



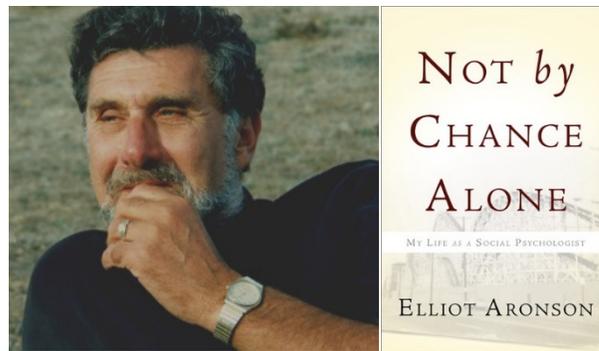
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The Elliot Aronson Interview



Ben: This is Ben Dean with MentorCoach[®] and Coaching Toward Happiness. It's Friday, September 24, 2010, and we are looking forward to our conversation with the legendary psychologist Elliot Aronson.

This is one of an [ongoing series of interviews](#) with thought leaders in theoretical and applied areas of psychology and coaching.

I'm so honored today to welcome Elliot Aronson to our call. Elliot graduated from Brandeis in 1954, and was the student there of Abraham Maslow. He earned his master's in psychology at Wesleyan in 1956, and worked with [David McClelland](#) and completed his PhD at Stanford in 1959, where his mentor and doctoral advisor was [Leon Festinger](#).

He has taught at Harvard, the University of Minnesota, the University of Texas, UC Santa Cruz and Stanford. He is among the 100 most influential psychologists of the 20th century. He is best known for his theorizing and research on [cognitive dissonance theory](#), one of the most provocative and enduring theories of psychology, and for his design of the jigsaw classroom, a method of reducing conflict and prejudice in multi-ethnic schools.

Throughout his career Elliot has championed the application of social psychological theory and methods for solving such pressing social problems as prejudice, energy efficiency, conflict, and miscommunication in relationships and the reasons why many people justify their mistakes rather than learning from them. He is the only psychologist in the history of the American Psychological Association to have won all three of its top awards for research, teaching and writing. He has written or edited twenty-two books, and has been called the best writer in all of psychology. For example, he co-authored a book chapter on experimentation in social psychology, potentially a deadly topic. Yet it has been called “a love poem to social psychology”, and has continued to inspire graduate students for the last forty years. His book, [The Social Animal](#), is beautifully written as well and is now in its eleventh edition.

The occasion for our interview today is his just published memoir, [Not by Chance Alone, My Life as a Social Psychologist](#). It reads like a novel. It’s gaining rave reviews and it’s filled with ideas and wisdom that can profit everyone on our call today.

So Elliot, welcome to our call.

Elliot: Thank you, Ben. Good to be with you after all these years.

Ben: **Yes, after all these years. To orient us, where are you physically located right now?**

Elliot: I’m sitting in my study in Santa Cruz, California about a mile from beautiful downtown Santa Cruz. The temperature is about 70°. My study is a very small room and it’s floor to ceiling bookshelves, but unfortunately the bookshelves are now only decoration, because I can’t read any more since I’ve lost most of my eyesight. This is a very pleasant if crowded room. It’s dominated by my computer and a very large monitor that allows me to make out words occasionally on it.



Santa Cruz

Ben: **How big is your monitor?**

Elliot: I haven’t measured it, but it looks like it’s about three feet across and two feet tall.

Ben: That's huge.

Elliot: Yes.

Ben: There are so many areas to cover and talk about today, and we have started getting questions flooding in even before the call began. I would like to ask you some questions first about your childhood. I would like to lead into it with a beautiful email that came about an hour ago from Judy Ellison in Medford, New Jersey, who writes that she has been doing business coaching after years of working as a research chemist and then as a manager of research chemists.

She writes:

"Profession Aronson, I read your book, Not by Chance Alone. I loved it so much that on finishing it I immediately began re-reading it to deepen my understanding of the studies you reported, and simply to enjoy your inspiring story and your rich storytelling again. This is deep praise as I have not re-read another non-fiction book in years. Since then I've been trying to apply learning such as on dissonance and the findings that work expands to fill a time available. I loved your help of the Austin school system through the introduction of the jigsaw classroom, and I share your disappointment that the jigsaw classroom has not been used more."

"Thank you Elliot for sharing your life story with all its wisdom. I have taken from it many lessons and I held dear the wisdom from your brother Jason; "Never complain about the hand you are dealt. The trick to poker is to play the hand you're dealt in the best possible way. You can win with a lousy hand if you play it right. These are indeed words to live by. Again thank you."

Elliot: What a beautiful statement that is. I love that letter completely and I'm honored. I noticed she began the email with, "Dear Professor Aronson," and along the way she started to call me, "Elliot," which is everybody's privilege after they read my autobiography twice.

Ben: She mentioned Jason. What were you like as a boy and what was Jason like?

Elliot: I was very shy, very frail, sickly and not very smart. I was not exactly dumb, but I wasn't anything outstanding. My brother Jason, who was two and a half years older than me, was brilliant and effusive and talented. He could sing, dance, he could invent new games. He was the darling of the extended family. When there was a family gathering, we had a lot of aunts and uncles, and when him and I entered everybody would say, "Hey, it's Jason," (in an enthusiastic tone) and "Hi Elliot." (more quietly).

What I got in touch with when I was writing the autobiography was Jason was the best male friend I ever had and my first mentor. I loved him dearly. He died at the age of thirty-two of cancer and was one of the great losses, the great tragedies of my life.

What I got in touch with when I was writing the autobiography is I got back in touch

with the fact that I resented the hell out of him when we were kids, because he deservedly got all the attention. It was important for me to get in touch with my resentment as well as my incredible love and gratitude to him, both things existed simultaneously.

Ben: I know in your book he seems over and over to give you such wise lessons. You mentioned one place that you wished he could just give you the wisdom and not do it in such an overbearing lecturing way. I know later I've heard you talk about at least at one point that you really had an affection for [J. D. Salinger](#) and the Glass family. I wondered did you see any kind of a connection between you and Jason and Buddy and Seymour Glass.

Elliot: Yeah, I did. Jason was no Seymour. I attributed a lot of Seymour's qualities to him, but deep down I knew he was no saint. He was a real human being with the flaws of a real human being. Initially I loved the Glass stories that Salinger wrote and they were very important to me. I always taught them in my introductory social psychology classes, but what the stories came to mean was ... it seemed to mean transcendence for me. For me it was the journey from being Buddy to becoming more Seymour-like. That was my own personal journey, which I often held out to the students as a possibility for them.

Buddy Glass was smart, and caustic, and sarcastic, and difficult and very sharp edged in his humor. Seymour was warm, and loving, and accepting, and open to people and non-judgmental. For me the journey of transcendence ... I'll step back a little. Because of my shyness as a kid and as a young adult, I tried to cover it by being sort of witty, and aggressive, etcetera, and tough. In the academic world, you have to be a little bit tough I thought to survive, but it was a cover for my shyness. What I began to learn primarily through group encounter and a lot of self-reflection was to make myself vulnerable again, because when I was a kid my vulnerability was extremely painful. As an adult my vulnerability opened doors of self-awareness and self-understanding, so the journey, which is a sense is what Abraham Maslow might call that self-actualization, the process of self-actualization, the journey was from being Buddy Glass to becoming more and more like Seymour.



Ben: That's a beautiful explanation. One of the questions I had was the way you describe it in your book it was like neither of your parents had very strong intellectual interests. You were not only financially poor but kind of intellectually impoverished in your family, and yet they had not one but two brilliant sons. Where did this come from? Statistically that's very unlikely.

Elliot: Yeah. Someday somebody is going to explain that to me. I think that my parents were not stupid. I think they had some good smarts in them that was never developed. My father only had a fifth grade education but he had a lot of street smarts. My mother had a high school education. They didn't read. My mother's major occupation was to listen to daytime soap operas on the radio. My father was a sort of a tough guy and a gambler but mostly unemployed. I have to think, in retrospect, that they had intelligence but they wouldn't have been able to do well on an IQ test because they didn't have a lot of knowledge.

I didn't think I was very smart either right through high school. I hated high school and didn't do well. Mostly I now say, I just think it's because the teachers were burnt out for the most part, and uninteresting. My brother was the first person who not only thought I was smart and quick, but who convinced me that I was smart and quick. Since I respected him so much I had to take his word for it. I think my brother really did a great job of moving away from his roots and seeing himself as very special and in a sense pulled me along with him in his wake somehow. I don't think as a kid I had the gumption to see the potential that both of us had.

Ben: Right. You tell the story about how he was telling you that you had to go to college, and you were saying you couldn't do it, and he said, "We'll get a scholarship, and you said, "But I'm not as smart as you are." He said, "Do you want to end up like one of those men pushing the baby carriages down some street there."

Elliot: That was the chilling image. Can you see yourself pushing a baby buggy at age twenty-two down Shirley Avenue, which was a chilling image, because it was always, well, one of my high school friends, who got his girlfriend pregnant, and there he was in a dead end job in a dead end city. That was a scary image.

When my father died ... My father died when I was seventeen years old and a junior in high school. My aunts and uncles had a family meeting and they decided since Jason was a sophomore in college, he had gotten a scholarship, they said, "Okay, well Elliot will go out and work. There are jobs at the Ford Motor Company in a nearby town on the assembly line, good pay, and he will help Jason get through college. He will help support his mother and sister, and that's it." I thought that seemed like a reasonable idea. My bother said, "Screw that. Elliot's going to go to college." They said, "What about your mother?" Jason said, "She can work. She's worked before, she can work again."

He saw right through it. He saw that my uncles were frightened that they might have to support us financially, which is why they thought that I might as well quit school and do that. My brother thought that I had enough smarts to go to college. His wisdom was amazing, because it was very good for my mother to go out and work. She hadn't worked since she was married and it changed her. It made her a more interesting person. Of course, as soon as I got to college I absolutely fell in love with it. For the first time in my life I really got excited about learning things. It was a huge transformation for me.

Ben: **How did you come to find psychology in college?**

Elliot: When I went to college I didn't know anything about college. I didn't know how to study or how to work or anything like that. I'll just start a little bit earlier: in psychology, my freshman year midterm when we had exams ... I used to go to lectures and take notes, scribbled, as if I was writing everything down I'd learn it. Then when I had to study the exam I couldn't read my lecture notes because they didn't make any sense. They were all jumbled. I didn't do well on the first set of exams. What I taught myself to do was after every lecture I would find a little alcove somewhere for twenty minutes and I would read through my notes and I would summarize them in five or six printed sentences that I printed in my notebook. Then when the next exam came along I had the essence of that course. I realized that I could get to the heart of things by spending the time to think it through. That's how I became a good student. I taught myself to become a student by getting to the essence of things rather than writing everything down.

When majors came I didn't know we had to major in something. I chose economics, because since I had grown up in the depression and saw my father unemployed I figured it was important that I learn something that was useful like economics because then I might not be unemployed. I wasn't really thinking. I wasn't enjoying economics very much. One day I was having a cup of coffee with a fellow student, a young woman, a very attractive young woman, who I was trying to impress, and suddenly she looked at her watch and she said, "Oh my God, I'll be late for class." I went along with her to her class. She said it was a lecture class so I went with her. I figured we could sit up in the back of the room and maybe hold hands or something. Those were innocent times. The class she went to happened to be a course in introductory psychology being taught by Abraham Maslow, the great Abraham Maslow. I didn't know he was the *great* Abraham Maslow. He was just another professor. He had just gotten to Brandeis that year from; I think he was teaching at Brooklyn College.

As I'm sitting there, he's lecturing about psychology. He's talking about prejudice. He was talking about things that I had thought about because I grew up in a town that was very anti-Semitic and so I had been beaten up a lot and called, "dirty Jew," and all that stuff. I was wondering when I was a kid, ten years old whether people were born prejudiced, or did they learn it, or could it be changed or stuff like that. Then here I am sitting in the back of Maslow's class that I entered quite by accident and Maslow was raising the very same questions that I raised when I was nine years old. I thought, "My

God, for the first time in my life, there's a whole science called psychology or social psychology that raises questions like this and tries to answer them?" The very next day I quit economics and I became a psychology major, because that seemed to be the most exciting thing anyone could ever study. I believe that. I learned that when I was nineteen years old and I haven't changed my mind since.

Ben: **You said something to me this week about ... Were you shy with Maslow as you were getting to know him?**

Elliot: Oh yeah. Early on, I was very shy with him, but he was a very gentle man. He saw when I took his class that I had something and he sought me out and helped me reduce my shyness toward him, but at the beginning I thought, "My God, how could anyone of that stature be interested in someone like me" but he reached out to me and we became ... we never became friends, Maslow and I, but it was clear that we were fond of each other.

Looking back on it I was looking for a father. I was looking for an older man who would take me under his wing and I tried to cast Maslow into that role. As one does, over the years, he disappointed me, while I was an undergraduate from time to time because my expectancies were too high. I really did need a father and that wasn't part of his job description. No fault of his, of course. Years later, when I became a professor and I could see a lot of students casting me in that role, and I had a lot of empathy for that, but it was too much of a burden for me to be placing on Maslow.

Ben: **One other striking thing to me about your college years was that you had absolutely no financial help from anyone. You had a scholarship your first year, you made good grades and then you got a letter commending you for your good grades and then the next week a letter jerking your scholarship. What was the fall of your sophomore year like?**

Elliot: It was quite a blow. When I was a lousy student in high school they gave me a scholarship, and in college I got practically straight A's and they congratulated me on that and then they also said, "We have to take your scholarship away because we don't have enough money in the scholarship fund." I didn't have any money. I worked all summer, so there was enough money for tuition, but I didn't have money for room and board. I didn't know what I was going to do. At the beginning I slept in other people's rooms, but then they caught me and threatened to kick me out if they caught me again. I ended up in the fall I slept in the woods. I had a sleeping bag and I slept in the woods, and scrounged food off of friends in the cafeteria. Then when it got cold in November - it was New England - I was sleeping in the back seat of cars that were parked on campus when nobody locked their cars. That's what I did throughout the whole first semester until I could earn enough money to rent a room off campus.

It sounds like a sad story but it wasn't. I fell in love with learning things to such an extent that no one was going to pry me loose from that college. They could've taken anything away from me, and I would've hung on by my teeth and fingernails because I loved it so

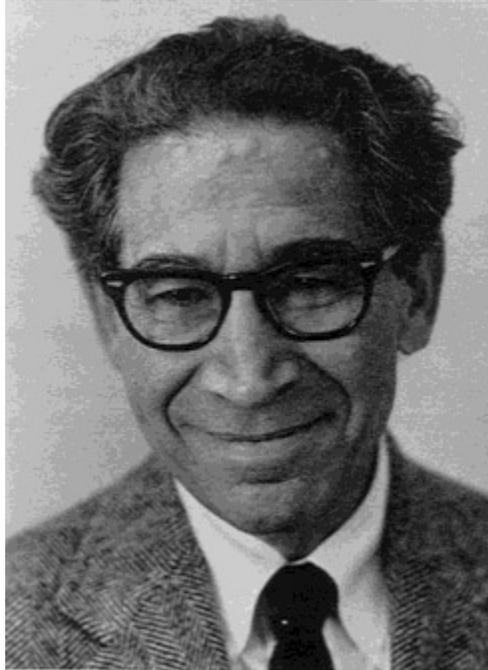
much. I didn't think it was such a great hardship. When I wrote it in my autobiography people are now writing me letters and saying, "How could you do that. Wow." At the time I didn't think anything of it. I would do anything to stay in college, so sleeping in the back seat of cars was no great hardship, although it did lead to some interesting adventures and misadventures.

Ben: **Right, they are spelled out your book. When did you realize you were smart? When you said in your senior year much to your surprise, and your teacher's surprise, you got astronomical SAT scores. Was that the first tip?**

Elliot: That was the first tip. My brother thought it earlier when I was a junior. He told me I was smart enough to go to college. My thought was could he be wrong? Maybe, but maybe I am smart enough to go to college. My grades were Cs and Bs, mostly Cs. I wasn't interested, but I didn't know it was because of lack of motivation. When I hit the SAT and really hit it hard, I got a really high score, then I said, "My God, Jason was right. I am smart, I guess." When Brandeis offered me a scholarship that confirmed it. It was an incredible revelation, but you know since it came late it took a long time for it to sink in. For a while I felt like a little bit of an impostor even though I was doing really well. Things were coming so easily and it was such a shift from what things were like when I was sixteen, seventeen years old that it was hard for me to fully embrace that.

Ben: **I guess one of the other questions, if we skip the Wesleyan years and go to Stanford, could you say something about meeting Leon Festinger and what that was like, and then something about, for people that aren't familiar with it, a capsule summary of the theory of cognitive dissonance.**

Elliot: Okay. Leon Festinger is a genius, was a genius, smartest person I ever met. He and I came to Stanford the same year. He as a young, I think he was 39 when he came to Stanford, brilliant guy and a professor and I as a first year graduate student feeling a little bit insecure. Leon had a reputation for being cruel, and vicious, an angry inpatient guy who was a genius. I didn't want any part of him.



Leon Festinger

[Richard Alpert](#), who was a friend of mine and an advanced graduate student at Stanford, I met him at Wesleyan and he convinced me to go to Stanford and we became very good friends. Richard Alpert, or Dick Alpert, was the guy who with [Tim Leary](#) started the Age of Aquarius with psilocybin and LSD and stuff like that, and later he became [Ram Dass](#), a spiritual leader, but at that time he was an advanced graduate student at Stanford.

He told me one day, he came over to the house for dinner, Vera and I really liked him, he was a close friend and he said, "There's this brilliant guy, Festinger, teaching a seminar in the spring and nobody signed up for it. There's like three people signed up for it. I think the students are afraid of him. By the way, have you thought about signing up for it?" I didn't want Dick to think I was a coward, which I was. I was I scared to death of Festinger because he was angry looking and very tough. Because I didn't want Dick to think I was a coward I signed up for the seminar.

In the seminar he lived up to both those reputations. He was absolutely brilliant in every way and also very impatient with any kind of sloppy thinking, people who weren't as quick as he was. He just had no patience for them. My favorite Festinger story, I was in the seminar, he assigned a term paper. I wrote the paper and a few days later I'm walking past his office on the way to the teaching assistant room, where I had a desk, and he called me in. "Aronson, come in here." I went into his office. He picked up a paper from his desk, my term paper, held it between his thumb and forefinger at arm's

length, turning his face away from it with a really awful look on his face and said, "I believe this is yours," as if it was a smelly piece of garbage or something. With false bravado I said, "I guess you didn't like it very much." He gave me a look that I've seen a lot from him, a mixture of pity and contempt; the contempt being that I'm wasting his time, the pity being that he felt sorry for me that I was born brain-damaged or something. He said, "Yeah, that's right. I didn't like it very much."

To make a very long story short, I thought at that moment that I might quit his seminar and blow him off and say, "Who needs this kind of treatment, this kind of humiliation," but I decided to stick it out. I re-read the paper and it was a sloppy piece of work. For the next three days I re-worked the paper, brought it into his office, put it on his desk and said, "You might like this one better." To his great credit, he must have dropped whatever he was doing because ten or fifteen minutes later he came into the room where I had a desk, put the paper in front of me, sat on the corner of my desk, put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Now this is worth criticizing." It was quite a statement. With that gesture he was telling me if I didn't do my best work, if I didn't leap the highest possible bar, that he was not going to give me any of his time, or any of his comments, but the biggest gift he could give me was his criticism, was taking the trouble to take me seriously but only after I decided to take my own work seriously.

At that moment he and I became colleagues. Within a year we became close friends. Under his guidance he taught me how to do experiments. He was the best experimenter Social Psychology ever had. He taught me that skill, which is an intricate skill. He was also at that time developing this new theory called The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, which I will describe in a moment, which revolutionized the field. This was in 1956 and '57. It's still the single most interesting and provocative theory in social psychology that's been for 50 years, more than 50 years. Basically, it's very simple theory. All it says is, if a person holds two cognitions simultaneously, two ideas, where one contradicts the other the experience is this terrible feeling, this negative drive, called cognitive dissonance and the person's motivated to reduce the dissonance by changing one or both cognitions to bring them closer together.

It's a simple theory, but it led to an enormous number of interesting experiments that told us things about human thinking and behavior that we didn't know before. For example, my very first experiment was predicted and showed that people who go through hell and high water in order to get into a group end up liking that group much more than people who got into the group without going through hell and high water because anything negative about that group, if you worked hard to get into it, is dissonant with the fact that you worked hard to get into it. Therefore, you tend to downgrade the negative aspect and upgrade in your own mind the positive aspect so that within an hour or two you're convinced that the group is better than a neutral observer would think it was.

Very powerful prediction and it came out. That was the first experiment I ever did and it became a classic. In the next few years, both at Stanford, and later at Harvard and with

Minnesota, I did several experiments testing the theory that helped shape the field of social psychology.

Ben: **Okay, let me try asking a couple of questions here that people I've asked about cognitive dissonance that are a little more specialized. This is from Giacomo Bono, who is a professor of psychology at Cal State, Dominguez Hills. He asks, "How can cognitive dissonance be used to make people more mindful in general, mindfulness according to Langer being attending to being cognizant and aware of the circumstances around you so as to make opportunities, live more intentionally and hopefully adhere more to important goals?"**

Elliot: That is entirely specific and would depend a lot on the specific situation. I think mindfulness can be trained but it has to be trained in specific situations. For example, I co-authored a book a few years ago, [Mistakes Were Made \(But Not by Me\)](#). What that really is, is the way people justify their behavior as a way of reducing dissonance by convincing themselves that the thing they did, which was really an awful mistake, like for example going to war in Iraq, was really not a bad idea after all. That can be very dangerous.

The way to make people mindful of that is to get them to accept the fact that although they are a smart and competent person they can still make mistakes. The way I would approach it is not by using cognitive dissonance but in effect by turning it inside out, by training people to tolerate the dissonance that's caused when you come to terms with the fact that you've done something terribly wrong and getting people to realize that it's okay to make a mistake. The important thing is to learn from it so that you don't make the same mistake again, because that would really be dissonance, rather than to cover it over and set yourself up for making the same mistake.

That's the kind of thing that's really spelled out in the book that I did with [Carol Tavris](#), *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)*. It's about how we justify our past behavior and the final chapter is how to overcome that by accepting your errors and learning from them. Not by saying, "Okay, it's okay to make mistakes." That's the first step. Next step is, "What can I learn from that mistake so that I won't make a similar mistake in the future or so I won't compound it by deepening the hole that I've dug for myself."

That would be my answer to that question that mindfulness comes from self-acceptance and the ability to resist the simple simplistic way of reducing dissonance.

Ben: **Okay. A related thing at the bottom, Professor Bono says, "By the way, Elliot is a big hero of mine." He says, "I was thinking of asking about how cognitive dissonance can be applied to influencing people's forgiveness or constructiveness towards transgressors, but I think I know the answer to that. Increasing humility and thinking about your own shortcomings before thinking about the offense and the offenders should increase forgiveness."**

Elliot: That's good. Really again it's turning it inside out. Self-awareness is the most important thing that I can think of for me. People often ask me how I can help other people. I don't think you can ever help other people. I don't think I can change someone else. I can set up situations, which make it easier for the person to change, but I can't change them. The way that I can best do that is by becoming more and more aware of my own shortcomings and working on them so that I become more enlightened. Any therapy or any coaching is as good as the enlightenment of the coach or therapist, no matter what the theory or no matter what the specific practice, is it all comes down to self-awareness and empathy. If you're aware of your own shortcomings you're empathic of others and you can be really helpful to them by being open to them in that way.

Ben: **Here's a related question from Anette Due Rosenzweig in New York City, who at the end says, "I was first introduced to the work of Elliot while studying psychology in Paris. I am thrilled to be able to be part of this call." Here's her question; "Is there a correlation between a high tolerance for cognitive dissonance and resilience? As a coach, I find that clients who can tolerate dissonance are more likely to look at what creates the dissonance and try to make changes by doing things and not just adapting their middle image to the situation."**

Elliot: Exactly right, and that's another way of phrasing what I've just been saying. I think that tolerating dissonance is self-acceptance, but again the next step is if the dissonance came from a piece of behavior you did that was wrong-headed then embracing that means you've learned enough not to do that again, and that's part of what resilience is all about.

Ben: **Here's a question from Olivia Miller Snapp of Austin. She writes that she has been in Austin since 1997 and has incorporated the jigsaw approach with all age groups, including business, education, government and so on for many years and that you are highly respected and beloved in this community. She has a number of great questions. One of them is, "What has been the most significant lesson you have learned in life, how did you learn it, and what difference has it made?"**

Elliot: It's hard to ... By the way, I should say that I once met Olivia. I knew her ex-husband very well. He was a close friend of mine, still is a close friend, Matthew Snapp, so truth in advertising.

The question is a wonderful one. I don't know if I would say that there's one most important lesson but there's a lot of important ones. I think that the one that I think you mentioned earlier about poker that my brother taught me is it stays with me and that is he taught me how to play poker and then he got me into a game with the big guys when I was thirteen years old. I'm playing with sixteen, seventeen year old guys and my brother. At one point I got dealt a really terrible hand and I said, "My God, what a terrible hand." He grabbed me by the front of the shirt, practically lifted me off the chair and said, "I never ever want a hear you complain about a hand that you've been dealt." He, if you'd pardon the expression he said, "Any asshole can win if he's dealt a full

house. The trick to playing poker is to not complain but to play the hand you're dealt as well as you possibly can."

Well of course what he said about poker is true for life. Nobody's going to be dealt a full house in life all the time. The lesson that I've learned is you play the hand you're dealt, you do it without complaint. You can be suffering from a terrible illness, you could have lost your best friend, you can fall out of love with someone you thought was terrific but you play the hand as best you can. This is the hand you're dealt, this is what you've got, how can I play it? I love that lesson. I try to apply it to my own life as well as I can. That's one of them. That's certainly one of the major things I've learned in life.

Another thing that I would say also is that I've learned in working with people is that everybody is capable of change and I mean everybody. I mean, the angriest most prejudiced people, people who resent the fact that that you're talking to them and are angry at you for being there. In my work with encounter groups and with students everyone is capable of change. Everyone is capable of making important changes in their lives. The important thing for me is to find the way in to the particular person and not be inclined to change them, but to be inclined to create a situation where they can be motivated to change themselves. That of course is a lot easier said than done. One of the great lessons I had to learn was not to try to jump in and change someone, but to step back and see where the issues are that the person can be working on. It's a little bit like judo. You take the energy that the person has and you help that person move in the direction that they themselves will come to believe is most useful for them.

Ben: ***Time is just flying by. Here's an email from Jessica Proctor in London. "Elliot I LOVED, Not by Chance Alone, which I was just able to read. I am progressively losing my sight and I'm told I'll be blind within the next year. You may be surprised to know I felt inspired to read about your loss of sight. I see from the web that at least at one point you used a very large screen monitor and Apple VoiceOver to access the Internet. If I may, I'd like to ask how you cope so well and what your experience has been like as you've dealt with your loss of sight."***

Elliot: Thank you. That's a lovely question. It's not easy. If I made it sound easy in the last chapter of my book I've made a terrible mistake, because it's not easy. It's easy now for me to look back on it and say, "Oh, here's what I did," but every step along the way was difficult. The loss of eyesight is a terrible loss, of course. We all know that. You can practice being blind by closing your eyes and trying to walk around your house. It's a game, because you know you can always open them again, but when you can't open them again, when you can't see, it's a frightening thing. The way I coped is the way I cope with everything, okay. Once I determined that there was no cure for my particular kind of macular degeneration, and I went to the best experts that I could find, and there was nothing they could do for me, then I said, "Okay, what do I do now. This is the hand I've been dealt. How do I play this hand?"

The first thing is resist the temptation to complain, and whine and pity yourself. That's what I did. Try not to be too much of a burden on the people around you, but be able to

ask for help when you really need it. Get all the technical tools you can, get all the learning. That's what I did. I got all the learning I could. I learned how to use a white cane. I'm about to get a guide dog. I availed myself of the resources and I thank goodness for VoiceOver, which is Macintosh, that's built into the system that converts the written word into the spoken word. All I have to do is highlight material. That's how I write. I'm writing something and then I'm typing it onto my computer and word processor and then I highlight the material and I play it back to myself.

It's a terrible voice. I call it Fred. That's his name. He sounds like this, but I am so grateful to Fred. I am so grateful that it allows me to stay in the game; it allows me to do my work. I've memorized walking downtown, so I know how to get to the restaurants I need to get to to meet my friends, the coffeehouses. I even jog. I still jog at the ocean by the shore at a time of day, early in the morning when there aren't a lot of toddlers there that can trip me up. There are ways of coping. My life is a lot more difficult now than it used to be, there's no question about that. Writing is a lot more tedious than it used to be. Everything takes three or four times as long as it used to, but I enjoy it, and I love it and I love conquering and overcoming these obstacles.

I turn it into a contest between me and my tendency to sit in the corner and suck my thumb and I'll be damned if I'm going to do that. I don't see myself as an inspiration to anyone else, but I am happy to share what I do because I think people can find their own way of coping with this kind of nuisance. I don't call it a handicap. I call it a nuisance because that's really what it is. Each person has to find his own path through the snow in this kind of thing.

Ben: **For you to read email--you listen to it?**

Elliot: Yes I do.

Ben: **That can be very time-consuming right there.**

Elliot: It is, it is. I have to listen to it two or three times because there is no way to scan it. With a large screen and very large type I can recognize the name of the person in the inbox. I have enough vision to do that, which is very helpful, and then if it's a letter I want to read I listen to it. Then I have to listen to my own letter that I'm writing back because I'm not a great typist. I make mistakes. In order to edit my own letter ... Everything takes three, four times as long but that's the hand I was dealt. I'm not going to stop writing. Writing the autobiography was great fun, because I didn't have to do any library research. All I had to do was scan my memory, and that was just an incredible experience. I liked it so much I might write another one someday.

Ben: **Have you thought about what your next book might be?**

Elliot: I have, but I haven't really arrived at it yet. It might be about blindness. It might be about the experience of blindness in the hope that it could be helpful to other people, but it might be about touching. Touching and being touched is very important in this

world. There was a time in the '60s and '70s when barriers came down and people touched each other a lot in encounter groups and everything. Then there was a time in the '80s and '90s and still now where it's become forbidden. It became an intrusion. Instead of knocking down barriers there were boundaries that were being encroached upon. There's a difference mindset. I want to get people to look at what good touching is as opposed to intrusive touching and how can we bring some of that back again. That's one of my thoughts, but I'm not sure that I'm capable of writing that book. It's something in the back of my mind.

Ben: I'm thinking with the amount of time we have left, we have to touch on your [jigsaw classroom](#) work. I have a question, several questions about it, one from someone that knows very little about what it is and wanted to know more. Then we have other people that know a great deal like Olivia. Could you give everybody a summary of what the racial tension was like in Austin that summer, and what you did?

Elliot: It was the fall of 1971, and Austin had finally desegregated its schools. Austin was residentially segregated, probably still is, where the blacks and Hispanic people lived on one side of Interregional Highway and the white people lived on the other side of the highway, and they hardly ever saw each other. When the schools were desegregated, it was the first time black and white kids and Mexican-American kids were together for the first time in the same classroom. There were fist fights breaking out in the classrooms. Matthew Snapp, my good friend who was an assistant superintendent of the Austin school system at the time, he called me in and asked if there is anything I could do. We observed the classrooms and we saw that it was a highly competitive situation where people were pitted against each other. That's the way a typical classroom is in any city, in any school, almost any school, but it exacerbated whatever racial stereotypes existed.



Jigsaw Classroom logo

What we did was we went in there and within a few days we invented a structured technique of cooperation where we put in front of people sitting in the classroom and raising their hands and trying to get the right answer, trying to beat each other. We had kids divided into small groups of about five or six each multiracial of different genders, so the black kids, white kids, Mexican-American kids, boys and girls and we gave each kid one piece of the action. If they were doing the biography of Eleanor Roosevelt each kid had a part of her biography and learned it to recite it to his fellows. The only way you had of getting that kid's input was to pay close attention, to ask good questions to help that person come out with the information he had. It was like a well-functioning basketball team with each kid having a particular skill, a particular piece of the action.

When kids work together cooperatively that way they begin to see the beauty, and the smartness and the goodness in each other. When they're competing against each other the other person is the enemy and they're looking to beat them. When you're teammates you see things in the other that you wouldn't normally have seen. We develop this into a foolproof technique that's easy to apply, easy to use. What we did in the early experiments - this is my combination of Maslow's humanism with Festinger's astuteness as an experiment - we did very good tough research in these classrooms and we showed that comparing jigsaw classrooms with traditional classrooms we found that the kids in the jigsaw classrooms liked each other better, that they became less prejudiced against blacks, Mexican-Americans and whites, that they liked school better, absenteeism was down and that they did better in school, that they did better on objective exams. It had everything going for it.

In the schoolyard we took aerial photographs of kids mingling in this schoolyard during recess. In schools where the traditional classrooms were in place there were clusters of black kids, clusters of white kids, clusters of Mexican-American kids. They never intermingled. In schools where we were employing jigsaw there was total integration in the schoolyard. Kids became friends with each other across racial lines. When kids are scared, like in a newly desegregated school, it's natural for them to cluster together with people like them who they know pretty well. It creates animosity between groups. When you do the jigsaw they get to know each other, they get to appreciate each other and then they seek each other out in the schoolyard. The system worked like clockwork. We've done it in hundreds of schools all across the country. It's been used in Europe and in Asia and it works.

Ben: **One of the objections, I can imagine to it, it would be too awkward to introduce that in every single class a child took during the day. I'm sure you only need it in one class a day, something like that.**

Elliot: You only need it six hours a week, and it's a maximum. If you do it in one or two classes, you're doing social studies ... People have done this in arithmetic too. Teachers are very inventive and they've found ways to do it that I never thought of in a subject that I would have never have dreamed of. The truth is we get top results if we only use it six hours a week, but the more we use it I think the happier the kids are. In terms of

reducing prejudice and by getting good scores on exams it maxes out at around six hours a week.

Ben: **If our listeners wanted to know how they could help bring something like this to their school system where should they go?**

Elliot: I have a website on jigsaw. It's called www.jigsaw.org. It's org. If you do .com, you're going to get a lot of jigsaw puzzles. If you do .org, it tells you how about it, how to implement it. It's all free. You can use everything you want. There are related websites where teachers have actually developed curricula for the jigsaw and have put it in there. It really is a very well-functioning system. It's been used, I would say, in thousands of classrooms. My disappointment is that is not used almost universally. I think it's a great system. If I were the Tsar of education I would get it to be adopted everywhere.

Ben: **I have an email here Elliot. I know it's from somebody that knows you because it begins "Elli." It's from Whitney Cassar at Perseus Books.**

Elliot: She's my editor!

Ben: **Yes. Whitney says, "Jason was such an amazing part of your early life story. If you could speak with your brother today for an hour or so, what would you want to talk about with him? What do you wish you could tell him? Also did he inspire any of your social psychology work?"**

Elliot: What a question. I thought about that a lot. My brother was a political scientist. He died just before he got his PhD, but he was brilliant. I would love to collaborate with him on politics. I think the two of us would've made a great team as consultants to Obama, and things of that sort. I would talk to him about everything. That question really choked me up a little.

What was the next question? Did he inspire any of my work? I don't think so directly. He inspires the way I do my work though. He was another guy that kept me on my toes, that made sure that I didn't goof off. I think in a strange sense being my first mentor he was almost as tough on me as Leon Festinger, who was my most powerful mentor. I think Jason in a sense took on the job of my father when we were in college and wanted to make sure that I didn't waste my time by, for example, going out with women, but wanted me to keep my nose to the grindstone and things of that sort. For the most part if he were alive today, I think we would do some good work together, we would have some good fun together, we would ride the roller coaster together and we would play some poker together.

Ben: **Great question. Okay, coming back to a question from Olivia again. You may have already spoken of this Elliot, but, "What are the three most significant things to keep in mind when trying to help yourself and someone else?"**

Elliot: I think I have spoken to that but it probably bears repeating. I think helping yourself remaining open, pushing for self-awareness, try not to quickly reduce dissonance but to be able to take responsibility for making mistakes and learning from those mistakes, all that stuff, making yourself vulnerable to people who care about you, not needing to be right all the time, but being able to own up to your errors. Those are the ways you can help yourself in becoming more enlightened, so that you can be helpful to other people, but not by trying to help them, but by trying to set up situations where they can see where they can go.

The difference, in a nutshell to me, is one of my granddaughters. We're having a discussion about something, and a tone comes into her voice, an argumentative tone, and like an idiot here I am 78 years old and I know all this stuff, I said to her, "Ruth, why are you so angry?" She said, "I am not angry." Then I'm thinking, "What am I doing?" I step right up and I apologized. I said, "Clearly Ruth that was a terrible question. What I want to know is what are you feeling right now?" I want her to get into her feelings. If she's feeling angry or not, or whatever she's feeling. For example, if she's feeling angry to try to ask her, "Can you say what you're angry at?" That's the way to be helpful to set up the situation. We all make mistakes. I made a blunder on that one. It was a knee-jerk response. I will try very, very hard not to make that mistake again, certainly with Ruth. I forgive myself and move on.

That is the way to be helpful to become more enlightened and to give up the notion of trying to take credit for things, of showing the other person how smart you are. You meet the other person as equals. You might have a little more skills than they have, and you use it in a way that when it's all over they can say, "Boy, I really accomplished something." Rather than, "Boy, that guy really was smart. He really gave me some good stuff." In the final analysis, it's what the person learns that they can do on their own that's going to be the most useful thing for them.

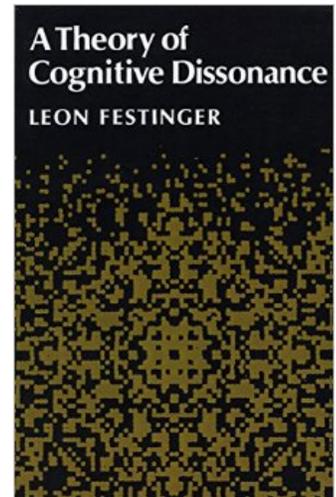
Ben: ***That's great. Here's a very specific question from Patty Newbold. "Elliot, you have shown that asking for a small first favor is a better way to get subsequent favors from someone then giving them something that puts them in your debt. A lot of advice from marketing and coaching practice these days recommends giving lots away for free before asking for money. Is this bad advice?"***

Elliot: I don't know. They're apple and oranges really. Although they look like they're in the same domain there's really different. I think that if you want people to first become acquainted with something you might want to give them a trial run free so that they see whether they like it or not. Once they're acquainted with it then you might use other processes as a way of keeping them interested and keeping them learning, but on first acquaintance giving something away is probably a good thing. Business theory and reinforcement theory are seen apparently at odds. When I write about this and talk about this, if you want somebody to do something once give them something reward for doing it, but if you want them to come to believe that they love the thing and they want to keep doing it, then you want to take the reward away, lest they think that the only reason they're doing it is to get the extrinsic reward.

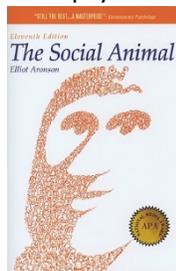
That's where dissonance can be helpful when a person asks themselves, "Hey, how come I'm doing this particular thing." In some places they pay kids to do their homework and when the kid says to himself, "How come I'm doing my homework. Well, because I'm getting paid for it." Then if you stop paying them for doing the homework they'll stop doing the homework. If you want people to really enjoy the process of doing that work you don't want to pay them for it. That's why I think grades in school can be counterproductive. If you're going for the grade then the reward is the grade. If you're going for the learning then the reward is what you learn. If you begin to think that the only reason you're learning the thing is in order to get the reward, you're missing out on the most final aspect of education.

Ben: Elliot here's a question from your intellectual grandson. I think you probably met him. His name is Jeffrey Hunger, who was a protégé of [Marti Hope Gonzales](#) and it is now a graduate student at Cal State, Fullerton. Jeffrey asks, "What readings, either books or articles, significantly influenced your thinking during graduate school and what core readings would you recommend to burgeoning social psychologists now?"

Elliot: That's a great question. The most important book I ever read in psychology in my life was Leon Festinger's, [A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance](#). I read it in manuscript form under the worst possible conditions. He practically threw it at me. He had just finished writing it. He had submitted a copy to the publisher and he said, "Here, read this, and make sure your little kids don't get blueberry jam all over it," or something like that. It was the most exciting thing I ever read in psychology at the time, and since. Now, nobody reads that book anymore, because nobody reads it anymore and we've gone beyond it.



I don't know what to recommend now. I think there are some really important books in social psychology. I really like the ones that [Richard Nisbett](#) and [Lee Ross](#) have written. I like [The Social Animal](#). I think for anyone beginning with a beginning interest in social psychology, it's written in an easy narrative way. I think if a person wants to see what the intellectual life is like, I almost hate to do this but I will, I would recommend, [Not by Chance Alone](#). I think what the skillful readers, some very, very good psychologists have told me about the book is that it's a window on what it's like to be a graduate student, what it's like to be a professor, what it's like to discover things, what it's like to teach a class and things of that sort which I think for a young professional might be very, very useful in addition to being a story of how a dumb kid became a smart adult. I don't have a reading list. Those are the things that I cherish. I like [Bob Cialdini](#) also on influence, [Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion](#). I think it's a gorgeous book.



Ben: Elliot, what's the question that you would have liked to have been asked that you haven't gotten to answer yet today?

Elliot: Oh, boy, the questions were wonderful. I particularly like the question about most important learning and things of that sort. I didn't get any questions about teaching about the actual art of teaching. Not necessarily one question I would've wanted to be asked, but the importance of teaching and how you get students interested and excited about a lecture rather than falling asleep, or playing computer games or doing text messaging while they're sitting in class. For that it involves talking about issues that are of great importance to them, and then showing them that there's a science that underlies the stuff and that we can learn more about the things that they find most exciting like falling in love, like influence, like parenting, the parent/child relationship and you can learn about it in a scientific way. These are things that teaching strategies, which are really important not simply for classroom teaching but in our day to day life with our kids, and grandkids, and friends and everyone. There is so much. These questions that came today I'm very pleased with. I don't have anything much add to that.

Ben: [Marti Hope Gonzales](#) has a wonderful chapter in the book about you, [*The Scientist and the Humanist*](#), on your teaching and how you approached it.

Elliot: Marti Gonzales is probably the best teaching assistant I ever had when she was a graduate student, twenty-five years ago. She wrote about my teaching strategies in a terrific way in that book, and a book that she edited. Yeah, very good.

Ben: Elliot, before we close, I'd just like to encourage everybody to go straight to Amazon to get a copy of Elliot's autobiography. It really does read like a novel. It's a beautiful, inspiring book and I think you'll be very happy with it. Thank you so much for spending this time with us today. It was a real treat.

Elliot: It was my pleasure. I enjoyed every minute of it. Thank you all who sent in questions. I loved them all.