Dan Ariely

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Dan's books

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- The Honest Truth About Dishonesty
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- The Upside of Irrationality

Episode 6 - Ryan DeRoche

ROBIN ELDRIDGE: You are listening to The Upside of Down with Dan Ariely.

DAN: Shall we go for a little ride together?

RYAN: Yeah, definitely. We're going to go through some trees here over some roots and we're going to get a little bit steeper here before we get into it.

DAN: Can you do this trail?

RYAN: Oh yeah.

DAN: You can do this? Wow.

RYAN: I try to find trails that are more challenging for me in terms of difficulty rather than speed. A lot of trails that I live near have beautiful views, a few ponds and lakes that you can stop and you know really kind of take it all in. I have a few little meditation spots if you will where I stop and just kind of reflect on life. Think of new goals to accomplish and figure out what I'm gonna do next with life.

DAN: 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.

DAN: So Ryan, there are many things about you, but one of the things that are very hard to miss is that you're a quadriplegic, and you said you are paralyzed from C4?

RYAN: C4, yeah.

DAN: C4, which means what?

RYAN: Essentially my chest down is paralyzed. Luckily, when I was injured, it was an incomplete injury, which means the spinal cord was not severed. I have a lot of function in my upper body. My left hand has quite a bit of dexterity, so I do a lot with my left hand now. I'm able to feed myself, able to do a little bit of writing, do a little bit of drawing too now. Able to do a little bit with my right hand too, but it's not as functional. It's more a fist all the time, and so grasping is easy, but actually using my fingers and stuff is pretty difficult with my right. I do have some function in my legs.

DAN: So when you say some function in your legs, what does that mean?

RYAN: I'm able to move my feet around, wiggle my toes. I'm actually able to walk a little bit. The most I've walked with forearm crutches or Loftstrand crutches as they're called, about a quarter of a mile. Took me about three and a half hours though. And I pretty much slept for like four days. So it took a lot out of me.

RYAN: Ever since I was born and could get on a bike, I rode around like crazy on the streets and stuff and really loved the idea of being able to go on adventures. You could really experience the world around you a lot better on a bicycle than you could in any other form of transportation. I've always been a person that likes to seek out things that I've never seen before, and the bicycle really, really allowed me to do that. As I got older, I was riding six days, seven days a week. And that was it. I was hooked. I knew that I wanted to do it for the rest of my life. I started racing in my sophomore year of high school, downhill mountain biking and cross-country.

DAN: And your parents, are they enthusiastic, supportive, apprehensive?

RYAN: Yes, they've always been very supportive, but they were a bit apprehensive about me doing such a sport. They both would cart me all the way up to the mountains and they would be on the sidelines watching me go down. Yeah, they were very, very supportive. I kept on moving up in the classes because I was placing well enough. I never made it really far. I never made any money doing it. It was more an amateur, weekend warrior type thing. But I loved it. I loved doing it. I did eventually stop racing and focused on having fun riding. Riding at any moment that I possibly could, I was on a bicycle. I applied for a job with Trek Travel, a luxury cycling vacation company. Traveling, fixing bikes, seeing awesome places, seeing a lot of the big races, like the Tour de France and Tour of California. And it was a dream come true.

RYAN: It was March 6, 2011. About a week before that, I arrived in Spain. Beautiful summer day like today and was riding home on a bit of trail that I had been on before a very low-key walking path. Don't know what I hit. Went right over the handlebars. Could see my legs still up in the air, but I didn't feel them hit the ground. When I landed, I landed directly on the back of my neck. The C4 vertebrae got crushed at burst. It's called a burst fracture. So it exploded in my neck. I immediately knew what was wrong. I knew what happened. Being into extreme sports, I know the dangers of what happens, and this is not good. There was an older lady. I was able to explain, please don't move me. I hurt my neck. I can't move. Please call for help. She put her jacket over me and we waited for the EMTs to come. The pain was excruciating. I woke up going into the hospital from the ambulance.

DAN: Are you worried about living versus not?

RYAN: I don't think I was really concerned about that. I don't think I was really worried about dying. I was more just worried about the future and what it held. I definitely was really afraid.

DAN: Did you kind of have some certainty that there's some paralysis in your future? Or were you still hoping?

RYAN: At that point, I was like, I'm gonna fight as hard as I can. I don't care what the doctors say. I'm gonna be walking again. There are a lot of people that think about suicide and of course it crosses your mind after a traumatic situation like this. You know, I think the thought that went through my head was, am I gonna have such a horrible life that am I really going to wanna be alive?

DAN: About two years ago, somebody called me out of the blue and he was also a quadriplegic. And he called me on the, a little bit after the one year mark of his injury. It became clear that he wanted to talk about suicide. And he hated the books of all the people who said their injuries was a blessing. He just hated that with a passion. And he asked me what do I think about it. I said, you know, you can't change your mind after that. So I said, let's figure out some other path. And we would talk about every week. We made specific plans. It didn't really stick. And this was going on for about six months. And then I got a call from his sister that he committed suicide. So he kind of hid pain medications. And you know, that process, we've talked for quite a while over this period, really made me wonder about what are the personality cases, social support, environment, that get some people to be unable but to see only the dark side and lose any kind of joy and just focus on the darkness all the time? And what gets some people to be able to find joy? And you seem to be a tribute to that human capacity.

RYAN: I never thought about, "Well, I'm gonna take a bunch of pills. This is the end." Once I got over that initial thought that, "Okay, even though I'm paralyzed, even though my life is going to be different, I'm alive. You know, I still can do things. I'm still young." I think there are a lot of people that think about suicide, and there are quite a few that do do it, that go through with it.

(soft music)

DAN: So when did you decide to try cycling back?

RYAN: I had a couple of friends that actually brought me out into the woods in a wheelchair, a manual wheelchair that was developed for rougher terrain. They just pushed me around on a trail that I used to ride all the time in the Fells Reservation.

(mellow music)

I was like, I have to find a bike. I have to be able to do this on my own. I don't care if it's not with my legs or my arms. I need to be able to get out in the woods and enjoy it on my own the way that I used to. I'm the first in the US that I know about that has this bike. There are very few people, quadriplegic or paralyzed, that are willing to put themselves in harm's way.

DAN: So we have a very fancy bike here.

RYAN: Yes, it's full suspension, so all four wheels have independent suspension.

DAN: Actually it has six wheels.

RYAN: It does. It has four big wheels and two little ones for transport, yep.

DAN: And then it weighs more than a regular bike.

RYAN: About 350 pounds. Has a motor in the back, drives the two rear wheels. Very big motor, so it's very powerful.

DAN: And if you went on the road, how fast can you go?

RYAN: It's about nine miles an hour.

DAN: You know, I'm kind of wondering about wide biking. If I think about all the things that I did, I used to play tennis. Now, of course, I can't hold the racket anymore. My kids wanted to play, so I tried. Every time I do it, it just reminds me about the difference. Every movement I have in my brain, the way that the movement should be, and I just can't execute. And this gap between what I should be doing and what comes out is just frustrating. Like wouldn't you, wouldn't you prefer to pick a different sport? Like something you don't have the contrast? I mean, I understand the love for nature and the desire to be outside in the same way, But does it also come with some pain of saying

things could have been different?

RYAN: You know, I don't think about it every time I'm on the bike. It's usually when someone posts on Facebook or one of the other social media sites that they're going for a big group ride. And I know that if I went with people, they would probably slow down for me, but I could never ride the way that they really want to ride. that's probably the most frustrating, and that's definitely the gap that I feel. Why not pick another sport? I know that all the sports that I would have to choose, I would have to adapt in some way, for better or for worse. And why not go back to what I love? And I certainly can't change the chemistry that I have for bikes. It's a part of me, and I don't think I'd really be able to enjoy another sport as much as I do.

RYAN: Something that I used to do before my injury, and I'm trying to do now, is getting people back out in the woods and on bikes like mine. And I didn't really understand it until last year when a friend of mine put that in perspective, what I used to do before my injury and why I'm doing what I'm doing now. It's because I want people to share in what I love. Nature is healing. Doing, just doing the thing that you love, never mind just nature, but doing the thing that you love and finding a place for yourself is healing. So if I can get people that, even if they weren't a mountain biker before, if I can get them out of their chairs and doing something that's different from what they know every day and get them out of that feeling of being trapped in their body and trapped in a wheelchair or trapped in some sort of apparatus that they don't feel as though that they belong.

DAN: So I think everybody has kind of a perception of what paralyzed means. But what are the things that kind of define the challenges of your daily life?

RYAN: Bowel and bladder issues.

DAN: Yeah.

RYAN: You know, when you're able-bodied, the things that really control your day, I think would be, you know, just having a headache or something like that. But just in general, my day-to-day life revolves around making sure that my bladder doesn't overfill and cause more health issues. At the beginning of my injury, I decided to not go with an indwelling catheter and decided to go with the intermittent catheters so I could still control my bladder. It's been a slow road of getting control back, but over the years it has gotten better. I have gotten a little bit more control.

DAN: You chose to give up convenience and then trying to gain some control. I wonder if there's a symptom there for other things.

RYAN: Yeah, I don't know.

DAN: One of the most depressing studies ever was a study in what's called learned helplessness. I don't know if you know this, but they took two dogs and they warned the dog with a bell and then gave him electrical shock. Bell electrical shock, bell electrical shock. The second dog was what's called "yoked". They were in a different room, they couldn't hear the bell but they got shock in the same time. So there's two dogs getting shocks. One knows when it's coming, the other one doesn't. Then you put them each in another contraption, and it's a bigger room with a barrier in the middle. And the dog can jump over it. It's not easy, but they can jump over it. And what they do now is they flash a light, and then the shock on the side where the dog is will give them an electrical shock. But the other side, on the other side of the fence, on the low fence, doesn't give electrical shock. And the question is, will the dog learn that every time they see a light, they should jump over the fence? And what they find is that the first dog with the bell learns it. They kind of explore the space, they get some shocks, they try things, they learn that if they jump over the fence, the other side is safe and they keep on doing it. The second dog, the yolk dog, basically doesn't explore the space, they just sit on the floor kind of whimpering. And that's the notion of learned helplessness. If things just happen to us and we don't see cause and effect, like the second dog basically did not know what was coming. Like, bad things were just coming at them without knowing what was going on. And we lose this sense of understanding how the world works and control, we kind of lose the zest for living, in their case also the zest for discovering how to live better. And I think there's lots of things that you kind of feel trapped in life. And being in a hospital bed is certainly one of those, and I remember the fact that they decided to get my blood work every morning at 4:30 a.m. Like why? I'm not going anywhere, I'm here for a while. What's the hurry? But that was their procedure and I would just fall asleep at 2:00 and somebody would wake me up at 4:30 to take blood. But the whole system was about having no control. And in your case, I wonder how much of both what you do to yourself and recommending to other people is about gaining a sense of control.

RYAN: It totally is. Having caregivers, it's easy to lose control because you are more apt to allow them to do every little thing for you.

DAN: It's more comfortable to let them do things when you win. And if you don't think about it...

RYAN: Especially if it's difficult to do certain things.

DAN: There was a paraplegic that talked to me and he said that it took him about 800 times to learn how to put his pants on. And he said actually that he counted 800 times. Quite a long time until you put your pants 800 times on.

RYAN: I go by time. I don't think I've counted all of them.

DAN: But he said that it kind of gave him a sense of like things are possible. We just need to give it 800 times. We need to give it the time it takes to do it. And on any particular day, it's easier to get help. Feeling of control, I think, is important to everybody.

RYAN: You know, on the whole pants thing, I just started learning and being able to dress myself. And I have to use tools to put them on. I have a dressing stick. And without a dressing stick, I'm not able to do anything because of the lack of mobility that I have. But even though it takes me 40 minutes, I have that control back. Just that little resemblance of control.

DAN: When you got the mentors, what did you get out of it?

RYAN: They really helped me see the future. What I could be regardless of my injury.

DAN: I think like month five or so in hospital, maybe a little later, they brought somebody to show me the future and he was a car mechanic and his hands were very badly burned, worse than mine. He lost the first joint on every finger. And he came to talk to me and he showed me how he used tools and even with these stumps of fingers and so on. But it really depressed me of this idea that this is the pinnacle of success, is being able to overcome some of the limitations.

RYAN: And many people do feel that way when they see a person that's been in a chair for, you know, I've only been in a chair for five years, but when they meet some of the guys and gals that have been in chairs for 40 plus years, and people say, "Man, am I gonna be doing this for 40 plus years? Am I gonna have to do this?" It can be really difficult to swallow. At the moment, right now, I'm one of the younger mentors that's a quadriplegic. I'm really the only 35 and under quadriplegic mentors. So I'm busy these days, unfortunately. We see some related injuries like people diving or--

DAN: Diving means scuba diving? Or skydiving?

RYAN: Diving into water.

DAN: Oh, I see.

RYAN: Diving into the ocean. It's more shallow than they thought it was. Or diving into a wave and, you know, the wave causing the accident. Diving into a pool, a lot of times drinking has a lot to do with it. Car accidents or sports accidents like mine. If they haven't accepted the injury, they're overly depressed. Or if they have other complications like traumatic brain injury that's severe enough that it's hard to cognitively speak. Those are the

people that we typically leave it to the professionals, you know, psychologists and psychiatrists, to help them through all of it.

DAN: How much meaning in life would you say that you're getting from the mentees and the mentees-mentor relationship?

RYAN: You know, I never thought that I would get as much as I do out of it. I started doing this just over two years ago. It's made me learn a little bit more about myself. Seeing patients that are newly injured again kind of brings a lot of that back. You see the hard times that they're going through, and for good you see, wow, I've come this far. Five years now, I am not--

DAN: Not a rookie at this anymore.

RYAN: Yeah, yeah, I'm not lost like I was.

DAN: Presumably you feel that you can help them think about how to make their lives better.

RYAN: That's definitely something that gives me a lot of purpose.

(gentle music)

DAN: Is the biking for other people, because for you it has a special meaning, it's back to when you were 13, it's nature that you love. Do you think for other people it facilitates those other aspects, like being in nature is important to everybody, or just for the people who have a--

RYAN: Well, and I say nature a lot with people, but I always preface it that it doesn't need to be nature, it doesn't need to be bikes. Getting back to what you once did is not unattainable. It may be different, but there are ways to get back what you once loved. Even work, you know, there are so many people, especially guys, unfortunately, you know, men still feel as though they need to be the breadwinner in a relationship, there are so many guys that after they're injured, they lose themselves because they don't feel as though that they can earn anymore. And that's just not the case. Yeah, it's going to be a little bit different. You might not be able to go back to the exact same work that you were doing, but you're able to still do it. Don't think as though because you're not able to walk or go to the bathroom on your own, it means that you have to stop working or getting back to what you love or having a relationship or having kids or... anything in life is certainly possible after a traumatic experience or injury.

RYAN: You know, I think the only thing that I could ever say to anybody is to give it time and don't give up and, you know, explore the options of what your life can be. Just because you're different now doesn't mean that it's over. Each day is a challenge. If I can make it through each day with a positive attitude still, then the next day is going to be even better and easier.

DAN: It's very clear that you have an optimistic outlook on life. Clearly now, but it looks like most days.

RYAN: Yeah.

DAN: And I wonder in your mind, what helps you keep this optimistic view?

RYAN: Even though I know I'm going to be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life, and I may not be 100% ever, it's still a goal of mine to work towards that. Because the moment that it stops being a goal of mine is the moment that I become out of control.

♪♪

RYAN: The goal of being independent without caregivers, I know we're a long way off from that. I know it's gonna take a long time for me to get there, but every little thing that I do to get there is a victory. When I pee five minutes faster than I did the day before, I celebrate big time. It's just great.

DAN: How do you celebrate? Not with a drink.

RYAN: Sometimes.

[LAUGHTER]

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.