

INTRODUCTION

I love when I am underestimated. Please think that you beat me. Please size me up as less than you. Please assume I will quit. Please assume that you will prevail, and I will be the doormat. You don't know me. You may think you know me. You may think you got me completely figured out and I am nothing. That is fine; please think of me as nothing. Please look at me with disgust or disdain. Because when I win (and I will win), it will make it that much better for me.

I have been underestimated my whole life—and it has made me a stronger person, more willing to fight for myself and to fight for what is right. Being underestimated is actually a position of power. Anyone who is thought of as less is assumed to be weak and complacent; that assumption creates an arrogance that is a giant blind spot. People have underestimated me, for sure, but most of the time it is the world that discounts me.

We live in a culture of “NO.” It is in every part of our society. “NO” is our mother culture. The world tells us “NO,” every day, all day. Mother culture tells us this so much that we start to tell each other, “NO”, too. And most of the time we also tell ourselves, “NO.”

You cannot do that.

You cannot take that risk.

You cannot wear that.

You cannot speak up.

You cannot fail or make a fool of yourself.

You cannot ask for what you are worth.

You cannot... [Fill in the blank], FOREVER.

When I teach improvisational comedy, the first thing I must do is break down the culture of “NO,” that hinders a performer's success. In an art form that depends on saying “YES”, the culture of “NO” becomes visible on stage immediately. We are so good at telling others and ourselves “NO” that we don't even know it. Improv exposes this horrible truth and just happens to be something that I love. This truth is something I have always known since childhood, not solely for being a victim of the culture of “NO”, but because, for most of my life, I have just lived in the “YES” mode.

Why? How, you ask? I do not know. I don't know why I have always believed in myself. Why don't I accept disappointment? Why I am always positive and why do I never wallow in defeat? Why I don't accept being in a funk or depression? I am human and have suffered disappointments and failures, but I have never let them define me. If you don't fail, then you've failed; failure is good. Michael Jordan was cut from the varsity team. Michael fucking Jordan, the greatest basketball player of all time!

I have definitely had moments where I didn't like my body, but quickly recognized this as the world telling me "NO". I decided to have a lifelong policy to love my body. My body is doing everything right. I celebrate every year I get older. I celebrate every gray hair. I celebrate my body, *period*. I will not let the world tell me I am wrong, and I am DAMN sure am not letting the world (or any piece-of-shit human) make me feel bad about my body. The older I get, the cooler I get; that goes for all of us. Anytime we let mother culture's "NO" into our minds, it creates a groove in our brain. The groove becomes deeper each time we use it. These paths can be very difficult to break down. It takes zero effort to give into this. It takes no effort to default to the negative and create a million trails of self-doubt in our brains. But: anyone can break down those paths and forge new ones. This is what I believe is most daunting and difficult for people.

I made my own stilts as a child and taught myself how to walk on them. There were a few prototypes of failed versions. One time a foot support came loose, and on the way down I cut my leg on three exposed nails. I lost balance hundreds of times. But making the stilts and learning how to walk on stilts never seemed impossible. No one was literally saying "NO" to me, but the expressions on my friends' faces did. This was a big moment in noticing the difference between me and others when it came to the culture of "NO." Making anything, let alone stilts, was unfeasible to my peers. To me, it was merely a decision of whether to do the work or not. Stilts could have been straight A's, another language, a sport, or anything I wanted. I was not limiting myself where my friends had already started.

When I was 18, I did not go off to a big-box college, but instead, I decided that I stay home, go to community college, and saved every penny to travel Europe for the following summer. Did I ever experience the world telling me "NO!" Every person I told about my plans to go to Europe told me not to go, or were insultingly baffled by my decision. There is a huge American chunk of the culture, telling Americans not to leave their country.

They don't like us.

You will get robbed.

It is too scary.

It is too difficult.

It is all nonsense. The American culture of "NO" can suck my dick. I was not hearing any of it; I went to Europe at the height of the George W. Bush presidency with zero problems. In fact, I had a completely fantastic, educational, enlightening, and transformative experience. What if I had listened to all of those "NOs?" How many "NOs" have I listened to unknowingly? How many had I let into my life to create a Pacific Crest Trail in my brain? That possibility of listening to mother culture was what was scary to me. I started listening to mother culture about other things of substance: things that were actually important

I used to think that I could not be gay because I could not let everyone who was mean to me be right. I could not let them win. All the people at my church in my small town looked at me like I was a fucking freak. I could not let them win. I could not let my teachers who shamed me for using my hands too much

when I talked win. I could not let all the people who told me I acting like a girl win. I could not let my Uncle calling me faggy at the family card table win.

This was listening to mother culture in the worst way. I always knew I was gay, ever since I can remember, and I never felt there was something wrong with me. In fact, when being told homosexuality is wrong by my church, I remember thinking even as a very small child, "But wait, I am gay and nothing is abnormal with me, so this must be bullshit." (This was the beginning of my journey to becoming an agnostic). How did I lose this knowledge? How could I let the world tell me who I was and that I was wrong? Especially after just bragging at the beginning of this introduction about how ahead of the game I was ad nauseam. How could I let the world convince me I was straight? That is how powerful the culture of "NO," is. If you listen to it, mother culture will not allow you to walk on stilts, travel Europe, or be yourself.

Awareness is the first step. Recognize that the world will never stop telling you "NO." Understand you will be underestimated every day you walk this earth. The second step is to defy "NO." Rebuke it. Stop listening to mother culture; stop running the paths she and YOU have created in your brain. Know that it will be easier the more you fight. Find power in being underestimated. Be yourself and WIN.

VOLUNTEER VICTIM

Advice: If you are going to get into a mass plane crash, do not do it in Anchorage, Alaska; the fire fighters are not prepared to save your life.

For many years I had to be CPR/First Aid-certified for my job. I took the class every year. There is always a part where the instructor partners up the whole class and one person is the victim and the other is the rescuer. There is only enough time in the class to do the exercise once, so most of the time the partnership will not switch from victim to rescuer and vice versa. Because I take the class every year, I know this is coming and anticipate it. I do this because one of my favorite things to do is pretend to be a victim with a stranger who is trying to do CPR, flip my body over, or drag me correctly out of a “burning building”. I *commit* to being 100% dead weight. Most people who play the CPR victim will help out; they’ll kind of flip themselves over rather than having a stranger really touch them. I LOVE it and secretly enjoy my front row seat to their surprise at me not helping them as they struggle to move my 250-pound body.

I got to experience this enjoyment to its fullest when I visited my friend in Alaska. We were talking over the phone about my upcoming visit and she said, “Oh, by the way, I went ahead and signed us up to volunteer to pretend to be victims in a mass plane crash simulation at Ted Stevens International Airport. Are you down?”

I replied, “This is why we are friends. Thank you.” I am so ready to be on Oceanic flight 815.¹ Then before I know it I’m in Alaska and we’re at the airport, and right from the start, it is a dream come true. When we arrive, we are giving badges with what our role is. Some people were the walking wounded; some were dead; some were unconscious. I had the pleasure of being assigned a broken left tarsal. They also instructed us that we were not to speak or respond to English. They wanted to simulate a plane crash from another country’s airline, one where the victims would not speak or understand the language of the rescuers.

To make sure we understood the rules, the trainers quickly yell “LOOK OVER THERE!” while pointing to his left. All of us volunteers look. The trainer says, “You have all failed. When we do the simulation as best you can pretend to not understand English. Act the part and take it seriously.” This is all to better train emergency responders of the city of Anchorage. It is also music to my ears. They are preaching to the choir and do not need to tell me twice.

We head out and get into position, which is on the tarmac in between active runways. Planes are landing and taking off all around us, and God only knows what the people on those planes think is happening. There are lifeless looking bodies on the ground, aimless survivors walking around, and a big old piece of the airplane is partially on fire. Instead of a plane, they had two city buses on the tarmac to represent the crashed plane. In Anchorage, they call city buses People Movers, which somehow seems demeaning with a sprinkle of racism to me. I was assigned to be a victim on the People Mover, but I thought my talents would be better suited outside the plane amongst the walking wounded, the dead,

¹ Who was into *Lost*? I was lost in the *Lost*. So many unanswered questions, and all I wanted was more, give me more questions! I want to be *Lost*!

and the real lost and found luggage of the Ted Stevens International Airport. I made this decision because, after all, I am a trained method actor and I also discovered that the victims still on the plane are the last to be rescued.²

They blow the whistle and someone yells, "Start acting. The simulation is beginning!" All but a handful of volunteers are not acting like they were actually in a plane crash. Their lack of enthusiasm really pisses me off, but it does not stop the Jay Train. I am committed to portraying a realistic broken left ankle.

Before any of the rescue workers could get to the scene, they had to put out the fake fire for a full ten minutes. Halfway through, they all just turned around and left. Apparently, there is a real emergency in Anchorage and they have to go save the day somewhere else. An hour later, they blow the whistle and say, "They are coming back, start acting." Game on.

After putting out the fake fire again, it is the firefighters who come on the scene to save the people, while the police stay in the safe zone helping victims and getting IDs. The cops are really into this exercise and taking it seriously. The firefighters are not. They slump onto the scene and break character and the fourth wall. They are mean to the volunteers, they make fun of us, and in general are being jerks (the way most firefighters actually are).³ The Firefighters are not really participating. You can tell that they are only doing this because they had to, and are pouting their way through it. Volunteer Victims are commanded to stop acting by the firefighters. Near me is one guy who is supposed to be unconscious and in a coma and needs to be taken via a gurney to the safe zone. The firefighters bring the gurney over and tell him that this is only a simulation and they are not going to pick him up. Out of the corner of his conflicted mouth, he says, "But I am in a coma..." They bark a harshly back at him to walk back himself.

The other volunteers are breaking left and right, succumbing to these bullish tactics. But not me. I have a broken left tarsal and they are going to save me. I scream in gibberish like a champion, don't they know I can speak in tongues? I do not give in. By God, I have a broken left tarsal and they are going to get me to the safe zone.

It takes two full grown firefighters to pick my ass up and carry me to the safety zone. I scream in pain the whole way. They mock me the entire time, asking if I am going to milk this all the way to the end. Luckily none of those words hurt my feelings because I didn't speak English. In my mind I am Korean and I speak only Korean. I was Jin-Soo Kwon from Lost. Their words slip off of me like water off a Korean duck's back.

In closing: the firefighters lived up to every negative stereotype and prejudice I harbor against them. They are not heroes, and NO, I didn't forget about 9/11. This volunteer victim won! Please

² Plane Crash Survival Tip: Do not let yourself be left on the plane when it crashes because rescuers will put out the fire first, save all the people outside the plane, THEN get to you. At which point you will be dead.

³ I really like how in Alaska, the hero is not the firefighter. It is the Bush Pilot. The Bush Pilot is what kids who grow up in Alaska want to be. There are no roads in Alaska, you have to fly everywhere. Especially in the villages. You have to fly and Bush Pilots are bad asses! Nobody cares about firefighters, and that is how it should be. Let's face it. Most firefighters are dicks. It is like your whole high school baseball team grew up to be fire fighters and baseball players are the scum of the earth. I have seen a group of firefighters hit a ball out of a kid's hand on a playground and high five his buddies, like it was out of movie. They are not heroes. They are bullies.

assume that I will get up on my own volition and walk on this broken left tarsal. Please assume that because you got C's in high school, I will respect you and be intimidated by your presentation of masculinity. Please do all of that, because it will not work. Long live the volunteer victims!

[Insert Crowd Applauding]