



# ALAN ALDA Is Obsessed With the Power of Science\*

Some 40 years after *M\*A\*S\*H* ended, the beloved actor and advocate remains passionate about laughter, respect—and the facts **BY DAVID HOCHMAN**

**A**LAN ALDA isn't letting social distancing keep him from the people he loves. Soon after Alda, 84, and Arlene, 87, his wife of 63 years, quarantined themselves at their home on Long Island, they began holding video chats with friends and family via Zoom, the popular videoconferencing app.

"The other night we had dinner, virtually, with three couples," says Alda, who—using Zoom's virtual-background feature—put up a gorgeous travel video of Italy, during cocktails. "I'm a little bit ahead of most of my friends digitally. For years I've been fixing their computers, and I call my service Celebrity Tech Support. The slogan is 'Why let a nobody touch your stuff?'"

Alda lands the joke with that winning ear-to-ear smile. I can tell because we're Zooming, too—his presence as reassuring on my laptop screen as it was all those years on the beloved TV war comedy *M\*A\*S\*H*. His iconic surgeon character, Benjamin Franklin "Hawkeye" Pierce, brought intelligence, wit and sanity to a world of chaos, much as Alda himself is doing now.

In the nearly four decades since *M\*A\*S\*H* signed off—with what remains the most-watched episode in television history—the six-time Emmy recipient has focused on something way broader than show business. He wants us all to relate and communicate

**\*And Wants You to Be, Too**



The actor has hosted more than 70 *Clear + Vivid With Alan Alda* podcasts (free at AlanAlda.com).



# “Pockets of people still think science is

better. His podcast, *Clear + Vivid With Alan Alda*, which launched in 2018 and features such megawatt guests as Tom Hanks and Paul McCartney, hinges on communication. “It’s just two people really listening to each other for 45 minutes,” Alda says.

If one subject stands out in these heart-to-hearts, it’s science. For 11 years, Alda—who describes himself as “a walking question mark”—was the engaging host of *Scientific American Frontiers*, a PBS show in which he got brainy engineers, medical researchers and Nobel laureates to talk more like the rest of us. He turned the gig into a full-time mission. In 2009, he established the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science at Stony Brook University on Long Island, where he loosens up scientists using improvisational techniques he learned during 50 years of acting. Some 15,000 participants have come through Alda Communication Training, so they can better share their critical work with clarity and passion.

“People are dying because we can’t communicate in ways that allow us to understand one another,” Alda explained in his 2017 book, *If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face?* “That sounds like an exaggeration, but I don’t think it is. When patients can’t relate to their doctors and don’t follow their orders, when engineers can’t convince a town that the dam could break, when a parent can’t win the trust of a child to warn her off a lethal drug—they can all be headed for a serious ending.”

Communicating science matters more

than ever to Alda these days. Not only is he in the age group most at risk for COVID-19; he’s also battling Parkinson’s disease, another illness with no cure. Alda doesn’t let that get him down. If anything, he finds inspiration in mysteries yet to be unraveled.

“We don’t value our ignorance enough,” he notes in a candid, wide-ranging and frequently hilarious conversation. “Ignorance is really good to have if it’s combined with curiosity, and scientists are professional curiosity machines. We should all imitate that as much as possible. Now it’s clear that our lives depend on it.”

## ALDA ON ALDA

### MOVIES

•**The Aviator** → (2004) “This one was fun—Scorsese was so supportive.”



← •**The Seduction of Joe Tynan** (1979), written by Alda.

“Around that time, I was approached to actually run for office!”

•**The Four Seasons** (1981), directed by Alda. “It’s closest to my heart; two of my daughters are in it.”



### TELEVISION

•**M\*A\*S\*H final episode** (1983), directed by Alda. “Even when the show got silly, we wanted to respect the reality of these people’s lives.”

## What has life been like for you since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic?

I’m having a good time, under the circumstances. The other day, we were walking 6 feet apart with friends in a secluded area and I said, “What’s the best thing that’s happened since this began?” One friend looked at me with a kind of stupefied expression, like, *What do you mean “best”? What’s good?* But I’ve found a lot of positive things. I’m very happy about some of the changes we’ve had to go through. For one thing, my wife, Arlene [the author of 19 books], is looking for ways to be creative during this time. So, she’s gone back to painting and drawing, and she plays the piano every day, and she’s experimenting with cooking. She looks into a sometimes empty refrigerator and comes up with a delicious meal. I haven’t eaten this well since the last epidemic.



## ust another opinion.”

**You’ve been advocating for years for better communication around science. Are we finally getting the message as a society?**

One of the most basic things I’ve tried to do is give people a greater understanding of how science works—the importance of evidence, the importance of many trials, of rigorous studies, and the idea that we learn only a little bit at a time. No single study is the end-all answer for everything. Making people aware of that process helps increase appreciation and respect for science, and that helps us make informed decisions for our families and ourselves.

Unfortunately, I probably need another 25 years to help the culture achieve trust in science overall. Because there are pockets of people who still think science is just another opinion. That mindset puts us all in danger, because it can infect people across the country. So, I’m very concerned about the casual attitude many people have toward science.

There are bright spots. I think [infectious diseases expert] Anthony Fauci is doing a wonderful job. He’s straddling two worlds, science and belief. It’s like that silent movie shot, where someone’s balanced on top of two moving trucks that are getting farther and farther apart. His legs are spreading as far as they can, but Fauci—who was on my podcast in March—comes closest to being the national figure most trusted by the rest of the country.

**With information changing so quickly, it’s hard to know what to believe.**

Well, you have to check the source. There’s a lot of fake information out there: Gargle with this; hold your breath for 10 seconds. If the only source is “my cousin who knows somebody who knows somebody in the health care field,” that’s not a reliable source and can do more

harm than good. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the World Health Organization—those are the best sources, and you’ve got to go straight to their websites to see what they have to say. I also cross-check information at [fact-checking website] Snopes.com as often as I can. But beyond that, in a fundamental way, there’s a problem we have now that we haven’t had before, which is that we’re operating within our own circles of kinship and friendship and information.

**Any advice on getting out of our own little bubbles?**

The scientists I’ve interviewed tell me it’s a good idea to spread the information you know to be correct with those outside your circle. If there’s anybody you know whom you don’t ordinarily communicate with and who has his or her own circle, try to include that person, so we can extend our reach with real information, and also with encouragement. Mental health is as important as physical health. They’re intertwined. I’m talking like I’m an expert, but I’ve only been studying this for 25 years.

**You survived polio as a kid. What do you remember about that epidemic?**

I got it when I was 7. I had a stuffy nose at the Warner’s movie theater—honking the whole evening. I couldn’t clear my nose. When I got home, I threw up, and my legs were unsteady.

The next day, I had a stiff neck. I couldn’t sit up in bed. My parents called the doctor. Went to the hospital, had a spinal tap. I was in the hospital for two weeks, but then I had about six months of a therapy devised by Elizabeth Kenny, the famous nurse from Australia. I had nearly scalding blankets wrapped around my limbs every hour. It was hard on me. It was harder, I think, on my parents, who couldn’t afford a nurse and had to torture me themselves. It’s always better to pay somebody to torture your kid.

**MEMBERS-ONLY ACCESS!**

Want to know why humans are unique? Find out by watching three episodes of the 2010 Alda-narrated documentary *The Human Spark*, at [AARP.ORG/MOA](http://AARP.ORG/MOA).

**It doesn’t appear that Parkinson’s disease has slowed you down much, if at all.**

**How did you first discover you had it?**

In 2015, I read an article in the *New York Times* by Jane Brody, in which a couple of doctors said some of their Parkinson’s patients had one particular early symptom, and it’s an unusual one: People act out their dreams while they’re asleep. I realized I had done just that. I had dreamed somebody was attacking me, and in the dream I threw a sack of potatoes at him. In reality, I threw a pillow at my wife. So, believing there was a good chance I had Parkinson’s, I went to a neurologist and asked for a brain scan. He examined me and (CONTINUED ON PAGE 74)

**Alda’s 63-year marriage to Arlene is still going strong.**

