

Episode 68: Dan was mauled by a grizzly bear

A couple of weeks ago, I was out on my regular morning bike ride. I was going through a neighborhood a few miles from my home, and I saw up ahead that there was a large dog, just walking down the sidewalk. At 8 o'clock in the morning, this is not really that unusual. Some people walk their dogs every morning. What was unusual was that there were no people around. It was just this big black lab, and he seemed to be just out for a walk, on his own.

Well, I'm a real animal lover, and that especially applies to dogs, so I couldn't just keep riding and ignore this. So I parked my bike and sort of cautiously watched the dog to see if it was friendly, or not so friendly. And the great thing about dogs is their tail. That tail is the great indicator of their mood. And this dog, when he saw me, just started wagging that tail and came right over to me. So I was talking to him, and I checked his collar, and sure enough, there was a tag with the dogs name, Jackson, and a phone number.

So I held on to his collar with one hand, and I dialed the number on my phone with the other hand. A lady answered, and I just said, "Hi, do you have a dog named Jackson?" She paused for a second, and she said, "No, but my son does. I'm actually in Colorado." So it turns out that Jackson used to be her dog, then when they moved to Colorado, Jackson stayed here in Florida with her son. And he just never changed the phone number on the tag. So, the lady called her son, and he came out from a few doors down and got Jackson back home. He actually wasn't even aware that Jackson had somehow gotten loose.

The point of that story is, I was okay with cautiously approaching this 80 pound dog, because in my experience, most dogs are friendly. But... what if, instead of riding my bike through a neighborhood and seeing a dog, I was instead hiking on a trail in Alaska, and crossed paths with a bear? Of course – I would have had a totally different reaction. I would not have tried to go near the bear. And in most cases, the bear would not want to come near me either. That's how those encounters usually go.

My guest today is Dan. He lives in Alaska, and he loves the outdoors. Hiking, camping, fishing, climbing – just about anything you can do outdoors, Dan has done it. And Dan has had encounters with bears from time to time. One time, after the bear scampered away from his campsite, Dan actually followed the bear for a bit just to observe him.

But there was one time Dan happened to unexpectedly cross paths with a bear that didn't run away. It was a grizzly bear, and that was a day that Dan will never forget.

Scott

Back when this happened, would you normally carry, like, bear spray or anything for protection against bears when you're outdoors?

Dan

There are definitely many times when I would carry bear spray. I spent a lot of time in the wilderness doing a whole range of different activities - flying to pretty remote areas, getting dropped off for days on end, or backpacking trips or different hikes. There are a lot of times in situations where I definitely would carry bear spray. I wasn't carrying bear spray this particular day at the Russian River. It's an area where, arguably, I should have had bear spray. It's a very

popular and crowded area - typically lots of people. I definitely had lots of bear encounters there previously, but none that were ever menacing or threatening. I think, typically, bears are pretty habituated to people. In this particular circumstance, I think there were some bears that have traveled down from higher in the mountains and elsewhere to look for fish. So, I potentially put myself into a pretty dangerous situation without maybe realizing just how bad it was.

Scott

Before we talk about that day and what happened, can you kind of set it up a little bit of what happened the day before - because that's kind of a critical part of the story, right?

Dan

Yeah, indeed. I had been in Alaska at that point for about a year, leading up to that day. That whole year was really a time in my life when things were coming together really well. I sort of found my dream home nestled in the Chugach Mountains there in Alaska. The backcountry skiing was amazing. The fishing was amazing. The beauty of the land and the ocean right there is just remarkable. I had a great job, kind of, working with troubled kids, taking them out into the outdoors, and helping them find healthy ways of living and coping with trauma in their lives. I had just purchased a cute little cabin nestled up in the Chugach - it wasn't much. The outhouse didn't even have a door, but I could look out from my outhouse and see all the way to Denali, like, 200 miles to the north. So, even though it wasn't much, I always joke that my old house had a million-dollar view. It was quite something. So my life, kind of, up to that point, was just coming together really well.

Probably, one of the best things that I had going for me on that particular day was I had recently got the attention of a cute blonde from Minnesota named Amber. We had, sort of, one of these spectacular first dates together, if you will, where we met up after work and drove back from Anchorage down to Girdwood where we lived. We were driving along the Cook Inlet - or, actually, the Turnagain Arm off of the Cook Inlet - and we saw a bunch of beluga whales out in the Arm. So, we kind of pulled off the road, jumped over the guardrails, scrambled out across to the tip of the point where it meets the water, and we sat there. Right in front of us was a whole school of beluga whales just rolling in the waves. They were so close that we could hear their breath and we were actually even getting sprayed by the mist as they came up and rolled. It was really remarkable. When you share a moment like that with somebody, that has a way of creating chemistry and bonding people with those types of shared experiences, because this was pretty amazing. So, I jokingly now refer that chemistry with Amber - that happened that first time we kind of hung out - as, like, "the beluga chemistry" between us.

So the day right before the bear mauling, we've been seeing each other around Girdwood for the month before that, noticing each other, and hanging out from time to time. The very night before, we sort of decided to move our relationship forward and try our hand at a relationship. I mean, Facebook wasn't really a thing of our time way back in 2003 but, if it had been, we might have woken up the next morning to change our relationship status.

Scott

So it sort of became official at that point.

Dan

Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

Scott

An unspoken official, sort of.

Dan

It was, yeah. So, the next morning, when I was taking off to go fishing, I thought about asking her if she wanted to come, but I was like, "Nah, it was pretty intense last night. Let's take it slow." So I just gave her a hug and we said our goodbyes. I told her, "Hey, I'll call you when I get off the river." Of course, at that point, I was unaware that that would be a promise that I would be unable to keep.

Scott

Wow. The place where you went fishing that morning— there were lots of bear sightings at that time. What is it that makes a place like that attractive to bears when there are lots of people? I thought they mostly avoided people?

Dan

Yeah. No. That's a good question. Definitely, typically, that's very true. Well, first of all, this is a common area for bears because it's a pretty significant run of fish. There is a lot of salmon that do run up the Russian River. There are a couple of different runs of red salmon, sockeye salmon, and silver salmon that go up. So, there is definitely a lot of bear activity when the fishes are in. This particular year was significantly worse setup in terms of bear safety or bear activity because the salmon were significantly late. So, typically, I think a lot of the bears are further upriver. There's plenty of food in the rivers and things like that. This year, because the run was so late, I think a lot of bears were coming down to the lower rivers, so there was an unusually large concentration of bears, sort of, down in the lower part of the river looking to see if the fish were coming in yet.

Scott

Well, okay. So your plan was to go fishing that day with some friends. Can you just take us through what happened?

Dan

It started out as a great day - one of these Alaskan summer days where blueberry skies, sunshine, just enough breeze to keep the mosquitoes at bay, and just warm enough to be in a T-shirt comfortably. Those are kind of priceless Alaskan summer days when the fish are in and the weather's good. Those are the type of days that make us forget about winter - we call it winter amnesia. It happens every summer. We had to fish pretty hard. By late in the evening - evening is a relative term since, of course, it doesn't really get dark up here in the summertime - we didn't catch all our fish. So, probably around 10.30 or so, we were packing up and getting ready to make the 20-minute trek upriver to where our car was parked at the trailhead. So we made the walk back up and we were just, kind of, talking about the day and catching up.

I was there with my friend, John and my dog, Maya. Maya just lets out this little growl. She was a trail dog. She'd been on probably over 1,000 trail miles with me in her time. So, when she made that noise, I knew that she was alerting me to something. I looked up and, sure enough, about 30 feet away was a large grizzly. I had a lot of bear encounters over the years that were quite like this. I mean, I've had some really cool bear encounters where I was able to kind of really watch bears in their natural environment behaving in a number of different ways and, kind of, spend some time watching them. More times than not, I've seen bears bolting - you'd see their rear end as they either walk or scamper off. This bear, though, was clearly having a pretty bad day. She was a very agitated bear. She turned to face us immediately, was stomping her

paw and kind of jumping up and down on her front legs, kind of huffing and growling. Her hunches were all raised.

We could tell right away that she wasn't messing around, so my friend, John and I stuck close together and put our hands up in the air to make ourselves look bigger. We didn't do much at first. We just stood our ground to kind of see how she was going to react and talked about what the best thing to do was from here. Then, we decided the best thing was just to back away slowly and head further upriver just to clear the area and give her plenty of space. We were gonna go to a different trailhead and, kind of, loop back around to where our car was parked because our car, at that time when we encountered her, was pretty much right behind where she was. I mean, right behind her was a staircase and at the top of the staircase was essentially our car.

Anyway, we were able to back away and start heading upriver and we had gotten just far enough to where we were able to start to really relax. We started talking about, "Man, that was kind of a crazy encounter. I wonder what's up with that bear," when all of a sudden, in front of us on the trail, the alders started shaking vigorously. We couldn't see through the alders' thick brush, so we couldn't see what it was, but whatever was causing them to shake the way they were was a large animal. So, we were pretty confident that we'd been cut off by that same sound. When you're in bear country, that's highly unusual bear behavior and it's not a good situation to find yourself in when you're being followed or, maybe, stalked by a large predator like that, especially a grizzly bear. So, at that point, my heart just started pounding and my stomach sort of dropped to my toes. We turned around and started heading back at a brisk pace back towards the trailhead where our car was parked back to where we had the initial encounter with the bear. In no more than probably about 10-15 steps, just the totally unimaginable happened... the bear came ripping around the corner at missile speed from the shaking brush behind us, and we had just a moment.

My dog, Maya was kind of out in front of our group and John was in front of me. I was, kind of, the closest to the shaking bushes behind us. So, in just a flash, she was onto us. My dog, Maya at the front leaped off the trail to the right and the bear swiped at her but didn't connect. Then, I saw my friend, John leaping off the trail in the other direction. So, I turned, took a couple of running steps, and leaped off into the bushes as well, hoping that she would just continue on her trajectory. Close to the shaking bushes - which we wouldn't know until later - were her cubs. We weren't even aware that there were cubs in the area. As it turned out, her cubs were cashed there during that whole initial encounter and we had unknowingly put ourselves into this situation.

So, as I leaped off the trail, before I'd even hit the ground, she had a hold of my leg and was yarding me out of the bushes with her claws. I could feel her claws immediately, sort of, digging into my leg at that moment. This is a fully, sort of, traumatic experience where, like, reality warps itself and everything feels a little surreal. There are some sort of dissociative types of things happening where you almost feel like you're outside of yourself. I could feel the pain, for sure. But then, I could, like, hear this screaming. Then, I sort of had to realize that was me that was screaming. Then, after she kind of pulled me out of the bushes, she picked me up by my head and was dragging me across the trail, down the trail, and then dragging me off into the boulders into the forest. I could just feel the dirt, the roots, and the grass moving by underneath me until I eventually just lost consciousness. Then, I would come to, kind of, wake up and the mauling would continue and then I would lose consciousness again. This sort of happened several times where I would regain consciousness and be very aware that the mauling was continuing.

During that whole time, I was laying on my belly. It was good that I was faced down. I had a backpack on - it was sort of holding my hands over the back of my neck to try to protect my neck and head as much as I could, which was a pretty futile effort to protect myself at that moment. Then, one of the times I came to consciousness, I wasn't getting mauled and it was kind of quiet. I could hear my friend, John calling my name from a distance, so I called back to him because I didn't know how far off the trail I was dragged by the bear. I definitely wanted him to know where I was in case he was with rescue. So I called back to him. Unfortunately, I think that, to the bear, my calling back to John was too much of a sign of life because she quickly returned after I called back and the mauling continued.

The next time I woke up, something really bad happened - she had managed to get me flipped over. So, I was now laying on my back face up. She was essentially standing over me with her front paws on either shoulder and her face was, sort of, directly over mine. There was this sort of this moment there where I could hear her breathing and hear her, sort of, grunting and growling. I'll just never forget, sort of, the magnitude and the power of this bear on top of me and the volume of a breath. That's when she cocked her head sideways and bit down across my face from side to side and chewed. That's when everything went black.

The next thing that I was aware of at that moment was that all the pain and fear had gone away, and there was this kind of a peaceful feeling. I was kind of trying to figure out what was going on and where I was. I was looking around but there was nothing to see - no shape, no form, it was just, like, this iridescent blue light. I was trying to figure it all out and I realized that I was at this crossroads. I felt like I had a choice to make at that moment - to live or die. To me, at that moment, it was clear that all I had to do was make up my mind and let go of life, and it was that easy. On the other hand, it was clear that I could try to fight to hold on to life - it was unknown whether or not I could. The thought process that went through my mind at that crossroads was interesting because I remember thinking, like, I "don't know what kinds of injuries I would have endured. I don't know what the damages will be if I can survive." So, sort of, like, the hard choice and the easy choice just to let go.

I couldn't really explain why but, all of a sudden, at that moment, this image just appeared to me. It was like watching a home video or something, but it was an image of my mom, and there she was from the waist up. She was just waving to me and smiling the happiest radiant smile I've ever seen her. It was interesting to just see her so happy and waving like that. It filled me with this feeling that a moment like that might be the only feeling that could make life worth fighting for, and that is clearly, like, that feeling of love between a parent and a child.

At that moment, I knew what I was going to do, I made up my mind that I was going to fight for life and that it was worth fighting for. So, I just sort of reconciled the fact that I didn't know how hard it was going to be or what kinds of challenges there would be. I realized that the worst-case scenario would be to look back someday and regret fighting for my life, or to regret life itself just because I didn't know how bad things were going to be. So, I made a deal with myself - like a contract, almost - like, "Hey, from this moment forward, it's about one small step forward at a time. You can never look back and question this decision." So that was it. I made up my mind. It was interesting because, as soon as I made up my mind, it was like I was just able to rest there in this place of the blue light and, sort of, restore and regain some energy there before I needed to go back into my body at the Russian River. I'll always remember sort of first seeing myself looking down at my body on the forest floor, laying there in a pool of blood, and then sort of waking up from within my body.

My first instinct was about self-rescue and self-evacuation. I was a trained wilderness first responder. I did a lot of backcountry experience and got experience. So, my first thing was self-assessment. Very quickly, I realized I was in really bad shape. Basically, I had no control over any of my limbs. I could feel blood pooling and filling up my waders. I could feel blood pooling under my head. I realized the only chance I had at living was just to stay still and try not to use any energy and hope that rescue would be there soon.

Scott

Did you know that the barrel was gone by that time? Or was she gone?

Dan

I didn't know. I knew that only by sense. There was a quietness and stillness in the forest. I just figured that I probably wouldn't have come back into my body at that time if the bear was still there but, yeah, it was just a sense I had that she was gone. Then, a little while later, I heard people. My friend, John had gotten a few other fishermen and came to find me. As it turns out, my dog Maya actually had helped guide these fishermen back to where they found John and then helped them find where I was. So, my dog definitely had a part in that rescue. John stayed with me and started applying pressure to try to stop the bleeding from my head and things like that, while the other people went to try to go get a cell phone signal so that they could call for help. So I would be laying there on the forest floor for about 2.5 hours before the EMTs would arrive and about 5.5 hours or so before the EMTs would have me loaded into a medivac helicopter and flown out to Providence Alaska Medical Center in Anchorage, Alaska.

Scott

That's a long time for such serious injuries.

Dan

It truly is. As they were loading me into the ambulance to take me over to where the helicopter can land on the highway, my friend said, "Hey, hang in there. We'll be out here fishing again before you know it." After I arrived by helicopter, the emergency room report said, "Eyes, nose, forehead anatomy unrecognizable. Patient arrived at the ER in a condition incompatible with life."

Scott

Incompatible with life... that sounds like such a sterile medical term, like a nice way of saying, "This guy should be dead."

Dan

Very much so, yeah. I went through an initial surgery there that night that was about 13 hours long of just cleaning out bear saliva, debris, dirt, and sticks from many wounds. Scab is probably not an unfair word to use - more or less like lots of large sort of flapping wounds where the skin had been pulled back. Every single bone in my head had been broken apart into many pieces and, in some cases, pulverized from where the bear had chewed. Even the palate that holds the brain up into place had been broken apart into pieces. So the brain had actually herniated down into my sinus cavity. The dura - the layer that holds the cerebral spinal fluid in and around the brain - had been ripped open in three places and my brain was literally exposed to the outer world. Just thinking about all of that- that means that the bear, in three different spots, came within millimeters of the brain.

The fact that I was alive— to say that it's a miracle is kind of an understatement. I mean, it was impossible. So, it's interesting. I've spent a lot of time talking with that surgeon who worked on me that first night and he actually ended up working on me several other times. He said that after that initial 13-hour surgery, he went back to his office, closed the door, and cried. This is a guy who does surgery specifically with facial trauma. He said it wasn't that he'd never seen anything this severe or anything like that - it wasn't The injuries and things like that. What it was for him was to see somebody at 25 years old who was, sort of, at the prime of their life and to see these sort of devastating injuries that he couldn't help but wonder what kind of life that I was going to have. He couldn't help but wonder if I would thank him for, say, helping to save my life if, indeed, he would save my life.

At the end of that, they couldn't begin any reconstruction or anything like that, so they essentially put me into a medically-induced coma where they tried to stabilize me for the next 11 days so that the swelling could start to go down enough to where they could start to try to put me back together again because there was so much so many wounds and so many foreign saliva and debris that they tried their best to clean out. Because there was so much introduced into those wounds, like, the risk of infection at that point was extraordinarily high as well. So, even if I survived the initial trauma, trying to navigate and escape without a lethal infection was sort of the other significant challenge at that point in time. I'll never forget - I woke up 11 days later from that medically-induced coma. My head was all wrapped with bandages at that point in time. My jaw was wired shut. I had a tracheotomy - I was getting oxygen through my throat - feeding tube coming out of my stomach, IVs coming out of my arms, and was just trying to figure out what happened. Trying to figure out what my life was going to be was a terrifying time.

As I was sitting there thinking about all this stuff, just kind of out of nowhere, I just thought, "Oh, what about Amber? Where's Amber - that cute strawberry blonde that had just said, 'Goodbye' to the morning before the bear?" Of course, I couldn't speak at that time with the mouthwash shed, the tracheotomy, and all this. I was able to write down to my family members, "Where's Amber?" So, they got a hold of her through some friends. She was so new. We had just decided to try a relationship the day before the bear, so none of my family really knew who she was or even knew of her. But fortunately, they were able to find her. I'm sure for Amber— the way she told the story was sort of, like, she wanted to be there but she was going through her own process of like, "Well, who are we? What do we have? Like, we sort of officially dated for 12 hours before this happened to you."

Scott

That was a uniquely awkward situation, for sure.

Dan

Yeah. So, for her to come in and, sort of, meet my mom and my brother after one or, maybe, two dates - yeah, awkward, to say the least. So she questioned, "Should I go?" She did the only thing she could think to do, which was to come down. She came into the hospital room, knelt down on the floor beside me, and puts her arm up on my knee. I just remember thinking like, "What do you say to somebody in a moment like this? There's nothing to say." So I just took my whiteboard that I was writing on to communicate at that time and the first thing I wrote down was just one word - I just wrote, "Crazy." And she was like, "Yeah, this is really crazy." Then, I felt like I had to get the elephant out of the room because I just had been informed by the medical staff the previous day, so I wrote down, "I'm blind." She said, "Yeah, I know. I'm really sorry about that." The only other thing that I could think to write at that time was, "I'm scared,"

because I was just like, “Man, if I survive all this, if I make it through, what kind of life am I going to be able to have?” Lots of fears about what that'd be like.

Scott

It would take so much to process that. I mean, your entire life was completely turned upside down. Not even knowing if you were going to survive. You had all day and all night to think about just that.

Dan

Yeah, it was a lot to think about. It was interesting because when the doctors told me that I would never see again and that one of my eyes had already been removed during the initial surgery because it was not viable, the tissue was starting to go on the second day, so they were going to have to remove that one. It made survival like a whole other unknown thing like, “What's that going to be like if I survived this type of thing?” I was thinking back and was, like, I guess I couldn't see when I was at the river, but I never really thought about that in the midst of all that trauma or too much blood. It didn't take long before my head was all wrapped up with T-shirts and bandages. So, there was a lot of denials when they first told me that I couldn't see or that I would never be able to see.

My first thing was like, “Well, that's not true. If I can't see, how can I can see right now?” There's this interesting thing called phantom vision where I was all looped up on all kinds of medications as well and wasn't exactly clear-minded. It took me a while to wrap my brain around that one. I like to joke now that I was the first blind person I ever met. So, I just had no idea what life for a blind person could be like. As I started to think about what that would be like, I was like, “Well, first of all, all my love and passion for climbing, mountaineering, backcountry skiing, backpacking, whitewater kayaking, and mountain biking— that's all gone.” That was my first thought. Then, I was like, “Man, what else is gone? Like, my ability to find meaningful work? Maybe, I was afraid of just being shuffled into remedial work that wasn't meaningful or fulfilling.” I was afraid of never being an eligible sort of bachelor, if you will. Like, I was afraid of spending the rest of my life alone without love in my life and never experiencing family and kids. So there was a lot that I was kind of grappling with at that time.

It wasn't until a few days after that - after Amber was there - that something totally unlikely happened. This guy named Lee Hagemeyer who lived down in Juneau heard what happened to me. He got on an airplane, flew to Anchorage, walked into my hospital room, introduced himself, and told me his story about how when he was 16 years old, 40 years earlier, when he'd been out fishing down in Juneau and mauled by a grizzly bear. He told me that, for that 40-year period, since then, he was the only person that he knew of who had ever been completely blinded by a bear who lived to tell about it. So he said to me, “Dan, you and me, we're a tribe of two.”

Scott

Not a club you want to join...

Dan

It's an exclusive club, but not one you want to really join. The point of the story, though, is that he went on to tell me about how, since then, he finished high school, went on and finished college, gone on and got his Ph.D., about how he had a fulfilling career with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, and how he had traveled the world and gotten married. He eventually ended up telling me that he still goes fishing and still owns a boat, and I was like, “Okay, maybe

there's hope, right? Maybe there's hope that life isn't over. Even if I live, maybe there's hope that there could be a life worth living." So that was a really important, sort of, turning point in the story for me where I wasn't quite so hopeless. There was hope about the possibility of a life worth living if I can get through all this.

Scott

What an incredible thing for him to do. I mean, almost nobody else in the world - very few people - would have realized what thoughts were going through your head that first day or week after it happened, but he had been through that and he knew what you were thinking. Boy, what an incredible act of kindness for him to come, and just want to give you hope that there is life.

Dan

Yeah, totally 100%. Amazing. At one point in time, like, my temperature started to spike, and they were like, "Oh boy, here comes the infections. I ended up getting MRSA. There were a couple of scares, but with some ups and downs. Unfortunately, five out of six arteries that carry blood to the scab had been either lacerated beyond the point of repair or just totally severed, so there wasn't enough blood flow to my scalp. Bone kept dying up there or in my skull from where they eventually had tried to sort of start to reassemble, sort of, bits and pieces using titanium mesh scaffolding and screws and trying to rebuild the eye sockets and all this stuff. There wasn't enough blood flow that the wounds kept reopening and bones continue to, kind of, die.

It eventually became clear that I was going to need more advanced surgery than what can be offered in Alaska. So, they ultimately made the decision that I needed to fly out to UCSF in San Francisco for some more advanced surgeries down there where, essentially, the plan was to take a graph of skin from my arm and leave that graph of skin attached to the vascular system - it's called a free-flap surgery. They were taking that skin off my arm, attached to the vascular system including the radial artery. So, they were actually going to remove this flap of skin attached to the radial artery and they were going to tie that radial artery into my carotid artery. Then, that would then bring blood through the vascular system of that flap of skin up to what now is my forehead, but it's up to the upper part of my head. So, it was going to bring that much-needed, sort of, blood supply because without that, as I said, they would close those wounds but just but they open right back up.

I was still very much not out of the woods yet. My family is actually from California anyway. It was clear I was going to need to be down there for quite a while going through surgery and rehabilitation, so I thought, "Well, maybe I would just stay down there for a while for family support while going through all this." So the time came to say goodbye to Amber. Something was on my mind and I was thinking about, like, "I'm in no shape to be in a new relationship. Anybody wouldn't blame her for walking away from this." That was sort of what I expected in my mind, like, "Well, we're not going to be together at this point." So before I left, we had a bit of conversation about that and, basically, I was like, "This isn't the time." So we gave our hugs and said our goodbyes. I'm sure we were going to be friends or was hoping we would be friends.

I went off to California. It was good because after, kind of, getting through some of the surgeries and stuff down there, I thought she had been keeping in touch with my family who was keeping her filled in on my progress and stuff. After a while, we started talking on the phone and that was good - just kind of touching bases. Then, I'll never forget this one day when my brother had just been up to Alaska visiting up here. He came back to California and he told me, "Hey, Dan. I just thought you should know that it seems like Amber might be dating somebody." On the outside, I was like, "Okay, cool, man. Thanks," but on the inside, it was more like, "Ouch. That

kind of hurt almost more so than I expected.” It caught me off guard a little bit. I guess I'd say that I played my best card for that moment. Almost compulsively, like right then and there, I sort of made the phone call and called Amber and said like, “Hey, I just want to let you know that I heard from my brother that it seems like you might be dating somebody. I just wanted to let you know that I think that's totally cool.” It's a good thing that Amber has always been able to see kind of right through everything I say or think or feel because she said back to me, “Yeah, I am, and he's already getting really sick of how much I talk about you.”

Scott

The best thing you could have heard, right?

Dan

The best thing. So, at that moment, I got excited. Like, this is another one of those points in the story where I was filled with that feeling of hope. I think hope is such an important thing for anybody trying to overcome something of this magnitude. You're facing these kinds of challenges to have that excitement. That sense of hope was incredibly motivating and inspiring. So, we kept talking on the phone. I'd say, more so even after that. I was determined and I became determined because there was hope that, maybe, there was something there with Amber still.

So, I needed to get through the medical stuff. I needed to deal with my mental health issues because I was definitely dealing with a lot of PTSD, nightmares, panic attacks, obviously, grief and loss around losing my sight and everything that came with it. I mean, the very experience of going through this and losing my sight in an instant— I think of it very much like a death-rebirth experience where it's like I lost my old identity, my old self, and all the things I used to do and love. It's like that person died and, now, there's this new Dan Bigley with this new possibility of a life ahead and I kind of need to refigure this all out, like, “Who am I? What am I capable of? What can I do with my life? What am I going to enjoy in life?” So, it's this like rediscovery of self and of life. I was pretty determined that if this thing with Amber had hope, it couldn't be out of any sense of responsibility or sympathy for me because she felt like I needed help.

Scott

You wanted to be a boyfriend, not a project, right?

Dan

Yeah. Like, if this is going to work, it had to be based on my own merits as a partner. So, it became about, “What do I have? What value can I add to her life into this relationship? What value can I add in general? How do I get there from here because I couldn't even make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich to save my life back then?” I couldn't find my way out to the mailbox and back or whatever, so I had a lot of work ahead of me. So, I started working with a rehabilitation specialist down there and learning how to use a white cane. Ultimately, once I was sort of medically cleared, which did end up coming to fruition, I started to ask my therapist, “Hey, can we meet twice a week instead of once a week?” So I was doing EMDR - this pretty good treatment protocol for working with people who have experienced traumatic events to help people that might be suffering from PTSD or traumatic responses.

Then, ultimately, I ended up going to a school for the blind down there and it was supposed to be a year-long program. I was thinking about Amber up in Alaska and I was like, “I need to finish this more quickly than that. How quickly can I do this?” So, I just poured myself into all of these things and was able to finish up the program at the School for the Blind in just 7 months. There,

I learned how to do things the activities of daily living. I was learning how to cook, clean, and use computers with that software for the blind. I like to joke that I was learning how to match socks and things like that.

It was about a year later when I made my first trip back up to Alaska since the bear. At that point in time, Amber was no longer dating anybody, so she picked me up at the airport and we were driving back up to her cabin. Ironically, her little cabin was up in the bear valley. Once again, we sort of have this, like, amazing, miraculous, and special evening where it's clear to both of us that the beluga chemistry that was there - or whatever you want to call it - was still very much there between us. So, once again, come morning time, it was clear to both of us that we were going to try this relationship thing.

The horrible irony of it - man, I can't even make this up - is that I had made plans previously to go fishing that very next morning. I kid you not - I literally had to get through that process of giving her a hug, "Hey, I'll call you when I get off the river," and off I go fishing again. It was like Groundhog Day, right? It's like we're gonna give this another shot. Fortunately, obviously, that was a promise I was able to keep. Even better than that, when I called her after getting off the river, I was able to tell her I just got a 40-pound king salmon. So, now I think back to that first trip back to Alaska as my victory lap where I returned to Alaska, got the fish, and most importantly, I got the girl.

Scott

That's a great way to end that story, for sure.

Dan

Yeah. When you're going through this type of recovery or rehabilitation process, there comes a point where, like, initially, it's just straight-up medical. That went on for months, I think. This happened in July. I was finally sort of medically cleared by the following January. Then it was, like, mental health and rehabilitation for the blind and learning all that stuff. Then, there comes a point where you're like, "Okay, I can't just stay in this rehabilitation mode forever. Ultimately, things are going to be expected of me like paying bills and moving on with life." And so that's a really interesting and difficult time. I was trying to figure out as a blind person, "What am I going to do with myself in my life?" I really liked the work that I was doing before I was blind with troubled kids. These are kids that had experienced lots of trauma of their own. So, I knew I couldn't keep doing that. It was kind of rec therapy oriented that very much require driving abilities, getting out with kids, and doing things.

Especially after my own sort of therapy experiences, I thought, "Now that's something that I could do with this population. I liked the work and I could do that." So, I looked into going back to college as my first step. I was pleased to see that there was a Masters of Social Work program here in Anchorage where I could be close to Amber. I filled out an application and I'll never forget the day I got back my acceptance letter that said that I've been accepted into the Masters of Social Work program at the University of Alaska Anchorage, but my acceptance was contingent upon getting a B or better in statistics. There was another prerequisite or whatever, but this one really stood out to me because I was thinking about statistics and I was like, "Man, these are some really long equations. There are charts, graphs, and curves. It seems very visual in nature. How am I gonna pull that off?" So, like many other things, as a blind person, I didn't know if I could do it until I tried, right? Then, even if I failed, you kind of keep failing until you figure out how to do something.

I had never been a blind student. I didn't know if I could succeed as far as a blind student, but I was going to find out. So I started. In the weeks leading up to the first day of school, I took public transportation to the bus stop outside the university first with an orientation mobility instructor, practiced routes around the campus, learned the routes with my cane, navigated the corridors, and all of this stuff. I was practicing the routes to the specific classrooms that have been assigned without my instructor every single day leading up to the first day of class. I walked into class on the first day of school only to find out that they had reassigned all the classrooms. Many times in my life as a blind person, I'm humbled and had to learn to be graceful about asking for help and to just accept that as reality. So, I asked for some help and they helped me find my new classrooms or whatever.

I was sitting there in statistics class and the teacher was up in the front of the classroom. She was teaching on the overhead projector and I was trying to follow it all, but I was just not able to learn that way. So, rather than learning statistics, what I did was sit in statistics class having pretty massive panic attacks. It feels like my heart's pounding so hard that other people could probably see my T-shirt moving. My stomach felt queasy. My arms and legs were numb and, kind of, feel like noodles. Everything was a little surreal and unreal. I feel like I was inside of, like, a glass bubble and I was, kind of, getting information from outside of it in bits and pieces. I felt like I was gonna pass out. The narrative in my head during stats class was essentially like, "Okay, I'm gonna pass out. Maybe I should get up, leave the classroom, and go to the bathroom. Well, NO, because if I pass out there, I might hit my head on something and that can be bad, so I'm probably better off just passing out here, if that's really going to happen."

In moments like that, in those early days when I was really struggling, the only thing I wanted to do was to get up, leave class, walk right out, walk back to the bus stop, go home, and crawl into bed, and just say, "You know what? I can't do it. I can't do it. It's too hard. I give up. I'm just gonna figure something else." I oftentimes talked about how I didn't get here to where I am today by being some sort of survivor or somebody who overcame all the odds on their own. Like, no, I very much got to where I am today because of a community of support - not because of my independence but because of my interdependence with the people around me. They were able to kind of support me through some of those hardest times.

So, at that moment when things were that hard, I couldn't give up on all the people who believed in me, I couldn't give up on all those people who had said, "Hey, Dan. If anybody can do this, you can do it." I couldn't give up on Lee Hagemeyer who told me about his story. I couldn't imagine facing my parents and my brother and telling them, "I couldn't do it." Most of all, of course, I couldn't imagine telling Amber that I couldn't do it. So, it was all those relationships and those people that really lifted me and carried me through those moments where I was determined to find a way. So, I first got a tutor. When one tutor wasn't enough, I got a second tutor. When two tutors weren't enough, I literally got myself a third tutor. Amber was working with me a little bit on the evenings and weekends when she wasn't working.

By about, maybe, a third of the way through the semester, I was kind of figuring out how to be successful in statistics class. I was using, like, this talking computer with screen reading software where it would read to me what was on the screen and I can work through it. Then, I had a voice recorder where I would record the long statistical equations, not in their given order, but in the order of operations to make it easier to track the work. I was writing that into the computer and showing my work, sort of, step by step. Then, I had a talking calculator that I was using to perform actual arithmetic. I was learning how to use software packages to manufacture and create charts, graphs, curves, histograms, and these kinds of things. So, I was doing it.

By the end of that semester - I'll never forget, it was sort of on Christmas break - Amber and I were on pins and needles waiting for the grades and to see if I had gotten a B or better in statistics because, sort of, my future plans were on the line here. I'll never forget just the feeling when it was posted because I had somehow pulled off an A in statistics. This is another one of those moments in the story - and not just the story, but in my life - where the narratives about myself change. I often think and I've heard from others about how our greatest limiting factor in life is the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves - that's our most limiting factor. In this moment, the story sort of changed from like, "I don't know what I can do, but I'll try" to "I think I can do just about anything that I put my mind to." Sure enough, I graduated 3.5 years later with a 4.0 and a Master's in social work.

I went on to get a job as a therapist helping kids with their own trauma and very quickly started getting promoted - first, director of therapeutic foster care program and, now, the Clinical Director at Denali Family Services here in Anchorage. I oversee about 15 therapists at 3 different clinics and oversee care for about 200 kids at any given time in our services. I've gone on to write a book about my experiences called "Beyond the Bear" - how I learned to live and love again after being blinded by a bear - and share my story as a speaker across the country to all different kinds of audiences. Just recently, I dropped my first album as a musician - kind of, like, my passion project. The best thing though that's ever happened to me since then - like, the kicker of it all or the cherry on top, if you will - is that Amber and I will be celebrating 15 years of marriage this next summer.

We have an 11-year-old daughter and a 13-year-old son that are just wonderful kids. They mean everything to me. Sometimes, I share this story when she was about 2.5 years old or something - she wasn't yet three. I was tucking her into bed at night. We were kind of having this moment together. At first, I mean, I was just, kind of, with her putting her to bed. I think I might have even been, like, on my phone or something. She was like, "Hey, Dad, are you blind?" I kind of put my phone down, looked at her, and was like, "Yeah, I'm blind." She stopped them and I could tell that she was thinking about that. Her wheels were turned, so I was just waiting for her to respond. She said, "Are you happy?" I said, "Yeah. Dad's really happy". So I could tell she was thinking about that. She was taking that and she was just quiet. I was just waiting for her to say something, and she said, "So you're blind and you're happy?" What do you say? I was like, "Yeah, Dad's blind." It was, like, one of the happiest moments of my life right there spending that moment with her. She was figuring this out - pretty amazing.

First off, I've learned the importance of that interdependence, that our strength is not in our independence, but in our interdependence. It really did take a community to help me get to where I am, so I'm grateful that I was really kind and nice to people and did things to build a community around me. I live by my values, I told the truth, and I worked hard because, I think, when you live your life a certain way, you build that community or you degrade that community, and that community really builds our resiliency. So that kind of retrospect- like, looking back on that, I'm grateful for that community that was there for me and grateful that I live my life in such a way that builds that community. I think about that.

That's a lot of the work that I do now in communities - more generally, in schools. I might spend time speaking with or even looking at the lives of my clients in terms of how do we build more resiliency within our communities to really help support people, even in organizations and workplaces. Like, how do we build resiliency into a business and into the lives of our employees through that business or culture of an organization?

I'd say, for me, the biggest thing is I've realized that - I'm going to talk about this, obviously, from my own perspective as blindness - we could fill in just about any other type of disability or any other type of disabling anxiety, stressor, or even this life event, whether it's a divorce, loss of a job, or whatever. For me, like, it's about my disability. I've learned that there's this inverse and proportional relationship between engaging in life and disability. That is to say that the more you engage in life regardless of what your circumstances are, the less disabled you are. But the more you disengaged are, the less engaged you are, the more disabled you become. If you look at the blind community as an example of that, there are blind people out there who experienced the same condition of total blindness. It's clear and easy to see that they're very disabled by that condition - the unemployment rate within the blind population was something like 80%. At the same time, there are blind people who are, like, lawyers, doctors, social workers, artists, and dancers. There was a blind person who climbed Mount Everest! So it's easy to look at some people and say, "With the same exact condition of total blindness, they're engaged in life in such a way that they don't appear to be disabled at all. They're doing more with their lives than most people with sight."

So, there is that. Regardless what your condition is, whether it's mental health, life circumstances, or some physical disability, the more you can be engaged in life, the less disabled you are. So, the more I've engaged in life whether writing a book, making an album, or even just things like playing guitar and howling at the moon with my friends, or playing hide and go seek with my kids, the more I engage in life, the bigger my life gets. The bigger my life gets, the smaller my disability gets.

Scott

That's an excellent way to look at it. Well, I can see why you are popular with speaking to groups. Of course, right now, as we record this, our country is in the middle of a raging pandemic. So, I would imagine you're probably not traveling a lot and speaking in person. But of course, that will happen again, as well, I'm sure. You have a lot of contact information. You are on Facebook, and you've got your website.

Dan

Yeah. Those are the best ways to reach me. "Dan Bigley - Bear Attack Survivor" on Facebook or on my website, danbigley.com or beyondthebear.com. You can also go check out my new album, which we're going to be launching here. Very shortly, probably by the time your listeners are getting this, it will be available on all the major streaming sites for streaming and download anywhere you can find music.

Scott

We'll have links to all that in the show notes for this episode. I gotta tell you, we've talked about it. I read the book prior to our conversation just so that I could be aware of what happened and everything, and it's a very well-written book. I mean, typically, you think of someone who goes through an event like this, and they came through the other side, and they decide, "Okay, I want to write a book about this." and they're not really a writer, but this is a book that is— I mean, I would recommend this book, definitely, and I highly recommend people to read it. It goes into a lot more detail than what we can do here on a podcast, and there's a lot more involved than what we went over here. But yeah, it's wonderful.

Dan

That's great. Well, yeah, thanks. "Beyond the Bear" is the name of the book. It can be found just about anywhere as well. So I'm glad you enjoyed it.

Scott

Yeah. A story that has such a horrific plot to end as well as it has is wonderful.

Dan

People sometimes say like, "Man, I'm so sorry for what you went through or whatever." It's funny because my attitude is exactly the app and I understand why people say that, but for me, it's like, Man, I'm the luckiest guy alive. cuz I'm so lucky to be alive. I'm so lucky that, you know, this is where I ended up with so much to be grateful for.

Scott

Hey – you heard Dan say he's a musician, right? Well in a minute we're going to hear some of his music, so hang on for that. But I have a couple of things I want to tell you about.

If you haven't yet joined our private Facebook group, get over there now! We talk about the podcast episodes and lots of other stuff. We have over 800 listeners in that group, and you can join at [WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook](https://www.facebook.com/WhatWasThatLike.com).

And I wanted to let you know – there are now NINE Raw Audio episodes available to listen to. The Raw Audio episodes are bonus episodes for patrons who support the show for \$5 a month. In this new episode, which is Raw Audio 9 –

A man tries to keep his wife alive after he shoots her –

Man 1

Oh my God. She just died. Oh my God.

911 Operator

Okay. Are you able to do CPR?

Scott

A young woman is trapped in her car after a crash –

911 Operator

It's okay. Just stay calm.

Woman 1

It's gonna be okay... (Whimpering)

911 Operator

It's gonna be okay.

Scott

And a teenager witnesses a murder suicide –

911 Operator

Where are the weapons at? Where's the gun?

Woman 2

The axe is in Jake's head and the gun is in Brian's hands.

Scott

These are actual 911 calls with the stories that go with them. You can get ALL of them by supporting the podcast at WhatWasThatLike.com/support.

And I know how you love to learn about other podcasts. Here's one that I recently discovered, called 3 Spooked Girls – check it out –

Tara

Hey there, I'm Tara.

Jessica

I'm Jessica and, together, we co-host the podcast "3 Spooked Girls."

Tara

If you love the paranormal...

Jessica

or murder...

Tara

Join us on Mondays for full-length episodes where we discuss our favorite paranormal stories and true crime cases.

Jessica

And join us again on Thursdays for our minisodes called "Stabby Snippets" where we tell you all about true crimes happening in the news.

Tara

You can find us on Apple Podcasts, Podbean, Spotify, and wherever else you listen your pods at. You can also find us on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook by using the handle, @3spookedgirls.

Jessica

Come and hang out with us and get your spooky on while we scare the hell out of you.

Scott

And to play us out this episode, here is a clip from Dan Bigley, performing his song Comatose Rider. Stay safe, and I'll see you next time.

Comatose Rider

Let's take a walk, by the river side
Fish in the basket, red dog by my side
Feels like so long ago, I was 25 years old

I cannot see, through the visions in my head
Feels like I've been for so long in my bed
Seems like the more I learn, the more my life seems new
And you're coming into view

Chorus

I don't know how I got to the top of the mountain
I don't know, but I believe that its true
I don't know how I got to the top of the mountain
But its got something, something to do with you
Its got Something to do with you
Its got everything to do with you
Something to do
With you

Verse

When it feels like, the desert sun and the canyon wren
Are a million miles away
I can hear you voice inside my head, whisper its gonna be OK

Chorus

I don't know, how I got to the top of the mountain
I don't know, but I believe that its true
I don't know how I got to the top of the mountain
But its got something, something to do
With you
Its got something to do with you
Its got everything to do, with you
Something to do
With you...

Guitar solo

Outro

Oh, are you feeling alive
Oh, are you feeling alive
Oh, are you feeling alive
Oh, are you feeling so alive so alive singing
Oh, so alive, singing
Oh, yes I'm feeling so alive so alive, singing
Oh, so alive
Oh, so alive