

Starting again. Sometimes nothing is the gift



By [Damon Stapleton](#)

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A couple of years ago I was in the middle of Mumbai in a place called Dharavi. It is what the West would call a slum. It is where Slum Dog Millionaire was filmed. It taught me a valuable lesson. It taught me that when you have nothing but you have people you can do anything. Trust me, in Dharavi there is very little wealth, what we call process or technology. But the people move mountains.



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Fast forward a couple of years and I find myself starting again. We began with nothing. We were starting something brand new. The Monkeys Aotearoa. There was a moment where it was just my partner Justin and I staring at each other in an empty room. I think we were both silently screaming the word f*ck. We had both walked away from a truly great agency. A very successful agency that I had put my heart and soul into for seven years. Sometimes there is no reason, except it's time.

Having nothing is very scary. Having no shield is pretty terrifying. After 25 years in the business, I asked myself if I was insane on multiple occasions. But, between these moments of fear there were these glimpses of something. That feeling you get on a rollercoaster mixed with seeing a crack of light you didn't expect to see in a dark room. Freedom, falling, flying, fear and other stuff that doesn't have words.

It's funny when you strip it all away. No business cards or fancy furniture. No polish or protection. I found myself discovering something truly beautiful. I walked into a room with a couple of fellow creatives. We had to come up with some ideas. Strange. When you take away the jargon, the bullshit, the egos, the process, the fear and the layers of stuff you collect over the years in this business that is where you always end up. A couple of people in a room trying to come up with something special. It was like my first day in advertising. No time had passed. I was at the beginning again. The truth is always staring you in the face. The people move mountains.

The Buddhists speak about beginners mind. No expectations or pre-conceived ideas. Dropping your so called wisdom and seeing things as they really are. Maybe that's what those glimpses of something were. Our industry loves labels. It loves to call things fancy words. It loves complexity and analysis. It loves to be right and loves to criticise. What I think it forgets sometimes is where ideas come from. You know in the beginning before all the bullshit.

They come from people.

Starting again has taught me that. You can take away everything except a couple of people in an empty room and you will be alright. Because when you walk out that room, there will be an idea.

It's not the building. It's not the motivational posters on walls. It's not the slick presentations or even slicker trainers. It's not the bean bags. It's not the great coffee or the next brief. When you start again you learn what seems an obvious truth but our business forgets.

It's the people that move mountains.

“ We can know only that we know nothing. And that is the highest degree of human wisdom.” - Leo Tolstoy ”

ABOUT DAMON STAPLETON

Damon is regional chief creative officer for DDB in New Zealand and Australia. Before that, ECD at Saatchi and Saatchi Australia, before that, group ECD of TBWA Hunt Lascaris and global ECD of Standard Bank. He has won over 500 awards internationally, including a D&AD Black Pencil, Cannes Grand Prix, Grand Clios, ADC Black Cube and most effective ad in the world by Warc 100. Damon is now regional chief creative officer for DDB in New Zealand and Australia...

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