

"Just start now and be creative" - Pepe Marais on Growing Greatness

 By Leigh Andrews

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Pepe Marais, group chief creative officer at Joe Public United, is already a creative inspiration to many, so his recently published book, *Growing Greatness*, is sure to be well-received. I caught up with Marais post-Loeries to find out the relevance of the Ruth Prowse School of Art in Woodstock as a location for the Cape Town book launch, and a taste of what readers can expect from the book.



Pepe Marais, author of *Growing Greatness*.

Hardly a day goes by that I don't see an inspiring, motivational tweet from Marais in my morning Twitter timeline.

His Twitter bio also offers an excellent glimpse into what makes him tick:

“ Founding partner of Joe Public United. Chairman of One School At A Time. Closet Afrikaans rocker. Humanitarian at heart. Core interest: Growth of people. ”

So it makes sense that his book is titled, *Growing Greatness*. He shares that his tweets do tie in with his book, but it wasn't planned that way. I'll let him explain in his own words...

■ **Thanks for fitting in a few minutes for us this morning. Your arm was in a sling when we saw you at Loeries last week – that wasn't related to the agency's 'run to the Loeries', I hope.**

“ Thank you [@heidi_marais](#) for walking this 27 year journey, every step of the way. So great to finally be at the start of something great. pic.twitter.com/Km5lqMqFKS — Pepe Marais (@pepemarais) August 21, 2018 ”

Everyone thinks it's broken when they see the sling, but I just tore a muscle while playing with my ten-year-old, Jasper – it's nothing to do with the Joe Public team run to the Loeries!



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Leigh Andrews 3 Aug 2018



📌 ***Wishing you a speedy recovery. Let's focus on the book itself then, and your decision to put your thoughts to paper.***

OK so, I didn't really plan on writing a book. I was an avid blogger about ten years ago, but I stopped when Joe Public United started growing as it has been doing over the past five years.

An independent publisher, Tracey McDonald, actually read some of those old blog posts and thought leadership, so I was approached out of the blue around March last year, with the motivation that I should write a book for entrepreneurs on entrepreneurship. I really didn't have the time, but I do have a strong belief that the only way to close the poverty gap in South Africa is by means of creating more entrepreneurs. It makes complete, logical sense to me.

To make the maths easy, let's oversimplify the numbers, as explained to me by Andrew Human over a lunch a few years ago:

“ If a poor person earns R10k a month, and a rich person earns R100k, that poverty gap is R90k. So if you get a 10% increase year-on-year, the poverty gap also increases by 10% year-on-year, because the person earning R10k will earn R11k, and the person earning R100k will earn R110k, so the gap in effect goes up to R99k. ”

The only way to fix that is to give the bottom end of the market massive year-on-year increases of almost 120%. You simply can't do that, or you'll bankrupt the economy. So the only logical way to reduce the gap is to get more and more people to start their own entrepreneurial enterprises.



Joe Public United launches School of Growth
Joe Public 29 Jan 2018



That's my belief, and that's what my publisher tapped into. Through our conversation, I realised that I could not but make this book work. It's for a greater cause, about how to create your own destiny as a human being, and if through this book I could inspire just one aspiring young entrepreneur, then my job would be done. That's the long and the short of it.

📌 ***Amazing. I've been a fan of those tweets of yours for years, really inspirational stuff. Do they tie in with the overall message of the book?***

Everything I do, from my tweets to our business, it's people and our product, is aligned to my greater purpose in life. And my book touches on all these aspects of my life. For one, I started working for an income when I was 12-years-old, subsidising our household income at times because I grew up with a single mother. She was a teacher with three kids, so by old South African white standards, we were relatively at the bottom end of the community.

I'm by no means blind to the state of South Africa today, with many of our people living in shacks, but that's where I started

back then, and I thought I'd share my whole journey, to get people to understand that you really can start something from nothing.

By 2007 I was partying as hard as I was working, the business I founded with Gareth Leck was firmly in the hands of an American multinational, I was really overweight and out of shape and my marriage was heading towards the rocks. All of this culminated in the demise of our business, which led to the turning point of my life.

There are massive insights in the book on what happened and the process I went through in finding greater purpose to my life.

“ Finally. pic.twitter.com/iz0seHsago— Pepe Marais (@pepemarais) [August 20, 2018](#) ”

I share everything openly to show people that there's a different side and way of living life, and also as a creative person in a very festive industry, I thought I'd set the tone and example for creatives. And then I applied that whole methodology of my personal life to our business.

It is this aspect of doing business for a greater cause, based on a profound and authentic purpose, that is at the heart of our business. It is what has turned our ship, it is what is leading us and inspiring us to do more and be more as a business and as people within our business, every day. My partner Gareth Leck, has coined the phrase: “Hippy s#it makes business sense.” I should maybe have made that the title of my book!

So I share all of that in the book. It's about my life journey, our business journey, finding personal purpose, a greater business purpose and allowing all that to move towards unlocking the potential of greatness within our people, our clients, and who knows, maybe even our country.

🎲 ***Definitely seems to be working for you guys, so that's fantastic. Then there's the fact that you're launching the book at the Ruth Prowse School of Arts, talk us through the relevance of the location in terms of empowering the creative youth. Is there any other aspect to that, in terms of getting those students on board and helping them in their own journey?***

The call to launch there is fascinating. I just said to my wife last night that life truly is incredible. A guy who I met in Toronto in 2014 called me last night out of the blue. I left my last meeting of the day at 19:45pm, so the call was really inconvenient, as all I wanted to do was eat and go to sleep.



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23 Jul 2018



Then Maged phoned me, all excited as he's from Egypt but spending some time in South Africa, and asked me to join him at Codfather in Sandton. I asked when he was leaving and he said at 6pm the next day.

My diary simply would not allow any time to meet with him that day, so I did what I mostly do in life and allowed my heart to overrule my head. It turned out to be the most amazing dinner. He's a big businessman and a top entrepreneur in Egypt, and we spent the night talking about entrepreneurship.

It's just so amazing how these things work. We connected back in 2014, and the next moment it's like 'chat, chat, chat,' and now we're going to join him and his family for New Year's in Cairo. It's spectacular how life works in such a synchronistic way, and we hardly ever realise it.

2014: The year Joe Public grew greatly in more ways than one

Leigh Andrews 20 Nov 2014





For example, when I came out of the army, I wanted to be a civil engineer because the dad of a friend of mine was very rich, so I wanted to become a civil engineer to make money because I was poor. It was that simple.

Then I met a guy on the northern border of Namibia – South-West Africa, back then – whilst waiting for a plane in Rundu, and he was a graphic designer. I'd never heard of such a profession, he even had a portfolio of work with him.

So the bizarreness that there was a guy at the border waiting for a plane with me, with this portfolio, inspired me to go and study. But because my Matric results were so poor, I couldn't apply at normal institutions, so ended on the doorstep of the Ruth Prowse School of Arts in Woodstock, Cape Town. That's where I found my art, which I never even knew I had within me.

That's where my commercial advertising journey started, a place which significantly impacted on my life. So I could think of no more appropriate place to have my book launch.

Can you imagine, an Afrikaans guy coming out of the army, indoctrinated with the beliefs of the time – if I think back, it's obscure – and then being in art school, with people speaking about freeing Nelson Mandela and long-hair, smoking marijuana? I had a complete overhaul at the age of 20.

■ ***That's incredible. Are there any other tips for entrepreneurs, or anyone aspiring to follow your path?***

People should look out for: 'Everything you need to know to start a business'. It's a chapter that's pretty much one-word long: 'Start'.

There's an amazing business conference I attended, where one of the speakers shared that the most valuable properties in the world are graveyards. Because that's where most people's dreams end up. I think people over-rationalise and over-strategise with all their business plans, and through all this rubbish, which holds you away and sets up so much fear, you end up never starting.

“ *The send off team for our team who are currently running from Jojie to [@loeries](#) in Durban, raising funds for One School At a Time, one step at a time. pic.twitter.com/jphK4AGBvu— Pepe Marais (@pepemarais) [August 16, 2018](#)* ”

That's always been one of my strengths. I'm a hard worker, but I'm also not afraid to start anything. For example, if you want to fix the 22,000 dysfunctional schools in South Africa, rather than crawling into a hole because of the scale of the problem, break it down and start with one school at a time. Just roll up your sleeves, get down, and get creative.



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Pepe Marais 8 Jan 2018



*Simple as that – just start stuff and be creative. Follow [Marais](#) (and [Joe Public United](#) itself) on Twitter for those inspirational tweets, keep an eye on the [Joe Public United press office](#) for their latest updates, and don't miss the launch of *Growing Greatness* – it'll be at the Ruth Prowse School of Art on Monday, 27 August and at Exclusive Books in Hyde Park on Wednesday, 29 August.*

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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