

Episode 3 - Yo-EL Cassell

Robin Eldridge: You are listening to The Upside of Down with Dan Ariely.

Dan Ariely: We are on the corner of Emory and Commonwealth. That's a great corner. And right now you have your hearing aids on, which you usually do. So tell me a little bit about what you hear.

Yo-EL Cassell: I just heard the subway pass by. The sound, the clicking sound on top of the track. I hear the cars coming by. I can hear the wind rushing against my hat a bit.

Dan Ariely: Let's try now. Would you mind taking your hearing aids off?

Yo-EL Cassell: Not at all. Would you like both of them off?

Dan Ariely: Yeah, let's take both off. Just to get the full experience.

(Background sounds fade away)

Dan Ariely: So you don't, for example, if you need to write something and you want quiet, just turn them off?

Yo-EL Cassell: Intentionally, I will. Sometimes I take them off because the quietness and solitude of that feels comforting.

(Background sounds fade back up)

Dan Ariely: So, so tell me now, what are you experiencing?

Yo-EL Cassell: I'm quite close to your proximity, so I hear you well. I'm having a hard time hearing what's around us. I do hear car, very--

Dan Ariely: The knocking from the T, did you hear it just now?

Yo-EL Cassell: No.

Dan Ariely: It was the same sound we heard earlier when the subway was going over the tracks.

Yo-EL Cassell: That's right, no, I don't hear that.

Dan Ariely: Do you hear the cars behind you?

Yo-EL Cassell: Very muted. The only thing I truly hear now is your voice.

Dan Ariely: Okay.

Yo-EL Cassell: Your voice, yes.

Dan Ariely: That's really all you should care about.

(Laughter)

Dan Ariely: That gives me a little bit of a better sense of what your hearing world is without the hearing aides.

Dan Ariely: Hi, my name is Dan Ariely, and in this show, I talk each time with somebody who's sort of like me, in two ways. They've also been through a difficult time in their lives and yet they're also trying to make specific and interesting meaning and contribution with their lives. I was burned many years ago in about 70% of my body and I spent about three years in hospital and now I'm trying to run all kinds of experiments about all kinds of aspects of human behavior trying to figure out what gets us to behave worse and what gets us to behave better. In this show, we will get to have conversations about what we do with all of this. What do we do with our own challenges and injuries? And how do we find meaning? It's about how we make these challenges into better times.

Dan Ariely: Yo-EL Cassell. We are in the music studio next to your movement studio.

Yo-EL Cassell: That's right.

Dan Ariely: In BU. You were born to a family that had multiple generation of people who were hearing impaired.

Yo-EL Cassell: Yes, pretty much similar to the same loss I had.

Dan Ariely: And your father and grandfather growing up, they had hearing aids?

Yo-EL Cassell: Yes, and what's interesting about that is they're all second child. I'm a second child, my father was a second child, and my grandfather was a second child, and we all had nerve deafness.

Dan Ariely: And your oldest sibling?

Yo-EL Cassell: He's perfect.

(laughs)

Yo-EL Cassell: Perfect hearing, but not perfect... Perfect in terms of hearing and visual. He has other imperfect qualities, but...

(gentle music)

Yo-EL Cassell: So for me, it happened very young. So I didn't know the difference, what it would be to be a hearing person and to be one who has a hearing loss. When I was around three years old, I remember that we were in a hospital and I had surgery for my nerve deafness. But my parents never said, "Oh, you have a hearing loss." I started to understand what was going on. And I went to the School for the Deaf in New York. That was around preschool age, and I realized there were other students like me who were hearing impaired, and some were completely deaf as well. And I said, "Oh, I must be like them." And we had a movement class, the creative movement, not a formal dance class. They just wanted us to jump across the room or to crawl on the floor. And they told us to move like a snake. And I said, "Oh, this is exciting." And I just felt so alive, and I felt so connected, and my pride built up there. So I knew, I immediately went to my parents, and I said, "I would like to learn more about movement."

Dan Ariely: Not at age three.

Yo-EL Cassell: That's age three, yeah.

Dan Ariely: Age three, you said you wanted more.

Yo-EL Cassell: Right then and there, I said, "I wanna be involved."

Yo-EL Cassell: Within my own family, there was a tremendous amount of support. Outside of my family dynamic, there was lots of curiosity. There was quite an amount of bullying that happened.

Dan Ariely: What kind of bullying?

Yo-EL Cassell: I would be the tutu boy or the fairy boy who likes to dance, or they would make fun of my hearing loss.

Dan Ariely: Even in the school?

Yo-EL Cassell: Not in the school for the deaf, but outside, like playgrounds or activities that was outside of that environment. It was quite hard. I don't remember really having a friend at that time because also I didn't know how to communicate. I didn't know how to speak to anyone. I would be sort of clam up and I would sort of get tense and anxious. I'm a very socially awkward person. Like if you get me to talk about anything outside of music or theater, I feel quite awkward and I feel like uncomfortable. But when I'm moving and when I'm in the studio, I feel so pure and so alive and that's when I first discovered moving as a way to express myself. The challenging thing for me is changing how people perceive me and they think, "Oh hearing loss, let's do everything to help him." I never like to tell people I'm hearing impaired, they can see it. I never like to say, "oh, by the way, I'm hearing impaired. Can you speak a little bit louder, or can you speak clearly?" I will do everything to get closer, or I will do the work. And it's just allowing people to understand that. The disability, it's really in the mind of the beholder. I made sure that this would not get in my way. I'm in the field of movement and theater and music, fusion of all of those elements, where hearing is so important. So how does one pursue movement and dance when they have a hard time hearing music? And for me, it's all about internal music and internal rhythm.

Dan Ariely: Do you think that people perceive you as not fitting? That how can somebody with a hearing impairment...?

Yo-EL Cassell: No, I have never experienced that. I think what I've experienced is curiosity from those around me. I wonder how he does it. They actually help and support, like for example, just the companies that I work with allows me always to feel the piano. There's certain rituals that we do before class. I would just feel the sense where the rhythm's coming from and that's all I would need. There's gonna be certain things where I cannot hear things or I need to greatly readjust, but that was sort of my life contract, that that's just a part of me.

Yo-EL Cassell: I remember one instance when I was in third grade where I was with a friend who was also happened to be taking dance with me. We were in the same classes in public school and he got an A on the paper and I got a C-. I remember the feeling I had, it's like, oh, I asked him, "what did you do to get the A?" And he said, "I just worked hard." I just, and I was like, "Oh." And I remember from that, literally that was my turning point in life, right there at that moment. 'Cause I remember I said to myself, "I'm just gonna work hard. I'm gonna work harder. Things don't come easy, I'm gonna work, work, work." I remember going to my dad. My dad still said to that day, I never had less than a B. But that also disconnected me from society around me because if people wanted me to go out or if they wanted me to hang out with them, I said, "No, I have to be in the studio. I have to work, work, work, work." And I started to lose myself because I was embracing this thing that made me feel safe, that made me feel comfortable. I didn't want to go back to that challenging place anymore. But I also felt I lost connection with how to communicate.

Yo-EL Cassell: I had a teacher at the Boston Conservatory who I felt really saw the potential in what I can do that I didn't even realize. And I was well liked there, I was well respected because I worked very hard and I always came in with a sunny personality. But there was also the perception that I didn't have a lot of depth, that I was sort of one note, that I was always the happy guy, but I was always the guy that's doing certain roles. But this teacher, Richard Colton, he was the first person who really challenged me to work even harder. He would give me material that I probably wouldn't have received from anyone else. He would give me stuff that was purely technical, and he would put that transparent in front of everyone and say, "Yo-EL is gonna..."

Dan Ariely: Do this in front of everyone.

Yo-EL Cassell: In front of everyone. And he was life-changing. He made me believe that I may not do it well, but that I could do it. He wanted me to find my own voice.

(Upbeat music)

Dan Ariely: I also feel socially awkward in gatherings. People never know how to shake my hand. It looks so different. And when people shake my hand, it's impossible for me not to feel and kind of sense their awkwardness. Do they shake hard or light or just touch? I mean, people do all kinds of things. And then I also see people looking at my scars and I kind of play in my mind their internal dialogue of what happened to him, why is it like this, what is this. But when I'm on stage giving a talk, for example, the social roles are very clear. I'm

here, I'm a professional, I'm good at this, but I have a very specific role, whereas when you're in a social interaction, the roles are very unclear, the expectations are unclear, and also lots of skills can come to play. Whereas when I'm on stage, I'm in control. I can do things that I can do well, and I don't have to do things I don't do well. So it's kind of interesting where you think about disability. One approach is, of course, to hide at home. But another approach is to actually be in a much more socially defined role. And being on stage means not being alone, but it also means having a very specific role where the rules are clear and you can play to your own strengths.

Yo-EL Cassell: Can I ask you, what do you feel? When you're saying socially awkward, what are the feelings? Is it anxiety? Is it...

Dan Ariely: So I always feel that I don't belong. I got injured when I was almost 18 and I was basically kind of plucked out of life and put in a hospital bed for almost three years and I got to observe life around me. And everybody else was, you know, dating and studying and doing all kinds of things. And I was kind of outside of that. And then when I left the hospital, I had these pressure bandages. It was an outfit that was basically like stockings, but on my whole body. It was an outfit that was supposed to put pressure on the burns. It was very hot. And because I have burns on almost all my body, I had pants and I had a long-sleeve shirt and I had gloves and I have even a mask on my head like that. And that kind of kept me outside of society. You don't go with this kind of outfit and interact in any normal way with people. And I still feel a little bit like that. So I feel like an outsider. Sometimes I think like I'm probably kind of how an alien would feel after a while. Yes, officially I'm part of this, but I have lots of experiences that people don't understand and there's lots of things that other people do that I can't. And it feels the separation.

Yo-EL Cassell: These moments where I would feel a bit down myself or I feel I've been taking advantage of or that I'm not being heard. I'm working hard to hear other people, but I feel like I'm not being heard. When I was younger, I'd start to embellish stories, or I'll start to say something that will allow me to be heard again. In high school, where I didn't feel quite connected, I would make up stories where I would say this person was my girlfriend when she really wasn't, or, "I did this," which I really didn't do, because I didn't trust myself as everyone else did around me. Now, in the end, I didn't feel right because that's not who I am. And that's what made it quite complex because I was all about being who you are and showing the best you. And yet, in my own head, I was not quite following my own voice. I was dating a girl who, you can tell, we weren't quite connecting. And I just don't know why I was continuing to date her. I just don't know because I felt there was a sense of negativity in that relationship where I was really wanting positivity. And I got quite jealous when that particular person was seeing someone else. So I embellished the story and it created hurt from both sides of the party. And I remember feeling really low because I did, I hurt someone's feelings.

Dan Ariely: You made up a story that didn't portray her in a positive way?

Yo-EL Cassell: It didn't portray me in a positive way, yeah. And so I was really down.

Dan Ariely: Do you mind telling what kind of, what type of story this was?

Yo-EL Cassell: I made up a story where someone in my family had passed away, which wasn't true.

Dan Ariely: So you killed a relative?

Yo-EL Cassell: I killed a relative.

Dan Ariely: To get higher likings.

Yo-EL Cassell: Yes.

Dan Ariely: I'll tell you, students kill grandmothers every semester and mostly before exams. It is amazing. We actually looked at some data about this and we found that the dying grandmothers before exams happen more frequently to students who are not doing well in the class. So you're not alone in killing relatives.

Yo-EL Cassell: Yeah, but it was, that period was a sense of darkness for me personally. I felt like I hurt someone and I was probably in a moment where I felt like I wanted to hurt myself because it was pretty, pretty dark.

Dan Ariely: And you were kind of in a difficult period because she was dating somebody else, you felt rejected.

Yo-EL Cassell: She was my first real relationship and I didn't know how to deal with a relationship. I was always alone. So I didn't know how to deal with something. If something went wrong, and suddenly we weren't talking. I didn't know what to do. So the night before, I was feeling quite anxious talking to myself and saying to myself, should I do this? And I kept saying, no, I won't do it. And then the next day I did it.

(somber music)

Yo-EL Cassell: And it happened. Suddenly she was calling me again.

Dan Ariely: You mean, when you killed the relative.

Yo-EL Cassell: Yes, yes, it's terrible!

Dan Ariely: Did you ever apologize to the relative? Did you ever tell the relative that you--

Yo-EL Cassell: All the time, it's my brother.

Dan Ariely: Oh, it's your brother.

Yo-EL Cassell: And he said, who cares, you know? But to me, it was like something quite strong and powerful. It hurt me the most for coming up with that. So what did I do in that case? I went back to my art. I created a piece about it called The Distance Between. It's a choreographic piece that I did for students at Walnut Hill School of the Arts. And it was basically a circle of people, and it was about people connecting and not connecting. And I

found my choreographic voice. I started to tell people, if you want to know who I am, just take a look at my work. And that was the way I found myself, and I found that that's how I can communicate. And I could lie without getting in trouble. I could be who I am.

Dan Ariely: Art is a good place to make up stuff.

Yo-EL Cassell: Art is a good channel. I could express my inner thoughts and desires in a way where no one is feeling harmed. They may feel offended, but no one's being hurt. I just had an incredible amount of support and people who love me and believe in me. And then I also got therapeutic help and just talking it out and realizing that I don't need to do that, and I didn't need to do that.

Dan Ariely: There's a fantastic researcher called Penny Baker. What he's doing, he's taking people who've gone through all kinds of challenges and get them to write the story of that challenge. And what he's showing is that putting, kind of writing the narrative of the challenge actually helps people get over it. As you're describing your artistic process, it's not writing, but it's similar in nature, where you take a particular problem, you try to express it in some kind of narrative way to work through it and understand it and understand the implication, and maybe it helps you kind of put it behind you.

Yo-EL Cassell: Absolutely, absolutely. That's how I feel with movement. It's very hard for me just to come into the studio and just put a step together, because I'm always thinking, what do I want to say? Because it's coming from a very deep place. But when I go through that challenge, I discover something new about the process.

Dan Ariely: You're saying, you know, there's all kinds of things I don't like about reality. There's hearing challenges, there's social awkwardness, there was some bullying. Can I try to create a different reality that would let me define the parameters and the story? And do you think it's a common thought for creativity? Is misery the real driver of creative people?

Yo-EL Cassell: I think there's something interesting there that it is a common dimension there because it's a place where you can express your inner thoughts in a way that's transparent. It's in a place of viewing that can serve everyone. And it's not a place of harm. And what's interesting there is what the works that I create is always - and it's truthful - it always has a positive outlook on life. I try to find a beginning, a middle, an end for myself. And that, I try not to enforce that, force that always, they're gonna be happy in the end. But there is a sense of inner joy and inner spirit in the work that I want to make transparent for all.

Yo-EL Cassell: When I met Melody, my social awkwardness disappeared because she made me feel, she made me celebrate who I am as a person. And she made me revel in Yo-EL Cassell. And that's when I started to teach the best I've ever felt. And I felt like alive. And I felt that there's someone who loves me for who I am. And there's someone who not only loves me in that way, but supports, and I support her. We have such a commonality with each other. And she's also a dancer and a choreographer, so she knows the field very well. And she's also a person who believes in inner joy and positivity. I remember that dating process feeling like a perfect glove on the hand, a perfect hat on the head. It just felt so fluid, and it still does to this day. I feel like we can connect in levels that I had never felt. We just

celebrated our 10th year wedding anniversary, and we met in a dance studio in Connecticut. I was setting a piece on a younger group, and I remember walking up the steps, and there was a studio with the children in it, and then I turned to my left, and there's Melody at the desk, 'cause her company was rehearsing in another studio. And everything I was focused for went away. My anxiety came back because I said, I said, "Who is this person?" The spirit. And I met her there, and we just, you know, we would see each other all the time, but we didn't quite connect communication-wide, but we would look in the studio and say, "How you doing?" One time I heard a piece of music by Youssou N'Dour, a South African artist, and it talked about connecting, and I gave her the piece of music. I said, "I heard this and I thought of you." She said she went home and she listened to it, and she started to realize there was something more in those lyrics than she thought. So I went to my parents, and I said, "There is this one person I kind of like, but I think she is seeing someone, so I'm not going to go there." And my mom said that she'd have a ring on her finger, and I said, "No." She said, "Then go after her."

(Laughter)

Yo-EL Cassell: So I remember getting confident, and I went to her at a party, and I said... and I would have never done this. I said, "So would you like to hang out?" And I thought she would say no. She said, "I'm seeing someone, but I'm not sure if he is The One." And I thought it was quite odd for someone to tell me that so directly. So I went with it and we spoke for an hour. And we just connected ever since. And we have a son, Keaton, who's named after Buster Keaton.

Dan Ariely: And how old is Keaton?

Yo-EL Cassell: Two and a half. He's a joy, pure joy. When they come into the world, what I saw was a motionless baby, complete still. And then when they turned him around, he started crying. And I can't describe the feeling. Everything was like, suddenly there's a life in front of you. And through him, it's exhausting, and it takes so much of you, but it's just so exciting and enriching. And I feel like I could be a child again because he's teaching me. That was the turning point, and we did the hearing test with him.

Dan Ariely: At what age did you do the hearing test?

Yo-EL Cassell: Right away. They do it now, right in the hospital, like maybe a couple days after they're born. I was saying, "Oh, it's hereditary, so he may have..." So we were prepared.

Dan Ariely: So what were the results of the test?

Yo-EL Cassell: It was completely negative.

Dan Ariely: He had perfect hearing?

Yo-EL Cassell: He had perfect hearing, and I started crying when I started getting really emotional. My wife was like, "Oh, get a tissue, you know, get over it." But it really had a lot because he could hear the thing that I couldn't hear.

Dan Ariely: Did that moment when you realized that he will not have to go through it, did it also make you reflect on all the things you had to go through?

Yo-EL Cassell: Yes, I went back to my own childhood and went back in my own life. I'm very proud of my hearing loss. This is my identity. I often tell people, and it's true, that if I wasn't hearing impaired, I don't think I would be involved in the world of movement and dance. So I am so thankful for my hearing loss to allow me to enter that world. Yes, it's a barrier in many ways, but I try to embrace those barriers. So I'm very proud of that, but I'm also relieved that my son can hear all of these things right when he's born. Those things that I'm still searching for in my own work, what it means to hear water going down the creek, it can all come naturally for him. He can put his effort in something else. It's such a precious and beautiful skill of hearing.

Robin Eldridge: "The Upside of Down" is hosted and executive produced by Dan Ariely. The episodes are produced and edited by DDC International and Newfruit Media, especially Luis Dechtiar and Colby Gottert. Sound mixing by Ross Nelson, additional sound mixing, editing, and producing by Daniel Rinaldi. The theme song is "A Okay" by Kayjez. Additional music provided by Musicbed and Marie-Claire Saindon. I'm Robin Eldridge, and I created, produced, and directed the series. If you like what you heard, please pass it on.