

2024

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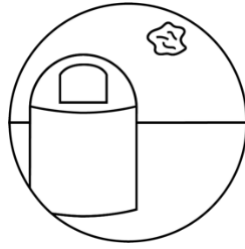
Prologue

The summer before I was a senior in high school, I had an internship at the zoo. It's not that I loved animals so much. I actually thought I was going to be a behavioral psychologist. The gig at the zoo gave me a chance to conduct some research at the reptile house. But honestly, that's another story. What I really want to tell you is about my time there with Aaron.

In order to do the research project, I had to sign an agreement that I'd also put in volunteer hours as well. Ten for ten. It was a fair deal. I worked with Dr. Salzberg in the animal behavior lab. He was succinct, punctual, and had strict rules about how to document research findings.

But Aaron was my supervisor for the volunteer hours. I ended up learning more from him than I ever expected. He wasn't the zookeeper, but he might as well have been. He ran the place. They called on him when anything broke, an animal escaped from its enclosure, or the temperature in a cage was off by more than a few degrees. He was a pudgy old guy with a bald head, stubby wrinkled fingers, and an awkward shuffling gait. And... He had an extremely annoying habit of asking questions that I couldn't easily answer.

I can't possibly begin to tell you everything that happened that summer. But the passages below capture some of the conversations I had with Aaron, recounted in a manner that I think would please Dr. Salzberg.



1. Act with Purpose

Besides getting to work in the research lab, another perk of my internship was the free food vouchers. Every week, I got a pack of five. But my friend Kali, who worked in the back office, always slipped me a couple extra. I shared them with Aaron. Though I'm fairly certain no one at the Zoo would charge him for food anyway.

He and I were sitting under an umbrella outside of the Safari Shack. They served traditional fare to satisfy the masses, but they also had some unusual things on the menu that I particularly enjoyed. The piri-piri chicken was spicy but flavorful.

Aaron finished his sandwich with an understated burp, wadded up the foil wrapper, and tossed it across the dining area. As usual, it landed in the trash can without hitting the rim.

"How do you do that?" I asked.

"Do what," he replied, knowing full well what I meant.

"I've never seen you miss."

"I don't," he replied. It was a statement of fact, with no hint of pride.

"Why don't you ever miss?"

"Just a matter of acting with purpose," he said.

"Well, I don't think it was accidental," I retorted.

"Not *on* purpose," he said. "*With* purpose."

"That doesn't help," I replied. "I still don't understand why you never miss."

"Look at that guy over there," Aaron said, gesturing to a tall wiry guy sitting with his wife and two kids.

“What about him?” I asked.

“What’s he doing?” Aaron countered.

“I dunno,” I said. “Just eating his lunch and trying to wrangle his kids.”

“What about his leg?” Aaron asked.

“Seriously? I dunno. He’s wearing shorts. And running shoes without socks,” I said.

“Pay attention,” Aaron instructed.

“It’s bouncing,” I replied.

“Exactly!” Aaron exclaimed as if I had made a huge discovery.

“I don’t get it,” I said.

“I know,” Aaron replied.

“I suppose you’re gonna tell me that that guy’s bouncing leg has something to do with why you never miss a shot to the trash can,” I said.

“Well...” Aaron ventured, “Maybe you *do* get it after all.”

“I’m quite sure I don’t,” I said.

“Look,” Aaron said. “Do you think that guy knows he’s bouncing his leg up and down like that?”

“Nah,” I said. “People do that all the time. It’s just a nervous habit.”

“Exactly,” Aaron said. “He’s definitely *not* acting with purpose.”

“But throwing wadded-up foil balls into the trash is?” I asked.

“Could be,” Aaron said. “It’s all a matter of how you do it.”

“And how do you do it?” I asked.

“Calmly, intently, and knowing exactly what I want to achieve,” Aaron replied.

“Sounds like a whole lot of effort,” I said.

“Just the opposite,” he replied. “When you act with purpose, you’re calm and relaxed. There’s no wasted movement and everything is effortless.”

“I guess,” I said tentatively as I gathered the trash from my lunch. No way was I going to try that trick shot of his. “Anyway, I’ll meet you back here at three. I’ve got to get back to the lab.”

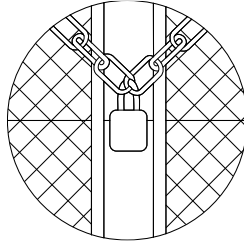
“Sure,” Aaron said. “What do you intend to do?”

“I’ve got to document the chameleons’ weight and respiration,” I said.

“No, that’s *what* you’re going to do,” Aaron said. “I asked, ‘What do you *intend* to do?’”

“Oh,” I said slowly. “You mean that whole ‘acting with purpose’ thing?”

“That’s right,” Aaron said, with a sly smile on his face.



2. Be Confident

The ruminant zookeeper was tending to the okapis. This gave me and Aaron a chance to tend to their enclosure. They had a habit of scraping their hooves against the wire fencing. That meant that we had to inspect the wooden posts and hammer down any loose nails. It was mindless work, but I enjoyed the rhythm of swinging the hammer.

“Dr. Salzberg taught me how to run an analysis of variance today,” I told Aaron.

“Hmm...,” he grunted, continuing to tap down nails in a post next to me.

“What?” I asked. “Those stats are gonna show that my chameleon project was successful.”

“I hope it works out for you...” Aaron said. He didn’t sound very enthusiastic.

“Why are you so crabby?” I asked.

“Well...” Aaron sighed, hooking his hammer on one of his belt loops. “Researching chameleons and running stats is fine, but it’s not exactly what I’d call ‘life skills.’”

“It is if I become a behavioral psychologist,” I protested.

“Sure,” Aaron said. “But I can think of more practical things.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“For example,” Aaron began, “When you first started here, you didn’t know the difference between a ball peen and a claw hammer. Now you’re pounding nails like a pro.”

“I don’t intend to become a carpenter,” I said. It came out a bit more aggressive than I had meant.

“Regardless,” Aaron said, ignoring my tone, “Everyone should know how to use a hammer.”

“Yeah?” I asked. “And what else?”

“Come with me,” Aaron said, walking to a gate in the fence. He fished for a key in his pocket, unfastened the padlock, swung open the gate, and gestured for me to go through. As soon as I

did, he swiftly closed the gate and snapped the padlock closed. He was surprisingly swift for an old guy.

“What the hell, Aaron?” I shouted, shaking the gate.

“Watch me,” he said, ignoring my indignation. He slid two thin metal tools out of his breast pocket. In a flash, he had inserted the picks into the lock and the shackle snapped open. Before I had a chance to even move, he pressed the lock closed again.

“Now watch,” he said. “I’ll go slower.”

I watched as Aaron inserted the L-shaped lever into the keyhole and then followed it with the thin pick.

“The idea,” he said, “is to put pressure on the cylinder while depressing each of the pins. This one only has three, so it’s a good one to begin with. Now you do it.”

He handed me the picks.

I made a couple clumsy attempts to mimic his actions. The lock wouldn’t budge.

“I can’t do it,” I said.

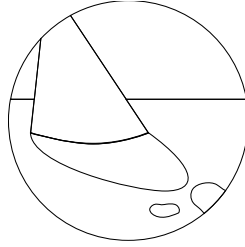
“Of course you can’t,” Aaron said. “Not with an attitude like that. So... What can you do?”

“Ask you nicely to unlock the gate?” I asked.

“Definitely a good skill to have,” Aaron said. “But not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?” I demanded.

“What *can* you do?” He repeated, walking away. “Oh, and by the way... I’ll tell Salzberg you’ll be a little late.”



3. Be Humble

Staffing the Arctic Blast Ice Cream Cart was definitely my least favorite chore of all my volunteer hours – tons of whining kids and buzzing bees. I don't know which is worse.

And afterwards, when Aaron criticized me for how I was doing my work, that just made everything even more miserable.

"Who were you thinking about?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"When that little kid dropped his cone on the ground and his mother got so frantic," Aaron replied.

"Oh, that," I said. "What about it?"

"Who were you thinking about?" Aaron repeated.

"I dunno," I said. "I guess I was just trying to diffuse the situation. Anything to stop all that whining."

"So you did that by talking about your popsicle anxiety?" Aaron asked.

"Aaack! I hate the way they slide off the stick so easily," I said.

"Understandable," Aaron said. "But do you think that mother was interested in your little quirks?"

"How should I know?" I protested.

"Well, you should," Aaron insisted. "The look on her face, the tone of her voice... She was hoping for some reassurance that everything was going to be okay."

"I can't be confident that it will," I said.

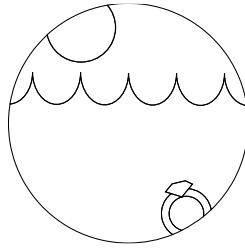
"Good point," Aaron agreed. "But letting her know you heard her would have helped."

“Of course I heard her,” I said.

“I don’t think you did,” Aaron said. “She said that she was frustrated. That her son often acts out impulsively. That sometimes she gets angry at him but doesn’t mean to. That sometimes she questions whether she’s really even fit to be a mother.”

“She didn’t say all that,” I said.

“Not using those words,” Aaron agreed. “But that’s what she was saying. And you could have heard that if you hadn’t been talking about yourself.”



4. Be Prepared To Lose Everything

“You’ve gotta help me,” I said, panting, as I rushed into Aaron’s workshop.

“Really?” He asked. “Do I *really* have to help you?”

“Ugh,” I said. “You’re so literal. No, you don’t *have* to help me. But I’d *appreciate* your help.”

“Oh!” Aaron said. “Now I understand.”

“I’m quite certain you understood all along,” I protested. “But I’m not gonna stand here arguing with you. Could you please help?”

“I’m not sure,” Aaron said. “What do you really need?”

“I dropped my class ring in the alligator lagoon,” I said.

“Why’d you do that?” Aaron asked.

“I didn’t mean to,” I said, feeling a bit like we had had this conversation before. “I was standing there, thinking about how I was going to ask Kali to be my girlfriend. I thought I’d ask her if she’d like to wear my ring. And I was fiddling with it, and I dropped it into the lagoon.”

“I can’t promise I’ll be able to retrieve it,” Aaron said. “Be prepared for it to be gone forever.”

“But it was expensive,” I protested.

“Doesn’t matter if it cost a nickel,” Aaron said. “It’s still at the bottom of alligator-invested waters.”

“But it does matter,” I insisted. “It was important to me.”

“People do indeed like to place importance on the things they have,” Aaron said. “But in the end, it’s all just stuff that can come or go in an instant. What is it that you really need?”

“I need that ring back,” I said.

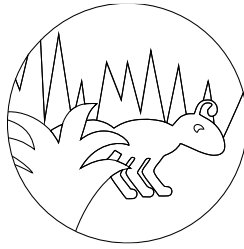
“But do you really?” he asked. “What would happen if you didn’t get that ring back?”

“I dunno,” I said. “I’d be sad. My parents would be super mad. I wouldn’t have anything to give Kali and she’ll never be my girlfriend.”

“So,” Aaron asked, “it’s a magical ring?”

“What do you mean?” I replied.

“You seem to think that it has an awful lot of power to do all those things, just by disappearing.”



5. *Be Quiet*

Aaron and I were sitting in the grass behind the Bird House, enjoying the sun. After scrubbing the penguin enclosure, it felt good to be back outside.

“Bummer you couldn’t find my ring,” I said.

“Bummer you dropped it into the pit,” Aaron replied. I couldn’t tell if he was being sympathetic or reproachful.

“Well,” I continued, “I’m not going to let that stop me from asking Kali to be my girlfriend.”

“That’s the spirit,” Aaron said. Again, I was unsure if he was being supportive or not.

“The thing of it is,” I pressed on, “I’m just not sure how to do it?”

“Have you ever tried just being quiet?” Aaron asked. This time, I was fairly convinced he was being critical.

“Well that was rude,” I said.

“Not at all,” he countered. “Try it,” he urged. “Just sit there and be quiet for a moment.”

I stopped talking and fidgeted with my shoestrings. After a few moments, Aaron broke the silence and asked, “What are you thinking about?”

“Same thing,” I said. “Wondering if Kali wants to be my girlfriend.”

“So you’re not being quiet at all,” Aaron said.

“I’m not saying anything,” I protested.

“But you’re not quiet inside,” Aaron insisted.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“When I’m quiet,” Aaron said, “nothing is going through my mind. I just sit back and become aware of everything around me. I can even feel the stubble growing out of the top of my head.”

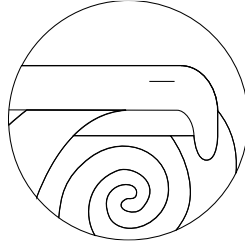
“Why would you want to do that?” I asked.

“Answers come when you’re quiet,” Aaron insisted. “Look at that,” he said, motioning to an ant crawling in front of us. “Try sitting there with your eyes shut. Don’t open them until you can hear the sound of his footsteps on the blades of grass.”

“That’s impossible,” I said.

“Again with that?” he replied.

“Okay,” I relented and closed my eyes. When I finally opened them, Aaron had already left.



6. *Choose Your Feelings*

Aaron and I were in the kitchen dicing up squid and anchovies for the stingrays. Even though I was wearing a facemask and gloves, the dead seafood felt like slimy mucus and its smell curled up my nose.

“I think I’m gonna puke,” I said.

“Okay,” Aaron said. “Thanks for warning me. But it’s not something I’d choose to do.”

“I can’t help it,” I said. “This stuff makes me sick.”

“Is that how you choose to feel?” he asked.

“It’s not like I can help it,” I argued. “This stuff is nasty.”

“But you *can* help it,” Aaron said. “You’re responsible for everything you do. And for that matter, everything you *feel*. Just like you can change what you do, you can also change what you feel.”

“You’re trying to tell me that if I wanted, I could *enjoy* chopping up this gunk?”

“Why not?” Aaron asked. He sounded like he truly couldn’t believe I had asked the question.

“Because it’s *gross!*” I said.

“You only choose to think it’s gross,” he said calmly.

I just stood there with slime dripping off my gloves, trying to figure out if he was serious.

“Let’s try this another way.” He paused for a moment but continued to methodically slice his knife through the anchovies and squid.

“Let’s pretend you have a sister,” he said.

“I don’t,” I said.

“That’s why it’s called pretending,” Aaron said and then continued. “And let’s say one weekend Dr. Salzberg let you take home one of the chameleons.”

“He’d never do that,” I insisted.

“Again,” Aaron said, “we’re pretending.”

“All right,” I said. “I get it. You’re making stuff up.”

Aaron ignored me and continued. “Let’s also pretend that your little sister is absolutely terrified of your new pet chameleon. No matter how hard you try to show her that he’s adorable and even a little bit affectionate, she always screams whenever you come near her with him. Now, let’s say that one day you let your chameleon out of the cage so it can sun itself on the windowsill. Suddenly, a huge gull swoops down, grabs it up, and swallows it in a single gulp. How would you feel?”

“Sad. Guilty. Depressed.” I answered slowly.

“Of course you would.” Aaron sounded pleased. “Now, how do you think your sister would feel?”

“I don’t know. Kinda glad, I guess.”

“Of course she’d be glad,” Aaron insisted. “She’d be thrilled that the nasty lizard was out of her life forever. So, now, in my little story, what made you sad?”

“The bird,” I answered.

“And what made your sister happy?”

“Same thing, I guess,” I answered, this time a little less sure of myself.

“Wrong and wrong!” Aaron exclaimed. “The gull did not *make* you or your sister feel anything. Look. It’s the same story, but two totally different reactions. The death of the chameleon did not make either of you feel a certain way, it’s just how you decided to react.”

“Well,” I began tentatively, “what if it would have been our Dad dying instead of the chameleon? Are you saying that I shouldn’t feel sad because *he* died?”

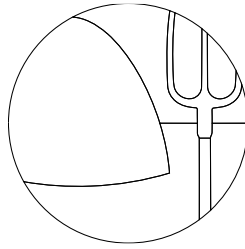
“I’m saying nothing of the sort. What I’m saying has nothing to do with feelings being ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’ Feelings are always ‘right,’ because that’s how a person has chosen to feel. Just because you feel a different way doesn’t mean that the other person’s feelings are wrong.”

“But I couldn’t help but feel sad if my Dad died. Even though he’s a jerk a lot of the time, I’d still be sad if he died.”

“Sure. It would make sense if you were sad. But how sad will you choose to be? Will you be a little bit bummed out, or will you be so despondent that you can’t eat for weeks on end? The choice is yours.”

“But most of the time things happen so fast that you don’t have time to think about it, you just automatically *feel* something. Like when I try something new to eat or hear a new song. I don’t sit around thinking about it for a long time. I just simply like it or not.”

“But remember, *you* are the one ‘liking it or not’ and you can choose either way. And now, whether you like it or not, I must go.” And with that, he quickly pulled off his gloves and headed for the door.



7. *Do What You Want*

I always enjoyed watching the elephants eat pumpkins and watermelon. It was like candy for them. But when it came to prepping the hay for them, that was a different story. I didn't like the smell of it, and I never really mastered using a pitchfork.

"You're holding it wrong," Aaron said. "Move your hands closer to the end of the handle."

"That's too tricky," I said. "I lose control and the fork flips sideways."

"You have to hold it tightly," Aaron said.

"That hurts my hands," I complained.

"Not that tightly," he said.

"This is stupid," I grunted, plunging the fork into the pile of hay.

"What's stupid?" Aaron asked.

"This," I said. "Feeding hay to elephants. They shouldn't be locked up here, eating hay out of a concrete trough. That's not right."

"They might be happier on the savannah," Aaron agreed. "But they're here now and it's feeding time."

"I hate that," I said.

"Then don't do it," Aaron replied.

"But you told me that my job this afternoon was to feed the elephants," I said.

"I did," Aaron agreed.

"And now you're telling me not to do it?" I asked.

"It's up to you," he said.

“I don’t get it,” I said. “Do I have to feed the elephants or not?”

“Of course you don’t,” Aaron said. “You can do whatever you’d like.”

“I can’t just go and do *whatever*,” I countered. “You’re my boss. I’ve gotta do what you tell me to do.”

“Not really,” he said.

“I don’t get it. You’re my boss, aren’t you?”

“Technically,” Aaron agreed.

“Then I’m supposed to do what you tell me to do,” I said.

“It’s up to you,” he said.

“But I have to,” I insisted.

“What do you have to do?” Aaron asked.

“Whatever you tell me to do,” I said.

“No,” Aaron disagreed. “You can do whatever you want.”

“Whatever I want?” I asked incredulously.

“Absolutely,” he said.

“That’s crazy,” I argued. “My dad would kill me if I said that I didn’t want to do something he told me to do.”

“I doubt he’d kill you,” Aaron said.

“No,” I agreed. “But whenever I argue with him, he’s always, like, ‘You’ll do it because I told you to.’ And then if he thinks I’m doing it half-assed, he has this stupid little quote.”

“What’s that?” Aaron asked.

“He’s always saying: ‘When a task has just begun, never leave it till it’s done. Be the labor great or small, do it well or not at all,’” I recited.

“It’s not horrible advice,” Aaron said. “But I don’t totally agree.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because you can do whatever you want, however you want,” he said.

“But there will be consequences,” I said.

“Of course,” Aaron said. “There are consequences for *everything* you do. But in the end, there’s nothing you have to do. Regardless of what I say, or your dad says, or what society is telling you - you can do whatever you want.”



8. *Enjoy The Process*

It's been well established that animals thrive better when they're in what's called an "enriched environment." That's why you see floaty toys in the polar bear pool and tire swings on Chimp Island. But those are all mammals.

For my research project, I wanted to see if being in an enriched environment made a difference for reptiles. Chameleons don't play with toys, so I had to think of another way to make their cages more interesting.

Dr. Salzberg let me work with two groups of chameleons. One was in a cage just like they'd always done at the zoo - embedded into the side of a fake tree, with one side facing the hallway so visitors could peer in. The other group of chameleons was in a special cage I had designed. I attached computer monitors to three sides playing a looping video of a jungle scene. And I had speakers set up to make it sound really real.

Early on in my study, I had taken each chameleon to a maze I had made. It was this large circular piece of plywood that I covered with fake grass and then used cardboard slats to create a maze they could walk through. At the end was a special treat they liked: worms, butterflies, and beetles. I recorded the time it took for each chameleon to go through the maze. And then, end of the study, I would measure their time again. My hope was that the chameleons in the special cage I made would be faster at getting through the maze.

It had been a bad morning. When I got to the lab, there was water running out from under the door. And when I walked in, there were about two inches of water covering the floor. My shoes were soaked. I stood there for a moment not knowing what to do. Dr. Salzberg was out for the day – attending some sort of conference. I fished my phone out of my pocket and shot off a quick text to Aaron.

Almost immediately I heard him yell from the lab's utility closet. "I'm already here," he shouted. "I've been telling Salzberg he needed to replace this gasket. Looks like it finally blew. Grab a mop, will you? I'm almost done back here."

I started sloshing through the water towards the closet when I saw it.

"Oh crap," I shouted.

"What's wrong," Aaron shouted back.

“My maze,” I said. “It’s completely soaked.”

“What maze?” Aaron asked, peeking his head out of the closet.

“Look at this mess,” I said, hoisting the maze out of the water.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Only the most important part of my whole research project,” I whined.

“That’s a shame,” he said.

“Worse than that,” I said. “It sucks. I don’t see how I’m going to be able to finish my project now. All that work was for nothing.”

“Really?” Aaron asked. By this point, I knew that when he used that tone, I was about to get another scolding. “What if you’re right and the whole thing turns out to be ruined?”

“That will be a disaster,” I said. “What a complete waste of time.”

“So you didn’t learn anything at all from what you’ve done so far?” Aaron asked.

“No,” I said. “I won’t be able to run the last chameleons through the maze and record their data.”

“And that’s the only thing you would have learned?” he asked.

“That was the idea of the study,” I said.

“So you didn’t you learn a lot about how to care for chameleons, how to make a multimedia enclosure for them, and how to run analyses of variance?” Aaron asked. I knew he was being sarcastic.

“Sure,” I said. “But all that wasn’t really the point.”

“No, but it was all part of the process,” Aaron said. “Didn’t you enjoy that?”

“Yeah, it was okay,” I said. “But what good is the process if you can’t get a good outcome?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way,” Aaron said.

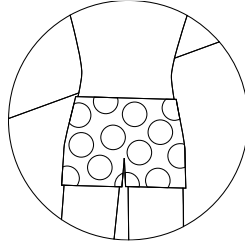
“Of course you wouldn’t,” I said. “What *would* you say?”

“What good is the outcome if you don’t enjoy the process of getting to it?”

“So are you going to enjoy the process of cleaning up this mess?” I asked, gesturing to all the water.

“I don’t see why not,” he said. “You gonna help?”

“I guess,” I said, as I tossed my maze aside and picked up a mop.



9. Laugh At Yourself

Despite the near disaster with my water-soaked maze, Dr. Salzberg thought I had collected enough data to present my findings. Evidently, that was part of the internship experience.

Dr. Salzberg ran a weekly “brown-bag” seminar to talk about his work. All zoo staff were invited to bring their lunches and hear him talk about his latest research. Often professors from the university would join in as well. This week, instead of hearing him drone on about the effects of increased water salinity on sea lions’ predatory behaviors (or whatever he was investigating that week), everyone was going to hear me struggle through a presentation on the work I had done with the chameleons.

I barely liked talking to people one-on-one. So, the thought of presenting to a whole group of people had me fairly terrified. Plus, to make things even more stressful, Kali told me she was looking forward to my presentation.

I was hanging out in the zoo’s reference room, trying to practice my talk. But I ended up spending most of my time fiddling with the slide layout. And when I wasn’t adjusting a font or aligning a graphic, I was staring out the huge windows that overlooked the lorikeet enclosure. It’s hard to believe their feathers are naturally that multicolored.

“What are you doing here?” Aaron’s voice startled me.

I quickly slammed my laptop lid down. “Just preparing for my presentation. What are you doing?” I asked, trying to deflect his attention.”

“Looking for you,” he said.

“How’d you know I’d be in here?” I asked. “I could’ve been anywhere.”

“You’re rather predictable,” he said.

“I guess...” I said. “What did you want?”

“Just to wish you well on your presentation,” Aaron said. He sounded uncharacteristically sincere.

“Thanks,” I said. “But don’t get your hopes up. I’m probably going to make a fool of myself.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Aaron said.

“What?” I said dumbfounded. “How can you say that? I don’t want everyone to think I’m a fool.”

“Why not,” Aaron insisted. “What do you care?”

“I care a lot,” I said.

“Well in that case,” Aaron said, “You probably shouldn’t make a fool of yourself.”

“It’s not like I can help...” I stopped myself, realizing the trap Aaron had just set.

“Why aren’t you laughing now?” Aaron asked.

“What?” I asked.

“That was pretty funny, don’t you think?” he asked.

“Hilarious,” I said half-heartedly. “You don’t get it? This is a big deal for me.”

“Sure,” Aaron said. “But don’t take yourself so seriously. It’s not like you’re going to be parading down Lakeside Crossing in your pink polka dot underwear.”

“Wait. What? I don’t have pink polka-dot underwear,” I said.

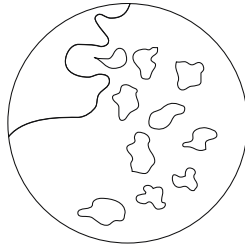
“Kind of missing the point there,” Aaron said.

“So what’s the point?” I asked.

“It’s okay to laugh at yourself, to make mistakes, do foolish things,” Aaron said.

“Easy for you to say,” I said.

“Should be easy for you as well,” Aaron replied.



10. Live In The Moment

I was hiding in the aquarium's pump room when Aaron's voice startled me.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

"How'd you know I'd be *here*?" I countered.

"Just a guess," he said. "It's dark and the motor's hum is soothing."

"I'm trying to forget about that fiasco," I agreed.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Don't pretend that you don't know," I said. "You were there. You saw how horribly I bombed that presentation."

"I wouldn't say you bombed," Aaron said. "But you did seem a bit nervous – especially there at the end."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Dr. Salzerg is a total jerk."

"He did ask some tough questions," Aaron agreed.

"And when I saw Kali in the audience, I got even more nervous. Everything that came out of my mouth sounded like complete nonsense."

"Sounds stressful," Aaron said.

"It is stressful," I agreed.

"Was," Aaron corrected.

"No," I argued. "I'm still stressed about it."

"When can you change what happened?" Aaron asked.

"That doesn't make sense," I said. "I can't go back and do it all over again."

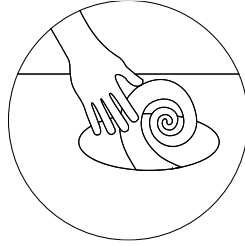
“True,” Aaron agreed. “So why are you reliving the past?”
“Because it was so awful,” I said.

“Now *that* doesn’t seem to make sense,” Aaron said. “You just said you can’t change what happened in the past. And I’ll assure you that you can’t know what’s going to happen in the future either.”

“Well that’s about everything then,” I said.

“It’s nothing,” Aaron argued. “All you have is what’s in front of you right here and now. And now it’s time to water the bromeliads. Are you gonna help?”

“Might as well,” I said.



11. Question Everything

I was sitting on the ground at the edge of Termite Mound City, looking dejectedly at the notebooks scattered around me. As always, without warning, Aaron mysteriously showed up.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, omitting the pleasantries of any formal greeting.

“I think I just got fired,” I said.

“I seriously doubt that,” Aaron replied. “What happened?”

“Dr. Salzberg and I were doing a follow-up to my research. We had tested the chameleons in the maze, but we wanted to see how they would do in more of a natural setting.”

“You wanted to see if their learning generalized to settings outside of the lab,” Aaron said.

“Exactly,” I said. “And everything was going well. The chameleons from the enriched environment really seemed to be better at tracking down termites.”

“So what’s the problem?” Aaron asked.

“Well...” I began. “One of the chameleons darted to a hole in the ground. I knew it would be full of termites and they’d probably attack him as a group. So without thinking, I rushed over and grabbed him before he had a chance to go all the way down.”

“So you saved him?” Aaron asked. “That sounds like a good thing.”

“Yeah, but Dr. Salzberg told me like a hundred times not to grab the chameleons by the tail,” I said.

“And did you?” Aaron asked.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “But if I didn’t, I thought he’d be a goner. That didn’t seem to matter to Dr. Salzberg. He saw me grab the chameleon by the tail. He was angry. He tossed the chameleons back into their cages, grabbed up the rest of our equipment, and stormed off. But before he left, he told me that I should just leave.”

“Oh,” Aaron said. “I get it. Salzberg told you not to do something, you did it anyway, and he was pissed.”

“Yeah, but if I hadn’t grabbed the chameleon, I’m sure he would have been attacked by the termites.”

“Can you hurt a chameleon if you grab it by its tail?” Aaron asked.

“Yeah...” I said.

“And do you think that the chameleon would have been in danger if you hadn’t pulled it out of that hole?” he asked.

“Yeah...” I said.

“Well there you go,” Aaron said, as if he had solved a great mystery.

“What?” I asked.

“Seems like you were both right,” he said.

“That’s impossible,” I argued.

“Happens all the time,” Aaron insisted. “There’s no one absolute truth. It’s all relative.”

“How can that be?” I asked.

“Let’s take an easy one,” Aaron said. “Later today, I’m going to the Safari Shack and order up a nice big juicy bison burger. I’m really looking forward to that. But some people would think that’s horrible – they’d argue that animals have a right to be treated with dignity and respect and that harvesting them for their flesh is simply barbaric.”

“What’s your point?” I asked.

“They see things one way, and I see it another,” Aaron said. “It’s like that for everything. Nothing’s always right or always wrong.”

“Hurting someone is always wrong,” I said.

“Nah,” Aaron said. “What about aboriginal tribes who have a custom of using red-hot irons to scar their children as a rite of passage into adulthood? To us, that sounds abusive. But to them, it’s a sacred privilege. See. That wasn’t too difficult. Give me another.”

“Murder is always wrong,” I argued.

“What about a man who’s been married to the same woman for sixty years and is slowly dying of cancer?” Aaron asked. “I’m sure his wife wouldn’t call it murder if she were to give him a

quadruple dose of his pain medicine so he could die quickly and painlessly. I'm sure she'd call it an act of love."

"I guess," I said.

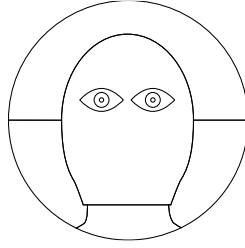
"So there you have it," Aaron said.

"Have what?" I asked.

"You were right. So was Salzberg. There's no absolute truth. Everything is arbitrary," Aaron said.

"If that's the case," I asked, "Why should anyone even bother following the laws of the land? How do you know what's right and what is true?"

"Exactly my point," Aaron said.



12. Treat Everyone As Equals

Kali's last day at the Zoo for the Summer was about a week after mine. Following that mess with Dr. Salzberg, I didn't really feel like hanging out there much. But I did end up meeting Kali in front of the Zoo's entrance in the afternoons after her shift was over. There's this giant plasma-cut metal sculpture there, and we liked wandering around it, trying to spot all the animals. They say there are sixty animals in the 130-foot-long sculpture. We ended up finding almost all of them.

On her last day, she exited the zoo holding a brown paper bag.

"This is for you," she said, handing me the bag. "It's from Aaron."

"I could tell," I said, recognizing his handwriting. In black Sharpie, Aaron had scrawled the question, "Who do you want to be?"

"Thanks," I said, taking the bag and stuffing it under my arm while awkwardly trying to give Kali a hug.

"Aren't you gonna open it?" Kali asked.

"I guess," I said, unrolling the bag. I reached inside and retrieved a black balaclava. I held it up to show Kali.

"That's weird," she said. "I don't know why he'd give you that – especially in the summer."

"Typical Aaron," I agreed. "But I think I get it."

"Really?" Kali asked. "You've been hanging around that guy too long."

"He's a strange one," I said. "But I actually think I liked working with him more than Dr. Salzberg."

"Seriously?" Kali said. "I thought you were all about that research stuff."

"Yeah, that was good," I admitted. "And I did learn a lot. But... I dunno... Aaron kind of had a different way of teaching me things."

“Like what?” Kali asked.

“He always asked me these super frustrating questions that made me think. Like this,” I said, pointing to his writing on the brown paper bag.

“Who do you want to be?” Kali asked, reading what Aaron had written. “What’s that mean and why did he give you a face mask?”

“This is what I think,” I said. “It’s kinda like me and Dr. Salzberg. At first, I was all nervous to be working in his lab. He’s this big important researcher who everybody admires and respects. And I’m just this stupid high school kid.”

“You’re not stupid,” Kali protested.

“Okay,” I relented. “Not stupid. But definitely not nearly as experienced as he is. But in the end, he’s just some dude. I shouldn’t treat him any differently than I treat you or anyone else.”

“I’d hope you’d treat me a *little bit* differently,” Kali said, giving me a playful poke.

“Ouch,” I laughed. “You know that’s not what I mean.”

“I know,” she said. “But are you trying to tell me that if you met the president, or say, Peter Gabriel, you wouldn’t think you should treat them with more respect than some guy you meet on the bus?”

“I guess not,” I said, secretly pleased that Kali had remembered my favorite musician.

“So what’s with the facemask?” she asked.

“When you’re wearing a facemask,” I replied, “nobody knows who you are. You could be anybody.”

“I guess,” Kali said.

“So I’m thinking that the idea is to actually not need the facemask at all,” I said.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“You can be anybody you want,” I said. “It’s up to you. And in the end, it really doesn’t matter who you are.”

“Well, you matter to me,” Kali said, taking my hand.

We kissed.

And I never went back to the zoo.

Epilogue

After all these years, I never really forgot about Aaron. But his memory did become more distant over time. So that's why I was so surprised to receive a package from the zoo recently. It was actually from Dr. Salzberg. Aaron had died and left some things in his workshop at the zoo. Dr. Salzberg thought I would appreciate having something Aaron had made.

I couldn't possibly do justice describing what it was, so I've transcribed the hand-written paper that accompanied the package. Aaron was meticulous in everything he did, even documenting the work he did for things unrelated to the zoo.

In the Jewish religion, the holy ark is the cabinet at the center of the synagogue that contains the Torah – a handwritten scroll that documents the teachings that are the foundation of the faith. Included in the Torah are the Ten Commandments – or the core ethical principles in both Judaism and Christianity.

This is my ark. At least that is what I had intended it to be. But, as I was constructing it, it occurred to me that in many ways it resembled one of those old-fashioned mechanical fortune-telling devices in which you inserted a coin, and it presented you with a glimpse of what's to come.

In all actuality, though, I'm not on board with either commandments or fortunes. So instead, my ark simply poses questions that you are invited to ponder.

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*Constructed out of flat sheets of laser-cut acrylic, the Ark of Questions measures approximately 7.5" x 10.75" x 17.5" and is embellished with resin-filled etchings reminiscent of Middle Eastern designs. The Ark's doors are decorated with an inlaid pattern of tiles that resemble the stained glass of church windows. The bottom portion of the Ark is a storage drawer that contains a book entitled, "Questions from the Ark."*

*The Ark plugs into household mains and inside there are a number of electronic components powered by an Arduino computer. When first turned on, the Ark's screen provides the prompt: "Slide ring to open doors." To the left of the screen is a small finger-sized hole. Beneath the hole is a pressure-sensitive switch. Inserting your finger into the hole and sliding downward causes the Ark's two doors to swing open and illuminate its contents.*

*Inside the Ark are twelve coins or tokens, each measuring approximately 2.5" in diameter. The token's front sides each depict an illustration from one chapter of the book. These illustrations are created from smoothly polished inlaid acrylic tiles. The back of the tokens are laser-etched acrylic that resemble currency and depict an image and chapter title from the book.*

*When the Ark's doors are opened, the screen displays the message: "Place Coin on Reader." To the screen's right is a circular indentation with a small notch. Each token*

*has a corresponding notch to ensure proper placement. Using a series of magnetic switches, the reader decodes which token is placed on the reader, and a corresponding question is displayed on the screen. Each question is designed neither to instruct the users what to do, nor to tell them what will happen in the future, but rather encourage them to ponder an issue – much like a Zen master will do with his students.*

*Switches on the side of the Ark control the main power, the screen power, the screen contrast, and the night lights. The two circular emblems at the top of the Ark are actually night lights that cast a soothing blue glow. And when they're on, so is a light that illuminates the Ark's drawer. The drawer pull is a cast resin blue dome. Finally, at the front center of the Ark's shelf is an incense burner that is encircled with a glowing blue ring to enable the incense's smoke to be seen in the dark.*