

“To This Day” Shane Koyczan

[https://www.ted.com/talks/shane\\_koyczan\\_to\\_this\\_day\\_for\\_the\\_bullied\\_and\\_beautiful/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/shane_koyczan_to_this_day_for_the_bullied_and_beautiful/transcript)



There's so many of you.

00:19 (Laughter)

00:24 When I was a kid, I hid my heart under the bed, because my mother said, "If you're not careful, someday someone's going to break it." Take it from me: Under the bed is not a good hiding spot. I know because I've been shot down so many times, I get altitude sickness just from standing up for myself. But that's what we were told. "Stand up for yourself." And that's hard to do if you don't know who you are. We were expected to define ourselves at such an early age, and if we didn't do it, others did it for us. Geek. Fatty. Slut. Fag.

01:01 And at the same time we were being told what we were, we were being asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I always thought that was an unfair question. It presupposes that we can't be what we already are. We were kids.

01:17 When I was a kid, I wanted to be a man. I wanted a registered retirement savings plan that would keep me in candy long enough to make old age sweet.

01:26 When I was a kid, I wanted to shave. Now, not so much. (Laughter)

01:32 When I was eight, I wanted to be a marine biologist. When I was nine, I saw the movie "Jaws," and thought to myself, "No, thank you." (Laughter)

01:41 And when I was 10, I was told that my parents left because they didn't want me. When I was 11, I wanted to be left alone. When I was 12, I wanted to die. When I was 13, I wanted to kill a kid. When I was 14, I was asked to seriously consider a career path.

01:55 I said, "I'd like to be a writer." And they said, "Choose something realistic." So I said, "Professional wrestler." And they said, "Don't be stupid."

02:06 See, they asked me what I wanted to be, then told me what not to be.

02:11 And I wasn't the only one. We were being told that we somehow must become what we are not, sacrificing what we are to inherit the masquerade of what we will be. I was being told to accept the identity that others will give me.

02:25 And I wondered, what made my dreams so easy to dismiss? Granted, my dreams are shy, because they're Canadian. (Laughter)

02:37 My dreams are self-conscious and overly apologetic. They're standing alone at the high school dance, and they've never been kissed. See, my dreams got called names too. Silly. Foolish. Impossible. But I kept dreaming. I was going to be a wrestler. I had it all figured out. I was going to be The Garbage Man. (Laughter)

02:59 My finishing move was going to be The Trash Compactor. My saying was going to be, "I'm taking out the trash!" (Laughter)

03:09 (Applause)

03:12 And then this guy, Duke "The Dumpster" Droese, stole my entire shtick. (Laughter)

03:20 I was crushed, as if by a trash compactor. (Laughter)

03:27 I thought to myself, "What now? Where do I turn?"

03:31 Poetry. (Laughter)

03:33 Like a boomerang, the thing I loved came back to me. One of the first lines of poetry I can remember writing was in response to a world that demanded I hate myself. From age 15 to 18, I hated myself for becoming the thing that I loathed: a bully.

03:49 When I was 19, I wrote, "I will love myself despite the ease with which I lean toward the opposite."

03:58 Standing up for yourself doesn't have to mean embracing violence.

04:03 When I was a kid, I traded in homework assignments for friendship, then gave each friend a late slip for never showing up on time, and in most cases, not at all. I gave myself a hall pass to get through each broken promise. And I remember this plan, born out of frustration from a kid who kept calling me "Yogi," then pointed at my tummy and said, "Too many picnic baskets." Turns out it's not that hard to trick someone, and one day before class, I said, "Yeah, you can copy my homework," and I gave him all the wrong answers that I'd written down the night before. He got his paper back expecting a near-perfect score, and couldn't believe it when he looked across the room at me and held up a zero. I knew I didn't have to hold up my paper of 28 out of 30, but my satisfaction was complete when he looked at me, puzzled, and I thought to myself, "Smarter than the average bear, motherfucker." (Laughter) (Applause)

04:58 This is who I am. This is how I stand up for myself.

05:05 When I was a kid, I used to think that pork chops and karate chops were the same thing. I thought they were both pork chops. My grandmother thought it was cute, and because they were my favorite, she let me keep doing it. Not really a big deal. One day, before I realized fat kids are not designed to climb trees, I fell out of a tree and bruised the right side of my body. I didn't want to tell my grandmother because I was scared I'd get in trouble for playing somewhere I shouldn't have been. The gym teacher noticed the bruise, and I got sent to the principal's office. From there, I was sent to another small room with a really nice lady who asked me all kinds of questions about my life at home. I saw no reason to lie. As far as I was concerned, life was pretty good. I told her, whenever I'm sad, my grandmother gives me karate chops. (Laughter)

06:00 This led to a full-scale investigation, and I was removed from the house for three days, until they finally decided to ask how I got the bruises. News of this silly little story quickly spread through the school, and I earned my first nickname: Porkchop. To this day, I hate pork chops.

06:24 I'm not the only kid who grew up this way, surrounded by people who used to say that rhyme about sticks and stones, as if broken bones hurt more than the names we got called, and we got called them all. So we grew up believing no one would ever fall in love with us, that we'd be lonely forever, that we'd never meet someone to make us feel like the sun was something they built for us in their toolshed. So broken heartstrings bled the blues, and we tried to empty ourselves so we'd feel nothing. Don't tell me that hurts less than a broken bone, that an ingrown life is something surgeons can cut away, that there's no way for it to metastasize; it does.

07:00 She was eight years old, our first day of grade three when she got called ugly. We both got moved to the back of class so we would stop getting bombarded by spitballs. But the school halls were a battleground. We found ourselves outnumbered day after wretched day. We used to stay inside for recess, because outside was worse. Outside, we'd have to rehearse running away, or learn to stay still like statues, giving no clues that we were there. In grade five, they taped a sign to the front of her desk that read, "Beware of dog."

07:29 To this day, despite a loving husband, she doesn't think she's beautiful, because of a birthmark that takes up a little less than half her face. Kids used to say, "She looks like a wrong answer that someone tried to erase, but couldn't quite get the job done." And they'll never understand that she's raising two kids whose definition of beauty begins with the word "Mom," because they see her heart before they see her skin, because she's only ever always been amazing.

07:56 He was a broken branch grafted onto a different family tree, adopted, not because his parents opted for a different destiny. He was three when he became a mixed drink of one part left alone and two parts tragedy, started therapy in eighth grade, had a personality made up of tests and pills, lived like the uphill were mountains and the downhill were cliffs, four-fifths suicidal, a tidal wave of antidepressants, and an adolescent being called "Popper," one part because of the pills, 99 parts because of the cruelty. He tried to kill himself in grade 10 when a kid who could still go home to Mom and Dad had the audacity to tell him, "Get over it." As if depression is something that could be remedied by any of the contents found in a first-aid kit.

08:45 To this day, he is a stick of TNT lit from both ends, could describe to you in detail the way the sky bends in the moment before it's about to fall, and despite an army of friends who all call him an inspiration, he remains a conversation piece between people who can't understand sometimes being drug-free has less to do with addiction and more to do with sanity.

09:05 We weren't the only kids who grew up this way. To this day, kids are still being called names. The classics were "Hey, stupid," "Hey, spaz." Seems like every school has an arsenal of names getting updated every year. And if a kid breaks in a school and no

one around chooses to hear, do they make a sound? Are they just background noise from a soundtrack stuck on repeat, when people say things like, "Kids can be cruel." Every school was a big top circus tent, and the pecking order went from acrobats to lion tamers, from clowns to carnies, all of these miles ahead of who we were. We were freaks -- lobster-claw boys and bearded ladies, oddities juggling depression and loneliness, playing solitaire, spin the bottle, trying to kiss the wounded parts of ourselves and heal, but at night, while the others slept, we kept walking the tightrope. It was practice, and yes, some of us fell.

10:03 But I want to tell them that all of this is just debris left over when we finally decide to smash all the things we thought we used to be, and if you can't see anything beautiful about yourself, get a better mirror, look a little closer, stare a little longer, because there's something inside you that made you keep trying despite everyone who told you to quit. You built a cast around your broken heart and signed it yourself, "They were wrong." Because maybe you didn't belong to a group or a clique. Maybe they decided to pick you last for basketball or everything. Maybe you used to bring bruises and broken teeth to show-and-tell, but never told, because how can you hold your ground if everyone around you wants to bury you beneath it? You have to believe that they were wrong. They have to be wrong. Why else would we still be here?

10:54 We grew up learning to cheer on the underdog because we see ourselves in them. We stem from a root planted in the belief that we are not what we were called. We are not abandoned cars stalled out and sitting empty on some highway, and if in some way we are, don't worry. We only got out to walk and get gas. We are graduating members from the class of We Made It, not the faded echoes of voices crying out, "Names will never hurt me." Of course they did.

11:27 But our lives will only ever always continue to be a balancing act that has less to do with pain and more to do with beauty. (Applause)