

Episode 4 - Dan Simpson

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

Dan Ariely: It's a Saturday morning. We're here in beautiful Hoboken.

Dan Simpson: This is Hoboken, yeah, and the Hudson River.

Dan Ariely: And the Hudson River. And this is the promenade. Should we walk around a little bit?

Dan Simpson: Sure. If you hold my left arm...

Dan Ariely: We're kind of, like, married now, walking down the aisle?

Dan Simpson: Yes.

Dan Ariely: Okay. Can we have some music?

Dan Simpson and Dan Simpson: Tan-Tan Tada...

Dan Simpson: And now I have Boon on my left.

Dan Ariely: Who is Boon?

Dan Simpson: Boon is my fairly new Black Labrador guide dog. And I'm just going to give him a command to go forward.

Dan Ariely: Okay. So now I'm closing my eyes or should I keep my eyes open just from the beginning to get used to it?

Dan Simpson: That's up to you. Either way.

Dan Ariely: You know what? I'll close my eyes and let's see what happens.

Dan Simpson: All right. Boon, forward.

Dan Ariely: Okay.

Dan Simpson: Good boy.

Dan Ariely: Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey. Wait, stop! No, no!

(Laughing)

Dan Simpson: Atta-boy!

Dan Ariely: Oh, whoa, whoa! Okay, so I feel you, I'm behind you because I'm a little worried. So I use you as a shelter.

Dan Simpson: That's fine. I stay behind Boone a little bit.

Dan Ariely: If there's a tree, you're going to hit it first.

(dramatic music)

Dan Ariely: So we're running. It's kind of like running, but certainly going to get the sweat out if we continue like this.

Dan Simpson: Yeah, this is my exercise plan.

Dan Ariely: Okay, now wait, wait, wait. I know that this road ends at some point. No, so what are we going to do? How are we going to know that it ends?

Dan Simpson: Hopefully he'll stop.

Dan Ariely: Okay. Now this is not the regular speed that you go with in my hope.

Dan Simpson: This is normal, yeah.

Dan Ariely: Really? This fast?

Dan Simpson: Yeah.

Dan Ariely: You know, I kind of had the visual map of where it goes, but now we're beyond my visual map. And it is scary.

Dan Simpson: You know, it reminds me of a joke that...

Dan Ariely: Don't tell jokes now, let's focus.

(Music ends)

Dan Ariely: Okay, so we're here, we're a little stuck.

Dan Simpson: Yeah.

Dan Ariely: Boone did a good job.

Dan Simpson: Yeah, he did.

Dan Ariely: What would you do now?

Dan Simpson: Well, I would probably turn around and if I were trying to get somewhere in particular, I would ask somebody.

Dan Ariely: Let's say we wanted to go back... Oh, you would ask somebody because he's stuck.

Dan Simpson: Anybody around?

Dan Ariely: So that's how you do?

Dan Simpson: Yeah, sometimes. If it's worst case scenario, yeah.

Dan Ariely: Anybody around?

Dan Simpson: Somebody will show up.

Dan Ariely: Oh, hello? Hello? Anybody around?

Dan Simpson: Excuse me. Excuse me! Probably has headphones on.

Dan Ariely: Yeah.

Dan Simpson: Excuse me.

Dan Ariely: Hello?

Man: Yes, what's going on?

Dan Simpson: We're trying to get to the Sheraton...

Man: Sheraton is right next to you, okay.

Dan Simpson: Oh, wow, all right.

Man: You can go right through. Straight ahead, the double door.

Dan Simpson: Fabulous. Okay. Great. Thank you so much.

Dan Ariely: All right, thank you very much.

Dan Simpson: Boom forward. Atta-boy.

Dan Ariely: And how often are people this nice and give you big--

Dan Simpson: They're wonderful. I wish in some ways everybody had to travel around as I do, because I find that it brings out the best in people.

(footsteps)

Dan Ariely: So you're saying that you see the good side of humanity.

Dan Simpson: Oh yeah. I'm really lucky because I also get to walk with a lot of people. I used to teach high school English. You know, I could walk with the cafeteria worker and my students and the construction worker. You just get to have more contact with people.

Dan Ariely: So you're saying that the fact that you get to hold somebody and they get to hold you or...

Dan Simpson: Yeah.

Dan Ariely: And to guide you helps.

Dan Simpson: Yes.

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 Simpson: I get to ask people for help. I mean, I have to ask them for help, but I kind of get to ask them also. What I find is that most people are really generous and want to do the right thing. They'll walk with me if there's a really tight space or construction to get around. So I get to walk hand in hand with all kinds of people. And maybe for three blocks, we're friends.

Dan Ariely: You don't feel like you have any hesitation about asking for help?

Dan Simpson: Oh, sometimes I have to, you know, especially if it's not easy. Like when we had to shout to people running, it's like, oh, there's a little part of me, it's like, do I have to shout? But no, mostly I think I've gotten over that.

Dan Ariely: There's a kind of a basic debate between psychologists and economists. Economics is basically depicting people as very selfish. Each person just worries about themselves. And there's a question of whether we're inherently just selfish, like babies who just want things for themselves, and then society teaches us to override it, or whether society teaches us to become generous, and then selfishness just comes from time to time when we override our nature. And of course, it's very hard to figure out and there are results in both direction, but not as clear cut.

Dan Simpson: So I think when I get to situations like that, again, I'm not right on target every day. In places where I don't know, I'll take the yes over the no.

Dan Ariely: I guess, why assume the no, instead of trying...

Dan Simpson: The yes has more possibilities.

Dan Ariely: Yep.

(gentle music)

Dan Simpson: So as far as my blindness, I've been blind since birth. I can see light, so I can tell that there's light coming from in front of me.

Dan Ariely: Can you feel or see that right now there's a light on your right side?

Dan Simpson: Yeah, if I turn my head and you call my attention to it, now I notice it. But it's not as bright to me as the light coming from in front of me.

Dan Ariely: Yeah, so there's a big window in front of you and you can tell that. And then you're sitting next to quite a bright lamp on the side. And what about this other lamp that is maybe at two o'clock from where you're sitting? Now you're staring directly at it.

Dan Simpson: Yeah, no, I can't tell. I wouldn't be able to tell whether that was just sort of a periphery from the window, or I really can't. I wouldn't have noticed it. I think in some ways, because I was born blind and my acuity or lack thereof, the light perception has always been the same. I'm sure it's much easier for me than for someone who had good vision and then lost it. I think about if I were to lose my hearing, what a tailspin that would put me in. Probably even more so because I already can't see, but even so, I think just to lose a major sense, how could you not go through a period of depression? So it's interesting in terms of why people move on and other people give up. How do people come out of that kind of loss? And I wonder how I would come out of that loss, which I have not had to face. So to me, this is just what I know.

Dan Ariely: And going back to the point in time where things are difficult, what causes you to want to continue? So you could probably get some more help and do less things by yourself. How do you decide what to fight for and what to give up on?

Dan Simpson: Boy, that's the question. That's actually the line that end of a poem. I don't know why some people give up and others don't. And I don't, like recently, I was walking with Boone to a restaurant and I was waiting, a couple walked up to the restaurant. I had my hand on the door handle and discovered the place was locked. And as I turned around, I just heard the woman mouth to the guy, "He blind?" And I said, "Yes, I am." And then they got all, you know, like I wasn't, she didn't think I would even hear that. And there's some way, like, you know, what do I have to do? I don't wanna tell you like my resume and why I belong in this world and how great my life is. Or, you know, I was eating at a fast food place and some guy came over and said, you know, I feel so sorry for you. I just really, you know, I think if I were blind, I'd want to kill myself. I was like, wait a minute, you have no idea. Like, you know, then I start like saying, look, I've been to college, I've been to... I lived in Paris for a year. I ended up trying to like justify your own existence by saying, you know, I don't think I would

trade with you. I wouldn't trade with you. But to have that every once in a while when you're just like really feeling great and have these reminders. But I just know there are just so many blessings that I have in terms of my wife, art and music. And there's just so many, so many things. I hope that I go out kicking and screaming.

(upbeat music)

Dan Ariely: So what do you actually do? You play music, you write.

Dan Simpson: Yeah. Poetry is what I feel is my home base, but I've been working on this memoir, I write personal essays, I have a blog. And then I have a part-time job working for the Library of Congress doing tech support. There's a program where blind people can download talking books and Braille books, digital braille books from the Internet. And then the rest of the time I have peer counseling. I'm in a choir of about 120 to 140 voices.

Dan Ariely: Dan, tell me a little bit about your childhood. You were born where?

Dan Simpson: It's born in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, about three hours northeast of Philadelphia. I had a twin brother, identical twin brother.

Dan Ariely: You were both born blind.

Dan Simpson: Born blind, yeah. We were in the middle between two sisters. Our family moved to the Philadelphia area when we were three and a half, because at that time, 1955, pretty much everybody sent their blind children to residential schools for the blind. We were basically left there on a Sunday night, and Friday afternoon I'd be picked up, and as a four-year-old, I don't think I had a sense of really how long that would be.

(Somber music)

Dan Simpson: We were living in open dorms with house mothers who had maybe 25 or 30 boys to look after. They didn't have a lot of time for hand-holding or people crying about being homesick. And I didn't realize until later in life how much that affected me.

Dan Ariely: And up to age 4, do you feel love and caring from your family?

Dan Simpson: Oh, very much so, yeah. Yeah.

Dan Ariely: And what was their decision to send you away?

Dan Simpson: It was the norm, but my mom was born in a farming family out in the country, and my dad was very much a working class guy. And I think the agencies at that time basically said, "This is the only place where they're going to learn Braille," which was super important. It was sold, I think, as pretty much as, like, "This is the way to go." Not getting to grow up with my sisters and my parents. I don't think we had the same appreciation of family.

Dan Ariely: So on Fridays, they pick you up from the school, and then on Sunday night, they drop you back, and is the picking up happy and the dropping off feeling like they're shipping you out?

Dan Simpson: Absolutely, yeah. There's a story that we grabbed onto our mother's skirt when we were four, when she left. And I still don't really quite remember it, but I'm sure I would have done it. And I think there's just a disconnect. How could people who I know love me do this? I think later I could put them together a little better and say, "I wish there was another way." And I guess they wish there was another way, but I guess there isn't another way until... our friend Ward made the leap.

(Music)

Dan Simpson: So when we get to the end of eighth grade, it's 1966. A friend of ours who was in the same kindergarten class made the decision that he would try public school. And he was the first person I knew, and I think maybe the first person in our county, to try public school. And there was no mainstreaming, there was no legislation to ensure an education for blind people in a public school. But he is very smart and creative and took a lot of initiative. So he had what it took and he made it a success and we got very excited about trying it. So we shadowed him for a day and there was a person called his itinerant teacher and she helped facilitate his transition. And so we stayed in touch and one of the smartest things we did was to get his itinerant teacher to talk to our parents because I think having a sighted adult who could answer their questions and reassure them really turned the page.

Dan Ariely: And then when you get to eighth grade and you move to a regular high school, you leave the safety of the school for the blind where you have everything is set up in an easy way. Then you decide to take a risk and go to public school. And what drives you?

Dan Simpson: I wanted to know what it would be like to live at home like most people my age did. To be able to eat my mom's cooking every night. And I think there was a certain amount of, we're kind of sheltered here. I didn't have to just stay with this small pool of people. I could swim in the bigger pool. And I wanted to be challenged academically, I think.

(gentle music)

Dan Ariely: There's a paradox in economics where Samuelson, the famous economist, comes to one of his friends and he says, "I have a coin here. If it's heads, you win \$120. If it's tails, you lose \$100." And he says, "Do you want to play this game?" But most people say, "I don't want to take this bet." Because losing \$100 is really miserable. Gaining 120 is nice, but doesn't make up for it. So you say, "I don't want to take this." And then he says, "What if you play this game 1,000 times?" One after the other, and people say, "Of course, yes." Because of course when you play 1,000 times, you realize it's a wonderful bet to play. You know, you would win lots and lots of money. Then if you say, "What if every day I offered you whether you want to play this game today?" And every day you looked at it as just one time, and every day you said, "I don't want to take this risk. I don't want to take this risk." Then you would have a whole life of not taking the risks you want to take. We don't take enough risk. We think about every day as if it's a one day. Every day we don't want to suffer. So in the name of not suffering, we're also eliminating our ability to have real high pleasure.

And I'm thinking a lot about kind of how do we get people to act in their long-term well-being, which often means taking more risk on a day-to-day basis. But I think this problem is particularly acute for people with disabilities, because we get more connected to the environment that is comfortable for us. The downside for us is actually larger. For you, going to a place you don't know, you're more likely to get lost. I have a hard time with all kinds of physical things. It could be painful, it could be uncomfortable. I mean, there's just more on the downside. And I wonder whether people with disabilities are even worse in terms of not living life to the fullest, not taking enough risk.

Dan Simpson: I do feel this tension all the time between the risk and the comfort. If I have a strong enough home base, I can fly out from that.

Dan Ariely: Overall, high school is a good experience?

Dan Simpson: What I would say was very good academically. I think it really pushed me and Dave to a whole other level. It was pretty good socially, but I was on the edge a little bit on the periphery. High school was the training wheels, and college was when I really started to ride the bike. My first year I did what a lot of freshmen did. I went to fraternity parties, I got drunk. I was like, "Okay, I've done that, and I wonder what would happen if I just really love even more deeply literature and music," I was double majoring, and I didn't have time to fool around. And I didn't want to so much, but I did start a long-term relationship with a girlfriend in my sophomore year, and I started feeling like I'm really living a normal life.

Dan Ariely: My story is very different. I was injured in my last year in high school, and kind of got plucked out of society for almost three years. I was in hospital for a very long time. And when I came back, I went to university, and I felt very different from other people. When I started going to university, I had pressure bandages. These are tights that I was wearing all over my body, holes for my eyes and ears and mouth and nostrils, but that was it. I had gloves and a long shirt and trousers and boots and a head mask on my head. So I looked like a brownish Superman-like thing, you know. And it was very, very tight. It was supposed to kind of hold on the skin and create pressure so that the scars have pressure against them and they don't grow and deform and so on. But it was very hot, itchy, and also constrained my movement. I really looked so strange. And actually for me, college was more separation and not being part of the environment. The separation from society felt very, very acute. I was, in class, I couldn't write. I would just sit there. During the break, all the kids would sit on the grass and talk to each other. It was too hot for me, plus I was not allowed to be in the sun. See, as long as I was in the hospital, and as long as the people who came to visit me knew me from before, and it wasn't my term and my time, I felt at least a little bit in the social circle. But moving into university, all of a sudden I was on somebody else's turf, and I was not part of the social circle.

Dan Simpson: What kept you going?

Dan Ariely: So I also discovered the joy of academia. I enjoyed the research side, I enjoyed reading, I enjoyed that part of it. And I actually remember thinking of whether I even want to be part of society. And I had a couple of years when I decided that I just am going to learn how to be a monk. That I'm going to try and think myself into not having any sexual desires or passion, that I'm going to separate myself from my body, that I'm going to live as an

academic in that part that was still me, but not surrender to the part of my body that betrayed me. It gave me strength to fight much harder in physical therapy. This decision, I think, to not surrender to my body actually gave me extra strength to work against my body. So it's wonderful that for you, college felt like you were finally in with society. For me it was the lowest point.

Dan Simpson: Yeah.

Dan Ariely: You've had a life of art from music to writing to poetry. And it allows you a life of flexibility to work at your own pace, to have a lot of control. But of course it's an important outlet for how you're thinking, what you're feeling. Do you think you would have gotten to art anyway? Or do you think it's an important outlet for you to reflect on your own life?

Dan Simpson: Yeah, I don't know what life would have been like if I could have done more athletic things or driven a car and had that kind of freedom or flown a plane. I might have loved that. But then, yeah, there is something about writing where it's really getting to see where my mind goes. I get caught sometimes in the ambivalence of the place of art. Like, how much is it really about the personal? Can art change things in the world? Or is it just its own thing and should be left to be its own thing? I know art is what keeps me in the present. It's what keeps me really engaged with my heart and mind. Is there a point where that can flip over into escaping the world? I talked to a fellow writer about this once and she said, "You know, I think if you want to change the world, go do something other than writing, then you can come write about it." I'm not quite that clear about the boundaries, because I do think that sometimes you might say something in your writing that resonates for somebody else, and that could be enough, because you don't know what the ripple is after that.

Dan Ariely: So how much of your art is for you to think, process? It has nothing to do with other people. There's a wonderful psychologist, Penny Baker, who has shown in a lot of work that writing is an amazing tool to process information, and it's one of the best ways to get people to get over traumas. And you get people to write something on their traumas, and it kind of contains it and creates a distance from it. I remember reading much of his writing, or some of his writing in grad school, and then I decided to write about my own injury and I sat for the next semester and I wrote maybe an hour a day biography of my injury. And then when I finished, I printed it on really nice paper. I went to the art department. And I got somebody to teach me how to bind books and how to make a cover. And I created a cover and I bounded this book and I had one copy and I put it on my shelf. And it was this feeling of, "Okay, this chapter is over. Here it is sitting on the shelf. I'm ready to do other things." I never wanted to show it to anybody. I never wanted to, you know, it was just for its own sake.

(Dramatic music)

Dan Ariely: So in your case, how much of what you write is of the type of thing that you say, I just want to think about this, whether it's history or what's happening now or?

Dan Simpson: It's changed. I would say right now that I do it for my own sake. I hope that when I write that I'll make connections or see things in a different way than I did before I wrote. And so it's a wonderful perspective to try and focus on the positives. But at the same time, you have all kinds of challenges on a daily level and all kinds of negative memories

and experiences and it's tough. How do you focus on the good side and not think about the bad?

Dan Simpson: This peer counseling I do, I usually get a session or two a week. And basically the way it works is I give you 45 minutes or an hour of time and then you give me the time. The goal is really to go back and feel the places where you got hurt. And so I get to cry, I get to be scared, I get to be embarrassed, I get to be exuberant, basically just to go back and feel those things. And the goal is to be in the moment and in the present the rest of the time.

(Acoustic music)

Dan Simpson: There are still painful reminders that I'm different. I don't mind being blind. In fact, it's given me some real gifts. I think there's a way in which people relate to me at their best when I'm traveling. And I think I've learned something about listening to people and sort of processing the places where I got hurt. And having a chance to go back and work through them has really helped me to feel very pleased with my life and how I fit in the society. People have often asked me if they could do something today that might succeed in giving you sight, but you might also lose your light perception. Would you do it? And I used to say, undoubtedly yes, because I want to experience as much as I can. But you know, now my identity is, this is who I am. And I've read and heard from people who've tried those early experiments, how disorienting it was and how they just needed to close their eyes and go back to being blind for certain parts of the day just to feel normal for a while. I don't know now. I love my life, and there's a part of me like, I'm not sure I would mess with it.

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.