

When it Mattered

Episode 14: Stanley Alpert

Chitra Ragavan: Hello, and welcome to When it Mattered. A podcast on how leaders are forged in critical moments and how they overcome adversity. I'm Chitra Ragavan. This episode is brought to you by Goodstory, an advisory firm helping technology startups find their narrative. My guest today is Stanley Alpert, an environmental lawyer, among other positions in his distinguished career, Alpert served for 13 years as a successful federal prosecutor handling environmental cases for the U.S. Department of Justice in the Eastern District of New York.

Chitra Ragavan: On the eve of his 38th birthday, Alpert was kidnapped near his Greenwich Village home, and held captive for than 24 hours. He was lucky to released but not before his captors got his ATM password and withdrew large sums of cash from several banks. Alpert wrote a memoir about the incident and what it taught him, called *The Birthday Party: A Memoir of Survival*

Chitra Ragavan: Stanley, welcome to the podcast.

Stanley Alpert: Thank you for having me, Chitra.

Chitra Ragavan: So this was on cold January night in 1998, and you were walking to your house in Greenwich Village and you were in a really good mood.

Stanley Alpert: I sure was. I just met a young woman on the train. We'd gone and found some chocolate chip cookies. I got my box, and she got hers, and she went upstairs to go to her apartment and then I walked up the street going towards mine, and that's when my life changed.

Chitra Ragavan: What happened?

Stanley Alpert: As I got to the corner of 10th Street and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, I felt a tug on my elbow. I spun around, there was an automatic machine pistol in my gut. Two men behind me with guns. They pushed me into the street into a car, and shut me in the car. They demanded my personal information, my bank

information, my name, et cetera. And then they drove me to the bank where they began to withdraw my money.

Chitra Ragavan: Tell me a little bit about who these guys were. What did they look like, what did they sound like, what information were you able to get in those frenetic first moments? I'm sure you were terrified?

Stanley Alpert: I was absolutely terrified. It was a shock and I purposely kept my eyes down toward my knees in the car because I did not want them to think that I was looking at them, so I got only the barest glimpses of them. They were three young men, very agitated, very excited. The leader of the gang, who went by the street name of Lucky, had a very professional air about him. He spoke well. He demanded all my information, so he could take the money out of the machine.

Stanley Alpert: So they drove me to the bank and they asked me how much money I had, and I told them I had \$110,000 in my savings account. And even though I was a federal prosecutor who did not make the most money one can make as a lawyer in New York, I had dutifully saved \$110,000. I was really a saver in those days. Planning for the future, which is good, but I had planned a little too well and there was my money, sitting in the bank, waiting for these gangsters to take it.

Chitra Ragavan: You didn't invest the money in the stock market, I guess? You kept it in your saving account?

Stanley Alpert: Yeah, well that was one of the many foolish things I was doing at that time in my life. And for some reason, I felt a sense of security. I think it probably came from my father's depression era mentality. Somehow it felt a sense of security just keeping in a savings account and have it available in case of an emergency.

Chitra Ragavan: I want to backtrack a bit before we continue this story. Now, you grew up in rough and tumble Brooklyn long before New York underwent this giant scrub under Mayor Rudy Giuliani, and you'd been held up for money many times before on the train and on the street and you'd always survived. Tell me a little bit about that time. I mean, you were a tough kid, not easily afraid.

Stanley Alpert: Each of us is formed by our circumstances. Each of us is formed by the environment into which we are brought into, which we are raised. And the environment into which I was raised, which I didn't choose for myself, was one in which, when you walked the street

you could expect that there would be other young men, a little bit older than you, who'd come up and demand your money, ask you, "Lend me a dime, Stanley," was the big line. "All I find I keep," meaning if you claim to not have money, they would go through your pockets and grab whatever you had. I didn't have much, but they would try to take it anyway. Sometimes I gave it to them, sometime I fought, sometime I ran. And what you don't realize when you push forward and get your education and got to law school and move forward. What you don't realize is that those experiences are extremely formative, and they travel with you wherever you go.

Chitra Ragavan: But this was different. This was different than all the other times you'd been held up.

Stanley Alpert: This was far more serious. I'd only seen the wrong end of a knife a couple of times in Brooklyn, usually it was the wrong end of someone's fist. But this was different. This was three very determined guys driving a brand new car, a Lexus, and they had guns, and they had me, and when they saw how much money was in my savings account, they decided to keep me. So it would turn into kidnapping, so this was a very, very serious incident. Far worse than anything I'd experienced in Brooklyn growing up.

Chitra Ragavan: And you were in the car now, and you had a lot of guns pointed at you. And you had three men in the car and Lucky, the lead guy, asked you what you did for a living, and what happened when ... What did you tell him and what did he think?

Stanley Alpert: The debate goes as to whether if you're prosecutor, whether if you're involved in a crime, if you're the victim, whether you should tell them or not because they may just easily put a bullet in your head for the fact that you are a prosecutor. But I really had no choice, they had my wallet and it information on what I did for a living so there was no avoiding it. But I said it gently, I said, "I'm an Assistant U.S. Attorney." And when I said it, they didn't quite understand what that meant. They said, "Oh, oh, you're an attorney."

Stanley Alpert: So they didn't quite get the prosecutor part at first, which was really just fine with me at that moment.

Chitra Ragavan: So now they know you have \$110,000 in your savings account, they know you are an attorney to their mind, and their plans have

now changed. So tell what happened in the next 26 hours of captivity.

Stanley Alpert: Well, so they viewed this as one of the great opportunities. They could probably write the management books about how to take advantage of opportunities in the moment, because their original plan was to take someone to the bank and take money out of the cash machine and then release the person which they had done, I found out later, on a couple of occasions previously. But now they're looking at \$110,000 and you can't take out more than a thousand at a time, so they saw this as their lucky day and they had caught a fish that they wanted to take home.

Stanley Alpert: And that's what they decided to do. They changed their plan, they blindfolded me, put me down on the back seat of the car, my head was in a fetal position sitting in the lap of one of the thugs, and drove me to Brooklyn where they brought me into an apartment and kept me for the next 25 hours while they figured out ways to take money out of my account, to use my credit cards. They did have a scheme where the plan was in the morning to take me to the bank and force me at gunpoint to withdraw a large sum of cash. That scheme evolved over the night, they were afraid they'd get caught, it didn't look right for that to happen in their minds. So they eventually abandoned that scheme, but in the meantime while they kept me they were able to keep stealing through my cash machine card and through my credit cards.

Chitra Ragavan: Now tell me where they took and kind of the decisions you started making very quickly on trying to keep track of where you were, and while you blindfolded, the details of the apartment and eventually of the details of these guys and who they were, and their names. Walk me through that whole thing.

Stanley Alpert: So again, we are all created by formative experiences. One of my formative experiences was growing up in Brooklyn where I'd had plenty of street fights and plenty of times that people tried to grab my money. But another very formative experience is both being lawyer but also more importantly, being a federal prosecutor. So you have natural instincts. Your natural instinct is to gather information and use that information in the best way you can. And of course, when you're stuck in the middle of crime, that instinct gets even stronger. So every single thing I heard them say that was a clue either to who they were, or where we were, or where we were going, just naturally registered in my mind. And I stuck it in my mind and thought I could use it either to get out alive, and then

I realized later if I were to manage to get out alive, then I could use those clues to help law enforcement catch them.

Stanley Alpert: So there were lots of details. I got each of their street names. I got a sense of where we were driving because even though I was blindfolded and lying on the backseat of the car, I could hear the hum of the tires going over the metal grating of, I thought it was probably the Brooklyn Bridge, it could have been the Manhattan Bridge or Williamsburg, but most likely the Brooklyn Bridge. Then when as we drove into Brooklyn, they asked me if I'd ever been on the BQE, the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, to which I said, "I had," and you could tell from the length of time spent in the car that we were probably in one of the outer reaches of Brooklyn, perhaps on the border of Queens.

Chitra Ragavan: Tell me about the apartment and the cast of characters. They were straight out of Central Casting, if you look at their names and who they were and what they did for a living.

Stanley Alpert: We drove for about 35, 40 minutes, and they did stop at a gas station to pick up duct tape that they could use to tie me up. Luckily, I was so calm and non-confrontational with them that they didn't end up using it. I think that helped me a lot that they didn't tie up my hands with duct tape. So they drove and we got to a spot where they walked me across the street, and then up some stairs and the blindfold wasn't perfect, it was my own scarf and I could see out the bottom. So I noticed the pattern on the tiles, it was a typical tenement building. You could smell the tenement smell, my grandmother had lived in one of those on the Lower East Side when I was young, so I memorized the pattern on the tiles. I also memorized the number of stairs going up and exactly where the apartment was, again, in case I was to live, I would be able to use those clues.

Stanley Alpert: And in terms of who these guys were, yeah, they were right out of Central Casting all right. They were in the business of running a prostitution ring. So when we got there, there were three girls who were roughly 16 years old, and each night, Lucky the gang leader, would drive them out to the White Castle on Utica Avenue, where he would sell their goods. Now I really want to pause here, because I can make light, somewhat, in hindsight of what happened to me, but I don't want to make light of what happened to those girls. They were victims of this hideous criminal and his hideous gang. And the thought that 16-year old girls could be sold into prostitution by a more dominant male is just disgusting to me.

Stanley Alpert: And I got there and it was ... So it was Lucky and the other two things with me and with ... who brought me on the street. The three girls who were prostitutes, they were running a prostitution ring. The two thugs, Ren and Sen, were the heat for the prostitution operation. And they had only recently switched into this business of picking up suckers on the street who they could steal from their cash machine cards. So that was the cast of characters, plus there was a final male individual who was the landlord, he owned the apartment and he would rent out the space in it, that they could use for their evening crash pad to run first their prostitution ring and then their robberies.

Chitra Ragavan: Yeah, and this was Ramos, right? So you have Lucky, Sen, Ren and Ramos. And then you have the girls, Mercedes, Mystic, Honey, and there they were in the apartment. What happened as the hours passed?

Stanley Alpert: Well, when we first got in here it was a lot of excitement. They hadn't done this ... they hadn't taken it to this level before, they'd only stolen from people and then released them. They hadn't actually captured one and then brought him back alive. And so they were very excited, buzzing around in their excitement. They kept pointing their guns at me and cocking them at me, and clicking the trigger without there being a bullet in the chamber. So they were trying desperately to intimidate me.

Stanley Alpert: But all people have to calm down at some point, so they did, and then someone decided to go out to McDonalds and get food. And they asked me if I wanted something. I said, "No," and I was afraid they might put some drugs or something in the food so I said no for that reason. I've of course learned since that food is a bonding experience, it probably would have been smart for me to take it. But they did bring me back a Snapple, and when they gave it to me, I could hear the click of opening it so that I knew that it hadn't been drugged.

Stanley Alpert: And by this point they've eaten food, they also had marijuana, so that was a calming effect. And then they had these prostitutes there, and it turned out that the proprietors of the prostitution establishment were able to sample the goods, and that's what they did. Disgusting, though they were. And I could hear all that going on around me, and then after all of that they were feeling quite calm and happy and relaxed. So they turned to me, instead of in violence, instead in anger, instead of threatening to shoot me as they had, they turned to me and wanted to see what this creature

was that they'd brought home. So, they said, "Stanley, what would you be doing right now if we hadn't grabbed you on the street?"

Stanley Alpert: And I said, "Actually, this evening is going to be my birthday, I was going to take some friends to concert." And they thought that was the funniest thing they ever heard. Oh my God, "We kidnapped the blankety-blankety-blanker on his birthday," and then they decided to offer me the services of the young women as a present for my birthday.

Chitra Ragavan: Which of course you graciously declined.

Stanley Alpert: There were a multitude of reasons to decline. But I'll point to the one that may not be the most obvious. Which is, the moment that I accepted that gift, was the moment that I turned from, in their minds, in my opinion of course, I turned from a human being who might be able to stand up for himself, into a John. And obviously there were many other reasons I wouldn't go there, but that was tactically the most important reason. I needed to maintain a sense of dignity in their eyes in order to hope that I'd get released alive.

Chitra Ragavan: Now you were concerned on multiple levels for your life, but one aspect of it was also racial. You're Jewish and your captors were African-American and this was a very tough time for race relations in New York City.

Stanley Alpert: The irony of it is, because I grew up in Brooklyn and because my friends were white and black and Catholic and Jewish and Irish and Italian and you name it, the experience of these guys was not very different from mine. Okay, they'd taken it in a much worse direction. They decided to become criminals, I decided to work my tail off, get my education and move forward. But really, they weren't that different from me. And yet there was a sense of fear, they did ask me about my religion and there was a sense of fear in conveying it because there had been some tension in Brooklyn between blacks and Jews.

Stanley Alpert: If you look at the newspapers, it's happening again today where Jews are being attacked violently, without any provocation in the streets of Crown Heights. And of course in Crown Heights, we had had a terrible car accident where a Hasidic Jew hit and very sadly killed a black child, and then there were riots. And there were people who went out to try to kill any Jew they could find. So there had been some serious tensions. Of course, the backdrop before

that it is that Jews have always worked in civil rights together with blacks. But I knew there were serious tensions.

Stanley Alpert: So I was really afraid to tell them who I was, what I was. But there was really no choice, it was pretty obvious. And so I just said it. And much to my pleasant surprise, they actually were pleased by that. They liked Jewish people, they actually said, this of course was their form of a joke. They said that if they had known I was Jewish, they wouldn't have kidnapped me on the street.

Chitra Ragavan: Did you believe that?

Stanley Alpert: No, of course not. It was them joking.

Chitra Ragavan: So by now, time has passed and they're friendly while they're cocking their guns at you, and you know that even that though they are friendly that they could probably kill you, right? I mean, you had no doubt that these were very dangerous men you were dealing with.

Stanley Alpert: Well, they were both very dangerous and also very unstable. They viewed me as an economic opportunity. But if you think of it, once the opportunity is grabbed, well what's the probability? Are you more probable to be caught and be put in prison? Even though I was blindfolded if you release me, are you more likely to get caught or would it better to put a bullet in my head and throw me in a garbage dumpster somewhere?

Stanley Alpert: So this was a constant risk. And you could see the instability of all of these characters from the start. So I was on edge the entire time. And I, of course, was not trained in how to respond to a kidnapping. No one had ever given me a lesson. But I had instincts, and my instincts came from this street. And my instincts also came from being a federal prosecutor. My instinct told me to be calm, to be very respectful, to treat them as I would treat any other human being, which is what I did. To be highly cooperative, but not obsequious, not giving up everything. Not agreeing to the sexual acts they offered. Not agreeing ... Like they asked me, for example, to take off my shoes. And in my mind, psychologically, if I took off my shoes that means I was not walking out of there. But I planned to walk out of there. So I left my shoes on.

Stanley Alpert: There were certain lines that I drew that I wouldn't allow them to cross, but mostly I was very friendly, very cooperative, really quite an amiable guy. In fact, they ended up saying to me, "Stanley, if

we hadn't kidnapped you, we could've been friends." And the funny part is, they're not wrong. Of course, I wouldn't be friends with criminals, but you understand, if they hadn't chosen that lifestyle, I could've been their friends. And the funny part is that, the leader of the gang, Lucky, was a highly successful guy out of his criminal life. His family owned property in Virginia, he was driving a brand new Lexus. He had a fiance, he had a job selling cellphones at Kings Plaza in Brooklyn. This was a highly successful guy, and he just needed a little extra income, so that's what he was doing in the night time.

Chitra Ragavan: So the second time they asked you again, what it is you do for a living, and this time they understood that they were in huge trouble because they were dealing with a federal prosecutor. What happened then?

Stanley Alpert: Yeah, so everyone talks about how street thugs were afraid of Giuliani's cops, and of course there's truth in that. But as soon as they heard that ... as soon as they realized that I was a federal prosecutor, which happened when they asked me again in the middle of the night. They said, "Oops, AUSA, U.S., the FBI is going to be after us." And they viewed that as a genuine risk. They feared that.

Stanley Alpert: Now of course, I know now that don't fool around with those NYPD detectives. They're some of the best in the business. But in the minds of these thugs, the FBI was the bottom line.

Chitra Ragavan: So the plans must have changed at that point as to what to do with you?

Stanley Alpert: They decided that instead of keeping me further, they were going to, well they claimed in front of me that they were going to drive me back to where they had picked me up and release me. And the problem, from my point of view, psychologically, is after they made that announcement, they held me for another, roughly 14 hours. And in the ... for the first 10 of those 14 hours I had no idea why they were still holding me. The leader of the gang left, I was being held by the landlord and the girls. And I had no idea why they weren't keeping their promise to take me back.

Stanley Alpert: So the tension rose and rose, my body was sweating, I felt palpitations in my heart. I hadn't eaten the night before but by about 1:00 PM, of the day that I was there, they asked me whether I would like some food and they were going to the neighborhood

deli. I think they used some sort of a slang term for it being owned by a Muslim owner. And they asked me if I wanted them, if I wanted to ... they wanted me to get me something to eat and actually first they suggested that they would go and buy me a ham and cheese. And you know, you can't change a person. I'm a Jew, we don't eat ham, and a ham and cheese is just unthinkable to me. So I said, "Well, could you please make it a turkey sandwich?" And they did that.

Chitra Ragavan: So as the night passed on the other side, your colleagues were very worried, started looking for you, your friends were frantic. The NYPD was contacted, the FBI was brought in, and there was a massive, massive investigation that was launched for you. What, more than a hundred agents and officers out on the street looking for you?

Stanley Alpert: Well, the way it played was my friends were meeting me for my birthday and some of them were Assistant U.S. Attorneys, and I didn't show up and they went into panic mode. And if you think about it, what you do in your life affects those around you. So I was, of course, under extreme pressure but at least I knew what was happening with myself and I knew that I was okay at the moment, even if I might be killed.

Stanley Alpert: But for my friends point of view, I hadn't shown up at work, I didn't show up for my birthday. Then they went and they got the Super of my building to break into my apartment and they played my answering machine. And they heard bone-chilling messages. One was from the bank, about unusual activity on my card. One was from a woman who had found my credit cards on the street in the morning. Remember, I was kidnapped at night and then this is already the second evening, so that morning in between apparently the thugs had dropped my credit cards on the street and this woman had found them.

Stanley Alpert: So my friends heard these messages, and from their point of view, the greatest likelihood was that I was dead. And one of my friends is a guy who prosecuted ... he went to trial against more Mafiosos than anybody in his group at the time, and he sat down on the couch in my apartment and just started crying. As far as they knew I was dead. They called the police, they called the FBI, and they set up the command center in my apartment. And started to search for me.

Chitra Ragavan: But by some miracle your gang of three or four, I guess, three mostly, Lucky, Sen and Ren, decided that they were going to ... the smartest option would be to try and get the last bit of money they could from the ATM machine and let you go and they did.

Stanley Alpert: Well, they did let me go, and it was certainly a miracle. I think the federal prosecutor part certainly helped. What also helped is, as I mentioned, I dealt with them with total kindness, respect, treated them with the dignity that any non-criminal human being deserves, to be spoken to respectfully. I was so nice to them that towards the end of it they were asking me for legal advice. And I was treating them as I would any client. Asking questions, getting the full picture and then giving them my best advice. So we really kind of developed a link, and I think that helped a lot in giving them an incentive not to kill me.

Stanley Alpert: In fact, Lucky the gang leader, just before he was about to take me back and he was just going to drop off the prostitutes at the White Castle on Utica Avenue, and he stops before he leaves the apartment and he turns around, he says, "Stanley, let me ask you something. If you had the chance to put me away for life, would you do it?" And I said, "Look, you haven't hurt me so far, I don't know who you are, I don't where we are. You say you're going to release me unharmed, so I don't think this has to go any further."

Stanley Alpert: And because of the friendly relationship that we'd established, he believed me. Now obviously, once a federal prosecutor is in the hands of the FBI and the NYPD where they debriefed me that night for hours, obviously I'm going to give over the facts. But because of the friendly relationship, because of the fact that I was a fed, they drove me to Prospect Park in Brooklyn, and let me go. Of course if you read the book, *The Birthday Party*, you'll see the moment right before that when I thought they were going to kill me, and you'll get my views on how it felt to almost die.

Chitra Ragavan: And in fact, when they dropped you off they even gave you 20 bucks so you could find your way home.

Stanley Alpert: Yeah, so this was interesting. And I ... when they gave me the \$20 still in the car and they said, "Oh, you can take a taxi home." Well first of all, I didn't spend that money because I thought it would have fingerprints on it. But when they gave it to me I thought, "Oh, that's a good sign, maybe they aren't planning to kill me." But I still thought they might have been bluffing. And so giving me the \$20 might have been a way for them to have me get my guard down.

And when they put me on the street and told me to walk and I was still blindfolded, I still didn't know if they were going to put a bullet in my back. And I thought they might and then finally, a few seconds later, I heard the Lexus pull off, and I ripped off the blindfold. And my life, which perhaps had been stolen from me 25 hours earlier, was suddenly returned, and was mine to use in a way I saw fit.

Chitra Ragavan: And when the cops picked you up and the FBI got involved, and the subsequent investigation, you gave them so much details about the guys, where you were, the patterns of the tiles, parts of phone numbers you heard, that they actually didn't believe your story at first.

Stanley Alpert: Yeah, there were two big problems from their point of view with my story. The level of detail was absurd, from their point of view and then the actual details themselves made no sense. As one of my favorite people on earth, sergeant Jim Duke of the NYPD who's still working, he does their computer crimes right now. He says, "Come on, what kind of kidnapping was this? I mean, who picks up a guy and offers him sexual favors and gives him McDonalds and has this whole, offers him to smoke marijuana. Come on, the whole thing didn't add up, didn't make any sense."

Stanley Alpert: And so from their point of view it made no sense. And it wasn't until the following morning when, as you mentioned, the huge squad of NYPD and FBI started investigating, that some of the small details turned out to be true. Like when I told them I had met the girl on the subway and walked her home, and we bought cookies on the way home at a supermarket on 6th Avenue, between 10th and 11th, they went there. And it turns out the manager remembered us and we had we had bought the cookies, and in the experience of the FBI and the NYPD, when the little details are true, it tends to corroborate the whole story.

Chitra Ragavan: And so because of the amount of detail you gave them and the tremendous detective work that they did, all these characters were rounded up and eventually ended up getting very long jail sentences. So in a way, the ordeal did come to an end.

Stanley Alpert: You know, so there's two issues. There's physical safety but then there's mental and emotional stability. So in the weeks that I walked around the city of New York after the kidnapping, I was very much afraid. I was afraid in general. But in the ... Actually in the ... Well, in the days before they were picked up, I was very

much afraid that they would come and try to kill me. They knew where I lived. And then in the months before they were convicted, I was afraid they might have one of their thug friends come try to kill me, so they could prevent the testimony.

Stanley Alpert: I actually received a phone call at one point, I can't identify which one of the perpetrators it was, but he said that he couldn't believe it and he was going to kill me, he was going to kill Lucky, he was going to shoot everybody. And so I had fear and concern. So the problem for victims I think, it's not just the physical safety, but once you get out, the question is do you get emotional satisfaction? We all have a deep need in our lives for justice. And police and FBI officers and the courts deliver that form of justice. It may not be perfect, but it works most of the time very well. And it worked for me, because the people that committed this horrific crime against me who tried to steal my life but didn't quite make it, were punished appropriately. And that gave me a feeling of calm, of ease. Now look, I'll always carry additional anxiety for the rest of my life because of this experience, so thanks but no thanks, guys. But at least I got my justice.

Chitra Ragavan: Looking back, what lessons of you think you've learned from this whole experience and what is one to make of something like this when it happens to you in your life?

Stanley Alpert: I fully understand and completely empathize that many people who go through this sort of an experience are marred by it for life. Of course PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder is a major thing and I get it, and I could have been sent there if the circumstances of what had happened to me had been a little bit different. If they'd sliced me on the arm with a knife, if they'd shot the bullet next to my ear, if they hadn't released me unharmed, if the FBI and the NYPD hadn't rounded them up, I might be scarred in a very different way.

Stanley Alpert: But I wasn't scarred as severely as I could have been, so then I was given the opportunity because of it to learn great lessons. And when you almost die, you realize what life is really all about. We are all going to die. You may know not know that, Chitra, others who are listening to this podcast may not fully understand it, right. We can understand it intellectually, but you don't really feel it until it almost happens to you. And because of it I understand that this day could be my last.

Stanley Alpert: Now you could take that as a message of depression and just sink into a hole. Or you can realize that God gives each of us a gift. The gift is everyday we wake up, we breathe, and we have opportunities to go out in the sunshine, to take a walk in a park, to hug somebody we love. These are opportunities, and we have the chance to grab them. And I think what happens with most people is we get caught up in our lives, in our jobs, in our drama at our jobs, in our American Express bills, in yelling at our kids for not doing this, that and the other thing. And we lose sight of the more important points.

Stanley Alpert: So I think what's happened since, is I've learned to live each day as though it were my last. Now I'm not saying I'm irresponsible, that would be silly too, but when I go out there to have a good time, I'm doing it. And then of course, money. Well, I saved all this money in the account, I got to tell you that when I sat there on the corner of 23rd Street and 6th Avenue, and they were trying to take the money out of my account, this is before they took me to the apartment. I thought to myself, "Goddammit, take my money. I don't care, it's meaningless. Just give me my life back." So that's a way to form priorities.

Stanley Alpert: Now of course, one needs to have a certain amount of money in order to put a roof over your head, food on the table, and raise your family. But you got to keep your priorities straight, and if anybody thinks amassing money in large amounts is the key to happiness, they're just mistaken. They're simply mistaken. And obviously, everything you see around you proves that. So I think, live each day to the fullest, realize that what's really important in life is love, and the people around you. These are tremendous lessons. I do owe my kidnappers a debt of gratitude, teaching me those lessons.

Chitra Ragavan: Did anything good come out of it?

Stanley Alpert: Well, my future wife's boss read the book, he came to meet me. He and I became friends and he introduced me to her. So thank you to Lucky, Ren, Sen, Ramos and the poor abused prostitute girls for helping me meet my wife. And yeah, as I say, what good has come out of it is I've learned to live my life more fully. And then of course, what things come out of adversity, what life lessons can you learn? So I've got a whole set of "Stan's Life, Adversity, and Management Principles", if you're interested in hearing them.

Chitra Ragavan: Definitely. Just run through them for us.

Stanley Alpert: Well, the first thing is when you're under pressure, stay calm. I know that's hard, but for some reason, I can't explain it, my reaction to being at gunpoint was to go into an almost unnatural calm. I realize when you read the book it's a little bit unsatisfying. Why wasn't I more upset, why wasn't I crying, why wasn't I shaking uncontrollably. Stay calm under pressure, it's the only way you're going to survive. And you can see that, for example, in a movie like 25 Hours, where the guy is stuck in rock in Colorado, you can see that. You have to stay calm and figure it out.

Stanley Alpert: The next thing is, you should always be nice to those around you, even your adversaries. In fact, you have to be a little bit modest. After this happened, one of the federal judges in the district called me up, and he asked me if I'd come talk to the other federal judges about what they should do in case they were ever kidnapped. And I was thinking to myself, "Well the first thing is be modest. You have to be nice and be modest and forget about your ego because it isn't going to help you in that situation." And that's a tough lesson to talk to people who are at the pinnacle of their careers, such as federal prosecutors or top level executives.

Stanley Alpert: So the third thing, I think, is you need to always think about your opponent and understand his or her position. Accommodate the opposition point of view, before you state your own. So I always did that. I always thought about, "Well, what does Lucky really want? What does Sen really need here?" When Sen asked me for legal advice, I'm going to give it to him. So understand your opponent, accommodate their position that these are critical things. Then as I mentioned earlier, even though you're being accommodating, you have to stay firm where it's necessary. There are certain lines I wouldn't let them cross. I wasn't going to take the sexual favors, I wasn't taking my shoes off, I refused the food at first because I didn't want to be drugged. It was certain firm lines that taught them to respect me, and I think that's true in life. I think that's true in adversity, and I think it's true in corporate management.

Stanley Alpert: Next thing for me is always keep your eyes on the goal. My goal was not to prove anything, my goal was not to be a bigger man than them, my goal was to get out of there alive. And I kept firmly focused on that. And the corollary to that, I would say, is that getting the job done whether it's in corporate America or being kidnapped, is much more important than being right. My job was not to instruct these kidnapers, why they were going to get caught and put in jail and give them some kind of school marm

lecture. That was not my job at the time. My job was not to be right, but to be connected to them and get the job done, which was getting me out of there alive.

Stanley Alpert: And of course, in life, you've always got to be realistic, but you've got to aim for the best possible result. And my best possible result, I couldn't care less about the money, they can have every penny of it. I wanted to get out of there alive. I refused to give up. Stayed focused on that. You know, I'm a guy who likes to sleep, so I like getting my eight hours sleep a night, but this was one night that I wasn't going to sleep. I needed to stay alive, I needed to stay awake. Eventually, the following afternoon I did sleep for an hour when things had calmed down, but keep your eye on that and where you're got to push extra beyond you're own abilities, do it.

Stanley Alpert: And I think the last thing I would say is that life as well as work, relationships, they're all a marathon. They're not a sprint. You've got to go for the long goal, not the short goal. You've got to realize that even though sometimes you are down and out, and man was I down when these guys had my life in their hands and I could've been killed. But you got to keep your eye on the long focus. So run at your aerobic level, not at your anaerobic level. Keep running, don't stop.

Stanley Alpert: Those are my lessons that I can thank these kidnapers for having given me. And at the same time I'm not suggesting that they should be done any favors. Of course, the fact that they were taken off the street for a very long time is critical because other people needed to be spared the ordeal that I went through. But I do appreciate that even this tough experience taught me some important lessons.

Chitra Ragavan: One last question, that is; they're now back out of prison. Are you ever afraid that they will remember you and try to come at you?

Stanley Alpert: Oh, I'm quite sure they remember me. And they should be quite sure that I remember them. And I've got a lot of friends in the FBI and the NYPD, and I have no fear whatsoever. I will say that the general understanding in the law enforcement community is that it's almost unheard of for those who are prosecuted to come after judges, to come after prosecutors, to come after victims. There are rare, rare, rare exceptions, but it's almost unheard of. But putting that aside, I've got FBI agents, NYPD detectives, probation officers, they're all looking out for me.

Chitra Ragavan: Stanley, it's been so great having you on the show and listening to your most inspiring story, thank you so much.

Stanley Alpert: I appreciate that you had me on, Chitra.

Chitra Ragavan: Stanley Alpert is an environmental lawyer and former Justice Department prosecutor. Alpert served for 13 years as a federal prosecutor for the U.S. Department of Justice in the Eastern District of New York. His book is called *The Birthday Party: A Memoir of Survival*.

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