

## **Goldman Sachs Talks**

### **André Aciman, The Meaning and Message of ‘Call Me By Your Name’**

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**Pablo Salame:** Welcome to Talks at GS. I’m Pablo Salame, a Vice Chairman of the firm and Global Co-Head of the Securities Division. I am honored to be joined by author André Aciman. His novel, *Call Me By Your Name*, which was his first, not his first book, his first novel, won the Lambda Literary Award for gay fiction. And, of course, was turned into an Academy Award winning film. He’s currently a distinguished professor of comparative literature at The Graduate Center of The City University of New York. André, thanks so much for being here.

**André Aciman:** Thank you for having me.

**Pablo Salame:** So, you know, your work has touched more people now than you may have imagined when you wrote it. So, your family was expelled from Egypt in 1965. And via Italy, settled in New York in 1968.

**André Aciman:** Correct.

**Pablo Salame:** So, how did your experience influence what you want to communicate in your works?

**André Aciman:** That's a good question. I don't know that I want to communicate anything in my work. I mean, I'm not aware of wanting to. It's just how I write and how I perceive things. And I tend to perceive things, the world, as being not exactly a friendly place, but one that could be hostile in a kind way.

And therefore, I--

**Pablo Salame:** Well, New York is perfect for that.

**André Aciman:** Oh, totally. Totally. People are nice in New York. People stand up in the subway for me. I say, "What? Do I look that old?" But in essence, everything about my life has been chaotic and jumbled and undefined. And because I have many nationalities, my father converted, became a protestant, though he never told me what kind of protestant he was because he didn't believe in it anyway. He was doing it for political reasons. Which means that I'm a protestant. And I don't know whether I'm

Lutheran, Calvinist, Presbyterian, whatever. But I'm Jewish. And that just doesn't go away. I tried to scrub it, but it won't go away. I don't practice religion. I've been to more churches than I've been to synagogues- god more times.

And I have many mother tongues. Italian and French are my mother tongues. But I also write in English. Not in French or Italian. I speak Arabic, though very badly at this point.

And I don't know where I belong. I mean, I'm an American citizen. I was an Italian citizen until my citizenship just disappeared. They took it away from me because I became an American.

But everything about me is a mess and it's all conflicted and multitiered. And so, I wanted to, when I wrote *Call Me By Your Name*, I wanted to express that in one way. And I don't know how many of you know this particular work by Joseph Haydn. It's "The Last Seven Words of Christ." And it's basically a quartet. And what Elio- the character- is doing, he's trying to transcribe it for piano. So, he's trying to take all these four instruments and make them into one.

And this is his project. And I assume that's the project that we all have in our lives. We take all these disparate parts of our identity and try to conflate it into one thing. Only to find that at least there are four of them that will never unite. And as I like to say, never even speak to each other. And that's what I call the San Clemente Syndrome. Which is basically where many, many levels of identities, none of which is ever going to be resolved to even be friendly with the others. They don't get along.

And I like that. I like that because it allows me to never take a position and to always be ambivalent, since I'm ambivalent about everything. I don't know if I like people or not. My first day in a classroom, I hate every single student. I do. Because they scare me. And eventually, at the end of the semester, I'm in love with each and every one of them. And I want to make their lives better. I want to help them. I want to do anything I can. I'll do anything to help them.

**Pablo Salame:** So, I gather some of the people inside you like some of the people outside some of the time.

**André Aciman:** Yes. Exactly. That's a good way to put it, yes.

**Pablo Salame:** The book was published in 2007.

**André Aciman:** Yes.

**Pablo Salame:** You know, in reading it, by the way, to me, its universal human experience that it communicated and the three words I took were passion, identity, and anticipation. But, you know, I wanted to ask why two men?

**André Aciman:** It was more exciting to do it with two men. At the time that I started *Call Me By Your Name* I was under contract. And for those of you who are going to write books, never write a book under contract because it kills it. You already made the money. You don't need anything. You don't have to do it.

I was on contract for a novel about a man meeting a woman at a party, which was very difficult to do because I wanted them not to have sex right away. I wanted them to sort of enjoy the romance. And I didn't believe in that, to be honest. It's called *Eight White Nights*. And basically, in

today's world, the sex comes right away. So, I just didn't want it. And I was sort of tussling with that idea.

And eventually, I wanted to go to Italy. We weren't going to Italy that summer. So, I decided I was going to write about a house in Italy. That's what I wanted. A house in Italy. Just to get away. With a swimming pool and a nice life.

And eventually, I had myself living in that house as the son of the owner of the house. That was the ultimate dream. And it was also a way of going back to my childhood in Egypt. We had a house on the beach. And I was going to go back to that house on the beach. But it wasn't in Egypt, which I never liked, but it was more in Italy, which I do love. And that was it.

And then I said, well, you have to have some romantic incident happen. And it was natural for me to begin with a boy and a girl. And then I said let's make it a boy. And once I did that, something else happened. Suddenly, I was totally mesmerized by the possibilities, by the newness of the whole thing. And I had no idea how to develop a character who was going to clearly desire another man. He has no mystery about it. He knows what he wants. He's

young enough. But he knows it. And I was going to go with that.

And eventually, I was going to stop myself from doing anything sexy. But I felt that I was going to have Oliver sort of disappear. He was going to go back to the States. And I threw hints along the way that he was receiving mail. He was getting mail. Therefore, there was something going on in the States that was drawing him back.

**Pablo Salame:** Those calls.

**André Aciman:** Yes. And there were those phone calls also.

And there was also the possibility that he was going to go out fishing with Anchise and then drown. And that would have killed him off, which would have been a good thing because then I wouldn't have had to deal with the rest.

But then I decided that's stupid. And I just didn't even go there. I said they're going to have to talk. And that was the most difficult scene to write, the conversation between them when they finally say something.

And then I said, okay, they're going to kiss. A kiss is okay. And then I said, fine. They're going to kiss and nothing more. And Oliver says, "This is all wrong. We're not going to talk about this again." And then I said, no, they have to sleep together. At least once. And then at that point I said let's do it, let's have fun. And then there's the peach scene. And then-- and you know the rest.

So, it was just consuming. I fell in love with Oliver. I fell in love with Elio. I fell in love with their love. And you know, it goes on with the family, with the house, with Italy, with the summer, and with fruits, of course. But it was just a wonderful adventure.

And so, why did I make it a boy? I think in the back of my mind, when I was ten years old and I was a child, I knew absolutely nothing. Unlike my children who know everything by the time they're, like, ten. They even practiced it, I'm sure. They won't tell me. But they're older now.

There was another boy at the beach where I lived who was probably seven years older than I was. And I wanted him to



be my friend. And I obsessed about him. I wanted him to be a good friend of mine and to talk to me and to be just chummy-chummy with me. And that is a thing that resurrected. Suddenly, when I was writing *Oliver*, I wanted to go back to that friendship and say what if were I really wanted at that age was something more passionate than what I ended up thinking I wanted, a friendship? And so, I went with that.

And I think that writing is a way of liberating certain things. But at the other hand, it could also be a way of inhibiting so many other things. It's just how it happens on that day when you're writing.

**Pablo Salame:** So, you wrote. It's a very internal, human experience. And then the book becomes part of a movement that has been extraordinarily impactful, all the way down to our laws in this country. How has the experience of your creation becoming part of that movement impacted you?

**André Aciman:** Impacted me?

**Pablo Salame:** Yeah.

**André Aciman:** I don't think I have been impacted by it. However, I would dream, I mean my longest wish, and it wasn't when I was writing the book, but now I think that every father who has a gay son or a gay daughter or every mother for that matter, would want to be inspired by the speech that the father gives because it is-- I have to tell you, I used to get a lot of mail from people in their sixties, seventies, even older who would say, "I wish my father had given me that speech. It would have changed my life."

So, if there is a mission in my book, I would like that to be the mission. I wanted it to be a scene between a father who is essentially forcing the son to come to the realization that the parents are there for them and that the father is certainly going to help in whichever way he can, if only by letting him say what is in his heart. And the father says, you know, "Don't kill it," because this is the first thing that a parent will say, "Don't worry, it's going to go away. It'll die." You know? And that's what as adults we tell ourselves. It's going to die. It has to. It has to. The flame cannot last forever. Don't expect it to.

But what he's really saying is it may not last forever, but

don't snuff the flame too soon. Don't kill it. Which we know how to do when we, basically, somebody sort of drops us, we try to rescue ourselves. And the first thing you do is either you decide that you're going to find someone else right away, which is not a good idea. But who am I to tell you? Or second of all, the other thing is you learn to hate the person. "She was no good. I knew it all along." I mean, that sort of thing. You can do so many things with your mind in order to avoid having to confront the fact that you're in pain.

And the father says don't do any of those things. But he says, "And let me say something more because it's going to clear the air." He says, "I envy you. I envy what you had." Not I envy just the fact that you had this absolute powerful love, but I envy the fact that you had this love for another man. And then he says something that's actually more mind-boggling in the movie than it is in the book because for some reason it acquires a power of its own in the book-- in the movie. Why am I taking credit for this? It's the same words but they're spoken differently. And he says, you know, "I could have had this. I could have had it, but something always came about, came upon me. Or something stood in the way, and it just never happened."

And this is something I learned from an event like this one where somebody asked me a question, because the son says, “Does mom know?” And when I wrote the scene it was, “Does mom know about me and Oliver?” But the person asked the question, “Does mom know about you, that you could have had that, and it never happened?” And that had never even crossed my mind. And I think that interpretation is far more sort of resonant than the other one, “Does mom know about me and Oliver?”

**Pablo Salame:** So, you mentioned before that the hardest speech, the hardest dialogue to write was when Elio and Oliver are in the piazza. And I read that when you arrived on set for the first time, it was precisely when that scene was being filmed. Can you just share with-- you know, you’ve written this book. It’s ten years later, eight years later, whatever it is. You show up on now somebody else’s interpretation of your work. Can you just describe your thoughts and feelings at the time, and since, about that?

**André Aciman:** Well, I arrive on the set, and they said, “Shh, be quiet.” That’s the first thing because they were

actually having a scene. There's a bus. An old, sort of rickety bus comes into the scene. And there's an old lady with old bags sort of walking. And I mean, the whole scene is set up.

I had a much more crowded scene in my book. But it doesn't matter. And there are the two boys. They arrive biking. And they start smoking cigarettes. And they walk around this monument. And Elio tells him, you know, "This is the Battle of the Piave" or whatever. This is in the movie. "The Battle of the Piave." Because in the book they discuss the death of Shelley, which happened on the shoreline. Anyway, so we're not on the shores anymore. We're in the middle of Lombardy for those of you who know Italian geography. So, there is no shore.

So, they're walking around, and they discuss the Battle of the Piave, how many people died. And Oliver says to him, "Is there anything you don't know?" Like, you know-it-all, you've read all the books and so on. And Elio answers in this kind of very cryptic manner, he says, "There are many things I know nothing about, particularly the important ones." And sort of. Says, you know, "What things," asks Oliver, who is sort of this kind of brusque human being.

And he says, “Things. Things that I--.” I forget what the exact words are. But it was a very difficult moment because at some point--

**Pablo Salame:** “The things that matter.”

**André Aciman:** “Things that matter.” Thank you. Thank you. I haven’t read the book in ten years. Okay? But it was “things that matter.” And “What things that matter?”

“Things that--” basically something like, “and I should tell you above everybody, things that should matter to you above everyone else.” “Why me?” Or something like that.

And there is absolutely nothing being said in that scene, which was very difficult to write. Because I didn’t want him to say something like, “I’m very attracted to you. I want you. I love you.” The word love never even appears once in the book. Because I didn’t want to go into those hard places. I wanted everything to be sort of softened and ambivalent and ambiguous.

And at some point what happens is that it seems to Elio that Oliver is understanding everything he’s saying. And you, the reader, totally understand what’s going on, even

though nothing is being said. And I wanted that to be-- I didn't want that moment to be lost. I wanted it to resonate and to keep expanding into ambiguity, further ambiguity, which becomes sort of unbearable because you want them to say something to each other. At which point, Oliver will say, "We shouldn't speak about those things." And I think that Elio replies, "So, we're not on talking terms anymore but are pretending to talk?" Or something along those lines.

And that's the point where essentially a chill is established between the two. They're now going to behave. But the reader has a--

So, I'm arriving on the set. And I see them filming this scene. And each time it's a different take. And they even say different things in each scene. Because I think the director, though the lines are more or less written down, there is leeway for everybody to do whatever they want to say if it is in keeping.

And they did about three to four takes. Bike arriving. Bus coming into the square. Old lady with little sack walking around. And then the two guys having the conversation.

And it's different every single time.

And I said, my God, I wrote this, it was written in five to six pages long and it takes, like, a minute for them to have this conversation. And yet, it's equally eloquent and powerful in that one minute or two minutes than it is, I think, in my book. And I loved watching it happen. And I said, my God, this was in my head as I was trapped on 109<sup>th</sup> Street on the West Side one summer in 2005. And here it is being acted with all these people in production doing something that was just going to stay in my head. I was never going to show the manuscript to anybody.

Anyway, it's a wonderful moment the way you see the evolution of something that is simply a little gene at the time. And suddenly it becomes this huge production that ends up in Hollywood. And for me, it was like I never expected any of this. This was not going to happen.

**Pablo Salame:** So, I read in one of your interviews, you said, I'm going to paraphrase about the book, it was about somebody's reaction to the book, "Why would anybody, anyone cry?"



**André Aciman:** Yeah.

**Pablo Salame:** “In either watching the movie or reading the book?” And I must say, it shocked me in reading that, that that was your-- and we were speaking beforehand, and I said, “Oh, I’m going to take a shot at explaining to you why anybody would cry.” And I failed miserably. So, I’m not going to attempt again. But you know, to everyone here, why is it surprising to you that people would cry at essentially having-- you know, I think everybody can connect with it. And I think that’s what it is. And some people either feel like, you know, somebody understands me. Or some of us look back and say, “I remember that person.” You know? I remember. I remember that kid. One of those people inside me is one of those kids. And maybe, you know, we cry in memory of that.

**André Aciman:** Yeah. We do. What I do now, whenever I speak to an audience, I tell people to please send me a letter, or an email, explaining to me why the film moved them. And they send me answers. And usually, the answer is I was very moved. I still haven’t figured out why.

So, I mean, when I wrote this scene, there’s a moment in

the book when Elio and Oliver kiss at night and Oliver pushes Elio against the wall, a wall in Rome. And they kiss almost sort of violently. And there are two individuals walking by and say, “Look at these two guys. In Mussolini’s time, that would never have happened.” And Elio doesn’t even open his eyes. He doesn’t care. And Oliver doesn’t care.

And that moment was, for me, very moving because it reminded me of a moment in my life when I was the one kissing someone else that way. And against a wall. And I went to visit that wall. It was not in Rome. It was in Cambridge, Massachusetts. And every time I pass by that wall I stand there and I almost freeze. And I don’t know why I freeze. I still don’t know what it was.

Of course, the woman in question that I kissed has sort of gone to different paths and we don’t speak to each other. But I’m still frozen in that moment now about almost 40 years ago. So, it never goes away. And that’s something that I wanted to reproduce at the end of the book, that passion and that extreme sorrow that I feel every time against that wall. I don’t get teary or anything like that. But I feel as if my life at that point could have taken a different

turn. And it didn't. And I'm sorry that it didn't. But at the same time, I'm happy it didn't either because there were a lot of issues there. No, she has a husband now and it's his problem now.

**Pablo Salame:** But that path died.

**André Aciman:** That path, well, you know, nothing dies in life. I think our loves, even the people we have stopped loving and think we've stopped loving, we continue to-- if we met them again in the right circumstances with no one watching, we would be in love with them in a second all over again. I don't think anything dies. We forget nothing. We also forgive nothing. But in a sense, I feel that whatever it is that we had 40 years ago, that wall still remembers for me. And whenever I go to that, to Cambridge, Mass, I always go. I'll take a picture of that wall. It has not changed. It's still there.

But I was very moved at that point. I wasn't crying or anything like that. And I wanted to capture that sense of lingering nostalgia for what didn't happen, for what might have happened, for what might still happen, though I'm afraid it might, and I hope it doesn't, yet wish it does.

Okay?

I mean, I'm writing a whole book on that one sentence, by the way. That's why it comes naturally to me. But in essence, this is what the book is about.

And when I say I don't understand why people are moved, it's because I don't believe that they are going through exactly what I went through when I was writing the scene. But there are people who cry and who wake up crying and who cry all the next day. And that part I don't understand. I mean, I'm telling you there are people who cry for days. And I know this because they write to me, and they tell me. "I've been crying for a week now. There's something wrong with me." I say, "Yeah, see a shrink." Okay?

**Pablo Salame:** You know, the other thing I talked about in the book that's very present to me is the sense of anticipation. And then again, I read a couple of things you said about your life. One, that you had hated Egypt. But at the same time, you know, something that really touched me, which is you said, you know, you miss the Egypt where we dreamed of Europe. And anyways, there's a lot packed in that sentence.

**André Aciman:** Yes. It comes in a moment when one of my aunts who lived, had lived in France during the war, and who lived in a beautiful apartment in Paris overlooking the Seine. And here we are in Alexandria, which where basically we've been despoiled of all our property. They've taken all our money. We're now basically poor. And we're being expelled. And she's sitting at her window at night overlooking the Mediterranean and she says, "You know what, sometimes I look at the Mediterranean and I'm imagining being in Paris looking at the Seine instead. And that gives me a great deal of pleasure."

And I said to myself that's exactly what I want. I want to be with the Seine. I'm no longer interested in the Mediterranean. But then as soon as I got to France and I faced the Seine in her apartment, which was a really small apartment, nothing fancy about it at all. And it barely got a slice of the Seine. And there was no Seine to look at. So, she had basically invented the whole thing. And suddenly, suddenly I said to myself, I miss-- it was on New Year's Day. On New Year's Eve. And we always had a big party on New Year's Eve. And this time in Paris with my parents and my aunt, the New Year's party was kind of, sort of a

scrawny affair. There was nothing to it.

And I said, “I miss Egypt.” Suddenly it came to me. “I miss Egypt.” And then I said, “No, no, no, you don’t miss Egypt. What you miss is that moment looking at the window saying I’m sick and tired of Egypt, I want to be in France. That is the part of me that I miss.”

In other words, I miss a part of me that never really existed. I miss a fantasy of Europe in Egypt, which had nothing to do with Egypt but happened to have occurred in Egypt.

And I think that a lot of my life is that way. In other words, that sentence was not written incidentally. It’s basically because I enjoy or at least I’m interested in those moments that really don’t occur in the present tense, in the here and now. They occur in some kind of fabricated image we have of the life that is still beckoning us and waiting for us if we only could find the right ship, the right key, the right whatever to access it. And that, for me, gives me a lot of pleasure as a writer. As a human being it’s damnable. But that’s a different thing.

**Pablo Salame:** Thank you.

**André Aciman:** Thank you.

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