

Ari: I don't exactly know how I ended up there, but I loved the books. I was raised where books were everything and you honored books. Then, I loved obscure things, and so I totally remembered being in the stacks going through stuff and finding this book that was called Foreign Policy of Outer Mongolia, 1905 to 1917, and going, "Wow. This looks really cool," and then thinking to myself, "You are really weird."

Julie: What was your experience, if you remember, when you first encountered The Reading Room?

Ari: Just the whole thing, which you still have, no pens and those little podiums that hold the books, and then those cushiony things to keep the book open so you can take notes. I love all that stuff. There's still something to this day, I mean, even when I've been back up there in the last five, six, seven years. When I read the newspaper from 1911 about Emma Goldman's visit, there's something to me that holding that paper in my hand, just blows my mind in a really great way.

Julie: It sort of makes it all real.

Ari: Yeah. Totally real, and it's right next to the article about some woman's dog getting lost or whatever. I like that, because as much as I'm interested in a lot of the people, the reality is they're just people, and they had problems and fights with their significant others, and good meals and bad meals, and bad days and good days, just like you and I, and everybody else.

Julie: I have to ask you this question, what does anarchism mean to you?

Ari: Yeah, that's a good question. Well, what it means to me, and probably to you, is not what it means to almost everybody else in the world. The standard image, as you know, is chaos, bomb throwing, rock throwing, opposition to everything, all rules are bad, but none of that is actually embedded in what the core of what most of those people wrote. It's really about how people treat each other, and how we treat ourselves, and how we live in the world. It's completely not about who's in charge. When you get out of it, you start thinking that anybody's better, or anything's better, and you start to realize what I really believe, which is every tiny element, and every person, and every action, have really big meaning. When you really believe that, then you treat them much differently.

Julie: Can you talk a little bit about how your business model was formed based on those principles?

Ari: Yes. The general belief about anarchism being about chaos is totally not true. It's all for organization. It's just organization that people choose to participate in instead of being forced to participate in, and organizations that they can participate in the design of the rules. Nothing against rules, it's just rules imposed from the outside are totally different than rules that you and I collaboratively create for our own work. I start reading all this and I'm like, "This is crazy." What they were writing about, A, is like a ton of how we run the organization, but I had not really put the two together. What really blew my mind is how much of what they were writing about in 1900 or whatever was very parallel to

what's now called progressive business. Stuff like self-organizing work teams, and how employees who don't believe in the work they're doing are disengaged, and when they're disengaged, they do bad work. It talks about how the organization's purpose is to help the people develop, and you can't make a great organization without great people. I'm like, "This is what we do."

Julie: People who eat in your restaurants often see you on the floor pouring water, and many people don't even know who you are.

Ari: I like that.

Julie: Could you talk a little bit about that?

Ari: Well, it just really started out a practical need. I walked in on a Friday night or something and it was really busy. I turned the corner and I was like, "Oh my god. Table 401, they need water," so I grabbed a water pitcher and started pouring them water. Then, it was, "Oh, table 403 needs water too," so I kept going. Then, I started clearing tables. Then, I'm getting more bread for people. Then, you help them clean up and all of that. There's actually proactive application to the work, so it's not just this parasite living off the work of everybody else.

Then, for the staff, I think, it shows support for what they're doing. Then, something's wrong, I can deal with the problem. Then, just personally, it's very grounding. I like ending my day doing that, because whatever stresses came up or big issues, it's go back to the basics. There's actually a great Emma Goldman quote where she said, "When times are tough, scrub floors." It just brings me back to the basics, which is be nice to the customers, help the staff, serve the food, clean up. It's really about how I treat everybody and how they treat me. That's really what makes it go.