trying to please their parents, teachers, friends, bosses. Particularly when they try all at the same time. I was miserable doing that.

And if you decide you're really just interested in sports and you don't want to be an investment banker anymore, then you can start using the techniques in the book to figure out, well, what does it mean that you're interested in sports and you're 48 years old? You're not going to be an NFL star, but maybe there's something else you can do. And I kind of outline, well, here's how you explore the space, the possibility space of how you're interested in sports. And here's how you could not follow the script and be an accountant all your life, or whatever it is you're sick of doing. So that's the important thing. And there's this idea too of, reach for the stars but keep your feet on the ground. Do what you love, pay the bills. And those two things are important, but nothing else is important.

Dave:

Love that advice. James, your new book is... it's really, it's a fascinating read I've got to say. I get sent books every week, like a stack of them, more than I could read. You probably are in a similar situation.

James:

Yes.

Dave:

And like you, I've done this show, we'll hit a thousand episodes soon. I've done it because it's the best way to learn. I get to talk to incredibly smart, cool people. And some books I skim, some books I read. Yours is definitely a reader. It's called Skip the Line. Guys, you can tell there's a lot of knowledge, a lot of study, and the relentless curiosity that James has drives him to take note of things that you probably don't take note of in your own life. And that means when he takes note of them, eventually if they end

up into a book, it's because it was a filtering process. That's a very long, kind of a lifelong thing. So read Skip the Line.

James:

Thank you Dave.

Dave:

You can pick it up wherever you like to buy books. Amazon, wherever you like to go. Skip the Line, it's pretty easy to remember that. And yeah, this is a book that, it'll make you think for sure. And if you're trying to figure out what you want to do in the world and you're just getting going, this is going to be a strong book for you. And if you're just tired of what you're doing, and you're dealing with all the coronavirus whatevers, there's some wisdom here, and it's from a very unusual life lived in a way that no one else has. And I can say that with assuredness. So read Skip the Line. James, thanks brother for being on the show. I look forward to hanging out whenever all this travel garbage gets sorted out.

James:

Me too, Dave. And thanks so much for having me on the show.

Dave:

If you liked today's episode, here's what to do. Well, here's what to do. Go to Amazon, pick up Skip the Line, and then pick up Fast This Way if you haven't already. And that way, everyone who buys either book will see the other one, because Amazon's algorithms really aren't that smart, at least for that. And leave a review, because if you would tip someone who makes coffee for you, why would you not leave a review for an author? We actually really look at those, because that's our experiment. How did we do? So I appreciate your reviews, and so does James. Have a beautiful day.