

Episode 70: Aaron survived a tsunami

December 26, 2004.

That was the day a huge earthquake happened. In fact, it's the third-largest earthquake ever recorded, and it had the longest duration of faulting that has ever been observed – between eight and ten minutes.

But there was something different about this earthquake. It happened underwater. It took place in the Indian Ocean. The epicenter was off the west coast of northern Sumatra, Indonesia. The result of this enormous earthquake happening under the ocean was that it created massive waves of water, up to 100 feet, or about 30 meters, high. These waves arrived without warning. More than 227,000 people woke up that morning and went through their normal routine, not realizing it was their last day to be alive.

Female News Reporter

Good evening. More than 11,000 people are now thought to have been killed in Southern Asia after an undersea earthquake sent enormous waves rolling across the Indian Ocean. The quake measured 8.9 on the Richter scale. The biggest in the world for 40 years. Waves up to 10 meters high engulfed the coast of many countries.

The quake's epicenter was off the island of Sumatra in northwestern Indonesia, where more than 4,000 people are thought to have died. In Sri Lanka, officials say more than 3,000 people have been killed and more than a million affected. In southern India, 3,000 people, mostly fisherman, are reported dead. At least 300 have been killed in southern Thailand, including some tourists. Hundreds of people are missing. Waves swamped the low lying Maldivian islands, leaving the capital Male two thirds underwater. Gareth Therby reports.

Gareth Therby

For many tourists in southern Thailand this was a paradise. Not anymore. Survivors here evacuated on the island of Phi Phi, well known to many as the perfect setting for the movie 'The Beach.' From a tourist in the Maldives, this account of her survival.

Female tourist

We didn't realize, we just saw water coming up and towards the building and people from outside screaming. Then we saw the water come into the building very fast.

Gareth Therby

Pictures from Indian television show the water overwhelming large areas of the coast. Hundreds of fishermen are among those reported missing. India's prime minister says everything possible will be done to help those affected.

Indian prime minister

My heart goes out in sympathy to all those families who have lost their dear ones.

Gareth Therby

Sri Lanka has declared a national disaster and is appealing for international aid

I remember when it happened. It was a Sunday, the day after Christmas. Of course it was the leading news story all over the world. I heard how the story unfolded, how the underwater earthquake happened, and the unbelievable numbers as the death toll kept rising. It was an incredible tragedy. But I was in the US, and that horrific scene was on the other side of the world. It didn't seem real.

But for my guest today, Aaron, that scene was very real. He was there.

Scott

I'm not a rock climber, so I gotta ask you this, why is the rock climbing in Thailand among the best in the world?

Aaron

Well first off it's probably the only rock climbing you can do in your bare feet on a perfect white sand beach, which is really unusual. It's like half beach sunbathing, half extreme sport, which is a really nice combination.

They also have these beautiful limestone cliffs jutting out of the jungle and a lot of them are actually out to sea, which is really special because you can do this thing called deep water soloing. It's where you get a boat out there and the boat goes right up to the edge of the cliff, and you hold on and climb up. There's no rope, it's just an overhanging cliff and if you fall you just fall into the deep ocean. It's really fun. I tried a bit of that but I don't know if my climbing skills were really up to it. Or maybe it was just my mental skills were only to let me get so far up there.

We loved it, my now wife, but girlfriend then, were traveling around there. We were both big into rock climbing at the time and it was just a beautiful place to visit.

Scott

Awesome, it sounds beautiful. I've never been to Thailand; I'd love to go there sometime. When this happened, you had the whole month of December off work?

Aaron

(laughs) Yeah. We both worked for the same company and we had met there. It was a music management company called IE Music in London. I had the best boss, he was a total rock'n'roll 60s boss. He used to work for Island records and managed a bunch of the big bands there. It was just one of those offices that was a lot of fun to work with. We would work really hard during the year and then he would just shut down the office in December. Every December he would say, "Right, that's it. I'm out of here that means you're out of here too." If you didn't have a tour on or something like that then you were allowed to just go.

So Jill and I would just go backpacking for a month every December. For about 4 or 5 years we did that. It's a really amazing way to see a country. To have that amount of time to properly get it into you and enjoy it. Thailand was our second trip where we did that.

Scott

You went there specifically for rock climbing, right? I mean obviously they have other things that you can do there.

Aaron

We went there for rock climbing and diving really. We flew over to Bangkok. It is an incredible place, if you've never been to Asia, there is something about the otherness of it that's different from traveling to America or Europe or even South America in a way. It just feels like a very different country. Bangkok is kind of mad and crazy and you can go see the temples and all that kind of stuff.

We got out of there pretty quickly and went down to Phuket, which is an island down in the south. It's really great for diving. We went there and did our PADI course and spent about 5 days there. Then we got a ferry over to Krabi which is just a couple hours off the coast of Phuket. It was there we were intending to go to this island called Koh Phi Phi. We had made these plans to spend Christmas on this island. It's a beautiful paradise island. It's basically like an atoll with a double beach, so you're on the beach and you have the ocean on both sides of you. It has beautiful mountains and is just a really chill place so that's where we had planned to go.

On the ferry, it had an open air deck, and we met some other travelers and saw that they had rock climbing equipment. So we went up to them and said, "Oh hey, we're climbers too and we're looking for a really good place to go. We've heard it's amazing. Where's the best place to go?" They said, "You have to go to this beach called Tonsai. It's the best place to go, it's filled with climbers, you'll absolutely love it."

So the ferry was actually stopping at Railay beach which was right next door to Tonsai. On the spur of the moment we decided to not go to Koh Phi Phi, but to stop here at Tonsai instead and spend a few days there. That decision ended up being an absolutely critical decision and a real stroke of luck.

Scott

Before we get into that part, I remember when you originally told me about this, you said you had a bad feeling about this trip in the plane.

Aaron

Yeah, and before then too. It was really weird. It was one of those things I can't explain now and I couldn't explain then either. I'm not 100% cynical but I'm also not someone who believes in supernatural things or psychic phenomenon or anything like that, but I can't deny what happened. I just had this feeling leading up to this trip that something bad was going to happen.

I was talking to Jill about it and I kept trying to put it out of my mind saying, "Stop being ridiculous. You're just stressed at work, you've got too much going on. It's just stuff like that that is bleeding over into this and that's why you're feeling that way." But I couldn't shake it. I went to see my mom before I left to make sure that I'd sort of said goodbye to her and given her a hug. I did lots of things like that.

Scott

Yeah that sounds really serious. I mean you've gone on trips like this before, have you ever had a feeling like that?

Aaron

Never. Never since either. I'm always really excited before I go on a trip. I try to absorb all the different things we're going to see and the background of it all. Yeah it's just pure excitement,

I've never had a bad feeling about it. That's why it was so strange. I kind of just forcibly put it out of my mind. When we got on the plane and they closed the doors I started hyperventilating and had a panic attack, which I'd had some times in the past but not for years. So I knew what it was and I said to Jill, "I think we're going to die there. I don't know why but I feel like we're not going to make it back." I was on the verge of tears. She was calming me down and said, "Do you want to get off the plane?" I said, "No, no I'm just being stupid."

I had such a strong feeling and afterwards, to this day even, I can't really reconcile where that came from or why I had that. I know that people listening will think, "Oh it's just a coincidence." I know how memory works and you can kind of implant things in your memory post-dated. I just have to say that that's not the case in this instance. I really did have a strong instinctual feeling that just kept coming back and back again.

Scott

Hey, you know, some things you just can't explain but what happened happened. So you went to Tonsai?

Aaron

Yes.

Scott

You were looking for a place on the beach and what happened when you got there?

Aaron

The really interesting thing in the set up to this is there were a number of incidents that happened that led to us surviving. There were so many of them that it's so strange to look back at all of those coincidences and roads branching, and if we'd gone down a different route we'd have had a completely different outcome.

The first one was not going to Koh Phi Phi. Koh Phi Phi ended up being one of the absolute worst hit islands in the whole of Thailand because it's a really shallow island and when the wave hit it, it completely overran the whole beach.

Scott

Your original plan was to spend Christmas there?

Aaron

Yeah, and Jill really wanted to do that. She was into climbing but she said, "Look, we want to have a holiday as well and chill out, this is like a paradise island." So we had always planned to spend it there. There was very little high ground there so there were a lot of casualties on that island. We would have almost certainly tried to get a place on the beach.

That was the second thing that happened. We got off of the ferry at this place called Ao Nang and then we had to get a Thai longtail fishing boat down to Railay beach. It was really like "The Beach" both the book and the movie which was written by Alex Garland. It's about this hidden backpacker paradise that's hard to access and people don't know about it. That's a little bit like what Tonsai is like. In order to access it you have to get this boat to Railay beach. We arrived and it was an absolutely spectacular place. If you could imagine a photograph of a tropical paradise, this was it. Beautiful limestone crags covered in jungle rising up from this perfect

beach, turquoise water, little Thai fishing boats and monkeys in the jungle. There were really nice authentic hotels along the beach, nothing high rise.

We got off and we thought that Railay beach was so nice that we wanted to try to get a guest house there instead, and Jill really wanted to do it. We walked around and tried and tried to find somewhere but it was all booked out, because it was coming up on Christmas. We were so disappointed. I watched the trailer for the movie "The Impossible" and the hotel that they stay in is the hotel that we were trying to stay at, it was our number one choice.

We were so disappointed. We walked around for a couple hours and we couldn't find anything. We decided to go over to the next beach at Tonsai. That was a sort of hidden paradise. The only way you can get there is by hiking over this really steep jungle pass, or at low tide you can wade around a headland in the water, there is no other way to get there. People have to work to get there and it's a real climbing community. When we arrived it was just a beautiful place, but more of a backpacker budget place with little shacks on the beach and really cool open air bars.

Again, we walked up and down this beach trying to find one of these little beach cabanas to stay in. There were a few of them that were absolutely gorgeous. Nothing was free so we gradually made our way backwards, we wanted to be as close to the beach as we could. We gradually made our way further and further uphill. Tonsai, unlike Railay Beach, has a really steep slope from the beach up a mountain. We were absolutely gutted because the only place we could find was probably about a quarter of a mile up this steep path right in the jungle. At the time we were really gutted.

Had we stayed at that hotel in Railay, it was one of the hardest hit areas anywhere in our region, it was completely overwhelmed when the wave came in. Had we stayed on the beach in Tonsai, all the places that we would have stayed in were completely obliterated by the wave too. Where we ended up staying was one of the few places that didn't get any damage because it was so far up the hill.

So an incredible set of fortuitous circumstances steered us away from Koh Phi Phi, away from Railay Beach and then away from the beach of Tonsai. Then it just got stranger after that.

Scott

Well that's what we want to hear about. I wanted to ask you though, you're an experienced traveler and the question that comes to my mind is, if I'm going to travel someplace I'm going to make reservations at a hotel or airbnb or something ahead of time. Why wouldn't you do that?

Aaron

Um, you know, we were in our 20s and stupid and just wanted to backpack. We used to call it "flash pack" because we weren't quite that backpacker age and we both had decent jobs in London. So we would sort of do the backpacking thing for a few days and then we would stay somewhere nice for a few days. We still had this sense of, "We're just free and easy and we're just going to see what happens." It's lucky we did because if we did have reservations they would have been on Koh Phi Phi and we wouldn't have been able to change our plans.

Now, I'm in my early 40s and I definitely make reservations now. The reality of not making reservations is that you spend your entire time walking around trying to find somewhere to stay; so I've learned my lesson. It was very fortuitous that I hadn't learned it by that time yet.

Scott

Yeah back then it was great to be spontaneous right? (laughs)

Aaron

(laughs) Yeah back in those days, that's right.

So we spent about a week there and we kept talking about leaving, we were just having a good time. We met some Thai friends that ran a local bar and were into the climbing scene so they were showing us around. It was a beautiful time with fires on the beach in the evening. We just kept saying, "One more day, one more day." Eventually it got to Christmas day and we were still there so we stayed for that.

We'd been vegetarian the whole time because, particularly when you travel to remote places in Thailand where there's no refrigeration, it's sensible not to eat meat because you're probably not going to get food poisoning that way. Our little guest house had done this British style Christmas dinner buffet feast. They had roast potatoes and the works and they were so excited that they had done this for us.

Jill felt so bad because they kept coming up and saying, "Oh we've done this special thing for you guys and we're so excited for you to have it." So we sat down for dinner and because we were vegetarian we weren't eating any of the turkey, but they kept coming up and saying, "Don't you want to try the turkey? We brought it all over the island especially for you." We were being polite and eventually Jill said, "I feel so bad I'm going to go get some." So she went over and got a little piece and ate it. It was a Happy Christmas and we had some turkey.

Later that night, she got violently ill from it. She got terrible food poisoning. We canceled the plans we made the next day, and those plans were to go diving. We'd just done this PADI course in Phuket and we hadn't done any more diving since then so we wanted to go out and do that.

Scott

Let me just ask, for people that aren't divers, what does PADI stand for?

Aaron

Professional Association of Diving International, I think. It's basically the course you have to do to go diving. It's usually 3 days or so for a basic level course. We had done it so now we could go diving with a company down to about 20-25 meters. We hadn't used this certification yet, so we thought the day after Christmas would be perfect so we booked a couple of dives. Then on that morning, she'd had such a rough night, that I canceled it. I said, "We can't go out, we'll do it another day when she's better." That was the other thing, if she hadn't eaten that piece of turkey, we would have gone out diving that day. If you were on the water when the wave hit there would have been absolutely no chance.

I said goodbye to Jill, I was going to stay with her but she said, "No, go off and have some fun." I met up with my Thai mate Joey and we were going to go off climbing together. He said to me, "Look, we have a choice of places we could go today. I really like this place called Eagle Wall, which is here in Tonsai which is really close and really easy," he was kind of pushing that one, "Or we could hike over to Railay Beach and kind of climb up the other side of Railay Beach where there's a big limestone crag." It's almost like a hill covered in jungle that leads up to a cliff

on a peninsula out to sea. There's a really famous climbing route there called Lord of the Thais. So he said, "We could go to the Lord of the Thais wall." I almost just flipped a coin in my head and said, "Let's do the hike over." He said, "Are you sure? It's kind of a long hike." I said, "Yeah I feel like doing that, let's hike over."

It turns out that Eagle Wall, which is right on the beach, is hemmed in and you have to wade across water to get there. Once you're there there's no way out, the only way out is to wade back through the water. The people that were really hurt on Tonsai were the people that were climbing on Eagle Wall. A couple people survived by literally climbing up and holding on. We didn't go there (laughs) and if we had God knows what would have happened. We went to the other place on a 50/50 decision even though he was pushing the other one, so I don't know why I picked that.

So we hiked over to the other place and climbed up there. It was maybe the best place in the whole island to be because it was about 75 feet above the ocean, jutting out to sea. We were climbing and having a good time. It was an incredible feeling because you're climbing this cliff and literally dangling above this beautiful turquoise ocean. While I'm doing that, I look out and see this wall of white water really far away.

We never had any surf in these beaches, it had always been absolutely calm. I said to Joey, "Do you guys get surf here? I've never seen anything like this. Check this out." His face immediately dropped and he said, "Something's not right. This isn't right." He lived there and was a climbing guide and a local. He knew instantly that something wasn't right because he'd never seen anything like this and knew that that shouldn't be happening here.

We had no warning. One of the reasons that 240,000 people died around the Indian Ocean that day was that there was no system in place for a tsunami early warning system. They knew this earthquake had happened and they knew that the tsunami would be spreading out like this ripple effect from the epicenter of the earthquake, but they had no way of letting people know. One of the great tragedies of it was that it could have been averted but they had no system in place at that time.

So we had no idea and it was before the day that smartphones were ubiquitous. There was no way of Googling what happened and there was no Wifi there unless you were on one spot in the island. We really had no way of figuring out what was happening. We just watched this wall of water kind of slowly come towards us. To be honest, I felt at that time that it was just a big surf wave, I didn't feel like there was anything wrong or dangerous with it. We could see behind it that there were another 2 sets behind it. So it really looked like if you were on a surfing beach and you saw a big set of waves coming in, but we were above it so we didn't really have a perspective on how big it was.

Underneath us was a moored sailing boat, and I watched this wall of water come up and when it hit the sailing boat it just swallowed it. It flipped this boat immediately and broke the mast and the boat was just gone. We knew then that something was terribly wrong. The interesting thing, I suppose, was that before then you think of a tsunami and you think of a giant 50 foot wave. It wasn't that in this case. It was just an incredibly fast and powerful surge and it brought so much water behind it. Your average wave doesn't have a lot of depth going back to it, but this just went back forever it seemed. It was this huge surge of water.

After it took over this sailing boat it went up onto the beach. There are always these longtail Thai fishing boats that are parked on the beach, you don't have to moor them, they are just dragged onto the beach. It just picked them up and you couldn't see them anymore, it just threw them towards the hotel. Right on the edge of the beach where the jungle begins were all of the nice hotels. We just saw the water surge up and smash through the hotel and just keep going and keep going.

Everyone was watching at this point and everybody knew something bad was happening, but there was also this incredible surrealness to it. I'd never been in a disaster before, I didn't know what to expect or how I would react. Some people immediately were like, "We have to get down. We have to go and see if everyone is alright." Then they ran down. Other people, me included, and I'm not proud of this, were maybe in shock after and I felt like it wasn't real. I wasn't processing how dangerous it was.

For some reason, because I saw that boat destroyed I said, "Well there's no one in that boat. There can't be anyone in that boat, because had there been someone in that boat they would have certainly been killed." I could see on the top of the boat a child's inflatable thing to play with. I just couldn't accept the reality of that. The same, I couldn't accept the reality of what was happening to the hotel. I just felt like it wasn't real and it was all going to be ok.

So some people left and ran down the beach, which was a mistake because then the second and third wave hit. So it was lucky, in a way, that I wasn't processing it properly and I wasn't one of those guys who knew immediately what to do.

Scott

Were those second and third waves just as strong as the first one?

Aaron

Yeah they were. There were three waves, one after another. They were a little bit apart. The wave came in and surged up and it seemed to just surge up forever, then it pulled back. After it pulled right back then another wave hit. A lot of people said of the Indian ocean that a lot of the devastation and damage that was done was simply pulled back into the ocean afterwards. The pull of that receding wave is incredibly strong. Actually as the tsunami hits, you can feel the pull of the water. There's this famous picture of this tourist family standing on Railay Beach, it's quite a harrowing image to see. It's these parents and their kids trying to run away from the wave but they are already knee deep in water. I know this family is ok actually because the art school that reported this said, "This is a picture of a Norwegian family but they all survived." You can see though, that the pull of the water going back is making it so they are struggling to run away. Which is why when a tsunami hits you have to get out of there early, because if you are already in the water you may just get caught in it.

Scott

So people that were there and got hit on the incoming, if they survived that, now they're being sucked back out to sea?

Aaron

Yeah. I think tragically, what we found out later was that- I'm jumping ahead but we ran out of food afterwards. The reason why was because all the fish were contaminated from eating the bodies of the people that had passed away. A lot of that was just sucked back into the ocean sadly.

After we didn't go down after the first wave and we saw the second and third wave hit, we were very nervous about when it was going to come again. In order to get down from our safe vantage point and get to the next vantage point, it was maybe 500 meters or 1-2,000 feet away. So it was quite a ways away, like if you had seen that wave coming in you would have had to really sprint across the beach to get to the other high ground. Otherwise Railay was completely flat. That was one of the problems too was that the area where all the hotels were was completely flat, there was no way to escape from that.

After a while we felt it was safe. Obviously Jill wasn't with me and I was starting to get worried that she had left the house. I had left her not feeling well and I was pretty sure that she was just going to stay in our place which I thought was safe because it was so high up the mountain. I started to get worried that for some reason she had come down to the beach to see what's happening. Jill is one of those people who just switches on in an emergency and just knows what to do and wants to take control and stays calm. I knew that she wouldn't be passive in this situation, she would be wanting to help people and wanting to have a positive influence on it.

So I started to get really worried that she'd gone down to the beach and I really wanted to get back. We hiked down this path to the beach, and when we got there it was absolutely shocking. We really couldn't tell from where we were the amount of damage that had been done. There was just litter strewn all across the beach. Broken Thai fishing boats, parts of sailing boats, people clothes, fishing boats that had gone all the way into the top of palm trees, the hotel was destroyed. It was like a war scene.

We walked across the beach and at the far end of the beach I found this child's doll just lying on the beach and I just thought, "Oh my god." It sort of brought it home. I needed at that point to get out of there and get up and find Jill. So we hiked up to the top of the pass over to Tonsai. People were screaming. There was someone shouting at us, "Get down! Get away from the ocean, get away from the ocean, it's coming again!" There was a lot of conflicting information, no one knew what was happening. I went down and again it was like another war scene in Tonsai. All the places that we'd wanted to stay in, they weren't there anymore, they were just destroyed. All the places we'd been hanging out were destroyed. The boats were destroyed.

People were just wandering around like zombies, they were in shock. I think I was in shock too. I still couldn't really accept that people might have been killed, even at this stage, I just felt that it was something bad that happened but everyone probably escaped. As we were crossing over we saw another sail boat that had been broken in half on the rocks and we came by really close to it and there were people's things inside, but there was no one there. I just didn't know what happened.

So we came over to the other side and I ran up the path to our little guest house really nervous and wanting to find Jill there. When I got there she wasn't there and I really started to panic because she wasn't anywhere to be seen. I was running around that area shouting for her and in my panic I had missed the note that had been stuck to the door. When I went back to the door I saw it and it was just 3 words, "On the mountain." So I started to make my way up to the top of the mountain.

Jill's story from this is worth hearing from her perspective. What happened to her is that she came out and heard screaming and saw people running past her. People were forcefully grabbing her and telling her, "You have to run away, you have to run to higher ground!" She was

distraught because she knew where I was and was worried that I was in a lot of danger. It was her instinct to go looking for me. She started to make her way down to the beach, but thank God she stopped and thought, "This is stupid I could get really hurt and maybe he is safe. What else can I do?" So she started being one of the people to start rounding people up and she was getting everyone together and saying, "We all have to go to the top of the mountain." There is no path up, you get to the end of the path and it's just thick jungle. She and a bunch of other people were just fighting their way bushwhacking through this jungle to get as high as they could.

Meanwhile, I get back to her place and see the note and start doing the same. I start running through the jungle. I saw lots of people dotted around and I was shouting her name. I kept walking for what felt like an eternity of going around and shouting her name. It felt really hopeless, like "What are my chances of finding her in all of these people in the crazy scenario in this huge jungle area?" Someone heard me shouting for Jill and she came over and asked, "Are you Aaron?" I said, "Yeah!" She said, "Jill's looking for you, she's about 100 feet up there." She pointed me in the right direction and I ran up there. There was a little clearing and she was about 40 or 50 other people and I saw her and she looked over and saw me and burst into tears and ran over to me. We were just hugging each other. It felt so amazing to be reunited and know that she was safe.

Scott

I can imagine. To me it seems like sensory overload. Not just the devastation and death all around everyone, but also the confusion about what actually happened, because you still didn't know.

Aaron

Yeah, and I think that's the biggest thing. In the movie everyone knows instantly what happened and is immediately in panic and survival mode. In reality there was a lot of confusion and shock and denial and a lot of people who were still just trying to go about their normal business. It was weird. Even for myself, I look back and struggle to understand why I was in denial about the severity of what had happened. I think you're right. I think it was a lack of knowledge at that point.

A few hours after the wave had hit I said to all these people, "We think it's safe now and we can come back down." So we did that. I got my phone out and phoned my mom. It was probably about 4 a.m. or so UK time. She answered and I said, "Mom, something's happened. I don't know what's happened but we're ok." Literally after that the line went dead and we weren't able to do any communication for the next 10 days. She always says, "The fact that you got that call off (laughs), I wouldn't have been able to survive those 10 days not knowing what happened to you."

Scott

Yeah and this was worldwide news obviously. I was in the US at the time and we heard about it. That was the news of the day for several days.

Aaron

Yeah absolutely. After that she got out of bed and saw it and was just so thankful that I'd managed to get that message across because I think that would have been just an unbearable weight knowing that your kid was there in danger. Now that I'm a father I understand that more.

Scott

Not knowing how your kids are doing for that period of time, yeah. So you were stuck there?

Aaron

Yeah. After we kind of got ourselves together, we went down and everyone immediately started cleaning up. I think by the next morning pretty much everyone that was there was helping to move all this rubbish and timber and broken boats, trying to just clear it up. We were stuck there because the only way out of Tonsai and Railay was by boat, and there were no boats, they were all destroyed.

There was no food. There were no natural food sources on the island and there wasn't a huge amount of food stored and we couldn't eat the fish. They started air dropping packets of rice. So for 10 days we ate air dropped rice. I lost about 20 pounds. We helped people clean up. Everyone pitched in together and tried to help the Thai people repair their lives a small bit. You know, they don't have any insurance for this, their livelihoods had been absolutely destroyed. We all just wanted to help in some way.

I felt very lucky because there were a lot of people around me that had been separated from family members. There was a guy I remember who was helping to move stuff into a pile of rubbish. He was talking about how his wife and kids had gone ahead of him to Koh Phi Phi and he couldn't get a hold of him. I can't imagine what he was going through. He kind of wasn't letting it in, he was just working 12 hours a day to clear this thing and then sleeping. How do you face something like that when you have no control over finding them? So we felt very lucky that we'd found each other and were both ok.

That afternoon there were a lot of people hurt and a lot of people that were being carried to makeshift first aid centers. Not even medical centers. A lot of it was just swept away by the ocean, so it was just gone. It was very strange. Our guest house was still ok so we slept there and a lot of other people bunked in. A lot of the places up in the mountain were ok. Some people left earlier. There were certain priorities, like if you had family or kids elsewhere then people were allowed to ship off. We stayed though. It was such chaos everywhere so we decided to stay and help. We had no immediate urgency to get back like other people did so we just decided to stay and help.

We had made friends with the guy and his wife that ran the climbing school and the bar, and they really welcomed us in and a couple times they cooked for us. They caught a bunch of crickets and fried them up. We were hungry so they invited us, they said, "Come around. We found some food we're going to eat." We arrived and they fried up all these crickets. Jill she's Scottish so she's a picky eater at the best of times, they really only eat meat and chips and that's about it up there. We were hungry though man! I went full on into the crickets. I think Jill had a couple and then she just passed me the rest under the table. (laughs)

Scott

So much for a vegetarian diet right?

Aaron

So much for vegetarianism, yeah. I don't know how insects are included in that or not but yeah.

It was really community spirit in some ways. It was very sad and quiet. You could feel something of the presence of what had just happened, and it was such an immediate change. There were

a couple of moments that were nice though, and that was one. There was a nice hotel on the other side of the island, not a backpacking area, so all the guests had been immediately evacuated and the staff had gone. So we said, "I think they've got some beer left there." This was about 5 days in. So we went over there and there were a couple cases of beer. We put them on our shoulders and walked back to the beach where everyone was working and just started handing it out to people. It was just a moment of normality and being together and saying thank you and everyone was so happy.

It is amazing how people come together in those environments. The Thai people were really frightened. They were letting off fireworks and bangers every night and throwing them into the ocean to try and ward off evil spirits. They were really afraid. We all just came together and did our best to help in whatever way we could. Sadly, it wasn't a lot or enough, but we did what we could.

Scott

I can imagine for people like that that don't know what happened and they'd never seen it happen before. Obviously logic tells you that it might happen again. It's got to be frightening.

Aaron

Yeah and because there was no communication really too. By that point some people had gotten the information that it was an earthquake and there was a tsunami, but we had no access to hearsay and what other people were saying. You didn't know what was happening and we were anxious to contact people at home again and let them know how things were. It was a stressful time.

I think it was a long time before I really processed how lucky we were. I think in the moment you're just dealing with this sensory overload and this incredibly shocking situation which has suddenly happened out of the blue. It was a beautiful blue sky day, perfect day, everyone was smiling and happy, and then all of the sudden without any warning whatsoever it changed. I think the suddenness of that was incredibly shocking. It took us both a long time to process and appreciate how lucky we were.

Scott

The conversation you and Jillian must have had in thinking back. Now you're telling the story, but thinking back and wondering, "Wow, what if we had not made that decision, and then the other decision, and then you ate the meat," it's just a chain reaction of things.

Aaron

I think I gave up like 8 of my 9 lives on that day. To look back and see those 5 or 6 decisions, which at the time were tiny and inconsequential decisions, yet later on they would be life or death decisions. It made me think, you don't know those moments when they're happening. You know them in retrospect but you don't know them when they're happening. It's kind of a hard thing to realize in a way because there's a lack of control to that. You can't prepare for that. I think all you can do, in a way, is just be really grateful.

Afterwards I became really obsessed with death and the nature of it. I'm kind of a philosophical guy I guess so I was reading a lot about it. I was trying to understand what happened and what it meant that we survived and so many other people didn't. What it meant that these chance situations happened. I think in some ways, to have a near death experience like that, makes you

really look at yourself and how you're living your life in a different way. If there's a positive to bring from that, I guess that's it.

To realize that the day that you die will be today, it's not some time in the future that was impactful. The day that you die will be today. That moment can happen at any time, and we can't face it head on. I thought if I could fully accept the reality of it and face it head on, then I could somehow overcome this fear of death. I don't know if human beings have evolved to be able to do that. I don't think you can face the reality of it. We sort of picture it as some distant thing in the future and put it out of our minds. I think when you're confronted with it and realize that the day it will happen will be now, it changes your understanding of that in a fundamental way.

When I got back, I made a lot of changes to my life. It didn't happen instantly, but I started to really think about what I really wanted to do and what was really important to me. I tried to stop living my life for other people. So much of what we do we do for our ego. To be successful or appear successful or cool or all the rest of the things that we want other people to see us as. A lot of times those things aren't for ourselves. If we were to take all of that out, what would be the decisions that you would make? I think if you realize your own mortality and the impermanence of life and the fragility of life, then in some ways that frees you up to make the big decisions for yourself. To live the life that you really want to live.

Soon after that I quit my job in the music industry. It was a great job, but I always wanted to be on the other side of it. I always wanted to be making music, not doing the business of music, but I probably wasn't good enough for that. So I ended up becoming a writer which was kind of my lifelong dream. I don't know if I would have had the courage to pursue that without that event shaking things up for me.

Scott

Isn't it interesting that it takes something like that for us to step back and say, "Wow, what am I really doing with my life?"

Aaron

Yeah, absolutely. We're on autopilot so much. In modern life particularly, we have such a busy life, even more so now. It's so full of information and business and we kind of hold up that mantle that being busy is an emblem of pride, right? So we don't have enough space to really consider those big questions. I think a big event like that knocks a bunch of that rubbish out of your head and gives you, for a while at least, the space to see how life truly is and how lucky we are to be alive. I think that one of the big things I've taken from it is gratitude. I think gratitude is really really important. It's easy to go through life without thinking about that because we're always striving for the next thing. We live in a really ambitious culture, we're always striving for the next thing or trying to achieve the next thing. Often at the expense of being grateful for where we already are and present and appreciative of that.

We have a little Thai mask that we bought in Phuket, and we've got it hanging on our dining room table. I want to sit around that table with my family and just be grateful and remember that I came very close to not having that. I came very close to the last 18 years or so not being there, not having my children, not becoming a writer, not having all those thousands of experiences that have filled me with so much joy. I came very close to not having that. I came 5 decisions away from not having that. That's made me incredibly grateful for everyday and incredibly determined to keep that attitude of thanks for being alive. Understanding that it can be taken

from you at any minute. It doesn't mean you have to be fearful of that, because that's inevitable, what it does mean is you can't waste the time you do have.

Scott

This happened in 2004, have you been back there since then?

Aaron

(laughs) Yeah. I don't know why I did it. About 4 or 5 years later I went back with a friend of mine. It was actually a huge mistake. It's this famous place for rock climbing and he really wanted to go. I was about to get married, to Jill actually, so before we did that we wanted to go back there on a climbing trip. We weren't supposed to stay there for very long. Immediately when I got there though, I knew it was a mistake. I just felt so much the ghosts of what had happened, and no one else did. It was like life had returned to normal and people were sitting on the beach as they were before it happened. Everything had been rebuilt. There were tourists there and people were all smiling and laughing. It was kind of shocking how it can return to normal and that so much devastation could occur in this place and here I was standing here again. To this day I really don't know why I went back. I guess I felt I had to, but I found it really hard and I actually ended up leaving pretty quickly after that.

Scott

I tend to think of someone who's in the military and travels to another country during war and all the horror of that but then going back after the war to the same place. It's probably a similar experience.

Aaron

Yeah it is. I guess there is a positive to that which is, these people had rebuilt their lives. Life goes on and that's a good thing. We can't stay mired in that tragedy forever, life is for living. I'm a firm believer of that. Of course it's a positive thing, but for me personally it felt very strange. I really felt the presence of what happened there. I couldn't stop looking around and thinking, "Where people stood right here, this happened. Now it's disappeared and gone." That felt strange, yeah.

Scott

Life is very different for you now.

Aaron

(laughs) Yeah it is. I'm enjoying life now like I said. Life is for the living and you've got to enjoy it and be happy and grateful for it for sure.

Scott

You and Jillian got married and have a family? You've got kids right?

Aaron

Yeah! We got married in Scotland, I even had the kilt on for that. About 7 years ago we actually moved to the states, originally for a short term job but we got stuck here. I live out in Colorado which famously gets 300 days of sunshine a year and I think the UK gets the other 65, so I feel like it's a pretty good trade.

Scott

If anyone's wondering why you have such high quality audio, you are a podcaster. I know my listeners are going to love your podcast. It's called "Armchair Explorer: World's Greatest Adventurers Tell Their Best Stories From the Road," that sounds great. I've listened to some of the episodes, but tell us about the show.

Aaron

Yeah thank you. One of the reasons I'm really honored to be on is I think there's synergy between our shows in the sense that they're both about stories and incredible ones you may not get a chance to experience yourself. I absolutely love the concept of your show and how you do it. My show is about adventure and travel. I've been lucky to have a bunch of pretty amazing guests tell their stories. I've had the explorer Ed Stafford talking about his 2.5 year trek along the Amazon River, he was the first person to walk the length of the amazon. I've got an episode coming out with a woman who rode 2,000 miles down the Ho Chi Minh trail to raise awareness of what's happening post Vietnam War there in terms of the devastation that still exists, but also so much of the beauty. I've had astronauts talk about their first space walk and Olympic athletes backcountry skiing in Alaska. I try, like you, to tell incredible experiences that inspire people and take them out of their ordinary lives for a short period of time. I want to celebrate the beauty and wonder of the outdoors and the pure joy of experiencing this amazing planet.

I was struck by this disaster but it didn't knock out the love of traveling for me. I subsequently became a travel writer actually. It's a wonderful way to tell stories. My dirty secret about this good sound is I'm actually currently in my walk-in wardrobe (laughs) surrounded by these big blankets I've put up on the walls. It's not quite a high tech studio. The only problem is Jill is getting pretty annoyed with me. She says, "Come on! Every week you have to take everything out and do this?" So maybe I'll have to move one of these days.

Scott

So your podcast can be found on any podcast app, and the website is armchair-explorer.com.

Aaron

That's right. Thank you so much for sharing that I appreciate it.

Scott

You're also on all the socials as [@armchairexplorerpodcast](https://www.facebook.com/armchairexplorerpodcast) on Facebook and Instagram. We'll have links to all that in the show notes for this episode. Aaron, thanks for coming on and telling your story.

Aaron

Thank you so much. Like I said it's been an absolute honor Scott, I appreciate it.

I have a bunch of things I need to tell you about.

During our conversation, Aaron mentioned a movie. It's called The Impossible, and at the moment it's available on Netflix. If you want to get a sense of what happened in Thailand that day, I recommend you watch it.

And in the near future, I'm going to be doing a special Q&A episode. Some listeners in the Facebook group suggested this, and it's actually something I was thinking about doing anyway. It wouldn't replace one of the regular episodes – this would be on a Friday in between episodes.

So think about what you would like to ask me – it can be about the podcast, or anything else (well, almost anything I guess). Now, keep in mind, some of the people in the Facebook group have already sent in questions such as “How do you find your guests?” and “What’s your favorite episode?” so don’t ask those things. And when you have your question, you can call in to the podcast voicemail line – 727-386-9468 and leave your question in a voicemail. If you can’t do that, you can send me an audio file by email to Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com. I’ll collect all the questions and answer all of them in a special episode coming up in the near future. It’s gonna be pretty fun.

And if you enjoy hearing actual 911 calls and the backstory that goes with them, I recommend you sign up as a patron and support the show. For \$5 a month, you get access to all of my exclusive bonus content called Raw Audio. And Raw Audio episode 10 just went live. In this episode,

A Boy Scout leader is taking some boys on a hike, and they encounter a bear –

911 Operator

How bad are you injured?

Boy Scout

Pretty bad

911 Operator

Ok. Are you bleeding?

A little girl calls 911 in the middle of the night –

911 Operator

What made you wake up tonight?

Girl

I think I heard a gunshot.

911 Operator

You heard a gun?

Girl

Yes and I see a bullet laying on the floor. I think it’s a bullet

And a car crashes into a grocery store...and then things get worse

Woman

Oh my god.

911 Operator

What’s going on?

Woman

Oh my god.

911 Operator

What's going on?

Woman

He's trying to kill himself.

So don't miss out on this stuff! You can get access to all of the Raw Audio episodes past and future by becoming a patron at [WhatWasThatLike.com/support](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com/support).

And now, a question – are you into plants? Do you WISH you had a green thumb? Well, you might like this podcast. The host is Maria, and she is the Plant Lady at Bloom and Grow Radio. Check this out –

Maria

Have you ever killed a houseplant before? I know I have! In fact I've killed so many house plants that I've actually created a podcast all about plant care. Bloom and Grow Radio, the podcast for plant people where we learn not only how to stop killing our house plants, but learn how to help them thrive, grow our indoor jungles and cultivate more joy in our lives. On Bloom and Grow Radio I interview plant experts to get answers to the plant care question we all have, but might be a little nervous to ask. Like, "What the heck is bright indirect light? What is soil and potting mix actually made up of? What is the best way to water my plants?" For me the mind blowing thing about plant care is that it is so much more than just making our homes look Instagrammable. Plants are amazing tools for self care. They help us disconnect from screens and reconnect with nature and ourselves. They remind us things like, growth is always happening around us, dormancy is sometimes necessary and something as simple as it's important to water yourself. If you want to grow, we've got an episode for you. So what are you waiting for? Join our community of plant friends and subscribe to the Bloom and Grow Radio podcast on Apple podcasts or your preferred podcast player. Or listen on our website at bloomandgrowradio.com/podcast so we can all keep blooming and keep growing.

And finally, we have a voicemail from Karen, and she listens to the podcast in Scotland:

Karen

Hi Scott. I thought I'd drop you a quick line to say how much I'm enjoying the "What Was That Like" podcast. I live on an island in the outer Hebrides of the north west coast of Scotland and work from home. I listen to loads of podcasts all day everyday. After finding "What Was That Like" I am binge listening to every episode. I just love it. You have a great voice, I find it strangely comforting. Keep up the great work and I hope you know it's appreciated and keeping me going through a dark and dismal winter in Scotland.

Thanks for that message, Karen! And of course I would love to hear from you – yeah, that's right, I'm talking to you. I mean, we're almost to the end of this episode, and it's just you and me here, right? I would like for YOU to call in and leave a voicemail. It can be a comment, a question, a suggestion, whatever. Just call 727-386-9468 and leave it there, or you can email me your audio at Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com. It would make me really happy to hear from you!

So that's it for this time. I hope you're doing well and staying safe. I'll see you in two weeks.