STARTUP SACRILEGE FOR THE UNDERDOG ENTREPRENEUR

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Startup Sacrilege

for the Underdog Entrepreneur

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Introduction

The world does not need another business book. Or another startup book.

The physical and digital book shelves already groan with their weight. With that in mind, I want this to be worth everyone's time – yours to read it and mine to write it.

The audience I have in mind comes in several parts. I am speaking to entrepreneurs and organizers outside of established tech hubs, those who have questioned the typical models of the startup world and those who work in unsexy industries. Established tech hubs I'm talking about include Silicon Valley, New York City, Boston, Tel Aviv, Los Angeles, London, Singapore and rest of the top 20 on the Startup Ecosystem World Report. Those of you who have questioned the typical models for the startup world – you know who you are. The unsexy category is too long to list, but is defined by people working on important problems without much media buzz or major startup community attention behind them. You are all outside the mainstream, not because you are weird (well, maybe you are), but because you don't fit the artificial mainstream model of startups. You're an underdog.

While those are my target readers, my goal is for everything I write to be thought-provoking even if you are in a tech hub, or working on a sexy service that gets a lot of attention or even if you feel that the startup world is just fine exactly the way it is. If that's you, I hope you'll think about other options that exist.

Throughout I include pieces of interviews I conducted with people in startup communities around the world. Since in this book I'm interested in the experience of the unheard majority of startup people, everyone I decided to quote is building something in an off-the-beaten path location (with one interesting exception).

The writing was inspired by my experience running a startup, leading an accelerator, working with startups from concept stage to millions of users, and talking to lots of people (founders, organizers, academics, investors) around the world.

The book is divided into three sections: **Context**, **Sacrilege and Action**.

Context deals with some of my journey and what influenced me – a combination of theory and practice, with more emphasis put on practice.

Sacrilege is a critique of accepted practices that do more harm than good and suggested alternatives. I'm challenging the startup world gospel here. I didn't take this section lightly. Instead, I wrote it because I strongly believe that a lot of what is done in the startup world – a world that values discovery, creativity and validation – can be harmful to the very people it most needs to protect and encourage. Some of what you will see in Sacrilege may sound familiar if you've heard me speak or if you've read some of my blog posts. If you haven't seen the earlier posts or talks then what I write may sometimes seem odd. I hope that while you read this section you'll find yourself either saying "He's crazy to suggest that! How do I burn an ebook?" or "Is that why we're having such difficulty? We should change what we're doing…" Anything less than reactions like those and I haven't gone far enough. These are ideas that years later, hopefully won't seem sacrilegious at all. Maybe you will find yourself already in agreement because of your own experiences.

Action makes a set of tangible recommendations for startup communities to move forward, in light of the previous Context and Sacrilege sections. This is especially for people who get the least support and need help the most, for example by operating outside of tech hubs or in unsexy industries. These are also ideas that I'm either trying or plan to try. If you like these ideas, steal them.

If my story sounds different it's because it was shaped by differences. I co-founded and operated a startup accelerator in Hong

Kong – a large and wealthy city and at the time a small tech market – but was able to attract companies from around the world. Some of my favorite times have been spent with bottom-of-the-pyramid startups rather than those in short-lived hot markets. The process people go through when figuring things out fascinates me. I saw other perspectives about what it means to "change the world," in spite of how exaggerated that term often is.

I realized that there is a mainstream story told across the startup world that may hold true for the few lucky ones, but which doesn't always hold true for the rest. But "the rest" represent the majority of the startup community, although they receive minimal attention. For many of them, the mainstream story is harmful. Let's change that.

CONTEXT

Only Fools Rush In

For years now, I ask most of the startups I advise to listen to a 15 minute story by Ari Handel before we start to work together. The story is "Don't Fall in Love with Your Monkey"[1] and was recorded at a storytelling event called The Moth.

If there was ever an unintentional non-technical synopsis of the intellectual and emotional drama that a startup founder experiences, this is it.

Handel recounts his time as a doctoral student performing neurological experiments on a monkey named Santiago. Recorded in 2004, it describes events from the early 90s and takes place entirely outside of the startup world. Yet I still ask people to listen to the recording.

When months, or even years later one of "my" startups contacts me and says "we fell in love with our monkey" or "it took us too long to kill Santiago," I know exactly what it means. It means that they too fell for the slow-burning sensuality of their startup and as a result, couldn't bring themselves to change it (or kill it off for something that worked). They fell in love and so they're back at square one later than they would have been if they hadn't fallen in love in the first place.

But I also know that the allegorical warning they get from me and the many hundreds of other proscriptions they will hear over the months and years can only do so much. How can you look at the realm of possibility and not fall in love at every turn? How can you live a life of scientific discipline and not be lessened by stoically resisting that love? How can you work nights and weekends for something that statistically will never succeed while you will likely earn nothing, if not for love?

I tend to think that the first time around everyone needs to make some of the same mistakes – stupid mistakes – in order to learn to process what they see while running their startup. After the pain, the learning can begin. Asking startups to stay a disciplined course without sometimes also just going for it can be a bit much to ask of a human being. *Especially one in love with something as beautiful as a way to solve a problem.*

The irony of all this? If it weren't for falling in love with "stupid" ideas, there would only be a shadow of a tech startup community around the world. I don't mean this in a negative way. "Stupid" ideas can create opportunities, teach a lot for the next turn and give the unseen good ideas an opportunity to come forth. And sometimes, everyone who thinks an idea is "stupid" is just wrong.

Still, most of what you'll read in this book is there to try to prevent you from falling in love with your startup, to prevent you from falling in love with an ecosystem and even to warn you from falling for the feeling of camaraderie you'll find at startup events (what I sometimes call "startup entertainment").

But I know you will fall in love anyway. So here are other reasons why I wrote this book.

================== This is the end of the preview. The full book is available at https://leanpub.com/StartupSacrilege and you can join the mailing list if you send an email to <StartupSacrilege at gmail dot com>. I hope you enjoy reading it. ==================