

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 257: WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR S CURVE CHANGES UNEXPECTEDLY

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide strategies and advice on how to climb the S Curve of Learning in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. This episode is a bit different. I'm thrilled to talk with a listener of this podcast who reached out after feeling inspired by one of our previous episodes. Matthew Swaney is a career airline pilot but after 35 years in the air, Covid grounded him. He lost his job and as he approaches his 60th birthday, he is having some trouble finding his new S Curve. This unintended disruption is all too common, and I thought it would be valuable to chat with Matthew about his next move. I think you'll enjoy the conversation.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, Matthew, I'm so excited that we're having this conversation and what I'd like to do to start is, have you just tell us a little bit of your story? Tell our audience why you reached out and where you are in your life right now. What S Curve are you on?

**Matt Swaney:** Great, hi Whitney, what a privilege to be here. The reason I was into your podcast, it was over the summer you had a program with, I think it was the second time he's been on a James Altschuler, and he was talking about some very, very interesting things. But the thing that he said at the end of the podcast, he was interviewing people on the streets of New York City and like 3:00 a.m. Right in the morning.

**Whitney Johnson:** Of course. Exactly.

**Matt Swaney:** And there's always interesting people about. So, at the end of the podcast that you had with him, he mentioned that maybe you should do something similar to that. You know, get people that are maybe of unknown origins or unknown entities and have them on your show and maybe you have something interesting. Well, afterwards, after having listened to this, I got on to the comment section and said, hey, I'd sure would like to. I sure would love to skip a line as well. If you're looking for people, here I am.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, so I do remember that that's and that is so fun because he had said, in fact, I remember he was doing an HBO show. He would drive around a taxi at like 3:00 in the morning on Thursday evening and start interviewing people. And he's an idea factory. And I remember we asked him the question So, so James, what suggestions ideas do you have for us? And that's when he said, just have someone call in and interview them and you signed up. So, you skip the line in terms of saying, I want to be interviewed, I want to have a conversation. What's happening in your life right now that precipitated you wanting to have the conversation?

**Matt Swaney:** Well, COVID 19 ever heard of that?

**Whitney Johnson:** Yes, I have.

**Matt Swaney:** I'm an airline pilot, have been for thirty-five years, working for Qatar Airways in Doha, Qatar. I was a captain on the Boeing 787, and due to the epidemic, the company took measures to go ahead and make people redundant. So, unfortunately, my number was called, and it sent the life into quite a tailspin because we were living out of country, it sold our house and everything that we had all of our belongings. So, it was about coming back and getting another foothold back in society. So, it was quite the dramatic event and everything that is entailed with trying to get one's life in order again and find some back to normalcy.

**Whitney Johnson:** How did you end up being a pilot? I mean, I thought you were going to say like American Airlines or Delta. I was not expecting Qatar Airways. So, tell us how you ended up being a pilot for them in the first place.

**Matt Swaney:** I was a flight instructor for quite a few years. From there, it's a tier industry. You have to work your way up, OK? And it's a long haul. Twenty years later, I'm a dual citizen. I'm a Swiss citizen as well, and I was able to work for a company called Cross Air. And that ended up evolving into another job with a low-cost carrier whose name I will not mention the biggest one here in Europe, where I was flying this 737 for 13 years as a captain. And from there, I didn't want to terminate my employment at that carrier, so I thought bigger is better and there's a lot of expansion going on in the Middle East. There's not just Qatar Airways, there's also Emirates and Etihad, which are very big Middle Eastern carriers. So, I got the job with them in 2016 and was working there right up until the pandemic.

**Whitney Johnson:** You said you have dual citizenship, so Swiss citizenship and...

**Matt Swaney:** American.

**Whitney Johnson:** Ok, all right. Yeah. You sounded American but just double-checking.

**Matt Swaney:** Yeah. Born in Morristown, New Jersey. Really, the reason we're back here and not in the states, which would have been a better opportunity, but with COVID, it was limiting to whatever you're declared citizenship was. You could only declare one with the company. And then in view of the epidemic, they could only give you a ticket back to your declared country. So, there wasn't an opportunity to go back to the states. So here we are.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, you're in Switzerland? What you said is you didn't end up being coming a pilot through the military, you just went, and you trained over time and just worked your way up.

**Matt Swaney:** Correct. That's generally speaking the way it's done among the civilian, you get private pilot's license, instrument rating, commercial, commercial instrument multi, and then you have to build time. You have to get experience for somebody to say, OK, he's got enough experience. Let's give him a shot at being a copilot.

**Whitney Johnson:** Before we talk about this new, unexpected S Curve, what do you love about flying?

**Matt Swaney:** Oh, feeling of freedom, the feeling of exhilaration of I mean. Just going to work every day is never a bother, it's always a challenge, it's you have your office, I mean, who has an office like that when you're cruising at a thousand plus feet? There was, of course, an infatuation when I was younger of wanting to be a military fighter pilot and whatnot. That didn't actually pan out the way I had planned in as much as going to the military schools in the states at the time. You know, you had to have really, really good grades. You had to have a Senate appointment, a senator's appointment, all the rest of it. So. But you know, I thought that dream was lost to me, and later on, I was able to find it again.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, you had a dream of something you wanted to do, and there wasn't an easy path to make it happen. And yet you still figured out. You bootstrapped and you were resourceful, and you made it happen and figured out a way to where you wanted to be.

**Matt Swaney:** It was a bit of that and a bit of serendipity because once I found out that the possibility was there to, you know, in view of the fact that there was financial aid available, and you could do it through university because I was doing my university degree at the same time. Then it just all became clear. And then, yeah, then I went for it. There were no holds barred. It was very, very tenacious about getting it all done.

**Whitney Johnson:** Just out of curiosity. When was the last time you've flown? Have you flown since the pandemic?

**Matt Swaney:** Yeah, it's a hurtful thing to say because the industry is not very forgiving. When you're looking for work, they require that you know, your last flight, be done in the last three months and it's like, hello, hang on a minute, guys. Did you forget that we're in a pandemic, you know, and there are thousands of us that are grounded? It's almost been two years. March of 2020 was my last flight.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, one of the things I would like to invite you to do and then we'll talk about potential options for what you're going to do next is you love to fly. It's part of your identity. It's part of who you are. And one of the things I would encourage you to do is just go out and rent a private plane and get up in the air. Because I suspect that when that's so much a part of who you are, apart from the workpiece, there is this sense of loss. And I think by reconnecting with that with who you are and this love that you have, which it sounds like truly is a love to get up and not the simulator, but to be in the air. And I would encourage you to do that so that you can make sure you're staying connected to this really important piece of yourself. So that would be one suggestion. So, let's now talk about this brand-new S Curve. And so here you are figuring out what are you going to do for the next 20 years of your life? And so, I think that one thing that would be really helpful, first of all, is just to say out loud, OK, what is the experience of being on the launch point of the curve? Because I think sometimes, we pretend like we're not there. And so, let's just talk about that out loud for a second and then we can talk about exploring S Curves that you want to be on and just some things that can either help you jump to a different curve entirely or to move along. The one that you're currently exploring. So, but what's the experience like that that when you first found yourself here?

**Matt Swaney:** Panic, discouragement really, really had to fight hard with entitlement. Still do. Entitlement is a big, big issue? I mean, here I am at the end of my career. I don't deserve this. This isn't supposed to be happening to me. Then the old adage of you can't teach an old dog new tricks. There's a lot of this shadow talk that's going on, you know, it's been over a year now, so I really have to kick start the idea that it's time to get going and time to face the music and just double down and find something else that is going to, at least for the moment, put bread on the table. I have resources, but there's they're quickly dwindling.

**Whitney Johnson:** Thank you, Matthew, for sharing that because I think that one of the big challenges for anyone who's at the launch point of a new curve and there are a lot of people who are right now from a work perspective, is thinking they're alone. And so, I really appreciate your willingness to say this is really hard and it's been scary, and I've had moments of feeling like this isn't fair and just that range of emotions. So. So thank you for sharing that.

**Matt Swaney:** Yeah. Well, you know, it's not just that Whitney, it's all the discouragement. And really, am I adequately qualified to do something else, you know? You know, our industry is pretty unique, and we're seen as sort of a unique, niche sort of profession. So, a lot of people aren't able to associate, well, you know, maybe a pilot in as much as the role of a captain, for example, might just be able to be something that would work in parallel to some other sort of managerial jobs. But people don't make those associations. So, it's very disconcerting when you think about the fact that, well, hey, I could probably do that job. You apply for it, and they see your, oh, he's an airline pilot, you know? Oh, no way, he's overqualified. Or maybe. He doesn't have any idea of what, what, what our industry is all about.

**Whitney Johnson:** Thank you for sharing this and thank you for allowing me to bear witness to this loss that you've experienced. And it is a loss. I think when we, our livelihood changes and we jump or are pushed to a new S Curve. Let's talk now about what are some of the things that you're exploring and do some brainstorming about, around that? So, what are you looking at?

**Matt Swaney:** I got involved with some coaching as well during this time, and one of the things that are working on we're trying to readjust paradigms and have a bit of a paradigm shift in the way, you know, thinking and a lot of misconceptions of the way I see myself respect to maybe a potential job market. But we did a lot of exploring and we're definitely trying to try and find what were my distinctive strengths. So, where my interests lie right now, and especially with inspiration from you and all the fantastic people that you've had on your podcast, especially the theme of disruption, what you do and you're talking about, we either are in the creative or we are in the place where nobody else is playing, and that's where we need to go. And I found that place, but so of several other million people. But it doesn't matter because. Infinity and beyond is how much room there is, and what I'm talking about is the crypto space. Anything that's metaverse, anything that's Web3, your cryptocurrencies, and there's just so much potential there. It's all the rage. We're at the beginning of where the internet was back in the early nineties, late eighties, early nineties, just after the World Wide Web was kicked off. And where we're going now in that same space is going to be phenomenal. Right at the moment, it's a wild, wild west show and there's just so much room for growth and potential there. But I don't really know the first thing about it. I mean, I've just scratched the surface on it, and it's the learning curve is humongous, absolutely humongous. So, I'm over-indexing as much as I possibly can. That's the space, really that has the most potential for me to find something in.

**Whitney Johnson:** Ok, so you're not going to go get a job, you're going to figure you're going to create a job.

**Matt Swaney:** Looking at both possibilities, I have a couple of irons in the fire, obviously through my job, my profession as a pilot, obviously, to keep that alive because I don't know where I'm going with this other thing. But I'll be taking a couple of online courses to determine how I'm going to get involved in this space.

**Whitney Johnson:** So that's one avenue that you're exploring. And as you said, you can play where no one else is playing. I mean, there are other people, but it's so early in the evolution of that industry that there's plenty of opportunity, but you don't have enough information yet to know where that opportunity is for you.

**Matt Swaney:** That's correct. That's exactly where I am. You've pinpointed exactly.

**Whitney Johnson:** Ok. Ok, so clearly at the launch point. Now, in the meantime, you said that you're doing you're having some conversations with lots of other pilots. Are you looking at doing something like you said you were an instructor at some point? Are you exploring anything around your field of being a pilot at all that will allow you to continue to do something that you love?

**Matt Swaney:** Yes, exactly. Now, just prior to the pandemic hitting, I was actually prepared in setting myself up to. Within each airline, you can become what's called a certified simulator flight instructor. There are also different levels of instruction that you can give and be an examiner as well. I was prepared to do that within the confines of the airline. However, you can also do it independently outside of airlines, and there are a couple of companies that are that I'm looking at possibly doing that. Right at the moment because of the market situation is there's not much training going on. People aren't in need of any kind of, let's say, initial training. They're in need of remedial training. There's a sufficient amount of instructors right at the moment. So, I could do that. That would be an extracurricular thing that I would have to look into. That would be a potential source of income, but it would only be potential at this point in time, and it would require a significant investment on my part.

**Whitney Johnson:** Ok, so it's not, you're like cost-benefit. It's not a super easy thing. The reward, the cost-benefit isn't maybe there, but may not.

**Matt Swaney:** Exactly.

**Whitney Johnson:** Okay. What else are you exploring?

**Matt Swaney:** I've been told I'm quite charismatic, so I should probably think about doing something along the lines of inspirational speaking and or podcasting myself now. I don't know.

**Whitney Johnson:** Are you going to?

**Matt Swaney:** I've never. I've never delved into that. So, it seems so very foreign to me. But apparently, as other people would critique me, they would say that I have some potential there. So that is another avenue that I could look at. I don't think I have the confidence at this point in time to delve too deeply into that, but I'm certainly willing to explore it.

**Whitney Johnson:** Well, it certainly is fun to do, and I can see how you would be very good at it. I remember a while ago someone interviewed me. He was a pilot. And um...

**Matt Swaney:** I know who it is, I know who it is.

**Whitney Johnson:** What's his name?

**Matt Swaney:** His name is Martin Stork.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yes, yes. How did you know his name?

**Matt Swaney:** Because that's how I found you Whitney through Martin.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh!

**Matt Swaney:** Isn't it a small world?

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, I was going to say, you should check out what he's doing.

**Matt Swaney:** Yeah, he's in fact that is so odd. Whitney, out of the blue he contacted me, just yesterday. I haven't gotten back to him yet. He says, hey, Matthew, what's going on? Because he started this with another guy who actually ended up being the guy that I did the coaching with a thing called cockpit coaches. Yes, and that's the thing, right? The cockpit goes absolutely is one of my ex-colleagues from the unnamed that I would mention. Yeah, he was actually my first officer, and when I left the company to go to, he then became a captain thereafter, but he became dissatisfied with his career as a pilot. I'm not dissatisfied, but he was looking for something bigger. He did the S curve, as you probably know, having talked. Yeah, and he's now into the whole coaching scene. And he's, yeah, he's a big fan of yours as well. So that's how I actually found out about you.

**Whitney Johnson:** Ok, I love how we're like the unnamed airline. So what about doing some coaching? Do you think you would enjoy that?

**Matt Swaney:** I would, but I just don't. I should shrug off this cloak of imposter syndrome.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh yeah.

**Matt Swaney:** I don't know why it's so heavy on me, but I just, I don't feel like it's my place or I'm. I'm adequately qualified to do something like that. But maybe I'm just maybe it's just false modesty on my part, but I really do feel that way. I really feel insecure about that. I almost feel like, no, that's somebody more qualified with more credentials should be doing this.

**Whitney Johnson:** Someone said to me the other day. That we have imposter syndrome and stop saying you have imposter syndrome; I just say I am an imposter because whenever we do something new. Of course, we are. And so just to say it, and I think the other thing too, is that when you think about this idea of coaching, there is this tendency to think that like, we're going to know more. But more and more coaches are facilitators and are just asking and guiding and directing as opposed to instructing. So, if that I mean, you talked about this idea of podcasting and Martin, it sounds like it might be something worth exploring again.

**Matt Swaney:** You always encourage to play to your distinctive strengths. I'm comfortable in the limelight, but I don't feel it's my place to be here.

**Whitney Johnson:** And the fact is, when you're a coach, you're actually not in the limelight. You're very much the copilot.

**Matt Swaney:** Aha. Ok, OK. I like that

**Whitney Johnson:** Very much the copilot. You're not, I don't know, nautical terms, but I don't know airline terms. But you're not the main pilot. You're the copilot. Two questions. Any other things that you're thinking about or brainstorming with? And then do you have any questions for me as we start to wrap up?

**Matt Swaney:** I'm wondering if all of this hasn't happened for a particular reason. And one of the things that I found most enlightening. It's profoundly affected me because I've had more time with my wife and my 11-year-old son than I've ever had in the past 12 years that we've been together. I've really counted that as a real blessing to be able to have these people in my life. And what is it that I can do to have some because they're in my sphere of influence? How can I influence, especially with respect to my son and his schooling? And they're quite demanding. He's, you know, has to have, his grades have to be such that at the end of this particular scholastic year, he has to decide which scholastic path he's going to go down. A lot of this is maybe an opportunity for me to invest in his well-being and his investment of the future for himself.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, it sounds like a pretty big gift to me.

**Matt Swaney:** Yeah, I think this is good. You know, this is the upbeat side of the thing, you know, and the positive spin that I'm trying to put on it. So, I don't get too discouraged. You know, it's going to be for a time and a season, I think, you know, if it's for this particular scholastic year, that's fine. I'm hanging on for dear life, living off my itsy-bitsy pension that I have.

**Whitney Johnson:** One other thought that I had for you is, are there people doing any just private flying?

**Matt Swaney:** Yes, we call that. That is an industry within the industry. It's called corporate. It's called corporate aviation, where you're flying, you know, your big businesses, corporate jets, right? The Lear jets or the Gulf Streams, I mean, you've seen them. There's also missionary aviation type of work that's out there as well, of which I've also considered and wouldn't mind doing. The problem there is the commitment that you have to have in terms of time is sometimes as much as three to four months away from home and you can't take your family with you. So that's great for single guys or single girls.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, right? If you're if your children were grown, but yeah, you want to be, you don't want to give that up. I'm going to make some suggestions for you, but I don't want to do that until I give you an opportunity. Are there specific questions that you would like to ask me?

**Matt Swaney:** I'd love to skip a line on the S Curve, but I don't think that's possible. The distinctive strengths, I'm not really sure how some of what we were talking about before could actually play into the blockchain, crypto, Defi space. But like I said, any business that you can possibly think of in what we call bricks and mortar, you can apply to the crypto space. So not just in terms of the currencies and Defi, but also you can set up actual proper businesses through blockchain. So how could I use those skills to maybe make some inroads into that area of actually increasing my capacity to learn and then be able to pass that information on as a service to others?

**Whitney Johnson:** Right. Ok, so the short answer is, I have no idea how you would do that. The longer answer is you're in this place where you're very, very curious about this. So, can I go into making some suggestions now?

**Matt Swaney:** Yeah, absolutely, please.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right. So, you're in this place where you're very curious about cryptocurrency, about blockchain, about this whole field and you want to learn about it. And so, I would pursue that, and you said you've signed up for a course or two. I know James Altucher is very into this. I would find a few people and just follow them religiously and just learn from them. Follow them. Comment on their blogs. Reach out to them. I mean, kind

of like what you did with me is just reach out to them. And not reach out to have a conversation initially, but just to follow them and become students of what they're doing so that you're really learning and you're immersing yourself in that. And so that's this new S Curve, this new place that you think there's an opportunity here. And I want to learn this and I'm going to take my grit and my persistence that I applied very early in my career to become a pilot. I'm going to apply all those skills that you developed in order to become a pilot. Apply them to learning how to do this. So that would be one thing I would say now in the near term, maybe you'll trade, maybe you'll make money, but you want to be cautious because you've also need to live. So, you want to be sort of. And allocate 10 percent of my money to trading this, which would be OK. You don't want to be foolhardy, but you can trade on the margin at the same time is bring your son along with you.

**Whitney Johnson:** And maybe even if your wife wants to do this with you and you can all learn together, because that could be a really fun thing and you've got this gift of being able to spend time. And I absolutely agree. I think in many instances, families have gotten a lot, a lot closer as a consequence of coping and losing jobs at the same. Ok, so there's that new piece that you want to explore. You're with your family there anchoring you, you're anchoring them. You then have this skill set that you've spent 30 years developing. I would encourage you to think about potentially talking to Martin and doing some coaching. You talked about how you can be a dispatcher. There's a number of things that you could do that I would encourage you thinking about developing a portfolio career, doing one or two or three of these things that allow you to continue to leverage what you've trained your whole life to do that are interesting. They're engaging. It'll also allow you to look for, are there intersections between my experience as a pilot and this blockchain that I want to put together? But you need to be swimming in both of those pools in order for that to happen. And while you're doing this portfolio of drawing on your experience, you're also generating cash that allows you to feel the sense of security and that becomes a foundation for this other work that you want to do.

**Whitney Johnson:** And this transition that you want to make, which could take five years or so. I know for me, when I moved from investing to doing what I do now, it really took me several years. I mean, five years before I could say I started to gain traction. And so, making those transitions always takes a lot longer than we think it's going to. And so if you can transition to whatever that is next building on the foundation of what you have now, continue to leverage and build on what you've spent your life building on, but have a portfolio approach. I mean, I love this idea of maybe doing a little flying, maybe doing a little dispatching, maybe doing a little mechanical. Just putting these pieces together, maybe doing a little bit of coaching if you want to do a podcast. One of the things you could do is like a six-episode series and just say, I'm going to think about, look at, explore. How is blockchain being used in the airline industry? So, you're basically allowing your two worlds to connect. You do six episodes, you learn that, and then you see what you get. You ask your friend Martin to advertise it so you can get some traction on it. And so those are some just ideas that are bubbling up for me as I'm hearing you talk.

**Matt Swaney:** Yeah, very nice. Whitney. I love it.

**Whitney Johnson:** Why don't we talk about what's been useful in the last year and a half? Then we'll talk about what was useful in this interview, and it doesn't mean it's something that you or I said it may be something that you thought.

**Matt Swaney:** Probably the issue that has most been in the forefront of my experience over the last year and a half is just dealing with as many people have the uncertainty and how to move forward and then trying to come together with something that encompasses what's really important in life and the essentials of being a family unit, being together, and we weren't affected by the COVID. We have our family unit that is all together in one piece, we have a roof over our heads. We have a sufficient amount of cash flow to survive through the winter, so to speak. We're not giving up. We're constantly pressing forward and we're persevering and trying to find the best solutions for what's going to be our future. The point there is that, you know, we really have to take into consideration what matters most. And it comes down to, you know, I'm healthy, I've got my health. I'm able to provide for my family and will continue to do so as I seek to find something that's going to make a difference.

**Whitney Johnson:** Well, and something else, I think I heard you as you talked about your experience that you didn't articulate this way, but you discovered some resilience that you may not have known that you had. So, in this

conversation, what was something that you thought of or sort of what was useful? And what are you going to commit to do?

**Matt Swaney:** We talked about it briefly, I mentioned it, of course, of course, this is what your disruption theory is all about. Is playing in someplace that is going to be a niche market and trying to work in an area that is. You know, there is no competition, an area that can be developed, and it's going to be useful. It never even dawned on me to think about what, what, what kind of business could go into the blockchain from aviation. So that's a real key element here that I'm going to have to explore with some, some real enthusiastic curiosity.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, good. Right? Because then it's bringing the old and the new, and it's leveraging all of your vast experience.

**Matt Swaney:** That's perfect. Yeah, I love it.

**Whitney Johnson:** Thank you so much for joining us and being willing to share this journey that you're on because I think it's really going to make a difference for a lot of people. So, thank you.

**Matt Swaney:** Well, thank you. I hope so. It's been an absolute pleasure being here with you. Whitney keep up the great work that you do, and hopefully, I can come back another time and give you a glorious report on how things have turned out in the last five years.

**Whitney Johnson:** I love it.

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Isn't it fun how we're all so connected? I was recommending that Matthew speak to Martin Storch and that's how he found me in the first place was through Martin Storch's podcast. And then he reached out after listening to my interview with James Altucher. I love that as I reflect on this conversation, what I feel is awe and hope for anyone who has lost a job. It is hard. It is so hard. I know because I've lost my job too. There's a loss of identity. That moment of freefall. Who am I if I'm not who I was? And yet Matthew is figuring it out. He's using the grit and determination that helped him jump on the S Curve of being a pilot to fly to his next S Curve. My hope for him and Matthew, since you're listening, my hope for you is that you do something that builds on your love of flying, that you will find a way to leverage this distinctive strength in interesting and unexpected ways your taxiing, and I think you're about to take off. In the meantime, what a gift to be spending time with your family. It is an unexpected gift of COVID. This constraint for so many has become a tool of creation, and I look forward to hearing about many more creations.

If you all want to do more listening around coaching, listen to my interview with Richie Norton episode 45, and my conversation with Ryan Gottfredson episode 171. Thank you again to Matthew Swaney for being willing to talk about the experience of being pushed off an S Curve. And then what do you do next? If any of you who are listening found this episode useful, inspiring, I hope you'll reach out and let him know. Thank you again to Matthew Swaney for being our guest. Thank you for listening. Thank you to our producer, Matt Silverman; audio engineer and editor, Whitney Jobe; and assistant producer, Steve Ludwig.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.

