

Dan Ariely



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Episode 7 - Jack Every

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

JACK EVERY: OK, so we're heading to my normal classroom, which is room 6018. This is Rusty, my guide dog. So Rusty, left. That's a good boy. Left. Come on.

DAN ARIELY: And you told him left a while before we actually moved to the left to basically prepare him and then he just waits for the next left and then he goes.

JACK: Exactly, yep. So we're at the door to go into the stairwell. We're moving up the stairs. Here we are, forward. And we're heading down to my classroom, which is the third door down on the right hand side. And here we are for class. Right, Russ? Good job. Where is everybody today? They're all bunking.

DAN: When I go into a room, it's kind of tiring every time to say, I got injured, I have this injury, this is why I look like this. Somebody told me once that it's incredibly distracting if I don't say that. That people keep on wondering all the time that part of their brain is occupied not with what I'm saying, but with all kinds of other things. And to basically say, I was injured, here's what happened, let's move on, actually clears things up.

JACK: First day of class, when they see a blind professor walk in and chain his eye door up to their desk and start class, and you just wanna portray yourself that despite my disability that I'm approachable, you don't need to be shy, you know, it's not contagious.

DAN: You're probably the only blind person that your students have met. Do you feel kind of any desire or responsibility to basically set them straight on disability, blindness?

JACK: No, I want them to learn from my example. I just wanna portray myself just like any other professor that would be standing behind this podium. From high school, I started getting into various historical events, especially connected to the Civil War. You know, I had thoughts of going on to college and maybe becoming a high school history teacher, but I was basically a C student. At the time, I started working construction through my father. I was 22 when I married and my wife was a year younger than I was, so we were fairly young, so I was dependent upon that income. The whole thought quest of earning a degree in history to teach at high school level was kind of out of the picture. But that's when I started losing my eyesight and everything changed.

(Music)

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.

JACK: I'll be quite honest with you. Me losing my eyesight, I have nobody else to blame but myself. When I first became a diabetic when I was 16, 17 years old, you know, "you should see an eye doctor every year," da da da da da. Well, I saw one when I first lost my eyesight, but I didn't see another one until I started having eye issues. When you have diabetes, over time, the little tiny blood vessels in the retina, the back of the eye, they get clogged up. Some diabetics to the point where they'll actually burst. So that is what began to happen to me. Something known as diabetic retinopathy.

DAN: And when you said you have nobody to blame but yourself, why? Because you did not go for checkups?

JACK: The thing is, I did not put all that much effort into controlling my diabetes. I pretty much ate what I wanted. It would not be out of the ordinary for me to swing on the way home and stop at Cumberland Farms and buy a diet soda but get some Yodels at the same time. So I was my own worst enemy. I knew what the consequences were but when you're young, infallible, and all that other stuff. So it caught up to me. I'm about age 29 at this point. First, I went and saw the eye doctor that I had seen 10 years earlier. And he said, "When was the last time you saw an eye doctor?" And I said, "About 10 years ago, the last time I saw you." He goes, "Well, you're going to be seeing a lot of eye doctors beginning right now." He immediately picked up the phone and called up the retina specialist. Saw him shortly thereafter and did all these tests on me. And for the next few months, he did extensive laser treatments on my eyes. After the laser, I went back to work. I was like, "Oh my God, I can barely see out of it." And I was having a, you know, if it was raining, I'd have a tough time driving. And I go all bopping about in my pickup truck with my son when he was young. And "Jack, tell me what color that light is up there." "Oh, it's green." "Okay, okay." I went back in to see Dr. Woodcomb. And he says, "Well, I'm going to book you an appointment at Rhode Island Hospital to have a vitrectomy done." And they operated on me the following morning. That began that ordeal of eight vitrectomies over the course of the next year or so.

DAN: Is it the moment that they tell you you're losing your eyesight that you understand the consequences in a better way and start eating differently and taking insulin on time?

JACK: I don't recall any of my doctors, I did not have anybody at level with me and just say, you know, you're in the process of losing your eyesight.

DAN: Nobody wants to break bad news.

JACK: Yeah.

DAN: Physicians have to do it all the time. It's really tough to break bad news. And I actually don't know what's the right way to do it. But looking back at this, are you appreciative or not appreciative of the physician that was more blunt with you?

JACK: You know, he didn't come right out and say you're gonna totally go blind, but he just basically was, you got a tough road ahead here. But my other retina specialists, they were still optimistic and they wanted to keep fighting to try to prevent me from totally going blind.

DAN: But effort is separate than being clear, right? They could have said, the odds are very low, most likely you'll get blind, but we're going to keep on fighting. Couple of years ago, we followed physicians at the hospital as they were giving cancer patients bad news. What we did was we were in the room when they gave patients very bad news, "chemotherapy is not working," "you have cancer," really, really terrible news. And then afterward, we talked to the doctor, we talked to the patient, and we talked to the family. And what was amazing, it was as if the three of them were not in the same room. The doctors were talking in code because breaking the bad news directly was too difficult. The patients, of course, don't want to hear the bad news so they cling on anything that looks hopeful. The question of how to have these discussions, because on one hand you don't want to depress people and you want to build, think about people's resilience and willingness to take information and how you move forward. And on the other hand, not facing the truth, having some illusion about what the future would go is not helpful. Personally, I remember one time, this was when I discovered I had hepatitis C, that there was a physician and she told me my life expectancy was 30 years. And at that time, it was 10 years past when I got the disease, so I had 20 years left according to her. Like, you know, she just kind of read me the statistics of what's the life expectancy. And I was heartbroken when she told me this. I thought, you know, I have 20 more years to live and this is what she told me. You know, I didn't question her too much. I didn't think about, you know, the variance and the probability distribution, but by the way, this was a while ago and I didn't die since. So, you know, but maybe a few months after that, that number still resonated with me. It gave me some strange peace of mind of saying, okay, let's assume I have 20 years, how do I want to deal with it? So it was a very accelerated process of mourning and sadness, and then moving on to saying, okay, let's just accept this reality and what do we do with it? And I wonder whether when people don't give you bad news, they just delay dealing with this, when maybe it's a good idea to, I mean, imagine they told you early on that you might lose your sight. You might have mourned your sight for a while, but then figured out a way to deal with it when you still had some eyesight left.

JACK: So 1986 was the big year when reality set in. That March, I stopped driving. Then I had to stop working by June. In September, I could no longer read. I'll give Jack's mom Laurie, my first wife, a lot of credit because the whole ordeal of me going through that, she was there, and even the four operations I had in Boston, I had to stay there a few nights each time they operated. I mean, she always did the truck up from Providence on the bus and returned at night, and we'd be back the next morning. And, you know, Jack was very young at the time. He was, oh, four, five, six years old. I live on a cul-de-sac, and there were a couple of lots for sale up the street from me. My father built a house there because they were kind of accepting the fact that I'm going to be needing a lot of transportation. I did have these aspirations of going back to college and earning a degree and teaching history. So my parents, they would be a big part of my transportation network.

JACK: When I first lost my eyesight, the Community College of Rhode Island was my first entrance into higher education and my experience here gave me the confidence to move on to the four-year level, Master's, PhD. I did my Master's out at UConn. I mean, that was obviously a much-watered trek. And then, Boston College, PhD. That was a little trickier

because I had a full scholarship. I was a teaching assistant for three of the four years, so I had to be on campus three days a week to do my sections and take my own courses. It requires a lot of time, and it requires a lot of coordination. You gotta be organized to pull all this stuff off because it's just, being blind is just so time consuming. It's incredible. My mother worked for a shift as a medical transcriptionist at the hospital, but when all this stuff started happening to me, she switched to second shift. That way, then she'd be more available 'cause most of the classes I took were in the morning, early afternoon.

DAN: The dedication from your parents is amazing. So they realize that they need to take a bigger part in helping you.

JACK: Oh yeah. She was around any babysitting, stuff like that with Jack, and you know, I'd be home at two o'clock in the afternoon and was there to get Jack off the bus.

DAN: And what happens with Lori? You mentioned a few times she was your first wife.

JACK: Ah, just came to a point about three years after I lost my eyesight that we began to drift apart. She was working and I was pretty focused on my education and we ended up divorcing in 1990.

DAN: Did it have anything to do with your loss of eyesight or was it?

JACK: Yeah, I don't know. You know, I don't think so. I just-- I think just like any other marriage resulting in the husband and the wife divorcing, perhaps it just was running its course. At that time, I was not distraught about it. The only thing that would concern me, my – Jack and I were kind of tied at the hip. And I just feared losing him. Before I lost my eyesight, Jack and I were always very tight. He was daddy's boy. There's no doubt about that. He'd just be perched in the living room window, wait for me to get home from work. And I used to back my pickup truck into the driveway, and he'd run outside there. And before I could start backing up, he was right down outside on my truck, jumped inside, would make our rounds on weekends, you know, pizza and breakfast. And we were always together when I wasn't working. So it was like, do I want to live an unhappy marriage, but be with my son all the time? Or do I want to take the risk, file for a divorce, with the fear that, you know, more than likely, he would be residing with her? One night, Lori and I talked about it. She had mentioned about renting an apartment, moving out, and Jack was going to stay with me. And that's the way it was worked out in the divorce agreement so everything...

DAN: So you got full custody of Jack?

JACK: Yeah, exactly. When I lost my eyesight, he was a little bit younger then, five, six, something like that. He stuck by me. I remember him being up on the couch in the living room, pitched by the window, looking out in the driveway, and he'd say, "Dad, when are we gonna go for a ride in the truck again?" And that was the closest where I almost lost it when he said that to me. And I just could not come up with the words to say, "Jack, that's never gonna happen again." After, you know, Lori and I split, we used to go out, it was just the two of us living together. So he'd go out shopping with my mom, and I would make out a grocery list, and he took a lot of responsibilities. He'd write out checks with me and stuff like that. He was very accepting of what happened to me. Obviously spent a lot of time with my mom,

when I started back to school, and it just really worked out. And Jack's a very even-tempered, low-key, doesn't get too excited about things. So I think the personality got passed down to another generation of Every men.

DAN: So you said that you have nobody to blame but yourself. Do you sometimes think about what would happen if you kept your diabetes in check, if you went to an eye doctor more frequently?

JACK: Yeah, well, I'll say this, and I mean this. The quality of my life improved when I lost my eyesight. I never would have envisioned 30 plus years ago that someday I would have earned a PhD and I'd be a professor at the college level. And that in itself is very rewarding. I mean, I still walk into each class with a spring in my step. I enjoy doing what I'm doing.

DAN: You think that without the blindness you would have never jumped on that opportunity to—

JACK: I don't think so.

DAN: You had to start from scratch. You had to get a BA, a Master's, a PhD. It's a very long road.

JACK: Yep, so it was 10 years, but it was a labor of love.

DAN: Sometimes an injury or disability gets you also to be a bit more cognizant about the positive side on one hand. And also, you know, when a big thing is gone, in your case, eyesight, in my case, all kinds of other things. It's like when your car has a big dent, it's really hard to worry about the small scratches, right? And all of a sudden, it changes perspective. How do you not look at the downside as well? You're dealing with blindness every day. There are all kinds of things that are harder to deal with, all kinds of things that take you much longer. How do you stay not frustrated or give up or decide not to do a few things?

JACK: There are always challenges, that's for sure, things that do frustrate you. Not having that ability to hop in the car and drive somewhere and relying upon people to do my shopping for me. And a lot of times I'll limit how many times I wanna ask for a ride somewhere. The reality setting and that this is my new world. And after a couple of times like that, you get used to it, you deal with it.

DAN: So when you say you deal with it, what do you mean? Do you have to say something to yourself? Do you have to remind yourself that there are also positives?

JACK: It was just an adjustment. I didn't want to be grumpy or exposed to the fact that I was feeling a little sorry for myself. I wasn't fully enjoying what everybody else was. You know, I'll still go to Fenway Park to a baseball game and not be able to see anything. My son Jack took me for my 60th birthday up there last summer. But I just take my little radio, put the play-by-play on, and Jack describes to me what's going on. You know, the first few times around, the first year or two, when the reality had set in that you're totally blind, it is a reminder that you're not able to enjoy fully what sighted people get to enjoy every day.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DAN: Here's the thing. I'm wondering, what does it take to get used to a new life situation? What are the things that get to accelerate the adjustments and make us happy again? And what are the things that slow it down, that get you to keep on comparing how you are now to how you used to be and basically make it more difficult to find happiness in the new state of life.

JACK: I inherited my father's personality, probably using this word very loosely as being stoic. Similar to him, I don't get too excited about things. I deal with things as they come. The big things, like the challenges that face me, being a student, being a professor, I just deal with it. But on the other hand, being blind, it's the little things that aggravate the crap out of me. Like thinking I misplaced something, I go frantic trying to find it. Those are the crazy, frustrating things that really mean very little, but stuff that I can get really ticked off about.

JACK: You know, I like being independent, even though I can't totally be independent, but as independent as I can be.

DAN: I think it is independence. It's the sense of control. And Rusty is probably giving you some feeling of independence even though he's a living being. It's probably a very different sense of relying on Rusty compared to your wife.

JACK: Well, you know, Rusty makes me that much more independent. I mean, some days, you know, Rusty's been sick or had an operation somewhere. I'd have to leave him home for a week or two. And I'd have to, you know, go back and forth and just using my cane and whatnot. It's a whole lot easier with a dog, so it makes it that much better. And you do have a set of eyeballs there.

DAN: Being stoic, which you described as a family heritage, sounds like an amazing way to deal with life's difficulty. There's kind of two elements to it. There's the element of being stoic internally, which is to take things, but also being even more stoic externally. What kind of things increase your ability to take things as they are and just accept them?

JACK: When I was going through this whole thing, losing my eyesight. I always try to look at things realistically. My parents, my you know first wife, Lori, my second wife, Denise, our two boys, they help keep me that way. I just knew that it wasn't the end of the world for me. Family members, friends, and the fact that I wanted to accomplish something going into a new occupation profession, that keeps me stoic as well because I have a purpose in life. Four, five, six years ago, the college did a big student survey evaluating faculty and the person here who keeps track of all that came to my office one day and he goes, "You got more positive feedback than any other professor here. And the big thing that students commented was that you were a life changer. Last summer, celebrating that big 6-0, we were at dinner with my sister-in-law and brother-in-law, and this man came over and said, "Professor Every, I'm so-and-so, I took a couple classes with you" and he said, "I want to tell you that you changed my life." Now this is an African American male, probably about 50 years old, and for him to come up and say that to me made me feel great. So I don't preach. I do this solely by example. This is who I am.

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.