

Climbing up the tree

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To become humans, our ancestors climbed down the trees; at least that is what we were told in high school. (Frankly, I've never paid much attention to what we've been told back there, but I was an avid fan of Jack London's stories, and he said so too.) My problem with that was why they did it. Logical theories would tell you there were great benefits in doing that, for example foraging for food, but I didn't buy it: how would they know a priori there would be any benefits? What would've been clear to them, though, was that they might easily become a food for somebody else: crocodiles, saber-tooth tigers, all kind of monto-brontosaurus, whatever; it must've been no fun...

Yet they did it. Having been around for a while and seen all kind of trees, human beings, and predators, I think I know the answer. It is about challenge. See, it is hard to believe that those ancestors suddenly decided to climb down all together and march to their bright future as a whole gang, rank and file. It would've been a really stupid thing to do -- to provide a generous free thanksgiving dinner for all the local community of tigers, crocodiles, whatever.. No; instead there were just a few individuals -- or perhaps a single one -- who were crazy enough to step into a place "where no man has gone before". My bet is that the last thing on that individual's mind was any benefit -- it was the challenge of impossible and dangerous unknown that beckoned and drove him... The rest of them followed, hesitant in the beginning. Much later on, after they invented God, the name of the guy could've been Moses, but at the tree-time, the God was not on his shift yet, so the guy did it all alone...

Since then, there always were individuals like that, climbing down, up, and in any other ways, driven by the challenge of seemingly impossible. The humankind owes them big way, but they usually don't care. Where that quality comes from, I don't know. Some genes combinations, or from the God when he is on active duty, who knows; but definitely a person has it the moment he is born.

Long ago I witnessed how a little man took up his challenge. His name was San'ka (one of Russian nicknames for Alexander), a five year old, pretty reserved, square-built little fellow, never taking anything for granted, and not too trusty of whatever you tell him; whenever anybody tried to teach him life realities, he would stubbornly shriek, "I see it, I see it, you are getting nasty!" Nothing wrong about that; just a cautious individual, and you wouldn't expect him to do anything defying a common sense. Yet he did...

It was a late autumn in Boston, and the place was at the top of the Summit hill. When the tree leaves fall, you have a magnificent view of downtown Boston and Cambridge.

That little pretty park, although a part of Brookline, used to be almost always empty and surrounded by a quiet, mostly old Jewish neighborhood -- at least it was in 1980 when I rented an apartment nearby and would come there to relax. At some point an old man approached me and asked me whether I am a Russian -- easy to figure out by looking at my winter hat. Happy to hear my "yes", he told me that he still remembered Russian as he learned it as a boy from his mom -- and began speaking Yiddish! -- which I fortunately understood too.. But the event I want to talk about happened perhaps ten years later.

There were three of us: San'ka, his grandma Lucy, and me. After fooling around with dry leaves and chasing squirrels, San'ka finally got one of them jumping on a tree, running up to its lowest branch and stopping there to look back at San'ka with disgust and scorn. San'ka didn't like any of that, and set out to teach the squirrel good manners. (No logics there of course, but he was a kid...) Yet there was a logistic problem -- how to get there. It was an oak-tree; that branch was about ten feet above the ground, and the tree trunk was about three feet wide, with nothing on it where he would be able to put in his feet or fingers, except for a rough bark. But it didn't stop him: he started climbing up squirrel-like by squeezing his little fingers and feet into the bark cracks. It didn't work well -- after purchasing couple feet, he'd slide back. We cheered him up -- nothing wrong in his getting a little new exercise, and no harm for both of them. Bored by all that aimless excitement, the squirrel has gone anyway; amazingly, San'ka hasn't even noticed it -- the tree became his main target... After a while, as he tried to do it from all of its sides, we thought it was enough, and his fingers were too scratched. Not wishing him to feel bad, we told him that he did a great job, the squirrel is gone, etc, so why wouldn't he relax and we all go home. But he shut the world out by then -- he saw his challenge clearly, and nothing would stop him now.

Fine, we told him, we are going to walk around a bit, and he is free to go after it. So we did, enjoying the last sunny day, the view, and the cool air. We even forgot to watch his little battleground, and when we did, Lucy screamed. San'ka disappeared, the ground near the tree was empty. We hurried toward the place, and as we got closer, we saw him -- sitting on that branch, high above the ground, his feet dangling in the air, his face exhausted and expressionless, his hands being a mess of scratches and smeared blood -- a man who's done his job, the world be damned...

Lucy fell into an unstoppable chant of mixed relief, admiration and amazement, but he was too tired to listen. The next problem was how to get him down -- it is usually more difficult to climb down than up -- your feet go first, and you don't see your way -- the same problem the cats have with the trees... Besides, his swollen hands were not of much help. But we managed that: I stood tight to the tree trunk, raised my hand as far as I can, instructed him to move inch-by-inch, shifting his feet slow and holding tight to the branch -- and even so there was quite a way after he left the branch and before his feet touched my fingers -- but once I caught him, the rest was simple. Lucy almost

choked him with hugs, "San'ka, you are my hero!!!" He was still oblivious to all that excitement, but fortunately I knew what will jolt him up. See, San'ka was an unabashed fan of pizza, and was able to devour as much as there was on a table, any size, any type, any time... I even called him "Puzo-Pizza" and he liked it. ("Puzo" means a "big-belly" in street Russian. And no, it has nothing to do with the name of the author of the great "The Godfather" novel...) An immediate offer to take him to any local pizza-joint of his choice (and of course, he knew all of them) as a reward for his win, brought him back to earth -- the pizza-earth!

We loaded him into my car, cleaned up his hands with water and perfume, wrapped them with a tissue, and drove to the nearest of those joints. Once there, San'ka was back to life and business -- he marched directly to the counter, rose his head to be able to talk to the guy there, who also bent over to see him behind the counter -- and gave the guy precise instructions for extras for each section of his pizza (pepperoni, triple cheese, tomatoes, mushrooms, etc.) -- while the size wasn't optional -- must be the largest, 14", confirmed by my waving hand from our table; they knew him anyway. Once he was done, I stepped in, made an extra order for me and Lucy -- a smaller pizza, the drinks, and payed for everything. If you've never got a visual for nirvana -- you should've been seeing him diving into his pizza when it finally arrived... When he finished, he rose his eyes with an unspoken question in them, and we showed him his options: the remaining part of our pizza or a trip to the counter for a new one... I guess he'd came by then to his tipping point, so he settled for our leftovers...

Well, it was a challenge, but still a tree, a nature... He was less lucky with human beings -- other kids -- in a kindergarten, or at a kids' playground. His soul was set up for fair game, and was not in tune with bullies who tried to dominate or harass him and other kids. He never complained, but it was easy to see. His family came to the rescue then. His grand-dad on the father side had a black belt in karate and holder of all kind of prizes back in his old country, and it was no-brainer to him. He organized a small karate school for kids, and San'ka became his first and soon -- the top -- student in the class. Of course, they have never been taught to inflict permanent damage, but you see, a street fight is usually a quick affair, and those one-on-one sports give you a cool, clear vision of the battle, a great control of your own body, and help to anticipate your adversary's moves, let alone to have a few tricks up your sleeve. (This author happened to have some experience on the subject back in his school time, both in the street fights and in a boxing club, which he attended strictly for practical purposes...) Not to say that the bullies -- after a few encounters -- take notes, and this precludes further showdowns. This made San'ka's life more comfortable for the next ten years.

Meanwhile, he was growing up and showing good signs of independence, fair-mindedness and whim... He would usually have a strong opinion on anything of interest to him, but was always open for negotiations. At some point when he was left with me for a couple days at a little village at New Harbor (near Damariscotta, Maine,

my favorite summer place), we've done a few crazy things together, but in the end when I wanted to take a walk on the rocky beach, he didn't like it. OK, we negotiated, and came up with this plan: we take that walk together, and after that we have a late lunch at local pizza-parlor. We did, and he stoically kept his part of the deal. (After that, the most funny part was driving back to Boston. It is about 200 miles, but the highways in Maine are fast, and it turned out, San'ka liked fast ride. He's got excited, and when I put a tape with Nat King Cole into my player, he sang along and laughed at "Calypso Blues" -- "In Trinidad one dollar buy...", but when it came to the song "A buzzard took the monkey for a ride...", he hit the roof and rocked in his seat so wildly that our car zig-zaged on the road... The funniest part was near the end: when we stopped for a gas, I briefly blocked a car with young ladies, and a frustrated lady-driver screamed "F**k you!", I coolly replied "Pleasure would be all mine, lady...", to which San'ka was ready to scream "Mine too!", but I put my finger to his lips... He was happy to tell back at home about that little part...) As to negotiations: he was a tough negotiator. His dad told me once that in the winter, when the entire population of American kids, armed with snow shovels, makes a happy army of snow-removers for their parents and neighbors while being rewarded with a few bucks, San'ka was driving (and winning) the toughest bargains for the cost of his labor. His trouble though was that once the job was done, he would often forget to come back for his pay...

It went on as well as it could be; he grew up to become an exemplary high-school student, but then a call of wild suddenly pulled him into a completely unexpected dark jungle. It started as sort of a mundane big-city street collision: when he with couple friends waited for green light at a street crossing, three passing by black kids ripped off a camera from San'ka's friend's hand and run away. It didn't take much time for San'ka to react: he run after them, caught the guy with the camera, and being by then proficient with karate, got the camera back using a bit of physical persuasion... It might've ended up with this; but one of the black kids turned out to know San'ka school, and the next day, a gang of "neighborhood" kids, armed with baseball bats and broken glass bottles were waiting for him after his last class outside the school. He was cool; he took up the fight. Nobody knows how this would end up -- this is no joke, a gang like that is like a pack of hyenas, they have no pity and no sense of reason -- but the fight was suddenly interrupted. A young black adult who rushed to the scene -- as it turned out, he was their leader -- barked a stop-order; and with a cunning whim he announced pointing to San'ka -- "this is MY man!". Apparently, in his own way he was quite clever, and in some dark sense understood and valued San'ka's standing-on-his-own. What happened next, was a sudden metamorphose -- San'ka's soul was caught like a butterfly in the twister -- he became a devoted gang member, and run with it for about two years... He became their "bro", following all their adventures, and nobody knew what exactly that would mean. I guess, he and his family were lucky that by sheer chance he didn't end up behind the bars, or worse -- in a city gutter...

Interestingly enough, contrary to a common perception those gangs are not necessarily

made up only of ghetto kids living in a desperate environments and having no good role models. A dark gang-romantics pulls in some kids like San'ka. His family was/is a solid rock of hard-working emigres, highly educated, persistent and persevering Russian Jews. His grandfather on father's side was a skilled mechanical engineer back in old country, and quickly got an engineering position in this country, highly valued at each company he worked for; his wife was a teacher -- and became an ESL teacher in Boston. His grandmother (Lucy) of the mother's side was an amazing example of a true, tough-as-necessary single-mom survivor, who came to this country with her daughter -- and nothing else; back in the old country she was trained as an engineer too (and hated it), but as need arrived, she became an engineer at a production factory. All of them came to the States as refugees about the same time I did. None of them spoke English upon their arrival. Their kids, San'ka's parents, were teens when they arrived; they worked hard and at the same time were getting college education; by now his dad runs an international exchange company, and his mom is in charge of a computer info-system integrating huge cluster of Boston companies. Good and solid emigre stock; doesn't get better than that... My guess (strictly that, mind you) is that the main reason for a sudden switch was that before that happened, San'ka was kept in a more or less sterile environment, rarely exposed to back streets of "neighborhood". It is like a kid, who is made to eat only carefully washed fruits, can easily get food poisoning where any other kid wouldn't notice anything... Too much protection...

Back to San'ka's story. Needless to say that his school performance went down fast -- both his attendance and grades -- which was not too obvious in the beginning: his grades were forged in his records and the teachers were getting faked messages from his parents explaining his absences... In the end of his last year, his final grades were below any standard, and it was suggested that if he has any plans to continue his education in a college, he's got to take that last year again. At that point his parents got no choice but to take a desperate and drastic action: they paid a handsome money for one-year study for him in a tough-regime boarding school outside the Massachusetts state and drove him there. After a few days there, San'ka realized that it is the last place in the world he wanted to be in, and he called home begging to be taken back -- in exchange he swore by god that he'll never get any grade below "A", and that the gang will be forgotten... They didn't trust him -- but then they decided to pretend they do... and to give him this chance. They drove again to that school, took him back to home -- and never regretted their decision -- he did exactly what he promised... They lost their nonrefundable payment to the school, but later on always thought it was perhaps the best investment in their life... Well, San'ka was back to himself -- he kept to his part of the deal...

All right, after the high school he went to a business college, where he run into a real-life challenge -- this time not of his choice -- it was forced on him by a terrible event. He and his friends celebrated the end of the first semester (his was top grade, 4.0); after the party they drove to the late movie -- and smashed their car on a high speed

into a tree (damn tree, again...) They were lucky to stay alive, all of them, but his was the worst case -- shattered leg bones and heavy head trauma, with broken face bones and brain damage. He went through the string of surgeries, but in the end he didn't know who he is, where he is, what to do with simple objects... The doctor's initial prognosis -- 5-year old's level of conscience, full rehabilitation out of question. About a week later, his inner "I" has miraculously surfaced: he wanted to check-out, not to stay in an essentially psycho-ward. He knew already about his studies and didn't want them interrupted, even temporarily. "I want to try! I want my chance!"... New tests and medical examinations followed; his doctors changed their prognosis, but marked the situation as the first in the known practice.

A month later, on his crutches, with his face in stitches, his head bones in braces, and his being able to have his food or drinks only by straw, he walked into his first class of the spring semester. The pain was still terrible; sometimes he was passing out. He didn't allow anybody from his family to drive him to the college (his friend did it) -- he didn't want them to see him in pain. He finished that semester with top grades, 4.0. It was a hell, of course: when he read a paragraph in any text, he wouldn't remember the beginning of it. He would repeat that many times; most often with the same result. His professors, who remembered him from the fall semester, would allow him sometimes to take the same test or exam again, if the first try was not too successful -- it was only fair. He transferred then to the top college in Massachusetts in the field and graduated from it in three years, second from the top.

Fast forward to "now". Alex is in his early thirties, a successful investment analyst, married, and more or less typical yuppie: top cars, restaurants and hotels, a major target -- money. No passing of judgment here, just not my idea of the pursuit of happiness, that's it. It is his life, and I wish him to be happy and lucky in whatever he does. I haven't seen him from his childhood, and his dotted time-line is known to me from his relatives. Will the call of challenge -- of his own choosing -- ever be heard by him again? There is no way of knowing that, of course, but recently I've got a sort of indication that the door is not closed. It was a strange and a bit funny indication, but to me it was a sign. It was about his curiosity. He read an article in a semi-technical magazine about the nature of time and how we study, control and use our "time environment", from the Big Bang occurrence to "zeptoseconds" to the current age of the universe. It was written by me (that is how I learned about that); he saw the name but thought it was somebody else (judging by the article language he assumed that the author was born in the States); and after he read it, he asked his grandma Lucy and was surprised to learn that the author was me. But this is not the point; the point is -- how in hell an investment analyst would be interested in that subject including its intricate subtleties? It turned out that of course, it was not the only paper or any other source outside his direct professional domain that he was interested in; far from it.

Let me elaborate a bit. It is my observation that there aren't too many adults who have

a strong sense of curiosity about the world around them. Little kids (and the same with baby-animals) have so much to learn about that world from the scratch in a so short period of time -- their plain survival depends on it, so the mother-nature provided them with a powerful tool for that -- a curiosity. But in most of them it fades away in earlier teens -- there are many reasons for that, but one of them, I suspect, is the mother-nature again. A few of those who kept it, would later on become scientists, researchers, inventors, explorers, or adventurers, often looking for new -- always new -- horizons... Here comes my point -- this kind of curiosity (genes combinations, again...) easily translates into action; it is a strong precursor of challenge-taking. One may think that this point is highly debatable, and anyway, how the author would know that? Well, after 35 years as a university professor in this country, and more than half-century of highly independent research carrier, plus rich set of all kinds of dangerous adventures back in the old country, you'd learn something, wouldn't you... And with Alex -- to me it was a sign that his mind is in full drive and still searching...

Oh, by the way, one may say that San'ka/Alex was 5 year old when he was up against the tree -- could've been already conditioned somehow... My memory then pulls out another kid -- about 2.5 year old, who barely learned how to speak. It was long ago too, at a Mediterranean beach near Nice in France -- it was a sunny but a bit windy day, the waves were about two feet high -- almost the same as the kid's height. The first wave threw him down to the pebble ground -- it was clearly painful, yet he pulled himself up -- and went straight against the next wave! My first reaction was to run up to him and pull him out, but his mom -- a young French lady, just tiredly waved her hand from a distance -- leave him alone, he will keep doing it anyway... A little guy picked up a fight against the Sea. Fittingly, his name was David...

If you are a parent, my reader, most likely you wouldn't want your kid to have that trait; too dangerous, too many cons and too few pros -- it is better to be on a safe side. No arguing here; but there is no need to worry too much -- there are very few kids like that, and very far in between. Be aware, though -- if he's got the bug, there is no way to debug or unteach him -- it is hard-wired, and came from far-out past. What you can possibly do, is to try to install into him some good basics -- compassion, honesty, decency, fairness... With the rest of it, you are not much in control...

To those bug-bitten kids: as part of the same breed, I salute you, little fellows! Welcome to this world; it is full of wonderful, out-of-the-blue, dangerous challenges. Yes, you'll have to learn how to work hard and acquire new knowledges, how to survive and how to win, how to get back when thrown hard to the ground, how to lead others who cannot do all that; but you'll get through... Someone up there picked you up for special duty; serve with honor and distinction... Tall trees are waiting out there; let the Force be with you...