

# Epiphany Speech

Ron'e Neil

Cold, reclusive and a loner—most people don't believe me when I give them that description of me just a few years ago, when I tell them that I was a wreck who spent three years of my life in a downward spiral of corruption, self-hatred, and addiction.

Shana and I were unlikely friends. I was a bookish tomboy, who didn't mind weekend homework. I was shy, extremely awkward and, due to my large frame, very noticeable. She was my "Bizarro"—Superman's Other. She was pretty, outgoing, charming and had nice hair, too. She was adored and envied at the same time and, petite as she was, she had the presence and ego to match my size.

My change was obvious. Shana and my new friends were all gangsters. They basically did anything they wanted to do. I was just starting to get out of the house. I was beginning my freshman year of high school. I only had one friend in that school and, judging by my dorkiness, I wouldn't have any more. Her goal was to fix me. She would give me tips on being more laid back and she would always direct me to smile less. She also tried to teach me to flirt with boys, but I was still one of the guys and I was fat, so that didn't work out too well.

In school I was involved with everything the teachers asked me to be in. Every day I led my school's activities. I was the one in charge of raising money, decorating, and supporting everything creative. At home, though, my role was the opposite. I was a sidekick slash bodyguard. Shana liked to fight though, so I didn't have to do that much. She caused me to feel mixed emotions. I wasn't sure if I was intimidated or just intrigued by her brash, rude attitude. I didn't understand her appeal, but then again, I too was caught up in her power. I wanted to fight with her, be around her and, most importantly, be accepted by her.

That was the first stage of change. Next came the hanging out and running the streets. We were two fourteen-year-old girls on a first name basis with drug dealers, who were also the gang bangers and part-time pedophiles. My weekends went from homework to drinking contests. They would show me how to talk with razors in my mouth and then teach me how to roll joints. They would compliment us on how mature we were. Yes, she would always get too drunk and I would have to hold her hair as she barfed. That was very grown up and sexy. They would give us unlimited amounts of booze and all the marijuana we wanted. Fortunately my cell phone would serve as an over-the-limit warning signal. Before I would make any more mistakes, the phone would ring and I knew it was time to head home. Thank God for Verizon. I was losing an innocence that I never cared for and didn't realize till much later how necessary it was to have.

I was a bit luckier than Shana. She had no one she really cared about. No one mattered more to her than herself. Where she had all but given up on the world, I still had my father. I knew that the truth about me would break his heart. I would always give him stupid reasons to trust me. “Hey dad, I’ve never been arrested! I love the cops!” Or “Do you know how many girls my age are having babies? I don’t even like kids!” As foolish as I was becoming, I still aimed to please him. I had to impress him with my intelligence. I loved how much the teachers would brag to him about me, even when I didn’t deserve it. My nights were filled with premature debauchery; yet I kept my days dedicated to academic success. My honors classes, Jazz Band, charity work, sports and other activities weren’t for my own happiness. I did everything for him. I could have sworn I was in control of my life, but I was losing the ability to keep it all together. My other life, who I thought I wanted to be, began to interfere with who I had to be.

By my sophomore year, my inner demons had evolved. My sanctity was demolished and I felt no reason to hold myself back any longer. I was removed from one of my honors classes and started to socialize with older, wilder kids. My mouth was disgusting, worse than it is now. My experiences gave me an acceptance with the other degenerates. They could see that I was tainted. Either that or they could smell the alcohol on my breath and wanted some from my stash. I was losing the ability to maintain the façade. Most of the school day, I was either in the lunchroom rapping, or outside playing handball. I would dodge my classes and if I had to go, I would have to cover that stench with body spray and prayed that it removed every trace of marijuana and whatever flavor liquor I sweated out while playing handball.

The influences made me too carefree and nonchalant. I wasn’t a trouble maker, I just didn’t care. That is when the teachers finally began to notice. I thought it would be a bigger issue, but apparently as long as I continued to participate in the activities it didn’t matter. They knew that I was in a tight spot and just piled more on me. I felt like a character in an Italian gangster movie. I did the dirty work, the work no one else wanted to do, and then all of my other deeds would be ignored. I was slipping with their permission.

Regardless of all the fun I could have sworn I was having, I became very depressed. My smile was now completely gone. Everything I did was just me swinging it. I had no passion. Towards the end of the semester, we were having a discussion in my religion class. My teacher asked us “What do we live for?” and my peers gave the typical responses. The majority replied that they lived for their family, friends and for success. I tried to shrink into the side of my seat and avoid the question. But when you’re 5’10” with a bright red afro, you learn that you always need to have an answer.

I was going to lie and give him a sob story. I was planning one out, but as always I was too far inebriated and didn’t feel like coming up with cover stories. I just told the truth. I answered that I had no reason to live. I also said that if I weren’t such a coward I would kill myself. That remark ended our class. Mr. Trainor, my homeroom and religion teacher, gave me a look and pointed to his desk. He asked me the mandatory questions, “Have you tried to commit suicide?”,

“Is something going on at home?” No and No. I explained to him that there was something lacking in my heart. I remember telling him something along the lines of “I have so many around me but I still have nothing. These people in school are only four- year associates and those at my home are helping me to destroy myself. I am too dumb and too addicted to stop. You thought I was a leader, but I follow around idiots.”

I continued to tell him how every day was killing me. I was fully aware of the damage I was inflicting upon myself, but I would still try and numb myself to it. My attempts were unsuccessful. He just looked at me. After a moment of awkward silence, he asked me about my plans for the summer. We had a few weeks left in school. I had already planned out my summer three months before. I told him “Sex, drugs, and reggae parties.” I smirked, but he wasn’t entertained. It was funny when I said it to my friends. He gave me a pamphlet for a camp called Avotar. He explained that the camp was for adults and children who had “Special Needs.” I’ve worked with kids like that in school before, but never for a whole week. It was just for a period or two. It didn’t involve a major commitment like this. Plus, why would I want to volunteer during the summer? And it was scheduled for the second week of July too? I planned to celebrate the Fourth for two weeks straight. I was a bit turned off by the idea and he noticed that. He told me to think about the life that I was wasting and how so many others wish they had my chances and abilities. We walked out of the room. I had a whole day to think about the camp and my general feeling was “blah.”

It was 6 p.m. that same day and his camp was three more gulps from being erased from my mind. This was going to be our summer. We would spend it sitting on a random porch with friends. We would be making fun of those who walked by, play-fighting and “getting bent.” That night, one of the older guys dared Shana to kick a little boy off his Big Wheels. She quickly jumped down the steps, ran up to the kid and kicked him off his bike. We were sitting there laughing and one of the guys said to Shana that she is “retarded and needs help.”

As they continued to laugh at the crying child, what he said began to go through my mind. I am sitting here twisted and somewhat enjoying the misfortune of a child. There are those who would use my fully-functioning brain more productively. Now I am having some sort of paranoia-induced mind freak. I keep hearing the words special and retarded over and over. What if I had a special need? I thought about not being about to enjoy my games fully, my music, my writing or my loved ones. I couldn’t focus on anything else. When the boy’s mother came up to fight Shana, I was too much in a daze to get her out of that situation. The next day I brought my camp papers to Mr. Trainor.

(Flash ahead) It’s the first day of camp and I’m a bit relieved to see some familiar faces waiting for the bus. They weren’t close friends, but they were better than nothing. I needed a break from the jerks around me. The night before, my street friends were calling me a million times and begging me to spend my camp money and throw a small party. I kept declining, painfully, and kept getting cursed out.

The first two days were terrible. I could have sworn that I was suffering from withdrawal. I needed the block. I needed Shana. I kept wondering what they were doing and how much I was missing. The morning of the third day, I received two voicemails from my father. His voice was low and I could barely hear him. He seemed upset. He tells me that a seventeen-year old boy was shot the night before. I'm getting ticked off because he's talking too low and isn't giving me any reason why I should care. It sounds like the phone cuts off and that was the end of the first message. I play the next and he continues to inform me that three suspects were arrested, G, Shawn, and Shana, and that the police were looking for another female suspect. Some of my neighbors, knowing how tight Shana and I were and not knowing that I was out of town, gave some hints that I was the second girl. My father ends the voicemail with "Thank God you went to that camp." I played the messages over ten times. I knew by the third time I had heard him clearly, but I was still facing the shock and denial. Later that day, Shana's mother told me that she spoke to some people and the four culprits are looking at twenty years to life. I hung up the phone and couldn't stop repeating, "Twenty years to life."

The head counselor gave me the day off so I could handle the news. I kept thinking about Shana. How she took away two lives, hers and that nameless kid, for less than ten dollars and bought Chinese food. Was I becoming that person? What am I doing with myself? I have this life that I barely want and my campers have lives that they want to make the most of. I was in a half nap/half thoughtful mind state. I spent the last two years turning into an unhappy addict. I had to leave that room.

I headed outside to where the campers were eating. After dinner they usually had dance activities. Like the other nights, they would play a random mix of terrible boy band and pop crap. Britney Spears, N Sync, Backstreet Boys and a flashback group. New Kids on the Block. The last thirty minutes were usually dedicated to re-enacting the entire Grease Soundtrack. I noticed one camper was sitting alone crying. None of the other counselors saw her walk away and I had already decided that I wouldn't go to her, but I did keep a watchful eye. She would not stop crying and everyone else was occupied with other campers. I had to disregard my own issues in order to frigidly ask her why she was crying. She mumbled that no one wanted to dance with her. I looked over and saw all the other campers having a ball. I bent down, took her hand and told her I would dance with her until she found someone else. We got up and danced. At first she was a bit reluctant. I wasn't moving much and she wasn't much excited either. I was too laid back from Shana's training. I wouldn't smile or do too much to make myself appear foolish. Shana had trained me well. But look where that got her. I started to do all those cheesy dances that I remembered from the movie. After three minutes of my hopping around the yard, she started to laugh. We danced around for the remainder and at the end she hugged me, told me she loved me and thanked me.

It was the campers' bedtime and she held onto me and wouldn't let anyone else take her to her bunk. I told her goodnight and that I would see her in the morning. She hugged me again and kissed my cheek. I heard a mumbled

“goodnight” as I walked away. I felt something, something that at that moment I could not describe, but now I can tell you what it was: Fulfillment. Everything I had done previously had had no resemblance to how I felt at that moment. I was sober, lucid and smiling.

I realized that, each day, someone is under an influence. Some people are strong and can walk away. Then there are those, like me, who were misguided in their search for something more. I lost someone I thought was special to me, but I found something that I know has brought back my reason for living. So frequently I see people dedicating their lives to those who care nothing about them or anyone else. I am not sure that I have any words of wisdom to offer, but I can tell you that in order to find where you need to be, you should look at where others around you are, and where they are going. And also, never follow a blind guide walking on the edge of a cliff.

Nominating faculty: Professor Jacqueline Berger, Speech 1330, Department of Humanities, School of Arts & Sciences, New York City College of Technology, CUNY.

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