Aaron swartz: the personality of a young internet trailblazer

Aaron Swartz, a co-founder of one of the largest news and voting websites named Reddit, was a young adult when he ended his life after being indicted on charges of felony computer-crime charges. He was facing the possibility of a maximum sentence of 95 years in prison and a 3 million dollar fine. His trial was slated to begin 3 months after he committed suicide by hanging, and the prospects from his lawyers and family were high that he would beat the charges. Aaron's actions and accomplishments in life were greatly influenced by his privileged upbringing, the vast opportunities this privilege afforded him, and the morals and opinions that were crafted during his formative years surrounded by adults who were in many cases several decades his superior (Peters, 2017). He had grand goals and ideas to try and save the world, he wanted to implement great legislative and societal change, but he became increasingly more withdrawn and developed recurring depression which led to his untimely death at the age of 26.

In the dot com era of the Internet, there was an explosion of innovation and many of the most recognizable websites that are widely known today were created. Aaron Swartz played a large role in the creation and cultivation of some of these great websites and founding computing principles. Including being a co-founder of Reddit, he was also a high-level contributor to Wikipedia, The Semantic Web, and several online open-source " library" sites. He dropped out of high school before his sophomore year, and at the age of 14 began traveling to conferences and interacting with established adults at these conferences (Swartz, Lessig, 2016). Several of the people he considered to be his peers were quite surprised to discover that Aaron was a young teenager, as they considered him to be in some ways immature, but

never questioned his intelligence and knowledge of difficult programming languages and computing concepts.

Aaron Swartz never found a way to interact properly around peers of his own age, and many times stated he was uninterested in forming relationships as he viewed those peers as not being interested in the same things as him. This lack of interest in socializing was one of the factors of him dropping out of high school, and later college. Even while participating in activities generally associated with college age students, partying and drinking, Aaron would separate himself from the group and stay by himself in the kitchen. While amongst friends and peers, Aaron was considered an introvert with an interloper complex. " I'm afraid of asking for things from people, even the tech support guys on the phone; I'm excellent at managing m[y] own free time, and thus distasteful of structured activities; I have trouble making friends with people my own age; and I hate competition" (Peters, 2017, p. 150).

The single trait approach, true to its name, pays attention to singular traits that have been considered important identifiers of a person's character. Two of the most studied and most mentioned traits for this approach are narcissism and self-monitoring. The self-monitoring concept, developed by Mark Snyder, is the idea of how much a person checks in on themselves, their behaviors, and their emotions and paying attention to changes they make to their behaviors when reacting to situations. A high self-monitor would be described as someone who can make changes to their behavior to fit the situation they're in once they've assessed the environment. A low self-monitor, in contrast, would do the opposite of this. Someone who is identified

as a low self-monitor is less likely to adapt to different situations and keep their behavior the same regardless of what the environment calls for. Words that have been branded to describe individuals with low self-monitoring skills include distrustful, perfectionist, anxious, introspective, independent, touchy and irritable (Funder, 2017).

Low self-monitors are less likely to view other people's opinions on them as being important (Funder, 2017). Aaron didn't much care for socializing with his peers, as he felt his peers didn't understand him and he didn't understand his peers, there was a disconnect in communication. Later in his transition to adulthood, and his less than traditional entrance to the workforce, he was very much someone who in the end wanted no barriers and the ability to act as he saw fit in the work place. Once Reddit, the website he cofounded with Alexis Ohanian and Steve Huffman, was sold to Conde Nast, the nature of Aaron's work ethic changed for the worse and did not fit that of a conventional 9-5 office job. Aaron, Steve, and Alexis were young adults that went from working together where they were the bosses to working in an office where they had their own offices, but they had superiors to answer to. With this change, Aaron began showing up to the office only 3 days in a several months span while he pursued trips overseas and spoke at conferences, without telling any of his coworkers or bosses of his plans. Eventually, like one would assume of someone that presented this behavior, he was fired. His self-deprecating behavior hindered his ability to reach his full potential and take advantage of the opportunities that were afforded to him.

Aaron in many ways was unwilling to change the behavior he became accustomed to while being the co-owner of his own startup and showed this unwillingness to change his behavior to fit his new environment, showing a low self-monitor temperament. Both in his social and professional life, he didn't much care what those around him thought of him, which is a largely low self-monitor trait, to disregard those around you and their opinion of you and to not tailor your behavior to the situation in part because of a lack of concern over other's opinion. After Aaron was fired, he posted a disturbing " suicide story" on his blog that prompted those close to him to call the police (Swartz, 2007). He made light of the situation, and claimed the writing was an exercise to try and alleviate some anxiety he had been experiencing, but this was viewed in hindsight differently when he eventually committed suicide five years later.

Swartz kept a very detailed blog, for personal reflection. It served as a diary and an outlet for him but became a source of information into his feelings and thoughts for those that were close to him. While Swartz was not great at social interaction and reading the room, he was quite in tune with his feelings and was good at vocalizing what lead to his feelings. " I'd learned not to shrink from hard truths, so I'd literally have this conversation with myself: ' Yes, I know: if I got better at selling things to people [or whatever it was], I'd be much better off. But look at how painful I find selling: it'd be just great if I could do it, but is it really worth all that pain?" (Swartz, 2012). He knew that in order to become the greatest version of himself and to become more successful, he needed to push himself through things that made him uncomfortable, but pushing himself was something he struggled with.

Another trait that is included under the single trait approach is narcissism. Narcissism is a fairly well-known trait that people can easily identify in other individuals. People who would be considered a narcissist display more argumentative behavior, have a high vision of the self, displaying superiority, and impulsive decisions and behavior. Through exhibiting typical behavior of someone who is high in the trait of narcissism, people around them become irritated and alienated from the off-putting and self-centric behavior that is typical (Funder, 2017).

Aaron held himself in very high regard from a young age. He viewed himself as too good and too intelligent for conventional schooling, so he dropped out of high school his sophomore year. Once he enrolled in college, he viewed it as just a necessary stepping stone that everyone else suggested, but once he was in the throes of his classes, he reached the same conclusion as he did in high school and decided to once again drop out. In working on his startup ventures, he became very critical and argumentative of his partner on the project, not accepting the partners work as he would his own. His insistence on re-doing every portion of the work made him a very difficult person to work with, putting strain on this particular working relationship, but also being notorious in some circles for being an alienating figure and producing a lot of tension (Peters, 2017).

Aaron Swartz viewed himself as an important force that was going to change things, even if this meant disregarding the law (Swartz, Lessig, 2016). Aaron believed that copyright law, and the practice of hoarding academic information behind expensive and inaccessible paywalls was morally and ethically wrong. He was so certain that his ways were the right ways, he

completely disregarded that the law, no matter one's opinion of it, must be followed and if someone wishes to change this law they must do so through the proper channels. Aaron, thinking he was using his hacktivism skills for the greater good, effectively " stole" documents from Stanford by downloading them and making them available to the public. This action is what led to his legal troubles, and his cavalier attitude towards the charges brought up by the prosecutor was viewed unfavorably in the media coverage that these charges inspired. His outward position of his action was that of unconcern, and this was how the world was viewing him, cemented more by his shirking of the plea deal that he had been offered (Peters, 2017, p. 5). He presented an image that what he done was not a big deal, going in line of what he truly felt about the laws he was accused of breaking, but within his closer friend circle he showed real concern and a deepening depression for the prospect that he would be punished harshly for what he had done.

The humanistic approach begins as a study of how psychology is directly affected by human emotions and feelings. Things that are intrinsically human, and things that everyone needs and feels, in many ways effects the study of personality in ways that become very abstract to try and understand as a whole. Breaking down human feelings and experiences into more concise and easier to comprehend parts. The psychologists Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow separately viewed humanistic principles and the several " unanswerable" questions that everyone grapples with in their lives as being the predecessor to an idea about actualization, " maintaining and enhancing life" (Funder, 2017, p. 434). The perspective of humanistic psychology views the science of the brain as fundamentally different from other sciences

because the phenomenon created by the brain being aware, and in true laboratory experiments people are aware they are being studied and this in some ways effects the results and the questions that need to be asked. " The phenomena include willpower, reflective thinking, imagination, introspection, self-criticism, aspirations, creativity, happiness, and above all, free will. Self awareness makes all of these phenomena possible, and, interestingly, the rest of psychology tends to ignore them. (Funder, 2017, p. 424)".

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is represented in a pyramid with 5 sections. The bottom of the pyramid, and the first set of needs to be met before one can successfully seek the remaining sections, is the most basic human needs consisting of food, water, shelter, and the simple psychological needs that lead to a solid growth through the developmental years. The second level is safety, security, comfort, and sex. The third layer is belonging, and social activity. This layer is the one where Aaron Swartz began to reach problems and was not truly fulfilled within this step.

Aaron Swartz grew up in an upper middle-class family, meaning his most basic needs of shelter, food, and water were easily met and there was never concern about these needs being met. However, once Aaron reached high school he was allowed to retreat from attempting a healthy social relationship typical of a teenager at the first sign of him being uncomfortable. Not conquering the nuances of social situations caused him to struggle with this aspect his whole life.

After dropping out of high school at age 14, Aaron was surrounded by those that were 10, 20, and 30 years his senior, who were well established in their

careers. As somewhat of a prodigy, and while he excelled in topics and skills far beyond the normal activities of a teenager, Aaron never developed a structural foundation to help him build casual relationships or be accepted by acquaintances. This left him to isolating himself and becoming more and more frustrated with the " language" barrier he suffered from never developing the skills to properly interact with others.

Aaron Swartz led a life that was far different from the normal path most people are used to taking. He held very many different beliefs about right and wrong, but the way he approached trying to make what he believed was right wasn't always ethical. This was one of the biggest factors in his actions that led to his indictment and the serious jail sentence and fine that was possibly awaiting him once he reached his trial. The web blog that Aaron left behind, and the several papers and articles he authored, was the truest glimpse into how he saw the world. He was someone that seemed off-putting and anti-social, and this is what you would be told by those that were his acquaintances as well as those that had gotten close to him and had to go through those obstacles. He was a low self-monitor, but he was also greatly aware of how most everyone around him saw him and their opinion. He was conscious of his environment but found it trivial to change himself to be more socially acceptable.

Just like his awareness of how he was viewed in his environment and by his peers, he was similarly aware of how struggling through hardships would help him excel. Despite this awareness, his depressive waves prevented him from pushing through to being a more typical member of society, one that could play but also commit to the very lucrative 9-5 office job

opportunity he had been afforded. His narcissism got in the way of opportunities just as much. He struggled not only to ask for help from others, but to accept help from others as valid. He viewed those that were older than him and more established within the Internet Technology field with regard, but considered himself much higher than his peers, continuing with this mindset during his limited college.

His life ended while he was still very young, and while personality typically stays more consistent and engrained the older people get, it's quite possible he could have grown past his shortcomings of creating relationships with acquaintances. Aaron was extremely aware of his emotions and how he interacted with people, and with practice he could have become the vision of the person he talked about being in his blog. Unfortunately, the world will never see the capabilities he had to conquer both the world of innovative computing and the strength of mastering mental health.

References

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