

Dan Ariely



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Episode 2 - Gregg Mozgala

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

Gregg Mozgala: Bend your knees and then bring your knees together. Now, take your tailbone and bring that up towards the sky with your knees going down. Now take your sternum, right? And point that up to the ceiling. As you start to walk now, imagine that with every step, you're fighting, actively fighting gravity. So with every step, you have to fight falling down. Imagine you're trying to stop yourself from falling down a flight of stairs. The momentum, you can't stop. Like you're trying to break yourself, but you can't. Running downhill.

Dan Ariely: Oh, I see, I see. And I see, so that helps. So you're running.

Gregg Mozgala: Right, so make sure that sternum's going up.

Dan Ariely: Yeah, right. I think that going downhill was very helpful as a metaphor. So I'm going to stop with your permission.

Gregg Mozgala: Yeah, of course.

Dan Ariely: I don't like it so much. I don't like it as much as the regular one.

Gregg Mozgala: So what did you notice?

Dan Ariely: First of all, it's just consuming all my attention.

Gregg Mozgala: Uh-huh.

Dan Ariely: It's very hard, and then I didn't, and so there's the awkwardness and positioning of the body. But I think the stopping from falling it's a very unpleasant... It's just an unpleasant feeling.

Gregg Mozgala: Yeah.

Dan Ariely: I can see why you call it stress. The other thing was this guy passing us... looked at me very strangely.

Gregg Mozgala: Sure, sure.

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, 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.

Gregg Mozgala: Cerebral Palsy is a neurological disorder that results in abnormal muscle control. My gait is different than most. So I'm falling, right, with almost every step. So to counter that, my upper body compensates by going up and back. I mean, I would describe it as, you know, a human velociraptor. I'm always moving through an incredible amount of tension. I move through the world pushing through tension all the time. Right now, it's interesting. It's like just talking. My feet are gripping the floor to an incredible degree.

Dan Ariely: Outside of feeling the tension in your feet, are you aware that you're tense? Or are you just experiencing through your reaction of your body?

Gregg Mozgala: For the most part, you're just sort of living and sitting and you're sort of tension in the body all the time. I mean, I was born with this, so I have gained sort of a mastery and a control, right, which is the chaos of me, you know, walking. I've sort of developed another sense. I'm super hyper aware and hyper vigilant of all my surroundings, and that includes people looking at me or clocking my gait or how I move. I was much more concerned about that when I was younger. It occupied so much of my sort of emotional life and it took me a long time to realize that 99.9% of the people that I come across on a daily basis outside in social situations probably don't care or don't have time.

Dan Ariely: This is actually, it's a very important psychological phenomenon that people don't always comprehend. So there's something called the spotlight effect. And the spotlight effect is the idea that we pay a lot of attention to ourselves. You're acutely aware of every step you make and what we wear and what's our hair do and so on. And because we pay so much attention to ourselves, we think that other people do so as well. But other people are busy with themselves. So in one study they took undergrads at Cornell and they sent them into these fraternity parties and they dressed them up with a Barry Manilow t-shirt.

(piano music)

Dan Ariely: Barry Manilow is kind of a schmaltz singer.

Gregg Mozgala: Yeah.

Dan Ariely: Not the pride of any undergrads, Cornell, undergrads will be proud of. And then when they came out, they said, how many people noticed you? And the kids said, you know, "everybody noticed me. My social life is kind of over. There's no recovery from walking around with the Barry Manilow t-shirt." And then they went and they asked people in the party, how many of you observe this Johnny, whoever it is, with whatever he was wearing, do you have you noticed what he was wearing? Almost nobody noticed.

Gregg Mozgala: Right.

Dan Ariely: We all do it, right? We all pay attention to what we do and we think other people do as well. I think that's the reason the fashion industry is alive because otherwise would we spend so much money and time and attention. But I think with disability you have this extra attention.

Gregg Mozgala: More people are looking, more people are paying attention. So it is real, it is a fact of my life. I had a long time for a number of years being like, "Well, I do that too." You know, or, "I have that issue too." And it's like, "No, you don't. "Not like me." You know, because it's that other layer. And getting people to understand that was really hard. Like, there's this huge, I think, empathetic barrier to somebody who doesn't have a disability or some sort of very visible, physical issue. It can be really hard.

Dan Ariely: The experience of going out for somebody who looks different, it's a real barrier that people have to overcome. I'm betting that way too many people They stay in their house way too many hours of the day.

Gregg Mozgala: Sure, that's probably true. Sometimes I do that, you know?

Dan Ariely: So I think that you don't see disability partially because the disabled are in their apartments.

Gregg Mozgala: That's true.

Dan Ariely: When I go to places that have big crowds of people I don't know, I make different calculus between going out to eat and eating in my hotel room. Given the cost and benefit, given the unpleasantness of being watched and feeling different and being reminded that you're not the same.

Gregg Mozgala: Yeah.

Dan Ariely: I think it's a very unpleasant reminder.

Gregg Mozgala: Yeah, of course. But that's... But got stuff to do. That's a choice then. You know, you can choose to be an active participant. And there are, don't get me wrong, there are days when that wins, you know.

Dan Ariely: Yeah. So think about this woman that we just passed in the red dress. She started talking to the person sitting across from her. As we were passing, she stopped, she looked, she waited until we passed, and then it looked like she was resuming her conversation.

Gregg Mozgala: Yeah, that happens all the time.

Dan Ariely: How would you like people to react?

Gregg Mozgala: Ideally to me it goes back to the acknowledgement. I never used to acknowledge someone looking at me.

Dan Ariely: So this guy for example, just kind of actively look the other way to avoid..

Gregg Mozgala: Yeah, that guy's an asshole.

(Laughter)

Gregg Mozgala: Now what I do, I try to say "Hey." That lets them know that I see them looking at me I see them...

Dan Ariely: And that also you human you're capable of human sounds.

Gregg Mozgala: And it's a very simple simple, sort of basic human interaction that says, "I'm here and I see you." I mean ideally I'd be like, "Hi, would you like to go out to dinner with me?" You know, like, that would be nice.

Dan Ariely: That would be tiring.

Gregg Mozgala: I think hay might be. I've eaten six times today.

(Laughter)

Dan Ariely: How does somebody with an observable physical disability chooses acting school? Are you just looking for trouble?

Gregg Mozgala: Yeah, I mean, it's a certain kind of insanity, I think. I grew up, I'm the third of four siblings, and we played a lot of sports. My mother was a big athlete. Sports and athletics were a very big thing in our family. My parents both demanded participation. So I swam and I wrestled and I played soccer and it was incredibly frustrating losing. I couldn't run as fast, I couldn't jump as high. Around age 12, I wasn't able to keep up anymore. That divide became very clear. In seventh grade, like I signed up for a speech and drama class. And one of the first things we had to do was pick a dramatic speech from literature or a play, and I chose the "Friends, Romans, Countrymen" speech from Julius Caesar. And something happened. I felt this really powerful shift. Somehow people were looking at me for a different reason, they were listening, and I had control of my audience for the first time. And I think that was really seductive. Like that was power.

Dan Ariely: When you act in high school, it's a hobby. But when you go to college, that's already becoming a vocation.

Gregg Mozgala: Yeah, it's a choice.

Dan Ariely: Are you at that point concerned with being a disabled actor? Or are you not thinking long term?

Gregg Mozgala: No, my identity as a disabled person really didn't develop until late high school, early college. So it wasn't something that I claimed.

Dan Ariely: But when you went to BU and you started acting school, what kind of career did you think you would have?

Gregg Mozgala: I mean, I felt like I'm going to be a classically trained actor and work hard and I should be able to play any role that my type is right for.

Dan Ariely: So here you are and people stare at you for all kinds of reasons. And you're on stage and people are staring at you for all kinds of reasons, plus the dramatic role. And do you think that at that moment you could take the people's gaze and interpret it as if it's not for the other reasons, but just for the dramatic goal?

Gregg Mozgala: That's been really interesting because people with cerebral palsy, like in the interest of self-preservation and self-survival, right, you're trying to convince people that it doesn't exist all the time. That takes an incredible amount of energy. Every character I ever play is gonna have cerebral palsy, is gonna have my particular gait. There's nothing I can do about that. To be a good actor, you have to bring your whole humanity and whole self. Like, my disability is part of my humanity. I access all my emotions through this body with this particular nervous system. To not acknowledge that, trying to put a lid on that, is not bringing my full self and attention to the character and the role. There would be moments where my leg would start shaking rapidly on stage and I pretend like it wasn't happening. Everybody, I can see it, everybody can see it. So if I had just acknowledged it as myself and the character, would have been totally fine. I'm trying to do that more in my life. If I can do that more in my life, I can obviously do that more in my art.

Dan Ariely: You start acting school with some self-delusion in your—

Gregg Mozgala: Uh-huh. I think all actors have self-delusion.

Dan Ariely: All actors, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. But maybe in addition to the standard self-delusion, you have some specific ones about disability, and then lots of things happen in school. You graduate, you move to New York, and you start looking.

Gregg Mozgala: Yeah, I started trying to pursue this as a viable career.

Dan Ariely: And it's been a while, but you have a more serious problem because most actors become waiters, which is a little harder for you.

Gregg Mozgala: Yeah, carrying trays of food or liquids across crowded rooms, it was never an option for me.

Dan Ariely: The last year or so have been particularly interesting.

Gregg Mozgala: Yeah, I've been really, really fortunate to be involved with some really great projects. I just did a play in Massachusetts at the Williamstown Theatre Festival, which is going to be off-Broadway in the spring. I'm excited about that. But it's a disabled character. It's a character with severe cerebral palsy.

Dan Ariely: And how do you feel about playing a character with...

Gregg Mozgala: I think it's awesome. No actor can play every role, period. But I think until disabled actors have an opportunity to play themselves as disabled people, the needle is never going to move as far as progress. More opportunities for disabled actors, more visibility, more stories. This particular play that I was just in and I'm going to be in the spring, it's awesome to play a role that is closer to my experience. I understand that character. I understand what the tension in his body feels like. I have been around people like him. I'm modeling him after people in my life. And I can articulate my experience through the character to the director or my other castmates. So that's really wonderful.

Dan Ariely: So you're saying it's so internal, it's such a big part of your life, that it's hard for you to come to any role without that part of you.

Gregg Mozgala: It's impossible. I feel like before I get to just playing any role, I have to show people, the greater public and decision makers in the industry, that yes, I am a disabled individual. So like, see that first and then say, "Oh, you know what would be really interesting in this role? Gregg Mozgala."

Dan Ariely: I think that this idea that you... This is about acceptance, which I guess is something that you got over the 16 years of acting.

Gregg Mozgala: Again, I think it's just out of the interest of self-preservation too, because again, it's exhausting to be constantly denying something that is such a reality. I'm really interested in the, again, being born with a disability and acquiring one. I think there's a very distinct difference. That's not really something that has been really talked about and disseminated in a large way, for me anyway. And it's fascinating to me. Can you tell me, is there any sort of major way that your life trajectory changed as a result?

Dan Ariely: I haven't thought about this before. First of all, I do think there's a big difference. And so there's something called counterfactual thinking. You just think about another alternative reality. And I think that if somebody like me acquired this ability later, then there's lots of counterfactual thinking. So you could say what if happened, you didn't have this trauma before birth. For me, the question of what could have happened, I think could be much more salient. But the other thing is that there's lots of things that I do and I remember how they felt before, even though I've been injured for many, many years. There's some things that I just do now and it just feels wrong. So my body has a very different memory from something, like movement. You know, I'm moving also in a way, not as constrained as you, but I have all kinds of constraints of movement. But my body kind of remembers fluid movement. And I just can't execute it. But that memory of what fluid movement is about is still with me. So when I'm unable to produce a fluid movement, the contrast is very jarring. Somehow that memory of how things should be, like my brain still executes the right command for the body to move in a certain way, just it doesn't work.

Gregg Mozgala: That's the same thing with me, right? I feel like my body understands flow and grace and like moving with ease, right? But again, this system on top of it is changing that.

Dan Ariely: So you feel that the command you execute in your brain are fluid. It's just that it doesn't get executed this way.

Gregg Mozgala: Right, yeah. And I see it all around me. I know I should be able to walk in that way, right? I learned to walk while my brain was still damaged, right? So that's why I think I developed this different way of moving.

Dan Ariely: So you have a theater company?

Gregg Mozgala: Yeah. The name of the company is the Apothetae. It translates roughly to "the place of exposure." There was a disabled playwright who passed away 10 years ago named John Belluso. And he wrote a play that I was in. And that character mentions this place, the Apothetae. And the Apothetae was a real place in ancient Greece, in Sparta. It was a chasm, a hole in the ground, where they would leave disabled and deformed infants to the elements. I want to re-appropriate that phrase, "the place of exposure," and shed light on issues and history of "the disabled experience". And I put the disabled experience in quotes because I don't know what that is necessarily. I'm interested in exploring that and figuring out what that is. Every other sort of marginalized group, they all used theater as a vehicle to tell stories of their own history and experience. So you have playwrights like August Wilson, David Henry Hwang, Tina Howe, you know, that bring these stories to light. It starts in theater, right? And then mainstream media sort of catches on. We've been producing steadily, you know, on small scales, but the work is getting out there.

Dan Ariely: And it's interesting that the topics you want to explore are social rather than internal. For example, I would love to explore how to live peacefully with daily pain. I would like to think about how to feel a sense of belonging. But the topics that you bring are much more society than, like if you think about pain, it's very much an internal struggle in how to overcome that.

Gregg Mozgala: Yeah, I think all those things can be encompassed in a play, in a dramatic narrative. Those two things you just mentioned are, I think, universal themes, right? So I think maybe the narratives that I'm going to tell feature disabled characters, but they're looking for the same things as anybody else. So yes, I am interested. I am interested in the bigger picture and the smaller, you know. So micro, macro. But I think theater, that's why theater works. It can really, theater can be very effective, you know, to get those messages and issues across and be entertaining.

Dan Ariely: If you wrote all the pieces of your personality identity and you ranked all of them in list of kind of the biggest determinant of who you are, where would the cerebral palsy be?

Gregg Mozgala: I think right now, where I am right now, it's pretty high on the list. Because again, I'm trying to actively practice acknowledgement and engagement with it and with other people, you know, personally and professionally. This I think goes back to that spotlight question, right? Like that idea of it might be higher on a list for me, but not high for my mother or my girlfriend.

Dan Ariely: So is it fair to say that you're accepting it as part of your identity, but not as a force that dictates how you live?

Gregg Mozgala: Yes. That's a constant negotiation, though. It's not like I've... I feel like it's gonna be constantly evolving. Like, right now, within the past couple of years, I've found a new way to sort of operate and be in relationship to my body, my disability. Five years from now, like, it might be incredibly difficult again.

Dan Ariely: I can see the beauty in acceptance, but it also saddens me a little bit. That the notion of acceptance is kind of accepting a limitation. And when I was in the rehabilitation centre, there was a period where the scars shrink. There was the initial period where you have no skin, and then there's transplant, I had no skin, then there were transplants and then the scars were kind of healed in a way that all the skin was, like new skin was growing, but that new skin is very strange, it's very thin, it's highly scarred and then that new skin starts contracting and I could sit on a chair with my elbows bent and then if I even did it for an hour and a half, I couldn't straighten my elbows. And I would have to slowly, slowly, slowly work to stretch the skin back. And if I sat for an hour and a half, I would have to maybe stretch it for maybe three hours to get back. You know how the kids do Indian burns when you kind of have... This is kind of the feeling. And sometimes I couldn't do it. And if I couldn't stretch it all the way, they would put me again in the operating room and they would cut the skin and put some more skin to fill the gaps and do it. And I also learned how to sleep with my arms stretched and my neck a little bit outside of the bed. So my neck was fully stretched because if my neck was like regular on the pillow, the skin on my neck would shrink and after, you know, seven hours of sleep, I couldn't get it back. So I was like a Jesus position, plus my neck kind of a little bit outside of the mattress.

Gregg Mozgala: Do you still have to do those things?

Dan Ariely: It's slower, it's slower. I still have to stretch and I still don't have full, like I lost some range. I just had a surgery, since you saw me, I had two surgeries to try and expand my range of motion. So it's an ongoing problem but it's much slower than it used to be. Like an hour and a half now is not the issue. But I had this feeling, especially at that time, so the moment the wounds were open, it was one thing. Then the wounds were closed. I was so relieved. I felt like we achieved something. And then the contraction started and I felt my body was really betraying me because it was just fighting against me. And I had this very strong feeling of my body is not me. And not want to give in to my body. That my body is doing all these terrible things, but in some sense it's not the real me. That the real me is inside.

Gregg Mozgala: Yeah.

Dan Ariely: And I'm still the same. The thought was that I kind of don't want to give in to my body. And it gave me the extra kind of strength to fight back.

Gregg Mozgala: Sure.

Dan Ariely: And from that perspective, I kind of don't like the acceptance. I understand acceptance, but I also... don't want the giving up of saying that there's no way for you not to bring... disability to any role.

Gregg Mozgala: It's hard, it's hard being in this body. Like, it's incredibly difficult on a daily basis. It's anxiety-ridden. It makes me not want to be around people. It makes me not want to be around myself. I don't know if I'm ever going to truly accept it. Maybe a better word is "acknowledgement." Like, if I can acknowledge this to myself, if I can acknowledge it to someone else, like a loved one or a coworker or whoever, like, it's the act of acknowledgement. I think that's different from acceptance. That's been harder. The act of acknowledgement is something that I've found incredibly difficult. And that's something that I have to practice. I don't think I'm ever gonna truly accept having a disability. There's always gonna be a part of me that's like, if not for this thing, I would be able to do this and this and this and this and this. But what can I do? Like, I can't-- it's not going to go away. So I either have to find a way to deal with it that helps me get through my day and helps me live fulfilling relationships in my life, or I'm going to be lost.

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 Dechtar 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.